DOES THE FATHER SUFFER?

• **Jean-Pierre Batut** •

"What in God's own life is a death to self,
which is one with the super-abundance of life,
becomes a passage through death to Resurrection when
God enters into contact with the sinful
reality of earthly existence."

> All of the contingent "humiliations" of God in the economy of salvation are always already included and surpassed in the eternal event of Love.[1]

No one ought to broach the topic of God's suffering without fear and trembling. Voltaire is right. It is bad enough for man to deform the image of God in himself. But it is even worse for him to make himself a God after his own image. When it comes to God, such human projections can be both positive and negative, as Nietzsche rightly points out. But since, in spite of that, we must still venture something on the subject, let us begin by listening to a voice that attests for us just how ancient Christian reflection on it is. Already in the third century, we find Origen writing this in his *Commentary on Ezekiel*[2]:

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[1]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Pâques le Mystère*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1981); preface to the second edition.

[2]*In Ez*., 6.6. The text was rediscovered by Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), 241.

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> The Savior came down to earth out of pity for the human race. He suffered our passions before suffering on the Cross, even before deigning to take our flesh: for if he had not suffered them first, he would not have come to take part in our human life. What is this passion that he suffered for us beforehand? It is the passion of love [*passio caritatis*]. But the Father himself, the God of the universe, he who is full of long-suffering, mercy, and pity, does he not suffer in some way? Or do you not know that, when he concerns himself with human affairs, he suffers a human passion? "For the Lord your God has taken on himself your ways, like someone who takes upon himself his child." God thus takes upon himself our ways, as the Son of God takes upon himself our passions. The Father himself is not impassible. If one prays to him, he takes pity and is compassionate. He suffers a passion of love [*passio caritatis*].

Origen develops his idea in two steps. First, he considers the Savior's "pity" for the human race. He locates it, in very platonic fashion, in a noetic time prior to the Incarnation. It is well known that Origen holds that souls pre-exist their bodies. Some of them "fell" into the body because their love for God had "grown cold." Others, like that of John the Baptist and, above all, of Jesus himself, came to animate a body out of a compassionate desire to help humanity. Such an attitude logically presupposes a *pathos* prior to the Incarnation, hence, to any bodily suffering.[3]

The second step of the argument is less easily dismissed as Platonism. Listing a series of divine attributes that are especially characteristic of the Bible, indeed, of the Old Testament (such as "longanimity," "mercy," and "compassion"), Origen declares himself in favor of—to speak anachronistically—their analogical character. Even if the unlikeness is greater than the likeness, it is not absurd to apply them to God. Scripture itself legitimates such a move.

In claiming that God takes an "interest" in humanity to the point of entering into passibility, is Origen abandoning the traditional claim of divine *apatheia*? Not necessarily. After all, if God is able to

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[3]In the passage of the *Theo-Drama* in which Hans Urs von Balthasar tackles this subject, he sums up this first step thus: "The *pathos* of compassion is an attribute of the eternal Son" (*La Dramatique divine* IV [Namur: Culture et Vérite, 1990], 200 [hereafter, *DD*]; for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998]).

enter *freely* into passibility, it is precisely because he is impassible by *nature*. Nevertheless, Origen's proposal—that we can work back from the Son's *passio caritatis* to the Father's—remains a daring one. Origen himself is fully aware of the boldness of his claims. Granted that the Savior has drawn close to us in order to "concern himself with human affairs," does it follow from this that we can legitimately say that the Father, in his eternity, concerns himself with them as well?

Behind this question there looms another. Can it be good theology to use "human affairs" as a springboard for explaining a hypothetical "divine passion"? Don't we thereby risk falling into anthropomorphism and dragging God down into contingency and becoming? Oughtn't we to adopt the opposite starting-point and begin with what Revelation—and Revelation alone—can teach us about God: his trinitarian being? As we will see, this is how Balthasar approaches the question.

1. Early statements of the tradition on divine pathos

In the history of theology, the first important moment is the third-century struggle against Patripassianism. The "Tome of Damasus" adopted at the Council of Rome (382) combats errors in trinitarian doctrine. At the same time it condemns the ascription of the suffering of the Cross to the Father:

> If someone says that in the suffering of the Cross it is God who felt the pain, and not the flesh and the soul with which the Son of God had clothed himself—the form of the slave that he had assumed, as Scripture says—he is in error.[4]

The second moment is christological. It occurs at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The council's principal protagonist, Cyril of Alexandria, formalizes the idea that the Word was united to the flesh "according to *hypostasis*."[5] The hypostatic union entails that the ultimate subject of Christ's actions and sufferings is quite really the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. By the same token,

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[4]*DS,* 166.

