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Volume 3 – 2011

**Helping the Sufferers and Victims Benefit from the
Christian Relation with God through a
Contextual Theology of Suffering**

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Abstract

Suffering remains a significant problem for all people as it inhibits human dignity. Dealing with it is equally a serious challenge for the sufferers, victims and Christians alike. The main problem with suffering is that it causes destruction to the individual and communities. This paper defines suffering and attempts to show how Christian resources such as Prayer, Bible, Liturgy, and the

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Church are useful in helping the sufferers and the victim overcome. Furthermore, the paper makes a reflection on the relevance of a Contextual theology of suffering and the whereabouts of God in the midst of suffering.

Introduction

The issue regarding the Christian relation with God for the benefit of the sufferers/victims and the role of Contextual theology in the era of suffering is, in truth, the very meaning of the role of Christian faith, well as the mission of the Church in such trying times. This is one of the most persistent and pertinent question of our time. It is during such times when Christians attempt to answer this question that they must appeal to the doctrinal resources such as scriptures and theological interpretation to show their relevance and what significance they have for humanity that has reached a dire moment of desperation. Any, Christian indeed, any contextual theologian would probably agree that the key issue of Christian responsibility is that of saving, and serving the sufferers and victims through Jesus. Those who are familiar with the scriptures, would also agree that what is written in the book of Genesis (3:1-24), i.e. the fall of human race, was also the beginning of human suffering and victimization. Total depravity, of course, does not mean that human race has become as bad as it can possibly be, but that every part of us is a deep infection what result with suffering and victimization (Rosenblatt Rod, 1992:195). This reality moves us as Christian theologians, and Christian in general to affirm, therefore our role in relating with God for the benefit of the sufferers and victims. Such a situation has been referred to by many Christians preferable as *salvation*, whereas Theologians refers to it as *liberation*.

I. Problem with Suffering

Suffering by the victim is one of the most painful human experiences. It is a condition which perhaps when given a chance all people would gladly likes to live without. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978:1764) defines suffering as the state of anguish of one who suffers resulting with serious physical or mental pain. Suffering may come in various different forms. As such, it can be physical or mental. Suffering oppresses and frustrates the victim in the sense that it can affect both the physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of the victim. In that sense, it destroys and incapacitates the

victim from any voluntary action. That is why C. S. Lewis, (1940:608) notes that suffering is the opposite of action. According to him, in action, a person is free from suffering, victimization as he freely initiates a series of events in order to bring about desired state of affairs in, or with their lives. This is not necessarily the case with suffering whereby a person turned into a victim undergoes a series of events initiated from outside, and leading to a state of affairs which is not always desired. As already indicated, the suffering of human beings may take different form such as political oppression, economic exploitation, social exclusion, cultural enragement and sexist humiliation. It takes many other forms too which always hurt human life. Human suffering in itself causes destruction to individual and community life. It also affects social relations as it also retards the normal process of how people relate to one another. Thus it makes human beings subdue and become submissive to hostile conditions of life. In many ways, human suffering results and may lead to a process of victimization and oppression. Oppression which is one way through which suffering comes through destroys humanity as the victim gets dehumanized (Moltmann, 2000:185). This creates a problem in the sense that suffering cuts victims off from God intended of creation (Gen. 1:26). Suffering, pain and death are at times a result of universal sin (Is. 53:6). However, there is some suffering and pain that will/does come our way, not because of anything we personally have done wrong, but rather because human life by nature is characterized by these conditions which sometimes finally end in death.

