

SYNTHESIS SERIES

**Valuing suffering
as a Christian:
some psychological
perspectives**

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER I	
<i>Human Suffering and Christian Hope</i>	12
CHAPTER II	
<i>Love of the Poor and Suffering</i>	28
CONCLUSION	42
NOTES	45

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

THE AIM OF SYNTHESIS SERIES

As the growing edge of knowledge increases its pace and widens the domain of man, new vistas strike us which are both exciting and frightening. Although the spreading light reveals more and more the marvels of our universe, still the bordering darkness of the unknown expands along with it.

Nowhere is the uncharted field of the universe of being more deeply felt today than in the area which concerns man himself. Here especially our growing knowledge deepens awareness of the vast unknown beyond our present range of vision.

We have begun to realize that the project of comprehending man is indeed gigantic. It is the conviction of all who seriously contemplate the problem that only a multi-disciplinary approach and synthesis will produce a true picture. We find emerging a cooperative effort by those engaged in any discipline which bears upon understanding man and promoting his well-being. The human sciences, the arts, philosophy, religion and all the helping arts

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reveal him in the several dimensions of his complex pattern of life.

SYNTHESIS SERIES is intended to introduce the reader to the experience of using the multi-disciplinary approach when attempting to understand himself and others. We believe this will lead to his perceiving and relating to the entire human family more effectively — that is, more in accord with rich depth and breadth of all those realities it contains. We hope this will help reduce the confusion caused by the over-simplified “answers” to problems of living which used to be offered by specialists in various fields.

Instead of the easy or quick answers we propose that each individual make steady serious effort to achieve a rich synthesis of concepts developed by many disciplines. This appears to be the only method that holds the promise of yielding the fundamental answer—the meaning of his own existence is supposed to have — a meaning so often fretfully and falteringly sought by everyone whether he admits it or not. The promise and its realization in personal experience provide sufficient motive to undertake and sustain the search. But beyond this, one can foresee benefits which transcend individual well-being. For personal growth of many individuals brings about a **social atmosphere** which stimulates still further development toward a more meaningful life on the part of each member of the group.

This interaction between an individual and others is apparent when we observe the opposite process of deterioration. Just as the most disruptive factor in society is the unrest caused by failure of its members to find the meaning of life, so the reverse holds true, that society will benefit at all levels in proportion to the success people have in their quest for the meaning they believe their existence is supposed to have.

SYNTHESIS SERIES, we repeat, is intended to introduce the reader to the new multi-disciplinary method in carrying out the search for the meaning his life is to have when viewed in reference to the destiny of mankind.





INTRODUCTION

The suffering and death of Jesus Christ are a central and significant aspect of the Christian mystery, and suffering is an inescapable reality of human life. As Christians, we seek to strengthen a recognition and belief that the sufferings of daily life stand within the Christian mystery and are given meaning and value by their relationship to the sufferings of Christ.

Without in any sense minimizing the tragedy of suffering and death, we seek to strengthen those who suffer by speaking to them of the bond between their suffering and Christ's and by challenging them to let the cross of Christ give meaning and value to sufferings which otherwise would be without sense. But pastoral experience teaches us that, to preach with power, the mystery of Christ for the poor and the suffering requires not only a profound awareness of the Church's meditation on this mystery but a compassionate understanding of what human suffering costs and how easily human needs, fears, desires, loves, and hates can distort or prevent an authentic breaking through to the cross of Christ.

It is precisely our case for the task of preaching the present meaning of the passion of Christ and for our desire to give meaning to the sufferings of daily life, by placing them within the mystery of the cross of Christ, that makes us attentive to the whole person to whom we preach and makes

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us seek to understand the psychological dynamics through which human suffering can be given value in union with the passion of Christ — or, conversely, to understand the psychological dynamics which can make this appeal to the passion of Christ an unhealthy escape from the task of facing the reality of human suffering with courage. And so, from a psychological perspective, this essay explores some of the ways in which Christians give meaning and value to human suffering.

There will, perhaps, be some for whom such an exploration profanes a sacred mystery by suggesting that psychology can teach us anything valid about the Christian valuing of suffering. But Christian revelation is always rooted in human flesh, is lived by time- and culture-bound human beings, and is understood within the social matrix of a particular society. In this sense Christian reflection is always concerned with man not as an abstract essence but as incarnate, and the preacher may attempt to profit from the insights of psychology to further his understanding of “theological man.” To the extent that the preacher (theologian, religious educator, or pastor) is aware of the study of man that is undertaken in psychology, he may, in spite of differences of vocabulary, methodology, or philosophical presupposition, seek to gain a better understanding of man in relationship to God by using conclusions culled from a psychological study of man.

Many preachers of the mystery of Christ’s pas-

sion and death recognize the need to enrich their preaching by studying and applying the insights of psychology. They have, perhaps, found that there has been little systematic application of the insights of psychology to preaching about the relationship between the cross of Christ and human suffering. Limitations of space (to say nothing of limitations of insight and skill) make it impossible to do more than bring some of the work of one psychologist, Erich Fromm, to bear on several dimensions of the way in which Christians give meaning and value to suffering by relating it to the passion and death of Christ.

We have relied on Erich Fromm for several reasons: he is a widely read and popular psychologist; he is understandable, without requiring a professional background in clinical or experimental psychology; he is concerned not only with man in the abstract but also with man as he is shaped by his society; and he is sufficiently critical to provide a genuine foil for testing our understanding of the relationship between Christ’s passion and human suffering.

