THE SUFFERING BODY, HOPE, AND THE DISCLOSURE OF THE FUTURE[1]

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"The true secret of Christian hope is that it feeds on suffering. The art of hope consists of finding precisely within the suffering that seems to obstruct the future, the key that opens it up."

According to the myth of Prometheus as reinterpreted by Aeschylus, the Greek hero brought the human race something far more precious than fire or the divine power of dominion associated with it.[2] Prometheus' real gift was the capacity to forget about death and, therefore, to be unaware of the precariousness of human existence. This blindness was indeed considered a blessing, for it allowed man to build up his future without yielding to paralyzing despair. Only through the pious illusion that he was not going to die could the human being envision the morrow and walk toward it with confidence. According to this viewpoint, suffering prevents man from

[1]To Susan Shaughnessy, *in memoriam*.

[2]Cf. N. Wecklein, *The Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus and the Fragments of the Prometheus Unbound*, trans. F. D. F. Allen (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891), lines 246–50. Cf. the comment by Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 156.

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looking out at the horizon because it encloses him within a circle of anxiety. Suffering appears, then, as the great threat to hope.

The eradication of suffering is part of the modern ideal of progress, as well. Technological man can pursue his triumphant march toward lordship over the future only if he is able to exorcize suffering. At this point the medical sciences appear as a crucial element of the modern formula. Descartes wrote in his *Discourse on Method*:

> if it is possible to find some means to render men generally more wise and more adroit than they have been up until now, I believe that one should look for it in medicine. . . . I am sure there is no one, not even among those who make a profession of it, who would not admit that everything known in medicine is practically nothing in comparison with what remains to be known, and that one could rid oneself of an infinity of maladies, as much of body as of the mind, and even perhaps also the frailty of old age . . . .[3]

Among the various sciences developed in the modern era, medicine is occupied with this meeting point, the body, where the personal meets the natural. Perhaps because of the special character of its object, it took longer for medicine to be subsumed into the modern project. When this absorption finally took place, medicine brought forth a transformation of man's corporeality.[4] The technological goal consisted in making the body invulnerable to the world's inclemency. Again, this seemed the only possible way to assure man of his future and to allow him to pursue his way toward it.

And yet, the Christian vision seems to convey a very different relationship between suffering and the future. There is, for example, a passage in the New Testament where suffering appears as an essential setting for the rebirth of hope. This is what the letter to the Romans affirms: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3–4). Note that here it is not hope that first gives birth to endurance, so that endurance might then allow us to bear suffering, but just the

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[3]Cf. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, part VI. English translation from *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 35.

[4]Cf. Claude Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (New York: Schuman, 1949).

other way around. Suffering, far from being an obstacle against the opening up of the future, becomes the space for the recovery of our future's true shape.

How is this vision of suffering possible? The present article will be devoted to what we can call the prophetic power of suffering and to the understanding of the body at its base. We will first briefly analyze the nature of the body in health and suffering (1). After studying the solutions that attempt to cancel out suffering altogether (2), we will focus on the paradoxical nature of suffering, which is indeed able to offer salvation (3) and to give birth to hope (4).

1. The body in health and disease

In his collection of essays entitled *The Enigma of Health*, Hans Georg Gadamer points out that the question of the body and its importance for the definition of man, a question set aside by important branches of the philosophical tradition, comes to the surface again precisely when we attempt to develop a philosophy of medicine and find ourselves having to deal with the concepts of health and disease.[5] Health, in fact, consists of an enigmatic transparency of the body, a transparency that entails an immediate presence of man to his world. Man finds in his existence, from its very outset, a confluence between his body and his openness to the environment, between his body and his relationship to the world. Thanks to this confluence he dwells in the universe as in a familiar place that could be compared to his home. In this original condition the world is not merely in front of him, as if it were an object, but surrounds and embraces him so that man's very identity is determined by his encounter with the world.

Now, the harmony of man's healthy condition, which makes man's openness to the world possible, extends also to the openness to other human beings, to interpersonal relationships and, in them, to the experience of the human reference toward the Transcendent, toward God.[6] It is man's presence to the world, made possible by his

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[5]Cf. especially the two essays "On the Enigmatic Character of Health" and "Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification" in Gadamer, *The Enigma*.

[6]See José Granados, *La carne si fa amore: Il corpo, cardine della storia della salvezza* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2010).

corporeality, that allows him to consider the relationship to his neighbors and to God as a constitutive part of his own identity. The body, then, opens man up for relationship and communion, just as the experience of communion, when it takes place in his life, further reveals to him the meaning of his body and its language. What we have here is a hermeneutical circle that moves from man's body to the experience of love. The body reveals to man a constitutive openness that is fulfilled only in the encounter with the other, so that both experiences (being in the body and encountering our neighbor as part of our own core identity) are mutually reinforced. In this circularity lies the key for a meaningful interpretation of man's journey through life.