This paper gives as an example one form of sufferings which is poverty. The term designates in the first place material poverty, that is, the lack of goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name. In this sense, poverty is considered degrading and is rejected by the conscience of contemporary persons including Christians (Gustavo Gutierrez, 1971:163). Dealing with this form of suffering, Gutierrez (1971:165) reminds us that it is a central theme both in the Old and the New Testaments. It is treated both briefly and profoundly; it describes social situations and expresses spiritual experiences communicated only with difficulty; it defines personal attitudes, a whole personal attitudes before God, and the relationship of persons' with each other. The concept poverty and its effects on the sufferers

have often been dominated by three questions: (1) Are the poor different from other people? (2) If so, how different are the poor? Harold Kerbo (2000:266) notes that the dominance of these questions is unfortunate because of the conditions of poverty, the poor are presented with unique problems in living with non poor, which are suffering. They get isolated and through collective interaction and in the face of relative isolation from the non-poor, they have unique lifestyle as a common characteristic producing common values, morals, attitudes, and behavior resulting more accurately with a subculture of suffering.

II. God in the Midst of Suffering

Gerald O' Collins, et al (1991:230) reminds us that the question whether God can/does suffer, or remains "impassible" in the face of human misery also suffice to the sufferers and victims. But one wonders why God seems to allow suffering to exist. This is a pertinent question which also receives differing answers. Whereas some people argue that while God cannot change and suffer in the divine nature, by reason of his human nature the incarnate Son of God suffered and died on cross (2 Tim. 3:12). That appalling death expresses for all time God's loving concern for and real solidarity with human beings in their pain and suffering. For Jurgen Moltmann (1997:1), since theology deals with God, we are Christian theologians for God's sake. God is our dignity and our suffering. God therefore remain our only hope when we suffer. But a question always arises on the whereabouts of God in the midst of suffering of the victims. When people are suffering and they have tried everything and lost hope, they finally think of God. They also ask themselves whether God has forgotten about them, or is now no longer merciful. This is also an important theological question often raised by the sufferers and victims. For the sufferers, they suffer when they experience God's absence, or when God seems to hides his face from them. They feel God-forsaken, as Christ did on the Cross. Jesus however represented God as he suffered on his behalf with and for the victims. By allowing his only Son to suffer and die on the cross, God demonstrated his support for those in such horrible conditions. The incarnation or enfleshment of God in Christ is central to the Christian faith. In Jesus Christ the sufferers and victims we are given the supreme disclosure of God's grace and power. It is also through the human flesh that

God became supremely known, and through the body that God continues to be known. These simple central truths are not abstract truths arrived at by reflecting disembodiedly on the universe, but are affirmed and re-enacted whenever the bread is broken and wine poured out to the sufferers and victims by Christians in the name of Christ (Adrian Thatcher, 1993-40). The experience of the body of Christ is a source of spirituality, inspiration and liberation for the sufferers and victims. This is also important for many sufferers because with God on their side, knowingly or unknowingly suffering comes to an end.

An initial answer to the above theological question on the whereabouts of God in the midst of suffering therefore is that God is the subject of the existence of the victims and the sufferers. Therefore, God should not only be confined to our religion, culture or churches, but to our contexts. This is so because, according to the testimony of the Bible, people first experience with God is that of an immense liberation, or of being set free for life, but not of suffering. The victims and the sufferers are therefore possessed by the God's spirit and experience of liberation in their different sectors and contexts. Inwardly their energies for living are freed from sufferings if God is present. Outwardly, the compulsions of economic, political and cultural repression are also not broken. For the sufferers to know God means to suffer with God. Lessons of the role of God in the midst of suffering can be drawn from Israel's unique experience of God and his role in their liberation. The experience of Israel and Christian faith in the role God play in lives of the sufferers and victims are so deeply fused that they belong indissolubly together and become almost synonymous (Jurgen Moltmann, 1992:101). That is to say to identify God with the liberation and his lordship with liberty of the Victims and Sufferers is to show them how we as Christians relate to God and how they could also benefit from this relation. As Jurgen Moltmann (1971:23) succinctly puts it. Jesus Christ, who is the man who is God and God who became man, is the reality who represents to us that struggle and joy, suffering and the transcendent calm, interpenetrate in the life of God and in human life, as we seek the fulfillment of our being and becoming in the image of God. I would argue that this is inclusive of the sufferers and the victims. Moreover, to talk about the God by the Christians awakens emotions in victims

