

LOOKING AT THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

It is said that the only real and intelligent objection to belief in the existence of God, is the problem of evil. Many will be inclined to agree. Certainly any discussion of the goodness of God and the power of God among younger teenagers will eventually drift to the demand “if there is a God, why does He let it all happen?” If, on the plane of moral evil rather than physical or ‘natural’ evil, one replies that with the real freedom of the free will goes the real power of personal sanctifying grace to sweeten and transform our personalities if we will allow Him, the rejoinder comes, “well, yes, but if He is *almighty* why does He not stop me from sinning and going to hell?”

One has heard of a certain seminary professor who teaches his students that “God cannot be called *almighty* because of the problem posed by evil, but *unsurpassable*, yes, certainly”. I hope the good God feels flattered at being so put at the top of the class, even if not quite in a class of His own. One is not surprised to learn that the same honest man is unsure of any real distinction between matter and spirit, or between God and his creation. It would follow.

God cannot square the circle

In a mere article we will ponder what perhaps we may understand and can answer concerning the problem of evil, without losing pages on what we cannot. We will do better to keep to the old categories of *almighty* God and *eternal* God, because as God is utterly and totally *Being*, ‘pure act’, and the transcendental source of all dependent reality, these ancient categories of natural theology are going to be true. Failure to penetrate mystery is not due to incompetence in God’s being, but in ours.

One remembers back to youthful days, at St. Mary’s Hall, Stonyhurst, during the last war, and to a theologian of some distinction (Fr. Bernard Leeming, S.J.) remarking: “I think the solution of the ultimate problem of moral evil, the allowing of the damnation of the spiritual creature, is insoluble to the finite mind. We can only point to the enormous evidence for a good God, and the complete coherence of the order of his providence for our good. In that, as in the Sacred Heart, we can take our confident refuge”. Fr. Bernard may have been right about the ultimate impenetrability of the mystery of grace and salvation. If he is right (and of this one is less than sure) then the mystery resides in the nature of God and the majesty of God, which even in the order of grace we cannot fully penetrate.

We have to avoid the neat Calvinist solution of arbitrary predestination, so very logical to the finite mind. We have also to worry that Catholic schools of thought which teach that “God can

always and efficaciously will the salvation of the most deliberate sinner but of course “according to the modality of free will” might not be saying the same thing as Calvin. In all the aspects of our post-scholastic but pre-Conciliar theology, we need to be careful about admitting cheerfully the infinitely more perfect worlds and orders that *God could have* created, but didn’t. We may be saying that God can always make an infinite number of ever more perfect circles and of course keep them square. We do not know whether some of the postulates theologians make arbitrarily in the name of the omnipotence of God are simply incompatible with the order of the divine wisdom.

God and ‘Necessity’

At the root of the so-called “problem of evil” is one great, *necessary* lack of determination on which this writer at least suspects all else hinges. It is that God cannot will us, or our being, or our finality (which is the same thing as our fulfillment) with an intrinsic, metaphysical necessity. God cannot will the angel either, with an intrinsic necessity. God can only will Himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with a necessity which is absolute, because God alone, in his own essence is the unique and only Reality which is “necessary”. If God shall decree to know, will, and want anything other than Himself — the spiritual creature made to His, to God’s own spiritual image and substantial likeness — then that creating and the communion of that calling unto God must be an offer, a gift, in God. And in the creature it must be a desiring in the order of the intrinsically unconstrained.

Matter is constrained and predetermined of its nature, it has no one lasting ‘ego’ and fulfillment as men and angels have. It cannot commune with God, even as it cannot offend Him. The spiritual creature, angel or man, shares as spiritual in God’s own self-recognition, self-love, and in that self-determination which we call “freedom”. Its fulfillment will lie in its cooperation with God, as God seeks it and desires its love. There will be God’s one Truth, not any truth, God’s one order of Goodness, not anything the creature likes. The creature is not its own happiness, it will discover its happiness only in God, in a recognition that is free, from the fundamentals of its being. It will not find God without the seeking and prompting of God; yet its own response is known as “free” from the root of its dignity as spiritual. The spiritual creation does not *have* to obey from very nature and definition as matter does. It can adore and will itself to its own destruction. Yet, come to think of it, do we have any evidence, from the pages of the Gospels, that in any confrontation with Christ, the “unclean spirit” ever asked for its own annihilation?

