TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

By MARY CRAIG

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to Elie Wiesel's sad little book *Night*, which tells the story of a young jewish boy's gradual loss of faith in the midst of the nazi holocaust, François Mauriac wrote of his own powerlessness to help. The young man has confessed himself alone, without God and without man. He is the accuser, God the accused. 'And I, who believe that God is love', wrote Mauriac, 'what answer could I give my young questioner? . . . Did I speak of that other israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him – the crucified, whose cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the corner-stone of mine, and that the conformity between the cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? . . . This is what I should have told this jewish child. But I could only embrace him weeping'.[1]

There have been many events in man's recent history to which the only immediate response possible was tears – followed by the anguished question 'Why?' The slaughter of the jews, the annihilation of Hiroshima, the massacres in Africa, the carnage of Vietnam – why must such things happen? God stands accused. If I were God, we think, I should never allow such sufferings. On the face of things, we have two alternatives: either the universe is governed by a cruel, vengeful God who delights in torturing the innocent; or there is no God and we are adrift in total absurdity.

But another possibility does exist. Our anthropomorphic view of God prevents us from seeing things as they really are. Man's glory – that which makes him man – is that he has free will. From his earliest days he has had the freedom to choose. If we are to exercise this freedom, it follows that we must have the freedom to abuse it. If God were to intervene in our choices, wrong actions would be impossible, the freedom of the will would be meaningless and we should be no more than robots. But the price of our freedom is pain and suffering, a price that must be paid. 'If man were a brute or an angel', wrote Kierkegaard, 'he would not be the prey of anguish'. It

[1] Wiesel, Elie: *Night* (London, 1960).

is we who first turn our world awry and then reap the harvest, either ourselves or our children or our children's children. Throughout the ages man has destroyed his harmony and at-one-ness with his world and introduced discordance everywhere. It is not God but men who have produced instruments of torture and destruction, devised ever more effective means of enslaving or terrorizing their fellows. It is men's greed or stupidity or blindness that has caused the inequalities and the injustices in our societies. And God, who foresaw all the inhumanities that man would perpetrate on man and on his world, has only once stepped into the ranks of men – when he sent his Son to show us the way to love and become whole.

Anybody who attempts to find some sort of answer to the eternal 'why?' of suffering must, if he is honest, face the fact that theories, even profoundly held beliefs, easily break down when he is confronted with suffering in his own life. The natural human impulse is to fly from trouble, and when we realize there is no escape we are tempted to despair. When the suffering is our own it seems to shroud our whole being, swamping what little courage we have: the forces of darkness seem to use every weapon against us. There are times when it requires greater courage to go on living than to put an end to it all. At such times, nothing and no-one gets through to us: we are deaf to all but the din of our own misery.

Every human being must travel this road at some time and experience this temptation to despair. But the first overwhelming agony passes, and it is then that we must decide how we are to live with the situation. Some people drift from despair to self-pity. Why should this happen to me? Haven't I always tried to lead a good life? (This frightening conviction that virtue is measurable and should be rewarded, that suffering is unfair, is an attitude that owes more to paganism than to christianity.) Self-pity may be a normal reaction, but the time for it passes. If we allow it to take hold, it will destroy us just as surely as the cancerous growth it resembles. Self-pity erodes our courage and our humanity. It is destructive not only of ourselves but of those who love us and would help us. If we see ourselves as the victims of an outrageous and malevolent fate, we become embittered and the love that is in us will be soured into envy and hate.

There is another response which is almost as destructive as self-pity. It is certainly stunting. This is a refusal to face reality. If I shut my eyes hard enough and long enough I can convince myself that this dreadful thing hasn't really happened or that it will go away.

In this way we abdicate our responsibility, we refuse to accept our reality, and we say 'no' to the possibility of growth. Our 'no' is just as positive when we deaden our responses with tranquillizers.

Among christians another response is fairly common. We pray blindly that God will get us out of the mess. We even feel a barely suppressed sense of outrage that he's got us into it in the first place. We perhaps go to Lourdes, and expect *our* miracle, the one we want in the way we want it. When the miracle fails to happen, God has let us down. It doesn't occur to us that we're just using God as a funk-hole. Let's get away from this nasty reality, let's demand of God that he hide us or cosset us or tell us it's all going to be alright.

