12-1-2021

Redemptive Suffering in a Contemporary Context

Allison Magera
amagera@mail.stmarytx.edu

Redemptive Suffering in a Contemporary Context

by

Allison Magera

HONORS THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Graduation from the Honors Program of

St. Mary's University

San Antonio, Texas

Approved by:

Dr. Allison Gray

Associate Professor of Theology

Camille A. Langston

Dr. Camille Langston

Director, Honors Program

An Introduction to Redemptive Suffering

While suffering is not an exclusively human experience, one thing that separates us from all other creation is the way humanity seeks to understand why. Why do we suffer? How does suffering change us? What purpose, if any, does suffering serve? Each individual stumbles upon these questions at some point in their life, but finding the answers to them is certainly a personal journey enriched by life experience, moral values, and religious or spiritual tradition. For Roman Catholics in particular, viewing human suffering as a way to participate in redemption is an accepted and even encouraged answer to the above questions. Just as St. Paul "rejoices in his sufferings,"[1] the Church encourages the faithful to do the same through uniting our human suffering to Christ's suffering on the cross.

Comparatively, this stance is strikingly different than many other commonly held theories on the causes and purpose of suffering; whether it be the concept of karma, the "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" ideal, or a "God does everything for a reason" belief, defining suffering as redemptive doesn't quite fit into a single pithy catch phrase. Understanding the meaning Christians attribute to suffering requires complex and nuanced study, as seen in the similar and sometimes intersecting study of divine justice and evil in theodicy[2], and often isn't easily or concisely defined. However, three key stipulations which make it possible to understand

[1] Col 1:24, New American Bible translation (NAB)

[2] A theodicy is a framework of theological thinking that specifically seeks to answer why God (who is believed to be perfectly good and just) permits evil. The answer to this question often includes thoughts on divine justice, and presents furthers questions which include suffering, such as 'if suffering exists, is God really just?' or 'is suffering a part of divine justice?' I will not be attending to these questions in depth here, but Pope John Paul II briefly addresses this issue in *Slavifici Doloris* #9-10 and for further information, see Kempf, Constantine. "Theodicy." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 1 Dec. 2021 http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14569a.htm

suffering as redemptive in light of the Roman Catholic tradition may prove to be helpful in loosely defining this concept.

Key Stipulations

Firstly, in order to view human suffering as redemptive, an individual must believe that humanity needs redeeming. If one does not believe that humanity is fallen in some way, there is then no need for restoration or redemption and thus attempting to view suffering as redemptive would be nonsensical. However, the three major monotheistic faith traditions all believe in the concept of sin, a concept that is foundational to understanding humanity's relationship with God, the afterlife, and particularly, salvation. The Islamic and Jewish traditions both have their own expansive beliefs on sin and salvation,[3] but Christianity is unique in the way that all believers understand Jesus Christ to be a savior from sin. This is the second important stipulation.

Although many come to understand suffering in light of their own traditions, Christians would agree that believing that Jesus Christ's death and crucifixion was a redemptive act plays an essential role in understanding both salvation and suffering. The crux of the Christian faith is indeed the cross, and while there may be variances in how certain Christian communities understand how the cross is atoning in nature, it would be fair to state that all Christians see Christ's passion and death as the primary and fundamental example of redemptive suffering.

---

[3] For more information on sin in Judaism see Grossman, "Sin," https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-2975; Houston, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism.*
For more information on sin in Islam, see "Sin," *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2211
or Mona Siddiqui, "Islamic and Other Perspectives on Evil," *The Good Muslim: Reflections on Classical Islamic Law and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 126.

Lastly, in order for someone to view human suffering as potentially redemptive in nature, an individual must believe that it is possible to spiritually offer their own suffering to God in such a way that they may become "sharers"[4] in the suffering of Christ on the cross which would in turn allow them to take part in the redeeming work of God for the salvation of souls. This last stipulation is the most important, and is a key aspect in defining this concept referred to as "redemptive suffering."[5] Pope John Paul II develops this concept in depth, fleshing out several facets of this unique understanding of human suffering, in his apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris*.

Key Concepts and Terms from Salvifici Doloris

A significant document that substantially covers this concept of redemptive suffering is Saint John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, which translates literally to "redemptive suffering." Written in 1984 following two world wars and in the midst of a nuclear arms race, the document reflects John Paul II's desire to encourage people in positions of authority in the church (cardinals/bishops/priests) as well as all the Catholic lay faithful to understand in a deeper way "the Christian meaning of human suffering." Highly theological and theoretical in nature, there are few sections of the document that appeal to practical, real-life situations, but nevertheless this document provides a concise overview of the Church's stance on suffering and how the Catholic faith specifically handles the tough questions that accompany human suffering. Some key concepts in this document include the following: moral suffering, the ways in which suffering is connected with evil, how understanding salvation is also important in understanding

[4] John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), #20, accessed November 17, 2021, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jpii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html

[5] This concept has also similarly been called "vicarious suffering," but because the terminology of *vicarious* is different than that of *redemptive,* for clarity's sake only the term redemptive suffering will be used.

suffering—especially how the cross allows all human suffering to be redemptive—and that suffering calls us to empathy and solidarity.

