

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF THE SUFFERING BODY

• José Granados •

“What is revealed about the body through suffering is its openness to the world in the form of vulnerability. This openness guides us to solidarity with our fellow men: the body becomes a place of communion by means of compassion.”



There is a chapter of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* that is still waiting to be written. This claim might be borne out by way of a statement from the author himself, who mentioned at least one aspect of his work that would be worthy of development: “These reflections do not include multiple problems which, with regard to their object, belong to the theology of the body (as, for example, the problem of suffering and death, so important in the biblical message).”¹ Suffering and death are especially important when we try to understand the redemption of the body brought about by Christ.

Now, let us remember that the catecheses are arranged according to a temporal pattern: from creation, to historical man (fallen and redeemed), to the resurrection of the body, that is, the last stage of history. This means that the missing chapter in question is the one that would make the transition between the fallen and redeemed states of mankind: the very life and death of Christ, the exact moment and way in which the redemption of the body—and its renewed access to the original experiences of Paradise—took place.

¹Cf. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston, 1997) (=TB), 420.

This paper is an attempt at a theological elaboration of this missing chapter, taking John Paul II's theology of the body both as a point of departure and as a theological frame. Other works by John Paul II will be referred to as well in what follows.

In order to understand what was required for a return to the original state, we will start with a brief description of man's situation before and after the Fall (1). We will then turn to see how this recovery of the beginning began with the story of Abraham, which John Paul II comments upon in his *Roman Triptych* (2). The sacrifice requested of the Patriarch will open up the question of suffering, which we will consider in a third step, following John Paul's considerations in his letter *Salvifici doloris* (3). Finally, we will consider the redemptive act of Christ in order to see how it makes the way back to the beginning and its fulfillment possible (4).

1. Man's original state after the Fall: concupiscence

John Paul II uses the term "original experience" to describe God's original plan for man. This experience does not belong solely to the past: it is of continuing importance for us because it constitutes what is still at the foundation of every human experience. Following the Genesis account, John Paul II identifies the moments of this original experience as solitude, unity, and nakedness. These three moments are interrelated because of the one dynamism that holds them together: the dynamism of the gift.

How could we describe this dynamism? According to John Paul II, Adam, called to communion with God from the beginning (original solitude), is only able to discover and develop this call fully by meeting Eve (original unity). This process should not be understood as a temporal development, as though Adam's solitude were at some point overcome by his unity with Eve. Original solitude does not disappear with Adam's encounter with Eve, but is rather strengthened by it. How can this be possible? Isn't there a contradiction between solitude and unity? This would be the case, in fact, if solitude were simply identified with loneliness. But solitude, for John Paul II, does not mean only the fact of being alone; it refers much more to man's foundational openness to God, who is the only one who is able to fulfill his heart. In this light a path opens up for understanding the integration of solitude and unity.

Adam is able to discover in Eve a helper fit for him only if he perceives her special dignity, which means, for John Paul II, only if Adam perceives that Eve, as distinct from the other creatures he has encountered in his quest, is loved by God for her own sake. Adam has to receive Eve, then, as a special gift from God, as someone entrusted to him by God. At the same time, both Adam and Eve must understand that they have been entrusted to the other as God's gifts. But if human love is based on receiving and being given to the other as God's gift, then the profound link between love of God and love of neighbor comes to the fore here in the original experience.

At this point we turn to a consideration of original nakedness, which means a consideration of the anthropological reality we call the body. John Paul II insists on the difference between the body and the other material objects. Adam is aware of his original solitude not through a transcendental analysis of his own interiority, but through the direct contact with the world through his body; the bodily activities of tilling the ground and naming the animals reveal to him that he is different from the material world, free and endowed with self-consciousness. At the same time, it is the body that allows Adam to recognize Eve as a gift and to express his love to her. The body appears as the place of communion between God and man and between man and woman. The body is not void of meaning. On the contrary, it expresses the gift and makes the gift visible: this is what is meant by original nakedness. The body reveals to Adam and Eve that they both come from the Father, and points also to their vocation of self-gift to one another. It is the original place of communion and transcendence.

In describing the original experiences, it is important to note that Christology is not absent from this account of the original state of Paradise.² First of all, because original solitude, that is, the fact that Adam recognizes in God's love the origin and fulfillment of his existence, is expressed by calling Adam "son of God." Original solitude can thus be understood in terms of filiation. Christ, then, will be the fulfillment of original solitude and was its foundation already at the beginning. If God is able to open a space of filiation

²For a more detailed account of this relationship between Christology and the original experiences, see my "Christ and the Way of Love in the Theology of the Body," *The Indian Journal of Marriage and Family* 4 (2006): 45–48.

for man, it is because of the coeternal Son's existence in him from all eternity.

But Christology is also active at the beginning because the Incarnation will bring the dynamism of the gift to fulfillment. Original solitude is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who comes totally from the Father and whose whole existence is directed towards the Father. Moreover, this union between Christ and the Father is realized through the Son's obedience in the acceptance of his mission, his death on the Cross for the redemption of the world. According to the Father's will, Christ receives every human person as a gift entrusted to him (cf. Jn 17:6: "They belonged to you, and *you gave them to me*") and he is also, himself, the gift of the Father to the world (cf. Jn 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"). This means that original solitude (his coming from the Father and his going back to the Father) is fulfilled through original unity (for he receives the world as a gift and is given to the world as a gift). Original nakedness as total transparency of the body is also brought to perfection in the whole life of Christ: this is why he is able to say, "who sees me sees the Father" (Jn 14:9: "whoever has seen me has seen the Father").

