

The Bible on the Road of Modernity

God, Evil and Destiny

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Appendix

God and Disasters

How is the existence of disasters compatible with the power of God and His goodness?

Introduction

We have here a very important and sensitive subject that has tormented humans and put to the test the faith of many since antiquity. Because of it, many people have distanced themselves from faith and continue to do so; they declare that the existence of evil in this world (and disasters are but an aspect) points to one of two things: either God wants evil and consequently He is not Good, or He doesn't want evil, but cannot prevent it, and therefore he is powerless. In both cases – in case of a God without goodness or without power - they deduce that this god cannot be God as He is usually defined [1]. They conclude that there is no God, and at least behave practically as if He doesn't exist.

On the other hand, we notice that the believers strive to rescue an image of God, cracked by evil, in ways that can be described as the least unconvincing for non-believers, and even one can doubt their ability to convince the believers themselves. To be able to salvage the power of God, they claim that evil cannot happen without His will, and some of them, to mitigate this affirmation, say that He “permits” this evil, not taking into account that permission means alliance and complicity with evil [2]. In an attempt to salvage the goodness of God, they say that if He wants evil, He just wants it for the purpose of executing his justice, that requires the punishment of the wicked. Furthermore, to explain God “permitting” an innocent to be afflicted by evil, they say that this was a mysterious good that He delivered to this innocent via the evil that befell him. Even when presented with the best of intentions, distressing answers of this kind discredit both the dignity of God and man. Take as an example the answers we heard upon the catastrophe of the Tsunami that hit the Asian shores on 26th December 2004, claiming tens of thousands of victims.

My modest attempt commences from the faith, but it aspires, with the help of God, to avoid hiding the complexity of the reality and its tragedy, and to avoid the hasty answers and the inevitable dead-ends that these answers lead to. I believe that the full answer is not accessible because God is beyond all what we can say about Him. He is not someone hiding behind an impenetrable wall to protect Himself haughtily from our curiosity, but He's like a horizon that continues to recede in front of whoever imagines he is about to touch it. This encourages us to continue sailing or marching to push into the space ad infinitum. Therefore, God veiling himself from the realm of our knowledge, is but an invitation to plunge into His mystery that keeps being revealed to us without allowing us to exhaust it, even at eternity.

The complete answer is not within our grasp, but we can clarify few points, and eliminate illusions. This will not satisfy our curiosity and will not take away our worry. Nevertheless, it will trace for the mind a road that saves the dignity of both God and Man. We take into account that this will not relieve the sufferer from his affliction, nor from the bitter feeling that he has been deserted by God (which is the same feeling that Jesus shared with us when He shouted, on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, Mark 15:34). However, this clarification will allow us to live the affliction in its correct context, liberating it from the destructive absurdity of meaninglessness. Taking notice that the most hurtful absurdity is the one that disfigures God transforming Him into an excuse and confirmation of itself.

My attempt aims to create an alliance between the extreme tragedy and the extreme hope. It will shape itself on the model of Christianity that Emmanuel Mounier designated as “tragic optimism”, and that Jacques Maritain described in his writings: “The authentic Christianity (...) is pessimist and profoundly pessimist in the sense that it knows that the created is extracted from void, and that everything that comes from void tends towards the void. However, Christianity’s optimism is incomparably more profound than its pessimism, because it knows that the creature comes from God, and that everything that comes from God tends towards God [3]”

God is not a source of disasters

The first fact that we can confirm is that God is not a source of disasters. This fact contradicts the popular beliefs that are spread amongst us, and that are echoed by parroted sentences like the following wish: “May God not harm you” or the expression: “God has blinded his heart”. These are the remains of the Semitic mentality that links everything back to God, recognising His power [4] (hastily as we will see). A serious contemplation of the biblical heritage - read through Jesus without whom no biblical reading will be correct as clarified by St Paul (2 Corinthians 3:14 – 16) - will show that God cannot be the origin of evil.

1- Because He is entirely Goodness

Whilst the dualist currents like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism explain evil by the existence of two eternal principles, one good and one evil (Ahura Mazda - shortened to Hourmazd - and Angra Mainyu - shortened to Ahriman - in Zoroastrianism), we see that the God of the Bible is entirely goodness as mentioned in the Epistle of James: << When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone (...) Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.>> (James 1:13, 16 – 17)

In the same vein, the first Epistle of John declares: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5).

2- Because He is the father of humans

Furthermore, Christ revealed for us, based on His unique experience, that God is the father of all humans. The only prayer He taught us Himself addresses God and calls him “Our Father”. Jesus demonstrated that a father who deserves to be called as such, cannot be a source of evil for his son; on the contrary, his worry is to provide for all of his son’s needs. Even more so in the case of God [The heavenly father].

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13)

3- Because the troubles are not punishments that God inflicts on the wicked

A- A traditional teaching that was mentioned in the Bible ...

It is true that the Bible mentions a traditional teaching that states that God grants goodness to the virtuous and smite the wicked with woes, and that happens individually and collectively. Therefore, the people of God are promised goodness provided they obey Him. However, if they are led to rebellion, the wrath of God befalls them, taking the shape of catastrophes which tools consist of neighbouring predator kingdoms, especially the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Their armies will invade the rebels' land, killing, pillaging, destroying, and capturing. In this respect, ruthless conquerors such as Nabuchodonosor, the king of Babylon, are considered as executors of the divine chastisement that befell people - Israel and others - and therefore deserve their reward. (Ezekiel 21: 18 and 20).