Firstly, the concept of "moral suffering"[6] is important because it demonstrates that suffering involves the whole human person. Although the physiological pain that the body endures through injury and illness is certainly uncomfortable and difficult to bear, it is really the impact that this pain has on the moral self, the 'heart' or 'soul' if you will, that brings about suffering in the human person. With this consideration in mind, this also means that suffering doesn't necessarily require physical pain, but psychological, emotional, and perhaps even spiritual trauma and stress can also cause one to endure suffering.

John Paul II also claims that suffering is always, in some way, either directly or indirectly, connected to evil.[7] Someone experiences suffering because in some sense they have encountered evil in their lives. Sometimes this is due to the consequences of our own sins or the result of another's wrongdoing, or sometimes it is simply the repercussions of our human condition (both because of original sin and the nature of being a *homo sapien,* simply experiencing the limits of our own biology and psychology). John Paul II even includes a short discourse on semantics, mentioning that there is no Hebrew word for "suffer," Greek introduced this word, and instead the authors of the Old Testament defined anything that causes suffering as "evil."[8] Thus, the question of "what is evil?" is essential and "inseparable" to the question "why do we suffer?" Then, after some philosophical conversation on defining evil as the lack of a good,[9] and only being able to be defined in reference to a good, Pope John Paul II adds a brief

[6] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 5.
[7] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 7.
[8] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 7.
[9] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 7, following St. Augustine's theodicy on evil.

explanation of the book of Job because it demonstrates that suffering may always be connected to evil, but it does not always have to be connected to personal sin. He also uses this section to transition into his next topic on Christ and the cross.

He explains that because suffering is therefore connected to evil in some way, salvation plays a key role in understanding suffering because salvation by definition is liberation from sin and evil. This is where soteriology becomes a key component in John Paul II's specific understanding of human suffering. From a broader perspective then, the way Christians interpret how the cross was redemptive, how Christ saved humanity from sin through his death and resurrection, is therefore also crucial in framing how a particular Christian denomination or community will understand suffering. There are several popular theories of atonement[10] (which will be discussed in more detail in Part II) that describe specific understandings and models of how we are freed from sin, and the ways that they differ from one another may also provide some insight on how Christian communities may therefore understand human suffering respective to each community. Therefore, it is understandable that John Paul II's atonement framework established in this document is uniquely Catholic, and that this framework allows him to emphasize the way in which Christ's suffering on the cross and his death was redemptive and remains "open"[11] to us today.

Following these claims, John Paul II then describes in more detail how humanity can participate in Christ's redemptive work through becoming "sharers in the sufferings of Christ,"[12] because "the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all

[10] For more information on atonement theories in Christianity, see Wood, William, "Philosophy and Christian Theology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/>.
[11] William, "Philosophy," #24.
[12] Col 1:24, NAB

love expressed in human suffering."[13] Responding to claims that the concept of human suffering as redemptive is contrary to the belief that Christ's death on the cross is complete and final in and of itself, John Paul II reemphasizes that Christ's salvific action was in fact complete but remains "open" for humanity to participate in, which enables us to "share in the sufferings of Christ" through the cross. Although this document does not provide an expansive or thorough definition of what this "openness" is, or how one is to participate in the sufferings of Christ as a result of this openness, it does provide some insight on the foundational theological concepts that John Paul II's working definition of redemptive suffering is built upon.

Finally, because *Salvifici Doloris* is primarily a letter of encouragement, after his explanations and exegesis John Paul II also includes a section titled "The Good Samaritan," in reference to a parable in the gospel of Luke, where he stresses the recognition of the dignity of those who suffer and especially their caretakers (particularly healthcare workers and people in positions of care at all levels). This serves as a testament to his stance that suffering calls us to stand in solidarity with others who are suffering, and the belief that suffering calls an individual to move out of themselves and serve another in caring love through the help of grace. Thus, for these reasons, suffering is not only connected with evil, but can also forge virtue and lead an individual to a new spiritual maturity.

Therefore, because John Paul II's *Salvifici Doloris* elucidates these key concepts of moral suffering, how suffering is connected to evil and soteriology is therefore necessary to an understanding of suffering, and that suffering calls us to solidarity and service, it serves as a foundational document in understanding the Catholic perspective on redemptive suffering.

---

[13] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 24.

However, although the theological argument for understanding human suffering as redemptive is fleshed out in this document, the practicals of *how* one is to offer their suffering to Christ in order to share in His redemptive work is not discussed in this apostolic letter. Thus, I would like to attempt to "fill up what is lacking"[14] in this document for the contemporary moment, through firstly providing examples that demonstrate how the Catholic Church encourages the faithful to participate in this concept of redemptive suffering in daily life, secondly, begin an open conversation on how this concept could apply outside of the uniquely Catholic environment from which it has been formed, and lastly, include some critiques and considerations of this concept in praxis.

