

LOOKING ON SUFFERING AND SEEING GOD

Reflections on Charity Work and Suffering

Lillian Craig Harris

WHILE WALKING IN ITALY a few years ago, visiting remote churches along the way, I came upon a painted wooden statue with no hands. Next to the statue was a placard which read: 'Christ has no hands'. The point was clear: the only hands God has with which to alleviate suffering and injustice are our own. In the words of the prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila, 'Christ has no hands on earth but our hands'. The organizations through which God works include the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Greenpeace, the Jesuit Refugee Service, *Médecins sans Frontières* and London's Battersea Dogs Home—just to name some of my favourites. People who work for charity organizations—and many others who work independently except for God's Spirit within—are the hands of God reaching out to counter suffering. Their work expresses both human benevolence and God's love for humanity and for the earth.

Suffering surrounds us. Illness, aging, poverty and even war are all regarded as 'part of the human condition'. Active service to ameliorate suffering is a source of consolation, as are faith in God and the acceptance of suffering which cannot be avoided. According to Sundar Singh, a late nineteenth-century Indian Christian holy man, 'The root of suffering is found in sin, in separation from God ... [who] uses suffering to call us into the peace of his presence'.¹ For 'we cannot attain spiritual perfection without passing through pain and suffering'.²

¹ *Wisdom of the Sadhu: Teaching of Sundar Singh*, edited by Kim Comer (Robertsbridge: Plough Publishing House of the Bruderhof Foundation, 2000), 147.

² *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, 152.

Suffering does seem to be programmed into human life, and the relief of suffering would appear to be more our responsibility than God's. Charity work is not only a help for those who suffer but a path for those who struggle towards knowing God.

A recent television advertisement on the BBC World Service featured a businessman describing his work with Formula One racing cars as 'the best job in the world'. But in reality, perhaps, that title

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Statue of Christ without hands, Soweto

belongs to all efforts to alleviate suffering and to uphold those who suffer. This does not mean that this is always the most immediately rewarding job. Charity workers are usually deeply affected by their efforts to push back at the neglect, selfishness, greed and corruption which cause so much turmoil in the world. And while the companions of the Sufferer are blessed, there is no guarantee that their work will be positively received, that their intentions will be fulfilled, or that the impact on them personally will be beneficial. Burnout and other emotional difficulties are significant possibilities for those who work on the front line, or even on the fringes, of suffering.

My involvement in various charitable endeavours over the past twenty years has enriched my understanding of God's

desire to work through individuals, as well as my desire for God. There is, it seems, nothing which can be more effective in opening our hearts and changing our lives than service to others in need—unless it be raw personal suffering itself. The lives of charity workers are often changed forever when the suffering of others opens their hearts to God's loving presence; for where there is suffering, there God is most available to be known. The variety of suffering, and of our opportunities to reach out and meet needs, are apparent in the multitude of charitable organizations and causes devoted to the environment, to human mental and physical health, to animal welfare, and to coping with natural disasters. God often seems to be more interested in supporting people in their suffering than in transporting them out of it. We need to understand why.

Some years ago, while helping set up a befriending centre for suicidal and despairing people in Cairo, I began to perceive that those who seek to relieve suffering often find themselves confronted with changes in their own attitudes, understanding and actions—changes which suggest spiritual growth. Suffering—our own and that of others—can open us to God's suffering over us, and through this painful process it can have a positive effect on our lives and on the lives of people around us. It is not necessary to believe in any particular religion or even to have faith in God for the blessings of service to be experienced. When carers place themselves, even unknowingly, as a connecting link between suffering and God's love, the divine energy and grace which flows through them to the sufferer is sometimes startling and even life-changing for them.