and sufferers. The mysterious name of this God is “I will be who I will be” (Ex. 3:14), and his experienced presence brings the enslaved people deliverance into a free live for the victims and the sufferers. That is the reasons he is called God. To say God is the liberator therefore means He suffers for and with the victims. So God’s rule means the wide, free space he gives for the freedom of his people. God power manifests itself in the strong arm with which he delivers his people from slavery and saves them from suffering. So who is this God? According to one of the earliest of the Christians creeds (Rom. 10:9-10), God is the healing power which Jesus brought to the poor and the sick, sinners and dying. He is God of the crucified Jesus, who was the victim of power. He is the liberating energy that raised Jesus from the dead and led him into eternal life. Through faith in Jesus the messiah, Christian has very much the same experience. In Jesus the messiah, Christian has very much the same experience: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ (II Cor. 3:17). In the spirit, Christ is manifested as the Lord, and in the Spirit people experience what is to be free from suffering. It is well known throughout his ministry Jesus often suffering. That is why he had always told his disciples that their faith would result in suffering. The formulation noticeably parallels in the first commandment: God is the liberator-there from the power of one of one history’s tyrants, the pharaoh; here from the tyrant over history, death, there he frees people from suffering. In both cases, to believe God simply means getting up out of oppression and resignation, and laying hold of our freedom, and living (Jurgen Moltmann, 1992:101). I share the view by Latin American Liberation theologians that the starting point of how Christian should relate God to the victims and sufferers the way they themselves relate with God should not be based on theory but praxis-the praxis of the poor, who have to suffer most violence and injustice because they cannot defend themselves, and who are carrying out for liberation. The liberation of the oppressed from their sufferings lead to the liberation of the oppressors from the evil they commit. This is a moral duty, and in many situations a duty that is self-evident, at for the oppressed and which can come only as Christians relate to the victims the way they relate to God (Jurgen Moltman, 2000:186).

III. Using Christian's Resources in Dealing with Suffering

The responses of the Christians to the social milieu of the victims and suffers needs to be usually diverse, with some more consciously adaptive than others. This is so because some responses seek new forms of religious expression adequate to meet the felt needs of the victims and sufferers. When Christians uphold the faith and hope of Gods people (who are all people on earth, not just Christians'), then sufferings will come their way. As such, they will be able to witness what suffering is all about. Their servant hood and witness would urgently be translated into action through the Holy Spirit of God (Desmond, 1983:66). That is to say, Christian responses to suffering must include an interpretation of the whole life of the sufferers, instead of being limited to a matter of cultic acts and ceremonies. Christians are particularly important because they have the status and the resources that ordinary people do not have for example, *Prayer, Bible, Liturgy* and a sense of belonging to the a strong unified community of believers known as the *Church*. Christians therefore, bring a dimension of faith and the above named resources to help the sufferers and victims benefit from their relation with God. To do this, Christians must live out their creed in the existential lives of the sufferers and victims. They must also use the gospel of the crucified Messiah to transform the beliefs and the behavior of the sufferers and victims.

A. Prayer

As people go through pain and suffering there is a need for an effort to find out the role of prayer. Such prayer requires communication between the Christians and the victim. The sufferers need to be made aware of the deeper meaning of prayer. In showing how the people behave and respond when in pain, Psalm 70:1 shows that prayer plays a significant role. As Richard Dayringer (1998:108) puts it, prayer makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to break the wall of partition that causes suffering and enables the victim to enter an interpersonal with both the Christian and their communities. Christians must also endeavor to reveal a way of life that has cosmic faith and significance. This will certainly help the sufferers to recognize themselves as beings of worth in the sight of God and communities (Richard Dayringer, 1998:58). As C.W. Barrister (1992:201) writes: the Christian minister's resources include one's

identity as God's person and theological education... and a theodicy of evil and suffering pastoral practice as well as the devotion to the eternal kingdom-of God beyond the tragic struggles of humankind. One may argue that this is inclusive of suffering. Prayer is particularly important because it addresses the spiritual and emotional needs of the sufferers and victims. It also instills the spirit of hope, confidence and perseverance in those who are suffering. Furthermore, Prayer with faith makes the sufferers and victims develop a strong sense that God will answer and respond to their problems. In event, sufferers find themselves in their state because they have committed sin, Prayer allows them the opportunity to be forgiven by God.