B- It is contradicted by another biblical position

However, we also find in the Book a contradictory position that questions what was previously stated. This position expresses the shock of the believer at the sight of the prosperity of the wicked. (See for example Job 21:7 and 8; Psalms 36 (37), 73 (73); Malachi 2:17 and 3:13-15). The prophet Habakkuk, who lived in the 7th and 6th century BC, dared to ask God a fundamental question: given that He is all Holy, why has He chosen the barbarity of the Chaldeans, who don't know Him, and don't know but their own strength, to inflict His revenge on Juda who, despite his sins, remained faithful? Why did He choose someone whose evil exceed the wicked, to punish the wicked, as if He favours the victory of the arrogant and blind force? [5]. Elsewhere, the book of Job (5th century BC) is full of bitter and sharp protesting, expressed by Job, against the traditional position that is repeated by his friends. We see, at the end of the book of Job, that God justifies Job against his friends. (Job 42:7-9)

C- In Christ we find the answer

In Christ we find the answer to this bitter question. At the time of Christ, Jews believed that troubles happen to human beings as a punishment for their wickedness (we still share that belief when one of us asks, when afflicted by a catastrophe, “What did I do to God?” i.e. what sin did I commit against Him?). We see that Jesus contradicts this belief confirming that whoever is afflicted by a disaster is not necessarily more evil than other humans.

<<Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! (...)”>> (Luke 13:1-5)

Sickness is one of the most spread disasters. This is why people at the time of Jesus, pictured sickness as a divine punishment for sin. This belief used to double the isolation and marginalization of the sick. Jesus, who devoted a lot of his time and care to the sick and was overflowing with tenderness towards them, and cured them, contradicted this belief. When He once encountered the man born-blind and He healed him, the pharisees reproached the blind by saying: <<“You were steeped in sin at birth>> (John 9:34). The disciples were not far from this erroneous opinion when they asked the master: <<“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”>>, and Jesus decisively answered <<“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,”>> (John 9: 1 – 3)

D- Jesus made clear that God is not an enemy of any, even of those who consider him an enemy

Jesus went further. He clarified that God is not the enemy of any, even of those who consider him an enemy. Like any father, who deserves the title of father (and incomparably more), God still sees with the eye of tenderness all humans as his children, even if they were ungrateful. He does not stop supplying them with His goodness, regardless of whether they were good or wicked. From here Jesus demanded the love of the enemies, showing that he who loves his enemy resembles His heavenly father and behaves like Him, and, thus, deserves to be a true son of His.

<< But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.>>. (Mathew 5:44 - 45)

<< But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful>>. (Luke 6:35 – 36)

Ultimately, Jesus teaches us that verily God does not punish anyone. Man’s evil befalls him, surely, in this life and in eternity. However, what afflicts humans then, does not come from God. It results from man’s own estrangement from the source of life and his bewilderment in the desert of the void [6].

How do troubles exist then?

As we have seen God cannot be an origin of disasters, how then do these disasters exist in our current world? To help us shed some light on this problem, we must tread a careful intellectual path.

1- The universe is different from God

Often, we automatically tend to see God’s direct action behind every phenomenon of the universe. If the weather is remarkably bad and unusual, we hear people saying: “This is wrath”! (And what is meant is the wrath of God). It is as if people see the face of God in the troubled skies and read anger and divine desire to punish the human disobedience. And that is because spontaneously, the sky seems to us like

“the face of God”, and therefore every aggression we receive from the sky seems to be emanating from God. Doesn’t one say, if one wants to seek some fresh air, “I desire to see the face of my God”?¹

We might not realize that this identification of a natural phenomenon with God, is very hasty. It’s true that “the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6:3), i.e. full from his illuminating presence without which nothing would have continued to be; however, in His presence in the beings, God is revealed and concealed at the same time since “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12). He is fully present in the beings and yet fully distinguished from them at the same time.

2- This does not mean that God has created the universe and left it on its own

This transcendence of God doesn’t mean that God created the universe and then left it to its own devices, as Voltaire believed for whom the universe was as a giant clock fitted by a divine watchmaker and left to tick along on its own [7]. This is a superficial and truncated look at the act of creation. It draws a parallel between the act of creation and human manufacturing whilst, in fact, all beings are not fitted in existence, one instance after another, except through the *perpetual* work of God: “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) [8].

3- It means He supplies with existence, at each moment, a universe different from Himself

The true meaning of differentiation of God from the universe, is that God supplies with existence, at each moment, a universe that is different from Himself. The existence of God is fixed and established. He draws His existence, not from an external element outside His being, but from Himself. He exists inevitably and necessarily. As the old philosophers used to say: “the necessary being”. As the Quran called him “The Eternal Refuge” (As-Samad), which means He is independent from everything whilst all need Him [9]. Therefore, He does not need anyone to be: <<Say, "He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge.>> (Al-Ikhlās 112: 1 and 2). He is the fullness of being, with no gap in His existence, and no change, whereas the existence of the universe is vulnerable, alterable, prone to collapse and able of demise.

“In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded.” (Psalms 101 (102): 25 – 27)

This applies to living beings including man: <<The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone>>. (Psalms 102 (103): 15 and 16), and applies to the substances the most solid in appearance. For instance, the suns are born and die; the mountains are generated from convulsions in the earth surface and may be eliminated due to other earth disturbances. Atoms that seem to be the most stable in existence, because they are the staple of matter (hence atom means in Greek what can’t be broken down), have been constructed, as we know today, from the original universe dust, and they are prone to vanish in a nuclear explosion.

¹ This is a popular regional saying

4- The universe carries the imprints of the void that it comes from and goes back to

This unstable universe where nothing exists in a mandatory or evident manner and everything arises and gets annihilated, seems as if it does not have in itself enough justification that imposes its existence. Since it is susceptible to change and to annihilation, it could have been possible that it never existed in the first place. Its existence is possible and eventual but nothing imposes it². It does not necessarily exist, but it does so simply by eventuality and that poses an important question that the German philosopher Heidegger expressed is his saying: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”. As if this philosopher and other existential atheist philosophers do not see a justification for this existence that they were querying. For example, when Sartre meditated on things [in existence], he noticed that they existed “in excess”; and that this existence that is without justification causes “nausea”, which is the title of one of his novels relating the experience of the hero Roquentin [10] who concludes that this unjustified existence is a kind of absurdity, and that a human being alone is aware of this absurdity, given that s/he is a being and not a thing. A Human being suffers from seeing this absurdity infiltrates the entirety of his existence.