While in Turkey recently I was reminded of the role that Sufism plays in calling people to the need for reconciliation with one another and to a more loving relationship with God. The 'whirling dervishes' of the Mevlani Monastery in Konya were suppressed by Atatürk in 1924 as part of his secularization campaign, but are back at work today, evoking God's blessings on humanity through a special form of prayer. They dance with the palm of the right hand upward to receive God's blessing, while passing on that blessing with the left hand turned down. In so doing they seek to provide the same connection between suffering and divine love that I experienced as a befriender in Cairo. As Robert Frager puts it: 'To be a dervish is to be committed to social justice, to do

what we can to alleviate hunger and suffering. The heart that does not feel the pain of others cannot love God.’³

The Types of Suffering

Suffering may be divided into three major categories. The most widely recognised is *affliction*, experienced as the result of war, tyranny, aggression and the like, as well as in physical and mental illness and in the losses that we experience, in particular the loss of those we love and other forms of bereavement. Cruelty towards other people and animals and abuse of our environment and physical resources impose affliction on humanity, on other living things and even on the planet itself. *Vicarious suffering*, in which pain and penalty are taken on behalf of others, is the highest form of suffering, and fully realised in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. *Participatory suffering* is a response to the suffering of others by which we support them in their pain and distress. Those who experience participatory suffering understand that when the heart opens to others, our love and concern for them sometimes slip over into vicarious suffering. When this occurs in the context of professional or voluntary care work, supervisors are well advised to provide special support for the carer and sometimes even to place him or her on leave of absence.

It is participatory suffering on which I shall concentrate in this essay as it is critically important for charity workers. Charity workers are God’s front-line troops when famine, earthquake, war and epidemic occur. There is great blessing in their work, but ‘God’s hands’ are often themselves deeply affected by the suffering that they encounter. Among the burdens I carry forever is the image of two small weeping boys, one with a severely curved spine, being whipped away from a feeding centre for mothers and infants during the 1998 famine in southern Sudan. A short time later a Catholic sister working in Wau locked herself in her room, refusing to come out because ‘I cannot look at another dying baby’.

³ Robert Frager, *Heart, Self and Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1998), 16.

A Questionnaire about Suffering

As preparation for this article, I sent out a simple questionnaire to some 25 charity workers, most of them personal friends and most Christians, though some are Muslims, Hindus or agnostics. The sample includes people who engage, both professionally and privately, in charity work for development, health, animal welfare, community support, education and relief. All but one were lay people.

The questionnaire was not scientific, but was intended to check my own perspectives against those of others with similar experience. My purpose was to understand more clearly how the experience of prolonged engagement with the suffering of others had influenced their spiritual lives. At least one important conclusion results: the eighteen respondents to the questionnaire deepened my concern over the psychological, emotional and spiritual toll paid by inadequately supported charity workers.

Asked if, given the opportunity, they would visit or work in places of intense human suffering, most of the respondents answered positively, but expressed a fear of voyeurism, saying that they would only do so if they knew that some good would result. I understood this response as expressing an unconscious—and normal—fear of pain on the part of the beholder. Looking on terrible suffering is usually so painful, and arouses such stifling feelings of dread, fear and horror, that even a tiny lifting of the veil is enough to hold most people back unless there is a real need to go further in order to help.

The key questions, most of which allowed for more than one response, were as follows:

What do you regard as the reason for suffering in the lives of individuals?		
<i>To help us as individuals to become more loving, forgiving and aware (8)</i>	<i>To wake people up to the needs of others (7)</i>	<i>To remind us of God's suffering because of us (6)</i>
<i>It's God's will and we can't question or understand (1)</i>	<i>No reason. It just happens (1)</i>	<i>To punish those who have sinned (0)</i>
<i>Other answers: the consequences of free will; greed and selfishness of people in power; lack of education and opportunity; suffering is incompatible with the idea of a compassionate, omnipotent, omniscient God.</i>		

How could a loving God allow terrible human, animal and environmental suffering?

Suffering is caused by people, not by God (14)

I don't believe God has anything to do with suffering (2)

I don't think anyone can answer this question (2)

I can't understand why there is so much suffering and sometimes I get angry at God (0)

I don't know (0)

I'm not sure that God is loving (0)

Other answers: a loving God would not allow terrible suffering so the real question is why does not God stop it; suffering is a consequence of freedom of choice (2).