PART I

Participating in Redemptive Suffering through Prayer

Although much information can be gathered about this process of spiritually offering suffering through those who have personally experienced it themselves, there is not much written literature about how exactly one should go about it. Sections from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[15] do mention suffering, but there is no official prayer book or guide of any kind about the action itself of spiritually offering human suffering. Thus, what it means to offer human suffering to Christ with the intention of making it redemptive in nature is a bit ambiguous, but also means it is incredibly personal and up to an individual to decide what this means for him- or herself. Much information on the topic then comes from prominent individuals within modern Catholic media, speaking through sources like EWTN, Ascension Presents, as well as Catholic blogs and

[14] Col 1:24.
[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), #606-623.

local diocesan newspapers speaking from personal experience rather than quoting any type of instructional manual.

Jeff Cavins is one such individual who is prominent in Catholic media through his books, articles and talks. He agrees that personal prayer is the primary way in which an individual can offer their sufferings to God in the hopes that it will be united with Christ so as to be redemptive. From his perspective, this can take many forms and look different for each individual, but nonetheless always involves some sort of inward movement through spiritual conversation. In his own life, Cavins offering up suffering looked like "joining [his] will to God's will," and he didn't consider this act to be based on a specific ritual or format of prayer, rather, "you just do it."[16] Cavins also has a unique list of "15 things to do in the midst of suffering[17]" encouraging individuals undergoing suffering to "understand we have been called to participate in the redemption of the world," and even "embrace the suffering.[18]" In this example, we see how uniting suffering to Christ on the cross can help an individual feel more closely united with Christ, which also allows him to grow in trust and spiritual maturity.

Similarly, in an article sponsored by the diocese of Sioux Falls, a parishioner mentions that during difficult moments she often reaches out to close friends and family members to ask what they need prayers for, using her suffering "as an offering to bring good to someone else."[19] Another parishioner emphasizes that one experience of suffering can be offered for multiple people and multiple petitions rather than this "offering it up" being a one-time ordeal for a

---

[16] Redemptive Suffering. Franciscan University, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Big_v2sbU.
[17] Jeff Cavins, "15 Things to Do in the Midst of Suffering," *The Jeff Cavins Show (Your Catholic Bible Study Podcast),* Episode 52 (February 15, 2018), https://media.ascensionpress.com/podcast/tjcs52/.
[18] Renae Kranz, "Offer It Up: Making Sense of Suffering," *The Bishop's Bulletin*, last paragraph, April 2020, https://www.sfcatholic.org/bishopsbulletin/offer-it-up-making-sense-of-suffering/.
[19] Kranz, "Offer it Up."

singular purpose. She claims, "God is bigger than that," which demonstrates her perception that God can handle several intercessions in prayer offered during a specific event of suffering. Here, we see how "offering it up" is also intercessory in nature;[20] not only is it self-edifying but it is also perceived to help others through petition. In the apparition of Our Lady of Fatima,[21] Mary also encourages this unique type of prayer to the shepherd children:

> Will you offer yourselves to God and bear all the sufferings he sends you? In atonement for all the sins that offend him? And for the conversion of sinners? Make sacrifices for sinners, and say often, especially while making a sacrifice: 'O Jesus, this is for love of thee, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation for offenses committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary.'

Attributed to Father François-Xavier Gautrelet, loosely based on these words from Mary, the Morning Offering prayer may be every morning as a way for the faithful to dedicate themselves to God.

> O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, *I offer you my* prayers, works, joys, and *sufferings* of this day for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, for the salvation of souls, the reparation of sins, the reunion of all Christians, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father this month. Amen.[22]

Therefore, rather than viewing this act of spiritually offering suffering as a once-and-for-all event, this implies that offering "prayers, works joys and sufferings" can be a daily dedication, one that is prayed over and over again and renewed each day. This daily devotion[23] can therefore be a prayer for the salvation of one's own soul, as well as others through intercessory prayer.

---

[20] See *Catechism,* #2634-2636.

[21] Our Lady of Fatima refers to the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal in the early 20th century to three shepherd children. What is quoted here is perceived to be some of her direct words to the children in her apparition on May 13th, 1917. https://www.ncregister.com/features/mary-s-fatima-messages-to-the-shepherd-children

[22] See USCCB "prayers," https://www.usccb.org/prayers/morning-offering

[23] For more information on Catholic devotions and consecrations, see "Prayers and Devotions," USCCB, accessed November 30, 2021, https://www.usccb.org/catholic-prayers. https://www.usccb.org/catholic

Therefore, we see that offering human suffering to Christ is often done through personal prayer, for both oneself or other's needs, and can be prayed either as a single offering or as a type of devotion that can be renewed over and over again. However, having a clearer picture of what this type of prayer and devotion can look like, knowing that it remains ambiguous and personal, may also raise some questions about the nature of suffering that can be offered to Christ through prayer, as well as what role something like intentional suffering through mortification like fasting may play in redemptive suffering.