[5]See Cyril's second letter to Nestorius, which was canonized by the council (*DS,* 250–251).

it is perfectly legitimate to appropriate the actions, sufferings, and, above all, the attributes (*idiomata*) of human nature to the Word—and not to "a man considered as distinct from the Word."[6] And it is truly the Word of God who "suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, tasted death in the flesh, and became the 'First-Born from among the dead,' he who is life and who gives life as God."[7]

After Ephesus, we find the bold formula of the Scythian monks that continues Cyril's Christology as expressed in the "twelfth anathematism": "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh." Yielding to pressure from the Emperor Justinian, who hoped to win over the Monophysites, Pope John II approved this formula in 534, while adding the nuance that "one of the Trinity" should be understood as referring to a "person"—and not the Trinity as such.

2. The meaning of divine impassibility in the Fathers

a. The apophatic side

It is in the patristic era that Christian thought reprises the negative attributes of the godhead. This is a fact of the Tradition. It is within these attributes, and without calling them into question, that we must try to pose the question of divine *pathos*.

These negative attributes of impassibility boil down to *apatheia* and *ataraxia*, which have related meanings, or, again, to the generic adjective "without need" (*anendees*).[8] Because these terms were borrowed from Greek philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Middle and Neo-Platonism), they fell under suspicion and were discredited during the last century.[9] Nevertheless, the doubt cast on these concepts seems ill-justified. The idea that the Fathers' insistence on impassibility was a concession to the *Zeitgeist* does not withstand scrutiny. First of all, the adoption of this philosophical language about God amounted

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[6]Fourth anathematism (*DS*, 255).

[7]Twelfth anathematism (*DS*, 263).

[8]A list of patristic examples can be found in G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

[9]Balthasar cites Mühlen and others (*DD* IV, 195, note 78 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5]).

to a decision against mythological representations of capricious divinities subject to suffering. Moreover, paradoxical doctrines about Christ's simultaneous impassibility and passibility made it all the more necessary to underscore forcefully the impassibility of the divine nature itself. What we are dealing with, then, is not a "Hellenization" of Christianity, but *the resolute acceptance of the Christian paradox*, the *lectio difficilior* of the Christian faith.

The necessity of underlining God's impassibility soon took concrete shape in the struggle against the first heresies. The idea that the Father somehow suffered grew out of Modalism, which blurred the distinction among the divine Persons. It was vigorously opposed by the champions of trinitarian theology, such as Hippolytus of Rome and Tertullian, in their struggle against the Monarchians (as Tertullian called them). In his treatise *Adversus Praxeam*, Tertullian accuses his adversary of having "put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father."[10] As for Hippolytus, in his concern to deny any foothold to the confusion between the Father and the Son, he energetically opposes the compromise position apparently advocated by his contemporary Pope Callixtus: the idea of the Father's "com-passion" with the Son.[11]

At this ancient stage of the history of theology, reflection on our topic appears conditioned by a struggle of another kind: the struggle against an anti-trinitarian heresy that is itself born of a deficient Christology. For this reason, the debate remained unsettled. More refined resources of trinitarian theology will be needed to bring the debate to a more satisfactory issue.

b. The cataphatic side: divine pathos within divine power

For all that, insistence on God's impassibility is not incompatible with the idea of a divine *pathos*. In fact, the Greek word *pathos*,

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[10]*Adversus Praxeam* I, 5.

[11]It is not out of the question that this idea of "compassion" derives from Stoic thought, which tended to underscore the interdependence of body and soul. It is in this sense that, according to Cleanthes, the soul "suffers" with the body. We are indebted to H. Hageman (*Die römische Kirche*, 354f) for having discovered the traces of Stoic logic and metaphysics in Monarchian doctrine.

which has passed into many modern languages, has a number of meanings:[12]

First of all, it means "an unfortunate mishap that one suffers involuntarily." Obviously, this sort of thing cannot happen to God. "If, then, God freely decides to suffer as man, his passion contains an 'action' that freely prevails. Cutting across suffering and death, this action is able to destroy both."[13] We cannot, then, deny him *a priori* the ability to suffer if he wishes, as Origen noted early on.