[Sartre wrote:] “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance”.

The believer, however, sees differently. She/He sees that the universal existence changes from a mere possibility to an actual reality, not absurdly and not without reason, but out of a constant miracle [11] carried out by He who is necessarily existing, God. The universe is not an extension of God, as people used to believe. Not being capable of differentiating between the elements of nature and the divinity that they felt manifested in these elements, they used to worship those elements. However, (and as illustrated in the biblical heritage, in the second Maccabees book that dates from the 2nd century BC. see 2 Maccabees 7:28), the universe is extracted - or rather is permanently extracted (<<“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”>> (John 5:17)) - from the void, i.e. from nothing, due to the creative power of God that transforms permanently what existed by contingency or possibility, into a real existence. It is as if this power, at every moment, makes the universe cross the abyss that exists between void and existence.

Furthermore, it seems to me that the antiquity’s mythical way of thinking wanted to embody, in its own way, the transition of creatures from void to existence. This transition was an obscure human intuition, so the antiquity painted it as a sensory conflict between divinity and beings that were pictured as an embodiment of a void that is impossible to embody [, precisely because it doesn’t exist]. So, Babylonian legends mentioned a clash between the creator God Murdoch and the sea monster Tiamat [12], who represents the initial void that Murdoch extracted the creatures from [13]. These illustrations left their imprints in the bible, because of the geographical proximity of civilisations in the ancient Middle East; hence God is sometimes painted in the bible, in a popular and poetic manner, as the conqueror of the sea and subjugator of all the sea monsters like Rahab, Behemoth, and Leviathan, that were mentioned in the book of Job (written in the 5th century BC). These monsters embody the initial nothingness [14], which in turn is an image of the void as it seems to me.

Nevertheless, the creatures that God pulls out constantly from the void, and which without God would have been possessed by the void, don’t turn into Him, don’t acquire His eternal and perfect being. (How

² In philosophical terms, we say that it is “contingent”.

could they acquire it when, in themselves are only eventually existent [and not necessarily in themselves]). The creatures, now existing, are still carrying the imprints of the void from which they were extracted. They're torn between the void and the existence that they are invited to. These creatures, suffering from an existential fragility by carrying the imprints of the void in it, are radically different from the perfect God because they are inevitably incomplete, in need of the fullness of being [15]. It is true that the creation constitutes the world of God because He has created it; however, it doesn't surpass being a "world" (<<dounia>> in Arabic, which means inferior). It is a world that is prone to corruption, defects, and disruption, and therefore is the scene of all sort of evil including catastrophes and disasters.

Therefore, in the universe, evil and troubles result from the fact that the universe isn't extracted from the being of God and is not an extension of His existence. It is extracted, due to creation, from the void, and holds its imprints. The fact that the universe is the creation of God, and not an emanation of Him (as believed by the philosophers of antiquity), renders evil its necessary companion. In this respect, Jacques Maritain says: <<If we know the meaning of what we are saying, the existence of evil in the universe signifies, at the end of the day, that the world is created>>. [16]

5- Why didn't God impose, on a naturally imperfect world, a perfection that excludes evil?

Wasn't it possible for God, the all mighty, to impose on this naturally imperfect universe, a perfection that He selects, banishing from it every deficiency and calamity?

In theory, this is possible. However, this supposition contradicts the nature of God that was revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and that is God is <<Love>> (John 4:8 and 16). If God imposed on this universe a perfection that is beyond its nature, this universe would have stopped being a universe. It would have been just a stage to the will of God, a flexible tool of this will, a set of marionettes whose strings are pulled by the divine will, and in this case, the universe would have stopped being an existence on his own, having its own being, and it would have become just a shadow of God, a mirage that possesses nothing from reality but its appearances (it's what we familiarly call in Arabic "a desert shadow"). In that eventuality, the universe would have lost its distinction from God, and God would have been the only truly existent, in front of a universe that has nothing but the shape and appearance of existence. Therefore, the contemporary Orthodox theologian, Thomas Hopko declares: <<either there is a universe where evil exists, or there is no universe at all>> [17].

But real love never accepts to absorb the beloved, to cancel the beloved as a distinct being. On the contrary, real love desires to install the beloved in its own existence. It desires to confirm this distinct existence to engage with it in a real relationship that is a relationship with an *other* rather than a self-contemplation in a mirror. Therefore God, being Love par excellence in His essence, wants the universe to be "standing" on its own, even if it wasn't possible that it exists on its own. God supplies the universe with existence and withdraws himself from it at the same time - conceals Himself, as it were, from it - to enable this universe to truly exist rather than being a shadow of God's existence. In other words, God supplies the universe with existence to enable the universe to have its own existence, not to absorb the universe in His existence.

From this point of view, we can say that God, in creating the universe, on one hand practices His absolute power (by extracting the universe from void), and on the other hand restricts His power, so that He doesn't absorb the universe but gives it the possibility of existing distinctly from Him. Hence, we can understand the expression in the book of Revelation about the "lamb of God", that is "Slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). This expression means that God (who totally revealed Himself to us in his "lamb" Jesus) accepted in Himself, since he began the creation, a separation that resembles a deep wound (He was pre-painting the picture of the "lamb" that is slain on the cross, as we will see). By this separation, He accepted to refrain from exercising His full power, to allow the existence of a being next to him, standing on his own, and distinct of Him, despite the fact that this being draws his existence totally from Him. We have to understand that this voluntary abnegation of power doesn't diminish the total power of God, on the contrary, it affirms it in an unsurpassed manner, because it shows that God has power over his own power, as expressed by the existential philosopher Soeren Kierkegaard [18], that He is able, as an expression of Love, to surpass His power.