We have chosen the documents of Vatican Council II for an authoritative statement about the Christian meaning of suffering because they form the most recent extended official statement of Christian doctrine within the Roman Catholic tradition. Again, however, our space is too limited to explore all that is said about suffering by Vatican Council II,¹ and so we have selected two of its central statements about the Christian valuing of suffering. The first of these relates to Chris-

tian hope in the face of suffering, the second to the Christian recognition of Christ in all who are poor or suffering.

We now present these statements and examine them from the psychological perspective provided by Erich Fromm.

I. HUMAN SUFFERING AND CHRISTIAN HOPE

This section considers the relationship between human suffering and Christian hope by presenting a theological statement that is based on Vatican II and by examining it from the psychological perspective provided by Erich Fromm.

Theological Statement

One facet of the Christian valuing of suffering presented by Vatican II concerns the response in hope, founded on Christ, to the suffering a Christian feels when he is confronted by the problems of his own existence. From the statements of

Vatican II we can form the following principle and offer a succinct theological explanation:

In spite of the problems posed by suffering, sin, and death, the Christian presses forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope in Christ, who by his death has conquered death. Although this hope is related to the end of time, it does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives.²

Without this hope, the riddles of life and death, of guilt and grief, would be unresolved and men would succumb to despair. Christ's death and resurrection, into which man is inserted by baptism, frees man from the ultimate death of soul or body. Thus liberated by the Spirit, the Christian is freed for a service of love toward God and man which is a continuation of the work of Christ, a gathering together of the children of God, who have been torn apart by sin and dispersed throughout the world.³

As stated by Vatican II, the Christian concept of hope which underlies the above principle should be a positive force for human growth. To the extent that the Christian allows his ultimate hope for total salvation in Jesus Christ to inform his life, he has a sound basis for a mature attitude toward life and death, for love of self and neighbor, and for a profound involvement in fashioning anew the world according to God's design so that it may reach its fulfillment.

Some of these positive characteristics may be made more explicit. The Council leaves no room





for the idea that Christian hope is linked solely to the end of time; rather, it stresses hope as a virtue undergirding the task at hand. “For the Christian, humanity, culture, the State, world history, etc., are not merely intrinsically indifferent opportunities which he uses to work out his eternal salvation: they are also valuable in themselves and willed by God.”⁴ The Council is aware that such a view makes considerable demands on the Christian: “Pressing upon the Christian, to be sure, are the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations, and even suffer death.”⁵ But it is hope in ultimate salvation of body and soul which gives the Christian the strength to continue to press forward. “Far from diminishing man, [the Church’s] message brings to his development light, life and freedom.”⁶

In this Christian framework of hope, the world and every human person (body and soul) are of great importance. Salvation is already present; the messianic age has begun; and it is the task of the Christian to make this salvation present to all by his commitment to his neighbor. Christian hope should free man from the paralysis of the dread of perpetual extinction and thereby keep him from holding too tenaciously to his own comfort and satisfaction, to the exclusion of the needs of others. For the Christian does not live as if material comfort were the highest good of man, but lives for the full development of every fellow human.

Briefly stated, this is the teaching of Vatican II. Although the preacher would speak less theo-

logical language, the above presentation is clearly recognizable as the core of Christian teaching about the riddles of life and death, of guilt and grief, which are resolved only for the Christian who sees in Christ’s death a reason for hope.

Psychological Perspectives

As it is described by Vatican II, there may seem to be no reason to question the Christian concept of hope from any psychological perspective. Yet, even beyond the rather obvious insight that the proclamation of an authentically Christian ideal does not prove that it is the life force even of the individual who proclaims it, it is worthwhile to examine Fromm’s descriptions of healthy and unhealthy types of hope. His insights indicate certain characteristics which may be operative even in those who profess a Christian hope. His criticism of false hope can clarify what true Christian hope should *not* be; his positive description of hope can underline the value of true Christian hope in supporting man’s suffering and giving him the courage to press forward toward the recapitulation of all things in Christ. This critique is of value because, although the statements of Vatican II about hope are not faulted, Fromm’s analysis may offer insights into positive and negative attitudes which are motivational forces in those whose profession of the Christian ideal of hope may be a cloak for other attitudes.

There are many who feel consciously hopeful and unconsciously hopeless, and there are a few

for whom it is the other way around. What matters in the examination of hope and hopelessness is not primarily what people think about their feelings, but what they truly feel. This can be recognized least from their words and phrases.⁷

Negative Possibilities of Hope

Negatively, Fromm points out that the promise of immortality may weaken man's commitment to his present life. Overemphasis on the transhistorical ideal of salvation may overshadow "the hope for man's perfection on this earth and for his capacity to build a 'good society.'" ⁸ Where the idea of immortality is a denial of the tragic fact that man's life ends in death, it may lead to the suppression of an emotion which touches the deep roots of personality: the sense of tragedy. "The awareness of death and of the tragic aspect of life, whether dim or clear, is one of the basic characteristics of man."⁹ While ideally it should not be so, there may be a danger that hope in Christ and in ultimate personal resurrection will so dull the sense of tragedy that it sterilizes the ability to love life.