Pathos can also be understood in relation to sin. In this case, too, *pathos* has no place in God. But the Incarnate Word can experience an inculpable *pathos*, for example, sadness or compassion. In this latter instance, moreover, we glimpse that *pathos* has less to do with a deficiency than with an *aptitude* of man connected with charity: it would be odd if Christ were without it. From this point of view, "the passion of love" Origen speaks of is much more a divine quality that we find echoed in man than a human quality echoed in God.

In sum, then, if some of the Fathers venture to speak of a divine *pathos*, it is precisely because they are eager to apply to the Greek notion of *apatheia* the correctives it requires to be understood in a way that is truly "worthy of God" (Origen). Their basis for doing so, as noted above, is the paradox of divino-humanity. Augustine offers perhaps the best synthesis of this paradox when he says about the Incarnate Word that, "with him, weakness is willed on the basis of power."[14] The all-powerful God's entrance into the weakness of the Cross is itself an act of power (perhaps the greatest act of power), one that reaches to the deepest depths of the kenosis of the Word: "I give

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[12]Here we follow Hans Urs von Balthasar, *DD* IV, 197f [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5].

[13]Ibid. Cf. the *Dialogue on the Impassibility and Passibility of God* attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus.

[14]*Commentary on Psalm* 55, 6 (PL 41, 415), cited by Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, IV, 199 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5]. The idea that God reveals himself to be all the more divine the more he condescends to make himself vulnerable traverses the entire Christian tradition. Among many other examples, we find a striking one in the so-called "epitaph of Ignatius [of Loyola]": *non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est* [not to be constrained by the greatest, and yet to be contained by the least—that is divine]. For a complete history of this sentence, see H. Rahner, "Die Grabschrift des Loyola," *Stimmen der Zeit* (1947): 321–339. We find a summary in G. Fessard, *La dialectique des Exercises de saint Ignace*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1956), 167–177.

my life and will take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I give it of myself. I have the power to give it and the power to take it up again. Such is the commandment I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:18). The Resurrection attests that the final word is power, which never dissipates in weakness. Suffering and death are not irreversible, because God, immersing himself in them, never ceased to be God.

3. Trinitarian resources

Let us go further in our inquiry and reflect on some of the intellectual resources worked out by the theological tradition in order to safeguard the paradox of the God-world relation "without confusion or separation."[15] This tradition faced a twofold task. On the one hand, it had to hold fast to the fact that God had really intervened on man's behalf. On the other hand, it had to obviate any risk of confusing God with what is other than he. The resources developed to meet this double task boil down to two classical principles that balance each other out:

1. On the one hand, *every divine operation* ad extra *is common to the three Persons*.

2. On the other hand, *every relation of God to the world is a relation "of reason,"* one, that is, that does not affect God himself, *whereas every relation of the world to God is a "real" relation*, one, that is, that affects the structure of the world.

1. The formulation of the first principle, according to which "everything God does *ad extra* the three Persons do in common and undividedly," is Scholastic. The content of the formula, however, is much older. It flows from the fact that the Trinity is only one nature, and prolongs on the level of operation the formula "one substance in three *hypostases*." It could be translated as "a single operation coming from three operators."[16]

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[15]These are the two adverbs used by the Council of Chalcedon (451) to characterize the greatest paradox of them all: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ.

[16]Augustine formalizes the principle that the Trinity has just one will and operation: *Trinitas inseparabiliter operatur* [the Trinity operates inseparably] (*On the Trinity* I, 5, 8), because "where there are not different natures, there are not different wills" (*Contra Maximinum* II, 10, 2).

What follows from this for the matter at hand is that the paschal act of the Incarnate Word, like all the other acts of his life, is a trinitarian act: the three divine Persons are involved in it. When he is suffering on the Cross, it is the Son who hands himself over for us and it is the Father who hands him over. The Son is abandoned, and the Father is the one who abandons him. If we know that the result of the Son's abandonment is, for the Son, the dereliction of the Cross, we cannot escape the necessity of giving a name to the state that, on the Father's side, corresponds to the Son's dereliction.