Defining Suffering

Because of the human condition, suffering exists for every person but may manifest itself in many ways. Some may claim that suffering is generally only present for those who are undergoing some type of physical pain, distress to the literal body, but the word suffering itself implies that suffering does not exclusively include the effects of physiological pain on the body. *Suffer* etymologically can mean "carry/bear from below," or even to "bear under,"[24] which lends itself to the idea that suffering might consist of something even deeper than that of just physical pain. As mentioned prior, John Paul II confirms this idea in *Salvifici Doloris*; he claims that suffering can be either "physical or moral." He distinguishes these two types of sufferings as follows, "physical suffering is present when 'the body is hurting' in some way, whereas moral suffering is 'pain of the soul,'" which speaks to the more external nature of physical suffering as opposed to the internal nature of moral suffering.[25] And although it would be difficult to list exactly what sort of events can be classified as physical or moral, generally it seems that suffering always involves some sort of enduring, some sort of dealing with pain that persists for

[24] "Suffer (v.)," Etymology, accessed November 30, 2021, https://www.etymonline.com/word/suffer.
[25] *Salvifici Doloris*, #5.

a period of time, whether that be physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Therefore, because of the prevalence of mental illnesses, emotional trials, as well as what some would call spiritually dry seasons or "a dark night of the soul,"[26] it would be dismissive or perhaps apathetic to claim that the only suffering human beings undergo is that of bodily pain. The moral trials of life may be less visible, but the concept of redemptive suffering can hold that both physical sufferings and internal struggles are equally worthy of being offered to God through the methods of prayer mentioned above.

In addition, physical and moral sufferings are usually forms of suffering that one does not choose to bear, but mortification is a form of suffering that is freely accepted and intentionally chosen. For example, fasting is a popular form of mortification that generally involves intentionally abstaining from something good in order to be reminded of God's presence in lack of that good thing, and also to offer the inconvenience or suffering that is a result of that abstinence to the Lord.[27] Therefore the virtue in fasting doesn't lie in the literal action of giving something up, but in the way that it is meant to lead a person closer to God in prayer, a place where they offer their suffering to God by an act of the will. Other forms of mortification can also include wearing uncomfortable clothing such as sackcloth or a woolen scapular, and penances provided by priests as part of the sacrament of reconciliation.

In conclusion, it makes sense that these different forms of suffering may naturally give way to certain styles of prayer. Someone who is hospitalized for a severe injury or illness may have an internal dialogue with God before surgery, whereas someone undergoing a chronic

---

[26] See St. John of the Cross and A.Z. Foreman, "Saint John of the Cross: The Dark Night of the Soul (from Spanish)," Poems Found in Translation, accessed November 30, 2021, http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2009/09/saint-john-of-cross-dark-night-of-soul.html.

[27] "Fast & Abstinence," USCCB, accessed November 30, 2021, https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/lent/catholic-information-on-lenten-fast-and-abstinence.

mental or emotional trial may choose to be devoted to the Morning Offering prayer and offer their suffering several days in a row for an extended period of time, and someone who is choosing to fast may pray both ways throughout the duration of their fast.

Saint Faustina Kowalska and Redemptive Suffering

To further solidify how an individual can offer their human suffering to God through prayer, a look into the life of St. Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938), a polish nun who through her diary[28] provided tangible examples of how one individual participating in redemptive suffering can offer physical and moral sufferings through personal and intercessory prayer.

Firstly, St. Faustina endured much physical suffering in her lifetime which she freely chose to offer to Christ through prayer. She states in an entry in her diary, "my physical sufferings have intensified…I am uniting myself more closely with the suffering Savior, asking Him for mercy for the whole world," and she mentions soon afterwards how the pain she experienced from her illness (suspected to be tuberculosis) often led her to meditate on Jesus's passion, which led her to "unite [herself] with Jesus through suffering" which helped her bear her own pain.[29] Her prayers often included imagining Jesus's passion and crucifixion, and even picturing herself on the cross as a way of picturing herself more closely united to Christ through her pain. This type of meditation she claimed made her "physical sufferings lessen," and accept them with love.[30]

St. Faustina also mentions "moral sufferings" in her diary, as well what one might call spiritual suffering. Early in her diary she mentions a vision she received from Jesus through

[28] Faustyna Kowalska and Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Kraków: Misericordia, 2020)
[29] Kowalska, *Diary*, #1619, 1625.
[30] Kowalska, *Diary*, #1625-1633.

prayer during adoration where he showed her all the physical sufferings, as well as "the full scope of the spiritual sufferings"[31] that she would encounter, and many months later after accepting these sufferings she writes,

> Jesus, I thank You for the little daily crosses for opposition to my endeavors, for the hardships of communal life, for the misinterpretation of my intentions, for humiliations at the hands of others, for the harsh way in which we are treated, for false suspicions, for poor health and loss of strength, for self-denial, for dying to myself, for lack of recognition in everything, for the upsetting of all my plans. Thank You, Jesus, for interior sufferings, for dryness of spirit, for terrors, fears and incertitudes, for the darkness and the deep interior night, for temptations and various ordeals, for torments too difficult to describe, especially for those which no one will understand, for the hour of death with its fierce struggle and all its bitterness.[32]

Through these examples that she mentions, it is clear that she offered to Christ the full range of her human sufferings, including her physical pain, the hardships she endured while living in community and attempting to spread the message of Divine Mercy, as well as the sense of darkness and fear she experienced in her spiritual life. The phrase "I offer" is mentioned over thirty times in her diary, always referring to offering herself, or a suffering she is experiencing to the Lord "for sinners" in general, or at times for particular persons and graces.[33]

St. Faustina's personal writings and prayers thus demonstrate that there is no limit to what is acceptable to offer to the Lord; rather, it seems that anything that causes suffering including minor inconveniences, interior suffering, and painful physical distress can be offered to Christ for any intention, including but not limited to the salvation of souls.