Instead of allowing the awareness of death and suffering to become one of the strongest incentives for life, the basis for human solidarity, and an experience without which joy and enthusiasm lack depth and intensity, the individual is forced to repress it. But, as is always the case with repression, by being removed from sight the repressed elements do not cease to exist. Thus the fear of death . . . remains alive. . . . But being repressed it remains sterile. It is one source of the flatness

of other experiences, of the restlessness pervading life.¹⁰

Such a suppression of tragedy is not necessarily inherent in the hope of which Christians speak. A personal hope that, like Christ's, the individual's dying will end in resurrection should heighten his ability to face and integrate a sense of tragedy and, therefore, let it become a strong incentive for life, a basis for human solidarity, and an experience which gives depth and intensity to the individual's joy and enthusiasm. For the Christian does not deny death. Christian death remains a threat to the total situation of man; the fact of death is faced neither with bourgeois optimism nor with total despair, but in a complete and definitive act of hope and faith in an incomprehensible God. The sense of tragedy is thus neither removed nor allowed to drive man into hopeless despair. However, the negative possibility of an unhealthy form of hope remains.

A further danger to true hope is a contemporary attitude which disregards the present. "This tendency coincides with a general attitude characteristic of modern man. He lives in the past or in the future. . . . This abstractified and alienated form of love serves as an opiate which alleviates the pain of reality."¹¹ In this sense, hope may be passive and have very little relationship to the "now."

Time and the future become the central category of this kind of hope. Nothing is expected to happen in the *now* but only in the next moment,



the next day, the next year, and in another world if it is too absurd to believe that hope can be realized in this world.¹²

It seems possible that a too-future-orientated concept of hope was consciously, if tacitly, rejected by the Council's statement that true Christian hope, although it is related to the end of time, does not diminish the importance of present duties.¹³ Nevertheless, a tendency to regard this world and this life as only a preparation for another, better life is not unknown in Christian thought.¹⁴

Of note here is Fromm's insight that there is an attitude which expects nothing to happen in the "now," and that it is of no particular importance whether the expectation is linked to the next moment or the next life. An overly future orientation robs the present of its value and beauty. True hope should enhance the present, for it is in the "now" that salvation is present and that the messianic age has begun. But if the "now" is a moment of suffering, it requires a mature hope to maintain a healthy balance between the "now" and the future. Escape into the future is easier than a solid commitment to valorize and redeem the present. But it is a negative, dehumanizing form of hope.

Fromm notes a further negative form of hope: when an expected salvation fails to occur (in either a political or religious sphere), "the hope that it will occur eventually is not given up explicitly, but it is asserted that salvation has al-

ready taken place in a certain provisional sense."¹⁵ Christianity proclaims that salvation is already present in the saving presence of Jesus Christ, but there is a danger that an active belief in such salvation will be replaced by hope in an institution.

This shift is combined with the building of an organization which itself becomes the carrier of salvation. In the Christian development, the Church became the instrument of salvation; those who joined her were individually saved by their adherence, even though the second coming of Christ would eventually affect all of mankind.¹⁶

While the Church sees itself, in fact, as the instrument of salvation, it is not in the closed sense indicated in the above quotation:

By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity.¹⁷

The difference in spirit of these two quotations appears to validate Fromm's criticism that the Church may become a replacement for true Christian hope, if it is conceded that Fromm's statement is an accurate analysis of an attitude which existed, or may continue to exist.

Finally, Fromm quotes with apparent approval a statement of John Dewey: "Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon



some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing.”¹⁸

If such an attitude is held by the Christian, he is not living the spirit of hope described by Vatican II. In this mentality, hope is more a passive expectation than an incentive to work with a full measure of strength at the task before the Christian. But because such an attitude demands less energy and commitment than the authentically Christian attitude, it appears that it would be unrealistic to ascribe true Christian hope to all who profess it.

Positive Possibilities of Hope

Fromm indicates the need for and the characteristics of a hope which leads to a humanizing fulfillment of man's basic needs. Firstly, Fromm indicates a great need for hope in today's society. "Quite aside from all dangers from without, our inner emptiness and deep-rooted lack of hope will eventually lead to the fall of Western civilization."¹⁹ True hope is an essential ingredient for the building of a sane, human society. Such hope is paradoxical, and it is closely linked to faith.

To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime. There is no sense in hoping for that which already exists, or for that which cannot be. Those whose hope is weak settle down for comfort or for violence; those whose hope is strong see and cherish all signs of new life and are ready every moment to help the birth of that which is ready to be born.²⁰

More succinctly, Fromm states that "to hope is a state of being. It is an inner readiness, that of intense but not-yet-spent activeness."²¹ Certain characteristics emerge from these descriptions: hope is primarily an inner attitude; it is neither a feverish activism nor a refusal to engage in constructive activity; and hope is not desperate: it accepts that what is begun may not come to fruition in the individual's lifetime. In this regard, Fromm notes the support which was given the Jewish people by their expectation of a Messiah.²²

It would appear that the Christian's hope in his and the world's ultimate fulfillment in Christ should perform a similarly supportive function. Weak hope leads one to "settle down" for comfort, although Christian hope is not satisfied with calling comfort hope. But evidently a willingness to sacrifice comfort in the here-and-now demands a strong hope that is infused with faith. It may be asked, for example, what percentage of North American Catholics lead lives that speak more of radical hope than of middle-class comfort.