Creation as Community

If God creates within an order, a ministry of being, then spiritual creatures must be expected to act upon one another in a community of knowledge, love, and influence. This presumption

must apply to the angels as well. But upon that order of being so little known to us in detail that we will not linger. The proposition certainly applies to human kind - from the first dependency of our being conceived, to the last grace ministered to us at the hand of another in Christ's name, the last prayer whispered in our ear by loved ones, as we die.

Thus we are at all times a society of friends gathered around the Person of God. If we are capable of refusing the relationship which defines our "righteousness" within the very being of God, it is inconceivable that our life-ministry upon others should always be for good and never for evil! The alternative is to say that to be "good" God must always create an order in which it was morally if not metaphysically impossible to reject Him at all. Such a concept is opaque, for it does not cohere with any exercise of "freedom" as we know it on earth, nor with that inner sense of joy in obedience to God as "loved Person" which we sense when we obey the voice of conscience. It does not fit in with that sense of saying "no" with "darkness all surround" which we experience in the deliberate refusal of God's known will.

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God's Holy Communion with all Creation in the Mass

We really do not know when we talk of it being in the power of God to create a spiritual order in which truly and freely no creature would ever sin, whether we are talking about an order which is possible at all, or again, an order in which all the other characteristics which bind together our ministry of love, service, action, and communion would be really and freely manifested to the glory of God. What we must require of God, if God decrees to create an order and communion, a 'society of friends' between Himself and mutually to one another, is that the order so created should mirror to the fullest degree we can conceive, and beyond the fullest we can conceive, all the attributes of God, including most essentially the mercy, comprehension, understanding and forgiveness in love, of God. Such an order we do know and experience in the Incarnation of the transcendent God, and the redemption of mankind, in the *whole* gamut of His work.

Sometimes we forget that the redemption is a *work* done and still doing in the Person of Jesus, God and man. As a work it is manifest in Christ's resurrection, teaching us that our fallen flesh is membered to a victorious personality and a glorious and immortal body. Whatever through the pressure of sin, evil communion from others, pain and ignorance cannot be repaired or even healed a little in this time, is still covered by that living, personal, continuing redemption which consummates beyond the grave what could not be operated here. Of this, through time but into eternity, the Mass - in which not a man but Jesus re-presents Himself among his people as One ever offered and ever offering - is the most moving of signs. One thinks of it every time one raises the consecrated Host to the people. Then, borne to the hands of God, by the angel who ministers the gifts of men to the Father (Eucharistic Prayer I) He who is our peace with God

is given back to us as the pledge of peace, and our peace with each other. Then, in Him and of Him we eat the Bread of Life at the common table of Our Father, and grow in wisdom, age and grace personally and as a People before God and men.

Of such an order of creation — dignified in the first moments of its spawning by the decree of the Incarnation, redeemed not by one act but by the living communing of the same Son of God and of man — I am not willing to say that God could have done more, God could have done better. What we can see is that all good, even to our personal reception into the bosom of God at the moment of our death, is a work and a communing. From the moment of the 'Big Bang' through to the intercession for us of Christ and his saints, we are in the presence of one continuous ministry, in which we create or destroy in the order of being - of reality - for ourselves and upon our brothers and sisters.

Rupture of Unity-Law of Creation

Christians, including Catholics, have forgotten the doctrine of Original Sin. Within that doctrine, intelligently and coherently understood, is the actual answer to the problem of evil within the order of creation and within the actual order of our lives as a ministry one to another as God has constituted that universal relationship. That order includes, or better, is founded upon the Incarnation of The Word as the source and life-principle of the angelic order, and of the life of our own order as Son of God and Son of Man. (cf. Col. 1,16-17).

Hence the reluctance to speculate about an infinity of better orders of being which God could have made but did not. There is no conceivable crowning of the universe that betters the making and fulfilling of Angels and of Men in Christ, the Sacrament of All Creation. The order within which such a Gift is decreed must be supremely worthy of the unique majesty of the Gift.

Concerning man's life and order, the doctrine of Original Holiness teaches that all human life and being is a communion and a ministry of one upon another. Before the advent of man, this community of the inflowing of being by one thing to another, (which is the best definition of causality) was true of that 'community' which is the entire material cosmos. In the theology which inspires Faith, it is often called "the Unity-Law of Control and Direction". Yet this law of ascent in one ministry of development, truth and goodness is manifest in matter only as the foil which sets off greater jewels embedded. The first jewel is the nature of man, and his creation in original holiness.