It is precisely this harmony, which the human being encounters as a given when he enters into existence, that is somehow broken in suffering. Contrary to health, disease is what prompts us to objectify the body, to deal with it as though it were an object placed in front of us, resisting the transparency of our presence to the world. Gadamer refers in his analysis of the sick body to the German word *Gegenstand* (object), which means, that which stands over against us and offers resistance.[7] For the sick man, the body is no longer transparent to his presence in the world, but rather reminds him of his prostration and alienation from his environment. He also loses the transparency of his inter-human relationships and raises the question of the ultimate horizon of transcendence, a horizon that no longer seems to correspond to his innermost expectations. In other words, instead of the immediacy of the world, of the possibility of considering it as a home, the sufferer finds himself in the midst of an alien reality and surrounded by a broken horizon, in which he needs constantly to retrace his steps and relocate his actions.

The connection between the body's openness to the world and the building up of interpersonal relationships in the horizon of transcendence allows us to speak of an analogical continuity between the experience of disease or of physical suffering in general, and other forms of suffering caused by wounds in man's ties with others, or by the anxiety experienced by those who find no meaning in their journey. This continuity will permit us to deal with suffering in a broad sense, a point that will be made clearer later.

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[7]Cf. Gadamer, *The Enigma*, 105.

These considerations of health and disease allow us to turn to the answer man can give to the rupture that suffering occasions in his life. We will first discuss a kind of antiseptic solution to the problem, which attempts to eliminate suffering altogether. A critical look at this approach will allow us to see a different vision of suffering, in which it comes to bear a redemptive power and to be a dwelling place for hope.

2. Suffering and the technological claim

When placed before the problem of suffering, as before the mystery of evil, man tries to find an easy way out: that of rationalizing it in order to make it nonexistent. In his reflections on suffering based on the book of Job, Philippe Nemo has criticized this attempt to do away with suffering, characterizing it as a "technique." This solution is doomed to fail, Nemo says, because it does not grasp that evil is always "in excess," that is, it resists any attempt of rationalization that does not take into account the viewpoint of the one who suffers.[8]

The first technique is that of a simplistic theodicy that bears a vision of a world in complete order. Here the particular suffering of the individual disappears and is balanced out by symmetrical elements in the cosmos. Suffering, then, takes on a well-defined meaning: it is ordered by God in order to make us grow, or in punishment for our transgressions of the law that rules the universe, or so that we understand our own fragility and dependence on him. This vision, represented by Job's friends, though it has some valid elements, amounts to a denial of the ultimate mystery of evil, which cannot be accounted for from the standpoint of an external observer.

Modernity, of course, ended up rejecting theodicy and the justification of God that lies at its roots. What substituted for it, however, was a very similar way of dealing with the problem of evil, another "technique," in Nemo's vocabulary. Only now the explanation was transferred to a different realm of cause and effect and to a different understanding of order: that of experimental medicine. The novelty of this approach is that the attempt to explain away suffering is not limited to the consoling words of a superficial

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[8]Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, trans. Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

theodicy, but becomes a practical project through the applied science of medicine. Using the expression coined by Stanley Hauerwas, we can say that the ancient theodicy has been changed into "anthropodicy," in which the need to justify God becomes the need to justify man.[9] In fact, since science is supposed to be stronger than evil, man alone is to blame for the fact that suffering has not yet disappeared. The burden has passed, then, from the shoulders of God (who is viewed as inoperative in this world) to the shoulders of man (who, with the imperative of progress, has made himself responsible for healing all disease and repairing all disorder). As Hauerwas says:

> Sickness should not exist because we think of it as something in which we can intervene and which we can ultimately eliminate. Sickness challenges our most cherished presumption that we are or at least can be in control of our existence. Sickness creates the problem of "anthropodicy" because it challenges our most precious and profound belief that humanity has in fact become god. Against the backdrop of such a belief, we conclude that sickness should not exist.[10]

As we have already noted, both approaches, theodicy and anthropodicy, ultimately share the same presuppositions and offer a similar solution to the problem of evil. Both could be characterized as a "technique." The technique of theodicy provides the explanation of a divine law that is indifferent to the fate of man because it does not start out from within the enormity of man's suffering. The technique of "anthropodicy" suggests an exhaustive account of certain natural laws that are working in such or such a way, and which man's wisdom should be able to master. Once again, technique appears as an attempt to explain away the problem of evil, to reduce its excess and make of it something that can be understood from the point of view of the external observer.