B. The Bible

The Bible is arguably believed to be the Word of God with authority and truth. All the words of the Bible are believed to be inspired-those that pertain to faith Christian living as well as those that relate to matters of history, or to the issues of the natural and social sciences. In this understanding the Bible not only communicates the Word of God, but is the Word of God. In other words the Bible is not a simply a record of revelation but revelation itself. Since it is a miraculous, divine book, it is also binding (Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 1984:25). Lawrence Boadt (1984:11) notes that over the centuries many reasons have been put forward to explain the value of the Bible in the Christian lives. Some of these are: (1) it is treasure chest of wisdom and inspiration that guided the generation before us and today (2) that it contains some of the most profound insights into meaning of human life. The Bible is much more than a text to be restored to its original beauty; it is the literature of a living people. In the contemporary world, the Bible has been widely used by Christians to comfort, instruct, or diagnose the problems of the sufferers. Therefore, Christians understanding of suffering comes from the scriptures as many books of the Bible deal with the issue of suffering. There are sufferings and pains that have a direct bearing on individuals owns act. Some suffering, pain and death are a result of individual sin. There can be no doubt therefore that when Christian's ministers apply the truths and doctrines of the Bible in counseling the victims as they personally understand it to particular situation, as is the case with suffering will help the victimized. The Bible as the Word of God often injects the spirit of

hope and perseverance in the victim. The Bible also becomes both a sword and shield that protect the sufferers and victims (Richard, Dayringer, 1998:108). Thus, the Bible becomes for many Christians a security blanket that provides ready-made answers to difficult existential and theological problems such suffering.

For example, the Bible states that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures Christians might give hope to the sufferers and victims (Rom. 15:40). The book of Job (1:1) is particularly given solely to the question of suffering. Here Job was a righteous and a wealthy man who never did evil, but is presented here as the sufferer and victim of both poverty and disease to show that such conditions do not necessarily come because did wrong. The belief that man suffers because of their sins cannot count for every suffering experienced by human kind. Suffering of the innocent Job- where in the Old Testament there was a strong belief that righteousness is rewarded with prosperity and wickedness with suffering (Deut. 28 and Psalms 37 & 73) does not seem to count. The book of (Hab. 1:1-4) which cries out to God for an answer to why Gods people suffer in captivity also have much to say about the suffering of the victims. Suffering is also found in large parts of the New Testament. Here, there are indications of the sufferers prevailing over suffering. Unlike in some parts of the Old Testament, God comes in to conquer and liberate the sufferers through Jesus Christ. The New Testament presents Christ radically transforming the concepts of suffering, pain and death (Rom. 5:35). Confronted with sickness he had compassion, love and expressed it in human terms. He however demonstrated that He had power over sickness and did subdue it when He healed both word and by action. He did not promise to eliminate sickness, suffering and death through healing and raising the dead, but he transformed this into process by which we have the final victory over sickness, suffering and death. The immense pain of the garden of Gethsemane ultimately on the Cross-led to death. The good news is the fact of his being the first fruit of the resurrection. When he resurrects from death, He restores a new World order- the New Jerusalem where there is no more dying or pain, Jesus stands in the gap between god and man. As a result, the New Testament represents victory over suffering by the victim, as it promises joy, hope, and

confidence. The New Testament closes with the Spirit and the bride (the Church) addressing the exalted Lord Jesus and crying, “Come” (Rev. 22:17) Christians’ must in a way that will reveal the consummation of the Salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (I Pet. 1:5)-anew heaven and anew earth, the home of righteousness which is free of suffering (II Pet. 3:13).