In man this Unity-Law continues unbroken in a higher, but now free and spiritual order for the perfecting of the sons and daughters of God. A jewel beyond compare crowns the making of man: the Incarnation of God as the Christ, the Holy One who is the summit of the Unity-Law in

person, in the continuity of one unbroken, coherent economy of creation. The Incarnation of God in Christ is not simply an event, but also an activity: the summit of the creative Law through which God makes all things, maintains all things, and brings all things in balance to their perfection. We human beings too are always a living and a *causal* part of that one “creation in community” for better or worse, for good or for degradation. (cf Col 1, 16-26. Eph. 4,1-13. Heb 2,7-16).

Every aspect of human life damaged

Original Sin then - that overlooked but vital doctrine of the reality of our state, and the introduction into the material universe for the first time of “the problem of evil” - teaches the rupturing of that living, holy communion of good by which, from the first pair, men were to minister life and fulfillment to one another through Christ. It is not some abstract order of good which is ruptured. These free and spiritual creatures themselves are appallingly wounded in the depths of their beings. They cannot, and even within God’s order of redemption they do not respond to God with the fullness and fairness of beauty and good as they should. The good we minister is never perfect, and in many the ministry of their lives as a work and impact upon others is a ministry of evil, of destruction of peace and order. In the economy of God in which we actually live, this is the whole answer to “the problem of evil”.

Every institution of human society is wounded and lessened by the disharmony and greeds of sin - that “law within my members” that contradicts the Unity-Law, “the law of God”, which being a Law of Life and working only to the fulfillment of life, “delights me according to my inward man” (Rom. 7,22-24). At the time of a certain British air disaster caused by the wickedness of men, we heard a lot about God’s permission of this sort of thing destroying people’s faith in his existence at all. One understands the grief and the disorientation of loss, the numbing pain of horrible, unexpected sorrow. But yet in itself, how small and unconsciously selfish the complaint. We seek that the providence of God should always work to spare our little, local utopia of happiness, when the burdens and *the same causality* which caused the evil, fell upon the only-begotten Son of God’s delight, who was not spared, but tasted death for all, and gave Himself rising again as the certainty of our renewal and lasting joy (cf. Col. 1,24).

The corruption of the best is the worst

What about the earthquakes and the famines, and the unmentionable things done by men to each other “in the name of God” from the dawn of history? What of all the wars, horrors, cruelties beyond conceiving, the degradations and exploitations, and corruption of society, and the corruption of love and marriage and the ministry of sexual love? No power in human nature has been so deformed and distorted by the consequences of Original Sin as the sexual power and its pleasure within human nature. No one can measure the known and unknown tragedies

that have grown out of its defilement in our stock, nor the repercussions upon the human community at large from all the trauma so caused. ... There are many greeds and lusts of the flesh created by the power of the free soul upon the unfree flesh of mankind. The sexual one, however, is fundamental, the most basic, and in all its consequences over history, probably the worst ...

An ecological impact from sin?

We make now another point which follows on from the real, the *actual* impact upon the creation, of the sin of man, and the rejection of God and his Christ. The effects of sin in man will directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously affect the order of the very laws of Nature, and what we now call the “ecological balance” of Nature. It stands to reason this way: before the Fall, all material and deterministic creations were membered one to another in a great economy or ‘equation’ of causality for truth and for good. Man inherited that “good” order, and in him in one continuity, the Law was swept up in God and his Christ into the order of the divine life to be co-sharers of the divine nature of God. Man is part of that very order of Nature and the material creation he now crowns. He is physically and organically part of the Law and its mechanism as it operates now towards the summit of its meaning, in what St. Paul, speaking in much the same context, calls “these, the last days” (1 Cor 10,11) - days when the Lord of History consummates through his own activity the Unity-Law He poised in the first flash of its genesis.

There is nothing we do, conceive or plan, nothing we desire within our very being, which does not produce its own material ‘wave’ or impact upon the environment around, even as the same influence linked to the soul impacts and influences our brethren for good or for evil. In either order, if the ‘wave’ of our being is anarchic, incompatible in its own self with the pulse and frequency, so to speak, of God’s Unity-Law - his providence for good - then that impact is part of the principle and problem of evil, an influence for disintegration.

We know now on how fine a balance the world and the universe that supports it is poised. We have become aware of ecological damage and the disintegration caused in an obvious manner by human folly, human greed, and human heedlessness. We are that sort of people, most of us, unconsciously heedless and greedy quite apart from deliberate wickedness. We would have been wiser, humbler, cleaner in every sense of clean, if as a race, cleaving to God in grace, we had grown in holiness from the beginning. Holiness is the theological perspective of that which is *whole*, that which has the integrity of its nature and its working; ministering in beauty the Unity-Law of God.