We can deepen the meaning of this connection if we reflect, adopting Gadamer's language, on the enigmatic character of health. The harmony of health is not that of a balance between different elements of a chemical formula. If this were the case, the difference between health and disease would be merely quantitative. Rather,

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[9]Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990).

[10]Cf. ibid., 62.

with respect to sickness, health brings a qualitative novelty, which consists of the transparency proper to man's relationship with the world and the confluence between this openness and man's core identity. This is why, as Gadamer argues, health cannot be measured. "Of course, one can also attempt to establish standard values for health. But the attempt to impose these standard values on a healthy individual would only result in making that person ill."[11] The problem with a merely technological medicine that takes as its goal the elimination of all suffering from man's life is that it fails to see that the essence of health is a harmony that is not produced by a simple interaction of mechanical parts. In other words, man's existence in the body brings about a sort of synergy between the man and his world, in which he must be conceived not as a subject before an object that is set in front of him, but rather as part of a greater whole in which he participates.

Moreover, the harmony between the body and its environment that is characterized by health already contains the foundational pattern of man's relationship with the world, his neighbors, and God. This means that the balance opened up by man's corporeality affects all layers of man's existence, including man's interaction with others and with transcendence. A complete healing cannot be effected, then, without restoring the wholeness of man's life. From this viewpoint we can understand the doctor who calls on Lady Macbeth to treat her illness:

> . . . unnatural deeds
> Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds
> To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets:
> More needs she the divine than the physician.[12]

The doctor acknowledges his limitation in the attempt to solve the riddle of evil. The body cannot be healed without restoring all the relationships that engage man's life: his openness to the world, to others, to God.

In line with this conclusion, Gadamer points toward a new understanding of medicine, which needs an increased awareness of the fact that health is not a product of the doctor's activity. The

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[11]Cf. Gadamer, *The Enigma*, 107.

[12]Cf. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Richard Grant White (Boston: Houghton, 1883) 86; act V, scene I, lines 72–75.

physician collaborates with his art in the recovery of health, but is always at the service of the true healing force, that of nature. This means, again, that health is never a result of a simply mechanical intervention. Medicine cannot be practiced without considering the relationship of the parts to the whole, at every level of the patient's condition. An integral dimension, for example, is the dialogue between the physician and the patient.[13]

It is precisely man's bodily condition, his openness to his world in the body, that helps us see the connection between theodicy and "anthropodicy," because it shows us the insufficiency of any technique that attempts to solve the mystery of suffering from without. In fact, in both cases we discover a misunderstanding of man's corporeality and of its capacity to open man's life to an encounter with the world. In "anthropodicy," the misconception of the body results in the attempt to reduce health to a balance of different elements, without perceiving the original harmony between man and his world, which is health's very essence. In the superficial theodicy we criticized above, we can detect an incapacity to perceive the mystery of God's presence in man's inner life. God is seen as somehow external to man, unable to grasp his sorrow from within. How is this vision of the divine connected to a misunderstanding of human bodiliness? The perceived opposition between the horizon of transcendence and human interiority is rooted in a vision of the person as an isolated individual and, consequently, in a reduced view of the body as man's participation in and presence to his world. It is, then, a lack of appreciation of human corporeality that is at the root of the superficial theodicy we discussed above.

As a corollary, we can confirm that a radical separation between physical pain and "spiritual" suffering is inadequate. Rather, we can assume that these different ways of suffering retain the same analogical structure. In other words, because all suffering is rooted in our bodily condition (as a rupture of the harmony of our participation in the world, in others, and in God), the organism's disease is symbolic of any other kind of "spiritual" suffering. As Lévinas puts it, referring to Nemo's reading of Job, suffering consists in "a gnawing away of human identity, which is not an inviolable spirit burdened with a perishable body, but incarnation, in all the gravity of an identity which mutates in itself . . . . Despair despairs

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[13]Cf. Gadamer, *The Enigma*, 125–40.

like pain in the flesh. Physical evil is the very depth of anxiety, whence . . . anxiety, in its carnal acuity, is the root of all social miseries, of all human dereliction: of humiliation, of solitude, of persecution."[14]

All suffering consists in this disconnection between a person and his body, which discloses the brokenness of his relationship with others and with the transcendence that lies at the core of his existence and personal identity. Suffering at the organic and physical level can be interpreted, then, as the becoming-visible of what was hidden, of the real division that traverses human existence to the core. This division is the real sickness unto death, the loneliness and the anguish that is at the ultimate center of suffering. We start to see why the attempt to suppress suffering totally—without taking into account the whole of the person's relationships, as in the technological view we described above—is counterproductive: it hides the real disease in human life.