Would you willingly live in a world with no suffering?

No (7): Suffering is part of the life process; silly question/can't answer; no challenges, so no!

Yes (4): God did not intend us to suffer; impossible now although we will some day as believers in Christ

Do you believe that the suffering of individuals and nations can have a positive effect on those who suffer or on others who witness the suffering?

No reply (11)

Yes (6): suffering makes people more aware of the needs of others; it reminds us of our own vulnerability.

Maybe, but only afterwards (1)

No (0)

Most respondents ignored this question. I conjectured that this indicated an ambivalence over how the suffering which they have seen and experienced has marked their own lives.

How does the suffering of others make you feel?

Need to do whatever I can to alleviate it (13)

Desire to escape and not see it (6)

Compelled to look on suffering and try to help because I believe that it can enable me to 'see God' (5)

Helpless even when I would like to help (3)

Angry (3)

Guilty even though I had nothing to do directly with causing others to suffer (2)

That the sufferer deserves it (e.g. if the person is a prisoner/terrorist/murderer/child molester) (0)

Other answers: all this, depending on circumstances; makes me think that God is not in charge; pray that God will intervene. Sometimes a mix of all the above.

<i>Do you see a connection between divine love and individual suffering?</i>		
No reply (6)	Yes (5); our loving God gives us free will and sometimes we get crushed by it	
No (4)	I don't understand the question (3)	
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<i>Do you think it possible that God shares human suffering?</i>		
Yes (11)	Not a question I can answer (4)	
Ambivalent (1)	No (0)	
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<i>Our human suffering over the pain, distress and disadvantage of others is an invitation to participate in God's suffering over humanity. Do you agree?</i>		
Yes (5)	Don't know (4)	Maybe (3)
This doesn't make sense to me (2)	No (2)	

Among my small sample of charity workers are two people who work almost unceasingly to prevent and ameliorate animal suffering, one a Muslim and one an agnostic. Both these people are angry with God, and one of them expresses his anger in his prayers. He believes that there are 'links between divine love and suffering' and, in his experience, God responds positively to 'angry prayer'. Both these individuals are privileged to share God's suffering, but they carry a heavy burden because they cannot avoid seeing the desperate suffering of animals, and they are often scandalized by it and get themselves into trouble trying to educate people and rescue animals. However, another animal-charity worker (three were in the survey) believes that animal-welfare work has made her more able to cope with human rudeness and intolerance (when she points out the need to care for animals) because she now recognises that those who abuse animals may themselves be suffering. In her understanding, God wants us to recognise the reasons for suffering but does not necessarily want us to suffer.

A risk attached to charity work is that it can cause people to lose their faith, or become cynical, or both. Suffering is like fire, and we are scorched by sitting too close to it for too long. One respondent, who is a full-time employee of a major international charity, described pain as a nuisance rather than a way to wake up to God, said that he sees no connection between God and suffering, and does not believe that God intervenes in human affairs. He cannot accept that a loving God would 'send' natural disasters and feels angry over the suffering of others. In

particular, he is fed up with religious workers who credit God with sending disasters when this 'has nothing to do with God'. Not unexpectedly, he rejects the idea of a 'spiritual calling' to help those who are disadvantaged.

Though no one from my small sample of charity workers expressed this view, there are many people who believe that those who suffer somehow deserve it. It is not uncommon to regard the suffering of others as somehow their destiny, as Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino has pointed out. He counters that the source of contemporary spiritual pollution lies in our selfishness and describes suffering as God's way to 'purify the air'.⁴

But why are we selfish? Perhaps because we are afraid of loss—and here again is fear, that central negative emotion which cancels out love in our lives. How then do we achieve this love? Ultimately, it is God's gift which comes through suffering, either our own or that of others. While living in Tunisia, I hosted a reception for British veterans of World War II who arrived with an unexpected German from a panzer division which had fought against the British during the 1942–3 North Africa campaign. Remembering the love and esteem of those old soldiers, British and German, for one another helps me understand why Sundar Singh regarded suffering as God's way of calling us into 'the peace of his presence'.

