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Suffering and Love

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INTRODUCTION

Faith can be a shield and a ladder in the face of unspeakable tragedy. This is one of the facts of life that I have come to appreciate even more today in the midst of the killings of Christians in Benue State, and other parts of Nigeria. While faith helps people to face monstrous tragedies, these tragedies can also lead people to the depths of their faith. The reason for this paradox stems from the search for meaning in the midst of heartbreaks and the struggle to respond to them.

It is therefore, within the journey of seeking to understand and perhaps respond to calamitous situations that one comes to the appreciation of the assertion that “the depth of suffering is the door, to the depth of truth,”¹ for “the wound is the place where the Light enters you.”²

THE TRAGEDY OF LIFE AND THE DEPTH OF SUFFERING

The book of Job does not answer the question of human suffering, but at least it points the believer to the recognition of the possibility of an innocent person or God’s faithful people falling into a terrible misfortune. The experience of a small agrarian community of Mbalom in Makurdi diocese, Benue State, Nigeria, supports this Judeo-Christian revelation. Mbalom is a small village of less than a thousand settlers whose life revolves around their Catholic faith, farm and local market. A typical day for this humble people begins with morning Mass after which they proceed to the farm. They return back later in the evening to the village square which doubles as the market place and community space for buying and socializing.

In the early hours of Tuesday April 24th, 2018, the people gathered in the Church as usual for morning Mass. In the course of the Eucharistic celebration, heavily armed Islamic herdsmen

1 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1948), 59.

2 Jalal al-Din Rumi, “The wound is where the light enters into you” in *Selected Poems*, Trans. Coleman Barks (London: Penguin, 2004 Books), 142

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crashed in and attacked the community gathered to begin the day in praise and worship of God. A ruthless massacre took place and the lives of their pastors: Fr. Joseph Gor; Fr. Felix Tyolaha, VC and fourteen members of the congregation ended in cold blood even as they desperately sought to escape the bloodbath. For Fr Felix, this was his second tragic experience. The bishop of the diocese had only recently re-assigned him temporarily to this community having been displaced earlier from his former parish of Udei by the same armed herdsmen.

As those who survived fled the community, their attackers set many of their houses ablaze before proceeding to the village market-square to destroy it as well. Within a short time, this humble, loving and faith-filled village became a ghost town and a scene of one of the most grievous Christian killings in recent memory. The survivors and many people in and around the community, in their great anguish and distress wailed and lamented in their struggle to grapple with the misfortune that has befallen them. Why and how could God possibly allow priests and parishioners to be murdered in the most despicable and sacrilegious manner as they worshipped Him? If people are not safe in their homes, Churches and communities, where else can they be?

MY JOURNEY TO THE DOOR OF THE DEPTH OF TRUTH

In my search for meaning and strength in the midst of all that had happened, I stumbled one day on St John Paul II's Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, *Salvifici doloris*. I was immediately drawn to it because the theme spoke to my struggles and indeed that of many within my immediate community. Even though I had read a few pages of this magisterial document before, it seemed like I was encountering it for the first time. It was so alive, challenging and invigorating that I could not stop reading.

It was as if to the "whys" and the "hows" of this heinous tragedy, John Paul responds: "Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering" but points to his own suffering, wishing "to answer ... from the Cross, from the heart of his own suffering."³ Hence to those who suffer, Christ says: 'Follow me!' Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him.⁴ It is in view of this salvific suffering of Christ for the love of the world (Jn 3: 16), that '[suffering] no

3 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, *Salvifici doloris* (Boston: Daughters of St Paul, 1984), no. 26.

4 John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, no. 26.

longer appears as an exclusively negative event,' for, 'suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbours, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a 'civilization of love.'⁵

This particular statement of John Paul: "suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour" pierced my heart. It moved my question beyond "why did this happen to these innocent people in the most holy place?" to what can I do in order to give birth to works of love towards these neighbours of mine, the Mbalom community in anguish? For sure you can do one thing in the present scary situation, I said to myself. Pray for them! As the days passed by, I soon felt that, Yes, praying for them is one of the works of love, but the love of Christ compels us (1Cor 5: 4) to do more, to visit, to look after and to give (Matt 25: 31-46). Visit! Look after and Give what? Give birth to works of Love towards them!

THE BIRTH OF THE WORKS OF LOVE AND THE LANGUAGE THAT ALL UNDERSTAND

After a few investigations about the possibility of visiting the Mbalom community, a breakthrough came my way when some persons responded to my enquiry. They promised to coordinate and accompany me to the place. They subsequently made contacts with some of the returnees and bereaved families who were delighted that we wished to visit, pray, encourage and share in some way in the suffering despite the volatile nature of the place. After an early mass on Sunday, 29th April 2018, I quickly went to one of the priests in our large seminary community, told him of our mission and asked for his prayers. We got a big truck packed with food items and some cash gifts, fruits of generosity and love, and we departed for the place.

