

Human Suffering and Coronavirus: Some Theological Reflection on Christian Faith

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Abstract: *This theological reflection of Christian faith, its challenges on pandemic (the COVID-19) centers on the question about the place of God in Christian faith. The question about God in relation to human suffering and more so in this pandemic, the pains and trauma brought about by (COVID-19) of our time. This question has been asked, perhaps from antiquity. It touches at the core of the 'problem of suffering' as discussed in Obi's bookon "Human suffering: A challenge to Christian Faith" (2001, and various "theodicies." Traditionally, theologians and philosophers have largely engaged this problem in the form of theodicies, or the justifications of God in the context of suffering. If God is Omniscience, and Omnipotent, why does he allow his creatures to die in such painful death. Christian faith is being tested, if not ridiculed. Has the Christian faith in God failed the faithful? The reflection is anchored on the pillar of Christian faith, Hope and Love. In the midst of the challenges, as this pandemic is, and this is a paradox, Christian faith should be strengthened by Christ's painful suffering on the Cross in anticipation of his glorious resurrection. Christian faith should be consistent with hope in God's promise that "our sufferings bring us holiness", that with God all things are possible to those who trust in him. Love and compassion in the face of the challenges in life. As Christians, our pains and sufferings are likened to Christ's painful sufferings on the Cross which brings the glorious resurrection, happiness and joy.*

Keywords: Christian Faith, Pandemic, Cross of Christ, Palliative Care, Tribulations

1. Introduction

It was on March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic. COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan in China in December 2019. The rate of infections has quickly accelerated in every corner of the world. There are over a million people already infected and nearly a hundred thousand people have lost their lives. This has prompted extraordinary forms of social and national distancing as one nation after another has gone into lockdown. There are widespread travel restrictions and business closures all which and now threaten job securities and global economic recession.

The rate of the spread of this virus in the world has raise many theological questions: Where is All powerful and Allknowing? This COVID-19 has spread everywhere regardless of culture, class, religion, gender, sexuality, races or origin. It is threatening relational ritual such as hugs, handshakes, kissing, and cultural ways of venerating the dead and bereavement consolations have been discarded to reduce the spread of the virus.

There are so many stories (conspiracy theories) regarding this virus which make people of different faith to struggle with faith and courage, hope and despair over all the world. This 'novel coronavirus) constantly proves to be the crucial test of trust in God and of basic trust, provoking discussions and theological critical reflections.

Human Suffering as a Test to Christian Faith

Human Suffering like COVID-19, consistently proves to be the crucial test of trust in God and of basic trust, provokes decisions. Why is trust in God more challenged than in wholly concrete suffering? For many people concrete suffering has been the cause of their unbelief, for others the occasion of strengthening their faith. And is the basic trust in reality as a whole more challenged in the face of all suffering and evil in the world like COVID-19 and in one's life. According to P. G. Walsh "For many persons overwhelming suffering (eg, COVID-19) has been a stimulus to basic mistrust in regard to reality as a whole, but for many others a stimulus to basic trust."

This is the paradox of human suffering – the tension between Christian faith and suffering, the dilemma of the human situation that leads many astray. It is rightly described as a pandemic which has ridiculed humanity as whole. In the face of the overwhelming reality of this (pandemic) of suffering in the history of humankind and in the individual, doubting and despairing men and women may constantly question: What sort of God is this, incomprehensible, unconcerned, from all suffering as we imagine in our human reasoning and assume in all our protests, as philosophers in particular think ---Does not the very suffering and death of Jesus make God appear in a different light? In Christ's suffering and death there has been revealed by the incomprehensible God a definitive delivery from suffering which goes beyond all the in comprehensibility of God and which transforms suffering and death to life and to the fulfillment of longing. The fact of suffering like this pandemic. COVID-19 of every man and woman cannot be concealed even in the sight of Jesus.

Some will remain in doubt. But from this standpoint the right attitude of mankind to this suffering is the relative value, and the hidden meaning of suffering may become clear.