Here we can return to our initial problem and consider what answer to give to the mystery of suffering. If the technological solution proves insufficient, is silence our only word before the cry of evil? Are we offered any human logos that might be able to find a meaning in our pain? Or do we remain simply condemned to watch our hopes vanish?

3. The redemptive power of suffering

At this point we need to consider another dimension of suffering: its paradoxical nature, the fact that it is able to provide man with a healing revelation. As we said, a healthy condition consists of a transparency of the body that allows us to be in communication with our surrounding world. However, this harmonious immediacy does not correspond with the overall tone of our life, which we experience as alienation from ourselves and others. Consequently, those who do not suffer are at risk of forgetting their fundamental disease. Such a person lives an unreal existence, separated from a participatory engagement with reality, estranged and alienated from its true call. The man who does suffer is aware, at least, that this harmony is lacking. In this sense a healthy

[14]Cf. Lévinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*.

condition, the complete absence of suffering, hides his true sickness from a person, that is, the pointlessness of an existence that, in the blindness of Prometheus, denies its utter openness and vulnerability, its call to engage and participate in the world and in the life of others.

From this standpoint we can speak of the paradox of suffering. Suffering, on the one hand, is the rupture of an original harmony, the decoupling of body and presence to the world. What was obvious to the healthy man, the overarching balance he enjoyed without question, has ceased to be for the sick man. And yet, on the other hand, this rupture could be the beginning of a deeper healing, of man's awakening from a situation of estrangement. This is why, according to many a Church Father, the existence of sin without suffering and death would be the worst of punishments, the perpetuation of a damned state.[15] Or, as Jesus says to the Pharisees: "if you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (Jn 9:41). In a word, the question elicited by suffering in our existence helps us recover the experience of a lost condition, whose backdrop is essential to understanding the meaning of man's journey. Once again, a merely technological solution to the problem of suffering would only enclose man more and more in an illusory self-sufficiency.

If what we just said is true, then suffering has in itself the capacity to become a path toward healing. We can also say that suffering entails a recovery of awareness. This recovery, it is true, always takes the form of a loss, of negativity. In this light Gadamer points out that in German, when someone is unwell, he says: I am lacking in something (*es fehlt mir etwas*).[16] This lack notwithstanding, suffering also brings us something positive in that it reminds us of the body, in that it helps us come back to the awareness of corporeality. By losing its transparency, the body appears again to my consciousness and reveals the mystery of my corporeal presence to the world. But since this body is at once part of who I am and part of the world that surrounds me, then relationship, even if in this case a problematic relationship of dis-ease, appears again as constitutive of my being. My apparent isolation is broken and, at the core of my identity, a call to participation with the world that surrounds me is once again disclosed.

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[15]Cf., for example, St. Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* II, 47: *CSEL* 73, 274.

[16]Cf. Gadamer, *The Enigma*, 73.

There exists, then, a connection between suffering and the recovery of man's search for his true identity. In this light we could say that it is not the "I think" of Descartes that constitutes the foundational experience of man's subjectivity, but the "I suffer," for it is here that the truth of his condition is elicited. In fact, the suffering body appears as the new place of man's participation in the world, and it is precisely in this encounter that subjectivity (as constitutively relational) is allowed to appear.[17] It is in suffering that consciousness is born again.

And yet, as we have already said, man's identity appears in suffering only in a negative form. Man learns that he is dependent on a world that is hostile to his existence. If this were the only answer to his question, his awareness of his own condition could only serve to convince man of his desperate situation. It would be better, then, for man to remain ignorant of this truth, as the myth of Prometheus suggests. In a word, this "I suffer," if left to itself, would only result in despair and self-contradiction. Suffering alone cannot answer the question it raises.

An initial response to this problem can be found with reference to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas.[18] Lévinas agreed in rejecting a simplistic theodicy as we presented it above. This approach is problematic, Lévinas says, when we are faced with a suffering that is not our own, the suffering of the Other. Out of respect for this suffering we can never attempt to rationalize it: the suffering of the Other, as such, needs to be respected in its non-availability to us, precisely in its otherness. To express this insight Lévinas says that this suffering is useless. Theodicy—be it a defense of God or of the goodness of nature or of man's capacity to overcome evil by technology—is to be rejected as an attempt to annul the difference between me and the suffering Other.

Lévinas' position, however, does not dispense with the search for meaning in suffering. It is in the encounter with the Other, by listening to the call of his suffering, that an alternate way opens up for us:

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[17]Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Farrar, 1964), who analyzes Karl Jaspers' vision of the existential crisis.

[18]Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

> 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.[19]

For Lévinas the encounter with the suffering of the Other contains the ethical imperative to accept this suffering, to suffer for the suffering one. Only at this point can suffering be meaningful for me: when it becomes a compassionate suffering open to the pain of my neighbor.

