

Regarding Pain

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Pain has accompanied human beings since the beginning of our existence on earth. Pain was and still is one of the major existential issues for humanity, which continues to puzzle the human mind wherever human beings exist. We seek satisfying answers to such basic issues as pain, good, evil, death, and so forth.

The question of pain has occupied different religions and philosophical schools. They all tried to find an answer to the issue of pain, and cultural exchange among different nations shaped their heritages in that regard. However, the question continues to perplex humanity because it resists comprehension and acceptance.

The Holy Bible tells us that pain was with the first human since he left Paradise. “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.... In pain you will bring forth children.... On your breast and belly, you will go” (Genesis 3). The Old Testament addressed this issue multiple times and has dedicated a whole book for it (the Book of Job). In the time of the Old Testament, the prevailing mentality was based on reward and punishment and considered pain a punishment for all the sins one had committed.

Every philosophical school and every religious tradition strove to offer an answer to this demanding question. Many treatises were written—and continue to be written—trying to explain the source of pain, how to approach it, and how to eliminate it. Nonetheless, pain continues to afflict humans everywhere.

It was only Christ who did not offer a rational or explanatory answer and did not connect pain to one’s sins. When He was asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” He answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (John 9:2–3). It’s as if He was saying, Why do you care about the cause rather than the healing? And He restored the sight of the man. His answer was existential and practical. He saw the afflicted and healed them. He healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, opened the eyes of the blind, raised up the paralytic, raised the dead, and fed the hungry. How sweet is that phrase repeated in the gospels: “He was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd” (Mark 6:34; Matt. 9:36, 14:14); “Moved with compassion, [He] stretched out His hand and touched him (Mark 1:41; Matt. 8:3; Luke 5:13); “When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her” (Luke 7:13).

Christianity offers the same perspective in this regard. For two millennia, many theologians and Church authors diligently posed the question about pain and gave an answer. Pain is intertwined with the fallen world in which we live. Pain has accompanied humanity since Adam left the heavenly Paradise. However, the best response to pain that Christians gave was through following the example of their Master. We are not in Paradise, for which we were created, and our goal is to go back to it. Our goal is to seek, by the grace of God, for a taste of the Kingdom here and now.

Christians know that the Kingdom will not be achieved here, but rather in the coming, eternal life. However, we are invited, as followers of our Master, to graft onto this world some of the joys of the heavenly Kingdom—to embrace the afflicted, to console the grieving, to give drink to the thirsty, to feed the hungry, to bring hope to the desperate, to mend the broken, and to bring back joy to those who have lost it. Our calling is not to condemn the afflicted one but, rather, to soothe his pain. We must differentiate between the afflicted and their pain, between the sick and their sickness, between the sinners and their sins. We must embrace the former and combat the latter.

This does not mean that there is no rational or theological answer in Christianity, but the most important answer is to follow in the footsteps of our Teacher, Jesus Christ, by tending to the wounds of the afflicted and by redirecting their pain toward salvation. If you know you exist in a fallen world and pain is inevitable, then you had better perceive your pain through a positive lens and draw from it salvation and consolation. Don't stop at exploring the reasons behind it; rather, pursue ways to get past it. Asking "why" is inevitable, but asking "how" is more important and useful.

Don't pursue pain. Christians pursue life: "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10)—not pain or sadness. Nevertheless, Christians face pain in the name of Christ, and take from His Cross strength and hope that will lead them to the Resurrection. Thus, many saints transformed their various pains and used their suffering to sanctify their lives. The one who loves God can transform everything to his own benefit.

How many people have achieved their salvation through pain! They returned from their evil deeds through pain and knew the meaning of true life after persevering through their sufferings. I remember a dear relative who was very proud of himself

and the achievements of science. Before his death, he experienced a long sickness with much pain. He said to me a few months before his repose, "On this bed, one recognizes the meaning of cleansing and purity." His statement stunned me, and I glorified God who knows how to lure every human into His eternal Kingdom.

If we truly believe in eternal life, we recognize the triviality of every pain in this life in the light of the coming joy of the Kingdom.

Originally published on March 9, 2015.