Fromm links hope and faith closely: in periods of disbelief hope vanishes, for nobody cares to devote himself to the unfruitful.

The position of "the paradox of hope" is one of "faith," faith in the sense of certainty based on the inner experience of the goal, even though it has not yet been reached, and no proof exists that it ever will be. Such faith will never be possible in a spectator who "waits and sees" what

will happen. It is possible only for the one who with all his energy is tensed toward the goal.²³

Christian hope is not a spectator activity. There is a potential danger that overconfidence in God's saving activity will be an excuse to "wait and see." But the Christian whose certainty is based on his inner experience of the goal (salvation in Jesus Christ) will put his full energy into the task of spreading this salvation, that is, into fashioning anew the world according to God's design until it reaches its fullness. Hope, in this sense, is not an unfounded optimism that everything will somehow work out all right. Nor is it a denial of the tragic elements of man's life. Some types of suffering are necessary for the achievement of a chosen goal; there are some risks that have to be taken. But the object of human existence is neither security and lack of tension nor a frantic attempt to cover up boredom and dissatisfaction. "The psychic task which the person can and must set for himself *is not to feel secure but to be able to tolerate insecurity without panic and undue fear.*"²⁴ Christian hope should provide a sound basis for a radical tolerance of the insecurity inherent in human living.

That the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other is a fact accessible to faith alone. It remains a mystery, which sin will keep in great disarray until the splendor of God's son is fully revealed. Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church not only communicates divine life to men, but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth.

This she does most of all by her healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which she strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus, through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human.²⁵

Confidence in God's ultimate saving power may be a source of strength. For instance, the death of a loved one may be made more bearable by hope in an afterlife. But overconfidence in God's ultimate saving power may also cloak a real disregard for the poor and suffering, because no matter what the Christian does or does not do, God will reward the suffering of the poor in the life to come.

A final caution may be added: the ultimate victory in Christ, which is celebrated in baptism and the Eucharist, should reinforce Christian hope by constantly renewing the conviction that in Christ "the whole man is renewed from within, even to the achievement of the 'redemption of the body'" (Rom 8:23).²⁶ But does it so reinforce? Is the predominant impression that is given by or received from the liturgy an impression that salvation is in the here-and-now or in the hereafter? The answer to that question will influence the shape of Christian hope.

Influence of Society on Christian Hope

For Fromm, man's ability to face suffering is

dependent on the way in which society has culturally prepared him to see himself and his goals. Society conditions man's response to the fulfillment of his basic psychic needs. "To understand the individual we must see him in the context of the culture which molds him."²⁷ Fromm applies this concept to hope: "Hope and hopelessness are not primarily *individual* psychological factors; they are mainly created by the social situation of a country."²⁸ Fromm claims that "hope is fast disappearing in the Western world,"²⁹ and describes its psychic effects.

In fact, the responses and reactions to the shattering of hope vary a great deal, depending on many circumstances: historical, personal, psychological, and constitutional. Many people, probably the majority, react to the disappointment of their hopes by adjustment to the average optimism which hopes for the best without bothering to recognize that not even the good but perhaps, indeed, the worst may occur. As long as everybody else whistles, such people whistle too, and instead of feeling their hopelessness, they seem to participate in a kind of pop concert. They reduce their demands to what they can get and do not even dream of that which seems to be out of reach. They are well-adjusted members of the herd and they never feel hopeless because nobody else seems to feel hopeless. They present the picture of a peculiar kind of resigned optimism which we see in so many members of contemporary Western society — the optimism usually being conscious and the resignation unconscious.³⁰

For Fromm, restoral of hope requires a renewal of society. An individual cannot independently

create a mood of hope. Fromm points out that although a person's sense of hope may have been shattered in childhood, a society in which there is a strong current of hope can rekindle his hope even as an adult. Conversely, if a person lives in a society that has little hope, he will tend to be depressed and hopeless because his society has lost the spirit of hope. Fromm describes the social importance of hope for a renewal of man:

Progress . . . depends on our capacity to come to grips with our hopelessness. First of all, we have to see it. And second, we have to examine whether there is a real possibility of changing our social, economic, and cultural life in a new direction which will make it possible to hope again.³¹

Fromm has indicated that the material basis for a dignified life is indispensable for keeping hope centered on the present. "The bleaker the hope for real improvement . . . the more the hope has to find expression in fantasies."³² The existence of a material basis for a human world (at least in Western society) may shed some light on Vatican II's emphasis on the renewal of this world.

But the suffering of hopelessness is linked to a deeper malaise in man. The Vatican Council has taken note of this general "heartsickness":

In the face of the modern development of the world, an ever-increasing number of people are raising the most basic questions with new sharpness: What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress?³³



The hope which should be the Christian's has not alleviated this sense of sorrow in society-at-large. Perhaps this is because, as members of a broader, pluralistic society (or of a society which, whatever its ideology, is not Christian in its ideals), Christians are strongly influenced by the pervading air of hopelessness. This hopelessness may not be conscious — it may be an adjustment to an average or common optimism, which is, however, not at all the same as hope. In this regard Fromm has pointed out the pressure of group conformity in leveling opinion and ideals to a lowest common denominator. The pressure of conformity is so persuasive and powerful that only a person of great inner strength and integrity can resist finding an identity in conformity.