We need to add something essential to Lévinas' insight: this call to suffering with the Other can only be heard by someone whose suffering has already been received; it can only be accepted by someone who has already encountered compassion in his life. In other words, the primordial point of view is not that of our capacity to share in the Other's suffering, but that of our need for the Other first to embrace our suffering and reveal to us its meaning. For unless we are accepted by someone in our suffering, we remain unable to open ourselves to others and to accept them. As sufferers, we are in need first of receiving a revelation that we ourselves cannot produce. In other words, the "I suffer" only takes on meaning when its openness to the world is fulfilled by an encounter with the compassionate Other: "someone is willing to suffer with me." At this point it becomes possible to recover the harmonious confluence between the body and openness to the world and our neighbors, to reestablish the primordial hermeneutical circle, the original harmony of which the suffering man recalls but which he cannot conjure up on his own. By suffering *with* me, the Other is able to suffer *for* me.

Therefore, the "I suffer" acquires meaning when it becomes the occasion and the space for the manifestation of the Other who helps us in our sorrow. The excess of evil becomes then the opportunity to realize the excess of goodness that is part of the personal encounter of love. At this point the vulnerability of this "I suffer" is finally explained as positive relationality in love. Such an encounter can be called a compassionate one, giving compassion its strongest sense, that is, not a mere empathy that is aware of the

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[19]Cf. ibid., 94.

suffering of others, nor a mere aesthetical feeling, but a real discovery of the call to transcendence that is present in my neighbor's suffering. Compassion effects, then, an opening up of the subject from his or her very core toward the other person and toward God. Gabriel Marcel was aware of this fact when he wrote: "this suffering must be apprehended as the actual participation in a universal brotherhood."[20]

If this is the case, then we can say that there is a meaning in suffering, the meaning of compassionate love, which allows us to develop a theodicy that is respectful of the mystery of suffering in its otherness. In other words, to accept—with Lévinas—the uselessness of suffering does not mean accepting its fruitlessness. The suffering of the other is useless, inasmuch as it cannot be appropriated by a mind that evaluates the events of the world in terms of productivity; and yet this suffering, through compassion, remains able to bear fruit, the fruit of love, by recovering a new dimension of existence that is closed to the isolated man.

This point of view of compassion offers the possibility to integrate the medical arts into its vision. Medicine is the technological application that, more than any other "applied" science, underscores that its foundation cannot be only the will to power, but must take into account the horizon of compassion and the desire to care for the other person. An answer to suffering, which is the loss of harmony in the relationship between man and his world, can only be found by taking the entire man and his relationships into account. By being integrated into the movement of compassion rightly understood, the medical approach as a whole could be changed without losing any accuracy of analysis and operation.

It is difficult to overlook the biblical origin of what we have presented so far. It is our claim that this connection between suffering and compassion within the horizon of transcendence belongs to the religion of Israel witnessed to in the Bible, and to its fulfillment in Christ. The sacrificial practice, in which the body of an animal represents the whole community and enables the people to enter into union with God, is of particular interest in this regard. In Scripture the body is seen as the place where communion among men and communion with God becomes possible. The sacrificed animal appears, then, as a symbol whose very condition of possibility

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[20]Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator. Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 1962).

is rooted in man's own corporeality and in the body's capacity to become sacrificial through suffering. The suffering of the people is present in the death of the animal and able to restore communion between God and the world. Therefore, when the Temple sacrifices lost their symbolic value (because of their separation from the concrete life of the Israelites and their obedience to the Covenant) the prophets became the living sacrifices who were able to represent the whole People in their own suffering bodies.

Finally, in Christian revelation, it is the body of Christ, as suffering body, who offers the possibility of real reconciliation.[21] The letter to the Hebrews takes up the sacrificial theme in the Old Testament to reflect once more on the salvific power of Christ's death. The text of Hebrews 10:5 is of crucial importance for our topic: "a body you prepared for me." God does not substitute the sacrifices of the Old Testament for a spiritual worship without sacrifices, but puts a different kind of body and a different kind of offering at the center of the new liturgy. In Christ the thread of the suffering prophets joins with that of the Temple sacrifices to find its fulfillment. Moreover, the offering of Christ comes together with Pauline anthropology when the apostle advises the Romans to offer their own bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). It is in this sense that we could talk about the sacrificial meaning of the body. We cannot develop these insights here, though they could prove rewarding for a systematic view of Christ's Redemption. In what follows we will offer a conclusion to our considerations by turning back again to the image of hope.