This applies specially to the creation of man, this creature gifted with reason; a creature with whom God crowned the universe and crowned the relationship of love that joins Him with the universe, by creating a being capable of exchanging love with, and of partnering with him. It was inevitable that the distinction of this creature from God reaches a climax, by being endowed with a freedom that enables him to reciprocate God's love with a love that can only be true when it is voluntary. However, this freedom, in a non-perfect creature that resembles the universe he belongs to, could not be but fragile, impregnated with duality: to reciprocate God's love with a love that is vivifying and fertile, or to be drawn to the imprints of the void it carries¹. In the latter case this freedom closes itself on its own limitation and falls in the rejection of God, of those who were created on His image, and even of the world of God which this freedom only sees as a tool of its ambition, and a prey of its greed. This is a rejection that destroys and kills through wars, massacres, injustice, exploitation, enslavement, famine, and suicidal destruction of the environment and other woes.

Does God take the role of a spectator towards disasters?

Does God stay as a spectator, from his ivory tower, towards the disasters of the universe?

Of course, this is impossible because "God is love".

He, who because of His love, accepts to limit His absolute power to allow for the universe to be different, is pushed by this love to share the universe's suffering that resulted from its fundamental imperfection, and at the same time to work tirelessly to drive the universe towards a perfection that is not randomly imposed from the outside, a perfection towards which the universe gradually progresses based on its potential powers supported by the creative act of God and His perpetual care. This is a perfection that is not parachuted on the universe at once as a magic act that violates the universe and denies its characteristics, but a perfection generated from characteristics that are growing via a temporal trajectory allowing the possibilities to flourish and harmonize, in which everything comes in its own time.

1- God suffers with the universe

A- God suffers because of his love – Does God suffer?

The traditional popular idea is that God is above pain, because He is higher than any harm, damage, or imperfection and because He is higher than any need, want, or deprivation. This is true, however it misses a fundamental point, that “God is love”, and that the lover identifies spontaneously with the beloved, and is interested in all what interests the beloved and affects him/her, and therefore shares everything that this beloved experiences from lack, want, damage, bother, and pain.

It follows that God, even if not affected by disasters, and because of love, suffers in a way that is impossible for us to imagine (God is beyond all imagination), from the disasters of the universe and more specifically from the calamities of humans. These are the humans that God endowed with His image and took as a special beloved. Therefore, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware dares to say: “His tears join man’s tears” [19]. We can go further and say that, because He loves us more than we love ourselves to the extent that He takes care of every hair in our head like Jesus taught us (<<Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered.>> Luke 12:7 and Matthew 10:30), He suffers with each one of us more than we suffer ourselves.

This is what the contemporary theologians are now increasingly expressing [20]. This awakening is not completely new vis a vis the patristic heritage. We find in the writings of one of the great eastern fathers, St Maximus the Confessor who lived in the seventh century, these stunning sentences for their time: <<God, because of his tenderness, suffers until the end of times, in a manner that we cannot fathom, in the same measure of our suffering>> [21].

It is as if St Maximus answers in advance the question posed by Metropolitan Kallistos in the twentieth century: <<Do we have the right to say to this man or woman who are suffering, that God Himself, in this specific moment, suffers from what you are suffering...?>> [22].

God therefore doesn’t side with the laws of the universe that crush and annihilate living beings and humans. Contrary to what a man once confided in me, with a mixture of awe and wonder, after the news of a devastating earthquake reached him; that God annihilated that city to smithereens and flattened it, a belief shared by many, no doubt. In reality, God wasn’t in the earthquake [23], He was with the victims, identifying by his wonder tenderness, with them in their catastrophe, their death and displacement. <<God is not powerful in the image of the universal and social forces, in the image of tyrants and cyclones>>, says Olivier Clement [24], He sides with their victims. In his famous novel “The brothers Karamazov”, Dostoyevsky illustrates the atheism of one of the brothers, Ivan, who sees in God a supporter of the universal order that sentences an innocent child with suffering. However, the great philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev answers the objection of Ivan by explaining that God doesn’t manifest himself in a universal order that is taken as an excuse for the suffering of an innocent kid, on the contrary, he manifests himself in the <<tears of that child>> [25]. This reminds me of the expressions of a Nazi concentration camp prisoner, who, after helplessly witnessing the execution of another captive with his own eyes, bitterly wondered: Where was God in all that? He listened in his heart to an answer explaining that God was inside that man who got executed.

B- God's suffering as expressed in the old testament

God's identification with people's suffering can be seen emerging in the old testament. We have seen earlier that many passages, in the old testament, can be understood as if God sends down the disasters on His people as punishment for their sins. However, this is not the core of the revelation, as we have fathomed later in the light of Jesus. The core of revelation is revealed in passages that express God's identification with the disasters that befell His people, in the same manner that a father, and more specifically a mother, identify with the suffering of their child.

In the prophecy of Hosea (8th Century BC), God speaks about the treachery of His people (called here Ephraïm), and about the sins that this people indulged in, but He cannot think of handing down his wrath on this disobedient people, since He remembers how he raised them with the tenderness of a mother. <<It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, (...) I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. (...) How can I give you up, Ephraim? (...) My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man ... >> (Hosea 11: 3 – 9).

As for the prophecy of Zechariah (6th Century BC), the prophet hears God talking about his people that suffered the invasions and abuses of other nations, uttering an expression of ultimate identification and tenderness: << for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye>> (Zechariah 2:8). In these words, we sense a great distress. To borrow the expression of a contemporary philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas [26], God suffers, in His own way that surpasses our imagination, because of the evil of the universe.

