

ST JOSEPH & THE VOLUNTARY

The official terminology of the Church has the feast of May 1st as that of *St Joseph Opificis*. There are two nouns in Latin signifying work, *opus* and *labor*. The first accentuates what is produced—we use the term of the productions of our composers and artists. The second signifies only human effort. The term *opificis* is related to the first; it signifies ‘the one who produces the work’. It is not difficult to see how preoccupation with Marxist thought and terminology and the wish to rebut its influence affected Catholic thought to move the Vatican to entitle today’s feast ‘St Joseph the Worker’. A more accurate translation would be ‘St Joseph the Artisan’.

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In previous papers on this website we have sought to bring out the way in which the modern world confuses the natural with the voluntary. To reiterate, *the natural* is—

that which proceeds from an intrinsic principle without knowledge of end, but with such knowledge presupposed in its Author.

Its operations may be seen in the ordered behaviour of the planet as it circles the Sun, of the Moon as it circles the Earth, and the ordered-ness of the tides, of the months and the seasons; in the resistance inherent in the planet to the effects of cataclysms, earthquakes and cyclones, and of man’s own depredations and its restoration of equanimity; in the behaviour of man’s operations and his body’s inherent tendency to healing and to health; in the way dogs always act like dogs; and so on. Each is a creature of the Divine Author and depends on him both as to *what* it is (its essence), how it operates and its very existence.

In contrast, *the voluntary* is—

that which proceeds from an intrinsic principle with knowledge of end.

Will, in which the voluntary reposes, is the appetite that follows on the power of intellect. Only intellectual beings (men), then, can exercise the voluntary.

In his pride modern man endeavours to convince himself that there is no such thing as the natural, only material beings without inherent classification; endeavours to convince himself that man and the whole of reality are nothing but accidents, the happy results of evolution over aeons of time unguided by any extrinsic intellectual ordering cause. Consistent with this he insists that any human will may dictate to material being as it wishes imposing upon it his own proclivities such as indulgence in contraception (a distortion of the natural sexual order for the sake of pleasure without the responsibility that accompanies it); abortion of the innocent unborn; sexual perversion in the form of homosexuality; freedom to choose one’s gender; and similar exercises in fatuousness.

The rejection of the distinction between the voluntary and the natural is, as may be seen from these effects, an effect of the widespread modern phenomenon of atheism, belief in No-God. The lesson of the Corona virus and the ravaging it has wrought in our social and economic lives is that in those matters which fall within its provenance *the natural* will have its way irrespective of the puny objections of men via *the voluntary*; and that even the licit exercises of human will can be brought to nothing if men will insist in the main on rejecting the order imposed on them by nature.

In harmony with this analysis is a recent paper of Dr Peter Kwasniewski published on the website OnePeterFive which addresses the sufferings that result from the operation of the virus, noting the fact that they fall indifferently on the innocent and the guilty, and explaining why this is so. It may be viewed at <https://onepeterfive.com/catholic-guilty-suffer/> Those who wish to do so may study the copy reproduced in Word format in the Appendix.

Dr Kwasniewski quotes St Thomas Aquinas on the operations of the voluntary explaining how our willed actions have moral consequences precisely because we are moral beings, beings that choose their ends. In our works, as in all our actions, we must pay attention to the ends they serve. There are rewards and punishments imposed by the Author of our being and we ignore them at our peril.

The artisan exercises the voluntary—his own will—on what is natural, wood, iron, silk, cotton, and so on. It is the harmony with which he does his work that justifies his work and provides him with a vehicle with which to work out his eternal salvation. For, we have not here a lasting city; we are made, as St Augustine says, for eternity, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord and our hearts are not at rest until they rest in Thee”. This is the reason why we celebrate today’s Feast.

Michael Baker

May 1, 2020—*St Joseph Opificis*

APPENDIX

THE CATHOLIC VIEW: WE’RE ALL GUILTY, AND WE ALL MUST SUFFER

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Peter Kwasniewski: OnePeterFive, April 29, 2020

The pandemic pandemonium of the coronavirus—in its volatile mixture of undeniable physical evils and the superimposed moral evils of social engineering by political elites only too happy to take advantage of a global train wreck—has brought before Christians once again the ancient question of why the good and the wicked alike suffer in this life, seemingly regardless of personal merits and demerits. In particular, it has brought up again the question of whether God can and should be said to be responsible for the physical evils we suffer, so they can truly be called punishments or chastisements for our sins.