4. Suffering and hope: from useless suffering to fruitful suffering

Let us return to our initial point of departure: suffering seems to blur the horizon of the future. Moreover, when we suffer, the very way we organize our time changes, for we seem to be trapped in a present moment that lacks beginning and end. On the one hand, we cannot go back to the time before we began to suffer, a time that now seems infinitely distant from us; on the other hand, it is not in our power to open up a new future in which suffering is not present.

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[21]Cf. José Granados, "Toward a Theology of the Suffering Body," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (2006). Cf. also Granados, *La carne si fa amore*, ch. 3.

In sum, suffering disintegrates our history by disconnecting our memories and breaking down our future projects.

And yet, again, we need to ask: is this the whole truth about suffering? Is there not a sense in which suffering opens up a new perspective, one that transfigures time rather than disarticulating it? Let us read again the text in the letter to the Romans, according to which suffering is at the root of hope: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3–4). Following this same train of thought Gabriel Marcel has argued that true hope appears only in someone who, under the yoke of suffering, yearns for redemption: "the less life is experienced as a captivity the less the soul will be able to see the shining of that veiled, mysterious light, which, we feel sure without any analysis, illumines the very center of hope's dwelling-place."[22] How can this vision be possible?

The key lies in the paradoxical nature of suffering and in its redemptive power. Suffering, we argued above, in allowing man to recover the sense of his corporeality, reawakens him to his own presence to the world and to others in the horizon of transcendence. This openness, while marked by disruption and trouble, makes room for the encounter of love (in the form of compassion) to take place again in man's life. If this interpersonal encounter happens, man's isolation is broken and the harmony between his bodily existence and the experience of love sets forth the path toward healing.

Now, what we have said about the body also applies to time, for an embodied existence is always a temporal existence. Note that temporality, like bodiliness, is unproblematic for the healthy man, who enjoys the continuity of a history without rupture. When suffering arrives, however, it interrupts the flow of man's time by questioning the value and meaning of the entire narrative of his life.[23] Man no longer knows what to do with his time; its texture has

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[22]Cf. Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 32; cf. also 39: "hope means first accepting the trial as an integral part of the self, but while so doing it considers it as destined to be absorbed and transmuted by the inner workings of a certain creative process."

[23]The connection between suffering and time is at the core of some contemporary reflections on suffering. The narrative approach attempts to find a meaning in suffering without diluting its mystery, avoiding the dangers of both a simplistic theodicy and of anthropodicy. It is only possible to find meaning in suffering by appropriating a narrative that is able to be connected with our own history, which then, in turn, receives thus both an origin and a goal. Cf. Hauerwas,

been radically changed. However, this does not exhaust the link between time and suffering. In fact, the paradoxical structure of suffering applies also to temporality. The brokenness of man's narrative reveals to him that his time cannot be conceived of in isolation. The vulnerability of his temporal configuration becomes an opportunity to enlarge his own narrative frame, to include within it the time of the world, of others, of God. With the onset of suffering man realizes that the apparent coherence of his time hid the ultimate lack of meaning of any self-referential history. In contrast, suffering reawakens man to the fact that his time, precisely in its vulnerability, could refer to a broader horizon of meaning.

Again, we need to stress that suffering on its own is not able to reconfigure man's own time and restore its wholeness. What we have seen so far is that suffering helps man realize that the experience of time opens up his life to otherness. However, the question still remains: is this openness simply that of a mortal wound, through which his life now runs out? Does this new flux of time lead to an abyss of nothingness in which human life is finally lost? It is only if the interpersonal encounter of love, in the form of compassion, takes place in man's life, that he is offered an alternative to these possibilities and can regain a meaningful narrative. The proper contribution of suffering is, in fact, to allow man to recover the openness of his temporality to others and, in them, to the encounter with transcendence. In suffering, man realizes that both his past and future are no longer under his own control; that they remain in expectation of a personal encounter to illumine them and make them fruitful. It is in this situation of availability that the encounter can happen, thus restoring the wholeness of time at a new level by enriching it with a new personal presence. At the same moment that man realizes the brokenness of his history (the fragmentation of his past, present, and future) he is able to see this wound as a window through which his life can expand toward transcendence. It is only now that the possibility of a new measure of time—a new memory of the past and a new hope for the future—comes about.

Let us consider how suffering, when it is connected with the encounter of love in compassion, modifies our perception of the future. Man always runs the risk of seeing the future as totally alien to his present, as the wholly unknown. This first apprehension of the

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Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering.

future can only fill him with anxiety. Since this situation is unbearable in the long run, a temptation arises to view it in another way: to assume absolute control over his future, to think that it lies in his power to decide and to plan it. This second position is the view of modern faith in progress. Both alternatives, however, fail to provide a narrative for man's life. In the former, the future becomes totally alien to the present; in the latter, the future is absorbed into the present by man's attempt to control it. Neither articulates the different moments of time (present and future, in this case), since these are seen either as identical or as totally extrinsic to each other; there is no real history to be lived and told.