Social pressure and social sanction lead to a leveling out of taste and judgment. If the Christian's hope is born of inner strength and integrity and of his personal experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, he may be able to resist the mood of hopelessness. But certainly it must be asked whether the average Christian will be more influenced by his social milieu (with its air of hopelessness) than by his Christian vision.

This raises a further question: Is the Church in itself a sufficiently strong society that the Christian can find in the Church's communal hope a sufficiently strong support to sustain him in genuine hope? In countries which can no longer be described as Christian, or in pluralistic societies where the Church has moved beyond the ghetto stage, it seems doubtful that this would

be so. The average Christian's contact with his Church is limited to a very brief time segment of his total life. Nor does it seem self-evidently desirable that the Church become a society within the total society. Were this the case, the danger would be that Church membership would be perceived as a withdrawal from the world, and this would emphasize the otherworldly character of hope. This is not the intention of Vatican II. The thrust of the Council is rather to join with all men who are willing to build a human world.

So it is that this Messianic people . . . is nonetheless a lasting and sure sign of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a fellowship of life, charity and truth, it is also used by him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth.³⁴

Finally, this council desires that by way of fulfilling their role properly in the international community, Catholics should seek to cooperate actively and in a positive manner with their separated brothers, who together with them profess the gospel of love, and with all men thirsting for true peace.³⁵

The Church should perform a positively creative function by infusing society-at-large with a living witness to true hope. But to the extent that the mood of Western society is one of despair, it will be more difficult for the individual to maintain his mood of true Christian hope.





At the beginning of this section we proposed a statement from Vatican II about one facet of the relationship between human suffering and the Cross of Christ: "In spite of the problems posed by suffering, sin, and death, the Christian presses forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope in Christ, who by his death has conquered death. Although this hope is related to the end of time, it does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives." We explored, from the perspectives provided by Erich Fromm, some of the psychological dynamisms underlying a sense of Christian hope on which the above statement is based. We now turn to our second major consideration.

II. LOVE OF THE POOR AND SUFFERING

This section considers the relationship between human suffering and Christian love by presenting a theological statement, based on Vatican II, and

examining it from the psychological perspective provided by Erich Fromm.

Theological Statement

A second facet of the Christian valuing of suffering, as presented by Vatican II, concerns a response to suffering based on the Christian recognition of the relationship between Jesus Christ and those who suffer. From the statements of Vatican II we select the following principle and offer a brief theological explanation.

[The Church recognizes] in the poor and suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all she can to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ.³⁶

This principle lays the foundation for a love of all men, especially the poor and suffering. The Christian belief that the Lord identifies himself with the one who suffers should provide a solid basis for an attitude toward the poor man, based not on a sense of personal superiority but on respect and an awareness that it is in the poor man that the Lord presents himself to the Christian. To the extent that the Christian sees the poor man as a sacrament of Christ, he should be motivated to treat him with genuine respect and love. Likewise, his response to the poor man should help the Christian unfold his own power for true love by challenging him to a love based on something more universal than blood, race, or personal preference.

Further, the fact that the Christian believes

that all men are loved by God, and that in a historical as well as transhistorical sense the salvation of all men is intended by God, should be a strong incentive to treat all with a love that is worthy of those who are loved by God. The Council states: "It has pleased God, however, to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people."³⁷ Although Christ's call is always to the individual, it is not solely for the sake of the individual. The primordial object of Christ's mission is mankind and its history.

And now, after the resurrection of Christ, this grace is spread forth on the Church, on humanity and on the cosmos, for the fullness in Christ is nothing else than the love of God for the whole of creation, incarnate in a human nature, tending to unite in Christ not only souls but men, in their own framework, the cosmos.³⁸

Awareness of the communitarian and cosmic dimensions of salvation should give the Christian a sound basis for a brotherly love which is the foundation of all true love, for the Christian sees himself united in Christ with all men and with the whole of creation. This concept is reinforced by participation in the Eucharist. In it, the Church celebrates the victory and triumph of Christ's death, which unites man in communion with God and his fellow man.

Without question, Vatican II articulates a sound basis for, and challenge to, true brotherly love, especially for the poor and suffering.

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me."³⁹

It is the duty of all bishops . . . to instruct the faithful in love for the whole Mystical Body of Christ, especially for its poor and sorrowing members and for those who are suffering persecution for justice' sake.⁴⁰

Briefly stated, this is the teaching of Vatican II concerning a response to suffering based on the Christian recognition of the relationship between Jesus Christ and those who suffer. Preachers of the cross of Christ will recognize in these words a theme which is central to their conviction that the sufferings of daily life stand within the Christian mystery and are given meaning by their relationship to the sufferings of Christ.

Psychological Perspectives

As described by Vatican II, there may seem to be no reason to question this Christian concept of love from any psychological perspective.

However, especially concerning contemporary Western society, Erich Fromm is pessimistic in his estimation of the number of people who achieve this type of love. "People capable of love,



under the present system, are necessarily the exceptions; love is by necessity a marginal phenomenon in present-day Western society."⁴¹ In the light of this pessimistic judgment and in order to understand the characteristics of true brotherly love as criteria for evaluating Christian love for the poor and suffering, a more detailed examination of this facet of the Christian response to suffering is of value.