C- The suffering that God shares with the universe has been fully revealed in the cross of Jesus

This divine suffering is a natural consequence of God's love of the universe. This "insane" love, is expressed by St Maximus the confessor, Nicholas Cabasilas, and others in our era such as Paul Evdokimov, who describe His love as such because it surpasses and is different from all our standards. (This is how we understand what God said through Hosea: <<Because I am God not a man>> mentioned above). This "insane" love was fully and clearly revealed in Jesus' cross through which God wished to taste, in the humanity of the "beloved", all the human helplessness in front of the super powers, universal and social, that conspire against humans to crush them; and through which He wished to descend to our hell, and to drink to the bottom of its bitterness, until He experiences the extreme psychological distress and fear that befell a human being when s/he is exposed to the harshest stress and sorrows (<<My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them>>) (Mark 14: 33 and 34) [27], and to the depth of the experience of the terrible divine abandon ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") (Mark 15:34). And through the cross, He - the strong one – wished to taste the "fullness of weakness which is death" [28], and even to accept one of the most brutal and humiliating deaths ever invented by human monstrosity, the type of death inflicted by the powerful on the despicable and rejected of people, the poor and slaves.

By this [experience of the cross], God reversed all the common concepts that we projected on Him. As Metropolitan Georges Khodr says: "Why is there a dominant image of the titan and powerful God who shakes the mountains and makes them smoke? Why does He appear for us as all-mighty holding the

heavens and earth? He revealed to us that but with these two bleedings arms spread on the cross that He holds the world” (29).

D- God is always “crucified over the evil of the world”

Mertropolitan Kallistos Ware wrote: “It is justly said that there was a cross at the heart of God before a cross stood near Jerusalem. The cross of wood was removed, but that which was at the heart of God is permanently there” [30]. God, as Olivier Clement keeps repeating, is still “crucified over the evil of the universe” [31], He is still, as the same author expresses, openly facing evil, as the blindfolded Jesus faced the slaps of the brute soldiers [32]. Therefore, it was right for the Christian author Leon Bloy (1846 – 1917), to express this sentence that Berdyaev frequently quoted: “The face of God trickles blood in the darkness” [33][34].

2- God fights the evil of the universe

It’s not sufficient to say that God suffers from the evil of the universe. The same love that makes Him profoundly suffer from the evil of the universe moves Him to fight this evil without respite.

A- The plan of God is to fight evil, not to justify it

We have seen that when questioned by his disciples on why a man was blind, and if that was a result of his sins or his parents’ sins, Jesus rejected the two hypotheses. However, after that, He added this astonishing justification: <<“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.>> (John 9: 3).

France Quéré, a contemporary French protestant theologian, comments on this reply with the following strong words: <<Never has an answer packed so much liberty and audacity: “He is blind so that the glory of God is manifested (...)”.

The answer of Jesus is very strange. Whilst people were asking about the cause, He gave the goal. The calamity is enlightened by the assigned finality. God is not in the calamity, He is in its remedy. In front of the disability, the students discuss, but Jesus heals>> (35).

Here Jesus declares, in the name of God, that evil has no justification, it exists to be fought and surpassed, and that God is the fighter of evil, not its cause or justification, and therefore, we are invited to fight it with Him.

The French protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who passed away recently, confirms that this is the substance of the bible from Genesis to Revelation [36].

God doesn’t stop at sharing the suffering with the universe, and specially with man. He also works on neutralizing the “imprints of voids” that inevitably infiltrate the universe, as we’ve seen, and dissipate in it all kind of disasters. A genuine father doesn’t impose an early (and therefore artificial) maturity on his child, but supports and gently leads the child’s natural growth towards adulthood. In the same manner,

God works, from the beginning, and He still works, on guiding the universe, without forcing it, or denying its characteristics, to surpass its deficiencies, and to advance out of its current situation, with its own constituents, towards the paths of progress, sophistication, and completeness. Jesus pointed out this humble and tireless work: <<“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”>> (John 5:17).

A mature parent knows how to love (because “some love can kill”). He is fully present next to his immature child to provide him, when needed, with all his energies and experiences. At the same time, he hides himself, allowing the child to try things for himself, and as a result to trip and fail. This way the parent won’t cancel the personality of the child and allows her/him to be, and to make her/his own destiny. In the same manner the work of God sets the universe in motion towards the more complete and the better, but out of its own characteristics, concealing Himself behind those characteristics to allow the universe not to be a mere shape but to exist truly and to realise itself by itself to the maximum possible for a creature. This is why He was called by our Orthodox rites “the concealed God” (Service of the Holy Friday) echoing the words of Jesus when He pointed out our father “who is unseen” (Mathew 6: 18). This concealment is contrary to the absence that we lightly attribute to God. This way, the careful and tender power of God transforms the suffering of the universe, including its wallowing, disasters, and catastrophes, to what Jesus and St Paul after Him called: “labour” (37). A labour that yields at the end (at what is called “the end of times”) a universe that is renewed, in which every tear is wiped off, a universe that is rid of every pain, death, and corruption.

This divine tireless work progresses on two interconnected paths: creation and redemption.