How can we sneer at any of these responses? Who knows what his own will be when the hour strikes? And surely God *is* a refuge, and it is our right to ask for the agony to pass. Did not Christ do just that? He prayed for the cup to pass from him. But we cannot stop there – we cannot leave out the redeeming humility of 'Father, if it be possible' and 'not my will but thine'.

The acceptance is all. Our tragedy is not that we suffer, but that we waste suffering. Self-pity turns inward, warping us, driving out love. If we refuse to face our situation exactly as it is, neither better nor worse, we run from the truth – and from ourselves. And if we are doing that, it is no use sinking ourselves in good works; for if we are in flight from ourselves we have nothing whatever to give to others except our own barrenness. We can only gain from suffering if we use the opportunity to grow in compassion and understanding, to become more sensitive to the needs of others. 'You should carry each others' burdens and fulfil the law of Christ', said St Paul. In asking us to suffer, God is offering us a share in the life that he chose for his Son.

For at the centre of all that happens to us the cross stands as a commentary. It is easy for us to forget that the core of our faith is a man dying in mess and muddle and pain, who cried out in despair as he was dying. For Simone Weil, the cry 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' represents the true human condition: Christ was sharing with us the sense of having lost God. Yet his cry of despair did not diminish his love. If man can reach the point of crying 'My God, my God' without ceasing in his love, he *will* find happiness in the midst of his abandonment. We may not be called on to imitate Christ's example in detail (at the same time it must be admitted that men have frequently suffered *worse* deaths than crucifixion); but it gives us an ideal to aspire to, and an understand-

ing that Christ asks us to have the courage to follow him – in our own existential situation. The whole point of the Incarnation is that Christ fully shared our human situation. Faith in Christ is not an immunizing drug against pain, it may not even seem to be comfort of any kind. But it is a key to unlock the meaning and the latent possibilities of what we have in any case no option but to endure. In a television discussion with Malcolm Muggeridge, archbishop Anthony Bloom once commented: 'I think it [i.e. suffering] is ennobling and I think it is creative; but it may be nonsense if you do not see meaning or put meaning into it'.

What do we mean by suffering? It is something, on a trivial or a cosmic scale, which is highly unpleasant to us, which hurts, which upsets our plans, which is against our will. That is the crux of the matter. The will refuses to accept or to be reconciled to its new situation. We engage in a struggle, fearful of being overcome. We are no longer sure of ourselves, the bubble of our complacency is shattered; we are vulnerable and in our vulnerability we may find God. In our everyday hedonism we have no time for God. Our happiness lies in him, but we will not seek it unless he makes us. Therefore he must warn us of our insufficiencies. Pain, as C.S. Lewis wrote, is 'his megaphone to arouse a deaf world'. It is only when we are afraid or bewildered, aware of our own helplessness, that we turn to God. If we are to be re-made, re-born, turned around, we must be first broken into pieces. The philosopher-poet Kahlil Gibran expresses this idea in words of great beauty and poignancy:

> Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
> Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain.
> It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self.
> Therefore trust the physician . . . the cup he brings, though it burn your lips, has been fashioned of the clay which the Potter has moistened with his own sacred tears.[2]

What is odd is *not* that some pious, believing people are called on to suffer, but rather that some are not. That there is some therapeutic value in suffering is obvious. When our own need is great, to whom do we turn? To the one for whom life has always been easy, or to the other who's been buffeted by more than

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[2] Gibran, Kahlil: *The Prophet* (London, 1962).

one storm? Somehow we acknowledge that the former lacks a dimension and cannot help us. Not that sorrow automatically provides that dimension. Pain like pleasure is morally neutral: what gives or does not give it a positive value is the way it is received. It is not good in itself; the mere fact of suffering does not make a martyr. It can sour and embitter, it can make people less human, it can turn them into savages. But where it is accepted and used, it can bestow a maturity and a beauty of spirit that no other experience can provide. We have all seen shallow men and women grow better through adversity; it is their one big chance to do so. 'Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence', wrote Léon Bloy. There is a wisdom that only sorrow can bring. It is the source of the great poetry, the great music, the great art and the great discoveries of life. It is in sorrow that man can look into himself and find God.