2. We find the second principle, according to which every relation of God to the world is a relation of reason, whereas every relation of the world to God is a real relation, spelled out in the *prima pars* of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*.[17]

Aquinas applies to a particular question—is creation *something* in the creature?—a general principle already laid down in his treatment of the divine names.[18] In that earlier context, Aquinas had asked whether, when we call God "Lord" or "Creator," we may legitimately say that these divine names, which belong only to him, belong to him "in his eternity." Aquinas' answer, as is to be expected, is negative. In fact, since the creation is not eternal, God cannot be either the Creator or Lord of his creation eternally. Does this mean, then, that God *becomes* Creator? Obviously not. The only possible conclusion, then, is that *the relation that unites God to creatures does not affect his being*. God is eternally powerful in himself, but he is "Lord" only from the point of view of the creature, which, having begun to exist, begins to invoke him as such. But this homage adds nothing to God's glory that might have been lacking beforehand:

> Because God is outside the whole order of creatures, and all creatures are ordered to him, but not conversely, it is evident that creatures are really related to God. But in God there is no real relation with creatures, but only a relation of reason, inasmuch as creatures are related to him.[19]

It is easy to see the connection between this principle and the principle of divine immutability. Indeed, the former simply draws the consequences of the latter. Nevertheless, the question remains: what

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[17]I, 45, 3, ad 1.

[18]I, 13, 7.

[19]I, 13, 7 c.

might creation be *in the Creator*? Only a truly trinitarian monotheism can furnish the clues needed to answer this question, inasmuch as it affirms that there is a real otherness within the unity of the divine nature. In other words, if God's relation to what is other than he does not affect his being, it is because this relation originates in a prior relation with the Other in God. The "transitive" acts God performs in the history of salvation do not bring about any change in him only on the condition that they ultimately rest on the trinitarian exchanges. The only change lies in our temporal way of apprehending them:

> It is from all eternity that God knows and loves the creature, according to the text of Jeremiah (31:3): "I have loved you with an everlasting love."[20]
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> The operations of intellect and will remain immanent within the one who knows and wills. This is why the names that are given to the relations that follow on these acts are said of God in his eternity. But the relations following on the transitive acts, that is, the acts that, according to our way of understanding, pass over into effects outside of God, are said of God temporally, as is the case when God is called Savior, Creator, and the like.[21]

We are an eternal thought of God, a thought eternally included within the relation of knowledge and love between the Father and the Son. If, as is obviously the case, the transitive act of creating has established a *real* relation linking us to the Creator, the Creator's *real* relation to us does not come about in the act of creation itself. It comes about *within the Father's eternal relation to his Son*.

To sum up, let us listen to Louis Bouyer:

> Every relation between the Creator and the creature is real only in and for the creature. This does not at all mean that God is unconcerned about the creature, but that he is not, and cannot be, to any degree on the side of the effect, but is entirely on the side of the cause. In other words, it is he—and, in the end, it is only he—who produces something in his creature, because he has already existed before producing the creature himself. The creature, by contrast,

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[20]I, 13, 7, 3.

[21]Ibid., ad 3.

> cannot produce anything in him, because he already contains everything that can be, and does so from all eternity. This does not mean, however, that God does not know or love his creatures, or suffer with their pains, or rejoice in their joys. It means just the opposite. *God the Father does not know us, does not love us, does not delight in us except in knowing and loving his Son* and in eternally finding all his delight in his Son. Conversely, it is in knowing and loving his only Son, and in finding in him all his joy, that he has eternally known and loved us and has made of us this same joy.[22]

As we will see, Bouyer already presents the outlines of the Balthasarian answer to the question of divine suffering.

4. The influence of the Hegelian heritage weighs on reflection on divine pathos: two examples

Hegel's thought exercised considerable influence on our question during the last century. Its influence has not waned. We will limit ourselves here to a citation and to Balthasar's commentary on it:

> "'*God is dead*,' says a Lutheran hymn. Therein comes to expression the consciousness that the human and the finite, the fragile, weak, and negative, is a moment of the divine itself. All of that exists in God: otherness, finitude, and negativity are not outside him. They are otherness and negativity become conscious as an internal moment of the divine nature." Let us translate: the idea of the Trinity is inseparably bound up with the idea of the Cross. But, with respect to the Cross, the question remains open as to how far it is a singular historical event and how far it is the necessary and supreme "representation" of the most general law of being.[23]

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[22]L. Bouyer, *Cosmos* (Paris, 1982), 303f (the entire chapter, "La Sagesse dans la Trinité," merits attention).

[23]G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie de la religion* (cited in *DD* IV, 205 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5]).

Balthasar cites Moltmann,[24] who holds that Christ's suffering and death on the Cross are a moment in the self-constitution of the Trinity, and Kazoh Kitamori, for whom "the entire Christian religion becomes nothing but a service of God's suffering."[25] According to Kitamori, in fact, God's suffering does not begin with his relation to the world, but is part of his very being.