Sin as a natural curse

It is to be anticipated that without sin, disparate nationalisms, contradictory religions, selfish grabbing of the resources of the earth would have given way to a world order in which the world was worked as one commonwealth for the life of mankind. As men multiplied and their artefacts interacted with the environment of the planet — just as their minds and bodies interact — there would be changes, ‘greenhouse effects’ maybe. However, with their bodies, souls, and artefacts ordered within a much more beautiful and wise economy of life, we can anticipate that such an effect would profitably and wholesomely have increased the resources of the world for the numbers of mankind. It is science itself today which is showing us that the first three chapters of Genesis are not just mythological. For the Earth is a garden, and man is set to tend and cultivate it fruitfully. Everything we do and are is part of that impact for good or for desolation.

We have to take much more literally too the ‘mythological’ curse on the earth because of sin: *“cursed be the earth in thy work, thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee: in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread, till thou return to the dust, from which thou wast taken”*. (Gen. 3:18-19). The curse is not arbitrary, we suggest, just the result of “natural” law. Man is part of the causal order of nature on his planet. Everything we do affects the brother or sister in soul and body. Everything we do as a ‘mixed’ entity of matter and spirit affects also other material being around in its own order. God made the harmony of nature equational from the beginning, and we are the master-value of the equation.

Already the exigencies of space are squeezing harshly the development of an idea, so points have now to be summarized. If from the natural ‘radiation’ of body, soul, and both as ‘personality, sin in us is a principle of dissolution, even in the material environment, then grace likewise, especially the grace of Christ, the summit of God’s Unity-Law in creation, is also a principle of life, restoration and healing. We do not know how far the ramifications and interaction of this principle may go. We do know that the redemptive work of Christ was made an agony of stress and rejection, because God in Christ is the supreme Environment in whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17,28).

The rejection, agony and crucifixion of God made man is the supreme manifestation of the resistance to God which is the very “problem of evil” itself. The prayer in the Garden: “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me; nevertheless, if it may not pass except I drink it, Thy will be done...” (Matt 26,30) does not seem to me to be merely human grief. I suspect it is the manifestation that God himself, the Father cannot change the order established upon man’s freewill and the consequences, including the manner of our redemption, which must follow. Jesus - in all that He is - was then and is now, *as living and acting*, more than just the summit of God’s gift to us. He was and is the peak of God’s whole Law of creation and of governance for

the universe itself. Through grace and through nature (for God has made them one economy and one identity in the humanity of Christ) Christ (whether passible on earth or impassible but living in His Church, His Sacraments, and His People) is an 'ecological' influence if you like, which reaches, especially through us men, into every aspect of creation.

My Peace I leave with you

We do right therefore to thank God, and especially to thank *Jesus*, for all the good we have - all the blessings, all the security and family joy, for the friendships, for the good health, for all that goes well. It comes from Him and is maintained in so many complex ways by Him and through Him. Yet the consequences of sin also remain, are very active, and in our affluent, arrogant, and sensual days much on the increase. The consequences of this disintegrating power can hit us at any time. Jesus did not promise his friends immunity, quite the opposite: "if they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you also; if they have listened to My word, they will accept yours also (John 15,20) ...

We have to take up our cross every day, and walk behind Him. He is the source and creator of our joy in every happiness we have. Those who love Him - holy parents, good and dear friends, faithful and loving wife or husband, children that are a joy, and priests who are spiritual and true, and over all the Eucharist and the Church - all of this spiritual 'ecology' may give us years and years of almost unbroken happiness. It is not guaranteed, it cannot be guaranteed. The power of sin can, and may break in on us, as Judas broke in on the 'happy band' of the Eleven.

He who is the giver of the joy when all goes well is also the giver of strength and consolation when we drink of the chalice that He had to drink. We will all find it so. We do find it so. One speaks not from faith but from experience. In unclouded joy, and in sheer sorrow, there remains always, as an experience, the presence and support of Christ - communally in the Church, personally in the individual life: "my peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you: not as the world gives, do I give to you". (John 14:27).

To continue to summarize: as priests we need to explain to the little ones of God that God has *not* "done this to me" nor "sent this to me" in any direct, personal sense at all. Nor is it true to say of some great loss or horror, say the rape of a child, "we have to accept the will of God" except in the same sense and with the same solidarity as Christ accepted the bitter chalice *sin* had brewed for him. The roots of the wheat and the darnel are inextricably interwoven until the harvest, but "an enemy has done this," not the work or will of God.

An Angel on your shoulder?