With this we begin to see the relationship between the life of Christ and the original experiences. However, in order to understand the need for a Redeemer, we need to take a further step. The dynamism of love that was God's plan for Adam and Eve from the beginning was profoundly modified by their first sin. This modification is attested to by the biblical narrative's reference to the absence of shame prior to the Fall; it speaks of an original harmony that was afterwards lost. The importance of shame for John Paul II is that it reveals to us now, as though in a photographic negative, man's original condition: it is a consequence of original sin but also a reminder of the different state of things in the beginning. In this way it simultaneously reveals and veils the way back to the foundational experiences.

Let us consider why this is so. Following Max Scheler's phenomenological description, John Paul II describes shame as the necessity of hiding something from the view of the others.³ What is hidden is not just any object whatsoever, any one of our many

³Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 174-193.

possessions, but rather the very core of our person. If we hide it, it is out of fear of its being abused: this is the negative side of shame. On the other hand, this very shame attests to the value of the thing that is hidden: it shows that we are still able to recognize its importance.

In order to make this observation more concrete, we should note that the experience of shame refers to the human body, especially in its masculinity and femininity. Now, masculinity and femininity reveal how the body expresses the person in his or her capacity of being related to others in love. Ultimately, they reveal also that the body is a gift from the Creator, the original source of love. Thus shame points out that the body is called to express love and that this capacity is threatened and must be protected. This is why John Paul II calls shame a boundary experience.

According to John Paul II, this shame is twofold. One can be ashamed because someone is looking at him without respect; one can be also ashamed of his own gaze at another person. Both kinds of shame are a consequence of sin, but only the latter, the fact that one is interiorly disordered and unable to shape his own gaze and emotions according to the dignity of the person, is linked directly by John Paul II to the theological concept of concupiscence.

This connection provides us with new insights into the meaning of concupiscence. John Paul II describes the situation after the Fall as following a new logic that comes from the world (cf. 1 Jn 2:16) instead of from the Father; it is the opposite of the logic of filiation and nuptiality in which the body expresses the person as God's gift to others.

But this logic of the world is not merely the symmetrical opposite of the original, as though it were its counterpart. We could characterize it better, following John Paul II, as an intentional reduction, a reduction of the horizon, a form of blindness. It is a kind of existence at a lower level of consciousness and action, an incapacity to see the deeper meaning of the human body, and, accordingly, to express the meaning of love in one's own body. Man is prompted to consider the human body as a body among animal bodies, thereby missing the crucial difference between man's body and the other surrounding objects in the visible world. This ultimately means that he lives a reduced life in which he is unable to grasp the whole profundity of human action.

Where does this incapacity come from? In the beginning, man enjoyed an original radication in God's love: God's original

grace surrounded Adam and Eve, allowing them to receive his love and manifest this love in their bodies. It was only the gratuitous revelation of love that was able to awaken them to the higher level of reality of the communion of persons. The human being was thus totally grounded in this love. We could approach this understanding via the sense in which the tradition has spoken of original justice.⁴

Original sin is the privation of this original justice, together with the consequences that follow its loss. It means that this revelation of God's love, which embraced the entire person, is now lacking. In rejecting this encompassing love, man made himself unable to recognize love and to express it as before. The refusal of the light transformed his eyes, leaving them in a sense color-blind. Unable to perceive this love and, also, to govern his body to express it, man now lives the reduced existence described by John Paul II in the second cycle of his catecheses.

The effects of this absence of original justice mark man's entire constitution. Its absence is particularly noticeable in regard to man's body, which is the way he experiences the world and is present to it. In this regard we speak of concupiscence as a difficulty in perceiving the manifestation of love in the world and of expressing an adequate response to it in one's body. This incapacity comes from sin and inclines man towards sin, inasmuch as sin is the contrary of love and sets out, not from a denial of love, but rather from indifference in the face of its manifestation.

In the original plan of God, this light of love was to have been mediated to all mankind by the human love of Adam and Eve in the form of parenthood. It is thus interesting to note how one of the consequences of this disorder concerns motherhood and fatherhood, which cease to be considered a sign of the mystery of the origin. Every father and mother after Adam and Eve will have difficulty in expressing the mystery of the beginning in the way they love each other and, therefore, in their paternity and maternity.

From this moment on, there is a lack of mediation that will affect all the descendants of Adam and Eve. The love between the parents is now incapable of mediating fully to the child the presence of God, the original giver. Of course, we need to understand this lack of mediation in its fullest sense, and not merely as a bad example

⁴Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I-II*, 82, 3.

given by the parents. In the original plan of God this mediation belonged to the very structure of man; it belonged in a special way to his body, even in its physical structure. In this sense John Paul II speaks of a cosmic shame, because the disorder created by sin affects the whole of the material creation.⁵ Since this mediation of God's love in parenthood is related to the very constitution of the human body, it precedes the knowledge and action of the child who is conceived. A lack of radiation of fatherhood accompanies the life of the new human being from its very beginning (preceding his freedom) and is inscribed in his very constitution.