Even more recently, two authors, one Jewish and the other Christian, have expressed views that come quite close to the ones we have just mentioned. Their thought merits attention.

a. A Jewish author: Hans Jonas

Hans Jonas' starting-point is the scandal that Auschwitz and the extermination of a part of the chosen people represent for Jews.[26] Since the God of Israel has no existence except as the Lord of History, this scandal seems to Jonas to call the Jewish idea of God radically into question. A new image of God [*Gottesbegriff*] appears on the scene. This new image cannot be explained either with the intellectual categories that were current until our day or even with the traditional biblical categories, since the idea of God's sovereignty over history seems to be inseparable from the Bible's account of Israel's God.

Jonas' radical questioning does not concern only how God is "affected" by human history and by the consequences of human sin. It also concerns the meaning of the act of creation itself. Creation, along with the relation that it establishes between God and man (it goes without saying that the distinction between "real" and "rational" relations is not even an issue here), already contains a divine suffering.[27]

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[24]J. Moltmann, *Le Dieu crucifié*; *Trinité et royaume de Dieu* (a chapter on the passion of God).

[25]*DD* IV, 212 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5].

[26]H. Jonas, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz*. French translation: *Le concept de Dieu après Auschwitz, une voix juive* (Paris, 1994). Hereafter, *CDA*.

[27]According to Jonas, the Bible itself suggests this suffering when it shows us God regretting that he has made man only to be despised and rejected by him, or else speaking in the voice of the husband deceived by Israel's infidelity (cf. Hosea).

In order to explain this "new idea of God," Jonas relies on what he himself calls a "myth,"[28] which he tells in a strongly Hegelian voice.[29] He recounts the adventure the divinity undergoes as a result of having made up its mind in creating "not to keep anything for itself." He speaks of a kenosis of God. A part of the Jewish tradition has meditated on this kenosis for centuries under the name *tsimtsoum*,[30] but, according to Jonas, never dared to take things to their logical conclusion. Jonas, by contrast, boldly undertakes to detail the specific characteristics of the new idea of God on the basis of his "myth." To begin with, the God who decides to give himself up to the world is a *suffering* God (not in the Christian sense—God does not begin to suffer with the Incarnation and the Cross—but in the sense that he suffers simultaneously with the creation itself). He is also a God *in becoming*. By virtue of his "permanent relation to the creature . . . he undergoes an experience from the world" that affects him in his very being. God is also an *anxious* God—just the opposite of a magician. Finally, and above all, this God is *non-potent*. If he were omnipotent, he could not be good.

Jonas rather indiscriminately accuses a "Greek, Platonico-Aristotelian tradition"[31] of having decked out the God of the Bible with rags of "supertemporality," "impassibility," and "immutability" that, Jonas thinks, do not suit him at all. Nevertheless, it soon becomes apparent that these divine attributes are rejected only to be replaced by

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[28]*CDA*, 14–21.

[29]As in expressions like these: "in order for the world to be and to exist in its own right, God renounced his own being; he stripped himself of his divinity in order to get it back through the odyssey of time . . . at the end of which God would be transfigured, or rather, disfigured, by it" (*CDA*, 15); "transcendence awoke to itself with the appearance of man" (*CDA*, 20).

[30]Cf. *CDA*, 37. The word literally means "contraction." It supposedly appeared in the sixteenth century in the kabbalah of Isaac Luria (1534–1572). Although Jonas does not make use of the Pauline term "kenosis" (cf. Phil 2:7), he is not far from the "kenotic" theology of creation that we find in Friedrich von Hügel or, again, in Bulgakov (cf. P. Henry, "Kénose," in *DBS*, 139). For these authors, the creation, as a loving self-limitation (since now there is "something other" than God), is the translation of the eternal kenosis by which, within the Trinity, the Father does not exist except insofar as he projects himself in the Son, while the Spirit witnesses to the reciprocity of their love. For the influence of Bulgakov's thought on Balthasar's, see below, note 47.