If God were to try to stop me sinning, how many thoughts, impulses, initiatives, which seem to

us good, innocent, harmless pleasures etc., would have to be forbidden in their first movements by a 'good angel' who would know the ultimate consequences. We would - the vast, vast majority of us - soon wish him "get off my shoulder!" God can only influence us totally when completely, in all that we have and are, we are attuned in a manner which actually is deeply contemplative, to the wisdom and will of the Trinity who dwells within us.

As I understand it, this is the highest degree of inner communion with God in the "unitive way" as St. John of the Cross describes it. We do not know how many natural disasters *may* be due to the sin of man, perhaps cumulatively over centuries. We cannot be sure that The Flood had no relationship to all flesh around that area having "corrupted its way" ... The very protection of mankind from natural disasters that were inevitable from the contingent, limited perfection of the planet Earth as a habitat *might well* have been mediated to human communities by great prophetic souls, even as Christ prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem as a consequence of his rejection, and because "in the day of your visitation, you did not know the things that were to your peace". (Luke ??)

Certainly many of the saints helped individuals, both by warnings of danger and by encouragement in a prophetic manner, to respond more perfectly to God. The saints were great healers. Physical healing was not, and is not now, the primary work of Christ to the world. We all have to wane and die. Yet in the Gospels healing is a great sign of the power of God in Christ. Healing, not only physical, but "pardon and peace" brought to the brethren in the radiation and peace of beautiful personality, has always been the mark of the saint in the life of the Church. Truly holy mothers and fathers bring this radiation to the formation of the minds and hearts of their children. For the priest or the nun, (and here one admits to speak from knowledge), the first great joy of life as we get older is the humble joy of the love of God as an experience. The second is like to this: the sheer happiness of seeing in the lives and personalities of good men and women, especially the younger ones, a deepening beauty, closeness to God, willing and prayerful service, and not infrequently the giving of their own whole lives as a total vocation to God in the closer, apostolic service of religion.

There is a parallel here of course between Christ's own answer concerning the "two great commandments of the law" and their interdependence. It is God who gives the gift and the power and the grace always. But He needs flesh and blood as the channel of His own flesh now ascended. The beauty of human holiness, the radiance of nobility in men and women, needs to be ministered. It needs the disciple. This alone, once realised, should prompt many and generous vocations.

The personal loves and joys that grow out of this life of 'vocation' last till the end. It is the

fulfillment of Christ's own promise that those who, apparently, give up all to follow Him, receive back in love from *persons* "one hundred fold", even in this present time (Mark 10,30).

One Communion for Blessing or Curse

What we often call *The Unity-Law of Control and Direction* is more than the unity of the ascent of material being, through an evolution ordered from God back to God. It is also a ministry of life and well-being of thing unto thing. It passes into the creation of man, when matter of its own law and formula, at its unique peak, requires the soul as co-principle of being, and a new creation - spiritual and material in synthesis - now lives in direct communion with God as its law of life and being. The Law, still a continuity and one economy in a higher order of being, is still *a mutual ministry* of man to the Earth he inherits, and men to each other with God. The "Law", the one communion of ministry and finality consummates in Jesus Christ. His is the work to redeem the damage, the disintegration, the blighting of the beautiful work of God.

For evil has its own ministry, individual and social, even to this day. This is the Mystery of Iniquity, which at the end of time will greatly abound, and of its very nature call forth the Second Coming of Christ (Dan 7, 26; Rev 20,7-9). Christ's own work, guaranteed by his resurrection from sin-inflicted death, is to redeem and sweeten, to gather "a little flock", but through few to leaven many, and to redeem fully in the condition of purgation what cannot be made beautiful here.

It is part of Christ's work in the Eucharist, and it is why that Sacrifice is efficacious for the living *and for the dead*. It is a work of *ministry*, of the making of people, not just the institution of the Church and her Sacraments. It is always a personal work, and we are called to share in this, *The Mystery of the Kingdom*. To think this way and realize the intercommunion of creation at all levels and in all three orders, helps us, one suggests, to understand better the problem of evil - its inevitability, and our personal identification with Christ.

There must be much more to develop, yet more to ponder. It is unlikely to be the stint in the garden of the world and the Church of this writer. He is very grateful for all the prayers and love that supported him in his recent grave illness. However, the prognosis for severe myocardial disease is not generous. The Lord has most sweetly and gratuitously given notice of termination of lease upon "this our earthly tent" (cf 2 Cor 5:1). Time, as so often when camping, to brush out, fold, roll, and wait at the roadside for pick-up. The task is passed to the young.