Another respondent to the survey believes there are better ways than suffering to learn lessons, but remarked that suffering can be either positive or negative in shaping our lives. God shares human suffering, he wrote, but does not often interfere in human affairs. In fact, 'Our loving God gave us free will and sometimes we get crushed by it', which cannot be blamed on God. By contrast, another participant believes that 'Suffering is incompatible with the idea of a compassionate, omnipotent, omniscient God' and therefore concludes that 'God is not in charge'. The Muslims who participated all believe that the reason individuals suffer is to help them become more loving, forgiving and aware.

⁴ Peter Stanford, interview with Jon Sobrino, 'We Need a Culture of Being Human', *The Tablet* 262/8749 (5 July 2008), 10–11, here 10.

Some Personal Experiences

In my own earliest memory of suffering I was a pre-school child. The doctor was obliged to lance an abscess on my foot and my mother, who was with me during the painful and frightening procedure, told me that, when the pain began, I was to pinch her arm and transfer the pain to her. This I did with vigour, and so we suffered together. Now that I am older this bonding experience helps me to understand how pain can be precursor to deeper love for a God who suffers over us.

But already, as an infant, I had sensed the depth of my mother's suffering over me, although the incident occurred before my conscious memory began. At eight months I was very badly burned and, as it was wartime, no doctor was available for several hours. During those hours my mother paced back and forth, holding her screaming child and agonizing over a pain she could not stop. Undoubtedly because of that subliminal memory, it has never been difficult for me to accept that God suffers over us but will not or cannot always intervene. Nor, of course, do I have any problem with the concept of God the Mother.

Among the other formative experiences of my life was an incident which occurred in 1995 in the Nuba Mountains of Southern Kordofan, Sudan. A group of foreign and local clergymen was visiting the area, and it was near the end of a long, difficult day of stops at grass churches



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A village in the Nuba Mountains

and of talking with widowed, abused, traumatized and grieving mothers and their sick and hungry children. We had little to give them but recognition of their suffering and expressions of love, but to these they responded with joy and a fragile hope which blessed us. As the day lengthened, our convoy of vehicles arrived at a leper colony in an isolated and lonely area. We got out and walked up to a fence in front of which some twenty men and women had gathered to greet us. But it was late, and the leader of our group suddenly decided not to enter the compound in case we should return late to El Obeid and miss our flight to Khartoum.

We all turned obediently and started back towards our vehicles, having said only 'hello' and 'how are you?' in several languages to the hungry, ragged, disfigured and rejected people who had long awaited us and could expect no other visitors in the foreseeable future. Momentarily, in the great heat, and in the presence of enormous suffering, we had lost our sense of priorities. But by God's grace I was suddenly overcome by shame. Abruptly I turned back to the cluster of disappointed people, many with no hands and most with gross facial disfigurement. There was no time to think what to do and I did not know their language. I touched each person on the shoulder in the traditional Sudanese greeting as they jostled to reach me. Then, weeping, shamed and outraged by the illness, poverty and neglect I had seen, I returned to the car where my travel companions were waiting. It was a major step on my spiritual journey.

In 1998 I was expelled from Sudan, essentially for two reasons. First, my husband, the British Ambassador, had been officially withdrawn after the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, publicly congratulated the United States for bombing a site at Shifa in Khartoum. The US administration described it as a chemical weapons factory, but in fact it was a pharmaceutical factory—an error which led to at least one death, and for which neither the US nor the British government has ever officially apologized. The second reason for my expulsion was that I had become deeply involved in reconciliation work between northern Muslim Sudanese women and southern Christian women, an effort which they called the Women's Action Group (WAG) and which arose out of an initiative by Muslim women that I should 'find some Christian women for us to talk to about peace'. The British residence was used as a safe haven, and I served as the neutral moderator. This endeavour, which

gained a certain amount of international attention, had been ongoing for some two years when the Shifa bombing occurred. At the time I was also very much involved in various charitable endeavours revolving around women's education.