[31]*CDA*, 23.

categories that are more Gnostic than biblical. The vocation of the "righteous" is . . . to redeem God. Far from God's coming to raise man up and give himself to him, it is ultimately man who enables God to be God and to achieve his own plenitude.

b. A Christian author: Joseph Moingt

Joseph Moingt refers explicitly to Hans Jonas,[32] although he works on a broader basis than the trauma of Auschwitz alone. According to Moingt, it is necessary to take to its logical conclusion a metamorphosis in the image of God that is contained in germ in the conception of *fatherhood* brought by Christian revelation—a conception, says Moingt, that breaks radically with human preconceptions, even though the effects of this rupture would not become truly evident until the end of the second millennium of Christianity. Theology must awaken to the challenge of a decisive purification and deepening. It must accept, at long last, the paradox of an "impotent" and suffering Creator God—*not only* in the mystery of the Cross, where the impotence God assumes is plain to see, *but also* in creation itself.[33]

This transferral of the idea of God's weakness to the theology of creation is, in my opinion, a central point of Moingt's thought, indeed, its true specificity with respect to the classical claims of Christian theology, which take it for granted that God *makes himself* weak in the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Cross, so that his self-humiliation in them is an act of power.[34] On the other hand, the idea that God is weak already in creation makes it difficult not to suppose that he suffers from a weakness in his very nature, of whose expression and development the creation then becomes. As the following passage attests, Moingt himself does not hesitate to draw this conclusion:

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[32]Joseph Moingt, "Création et salut," *RSR* 84 (1996): 559–595; "Le Père non puissant—Évolution du sentiment de la paternité de Dieu: de la domination de la loi à la gratuité de l'amour," *De Père à la paternité* (Paris, 1996), 49–68.

[33]After having mentioned Bonhoeffer's theology of the Cross, Moingt explains, "my intention was not to develop a theology of the Cross here. It was sufficient for my purposes to try to understand, with Bonhoeffer, how the Cross authorizes us to relinquish the idea of divine omnipotence, in order then to apply this reflection to the theology of creation" ("Création et salut," 573). In making this application, Moingt relies on the thought of Jüngel and Jonas.

[34]See note 12.

> Read in light of the Cross, the creative act is an act of love that reveals God as a *being who desires* in anticipation of what he expects, a *being who lacks* what he calls into being, *a being affected by passion* because he binds himself to the man, whom he gives the gift of existing in his own right. Eternal being enters into this becoming [*devenir*] that is the future [*avenir*] of Christ in the world and God's coming [*venue*] to Christ.[35]

Although the Cross remains the formal starting-point of Moingt's reflection, the reflection itself leads to claims about God's being that deny him any control at all over the cosmos and history, except insofar as it is to elevate some living being to humanity and enter into a dialogical relationship with it.[36]

On these presuppositions, there is little room for an idea of *providence*, because "God, having given us being, has given us everything at once, and so has nothing left to give us. This means that we can no longer count on any intervention of God in history on our behalf."[37] Consequently, the initiative of redemption is left to the whims of chance: "God, having given himself up from the beginning to the chaotic vicissitudes of history, has left to *chance* . . . to provide him with the man in whom he could delight and incarnate his Logos,"[38] even though Moingt is careful to add that chance is "the hope of the peoples" and "the prayer of the just" and the "groaning of the poor"—probably echoing here the "'thirty-six' unknown righteous men" who keep the world in being, according to Jonas.

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[35]"Création et salut," 579; emphasis mine. The accent was slightly different in a work that appeared a bit before the article from which we cite here: "God surrendered himself to creation in the freedom of his love, opening history to the omnipotence of his love, but he did not become subject to the law of the world's time. He sovereignly 'disposes' his trinitarian existence in history as it is disposed in him in his eternal existence" (*L'homme qui vient de Dieu* [Paris, 1993], 690).

[36]"We must pause to face an objection: isn't this elevation of a being in the world to humanity, which is linked to its destiny in Christ, itself a divine intervention in the course of the world, hence, an act of power?" (579). The very fact that Moingt can raise this question as an objection evidences the extent of his discomfort over the very idea that God might intervene in history.

[37]"Création et salut," 580. Moingt goes on (582) to nuance these statements, which closely resemble Jonas'.

[38]"Création et salut," 585.

If redemption and the Cross are the result of chance, do they nonetheless retain at least some efficacy? For Moingt, the mystery of the Cross is God's unique intervention in the history of man and the world. Even more: it is the real locus of creation, which, for Moingt, is a creation in Christ. But this intervention is, at the same time, a nonintervention. The Cross is the exhaustion of the Father in his abandonment to men. It is the abandonment *of the Father*, and not of the Son, or, to use Moingt's own words, it is "the abandonment of God to the death of his Son."[39] This ambivalence makes the Cross at once the locus of God's abandonment to death and of his birth into his fatherhood:

> Contemporary theology, by retrojecting the "death of God" onto the Cross, has rediscovered the true face of divine paternity—the face of the *impotent Father*—underneath the old figure of the *omnipotent Father*, which had almost immediately covered over the revelation of the God of Jesus Christ, because it was imprisoned from the beginning in a certain image of "father." What is it, then, that theology is rediscovering about God's fatherhood? It is learning that, after having engendered his Son in eternity, after having sent him into the world "in the fullness of the times," as Saint Paul says, he did not truly become a *father* until the Cross, where he experienced suffering in communion with the death of his Son.[40]

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[39]"Le Père non puissant," 61. Moingt himself makes clear the connection between this point and his rejection of the "almighty Father": "There is a historical situation that turns us away from the figure of the all-powerful Father. This is true both for Jewish theologians and for their Christian counterparts, who are rediscovering Jesus' feeling of abandonment as the expression of the abandonment of the Father who abandons himself to men to be put to death on the Cross, who descends into death with his Son" (68). It is difficult to discern the difference between this position and the view of Noetus that merited him Hippolytus' reproach: "he says that Christ is himself the Father and that it is the Father who was born, who suffered, and who died" (*Against Noetus*, 1, 235, 4–5).

[40]"Le Père non-puissant," 62–63. Moingt adds: "If we think about it, we won't say with Nietzsche that 'God has been dead for a long time, only no one has realized it yet.' We will say instead: God had given himself up to death, and we hadn't realized all that that meant" (ibid.). Moingt is clearly under the spell of Hegel here. He himself claims to find in Hegel the means to "think anew about the fatherhood of a God that abandons himself to the death of his Son" (ibid.,

If we take the idea of God's impotence to its logical conclusion, the mystery of the Cross no longer refers God's ability to become weak to the Father-Son relationship. We are no longer able to say that the omnipotent becomes impotent in his Son, who, "crucified in weakness, is alive by God's power" (2 Cor 13:4). The validity of the strength-weakness dialectic rests on the *otherness* of the Father and the Son. Conversely, the abandonment of the paradox of an omnipotent God who becomes weak in his Son without ceasing to be what he is risks erasing this otherness altogether. Christian revelation presents us with the unprecedented claim that God does not hesitate to involve himself with the world. Within this revelation, *the trinitarian distinction is the ultimate* guarantee *of the distinction between God and the world*.

5. The proposal of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Neo-Hegelian authors, as we have seen, tend to champion a post-metaphysical critique of theism and a "stavrological concentration" of theology normed by this philosophical formalization. Accordingly, they demand a revolution in the concept of God. By contrast, Balthasar has attempted to work out a theology of God's suffering that is in continuity with the Church Fathers' and in conformity with Scripture.

Balthasar draws on Galot's idea that the link between love and suffering is founded in the intimacy of the Trinity itself[41] and on Maritain's intuition that there is a divine attribute that is the analogical basis of earthly suffering.[42] On this basis, he argues that theology must "transpose Maritain's intuition from the philosophical level to the life of the Trinity."[43] In order to think correctly about divine *pathos*, theology has to adhere to two principles, which reflect the "trinitarian resources" discussed above:

> On the one hand, theology has to remove from God any experience or suffering that would involve him in the world.

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61).

[41]*DD* IV, 220 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5].

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 221.

> On the other hand, it has to find in God the conditions of the possibility of this experience and suffering so as to lay the groundwork of Christology with all of its trinitarian implications.[44]

These two principles remove any danger of reducing the mystery and thus clear the way to affirming that God's "contingent acts of self-abasement" within space and time have as their condition of possibility the eternal event of the intra-trinitarian exchange: "every contingent happening can take place only in the *heart* of this encompassing dynamism."[45]

"*Encompassing* dynamic." The adjective is worth particular attention. It suggests that what we witness in the history of salvation is not simply the transposition of the eternal trinitarian event. If this were the case, we would inevitably wind up with some form of Gnosticism. And yet, it is the trinitarian "difference" that enables both the difference between God and the world in creation and the separation of death the Son experiences on the Cross:

> The fact that God (as Father) can thus hand over his divinity, that God (as Son) can receive it, not as a mere loan, but as a "consubstantial" possessor of it, means that there is a "separation" in God, a separation so inconceivable and unsurpassable, that any division it might achieve, no matter how dark and painful, can occur only *within* this first act in God.[46]

Balthasar's thinking here is partly indebted to Bulgakov.[47] Despite his risky language, Balthasar does not overrun the crucial limit imposed by theology. According to Bulgakov and Balthasar, the superkenosis that occurs vis-à-vis what is *other than God* (the world) in Jonas and Moingt occurs vis-à-vis the *Other in God*. Nor does its nature change when God empties himself to come into the world. What saves

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[44]*DD* III, 300 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994].