On the day that the second of my two mentally handicapped children was born (and I knew the truth as soon as I recovered consciousness after the birth), I experienced a fathomless despair. I felt that I was drowning and didn't even know how to struggle. Yet there was something in me that wanted to grow through this horror, to use it for good in some way. When I reached what seemed to me the darkest depths, I was suddenly aware of being upheld, aware of a promise of strength, if I would only seek it. I can only say that it was my one and only direct experience of God.

For the christian, suffering is the supreme paradox. The suffering that is the fruit of evil, of man's lack of harmony with his world; his incomplete understanding of it; his greed; his unwillingness to seek justice: wherever possible this suffering must be fought and eliminated. Hunger, disease, economic slavery, poverty, homelessness, injustice: in Vietnam, in India, in latin America or here at home, they must be fought by all the practical means at our disposal. It is simply not good enough to quote, 'My kingdom is not of this world'. Until such manifestations of man's inadequacy are eradicated from the world, man cannot achieve the wholeness that he needs. All men, and the christian in particular, are committed to this struggle, whether they will or not. Christ's commands are quite clear: we are to love our neighbour. As St John says in the First Epistle, 'If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?' Closer to our own times, Dom Helder Camara has constantly stressed that evangelization cannot be merely spiri-

tual: 'If I know that there are human creatures like me in some part of the world whose life is not worthy of man, of a son of God, who have neither house nor clothing, neither food nor education, then I must do everything I can to help them . . . For christians the incarnation of Christ is a living lesson in commitment'.[3] We must do what we can, however little it may be. It is indifference, not hatred, which is the true enemy of love. And may not indifference be what keeps the silent majority silent? 'For evil to triumph, good men have only to remain silent', wrote St Augustine, and centuries later his words were echoed by Martin Luther King, writing from his Alabama Birmingham gaol shortly before his death: 'We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people'.

For it is Christ who dies of starvation or leprosy in Calcutta, who is burned daily with napalm in Vietnam, who was buried with the children of Aberfan and who wept with their parents. It is Christ who lives in the handicapped or the mentally ill, the imprisoned or the persecuted. 'When, Lord, did we see thee hungry or thirsty or sick or naked or in prison?' Are we so naive that we really do not know? The message of Matthew 25 is a terrible challenge to us all. It is that wherever there is suffering and distress and injustice, Christ is there in the midst calling to us. 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to me'. Our lives are lived in a context of human suffering in which our own experiences are but a single thread in a vast canvas. If we turn our pain outward, uniting it by an effort of will with the pain of the world, then our own suffering becomes a positive gift to God and the means of our own growth. If we do that, far from rejecting God, we acknowledge that we are responsible with him for the redemption of the human family. Nothing has been taken away from us, something extra has been given to us. If we stand in spirit at the foot of the cross we can see that all the sorrow in the world is gathered together into one sorrow; and there, in the moment of seeming utter defeat, the victory over sorrow is complete.

We may refuse to see all this; we may hold back from the suffering that is in the world, insulating ourselves from it, preferring, like Candide, to cultivate our own gardens. The choice is ours. But as

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[3] Dom Helder Camara: 'The Third World and the Developing Countries': text prepared for *L'Osservatore Romano* during the second session of Vatican Council, November 1963, but not published. Quoted in *Church and Colonialism* (London, 1969).

Kafka understood, 'perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that we might be able to avoid'. We were not born for isolation.

Man's ingenuity has dreamed up many forms of escapism, but none of them offers peace, and in none of them is wholeness to be found. We all must share in paying the price of all men's freedom, for without freedom there would be no good either. Our age tries frantically to dull pain with tranquillizers or even hard drugs, but ultimately these 'answers' are self-defeating as well as addictive. In the USA a pretence is made that death does not exist, the corpse is painted and bedecked, and death becomes a macabre spectacle from which splendour and dignity have departed. This kind of escape and all our other somewhat frenetic attempts only diminish us. Those who try to escape miss something precious. People *are* capable of facing up to pain, of being heroic. Archbishop Anthony Bloom, who was a doctor before becoming a priest, once spoke to me at length on this subject. He feels that the desire to escape suffering is particularly prevalent in the West; whereas in the East 'there is a much stronger feeling that suffering like everything else is a God-given experience, something that can be creatively used, that makes sense; that to escape suffering may be a way of losing a chance to understand something of great importance to you and consequently for others. We are the body of Christ broken for the salvation of the world'. He went on to speak of a young woman who had been a patient of his. She was dying of cancer, but despite the great pain she refused to take any drugs to alleviate her suffering. The time had not yet come, she said. Then one day she called him and said she was now ready for the drugs: she had now learned everything that pain had to teach, and could go in peace.