C. Liturgy

To appreciate the role that Liturgy plays in the lives of the sufferers and the victims, one must begin to understand the beauty of their language images and messages they communicate, as well as the unique thought and individuality of each one of them. This is particularly clear in the Psalm-prayer poems which are probably intended to be sung or accompanied by music. In Hebrew, the Book of Psalms is called *tehilim*, that is, “Praises” Many of the songs such as the Psalms are brimming with joy and praise of Gods goodness, others s are filled with sorrow and lament and a spirit of contrition. Some were aimed at sickness or bad fortune. There are six major types recognized by most experts (1) hymns of praise, (2) thanksgiving hymns, (3) individual aments, (4) Community laments, (5) royal laments honoring both the earthly King, and wisdom Psalms. Most of these Psalms have a similar structure made up of the following elements: (a) an address to God: “Hear me, O God” often followed by praises. (b)The lament itself: the Psalmist brings his complaint to God(c) Confession of trust in God and petition for relief (d) Exclamation of certainty that Psalmist prayer has been or will heard by God and (e)The vow of praise: the Psalmist promises to declare God’s praises to the community or to praise him forever. In the Christian tradition, special place has been given to the so called Penitential Psalms which express a strong personal note of pertinence for sins and heartfelt plea for mercy (Lawrence Boadt, 1984:279-281). The most important thing is that liturgy is an important Christian resource necessary for use in relating the message of God to the sufferers and victims in the sense today. This is so because through them, even at times of deep sorrow and distress, the note of confidence and trust in God’s goodness always comes through.

D. Church

Historically, the Church has been too timid in dealing with the concrete causes of the existential challenges of the sufferers and victims and, instead chose to concentrate on the spiritual aspects of their lives. It is however, becoming increasingly clear that the Church now provides an important healing unit in the lives of the sufferers and the victims. Ensuring that the sufferers and victims benefit from the way Christians relates with God is therefore, interwoven with the organization a group of people known as the Church. Christian represents this institution that has body of beliefs and practices. Such a position is an asset because many sufferers come to the Christians seeking a group uplifting relationship. In an article entitled “Jesus loves the little Children, Black and Blue” Author Gene Smiley (1984:47) writes:

The Church is ideally equipped to minister to families during times of extreme stress and emotional trauma. The acceptance, love, forgiveness, and support roles that are at the very heart of the Church’s message are exactly those required for proper remediation, healing and restoration of families who have been traumatized such as the sufferer and the victims. The Christian communities’ may be seen by the sufferers as a form of security, unifying group and providing status by using the Church in creating harmonious spirited communities here on earth.

Christians are also perceived by the sufferers to be a religious and ethical-thoughtful, persevering, courageous and pioneering person who uses the Church space in restoring relationships. They are also dynamic and prodding as well as understanding and encouraging. Christians’ are selfless and encouraging to the sufferers. To the sufferer struggling to survive, Christians represent is a symbol of hope and care. Often, a Christian symbolizes an understanding with who the sufferer can enter into a close relationship (Richard, Dayringer, 1998:58). It common knowledge that throughout human history, the sufferers and the victims under pressure have turned to the Church and received strength and courage to face the challenges of life. It is also known that regardless of how bleak the situation may look for the sufferers and the victims, the Church as an institution have always assured them that they will overcome. A Christian entire ministry is oriented towards illuminating those values and relationships with the sufferers as stated in Hebrews 11:27. This is provided for nowhere else other than in the institution known as the Church and this is

pivotal in how Christian relation to God benefit the sufferers and the victims because the Church as a inclusive institution is also sensitive to the fact that sufferers and victims are also Church members. By acknowledging the presence of the sufferers and victims', the Church is also in a better position to be concerned for their soul. It can then intervene with spiritual authority, and offer an intensive therapeutic process to them (Maxine Hancock & Karen Burton Mains, 1987:132).