But, as John Paul II is careful to note, from the beginning we also hear a promise of redemption, the Protoevangelium. This promise begins to be enacted in the Old Testament. It will consist precisely in a new radiation of the fatherhood of God in human fatherhood, and it will be expressed in the form of suffering. This is why we will turn now to the figure of Abraham (2) and continue afterwards with the consideration of suffering (3) before studying the redemptive act of Christ (4).

2. Abraham: A new radiation of fatherhood

Another way to describe the effect of original sin, according to what we have just stated, would be to say that from the fall of the first parents onward, God's fatherhood remains something external to man. This is ultimately why we tend to see God as a lawmaker who opposes our innermost desires. John Paul II describes this situation in his play, *Reflections on Fatherhood*, in which Adam addresses God, saying:

Can I ask, after all this, that You forgive me for executing my plan with such obstinacy? For continually evading Your Fatherhood and gravitating toward my loneliness, so that You must reveal Yourself as if in an external vacuum?⁶

⁵Cf. *TB*, 114: "Adam's words in Genesis 3:10, 'I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself,' seem to express the awareness of being defenseless. They express the sense of insecurity of his bodily structure before the processes of nature, operating with inevitable determinism. Perhaps in this overwhelming statement a certain 'cosmic shame' is implicit."

⁶Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Opere Letterarie. Poesie e drammi* (Rome, 1993), 553.

God has to reveal himself as if in an external vacuum because the radiation of fatherhood, which Adam was supposed to provide, is missing. But, as we have just said, the Old Testament bears witness, not only to an increase of sin (cf. Gn 4–11), but also to a way in which God’s fatherhood recovers, step by step, its capacity of radiating from the human flesh. Especially important in this regard, because of the consideration accorded him by John Paul II, is the figure of Abraham.

The frame in which John Paul II places the history of the Patriarch in his *Roman Triptych* is, precisely, the growth in fatherhood that is requested of him. John Paul II turns to consider the figure of Abraham directly after having spoken of Adam and Eve. He starts by referring to the promise of the son:

He recognized the Voice. He recognized the promise.
A year later, with Sara, they both rejoiced
at the birth of a son,
though they were both advanced in years.
A son—which means: fatherhood and motherhood.⁷

What is the connection between Abraham and fatherhood? Let us consider its different dimensions.

a) The Patriarch bears witness, first of all, to the fact that every child is a gift from God and can never be claimed as one’s own possession. Sara’s womb was blessed with a son who is the expression of the divine gift, surpassing any human expectation. Sara reveals in a special way, through the extraordinary circumstances of her conception, the fact that every woman who receives the blessing of God becomes a sign of his being the original giver of human existence.

Now, it is important to notice how deeply connected this fact is with Abraham’s perfect obedience to God’s voice. There is an internal harmony between the generation of a son as acceptance of God’s gift, on the one hand, and the obedient heart of Abraham, who follows God’s voice, on the other. This is in accordance with what John Paul II states in *Reflections on Fatherhood*: “After a long time I came to understand that you do not want me to be a father

⁷Cf. John Paul II, *The Poetry of Pope John Paul II. Roman Triptych. Meditations* (Washington, D.C., 2003) (=RT), 31–32.

unless I become a child.”⁸ Abraham’s filial attitude of obedience is a preparation for his fatherhood.

We witness, thus, a first recovery of the radiation of divine fatherhood through human fatherhood. Abraham’s paternity begins to radiate the presence of God as original giver. By way of his filial obedience to God’s call, he appears as a step forward in the education of fatherhood, in the process of making God’s fatherhood interior to that of man.

b) The second important aspect of Abraham has to do more specifically with his fatherhood. Let us consider the promise made to Abraham: offspring that will be a blessing, faithful to the Lord. This confers upon Abraham a new mission: that of responsibility regarding his children. The father bears on his shoulders the future of others, opening new paths for them through his actions. Abraham’s action is precisely the action of hope, an action that is possible only because it finds its foundation in God’s promise.⁹

In this regard, let us recall the words of Adam in *Radiation of Fatherhood*:

Why ask that he allow the radiation of Your Fatherhood to enter him so that he can refract it as a prism refracts light?
When I give birth, I do it to become lonely among those born, because I pass on to them the germ of loneliness. In the midst of a multitude, are they not more and more lonely?¹⁰

The new paternity of Abraham, instead of passing on the germ of loneliness, will pass on to his children a germ of filiation and communion because of its rootedness in God. The human generation in the flesh will start to become again, as it was in the original plan of God, the vehicle of the generation according to the spirit, the recognition of one’s existence as God’s gift.

c) What is more difficult to understand in Abraham’s story is the extreme situation in which God’s commandment placed him. He will be called to sacrifice the very offspring whose future he must guarantee as father. The two dimensions of Abraham’s figure we just

⁸Cf. Wojtyła, *Opere Letterarie*, 555.

⁹Gabriel Marcel speaks, in this regard, of fatherhood as a “creative vow.” Cf. G. Marcel, *Homo Viator. Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope* (New York, 1962).

