

VATICAN

'Sufferance does not redeem': PAV anaesthetises Redemption

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A quotation from Saint John Paul II's *Salvifici doloris* is followed by a clear misrepresentation of the meaning of the words, even to the point of denying that pain can be an instrument of redemption. Thus the already considerably problematic *Piccolo lessico del fine-vita*

, (Small Lexicon of the End of Life) ([see here](#)), under the heading 'Pain, suffering, pain therapy' (pp. 37-40), chooses to explain that the path chosen by the Son of God for our salvation is in fact an expression of an erroneous 'perspective on suffering that can be found in a certain Christian tradition' and that 'has been overcome in many documents of the Catholic Church' (p.39). Obviously, the author does not bother to give a hint of those 'many documents'.

But, first things first. The quote from *Salvifici doloris* is as follows: 'Christ's revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering is *in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. Christ himself is especially active in this field (...) He goes about "doing good", and the good of His works became especially evident in the face of human suffering.' (no. 30). The text simply says one thing: in the face of the suffering of others one cannot simply extend one's arms and abandon the person to his or her pain, but one must, as far as possible, work for his or her healing, or at least to alleviate the burden of suffering.

Instead, the Small Lexicon offers an interpretation of the text that is somewhat 'singular' to say the least: "A vision that celebrates pain as an instrument of redemption, which has sometimes been erroneously upheld, even in the Christian tradition, is thus belied. Instead, the increasingly effective instruments that medicine has developed for pain therapy are welcomed' (p. 38). These considerations constitute a double *non sequitur*: first of all, because, as mentioned, the Pope's words have nothing to do with the denial of the redemptive value of suffering, which on the contrary is affirmed - as we shall see - throughout the encyclical. In addition, the paragraph's internal non-consequentiality is also evident: pain understood as an instrument of redemption is contrasted with pain therapy; a contrast manifested by the adverb of negation used, which expresses precisely a substitution (in-stead = in exchange, in place of), as if to say that pain therapies are the true answer to suffering, and not instead the idea of its redemptive value.

These statements constitute a very serious denial of the meaning of the Redemption, which was achieved precisely through the assumption of suffering by the Son of God. And this is a fact that has theological and not merely historical significance. Because Christ's passion, with all its load of spiritual, psychic and physical suffering, was not an accident along the way, perhaps avoidable with a little more clarification with the Jewish authorities, but a very precise choice of the divine Trinity. A choice convenient (in its theological sense of harmony, proportion) with mankind's situation after original sin, the primary cause of human suffering. John Paul II explains: 'For evil remains bound to

sin and death. And even if we must use caution in judging man's suffering as a consequence of concrete sins (this is shown precisely by the example of just man Job), nevertheless suffering cannot be divorced from the sin of the beginnings, from what St John is calls 'the sin of the world'(29), from the sinful background of personal actions and social processes in human history'. Needless to say, in the Little Lexicon, sin is not mentioned at all, a self-blindness that leads the editors no longer able to discern the redemptive meaning of pain.

The Lord therefore wants to save man from sin precisely by taking upon Himself that incessant accumulation of suffering (and death itself) that sin has poured out on men of all times and latitudes. Christ,' the Pope continues, 'therefore goes to towards His Passion and death with full awareness of the mission that he has to fulfil precisely in this way. Precisely by means of this suffering he must bring it about 'that man should not perish, but have eternal life'. Precisely by means of his Cross he must strike at the roots of evil, planted in the history of man and in human souls. Precisely by means of his Cross he must accomplish the work of salvation. This work, in the plan of eternal Love, has a redemptive character' (n. 16). The sin-suffering-redemption nexus is thus firmly established: the Lord Jesus, 'though innocent, takes upon himself the sufferings of all people, because he takes upon himself the sins of all.' (no. 17).

All history subsequent to the salvific event, with its load of sufferings, is nothing other than the great opportunity to participate in the same redemptive suffering of Christ, uniting one's own sufferings to his, to complete in one's own flesh what is lacking in his afflictions (cf. Col 1:24): 'Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part of *the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed (...). this Redemption, even though it was completely achieved by Christ's suffering, lives on and in its own special way develops in the history of man. It lives and develops as the body of Christ, the Church, and in this dimension every human suffering, by reason of the loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ.' (n. 24).

Therefore, it is certainly not pain in itself that is redemptive, but it is beyond question that, since Christ has chosen suffering as an instrument of redemption, human suffering itself becomes a privileged instrument of redemption, in so far as it is experienced as the completion of his sufferings, in the mystical Body of the Church. This

is not a perspective of sufferance', but an exquisitely Christian one, always taught by the Magisterium, the Doctors and lived by all the Saints, canonised and not.

The Anointing of the Sick expresses and realises precisely this incorporation into the sufferings of Christ, through the sacramental 'configuration to the redemptive passion of the Saviour' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1521), which is further 'sealed' by the Holy Viaticum. It is not surprising, therefore, that the book makes but a cursory mention of these sacraments (see the entry on 'Accompaniment'), which are declined - and quickly dismissed - as a mere 'contemplation of the suffering Christ' that procures comfort and allows one to experience the trial as 'a grace that transfigures' (p. 21). No mention is made of the fundamental participation in the afflictions of Christ the Redeemer and the configuration to Him crucified.