Though we were told the journey was an hour or so from Makurdi town, it took us over three hours. This was because the road leading to the place was in such deplorable state with many large potholes coupled with a lot of security checkpoints along the way. As we journeyed to this village, they were a few things that bothered me. The anxiety of been able to communicate my message of sympathy appropriately in such a way that mutual understanding is established was the most worrisome. I could not stop worrying about how I could possibly communicate and connect with these suffering families in the midst of this terrible tragedy. The background to my fears was not only that of having an appropriate message and right words that could possibly express heartfelt sentiments in the midst of the tragedy but also on account

5 Ibid.

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of the language-cultural differences between one culture and another.

When we finally arrived, we were lead to the Church where the massacre took place. It was the first Sunday after the atrocity, so coming together as a family of God on this Lord's day was symbolic. It epitomized the uncrushable faith of a devastated people. The Church was packed with a community in trauma and pain who looked unto the Lord for help in adversity (Ps 121: 1-2). We were welcomed and introduced by an interpreter. He then introduced the different bereaved families who sat in groups with details of those killed and indicated that people who wanted to share their story were free to do so. The first to speak was a young man surrounded by his four little children whose wife and son were among those murdered by the attackers. The second was a young woman who narrated how she struggled to escape with her six children from the house when she heard gun shots only to discover later that her husband who went to Mass was gruesomely murdered in the Church. As a few others continued in distress and tears, uncontrollable tears poured down my cheeks. As I struggled with what was happening to me, a member of one of the victims family walked up to me and said, "Fr, please don't cry! Pray for us! Thank you for coming to share in our pain!" In that instant, it dawned on me that the wounded has become the healer. Humbled and totally broken by my own vulnerability in the midst of this tragedy and the graced strength of faith of this people, I presented an appearance of bravery, strength and faith. We prayed together and the families of the victims were asked to go to their homes to wait for us. Many in the community accompanied and assisted us in reaching out to them in their homes. We finally ended our mission for that day in the ruins of the destroyed market as nightfall was approaching and shared our food with members of the community present.

Reflecting upon our graced encounter with this community in their tragedy, I became even more aware of the reality that though suffering and tragedy have always been among the greatest problems that confront and trouble humanity, a community's 'faith helps them to grasp more deeply the mystery of suffering and to bear their pain with greater courage.'⁶ This experience also made me to appreciate even more the truth in Steve Wiens words that: 'in deep pain, people don't need logic, advice, encouragement, or even Scripture. They just need you to show up and shut up, [in solidarity].' When Lazarus died, Jesus showed up and was visibly

6 International Commission on English in the Liturgy, "Human Sickness and Its Meaning in the Mystery of Salvation" in *Pasroral Care of the Sick: Rite of Anointing and Viaticum* (Dublin: Veritas, 1983), 10.

united with the family in their sorrow. The interpretation of his presence and solidarity in anguish was clear, ‘he loved Lazarus’ (Jn 11: 36).

CONCLUSION

The puzzle of the Christian vocation to rid our community and indeed the world of suffering is rooted in the fact that ‘the Cross is, and must be, an element in a life in which we truly follow Christ.’⁷ This is not just because whoever must be Jesus’ follower must take up his or her cross and follow him (Matt 10:28, 16: 24; Lk 14: 27; I Pt 2: 21), but also, for the very reason that the cross, the suffering of the other is the open door for an encounter with the God of Jesus Christ, who calls the Christian to participate in the mystery of love and suffering. As St. John Paul II reiterates ‘It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls.’⁸

It is on the basis of this mystery that we understand that in our journey of faith, suffering and love are always in a warm embrace, the former gives birth to the later and vice versa. The teleology of this warm embrace of suffering and love is that it leads the searching pilgrim to the depth of truth, Jesus Christ, who suffered and died on the cross in order to release the love of the Father to the wounded and suffering world (Cf. Jn 3: 16). The mystery and mission of the Christian life is thus, ‘conditioned by and grounded in the mystery of God, but not ultimately via thirst for a controlling knowledge and perception – rather only in the experience of the wonder of love.’⁹ For to this we have been called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).

7 George Cardinal Basil Hume, *Searching for God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 149.

8 John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, no. 27.

9 Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbour*, trans. Robert Barr (Middegreen: St Paul’s, 1983), 99.