¹⁰Cf. Wojtyła, *Opere Letterarie*, 517.

pointed out—filiation and fatherhood, obedience to God and responsibility towards his offspring—are being tested here.

The Jewish exegesis of Genesis separated these two dimensions in the corresponding figures of Abraham and Isaac. The traditional account of the binding of Isaac, in which the son willingly accepts the sacrifice of his life for the sake of Israel, attests to this fact.¹¹ In the figure of Isaac we see filiation as the trustful acceptance of one's own fate from the hands of the father. From the point of view of Abraham we witness the trial of fatherhood: he is called to an action, but an action that seems oriented towards the destruction of the future he has been promised by the Voice.¹²

Why was this trial requested of Abraham and Isaac? This question opened the way for Kierkegaard's famous discussion in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham's character as an example of religion as opposed to ethics.¹³ Instead of finding God's request utterly absurd, John Paul II sees the fittingness of Abraham's trial, in fact precisely as the path that leads him to a better expression of God's fatherhood in his life.¹⁴ By accepting the sacrifice of his child, Abraham gives witness to his total reliance on God, a reliance that is the real foundation of hope for his people in the future. As the letter to the Hebrews interprets Abraham's action, he believed that God was powerful enough to give life to the dead (cf. Heb 11:17–19). Isaac's obedience, on the other hand, attests to the perfect filiation he

¹¹Cf. L. Sabourin, "Sacrifice," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément* (Paris, 1985), vol. 10, 1508–1509.

¹²This separation of the figures of Isaac and Abraham will be reflected in the New Testament, where the figure of Isaac will be connected to Christ's offering, and the heart of Abraham will reflect the heart of the Father. In this way a background is provided against which we can read the Passion of Jesus as love between the Father and the Son.

¹³Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac. But in this contradiction lies precisely the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless, and yet Abraham is not who he is without this anxiety."

¹⁴Cf. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom. Reading Genesis* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 336: "I am suggesting that, far from being irrational, this test makes very good sense as a test both of the father and of the founder, as a test for the would-be 'Father of Multitudes.'" Cf. regarding the sacrifice of Isaac, the entire section, 333–348.

lived out, to the understanding that God is the Lord from whom every life comes.

What Abraham's test shows us is that the relationship between father and son is not closed in on itself, but is rather opened to a greater dimension, that of the Creator who is the absolute origin and foundation of existence, that of the Voice who promises beyond all expectation. We begin to see why the ultimate question of suffering and death had to be posed to Abraham as the foundation of the whole enterprise of fatherhood. With the question of death, there arises in man the need to seek the foundation of his life, the ultimate origin of everything. The question of death is thus one of the forms that original solitude assumes in human life. In the following section, we will study in detail the necessity of this path of suffering and death for the recovery of the original experiences.

But first, notice that this question is related to a second: Why didn't Abraham achieve the total transparency of fatherhood? Abraham fulfilled the sacrifice in his heart, which for John Paul II means a recovery of the original radiation of fatherhood in the body. At the same time, however, the pope speaks of a limit to fatherhood, a threshold that Abraham will not cross.¹⁵ Through his sacrifice Abraham paves the way towards a further fulfillment,¹⁶ Christ's death on the Cross, which we will consider after studying the boundary experience of suffering.

3. The boundary experience of suffering as a recovery of the original experiences

Our consideration of man's state after the Fall led us to affirm an ontological lack of a radiation of parenthood in human life from

¹⁵Cf. *RT*, 34: "Abraham, you who climb this hill in the land of Moriah, / there exists a limit to fatherhood, / a threshold you will never cross. / Here another Father will accept the sacrifice of his Son. / Do not be afraid, Abraham, go ahead, / do what you have to do."

¹⁶John Paul II highlights how Abraham paves the way towards Christ by quoting a christological sentence from Ephesians (the mystery hidden from the foundation of the world) in his *Roman Triptych*: "God came to Abraham, who believed. / When people and nations were making gods for themselves / He Who Is came. / He entered the history of humanity / and revealed the mystery, / hidden from the foundation of the world" (*RT*, 32).

its very beginning. We have associated this lack with the boundary experience of shame. Shame, at least in some of its manifestations, is related to concupiscence, to a disorder that makes the body incapable of fully expressing love. At the same time, however, shame offers a way back to the original experiences because it recalls the dignity of the person in its connection with the human body. Thus, by listening to the voice of shame we detect the active presence of the beginning within our experience.

The path of Abraham, as the recovery of the original plan of God, travels along the path of another experience: suffering. The point we want to make in what follows is that *the description of the experience of suffering offered by John Paul II in the apostolic letter Salvifici doloris runs parallel to the analysis of shame in The Theology of the Body*. We could say, then, that suffering is also a boundary experience, which simultaneously veils and reveals the path towards the original state of man: towards original solitude, unity, and nakedness.

