

23) Fruitful Suffering

Jesus did not distance himself from suffering because he did not want to, could not, separate himself from love. He suffered until the end because he loved up to the end. For this reason, every suffering lived out in Christ has become paschal: through this passage pain passes over to the joy of its victory. Every suffering in Christ can become the pain of childbirth.

Nevertheless, this is impossible for the human being: it is the work of God, the miracle that the Crucified One accomplishes right away through his Mother. The suffering of Mary at the death of her son is transformed into the birth pangs of the new humanity, of the humanity that lives from the love of Christ.

On the other hand, when St. Benedict speaks of “bearing,” “carrying” upon oneself, someone physically or emotionally fragile, does he not call back to mind the image of a mother carrying her child within herself or in her arms?

Every conversion should therefore pass this way, from our sterile suffering to the fruitful suffering of giving birth. As for St. Peter, “Do you love me?” (John 21) is the invitation and the offer that Jesus makes to him of passing through the still sterile suffering of denial and remorse, or of voluntarism in the gift of his own life, to the suffering of giving birth, of love, of fruitful suffering: “Feed my sheep.”

Therefore, every suffering of love is the suffering of giving birth, as Jesus reminds us in the discourse during the Last Supper: “You will be grieved but your grief will be changed into joy. When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:20-22).

In the Gospel and in the Rule there are signs that mark every suffering united to love as an offering, forgiveness, patience, service, the gift of life.

And these are aspects characteristic of paternity/maternity, of generation. “To give one’s life” means at the same time to die and to generate; to give one’s own life, to lose it, to give it to another, to give life to another, to generate. The two movements are distinct, but they also coincide. There are moments, experiences, in which they coincide, moments in which to generate means to suffer and die, and perhaps suffering is above all there where the gift of life, “to die for the other,” is not certain of generating it, of giving life to the other, does not guarantee the other will live. It is the suffering of the agony, of the passion of Jesus: the suffering of giving one’s own life without being certain that all human beings will let themselves be generated by this gift, brought to life.

But Jesus bears witness for us that in this test, in this agony, there is the comfort of faith: the faith that generation is stronger than death, that the gift of life insofar as it is paternity or maternity is ontologically stronger, more powerful, than the gift of life in death through which it must pass; the faith that believes that birth pangs will give way to the joy of the son’s life; the faith that

Easter is more powerful than Good Friday, than Holy Saturday; the faith of Mary, characteristically feminine, characteristically maternal. Jesus on the cross, entrusting John to Mary, leans as it were on the maternal faith of his Mother. His gift of life through his death on the Cross generates the people of the redeemed, generates the Church. The faith of Mary comforts Him. It gives Him the certainty that this will indeed happen, despite all the appearances of abandonment and being disowned on the part of those who belong to him.

Giving birth is the true meaning of agony, that which indeed makes agony serve life and not death. The agony of the Prioress in the *Dialogue of the Carmelites* by Bernanos was terrible because she was to bring to the life of Christ her youngest daughter, the most fragile, Blanche de la Force. The agony of the Country Priest as well, which lasts throughout the whole novel, is to generate his flock. In his diary the Priest describes in such terms the moment in which he finds himself before the body of the Countess, whom he had just accompanied on her journey to the freedom of the children of God shortly before she died: "I lifted the muslin from her face, and stroked her high, pure forehead, full of silence. And poor as I am, an insignificant little priest, looking upon this woman only yesterday so far my superior in age, birth, fortune, intellect, I still knew – yes, knew – what fatherhood means" (180-181).

The law of generation is that all suffering that it entails is overcome by life, by love, by joy. And this law is universal, like a divine image inscribed within all creation; it is that which St. Paul describes as follows in his Letter to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:18-23)

The place of suffering in love is generation, image and likeness, in creation, of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father in the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Incarnation of Christ, of his Passion and of his Death, and the grace of the gift of the Spirit is that our suffering can become labor pains where the love is that of God, where the love is the Spirit in us, and the fruit of which is Christ, the Body of Christ, the Church.

St. Paul speaks of the "inexpressible groanings" of the Spirit (Rom. 8:26). The Holy Spirit, who is nothing other than Love, groans. The Spirit in which the Father generates the Son eternally without pain takes on the labor pains of human beings so that they are born to filial life. It becomes the groaning of the

Crucified One who cries out on the cross in order to give birth to the Church from his pierced rib. . . .

It is in this sense that love is greater than suffering. It is necessary to suffer with the hope of giving birth, with the hope of a new life always being possible, for it does not come from us; it is a gift from God. Otherwise, suffering is sterile, an act of “auto-com-passion”, and that is contradictory and absurd; it is a lie, suffering for the other takes a detour onto the self.

Grace is to become aware of this. The grace of all graces is that even that sterile suffering that is often ours can, yes that above all even it can, be offered as a mysterious generation that brings also our love back to life.