Rationalization of Lack of Love

The love of which we have been speaking demands considerable personal maturity. If true love is as rare as Fromm believes, this is a caution not to confuse true Christian love with a mere protestation of love. Rationalization, while not always easy to identify, often cloaks contrary attitudes. Although the people for whom the conciliar documents were written may appear to accept them, there may be no real acceptance at a life level. Fromm has shown in his discussions of ideologies and rationalization (an ideology being a socially patterned rationalization) that a formula is no guarantee that the real source of motivation is the ideal which is proclaimed. When one considers the demands for mature love made by the Vatican Council (as summed up in the above statements about love of the poor and suffering), it may be seriously asked whether the man who calls himself Christian but is not fully committed to Christ would let an ideal such as the following become a real force in his life.

Indeed it is the duty of the whole people of God, following the word and example of the bishops, to do their utmost to alleviate the sufferings of the modern age.

As with the ancient custom in the Church, they should meet this obligation out of the substance of their goods, and not only out of what is superfluous.¹²

Such a demand involves a radical commitment beyond mere lip service or simple social adherence to the principles of Christianity as spelled out by Vatican II. Yet Fromm's insight is that, even when the ideal is not lived, the average person will not throw off the formulation but will cling to it in order to rationalize his actions. In the preceding example it is difficult to see how the demand made by the bishops could be sidestepped without a person's being aware that he is not living his Christian ideals. Yet the need for rationalization of actions is so strong that a person will normally seek out some "justification" for doing what he does. A person may be selectively inattentive to such a statement, and yet hold to the general Christian ideology. At the very least, the ideals are proclaimed in an empty sense, that is, without affective weight. They may be an empty ideology, but they provide whatever comfort there is in social adherence to the best principles, even if in his private dealings with his fellow man a person is "governed by the principle of egotism, 'each for himself, God for us all,' in flagrant contradiction to Christian teaching."⁴³

An example of a rationalization may be useful. Vatican II recommends that the bishops instruct the faithful in love of those who suffer persecution for justice' sake.⁴⁴ Such a recommendation is laudable, but it leaves room for rationalization. An easy way of avoiding the recognition of another's suffering is to start with the prejudiced supposition that his cause is wrong, immoral, etc., and therefore his suffering is not for justice' sake, and so is not a call from the Lord to respond. We are not unfamiliar with the professedly devout Catholic who excludes certain classes of people from his love.

Whatever the applicability of this example to an individual Christian, the general point is still true: the same words may be, for one person, an accurate statement of a life ideal, for another, a rationalization or lifeless ideology. This remains a constant challenge to preachers of the Christian mystery.

True Relatedness to All Mankind

Fromm's discussion of union through true relatedness sets some criteria for judging the quality of love, and clarifies the value of loving the poor and suffering.

For Fromm, union is the answer to the problem of human existence, that is, aloneness or alienation. However, not *any* sort of union provides true relatedness: neither symbiotic union, nor moral masochism, nor fusion without integrity and independence fulfills the requirements of true relatedness. For Fromm,

mature love is union *under the condition of preserving one's integrity*, one's individuality. *Love is an active power in man*; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to maintain his integrity. In love, the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.⁴⁵

True love has certain definite characteristics: it is an activity; it is giving rather than receiving, and such giving is an expression of potency; it demands maturity; it is an art requiring discipline, concentration, and a supreme concern with its mastery; it is characterized by care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge; it is an active concern for the life and growth of that which is loved; it is necessarily nonexclusive.

The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love, is *brotherly love*. This is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is love for all human beings; it is characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness. In brotherly love there is the experience of union with all men, of human solidarity, of human atonement. Brotherly love is based on the experience that we are all one.⁴⁶

Fromm emphasizes that the experience of the other as poor, suffering, and helpless is an incentive to the unfolding of true love. "Only in love of those who do not serve a purpose, love begins to unfold."⁴⁷ "By having compassion for the help-



less one, man begins to develop love for his brother.”⁴⁹ In Fromm’s view, brotherly love is love between equals; the basis of love is not personal superiority but a recognition of genuineness, and it is on this condition that giving help is an expression of love.

Brotherly love is love between equals; but, indeed, even as equals we are not always “equal”; inasmuch as we are human, we are all in need of help. Today I, tomorrow you. But this need of help does not mean that the one is helpless, the other powerful. Helplessness is a transitory condition; the ability to stand and walk on one’s own feet is the permanent and common one.⁴⁹

In the light of these considerations, two conclusions may be drawn. First, the demand that the Christian love the poor and suffering as he loves Christ is a positive challenge to grow in true productive love, for only in love of those who do not serve a purpose does love begin to unfold. Second, the maturity demanded by true productive love and Fromm’s pessimism about the number of those who achieve this type of love in contemporary Western society indicate a certain caution in attributing such productive love to all who claim it.

A final observation may be added: It requires strong faith to see the poor man as Christ, as well as a certain maturity not to be overwhelmed by the constant experience of suffering to which a sensitive person is exposed. Such faith and maturity cannot be presumed to exist in every person

who calls himself Christian. This remains a constant challenge to one who preaches the cross of Christ and the contemporary Passion.