Now, it is interesting to see how these two views are in fact two signs of disembodiment, of alienation from man's own corporeality. In fact, the time of the body is utterly different from the two ways of considering the future described above. In the living body, time is not totally at man's disposal, as would be the case with a disincarnate spirit for whom everything is always present. The future of the embodied person is a separate thing from himself and resists the total absorption into his present, against the claim of the imperative of progress. To exist in the body means to accept that one cannot take total control over tomorrow; that one needs to respect it in its openness and unpredictability. On the other hand, in the living body the future is not totally alien to the present, as would be the case with inert matter, which can be measured according to the linear time of physics. It is proper to corporeal existence that the future be lived in the present; it is lived in advance in the form of expectation. If the present were no longer connected with the future, the living being would die, for the organism would assume the inert a-temporality of the stone. The body, therefore, allows for the vision of the future both as different from man and as part of his own identity, both transcendent and immanent, mysterious but also at hand.

Only in the body, then, can time be lived as an articulated and differentiated unity that opens up toward the whole and is thus able to bear a transcendent meaning. And yet it is clear that the experience of the body, by itself, is unable to show the direction of man's journey into the future. In fact, based on the body alone we cannot say whether the otherness of the future contains threats or blessings. This and other questions cannot be answered only by looking at our temporal existence in the body. The response has to come from the hermeneutical circle between body and love, from the mutual illumination between our being embodied and the interper-

sonal encounter with others. On the one hand, it is our openness through the wound of time that allows us to encounter our neighbor, beyond the isolation of our personal history; on the other hand, it is the encounter with our neighbor that gives meaning to our time.

What form does this conjunction between our temporality and the encounter with the other take with respect to the future? Our openness to the future, when it is filled with the presence of another, takes on the form of a promise. In the promise, love gives a concrete structure to tomorrow. Now the future acquires a concrete shape, guaranteed by the faithful presence of the beloved in our life. This future will be both different from us and part of our very identity. On the one hand, the fulfillment of this promise will always be beyond our control and will require reliance on our friend; on the other hand, precisely because, in our body, this promise is part of our very identity, it will not be fulfilled without our total commitment, without our entrustment to it: the promise cannot be considered as external to the person's fate, but as constitutive to his relational identity.

At this point we can draw the connection between suffering and the future. Suffering, precisely inasmuch as it allows man to recover an embodied temporality, causes the future to appear both as something that is not in my grasp and as something with which I can collaborate and that requires my total engagement. Our relationship with the future can be compared, then, to giving birth to a child, an event that requires the active love of the parents, while they remain fully aware that it is never wholly in their grasp to "produce" the child. At this point the human person, far from being weighted down by his inability to control his own time, is able to realize that through the wound of time that seems to rob him of his vitality, he is in truth expanded and able to grow beyond himself; his existence is broadened into unknown horizons and discloses unexpected vistas.

Notice that this form of dealing with the future is precisely the one proper to the virtue of hope, in its distinction from the mere optimism of faith in progress. The difference between optimism and hope is not only that the former counts on man's own strength, while the second relies on another, ultimately on God. In fact, there is a form of reliance on another, even on God, that ends up acting as though, since the other is extrinsic to my activity, he does not require my collaboration. This form of passive reliance on another does not correspond to the virtue of hope. In fact, the external aid

that is an ingredient of hope, the support that helps me attain what is beyond my capacities, does not take place outside me but rather passes through me, allowing for an active participation. In this way the paradox of hope is brought about, that is, the fact that its foundations are beyond me (and, thus, hope allows me to expect beyond expectation, to hope against hope) while at the same time this hope is part of who I am (my hope could be said to be my very definition), so that it becomes active in me and can be compared to the very air I breathe.[24]

We see now that suffering is, paradoxically, the only situation in which I can hope, for it is the situation in which I become aware once more of my corporeality and, therefore, of my constitutive openness toward the encounter of love with others and God.[25] Far from being an obstacle to hope, suffering reveals hope's very possibility, its capacity to grow from within man and to bring man beyond himself. It is true that suffering seems to cut off my perspective of the future. In truth, though, it opens up a new vision, by effecting a transformation of time and thus offering a different temporality. In the words of Kierkegaard, what we have here is not the hope that something happens *in time*, but the hope *that something happens to time*.[26] What happens to time is its transformation into the time of love, a time that is now measured according to the growth

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[24]Cf. Marcel, *Homo Viator*.