Let us start by noting that in *Salvifici doloris* John Paul II follows the same method he uses in *The Theology of the Body*: the circularity between revelation and experience. Understanding suffering, he says, is at the same time a need of the heart (human experience) and an imperative of faith (access through revelation).¹⁷

The first result of the pope's analysis is that suffering reveals to man that he is different from the surrounding animal world. Suffering reveals to man the mystery of his being, albeit in the form of a question:

¹⁷Cf. *Salvifici doloris*, 31: "This is the meaning of suffering, which is truly supernatural and at the same time human. It is *supernatural* because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply *human*, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission." Cf. also *Salvifici doloris*, 4: "Human suffering evokes *compassion*; it also evokes *respect*, and in its own way it *intimidates*. For in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery. This special respect for every form of human suffering must be set at the beginning of what will be expressed here later by the deepest *need of the heart*, and also by the deep *imperative of faith*. About the theme of suffering these two reasons seem to draw particularly close to each other and to become one: the need of the heart commands us to overcome fear, and the imperative of faith—formulated, for example, in the words of Saint Paul quoted at the beginning—provides the content, in the name of which and by virtue of which we dare to touch what appears in every man so intangible: for man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery."

even though man knows and is close to the sufferings of the animal world, nevertheless what we express by the word “suffering” seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*. It is as deep as man himself, precisely because it manifests in its own way that depth which is proper to man, and in its own way surpasses it. Suffering seems to belong to man’s transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense “destined” to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way. (*Salvifici doloris*, 2)

Here we notice a similarity with the experience of original solitude as described by John Paul II in his theology of the body. In the beginning the body was able to reveal to man (by the activity of tilling the ground and by the act of naming the animals) his dignity as different from anything else on earth, because of his ultimate call to communion with the Father. After the Fall, the transparency of these activities has been obscured. Work and language risk being seen as mechanical operations, instead of as activities that enable man to be the coworker and partner of God. But there is still an experience of the body that reveals man’s dignity unequivocally: his suffering.¹⁸ Suffering reveals to man precisely the possibility of a dialogue with God:

questions [regarding suffering] are difficult, when an individual puts them to another individual, when people put them to other people, as also when man *puts them to God*. For man does not put this question to the world, even though it is from the world that suffering often comes to him, but he puts it to God as the Creator and Lord of the world. (*Salvifici doloris*, 9)

As we observed in our analysis of the original experiences, it is again the concrete experience of the body, now through the narrow gate of suffering, that offers us contact with man’s beginning and thereby with the transcendence of God.¹⁹ Let us recall, indeed, that the body is the proper place of suffering, in the etymological sense of “being passive” (suffering as pathos). Thus, we speak of suffering as bodily not because we equate suffering with pain, but

¹⁸Cf. in this regard Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, with a postface by Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh, 1998); cf. also Antonio Sicari, *Breve catequesis sobre el matrimonio* (Madrid, 1995), 75–76.

¹⁹John Paul II underscores the connection between suffering and the body in his letter: cf. *Salvifici doloris*, 6.

rather because human suffering is rooted in the body and is possible because of the body. What is revealed about the body in suffering is its openness to the world in the form of vulnerability. This openness guides us to solidarity with our fellow men: the body becomes a place of communion, by means of compassion (from the Latin *compati*, “to suffer with”).

John Paul II discerns the contents of the experience of the body by considering the redemptive act of Christ. First, we find the possibility of suffering as openness to others:

If one becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because Christ *has opened his suffering to man*, because he himself in his redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer in all human sufferings. Man, discovering through faith the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he *rediscovers them, through faith*, enriched with a new content and new meaning. (*Salvifici doloris*, 20)

John Paul II also discovers in the New Testament the association between suffering and vulnerability and weakness, a particular kind of weakness that becomes strength:

The gospel *paradox of weakness and strength* often speaks to us from the pages of the Letters of Saint Paul, a paradox particularly experienced by the Apostle himself and together with him experienced by all who share Christ’s sufferings. Paul writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” In the Second Letter to Timothy we read: “And therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.” And in the Letter to the Philippians he will even say: “*I can do all things in him* who strengthens me.” (*Salvifici doloris*, 23)

In this way, the world of suffering becomes a world of communion, a world of solidarity:

The world of suffering possesses as it were its *own solidarity*. People who suffer become similar to one another through the analogy of their situation, the trial of their destiny, or through their need for understanding and care, and perhaps above all through the persistent question of the meaning of suffering. Thus, although the world of suffering exists “in dispersion,” at

the same time it contains within itself a singular challenge to communion and solidarity.²⁰ (*Salvifici doloris*, 8)

In regard to this text, let us recall that from the beginning, the body (especially in its masculinity and femininity) is the place where the communion of persons is revealed and brought to fulfillment. Now, through an examination of the suffering body, we arrive at the same conclusion: the body is the place of communion. The difference is that the dynamism of the gift is now translated into a dynamism of compassion, which John Paul II analyzes through an exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan.²¹ Compassion, suffering with the other, does not conclude in a feeling, but leads rather to a gift of self.²² In this way suffering makes love visible in the world, it becomes a path towards the establishment of the civilization of love. In an important statement for our study, John Paul II writes: “suffering . . . is present . . . in our human world . . . in order to unleash love in the human person, that unselfish gift of one’s ‘I’ on

²⁰Cf. also: “In this way, that world of suffering which in brief has its subject in each human being, seems in our age to be transformed—perhaps more than at any other moment—into a special ‘world’: the world which as never before has been transformed by progress through man’s work and, at the same time, is as never before in danger because of man’s mistakes and offences” (*Salvifici doloris*, 8).