The Ordering of Values

Erich Fromm speaks of the human need for a frame of orientation which, optimally, gives meaning to the anomalies of life, relates man productively to his world, and allows man to order his values in a hierarchic form.⁵⁰ The demands of a maturely lived Christian frame of orientation are considerable. For instance, the Council indicated that a Christian ordering of values demands effective love of the poor and suffering. Perhaps one reason for the failure of some Christians to let the cross of Christ give meaning to their personal sufferings is that the *meaning elements* (mentioned in the previous section) depend to a large extent on the satisfaction of the *moral demands* of neighbor. The Council states:

It is the duty of all bishops to instruct the faithful in love for the whole Mystical Body of Christ, especially for its poor and sorrowing members and for those who are suffering persecution for justice’ sake.⁵¹

As was the ancient custom in the Church, [Christians] should meet this obligation out of the substance of their goods, and not only out of what is superfluous.⁵²

Unwillingness to allow one’s values to be ordered in such a radical way would, perhaps, lessen the power of the Christian frame of orien-



tation to illumine the problems of suffering, death, and anxiety about the meaning of life.

This relationship is not proposed as exclusive or exhaustive. For instance, a narcissistic distortion (by fear or desire) of one's perception of the world, and so a failure to relate to the world in a productive way, could equally block the power of the Christian frame of orientation to "answer" the problems of suffering, death, and anxiety about the meaning of life. Nonetheless, there appears to be a positive relationship between Christian meaning and effective love. To the extent that the Christian attempts to order his values in the way proposed by Vatican II, the power of the cross to illumine the mysteries of suffering, death, and anxiety about the meaning of life may be operative. To the extent that the demands of the gospel to love the poor and suffering are not met, the Christian "answer" may be without effect.

The Church as Mother

In its call to love the poor and suffering as one loves Christ, Vatican II proclaims an ideal of universal brotherhood. However, the achievement of such an ideal demands considerable maturity of personality and conscience in a difficult area.⁵³ The genesis of the problem is the search to find in adult life the same security which was had in mother love (an unconditional love which gives a sense of aliveness, rootedness, and at-homeness in the world). The deep sense of rootedness which most children find in mother love makes it dif-

ficult for the child to leave the protective orbit of its mother. According to Fromm, "even in the mature adult, the longing for this situation as it once existed never ceases completely."⁵⁴ Because the adult sees the complexity of his life, the fragmentary nature of his knowledge, and the accidentalness of his existence, he perceives that in many respects his situation is no different from that which existed when he was a child.

If the adult does not satisfy his need for rootedness in a humanizing way, by the rootedness which he has in his solidarity with all men, he will attempt to satisfy his need in other ways. One of these is the creation of a relationship to a mother figure by inserting himself into a group which can provide (more or less) the same psychological fulfillment of the need for rootedness as can the primary relationship to mother.

The *family* and the *clan*, and later on the state, nation or church, assume the same function which the individual mother had for the child. The individual leans on them, feels rooted in them, has the sense of identity as a part of them, and not as an individual apart from them. The person who does not belong to the same clan is considered as alien and dangerous — and not sharing the same human qualities which only his own clan possesses.⁵⁵

The ideal of universal brotherliness places a heavy demand on the individual. According to Fromm, the need man has for rootedness is commonly found in an "incestuous fixation" to clan, blood, soil, or state; and man must succeed "in

developing his reason and love further than he has done so far”⁵⁶ before he will be able to find his experience of rootedness in universal brotherliness.

Fromm’s discussion about the difficulty of achieving such rootedness provides an insight into the dimensions of the task proposed as a Christian ideal by Vatican II. The suffering of one who is regarded as a brother is more easily responded to than the suffering of one who is seen as a stranger. Although the Christian should see no man as a stranger, his affiliation with the Church as “mother” may lead him to regard “the other” as alien and dangerous, and not as a brother to be helped. The more strongly an individual’s sense of identity with the Church tends toward an “incestuous fixation” on the Church as “mother,” the less will be his experience of universal brotherhood. The less his sense of universal brotherhood, the less will be his concern for the sufferings of those who do not belong to the Church.

There is actually a dual polarity in the image of the Church: the maternal — offering salvation, love, mercy, forgiveness, and life — and the paternal — demanding active participation in building a human world, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.⁵⁷ Although the father does not represent the natural world (the natural rootedness which the infant has in its mother), he represents another and necessary pole of human existence: the world of thought, of order, of discipline.⁵⁸ The person who is fully committed to his Chris-

tian calling admits the tension of this polarity, and finds in his rootedness in Christ (through the Church) a call to strive for the unity of all things in Christ. But the desire for rootedness is stronger than the call to obedience,⁵⁹ and so is of more importance in asking what potential effect the Church has as “mother.”

To the extent that the individual seeks a “mother” (in a regressive sense) in the Church, he will tend to assume certain negative characteristics: he will have a fear of “mother,” which will compromise his independence, and those who do not belong to “mother” will be regarded as strangers. This will, in turn, weaken his sense of responsibility toward his fellow man and his care for the poor and suffering. To the extent that the individual accepts the maternal-paternal polarity of the Church image, he will find a source of rootedness which is at the same time an incentive to serve his fellow man. But Fromm’s judgment about the strong tendency toward “incestuous fixation” induces a caution that the brotherhood of all men, demanded by the call to treat the poor and suffering with constant love, is a difficult ideal to attain.

The documents of Vatican II maintain a healthy balance between the maternal and paternal dimensions of the Church, both offering love and demanding a responsible relationship to the world. Nonetheless, as according to Fromm the tendency toward “incestuous fixation” is strongly rooted in man, the consideration of this question indicates some of the psychological difficulties in-

volved in fully accepting the universal brotherhood of all men proclaimed by Vatican II, which is the basis for a full and active concern to alleviate the suffering of others.