On the other hand, behind all the suffering like this pandemic (COVID-19) in the world stands God's infinite, and merciful love (Rom. 2:4-9, Jas.5:11; 2pet. 3:9-15) He grants sinners time to turn back to Him, and, in the worst of their tribulations and temptations, his grace is always sufficient to support them. One notices that in our world today – the so-called world power has been ridiculed with pandemic. Coronavirus since February 2019 till date has caused many people to die, the economic and social life affected—"...In just over three months this virus has altered the human social world. It is a contagious but also social disease, a human social crisis. One will immediately recall similar case in Genesis, Chapter 15: 6-...about Job and his family and more so the case of Abraham and his family and friends Gen.15:6, 2-8. "Clearly God's promised to raise a multitudinous nation through Abraham was seriously threatened by Sarah's barrenness, and Abraham himself gave voice to his anxiety in this regard (cf. Gen. 15:2ff).

Abraham and his posterity were to learn both the value of God's choice of them and what was demanded by it. As a life case can enervate, so a challenge molds the mettle of a man, an outcome for which one can be grateful. Human suffering (e.g. COVID-19) remains an evil. But with trust in God it is not absolute evil (as in Buddhism) which would have to be dissolved in nirvana by denying the will to live. However, lovers often wish to show their love by sacrificing for the beloved.

In the wake of Abraham's testing the way was open for God to test Israel, especially during the wandering through the desert and in the struggle to possess the Promised Land (Dt.13:1-5. 2:22). Had not Israel often put God to the test and roused his anger by refusing to accept his sign? (Ex. 17:2-7, Nm.14:22) Yet God's testing often preceded a saving intervention and, however fear-evoking obedience, "to do you good in the end" (Dt.8:16, Ex.16:4, 22-30).

Here the sacrifices of Abraham were repeated to true followers of Jesus, The hundred-fold reward, promised already in this life(Mt.10:29ff), probably referred to the New community which Jesus had founded: for whoever did God's will was to Jesus ' a brother and sister and mother" (Mk.3:34). In this new relationship surpassing all natural ties, love was destined to rule, and goods would be shared (Acts.2:44ff; 4:32-36; Rom.15:28; 1Cor.16:1-4; 2Cor.9; 1Tim.6:17-19). In this was verified and often repeated the simple law of love, "whosoever wishes to save his life, will lose it; but whoever loses his life for sake, will find it" Mt.16:25; 10:39; Mk.8:35). Clearly this testing of men's hearts which Jesus worked was meant to bring an immense reward.

Perhaps after this pandemic of Corona virus – the world will be a better place – better human understanding, economic rejuvenation, social and racial understanding, self-understanding and human understanding better appreciation of human rights, racial and gender inequality and soon.

Human Suffering Stimulates Love and Compassion

Suffering like this pandemic (COVID -19) stimulates love and compassion of a deeper quality. This statement can be reinforced by appealing to the Scriptures: the vision of the loving Father obliged to chastise his children for the good of the family.

My son, when the Lord correct you, do not treat it lightly, but do not get discouraged when they reprimand you. For the Lord trains the one that He loves and He punishes all those that He acknowledges as his son. Suffering is part of your training (Heb. 12:5-7).

It makes us to have something in common with those who suffer. It is a power of communion. "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was in prison and you came to see me....(Mt.25:35ff).This is the greatest kind of exchange, the most "divine" relationship which can be established between people. Thus suffering initiates us for warns us in the midst of the unconsciousness of the healthy. Those who suffer are confident of God because they are invited to become like God who suffers for all. On this P.C. Vander affirms:

"In Christ, with Christ, suffering has become a means of communion and a place of redemption. The evil of misfortune and the evil of crime, the suffering of the victim and the moral poverty of the guilty, all this can and should find its redemption through the generous love of God".

It is therefore God's greatest manifestation towards mankind. In another text John affirms :Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost" (Jn. 3:16).