²¹“We are not allowed to ‘pass by on the other side’ indifferently; we must ‘stop’ beside him. *Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person*, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own. The name ‘Good Samaritan’ fits *every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others*, who ‘is moved’ by the misfortune of another. If Christ, who knows the interior of man, emphasizes this compassion, this means that it is important for our whole attitude to others’ suffering. Therefore one must cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to *compassion* towards a suffering person. Sometimes this compassion remains the only or principal expression of our love for and solidarity with the sufferer” (*Salvifici doloris*, 28).

²²“Nevertheless, the Good Samaritan of Christ’s parable does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone. They become for him an incentive to actions aimed at bringing help to the injured man. In a word, then, a Good Samaritan is *one who brings help in suffering*, whatever its nature may be. Help which is, as far as possible, effective. He puts his whole heart into it, nor does he spare material means. We can say that he gives himself, his very ‘I,’ opening this ‘I’ to the other person. Here we touch upon one of the key-points of all Christian anthropology. Man cannot ‘fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself’ (92). A Good Samaritan is *the person capable of exactly such a gift of self*” (*Salvifici doloris*, 28).

behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love."²³

John Paul II makes these reflections following an anthropological analysis, in which, as we said above, he combines the necessity of the heart with the imperative of faith. It is interesting to point to the connections with some personalist accounts of suffering, such as that of E. Levinas. For the latter, transcendence (in connection with John Paul II's original solitude) is revealed by the encounter with the suffering face of the other, who becomes an appeal to our freedom. Compassion invites us to assume our own responsibility regarding this evil that embraces our neighbor. In this way, by becoming suffering for the suffering, our suffering is able to take on a meaning.²⁴

Therefore, we find in suffering, as it were, a new grammar of the original experiences: original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness are attained by a different form of the dynamism of the gift, the dynamism of compassion. As the body revealed to Adam his dignity, so does suffering when it poses the question to God. As Adam was unable to find God without the encounter with

²³*Salvifici doloris*, 29; the quote continues: "and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions. The person who is a 'neighbor' cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another: this in the name of fundamental human solidarity, still more in the name of love of neighbor. He must 'stop,' 'sympathize,' just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable."

²⁴E. Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre nous. Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 94: "A high-mindedness that is the honor of a still uncertain, still vacillating modernity, emerging at the end of a century of unutterable suffering, but in which the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human. In this perspective there is a radical difference between the suffering in the other, where it is unforgivable to me, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else. It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties) can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle—the only one it is impossible to question—shaping the hopes and commanding the practical discipline of vast human groups."

Eve (original unity), so the man who suffers is unable to answer his question without encountering a compassionate gaze.²⁵ Let us describe in greater detail the dynamism of compassion as a new version of the dynamism of the gift when the latter encounters suffering.

In seeing the suffering of the other, man understands the dignity of the sufferer: face to face with him, he discovers the reference to transcendence in the form of a painful question posed to God: Why? Man is then moved to compassion: compassion is the adequate answer to the call of suffering, an identification with the suffering person that awakens suffering in us. Through our neighbor's suffering we are reminded of our reference to God, which is what constitutes our dignity. This is because our suffering with our neighbor, flesh of our flesh, means the reawakening in us, through our own compassionate suffering, of the question of the origin, of the need to look for the good that precedes all evil.

On the other hand, this movement of our compassion is a new revelation for the suffering person. Someone takes care of him, in the midst of his pain; even more: someone wishes to suffer with him. This compassion reawakens in him the sense of his own dignity; it is the beginning of the answer to his question to God regarding the meaning of his suffering. Compassion is also a call to love in return and by doing so to give one's own suffering the form of love. The cycle of compassion is thus completed in the form of love, of a rebuilding of love in man's heart and body. In this way, it leads to the recognition and acceptance of God, finding within suffering the blessing that allows us to encounter him again as the foundation of our existence.

²⁵E. Levinas quotes a story from the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot, 5b) to illustrate the fact that nobody evades suffering by his own strength, outside the world of the interhuman: "Rav Hiyya bar Abba falls ill and Rav Yohanan comes to visit him. He asks him: 'Are your sufferings fitting to you?' 'Neither they nor the compensations they promise.' 'Give me your hand,' the visitor of the ailing man then says. And the visitor lifts the ailing man from his couch. But then Rav Yohanan himself falls ill and is visited by Rav Hanina. Same question: 'Are your suffering fitting to you?' Same response: 'Neither they nor compensations they promise.' 'Give me your hand,' says Rav Hanina, and he lifts Rav Yohanan from his couch. Question: Could not Rav Yohanan lift himself by himself? Answer: The prisoner could not break free from his confinement by himself" (quoted by Levinas, "Useless Suffering," ch. 8, note 4).

Let us connect this analysis now with the conclusions of the earlier section on Abraham: we will begin to understand why it was precisely the trial of suffering that God required of the Patriarch. Suffering, as the way back to the beginning, finds its adequate context in Abraham's story: in the relationship between the father and the son, in the obedience of Abraham and Isaac to God, and in the total abandonment of Abraham to God's will, which becomes a blessing for the whole people. In contrast to other accounts of suffering in the Bible, Abraham's sacrifice brings to the fore the relationship between father and son, and not the isolated suffering of man before God. Abraham suffers for Isaac and all his children, he suffers for them because of his obedience to the Lord; through this trial he learns to find a mysterious connection between his compassion towards Isaac and the presence of God in his life. This is why Abraham's sacrifice is a step forward in recovering through suffering the link between human generation and the radiation of God's fatherhood.