After all, suffering does not have the last word. It needs to be viewed in an eschatological perspective. As man grows in wisdom and understanding and compassion, and as the kingdom of God draws closer, suffering and evil will pass away. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, the time will come when we shall become full human beings, worthy to know God. And Christ pointed to the only way to this fulness – dying to ourselves for love. 'If you refuse to love', says St John, 'you will remain dead'.

Why should we doubt the necessity for suffering in God's redemptive plan for the world? Man does not exist for his own sake; he was made by God for himself; and the old christian doctrine of being made perfect through suffering is not incredible. Pain may not have

been part of the original divine plan, but, given the 'aboriginal catastrophe', it became inevitable. In a way, a world without suffering is unthinkable, a plastic, homogenized world where growth is forever impossible. Pain may lead to revolt and rebellion, but 'it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment . . . until the evil man finds evil unmistakably present in his existence, in the form of pain, he is enclosed in illusion'.[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, condemned to death by the nazis, wrote from his death cell at Flossenburg: 'I believe that God can, and intends to, let good spring from everything, even from what is most evil. For this he needs human beings who know how to turn all things to the good'. Even the cruel man may be used to produce a complex good (though this does not excuse his cruelty). Without suffering, the evil and the good pursue parallel courses, never inter-acting on each other. Suffering alone makes them converge.

What better (or worse) illustration could there be than the ghettos, the slave camps, the extermination camps of nazi-occupied Europe? It is estimated that 20 million people died in 3000 camps, in terror, starvation, humiliation and degradation. Evil was let loose and ran amok; it was a world ruled by hatred. It was in such a world that the little jewish boy, Elie Wiesel, and countless others like him, lost their faith. 'I cry to you and you give me no answer; I stand before you but you take no notice' – in how many hearts must the words of Job have echoed. Belsen, Buchenwald, Majdanek, Auschwitz represent an infamy which leaves us paralysed with shame. This is the level to which man with his glorious gift of freedom has descended. Yet consider something else – the human spirit rising above the degradation, finding God in the stench and the filth and the misery. Physical strength counted for nothing: it was inner strength that counted and this was to be found in unexpected places. Public men foundered, while obscure and even despised individuals proved to be of solid gold. Some men became beasts and others saints, and until their hour came no-one could have foretold which would become which. There were of course the magnificent examples: Janusz Korczak, the polish-jewish doctor who resisted all offers of a safe passage for himself and led his orphanage children from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka, singing all the way;[5] Mother Maria Skobtsova[6] of Ravensbruck and Fr Maximilian Kolbe of

[4] Lewis, C. S.: *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1940).
[5] Olczak, Hanna: *Mister Doctor* (London, 1966).
[6] Hackel, Sergei: *One of Great Price* (London, 1965).

Auschwitz, both of whom gave their lives for another; and Edith Stein, of whom it was said that it was given to her by God to 'implant the cross in the complete desert of hatred'. But most of the heroes and heroines were unsung, those men and women who testified to the survival of the human spirit 'through the all-transcending Grace in the total absence of the means of grace'.[7] 'The spirit cannot die', wrote the czech poet Franz Mark, 'in no circumstances, under no torment, despite whatever calumnies, in no bleak places'. The concentration camps indeed proved that. The following prayer was found scribbled on a piece of wrapping-paper near the body of a dead child at Ravensbruck camp where 92,000 women and children died:

> O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill-will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to the judgment let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

Only one who had plumbed the depths of suffering could have learned so much compassion. We are reminded of the russian bishop who claimed that none but the martyr may stand before the judgment seat of God and say, 'According to thy word and thy example I have forgiven. Do thou likewise'.