---

[31] Ibid, #135
[32] Ibid, #343
[33] Ibid, #531, 1680

PART II

"Openness" in Atonement

As stated above, because redemptive suffering is only possible through a theory of atonement that agrees that salvation can be "open" for humanity to participate in, many will disagree that there can be a salvific component of human suffering. However, now having a better grasp of what this concept could look like in practice, looking at limited and unlimited theories of atonement may prove that there is potential for other denominations of Christianity apart from Catholicism to also value redemptive suffering. Not every denomination or faith community will agree that redemptive suffering is a plausible or acceptable understanding of human suffering, but there are many places of common ground within practice and tradition that may allow other Christian communities to also see suffering as redemptive, or if not potentially salvific, at least as a source of spiritual growth and maturity.

The Calvinist Tradition and Limited Atonement

To begin, limited atonement is a framework of thinking about salvation that is closely tied with the Calvinist belief of the elect[34] and predestination.[35] It is nuanced in the way this tradition holds that the atonement of Christ's suffering and death was infinite but is only for those who are saved, thus making redemption (the effects of atonement) being limited. Succinctly, "the value of the atonement was sufficient to save all mankind, but it was efficient to save only the elect."[36] In the Calvinist view, universalizing Christ's atonement (as seen in unlimited atonement theories) evaporates its substance because by claiming Christ's death and

---

[34] Loraine Boettner, "Unconditional Election," in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Tokyo: Nagasaki Press, 1936).
[35] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Predestination," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/predestination.
[36] Boettner, "Limited Atonement."

resurrection makes salvation *possible* but not secured for all, it qualitatively diminishes the saving value of atonement because not everyone is saved.[37] The distinction in this view is precisely in how Calvinists believe that the atonement of Christ was certainly powerful enough to make salvation possible for all mankind, but because only a select number of people (which has been predestined by God at the beginning of time) will be saved, Christ's atonement is limited in the extent to which it saves. However, "many temporal blessings" made possible through Christ's suffering and death "are thus secured for all men, although these fall short of being sufficient to insure salvation.[38]"

With these considerations in mind then, it is clear how theories of limited atonement, a product of the belief of predestination, may not allow for the "openness" in Christ's suffering and death that John Paul II proposes allows humanity to partake in redemptive suffering. Predestination then, because it holds that only a limited number of people are saved, would render a belief in redemptive suffering inconsistent as there would be no reason to attempt to offer human suffering to Christ in the hopes that it would be salvific for an individual's own soul, nor anyone else's. It then follows that much of the literature that is outrightly opposed to theories of redemptive suffering originates from individuals of the Calvinist background. However, a space where Calvinists could see some potential for redemptive suffering would be in the "temporal blessings" that Christ's atonement provides; when an individual offers their suffering to Christ, it often can make that individual feel more closely united to Christ and leads to a new spiritual maturity, and these two graces might qualify as "temporal blessings" which

[37] Boettner, "Limited Atonement."
[38] Boettner, "Limited Atonement."

still recognize God's grace and participation in the life of the person, even if Calvinists don't believe it would be sufficient for salvation.

Arminian Theology and Unlimited Atonement

However, traditions[39] formed from Arminian[40] theology usually follow theories of unlimited atonement: the belief that Christ's suffering and death was unlimited, meaning it was atoning for all of mankind instead of specifically benefitting the elect. This directly opposes belief in predestination and holds that salvation is available and possible for all of humanity. This belief that salvation is *possible* for all does not necessarily mean all are saved. Many traditions have their own doctrine on how salvation works specifically, which are generally imperative to theories of atonement, and there is certainly a large library of literature on salvation, conversion, and justification in the Christian life. Generally, many denominations of Christianity formed after the reformation claim the atonement theory of penal substitution[41] to be the primary or central doctrinal theory, but many theologians would also agree that "various biblical understandings of the atonement need not conflict,"[42] and can hold several theories of atonement to be true if they are all consistent with scriptural based evidence for unlimited atonement. Regardless, all the groups maintain the central belief of unlimited atonement, holding that the opportunity and possibility to be saved is available to all humankind, whether or not an individual chooses to accept that or even ends up being saved.

---

[39] Modern denominations that were formed on the basis of Arminian theology include Free Will and General Baptists, Methodism, Seventh Day Adventism and the Pentecostal tradition.

[40] Arminian theology refers to the writings of Jacob Arminius. See Dan Graves, "Jacob Arminius Founds Arminianism," Christian History Institute (Christian History Institute), accessed December 1, 2021, https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/arminius.