We still need to answer the question with which we concluded our section on Abraham: Why is there a limit to fatherhood that the Patriarch will not cross? How was Christ able to cross this threshold?

4. The act of Christ and the recovery of the original experiences

In *Salvifici doloris* John Paul II provides the connection between the two preceding sections of our study in his vision of Israel's suffering as a process of education:

in the sufferings inflicted by God upon the Chosen People there is included an invitation of his mercy, which corrects in order to lead to conversion: ". . . these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people." Thus the personal dimension of punishment is affirmed. According to this dimension, punishment has a meaning not only because it serves to repay the objective evil of the transgression with another evil, but first and foremost because it creates the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers. (*Salvifici doloris*, 12)

We looked at an important instance of this educational process in the sacrifice of Abraham, and we saw how it was a question of "rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers." We

defined this rebuilding of goodness as going back to the original state of Paradise through the recovery of the radiation of fatherhood in the human body. This new manifestation of God's grace in the body was needed in order to recover the logic of the beginning, in which the manifestation of love appeared in human flesh. This manifestation begins to take place in the heart of Abraham, which is able to reveal the heart of the Father, and it will continue throughout the history of Israel.²⁶

The fulfilled manifestation of the grace of God in the body will appear only in the life of Christ. In him we see this new presence of grace in the suffering body, a grace needed in order to walk the path back to Paradise. This is why John Paul II will see in Christ the final illumination of human suffering. "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and makes his supreme calling clear. If these words refer to everything that concerns the mystery of man, then they certainly refer in a very special way *to human suffering*. Precisely at this point the 'revealing of man to himself and making his supreme vocation clear' is particularly indispensable" (*Salvifici doloris*, 31). Let us consider how Christ made this transformation possible.

a) Only the boundary experiences make the way back to the beginning possible for man. This is because they are at once proper to historical man, and also linked with the original experiences.

We have described two boundary experiences: shame and suffering. Now: if Christ were to recover the transparency of fatherhood, he could not assume the boundary experience of shame, at least inasmuch as it is a reaction to the interior disorder of concupiscence. This is because concupiscence, as we have shown above, means precisely the impossibility of the total manifestation of love in the body. We have described it as a diminished existence, in which man is incapable of grasping the manifestation of love and living according to it. The absence of concupiscence is a precondition for the total recovery of the transparency of filiation, sponsality, and fatherhood in Christ's body.

For its part, suffering is also a boundary experience because it reveals in the body the dignity of the person in his transcendence

²⁶Cf. U. Mauser, *Gottesbild und Menschwerdung. Eine Untersuchung zur Einheit des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen, 1971), which deals with the example of Jeremiah.

and reference to God. Unlike shame, however, suffering does not arise from the presence of concupiscence in us. Therefore, suffering does not obscure the radiation of fatherhood and it appears as the fundamental dimension of human existence assumed by Christ, in which a path towards the rebuilding of love was extended. We can thus say: *Christ assumed the boundary experience of suffering, which manifests in a special way the nuptial meaning of the body, in order to recover for us the fullness of the original experiences.*

b) The fact that the redemption comes through suffering is connected to the importance given to the body in Christian anthropology. The body, precisely because of its capacity to suffer, to be affected by external events, is the anthropological element that opens us up to the world and to our neighbors. This communion established in the body is stated in the Letter to the Hebrews: “the children of the same family share in the same flesh and blood” (Heb 2:14). The suffering body becomes in a special way, therefore, the place of communion between men: there is a world of suffering, a world of solidarity in suffering. It is precisely by entering into this world that Christ “has united himself in some fashion with every man” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). The suffering body appears as the point of communication between mankind and Christ. We can see thus how Christ’s suffering and death did not remain an isolated act of an individual, but was able to transform our own suffering and death. Christ’s words at the institution of the Eucharist (“This is my body, given up for you”) are the final expression of this meaning of the body, which was made to express love and to make communion possible.

At the same time, the suffering body reawakens in man the question of his transcendence, of his relationship to God. According to the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ said to his Father: “A body you prepared for me” (Heb 10:5). The body refers here to God as the ultimate giver, who prepared this body through the generations of the people of Israel. The suffering body of Christ reveals in a special way man’s transcendence, his total reference to the Father.

If we understand the suffering body as both the place of communion of mankind and the place of the manifestation of the mystery of man, which finds its fulfillment only in God the Father, then we will begin to discern the depth of these biblical expressions. The body of Christ points towards God, who prepared it, and towards his brothers, to whom he gave himself up in order to return to the Father.

c) This revelation of transcendence in the suffering body attained its fulfillment in Christ because he is the Son of God, the one whose very identity consists precisely in having received everything from the Father, in being totally related to him.

That means, first of all, that his suffering revealed fully what we said is implicit in all suffering: that man is related to God and finds fulfillment and consolation only in him. There was no suffering in him that did not take the form of a trusting question to the Father, revealing in this way his dignity as the Son. This also implies, secondly, that Christ—the One who saw the presence of his Father in all things—was singularly able to perceive the suffering of his fellow men as a question posed to God regarding human dignity. He was thus able to answer this call of suffering with the highest form of compassion.