[45]*Theo-Drama*, IV, 223 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5].

[46]*Theo-Drama*, III, 301 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4].

[47]"With Bulgakov, we could speak of the Father's self-emptying in the generation of the Son as a first intradivine 'kenosis' underlying the whole trinitarian life" (*DD* III, 299–300 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4]).

God's divinity is that this super-kenosis, while the condition of the possibility of a kenosis within history, always takes place between God and God.

The trinitarian exchange, then, wherein the Father is "dispossessed" of himself into the Son, and vice versa, is the real "condition of the possibility of death in God."[48] Of death and of resurrection. For Jesus' Resurrection from the dead is the proof that he has the divine power to absorb his death in his eternal life ("no one takes my life from me, but it is I who give it; I have the power to give it and the power to take it up": Jn 10:8). What in God's own life is a death to self, which is one with the super-abundance of life, becomes a passage through death to Resurrection when God enters into contact with the sinful reality of earthly existence:

> It is only because suffering and death are inside God himself, but as the outpouring of love, that Christ can conquer death and suffering by his death and Resurrection. . . . Suffering and death are not left behind thanks to an eternal impassibility of the divine essence. Suffering and death, seen from God's side, are, by reason of his absolute freedom, the eternal language of his Glory—even in the cry of agony, the final dumbness of silence and death.[49]

Outfitted with these tools, we will now venture an interpretation of the suffering of the Cross that recapitulates our proposal in this essay.

6. What is happening on the Cross?[50]

On the Cross, Christ experiences abandonment. He seems to have lost his own identity—his essential identity with the Father and, therefore, his identity as Son—on account of his identification with sinners and with sin itself. This is the content of his suffering. *He experiences a difference from the Father, even as he is one same Being with the*

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[48]Ibid.

[49]*DD* IV, 223–224 [see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5].

[50]See T. R. Krenski, *"Passio Caritatis." Trinitarische Passiologie im Werk H.U. von Balthasars* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1990).

Father. And it is insofar as he is God that he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This difference manifests the eternal difference between the Father and the Son. This latter difference is rooted in the eternal generation of the Son, in which the Father and the Son stand face to face. And yet, this difference is a difference within the identity of one Being. It is a *difference*, because the Son is the one God as Son, and not as Father. But the difference occurs in an *identity*, because, precisely as the Other of the Father, he is only one Being with him.

As we have said, this intra-divine difference is the foundation of all subsequent extra-trinitarian differences (in particular the difference between God and the world). The primordial difference within God thus anchors in God's being the difference that opens between God and the world at the moment of creation, which in some sense prolongs the "self-dispossession" of God. By the same token, the Son's generation (and the difference it implies vis-à-vis the Father) is the ground within God's nature of a creation that is not a natural necessity for him. The difference between the Father and the Son is the ground and the image of the difference between God and the world.

But, because it calls freedom into being, the otherness existing between God and the world includes the risk that this freedom will separate itself from God, thereby perverting the blessed *difference* of love into a cursed *separation* of the world from God. In this respect, we can say that sinful difference, which gives rise to the suffering of God and of the sinner, has an indirect root in the difference within God himself. This sinful difference takes the form of the God-man's abandonment by God.

The difference between the Father and the Son, which pertains to the divine nature, grounds all other differences that are not tied to that nature—including the difference created by sin. By the same token, this sinful difference is surmounted by the identity of nature between the Father and the Son—insofar, that is, as the Son "becomes sin" for our sakes.

If the identity and difference that obtain within God are the archetype of all difference, they function as such also with respect to the suffering undergone in the Paschal mystery. This does not mean, of course, that creaturely suffering as such is a consequence of intra-divine difference. It does mean, however, that intra-divine difference

enables the self-outpouring by which God freely exposes himself to the freedom of his creature.

The distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity becomes necessary at this point if we are to avoid the impasses of any "theology of divine suffering" that would make suffering a necessity for God. The axiom of divine "*apatheia*" must remain in place. And yet, it can do so because the distinction between the "super-kenosis" within God and the "economic" kenosis enacted in creation, covenant, and Cross, safeguards God's freedom. God does not take our suffering upon himself on account of any necessity, whether internal or external. Rather, he exposes himself to it in the sovereign freedom of his love. It was for this reason that Origen, pondering the question of God's suffering, could answer affirmatively—in terms of the *passio caritatis*.
—Translated by Adrian J. Walker.

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