A-1 The path of creation

The universe, as looked at by science today, is not something inert that existed once and for all. It is a huge project that started 15 billion years ago, from almost nothing, from an excessively miniscule and dense mass that exploded (Big Bang) and kept expanding to form the space and the beings that form that space. The beings started in their simplest of forms and then progressed to more complex, detailed, and organised forms in an astonishingly ascending trajectory. Instead of denying this progressive trajectory - as the fundamentalists do based on their literal reading and understanding of the bible - the believer cannot but see in it the hand of God working in wisdom and discretely behind the interaction of the natural elements that science discovered and is still discovering. He sees that hand behind the sequence of coincidences that contributed, despite their apparent randomness, in plotting the ascending trajectory. The primal material dust started to concentrate and condense with time to produce particles that formed atoms, and then molecules that were formed of those atoms that increased in complexity and harmony allowing the birth of the cell, a being that, despite having a microscopic size, is more complex and harmonious than the sun in its structure, and in which the leap from matter to life has occurred. Then, cells assembled, interconnected, specialised in tasks, and inter-coordinated to allow the appearance of complex bodies with complete systems, controlled and coordinated by a central nervous system that has ramifications across the body and that directs their interaction with the external environment. This central nervous system is the brain that developed and progressed in size and organisation reaching its maximum ramification and concentration in human beings; a brain that holds about a 100 billion cells, each capable of making tens of thousands of connections [38]. This makes the brain a highly complicated electronic network with miraculous

interactions. Thanks to that, the leap of the reason occurred; the reason that permits humans born of the universe, through their awareness, to understand the universe, to organise it, control it, make it progress, beautify it, and render it more and more suitable to inhabit and convenient to human's needs; as if human beings are the deputies of God on earth, as the Quran mentions in concordance with the beginning of the book of Genesis where God authorises human beings to rule the earth (Genesis 1:28).

As God deputies, humans were capable of limiting the wrongdoings and damage of the universe, as if God seems to continue fixing the world and organising it through this creature that He chose and installed as His deputy. In a way, He made him His partner in creation. Indeed, through medicine and health sciences, both invented by the mind granted by God, humans fight diseases [39], and protect life from dangers that threaten its beginnings [40], lengthen it more and more [41], forcing the inevitable death to retreat in the two fields where it used to rule, i.e. in life's fragile commencement and in its advanced stages. There are many other fronts where humans are fighting against the evils that result from the universe's elements' disturbance and are making increasing victories; for example, they are fighting droughts by building dams to stop water wastages and assuring irrigation; they are fighting floods by widening the beds of rivers and altering their courses, if necessary; they are preparing for earthquakes by erecting types of building that alleviate earthquakes' devastating effects...

A-2 The path of redemption

As for the path of redemption, God's "insane" love was manifested in its highest expressions when God plunged Himself, through Jesus Christ, into the universe's cruel labour pain; on one hand to share this pain, and on the other, to plant in this universe the potentiality of freedom and emancipation. He accepted to be Himself the victim of the aberration of human liberty, to the point of being rejected by this liberty and murdered by it. Through this door, He entered to our world of suffering and death in its ugliest manifestation. Through the cross of Jesus, God entered to the heart of our evils and calamities. Through his unjust murder, He became the victim of these evils and through his suffering and death, he became a partner in bearing these calamities. However, when He recapitulated in Himself the tragedy of the universe, He, with his resurrection, exploded the light in the heart of this tragedy. He totally reversed the meaning of this tragedy, the latter became a bridge to liberation and victory. Taking a humanity similar to ours, He made it victorious over death by death, and it became the first of the new humanity, and the beginning of the new universe, where "There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:4).

The power of resurrection has a similar effect to that of the yeast in a dough (See Mathew 13:33). It expands from Jesus the victorious, to the humanity of which Jesus became head, i.e. the one who inaugurated the workshop of liberation and renewal in it. Christ works, not only in the visible church, i.e. in the congregation of believers who are aware of his victory and intend to live from Him, but also in every human being, or group, who are moving and striving, with clear intention and dedicated determination, for knowledge, truth, good, liberty, compassion, dignity, peace, and joy in our suffering world [42]. All these people, whether they know, or they don't, are workers in God's workshop. With Him they toil and build, with their sweat, tears and blood that is sometimes shed, the new world, and the sadness-free orient that God is preparing for the people.

Forever crucified on the Calvary of the universe's evils, God propagates the power of resurrection of His Christ; He propagates it even through the natural disturbances and historical tragedies caused by the "void imprints", in order to provide people with a way to profit, should they wish, from even the negativity of the universe and its disasters. Let us contemplate, for instance, the eloquent lesson that Europe learnt from the massacres of the two world wars that it fought at the first half of the twentieth century, where the prime of its youths' flowers withered and millions of souls were annihilated; as a result, the countries of that continent were determined to put a final end to the wars through which they tore each other apart for centuries, and to replace them with a permanent peace, cooperation and solidarity. Let us also contemplate the poignant international cooperation that followed the Tsunami disaster at the end of 2004. In those as well as in other circumstances, is realised a Portuguese saying, that the great poet Paul Claudel loved:

"God writes straight with crooked lines".

The crookedness doesn't come from God, as the traditional answer to human tragedy used to claim; as it is a result of the "void imprints" that inevitably infiltrate the creation as we've seen [above]. In other words, the crookedness is a result of the fragility of the universe and the chaotic human liberty. However, the tender and watchful eye of God knows how to permeate with good, the evil produced by the universe and humans. As a result, if we are careful, we can, even by way of spelling, discern the letters of that enlightening handwriting with which the hand of God infiltrates the obscurity of the universe and the tragedy of history.

Conclusion

It is important to point out that, even if in the above discussion we have managed, as we hoped, to uncover a corner of the curtain, the mystery remains complete; and that's what the next question concludes: Why did God accept to create the universe knowing in advance its upcoming tragedy? Why did he involve Himself in this tragedy? This will be hidden from us until, in the next age, we attain the clear view "face to face" that will allow us "to know we are fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Whereas for us now, whilst we are prisoners of our argyle and its limitation, "we walk by faith not by sight" (1 Corinthian 5:7). "For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthian 13:12), a distorted view (for mirrors, in the time of St Paul, were made out of polished metal, and did not give a complete and pure reflection); and if we are petrified by the labour of creation, if we are overwhelmed by our share in it, if our hearts are shattered because of the sight of the people crushed by this labour, if we are nauseated by the floods of blood versed generation after generation, and by the sea of tears that are shed by the hearts distressed by the loss of beloved ones; if we are horrified by the injustice that treads on life and dignity under the shadow of different slogans, if our ears are deafened by the screams of pain and pierced by the sharpness of moans, if we are scared of the sight of death overcoming the living undisputedly [43] and reaping children as fragile as sprouts, if we are spooked by the laws of fighting and devouring that rule over creatures including humans, if we see ourselves in front of it all, asking in confusion and fright: Why did this existence ever occur?, we should then remember that meaninglessness doesn't occupy all the spaces in existence, because the many beautiful things that catch our attention in nature and in human beings and in the amazing harmony that we read in the