And what of the guilty? With a few exceptions, as time has passed, we have come to accept Hannah Arendt's judgment that these criminals were as banal as the rest of the world's little men, that they were in the grip of forces which they didn't understand and to which they succumbed. One of the gaolers of Franz Stangl (commandant first of Sobibor and later of Treblinka) described him as 'like a man, an intelligent human being and not a brute'. Stangl, like others of his ilk, was not a natural monster, but, horrifyingly for us all, the *homme moyen sensuel* with no gift for heroics and no instinct stronger than that of self-preservation. Can we be absolutely certain we should have acted differently? Can we be sure that such men are beyond forgiveness?

Out of the abyss of evil, saints arose. Pierre d'Harcourt, analysing the experiences of Buchenwald, commented that in a way the life of the camp was 'the true life, the life that bore witness to what really

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[7] Simon, Ulrich, E.: *A Theology of Auschwitz* (London, 1967).

counted in humanity, the spirit'. The letters from condemned prisoners of the nazis, collected into a paperback anthology,[8] bear witness to the dizzy heights to which men may soar when they have discovered God in darkness. The letters are full of faith and courage and a joyful awareness of new-found values.

Among many of the survivors of the camps to-day, living out their lives in real hardship, one meets this tremendous inner strength, this indestructible human spirit. They seem to have passed beyond hatred and bitterness because they saw where they led. They are linked together by a powerful bond, and their mutual compassion is great. I shall never forget the woman I met in Warsaw at a party for survivors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Suddenly she turned to me and said sadly, 'I wasn't there; but I wish to God I had been. I'm on the outside. Do you understand?' Others are even more unforgettable: Wanda, medically experimented on by the SS and left to die (no 'guinea-pigs' were to be left to tell the tale). Rescued by friends in the camp 'underground', she was hidden in a bunker, surviving hourly searches by the Gestapo who were out to liquidate the 'guinea-pigs'. Suddenly all fear left her: she understood that she could no longer be hurt. Death was the worst that could happen, but she felt sure she was not going to die. With the force of a revelation she began to see a purpose in her sufferings, and determined that if she ever got out alive she would use her new insights and compassion to help heal the minds of others. She works now as a trained psychiatrist.

That is but one example among countless others. It is stories such as that which make us realize that God is indeed in what Karl Jaspers called the 'limit-situations' of human existence – guilt, suffering and death. Man, as Pascal (and Kierkegaard) recognized, can be carried to the height of redemption only after passing through the valley of despair. We don't suffer in order to become other than we are, but to become what it lies in us to become. It all depends on ourselves. The suffering that produced a Beethoven or a Helen Keller could also produce a snivelling weakling riddled with self-pity. Two men suffer the same anguish: one is destroyed, the other enriched. One has looked inward, and has withered; the other has found Christ suffering in the world, though he may not even know the name of Christ. A few months ago I met a girl with a broken neck. She is in a wheel-chair, completely paralysed, without feeling

[8] d'Harcourt, Pierre: *Dying we Live* (London, 1958).

or skin sensation from the shoulders down. She looks after herself in her own flat (it takes her two hours to get dressed), drives across London each day and does a nine to five-thirty job, after which she is too exhausted to do anything but sleep. She rejoices in her independence: 'For me it is the most wonderful and unbelievable thing. Every morning when I wake up, I think, another day, and I've made it!' To find hope and joy in the midst of affliction, rather than stoicism or mere patient endurance – that is the ultimate achievement of faith.

The paradox remains. We must continue to fight suffering, yet we must also be prepared to see in it what Teilhard called 'a loving principle of renewal'. We come to know our dependence and our helplessness and to recognize that we cannot save ourselves. When it's our turn, no-one can persuade us that our own pain isn't naked and raw. Pain, whether mental or physical or the spiritual pain of the dark night of the soul hurts like hell and anyone who denies it is a fool and a hypocrite. But we can't run away from it, and in it lies the possibility of redemption for ourselves and for others if we can say, 'For what it's worth, take it, Lord, and use it. Use it for those poor napalmed children in Vietnam, use it to make me grow into compassion, use it any way you will'. We may utter such a prayer through clenched teeth, it may be dragged out of us, but if we can hope one day to mean it we are half-way to humility. In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo set out on his long journey to Mordor, through every kind of evil and horror, no-one knew to what he would come in the end. 'Not to evil, I think', said Gandalf to himself, 'he may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can'.

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