[41] For more information on Penal Substitution, see J. I. Packer, "The Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture," (November 2021), https://www.the-highway.com/cross_Packer.html.

[42] Madison Trammel, "Biggest Christian Conference Divided on Atonement," ChristianityToday.com (Christianity Today, July 2, 2007), https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/7.15.html.

Although certainly complex, nuanced and differing between traditions and even specific pastors and churches within a particular denomination, teaching based on unlimited atonement provides much more space for what role redemptive suffering could play in the Christian life. Traditions rooted in or branching from Arminian theology may prove to be places of neutral or middle ground when it comes to redemptive suffering. Although some atonement theories or theories on justification don't necessarily leave theological room for the kind of "openness" that John Paul II speaks of, even the possibility of a person playing a role in their own salvation (either by 'faith and/or through works') gives way to facets of redemptive suffering—specifically the way that choosing to offer our own human suffering to Christ through free will is a choice made only in the context of faith with the help of grace, just like any other prayer or charitable work in the Christian life. Another integral position upheld by Arminian theology would be synergism,[43] the idea that an individual's salvation is a cooperation between God's grace and his/her free human will. Rather than conversion being completely dependent on God with or without human collaboration, synergism gives way to the fact that an individual has agency in resisting or cooperating with grace, and an individual choosing to accept suffering in their life and choosing to offer and unite it to Christ could certainly lead to major conversion or growth in spiritual maturity, which thus impacts salvation.

PART III

Redemptive Suffering in Praxis

Regardless of how one spiritually offers his suffering to God, or even whether or not every Christian accepts the understanding of redemptive suffering, it is clear that seeing human

[43] For more on synergism in Christian theology, see "Prevenient Grace," (Methodism in the 21st Century Conference), accessed December 1, 2021, http://www.eternalsecurity.us/prevenient_grace.htm.

suffering as potentially redemptive can certainly give it new purpose. However, it should be clearly noted that a thorough understanding of redemptive suffering recognizes that human suffering in any capacity is not good in and of itself and should always be sought to be alleviated when possible.[44] Pain, hardship, and trials are not necessarily useful to humanity on their own, and "it must be noted that the Catholic tradition does not present suffering or death as a human good but rather as an inevitable event which may be transformed into a spiritual benefit if accepted as a way of identifying more closely with Christ."[45] It is rather in the very offering of suffering to God through prayer in the hopes of coming closer to Christ on the cross as a way to participate in salvation that makes suffering transformative to the heart and redemptive for the soul.

When an individual offers their unchosen suffering to God, they are freely accepting it and claiming it for themselves. This can change a person's perspective from "this is happening to me," which passively exacerbates the often frustrating lack of control one feels when he or she experiences suffering, to an active "I am enduring this for something good," which by virtue of grace fortifies hope and courage. This allows a person to use the power of their will, which is related to what psychologists would call "autonomy,"[46] and provides an individual with a new purpose to combat the common powerlessness that is often closely tied to suffering.[47] Research

---

[44] Thomas Nairn, "A Guide through the Ethical and Religious Directives for Chaplains: Part Five - Care for the Seriously Ill and Dying."
file:///C:/Users/mager/OneDrive/Desktop/Thesis/psychology%20and%20autonomy/CHA%20ppt.pdf

[45] *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), #61.

[46] "Autonomy," American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed December 1, 2021, https://dictionary.apa.org/autonomy.

[47] See Newman-Taylor, et. al "Psychometric Evaluation of the Hope, Agency and Opportunity (HAO)" for research on how hope, agency and opportunity have been modeled into a patient self-assessment to track mental health recovery and wellness

in psychology has also proven that "regardless of whether free will is 'really real,' *feelings* of free will make an important difference in peoples' lives" and this sense of autonomy that redemptive suffering has potential to fortify is "reliably associated with many positive life-outcomes including performance, creativity, resilience, happiness, and well-being."[48] Therefore, more research could be done in this area, but it would be reasonable to say that through current psychological research on self-determination theory,[49] redemptive suffering could also be considered a helpful perspective for recovering patients that may increase a sense of personal autonomy and thus increase their resiliency, psychological well-being, and quality of life.

However, while redemptive suffering is certainly a healing and beneficial teaching for many, careful consideration should be taken when putting this concept into practice as to avoid harmful extremes. For example, used casually, "offer it up" can become a type of band-aid for larger, more serious problems and can lead an individual to dismiss or deny unnecessary pain, which may prevent people from seeking the medical and professional help that they may need. This would not be living up to the way we are "stewards of our lives"[50] and should therefore be taking seriously the way we care for our own lives as well as that of others. When someone is rashly told to "offer it up" regularly, in rare cases it may even have the potential to become a

[48] See Sheldon, Kennon M., Mike Corcoran, and Liudmila Titova. 2021. "Supporting One's Own Autonomy May Be More Important than Feeling Supported by Others." Motivation Science 7 (2): 176–86. doi:10.1037/mot0000215.
And Kaya, Cahit, Jill Bezyak, Fong Chan, Kevin Bengtson, and Sharon Hsu. 2020. "Autonomy Support, Life Satisfaction, and Quality of Life of Cancer Patients: Psychometric Properties of the Turkish Version of the Health Care Climate Questionnaire." European Journal of Health Psychology 27 (3): 88–97. doi:10.1027/2512-8442/a000054. for more information on how support of patient autonomy leads to better quality of life and well-being in recovering cancer patients.
[49] "Self-Determination Theory" American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed December 1, 2021, https://dictionary.apa.org/self-determination-theory.
[50] Nairn, "A Guide."

source of psychological trauma, as in an extreme case this pithy phrase could be a facet of a neglect[51] from parents or caregivers.