IV. Contextual Theological Reflections on Suffering

To ensure that Christian relation to God benefits the sufferers and victims in their context is in a way doing a Contextual theology of suffering. This happens as one raise the issue of the contemporary meaning and authority from the perspective of a Contextual theology of suffering, and to do this from the marginal position of the sufferer and victim (Adrienne Rich, 1975: 15-46). Contextual theology of suffering is about the remaking of sufferers and victims in the image of God. It is about restoring the full embodiment of the divine nature of God in a human being who happens to be a sufferer and a victim in this a particular case. This is something which is at the center of Christian faith. It is evidently clear that the existential aspects of the Christian sufferer have recently been stressed in different ways in many different contexts. No doubt, this includes how we as Christian respond to the issue of the suffering of the victim. Christians as the followers of Jesus believe that all humankind is invited to rejoice and share in the mutual love which is both the meaning of God and which was shred between the father and the Son's incarnate life (John 15:7-17). This is so because, Charity as a way to address the problems of the sufferer and the victims has been rediscovered as the center of Christian life. Gustavo Gutierrez (1971:4) reminds us that the function of theology as a critical reflection has gradually become more clearly defined in recent years, but it has its roots in the first centuries of the Church life. In a religious and secular world which is also full of suffering, the role of theology is therefore expected. Where different religions respond differently to the agonies of suffering resulting from social, political, and economic factors, the theological understanding of suffering becomes inescapable. Contextual theology of suffering therefore, considers suffering as a concrete and existential problem faced by the sufferers and victims. It does not regard suffering as an illusion poor abstract phenomenon. It

therefore gives a good deal of attention to the contextual reality of the sufferers and the victim such as poverty.

From the Contextual theological point of view, the suffering of the victim leads to a search for the meaning of life when one is in pain. It does this by relating Christian's experience of God to the victims and sufferers. Such an endeavor result with fundamental theological (spiritual) questions, which require us as Christian theologians to search the causes of suffering and pain in the scriptures, and try to apply them to the contextual experiences of the sufferers and victims. In this regard, the source of suffering for the victim is also provided for theologically. The question being addressed is this: Is there such a thing as suffering and what is its primary cause? If indeed there is, then the further question to be asked is what is the nature of suffering and how is it a challenge to the theological discourse and society at large? For victims and sufferers to benefit, from the way Christians relate to God, the Church must produce a relevant theology which speaks to the context of hopelessness and despondency. The Church must do this by declaring the Lordship of God and of His Christ-that God is the Lord of History and that is His world despite all appearances to the contrary, that He is a God of justice who cares about oppression and exploitation that brings their suffering (Desmond Tutu, 1983:65). Here the spirit of Christ is particularly important, because it affects Christians in the raising of new energies through the Word of the gospel (John 1:1-13). The spirit of God through Christ also opens new possibilities around about Christians and theologians through the circumstances of history such as suffering. This brings sufferers and a victim near to God as well as to experience his freedom. For the sufferers and the victims, the experience of freedom always springs from a coincidence of the liberating word of Jesus and the proper time in their lives. The Divine word thus becomes a word that binds or loose, when it is spoken as the right word at the right time in the right place. Then the word that come from outside sets free the inner energies of faith, hope and love. In this case the word effects in us what it promises which is freedom for the victims and sufferers (Jurgen Moltmann, 1992:103).

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to show that simultaneous use of Christian resources such as *Bible*, *Prayer*, and *Liturgy* in the *Church*

by the Christian communities do not only help the sufferers and victims benefit from God through Christ, but also produce a Contextual theology of suffering. A Contextual theology of suffering is relevant because it teaches the sufferers and the victims not despair, but instead to have hope that God through Christ is with them in their suffering. In this case, Contextual theology of suffering helps the sufferers and the victims benefit from the ways through which Christians relate with God.

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