Furthermore, one can also find many precedents on the positive effect of sufferings in patristic preaching and traditional pastoral counseling. St. Basil for example, distinguished between moral and physical evil, arguing that physical evil only appears evil to us and may have some positive purpose. Gregory of Nazianze and John Chrysostom both not only appealed to the value of imitating Christ but argued that God is not the source of evil he yet permits suffering as a factor in the learning process for discipline and judgment. There is a good deal of wisdom in these ideas and deep within the whole Christian tradition, in the sense that suffering is redemptive as mentioned earlier. However, some scholars raise serious objections against what Basil and Gregory said, contending that such as approach cannot explain "irrational pain," (like the case of a pandemic) or for example, the extremes of nerve pain with no obvious purpose. Nor can it explain mass suffering (like this pandemic) as distinct from individual suffering. It cannot cope with innocent suffering, it is one thing to feel that someone has got his deserts, another to ignore the severe suffering of innocent victims. Such sufferings as fires, earthquake, epidemics, birth defects, hereditary sicknesses, pandemic – Corona virus (COVID-19) which has ridiculed the whole world, childlessness, abject poverty as earlier mentioned, are disastrous in the sense that no good

outcome is possible, certainly not good enough to counterbalance the evil effects.

As regard Satins. Bernard or Gregory the Great, it is necessary to remark that some of their categories are no longer acceptable to modern thinkers, for instance, the modern assumption is that God is lavishly merciful and good even to the wayward. Also those excessive tribulations can have the negative effect of turning people away from God (as is the case of our people turning to *dibia* (traditional medicine men) and fortune-tellers. Therefore we take Augustine's assertion or Benard's view with a grain of salt. Bernard Haring is, of course, prominent among modern scholars who hold that God is lavish in his love and that suffering is often a negation of God's love. The reality of suffering is enigmatic. It may ennoble but it often embitters; it may stimulate love and compassion, but it can equally cause impatience, cruelty, rejection, despair, and doubts, as evidence in our contemporary time (the case of COVID-19).

Different ways of expressing compassion and love during COVID-19, known as palliative is evidence. According to World Health Organization (2013;2020), Palliative care "is an approach that improves the quality of the life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychological and spiritual.' Other sources like Oxford Dictionary and Collins English Dictionary both have similar definitions of Palliative as "relieving pain without dealing with the causes of the condition..."

Palliative care is important because it gives patients an options for pains and symptom management and higher quality of life while still pursuing curative measures. When a patient is seriously ill, understand the value of each day. In our contemporary society: "Palliative" has become a household word or phrase

Nevertheless, "Palliative" has five implications

- It provides relief from pain and other distressing symptoms
- It affirms life and regards dying as a normal process
- Intends neither to hasten or postpone death
- It integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care
- It offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death.

The goals of Palliative care:

- To provide relief from pains and other physical symptoms.
- To maximize the quality of life
- To provide support to help the family during their patient's illness and their subsequent bereavement
- To provide psychological and spiritual care.

Way forward

International organizations, for example the – World Health Organization, Government agencies and Non-governmental Agencies, Civil Society groups; different Communities; Individual Groups; Individual Organizations; these and more

have one way or the other expressed the love and compassion to alleviate the paradox of this pandemic on individuals, groups and communities.

More importantly, for Christians and individual communities all over the world, we should have to affirm Christian faith, hope and charity. Faith in the mystery and significance of suffering is summarized in the Cross of Christ. In the theology of the Cross. Suffering is understood from the theological perspective not the anthropological, that is, from the human perspective.

Regardless of these palliatives from international world, nationals, local societies organizations; many have lost dear loved ones. Many are traumatized, depressed, fear of the unknown; tension and psychological torture arising from the pandemic all over the globe (the world). It seems at times to bring frustrations and despair to the Christian faith. Such a crucial test of trust in God is inevitable. Yet our best response to this overwhelming paradox of the pandemic is to adopt the kenotic style life style which will enables one to accept the situation as one's daily Cross while complying to non - pharmaceutical rules and observing the "New normal" rules by NDC in every continent.

Authentic Christian faith, if it could be of use, one would contend, should be able to deliver mankind from the absurdity of ritual ideological conflicts, socio-cultural conflicts among the pandemic victims, socio-psychological torture and humiliation of the pandemic (Obi. D.2001). This authentic faith, therefore, should provide a basis for community in mutual respect and love that is, - to develop love for each other and neighbors, communities and nation.

Hope grants mankind the possibility of a new life and of a return to the love of God and the community (Moltmann J. 1980, p.33). While hope gives the Christian fortitude to endure suffering in life COVID-19 (pandemic) his patience to bear distress and socio-cultural humiliation also bears witness to the strength and the hope he possesses.

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