The Church Fathers and Doctors and all the premodern popes and catechisms had not the slightest difficulty asserting this to be the case, and the Church’s official public prayer—prior, that is, to the liturgical revolution of the 1960s—expressed it over and over again. Yet today we see that most high-ranking churchmen flatly deny that God can be said to be *in any sense* one who chastises us for our sins by means of natural disasters or sicknesses. Presumably they would also deny that death is a punishment for sin, contrary to the explicit words of Scripture.

Here I shall explain why we should say physical evils are punishments from God for moral evils; why all of us are implicated in moral evil and deserving of punishments; why universal suffering is a test sent from Him and an incentive to love, and in Christ becomes the supreme witness of love; and finally, how the faithful are being asked today to enter in a special way into the Passion of Our Lord in His Church on Earth.

Physical and moral evils

St. Thomas Aquinas in many of his writings gives the classic account of the distinction between *moral* evil, which has the nature of voluntary wrongdoing, and *physical* evil, which has the nature of an involuntary deprivation. In the *Compendium Theologiae*, he writes:

We should observe that sometimes action is in the power of the agent. Such are all voluntary actions. By “voluntary action” I mean an action that has its principle in an agent who is conscious of the various factors constituting his action... The voluntary agent, being master of his own action, deservedly draws blame and punishment on himself. If actions are mixed, that is, are partly voluntary and partly involuntary, the sin is diminished in proportion to the admixture of the involuntary element. (ch. 120)

Aquinas goes on to explain how exactly physical evils are punishments:

Just as defect in voluntary action constitutes fault and sin, so the withdrawing of some good, in consequence of sin, against the will of him on whom such privation is inflicted, has the character of punishment. Punishment is inflicted as a medicine that is corrective of the sin, and also to restore right order violated by the sin. Punishment functions as a medicine inasmuch as fear of punishment deters a man from sinning; that is, a person refrains from performing an inordinate action, which would be pleasing to his will, lest he have to suffer what is opposed to his will. Punishment also restores right order; by sinning, a man exceeds the limits of the natural order, indulging his will more than is right. Hence a return to the order of justice is effected by punishment, whereby some good is withdrawn from the sinner’s will. As is quite clear, unless the punishment is more galling to the will than the sin was attractive to it, a suitable punishment will not have been assigned for the sin. (ch. 121)

Aquinas reminds us that rewards and punishments pertain only to rational creatures:

Since good actions merit a reward and sin calls for punishment, rational creatures are punished for the evil they do and are rewarded for the good they do, according to the measure of justice fixed by Divine Providence. But there is no place for reward or punishment in dealing with irrational creatures, just as there is none for praise or blame. (ch. 143)

Recovering our humility as sinners

We need metaphysical humility. In the account of creation in all three of his summaries of theology (the *Summa theologiae*, the *Summa contra gentiles*, and the *Compendium theologiae*), St. Thomas presents the nine hierarchies of angels first, before he treats of man as the lowest, least, and last of the intellectual creatures made by God. Metaphysically speaking, man is already vulnerable and fragile, delicately poised on the horizon of the spiritual and bodily realms. Adam was robed by God with “preternatural gifts” of bodily immortality, impassibility, and perfect self-control—safeguards and elevations God wished to give mankind to compensate for the weakness of human nature.

In spite of that perfect set-up, Adam royally failed. I mean that literally: he failed as only a king can fail when he drives his entire nation into debt, ruin, war, and dissolution. The rock-bottom truth—and this will be found spelled out in every penny catechism that has ever been written—is that *all of mankind* is implicated in Adam’s sin. We are all a guilty lot—“in iniquity was I conceived, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 50:7)—and that is why we must be baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ.

Moreover, after our baptism, we still suffer the *effects* of the fall, such as passibility, mortality, and disordered concupiscence, and we will not be rid of them until the glorious resurrection of the dead on the last day. Apart from the Blessed Virgin Mary and Our Lord Jesus Christ, there is no man who can say he has not sinned (1 Jn. 1:8); indeed, Scripture says the just man sinneth seven times a day (Prov. 24:16). If we have a realistic view of ourselves, we will not be surprised about human frailty and suffering, because we will not be surprised to be, and to be called, sinners.

Although no sin we commit goes unpunished, whether here or hereafter, Scripture and experience alike show us that God does not punish every moral evil the moment it has occurred. God sometimes quickly corrects the sinner; at other times, He leaves him in his sins.

Therefore, it is absurd when people say: “Well, if the coronavirus [or insert any other natural disaster] were a punishment for sins, why are the evil and the innocent alike suffering?”—as if there were *any* person on this Earth right now who could be described as *simply* good or innocent. Not even a newly baptized infant, full of sanctifying grace and infused virtue and ready to go immediately to Heaven should he suddenly die, can be said to have ceased to be among the fallen children of Adam, heir to the same woes, plagued with the same evils.