Because of that, Christ's suffering was able to pass over the threshold Abraham was unable to cross (cf. *Roman Triptych*, 34). He did so by inaugurating a new form of the dynamism of compassion, to which we will now turn our attention.

d) We said above that the dynamism of the gift, once it has been refashioned through suffering, takes on the form of compassion. Suffering, said John Paul II, is present in the world in order to reawaken love. In the face of our suffering neighbor we glimpse his vocation to attain the divine and we heed a call of compassionate love towards him.

The first step towards a rebuilding of love is *the compassion that Christ experiences for man*, who was doomed to suffering and death after the Fall. The parable of the Good Samaritan dramatically exemplifies this logic of compassion. Unlike the others who saw the man in agony, Christ did not pass by; he received the suffering man as someone entrusted to him by the Father; he discovered his dignity and accepted him in love. The one whose life consists precisely in receiving everything from the Father as a gift is capable of the fullness of compassion before man who suffers: he is capable of discovering in him a gift, someone entrusted to him by the Father.²⁷

²⁷Let us highlight an important consequence of these considerations: receiving compassion is not humiliating because compassion is grounded in the dignity of the person who suffers, because it springs precisely from the dignity of this person. By referring this suffering to God, the one who has compassion on me is supremely affirming my own dignity.

Now, because of his compassion, Christ suffers with the suffering man. This “suffering-with” is possible for Christ because he has assumed a body and is “flesh of our flesh”: his sufferings are thus always sufferings with us and for us. The whole life of Christ is a growth in this compassion. His passion and death correspond to the highest point of his identification with the suffering person.

How did Christ live out this suffering-with? Since suffering points precisely towards the openness to transcendence and to the mystery of the Father, the suffering experienced by Christ meant also a total reference to God his Father, which was in perfect accordance with his being the Son of God. This is the way in which, in his body, Christ learned obedience from what he suffered (cf. Heb 5:8). With Christ, the whole world of suffering in which he shared was opened, step by step, towards the recovery of the beginning, towards the filial acknowledgment of God’s fatherhood.

e) The circle of compassion is completed by our participation in it. In the contemplation of Christ’s pierced Heart, the disciple sees someone who is suffering for him, someone who has recognized the dignity of his condition and has accepted him, the disciple, as the gift of the Father, entrusted to Christ. This contemplation helps the disciple to recognize his own dignity, which is manifest in the way the Good Samaritan accepts the sufferer as the Father’s gift. In this way the disciple recovers the sense of the origin, of the Father who is the source of everything, thus the sense of the original gift.

The next step of the disciple’s answer is that of compassion towards the suffering Christ. Compassion is awakened—as we said above—when one understands man’s suffering as a question addressed to God, when one sees that this suffering refers to the Father. Thus, the strongest possible compassion is awakened by the contemplation of the suffering Christ, precisely because of his unique dignity as the eternal Son of God.

This compassion breaks through the wall of indifference in the face of love, which characterizes man’s state after the Fall. The possibility arises for the disciple to rebuild love in the form of participation in Christ’s sufferings,²⁸ to enter into the very dynamic

²⁸Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 13: “The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing

of Christ's self-gift. Moved by love for his Master, the disciple is now able to give to his own suffering the form of love.²⁹

Conclusion

Our study reveals the fecundity of a method that takes into account both human experience and the contemplation of Christ's person and work. The life of Christ appears as the concrete revelation of love from which John Paul II draws his inspiration. This light does not prevent him from giving full consideration to the analysis of human experience; on the contrary, it grants him new perspectives and tools for this analysis.

This paper has pointed to the role of Christ as redeemer of the body, inasmuch as his work has to do with suffering. Suffering appears as a boundary experience that permits a way back to the beginning. The process is that of an acceptance of sonship by means of obedience that allows the fatherhood of God to radiate again in the midst of human experience. Both analyses converge in the figure of Abraham, who prefigures the redemptive act of Christ on our behalf. Christ appears as the fulfillment of this path.

Where does our study belong within the overall project of the theology of the body? Our considerations shed light on the place of Christ in Christian marriage, a decisive point in understanding its sacramentality. The new dynamism of compassion inaugurated by Christ must be present inside Christian marriage, which is a sacrament of the love between Christ and the Church. What is important is to take into account the fact that both spouses belong to this mystery of compassion shown to them by Christ. They know the price of suffering that has been paid for them and have learned to make this compassionate answer of Christ their own. It is from this point that they will be able to live out every situation of suffering in their marriage as an occasion of reawakening and strengthening love. Both are invited by Christ to be sources of compassion and forgiveness, able to transform suffering into a sign of the beginning, of the original love of the Father. In

in God's presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood."

²⁹This suffering, then, becomes creative, fecund: cf. *Salvifici doloris*, 75.

this way, suffering reawakens in the spouses the reference to the beginning that is at the very core of their relationship. “God bestowed on them a gift and a task. / They accepted—in a human way—the mutual self-giving / which is in Him.”³⁰ □

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³⁰Cf. *RT*, 20.