Thus my heart was fully occupied by Sudan and its suffering women and children when my husband and I were withdrawn from the country shortly after the Shifa incident. After a month in London I returned alone to Khartoum, thinking that, as I was a spouse and not a diplomat, my presence would be tolerated and I could continue my work. But God had finished working through me through WAG and I was soon expelled from Sudan in circumstances which were both frightening and psychologically painful. Unable to accept that suffering is invariably an invitation to healing, I asked self-righteously: 'Why me, Lord? Have I not served you well? Why must I suffer like this?'

On the surface life returned to normal. But it was at least another year before I was able to begin to emerge from the psychological trauma, which anger had made worse. In effect, I allowed my anger against politicians both in Sudan and elsewhere to spill over into anger against God. It took a long while before I came to understand that spiritual growth and further opportunity for service remained on offer and that I was still being carried along in God's love. It is God who must set the pace and the direction, not us. It is the Lord who owns the work.

There was even a reason for me to stay in London for several months before I could return to Khartoum and collect our household goods and our two long-suffering dogs. While in England a new charity, Together for Sudan, was set up—a growing work which, after more than a decade of service to the women and children of Sudan, continues to move forward on what I think of as the slipstream of grace. Even now, every visit I make to Sudan is a struggle with my emotions. Entering and leaving Sudan through Khartoum airport, invariably in the middle of the night, is always an uneasy experience. I have, however, come to understand my fear as God's reminder of love and concern for me. My prayer at such times is that God will purify my emotions so that I become a less self-absorbed servant. Only when I have come to love those who threaten and impede my work will this become possible. Sudan is, therefore, a learning experience which I need, just as much as the impoverished and illiterate Sudanese women whom Together for

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Sudan is trying to help need education. It is one of God's paradoxes that what we fear most can teach us by leading us back to Love.

The Purpose of Suffering

The positive role of suffering, both our own suffering and God's suffering over us, is frequently undervalued. Christians have, of course, long venerated suffering, even sometimes made a fetish of it or purposefully inflicted it for religious purposes. But suffering in its many forms has also caused some to conclude that God is out to punish humankind; and people who are deeply afflicted may easily become bitter, blaming their torment on God and turning away from their religious beliefs.

The reality of suffering and love is rather more complicated. Paradoxically, we are beloved by One who allows suffering—his own as well as ours and that of other creatures—as a means to alert us to the divine presence. There is no need to sanctify suffering, and it would be impossible to alleviate suffering altogether. But we are bound by God's love and supported by God's grace to work against suffering. In this we become partners with God.

Suffering seems to have been allowed by God at least in part as a means to alert us that something has gone wrong, and that, while action may be needed, opportunity awaits. Pain and suffering, including spiritual discontent, tell us that we need to take action, whether it be to repent after wrongdoing, remove our hands from a hot dish, assist others, consult a doctor, provide material support, go on a mission or ask why God seems to be calling. It is false modesty to hope that God will overlook us, that we have to be somehow special for God to work through our suffering or to help us support others in their suffering. Such modesty is motivated by fear, the reverse of love. Henri Nouwen posits that it is our own woundedness which enables us to become a source of life for others. We are, he wrote, 'called to be the wounded healer, the one who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others'.⁵

⁵ Henri J. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1997), 82.

Exploring this reality, Martin Israel wrote of 'the creative potentiality of suffering',⁶ concluding that 'It is one of the fundamental contributions of pain to make people wake up to a deeper quality of existence',⁷ for 'suffering plays a vital role in our growth into deeper awareness'.⁸ The teaching of Anthony de Mello is similar:

Here is a simple truth of life that most people never discover. Happy events make life delightful but they do not lead to self-discovery and growth and freedom. That privilege is reserved to the things and people and situations that cause us pain.⁹

What does this mean? The primordial opposites are not love and suffering but love and fear. 'Perfect love casts out fear' (I John 4:18): the gesture of 'casting out' is like that of a demon being expelled. By accepting the process of Love working with us we are empowered to move closer to God. But it should come as no surprise that learning to understand ourselves in the light of God's suffering over us can be very painful.