A manipulated use of this spiritual practice can also lead to some assumptions that suffering is a *better* way to live life, that people who use medication to deal with pain/mental illness are less holy or have less to offer God. This may be perpetuated by Saint stories that glorify passivity in the light of pain and suffering in such a way that might be misused or misinterpreted, causing people to believe that suffering is good for sanctification and should be self-inflicted. We see this in cases of extreme mortification, such as the heresy of flagellantism[52] in the 14th century, which led people to seek out harsh physical suffering through flogging their own bodies as a form of penance. Although controversial, one could see how extreme physical penances could make suffering an idol when they fall outside of what is reasonable, thus resulting in the opposite of their intended purpose of leading an individual closer to Christ. This can be confusing when there are several well-respected saints[53] who took part in these types of extreme physical penances, or others who chose to passively submit to violence or pain with the intent to glorify God through their suffering. St. Maria Goretti[54] is one such example of a beloved young saint who certainly demonstrated virtuous chastity and also forgiveness at the end of her life, but consideration should be taken in telling the story of her death because it can be

[51] See "Neglect," American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed December 1, 2021, and "Autonomy," American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed December 1, 2021, https://dictionary.apa.org/neglect.
[52] "Catholic Encyclopedia (1913)/Flagellants," *Wikisource* , https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Flagellants&oldid=4396265 (accessed December 1, 2021).
[53] Examples of these saints include Padre Pio, St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Thomas More.
[54] For a brief biography on St. Maria Goretti, see Franciscan Media, "Saint Maria Goretti." *Franciscan Media*, July 6, 2020. https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-maria-goretti.

triggering for those who have experienced trauma from sexual assault and can glorify a narrative of passivity, pain and suffering.

Therefore although the "offer it up" mentality can be deeply healing and encouraging for some when presented in a well-balanced, theologically grounded way, it seems we should err on the side of caution when presenting this concept to those who are in painful situations, especially those who have experienced trauma. Therefore, some further work could be done in developing techniques on how to discuss what redemptive suffering is and how it can apply to an individual's life centered in empathy and compassion. There is already a generous amount of information on redemptive suffering in Catholic health care ethics,[55] especially for end-of-life care, and the *Ethical and Catholic Directives for Health Care Services* specifically states that "patients experiencing suffering that cannot be alleviated should be helped to appreciate the Christian understanding of redemptive suffering."[56] Therefore, Catholic health care ethics is an area of literature that could be of use for those developing more thorough applications of redemptive suffering for the average lay person who might be undergoing suffering that is not directly related to physical illness since there is little guidance on how redemptive suffering could be considered as part of the spiritual journey in everyday life.

Conclusion

In sum, redemptive suffering is a Christian understanding of suffering which holds that the pain and adversities of everyday life can be spiritually united to Christ's suffering and death

[55] Fr. Jonah Pollock, "Redemptive Suffering: Jesus' Passion and Our Passion," Dominican Friars Health Care Ministry of New York, April 1, 2018, https://www.healthcareministry.org/redemptive-suffering-jesus-passion-and-our-passoin/

[56] Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018.

on the cross in petition for the needs and salvation of oneself or others. *Salvifici Doloris* proves to be a foundational document in comprehending the many facets of this concept theologically, but practically, personal prayer in petition is often how one can spiritually "share in the sufferings of Christ." There is also potential for this theological concept to apply elsewhere in Christianity outside of Catholicism, and in practice this concept should be delivered with grace and tact as to avoid misconceptions.

An area of further research could certainly be in studying with more subtlety the area of atonement theories in response to John Paul II's claim that the redemption remains open to all love expressed in human suffering. Some atonement theories were not specifically mentioned in detail here, but it could prove beneficial to think critically about how redemptive suffering works alongside such other theories of atonement, including the penal substation theory and ransom theory, satisfaction theory from St. Anselm, Christus Victor theory, and the governmental theory attributed to Jacobus Arminius mentioned above. Another area of further study could be the New Testament writings of St. Paul, which are foundational to St. John Paul II's *Salvifici Doloris* and how the interpretation of important verses like Colossians 1:24 'make or break' redemptive suffering.

Most important, though, would be the addition of more definitive literature on what redemptive suffering can and/or should look like in the everyday life of the lay person. I have attempted here to bring redemptive suffering into a contemporary context that addresses how it is generally defined and delivered in modern times and some implications of it in practice, but there is still a great need for more tangible, credible, and accessible resources to make such a conceptual topic practical to the spiritual life.