universe and in its ascending trajectory that it followed since its existence - that we might not pay enough attention to because all of it seems self-evident and axiomatic - suggests, in fact, a hidden meaning that we can't but take it into account. Moreover, we cannot but take into consideration that our sharp objection to the meaninglessness that fractures the universe, wouldn't have happened if we didn't have, deep in us, an element that elevates us above this meaninglessness, and allows us to expose it; an element that reveals the divine seal that is the basis upon which we were formed and that is in us at the same time; a seal that is a revolution against the meaninglessness, and a promise to overcome it.

However, if the depth of the disasters, be it individual or collective, could not allow us to see those beauties and that promise, and we were only to see the deep darkness of the universe, we still can, in these dark moments (that Jesus shared with us in the garden of Gethsemane), mutter with a broken heart, a reply to the previous question that is now shrouding us with maximum embarrassment: God must have seen that, existence, even if disfigured inevitably by the imprints of void that have been stuck to it, remains better than the absolute void; even if it merely exists solely to open a door to a possible better, and that God, for that, must have accepted to take that risk knowing that His suffering, even if it had a different nature, will be immeasurably harsher than His creation's suffering. He accepted to take that suffering upon himself, until the cross and the resurrection.

After that, what is left for us is to keep the discretion of silence that is worthy of God and us. However, it is not the silence of that who is helpless, it is not the silence of the "servant who does not know his master's business" (John 15: 15).

It is a silence rustling with hope.

Tripoli – Mina (Lebanon)

4/10/2002 - 15/5/2006

Costi Bendaly

(In the light of the paschal time)

Footnotes

1- See a very eloquent expression of this objection told by an atheist in the book:

Erich-Emmanuel Schmitt: *Le Visiteur*, in *Theatre-1*, Le livre de poche, no 1536, LGF, Paris, 2005, p187.

The book in its entirety is suitable to be a reference for this subject. It consists of a play by the French author Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, titled, "The Visitor". It was premiered in Paris in 1993, and collected several awards. It combines together with a humorous subject, suspense, beauty of style, depth, pragmatism and poetry.

2- Furthermore the contemporary catholic theologian, Fr Jean Cardonnel, sees that the saying that God "allows evil" dares us to drag God down to the level of Pontius Pilate, who, before delivering Jesus to His death, in response to the plots of His elders, found it suitable to wash his hands from an evil that would not have happened without his approval, proclaiming that he is "innocent from the blood of this righteous man". See Jean Cardonnel: *Dieu est pauvre*, L'Epi, Paris, 1968, p108.

3- See Jacques Maritain: *Humanisme integral* (1936), nouvelle edition, Collection "Foi Vivante", no 66, Ed Aubier-Montaigne, 1968, pp 64-65.

4- The great French poet Victor Hugo presented a very famous literature example of this attitude. His paternal heart was tragically stricken by the death of his favourite daughter Leopoldine, who sank with her young groom when their promenade boat capsized. He addressed God with these words:

"I come to you Lord, the father who we must believe in

I calmly bring you

these pieces of heart, full of your glory

that you have broken"

Victor Hugo: *Les Contemplations*, A Villequier

We are horrified here by the contradiction that God, called here father, breaks the heart of his son. More amazingly is that Hugo confesses in the next paragraph that He is "good, merciful, indulgent and sweet". How to marry these contradictions?

5- See the introduction to the prophets' books in the Jerusalem bible (1955).

Bible de Jerusalem, tome II, Ed. Du Club français du livre, Paris, 1965, introduction à Habacuc, p142.

6- See Costi Bendali: God, Evil and Destiny: An Nour publishers, Beirut, 1993

Does God get angry with man? P. 145 – 154

Does God kill with the purpose of discipline? P. 155 – 190

7- “The universe confounds me! I cannot imagine that such a ‘clock’ can exist without there being a Clockmaker.” Voltaire

8- In this verse, St Paul addresses the educated Athenians quoting Epimenides. See the footnotes of the ecumenical translation of the new testament.

TOB: Nouveau Testament, 5e édition revue, Ed. Du Cerf, Paris, 1977, p292.

9- See: Glorious Quran with its French meanings, copied and footnoted by Mohammed Hamid Allah with the help of M. Litourmi. RisalahInstitue, Beirut, Version 11, 1981, p. 826

10- See: Jean-Paul Sartre: La Nausée, 1938

11- See: Dr Adib Saab: The introduction to the philosophy of religion, Annahar Publishing, Beirut, 1994.

12- For the human imagination feeding from the inner psyches, the sea, with its dark depths and monsters living in these depths, constitutes an ancient symbol of the void depicting darkness, fear, and death. To demonstrate this, it is enough to go back, amongst many passages, to the book of Jonah in the bible (5th century BC). Also refer to:

Victor Hugo’s poem “Oceano Nox” (Night on the ocean),

Herman Melville’s novel “Moby Dick”

Robert Louis Stevenson’s 19th century novel, “The Merry Men”

13- See:

Mircea Eliade: Traité d’histoire des religions (1949- 1977), Petite Bibliothèque Payot, no 312, Paris, 1979, pp 335- 336.