[25]What we have said about the recovery of the future implies a new consideration of man's past, which we cannot approach here. To the man who suffers it appears with clarity that the past is no longer at hand. He would like to recover the happiness he enjoyed before he started to suffer, but he knows that it is not in his power to do so. Moreover, for the suffering person, the beginning in which the evil was not present appears now in all its true purity and is no longer taken for granted. Thus, the sufferer is aware that the past, if it is to be recovered, would take the form of an absolute and innocent beginning. In addition to this latter point, the novelty of recovering the past amounts to the necessity of expecting a new future, which alone could make this recovery possible. Again, the only option for this recovery to happen is through an encounter of love, through a compassion and forgiveness that really enables man to find himself received as a child, at the very roots of his encounter with existence.

[26]Cf. Niels Nymann Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*, Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series (New York: W. de Gruyter, 2000), 56. On Kierkegaard and time, cf. also Claudia Welz, *Love's Transcendence and the Problem of Theodicy*, vol. 30, Religion in Philosophy and Theology (Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 146.

in the communion of persons toward the final encounter with God himself, the source of all communion.

We can now attempt an answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this paper. Suffering, by helping us recover the awareness of bodiliness, opens up for us a new horizon of temporality. True, suffering is powerless by itself to restructure our time, but it allows love to be manifested in our life, in the form of compassion, which brings with it a promise of fulfillment. When this happens, if it happens, a new vision of the future, as the future of redemptive hope, starts to become part of human experience.

Charles Péguy expresses this connection between suffering and hope with an evocative image. He refers to the capacity of the Lorraine farmers to transform the dirty waters of rain into the clean sap that ascends through the stalk and produces the harvest. In this way these farmers are never out of hope, because they have learned the secret of using poisonous waters as an ingredient in the production of good bread and wine; they have learned, that is, to transform suffering and death into healthy life.

> Like a fervent soil that absorbs the ingratitudes of heaven. . . .
> Like a generous and healthy soil,
> Like a fit, mild, and loose soil drinks up everything that falls and does not allow itself to be overrun by swamps and marshes.
> And by pools and by shoals and by swamps full of mud and sludge,
> And of the soul's dregs and of sticky
> And slimy plants. . . .
> But, rather, from everything that falls and from the countless rains and from the countless bad days
> Immediately, instantaneously, almost before the days fall they create a current of water.
> Flowing water, clear water, sweet water.
> Beautiful, translucent water.
> Pure water that gushes and that flows in the meadows
> On the banks of the Meuse.
> Beautiful water from Lorraine, a soul of beautiful water and the spring itself of hope.
> That it should be precisely with this material, with these countless bad days that fall like rain
> That they create, that they gush, that they produce, that they cause the very spring of hope to burst forth.[27]

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[27]Cf. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David C. Schindler

Since there is always enough suffering and evil in the world, the farmers would never lack material for the production of new fruit. And, thus, the true secret of Christian hope is that it feeds on suffering. The art of hope, as the art of agriculture described by Péguy, consists of finding precisely within the suffering that seems to obstruct the future, the key that opens it up. For this miracle to occur man needs to be open to a greatness that surpasses and embraces him, while also allowing him to participate in it. Hope needs to become the hope for redemption, with which man, while not able to grasp it by himself, needs to collaborate. This hope is witnessed to in the book of Genesis, which links fruitfulness to the beginning of suffering. In the garden of Eden both the man and the woman are punished with a suffering that contains the mystery of the fruit, in the form of the child to be born, or of the earth that yields its crop. The words of God to Adam and Eve are therefore not only punishment but also promise. They are followed and confirmed by the Proto-evangelium, the birth of a child who will defeat evil.[28] It is in this grace of the Gospel of Christ, a grace in which we stand (Rom 5:2), that St. Paul finds the context for the connection between suffering and hope (Rom 5:3–4). Christ died for us, his friendship has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5), and therefore we are able to glory in our sufferings (Rom 5:3). These sufferings become a source of hope because through them our life is able to receive the compassionate Christ and to share in his life, thus opening up for us the new future of his resurrection. The suffering of the other, considered in itself, is useless, as Lévinas argues, because unjustifiable and unable to be explained from the point of view of an external observer. But in its conjunction with love, it becomes fruitful beyond measure. Since proper to the virtue of hope is, indeed, the expectation of fruit, then we see the truth of our claim: "suffering generates hope." □

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(New York: Continuum, 2005), 93–94.

[28]Cf. the contrast with the words of Job, in Job 17:13–14: "All I look forward to is dwelling in Sheol, and making my bed in the dark. I tell the tomb, 'You are my father,' and I call the worm my mother and my sister."