Bibliography

"APA Dictionary of Psychology." American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association. Accessed December 1, 2021. https://dictionary.apa.org/autonomy.

"APA Dictionary of Psychology." American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association. Accessed December 1, 2021. https://dictionary.apa.org/self-determination-theory.

Boettner, Loraine. "Limited Atonement." Essay. In *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Tokyo: Nagasaki Press, 1936.

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Predestination." Encyclopedia Britannica, Invalid Date. https://www.britannica.com/topic/predestination.

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church.* 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011. http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-webelieve/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm.

"Catholic Encyclopedia (1913)/Flagellants," *Wikisource ,* https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Flagellants&oldid=4396265 (accessed December 1, 2021).

Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018.

"Fast & Abstinence." USCCB. Accessed November 30, 2021. https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/lent/catholic-information-on-lenten-fast-and-abstinence.

Graves, Dan. "Jacob Arminius Founds Arminianism." Christian History Institute. Christian History Institute. Accessed December 1, 2021. https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/arminius.

Grossman, Maxine. "SIN." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, edited by Berlin, Adele. : Oxford University Press, 2011. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-2975.

Houston, Walter J. 2001. "Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism (Book)." *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2): 722. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=7157666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

John Paul II. Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana:

1984. Accessed November 17, 2021. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paulii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html.

Kaya, Cahit, Jill Bezyak, Fong Chan, Kevin Bengtson, and Sharon Hsu. 2020. "Autonomy Support, Life Satisfaction, and Quality of Life of Cancer Patients: Psychometric Properties of the Turkish Version of the Health Care Climate Questionnaire." *European Journal of Health Psychology* 27 (3): 88–97. doi:10.1027/2512-8442/a000054.

Kempf, Constantine. "Theodicy." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 30 Nov. 2021 http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14569a.htm

Kowalska, Faustyna, and Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa. *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. Kraków: Misericordia, 2020.

Kranz, Renae. "Offer It Up: Making Sense of Suffering." *The Bishop's Bulliten*. April 2020. https://www.sfcatholic.org/bishopsbulletin/offer-it-up-making-sense-of-suffering/.

"Mary's Fatima Messages to the Shepherd Children." *National Catholic Register*. Accessed November 30, 2021. https://www.ncregister.com/features/mary-s-fatima-messages-to-the-shepherd-children.

Media, Franciscan. "Saint Maria Goretti." Franciscan Media, July 6, 2020. https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-maria-goretti.

Morrison, Stephen D. "7 Theories of the Atonement Summarized." Stephen D. Morrison, March 23, 2021. https://www.sdmorrison.org/7-theories-of-the-atonement-summarized/.

Nairn, Thomas. "A Guide through the Ethical and Religious Directives for Chaplains: Part Five - Care for the Seriously Ill and Dying." National Association of Catholic Chaplains, November 2013.

Newman-Taylor, Katherine, Christie Garner, Elizabeth Vernon-Wilson, Karlien H. W. Paas, Lesley Herbert, and Sheena K. Au-Yeung. 2017. "Psychometric Evaluation of the Hope, Agency and Opportunity (HAO); a Brief Measure of Mental Health Recovery." *Journal of Mental Health* 26 (6): 562–68. doi:10.1080/09638237.2017.1385746.

Packer, J. I. "What Did the Cross Achieve?" *The Logic of Penal Substitution*. Lecture presented at the THE TYNDALE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LECTURE, November 2021. https://www.the-highway.com/cross_Packer.html.

Pollock, Fr. Jonah. "Redemptive Suffering: Jesus' Passion and Our Passion." Dominican Friars Health Care Ministry of New York, April 1, 2018. https://www.healthcareministry.org/redemptive-suffering-jesus-passion-and-our-passoin/.

"Prayers and Devotions." USCCB. Accessed November 30, 2021. https://www.usccb.org/catholic-prayers.

Prevenient Grace. Methodism in the 21st Century Conference. Accessed December 1, 2021. http://www.eternalsecurity.us/prevenient_grace.htm.

Sheldon, Kennon M., Mike Corcoran, and Liudmila Titova. 2021. "Supporting One's Own Autonomy May Be More Important than Feeling Supported by Others." *Motivation Science* 7 (2): 176–86. doi:10.1037/mot0000215.

Redemptive Suffering. Franciscan University, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Big_v2sbU.

"Sin." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. , edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2211 (accessed 30-Nov-2021).

Siddiqui, Mona. "Islamic and Other Perspectives on Evil." Essay. In *The Good Muslim: Reflections on Classical Islamic Law and Theology*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

St. John of the Cross, and A.Z. Foreman. "Saint John of the Cross: The Dark Night of the Soul (from Spanish)." Poems Found in Translation. Accessed November 30, 2021. http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2009/09/saint-john-of-cross-dark-night-of-soul.html.

"Suffer (v.)." Etymology. Accessed November 30, 2021. https://www.etymonline.com/word/suffer.

Trammel, Madison. "Biggest Christian Conference Divided on Atonement." ChristianityToday.com. Christianity Today, July 2, 2007. https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/7.15.html.

Wood, William, "Philosophy and Christian Theology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/#AtonSalv