Benefits gained from suffering

The real question will then shift to this: What *purpose* can suffering serve in our spiritual journey? The greatest pagan thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, saw that they, too, had to answer this question—and even they were capable of seeing that the good is worth suffering for. Socrates was condemned for leading people away from the conventional wisdom of Athens, and he accepted it as a witness to the truth, which is greater than any finite good.

St. Catherine of Siena—whose feast day is celebrated today on the traditional calendar, tomorrow on the modern calendar (sic)—writes in *The Dialogue* that God chose to make us men dependent upon one another in order to teach us charity, which we could not have learned so well in any other way. Our social nature is the ground, our social environs the schoolroom, for learning how to love and be loved.

Something similar is true of suffering. One discovers the true mettle of soldiers not in a time of peace, not even in time of rigorous training, but in the time of battle, of hardship and deprivation. There is a saying: Show me your friends, and I will tell you what kind of person you are. One could also say: Show me how you bear your sufferings, and I will tell you what kind of person you are.

Suffering brings out our deepest capacities; it tests and expands our limits, breaks down our resistance to grace and higher aspirations, assaults our egoism, humbles our pride, burns away our sins, leads us to rely on others and to accept their service, calls us to remember our ultimate end. In many ways, a life without suffering would be a life of vanity and illusion.

In her marvelous biography of St. Catherine, completed after World War II and published posthumously in 1951, Sigrid Undset makes a further point with provocative language:

The intense remorse which Catherine always felt for her sins came of her knowledge of what complete Purity, complete Love, really is... When she spoke as though she believed that her sins were the cause of the misery of the Holy Church and the whole world, she meant it with deadly seriousness...

This is the communism of the society of the blessed: just as the rewards of the blessed are collected in the treasure-house of the Church, so that every poor and infirm soul may have its share of this treasure, so in a mysterious way the sins of the faithful impoverish the whole of Christendom. Our

generation, which has seen how the horrors of war and the concentration camps have fallen alike on the guilty and on those who by human reckoning were the most guiltless, should find it easier than our forefathers, with their naïve belief in personal success as a reward for personal service, to understand the dogma of the Church that we all have our share in the rewards of all the saints and the guilt of all sinners. (Sheed & Ward, 1956 ed., 135–36)

Conformity to Christ Crucified

Jesus Christ is the only “satisfying” answer to the problem of suffering (play on words intended). He is the answer not by explaining it away, but by taking it into His flesh, absorbing it utterly and totally, and giving it a new meaning, a new purpose, a new power—that of atonement and redemption and, more fundamentally, that of love. Suffering becomes the ultimate expression of a love that stops at nothing in order to redeem, and be united with, the beloved. It is the decisive demonstration of the words of the Song of Songs: “Love is stronger than death” (Cant. 8:6).

Why did St. Paul say, in the midst of a letter in which he was sorting out moral and liturgical problems among the Corinthians: “I judged not myself to know anything among you, but Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2)?

While the Eucharist is, in a special way, as St. Thomas teaches, *ipse Christus passus*—Christ Himself as having suffered for our salvation, *all* of the sacraments apply to our souls the fruits of the Passion of Christ. The very structure of the Church is Christ crucified; the principal action of the Church is Christ crucified; the entire Christian life is Christ crucified; Heaven itself is nothing other than our perfect participation in the God-Man who reigns in glory with His life-giving wounds, “a Lamb standing as though slain” (Rev. 5:6). If I could but know “Christ Jesus, and Him crucified,” everything else worth knowing would grow out of that root, as a mighty tree from a tiny seed.

A blogger who called himself the Sensible Bond—sadly, long since gone from the internet, but not before I grabbed a few of his best articles—wrote the following:

We should take consolation from our irrelevance. God knows what we do, and its importance is not measured in human terms but in those of divine love. We can sing, dance, do penance and what you will, in the full knowledge that the value of our actions is beyond calculation, as long as they belong to Christ. Most of what we say will be a dead footnote in history. It is our child-raising and prayer muttering that threaten to make a difference, if not on this earth, then at least in Purgatory or Heaven... Find your consolations other than in the “human health” of the Church. We are not wrong to be so scandalised by the current management. We just have to take the pain. It’s our cross. We have to bear it. Our love is love unknown.

If Our Lord is summoning us, in this era of ecclesiastical dereliction, to an ever deeper participation in the mystery of the Agony in the Garden, should we not bow our heads, thank Him tenderly—“not my will, but Thy will be done”—and enter through the narrow gate, leaving aside the wide gate and broad way that leadeth to destruction (Mt. 7:13)? “For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).