Questions remain, of course. Jesus Christ took upon himself all sin, all suffering, to set us free to live lives of love and service. Why then does suffering continue to play such a large and seemingly inevitable role in our lives?



The Crucifixion, by Matthias Grünewald

⁶ Martin Israel, *The Pain that Heals: The Place of Suffering in the Growth of the Person* (London: Arthur James, 1992), 10.

⁷ Israel, *The Pain that Heals*, 12.

⁸ Israel, *The Pain that Heals*, 20.

⁹ Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1995), 157.

The most obvious answer is that suffering is vital to our individual formation. It is human to create, or simply to experience, suffering; and divine to give people the freedom which allows this. Suffering often occurs because, in our selfish choices, we reject God's love, and in our activities we contribute to Christ's own ongoing suffering to redeem the world. Suffering emerges, therefore, as God's most common and most effective way to attract our attention. As the polar icecaps melt, animal species become extinct, human populations increase and hatreds multiply, suffering accelerates globally. It may be that God's suffering over us is likewise expanding.

As valuable as suffering may be to our spiritual growth, there is, I believe, no need actively to seek suffering or to inflict it upon ourselves. Enough suffering will arrive naturally if we open our hearts to those who already suffer. The psychologist James Hillman has written, 'Suffering so belongs to the human lot that one can say it is more "normal" than is ideal health, or, let us say, suffering is normal health'.¹⁰ Stumbling towards life, we are caught between fear (death) on the one hand and love (life) on the other and it is very often our suffering which indicates the path to freedom. And thus, in the words of Henri Nouwen, in our own woundedness 'we become a source of life to others'.¹¹

Nonetheless, suffering carries with it the possibility, and sometimes even the certainty, that the sufferer will not survive. For many people there comes a point at which they cannot understand how a God of Love can allow such enormous human, animal and environmental agony and degradation. Most of us cling to the truth that we come from God and so we return, that 'now we see through a glass darkly', and other efforts at submission. But often this is not enough. Intense suffering may override all our prayers and hopes, leaving us whimpering in physical, psychological and spiritual pain at the foot of the cross. What then is the 'dark night of the soul'? It is the great mystery of our faith that the God of Love once allowed Jesus to experience extreme psychological and spiritual, as well as physical,

¹⁰ James Hillman, *Suicide and the Soul* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1988), 136.

¹¹ Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, back cover.

pain and that today this same God of Love seems often to ignore our prayers for release. This is holy ground, an experience which emerges as invitation rather than punishment and to which we are invited to respond: 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him'. But I have come to believe that we need not chide ourselves too much when we do not 'cope well' with suffering, our own or that of others. Even Jesus cried out from the cross his sense of betrayal that God had forsaken him. This must have seemed even greater than all the physical pain and degradation. When we reach Golgatha, all of us

collapse in some way or another. What is important is that we, as carers, hold on to the reality that Love and redemption will eventually triumph and that Easter will dawn.

We can experience God's active presence with us through the work that we do to lift others out of their suffering. God gives this gift not because we believe but because we accept the task, and because God longs to enter more fully into our lives and to work through us. The one certain way to experience more of God is to open ourselves to suffering, be it of people, animals or environment. In my experience many sensitive and caring non-Christians also function with divine enabling and are aware of the presence with them as they work to relieve suffering.



The Resurrection, by Peter-Paul Rubens

The cry on the cross is the archetype of every cry for help. It sounds the anguish of betrayal, sacrifice, and loneliness. Nothing is left, not even God. My only certainty is my suffering which I ask to be taken from me by dying. An animal awareness of suffering, and full

identification with it, becomes the humiliating ground of transformation.¹²

When we ask God to enable us to look on the suffering of others, not as voyeurs but as participants, space is made in which God can work, both to help the sufferer and to open the understanding and compassion of the companion to the suffering. This is the path of sacrificial service which Jesus demonstrated to us.

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¹² Hillman, *Suicide and the Soul*, 93.