CONCLUSION

We have explored, from a psychological perspective, some of the ways in which Christians give meaning and value to suffering. Quite evidently, this essay is incomplete from both the theological and the psychological points of view. Theologically, there are two other major statements in Vatican II about the relationship between human suffering and the suffering of Christ. The first is: "Made one in the sacraments with Christ who suffered and is exalted, the Christian offers his sufferings as an acceptable sacrifice before God."⁶⁰ The second is: "Christ continues to carry on his redemptive work in the Church, especially through the Eucharist in which the work of redemption is carried on. Christians, by

filling up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ, build up the Church, the sacrament of salvation, for the unity of all mankind."⁶¹ Psychologically, this essay has neither exhausted the work of Erich Fromm nor touched the wealth of insight offered by other psychologists.

Nevertheless, we trust that this presentation and the methodology it uses will encourage a serious and ongoing application of psychology to the preaching of the passion. We reiterate what was said in the introduction. It is precisely our care for the task of preaching the present meaning of the passion of Christ and our desire to give meaning to the sufferings of daily life by placing them within the mystery of the cross of Christ which should make us attentive to the whole person to whom we preach, and make us seek to understand the psychological dynamics through which human suffering can be given value in union with the passion of Christ — or, conversely, to understand the psychological dynamics which can make this appeal to the passion of Christ an unhealthy escape from the task of facing the reality of human suffering with courage.

To the extent that the preacher is aware of the study of man that is undertaken in psychology, he should seek to gain a better understanding of man in relationship to God by using the conclusions culled from this psychological study.

NOTES

1. For a fuller analysis see Henry Carl Simmons, *"The Christian Valuation and Significance of Suffering according to Vatican Council II, and the Five Basic Psychic Needs of Man Posited by Erich Fromm: An Interdisciplinary Study"* (Ottawa, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1970).

2. The main texts from which this principle is formed (all references are to *The Documents of Vatican II* [New York, 1966]) are "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (henceforth "*The Church Today*"), article 10, p. 208; art. 13, p. 211; art. 2, p. 200; art. 22, pp. 221–22, and "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity" (henceforth "*Missions*"), art. 8, p. 595.

3. J. L. Witte, "L'Eglise, 'Sacramentum unitatis' du cosmos et du genre humain," in *Vatican II, la Constitution dogmatique sur l'Eglise de Vatican II, Tome II, commentaires* (Paris, 1966), no. 51b in the collection *Unam Sanctam*, p. 466 (henceforth *Unam Sanctam*, 51b).

4. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. III: *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, 1967), p. 59.

5. "The Church Today," art. 22, p. 221.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

7. E. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (Toronto, 1968), pp. 10–11.

8. E. Fromm, *May Man Prevail?* (New York, 1961), p. 9.

9. E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, 1941), p. 177.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

11. E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, 1956), p. 85.

12. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 7.

13. Cf. "The Church Today," art. 21, p. 218.

14. Cf. E. Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (New York, 1963), p. 70.



15. E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York, 1966), p. 156.
16. *Ibid.*, cf. *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 19.
17. Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," art. 1, p. 15, in *The Documents of Vatican II* (henceforth "The Church").
18. John Dewey, "A Common Faith," quoted by E. Fromm in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New York, 1950), p. 20, fn. 10.
19. Fromm, *May Man Prevail?* p. 16.
20. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 9.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
22. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 143.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
24. E. Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York, 1955), p. 174.
25. "The Church Today," art. 40, p. 239.
26. *Ibid.*, art. 22, p. 223.
27. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. viii.
28. Fromm, *May Man Prevail?* pp. 237–38.
29. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 23.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.
32. Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ*, p. 36.
33. "The Church Today," art. 10, p. 208.
34. "The Church," art. 9, p. 26.
35. "The Church Today," art. 90, p. 304.
36. "The Church," art. 8, p. 23.
37. *Ibid.*, art. 9, p. 25.
38. Witte, *Unam Sanctam*, 51b, p. 476.
39. "The Church Today," art. 27, p. 226.
40. "The Church," art. 23, p. 45.
41. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 111.
42. "The Church Today," art. 88, p. 303.
43. Fromm, *May Man Prevail?* p. 124.
44. "The Church," art. 23, p. 45.
45. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 17.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
50. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 64.

51. "The Church," art. 23, p. 45.
52. "The Church Today," art. 88, p. 303.
53. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 61.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
57. Cf. Antoine Vergote, *Psychologie Religieuse* (2d ed.; Brussels: Dessart, 1966), chap. III: "Les deux axes de la religion: le désir religieux et la religion du père," pp. 155–212.
58. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 50.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
60. Cf. "The Church," art. 7, p. 20; art. 7, p. 21; art. 36, p. 62, and various subheadings: "Laity," art. 3, p. 492; "The Church," art. 11, p. 28; "Priests," art. 2, p. 535. "The Church," art. 10, p. 27; art. 26, p. 50; "Liturgy," art. 12, p. 143.
61. Cf. "The Church," art. 1, p. 15; art. 3, p. 16; art. 8, p. 23; art. 9, p. 26; art. 41, p. 70; "Missions," art. 5, p. 590.

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