14- See:

Mincea Eliade: op. cit, p327

Job 7:12, 40:15-24, 40:25 to 41:28, 9:13, 26:12

Notes from the Jerusalem Bible on Job 7, 12 et sur Job 9: 13, BJ, tome 2, pp 1624- 1625, et p.1628

15- In a commentary on the intellect of philosopher Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher Etienne Borne points out that, in all things, “existence and void are intertwined”. This is because they are prone to collapse at any instant in the void, pulled to that void by its accidental and unstable existence.

See:

Etienne Borne: Idéosophie et philosophie, p.237, in Recherches et Débats du Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français, no 61, DDB, Paris, 1967, pp231- 243

16- See:

Jacques Maritain: Humanisme intégral, op. cit., p.71

17- See:

Thomas Hopko: “Le pardon est au cœur de notre experience de vie”. Un entretien avec le père Thomas Hopko, p18, SOP (Service orthodoxe de presse), no 285

18- See:

Soeren Kierkegaard: Journal (Extraits), 1846- 1849, NRF, Gallimard, Paris, 1954, pp62- 63

19- See:

Kallistos Ware, Approches de Dieu dans la Tradition Orthodoxe, DDB, Paris, 1982, p100.

20- See:

Kalistos Ware: op. cit., pp99- 101

The catholic theologian Jean- François Six recounts that the Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain used to say, towards the end of his life, that “if people knew that God suffers, on our behalf, and much more than us, from the evil that wreaks havoc on earth, many things would have changed” (1969). Jean- François Six adds: “It’s about time, that this suffering of God be known, so that many imprisoned hearts get liberated”.

Jean-François Six: Les Béatitudes aujourd'hui (1984), Ed. Du Seuil, Paris, 1985 p126

21- See:

Maxime le Confesseur, Mystagogie, PG91, 713, cité par

- Métropolitain Daniel Ciobotea: Le "Sacrement du frère", p21, SOP, no 183, décembre 1993, pp27- 32.

- Olivier Clément: La vérité vous rendra libre (1996), Ed. Marabout, 1999, p.8

22- See:

Kallistos Ware; op. cit., p.99. Underlined in the text.

23-

<< The Lord said, "... the Lord is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face...>> (1 Kings 19:11-13)

24- See:

Olivier Clément: Pâques et la guerre, p21, SOP, no 238, mai 1999, pp21 – 22

25- See:

Nicolas Berdiaev: De l'esclavage et de la liberté de l'homme, trad fr. Paris, 1946, nouvelle édition, 1990, p.96, cité par Olivier Clément: Berdiaev. Un philosophe russe en France, DDB, Paris, 1991, p.67

26- Mentioned in:

Olivier Clément: Anachroniques, DDB, Paris 1990, p.213

27- In the period of return to God after a bitter and wobbly exile, the French poet Paul Verlaine heard God blaming him as a friend:

"My God said to me (...)

(...)

Haven't I wept for your extreme anguish

Haven't I sweated the sweat of your nights..."

Paul Verlaine: *Sagesse* (1880), IV, 1 in: *La bonne chanson, Romances sans Paroles, Sagesse, Le livre de poche*, no 1116, Paris, 1963, p121.

28- As expressed by Cicely Saunders, a Christian doctor specialising in treating pain of terminal illnesses that are impossible to cure. She works in a London hospital that she established.

See:

Cicely Saunders, *L'hospice, un lieu de rencontre pour la science et la religion*, pp270- 271, in *Le savant et la foi. Des scientifiques s'expriment. Présenté par Jean Delumeau* (1989), Coll. "Champs", no.298, Flammarion, Paris, 1994, pp.259-272

29- Metropolitan Georges Khodr: "Entry to Jerusalem, p.12, *Annahar Newspaper*, Beirut, 15/4/2006, p.1 and 12.

30- See:

K. Ware, *Approches de Dieu...* op. cit, p.101

31- See:

Olivier Clément; *La Descente du Christ aux enfers*, p.22, *SOP*, no 169, juin

32- See:

Olivier Clément: *Eglise et vie chrétienne, Commentaire ébauché du "Notre Père"*, p.18, *SOP*, no 83, décembre 1983, pp.16 -19

33- Mentioned in Clément: art cit., p18

34- From contemplating the suffering of God through the cross of Jesus, I mention this touching example that is drawn from the biography of a contemporary saint who is different than familiar saints. Nevertheless, she is not beneath them in the height of her generosity and the beauty of her radiance. I mean Mother Mary Skobtsova.

Elisabeth (Lisa) Bilanko was born in Russia, in 1891. She was extremely talented till the degree that, in her youth, and thanks to her strong personality and huge education, and literary and artistic prowess, she became a star of the St Petersburg's salons, and a friend of the great poet Alexandre Blok. She was active amongst the revolutionary socialists that strived against tyranny and injustice. When the Bolshevik revolution occurred and was followed by a long and grilling civil war, she was elected deputy mayor of Anapa (her hometown). She was in danger of being killed by both the white and the red Russians. She lived a wild life away from church. She was married twice and divorced, had a boyfriend, and had three kids. She was stricken by the death of two of her children. She had to emigrate and settle, like many Russian immigrants, in France. After knowing exile from God, she went back to faith and committed herself to work with ACER "The movement of Christian work of the Russian students". She was close to Fr Lev Gillet, the founder of the first Orthodox church in France. She was also close to the philosopher Nicolas Berdiaev. She remained all her life a poet, a painter, and a writer passionate about intellect. She decided to become a nun, and was tonsured by the Bishop of Paris Eulogy, giving her the name of the repentant St Mary of Egypt, and she became known as Mother Mary. Bishop Eulogy determined that her monastery be a desert refuge for the broken hearts, that are strewn in the harshness and dryness of the modern word, and that are thirsty for tenderness. She established a house in Lourmel Street in Paris, receiving in it all the marginalised and wretched of the earth. She provided food for them, as well as refuge, warmth, and care. Her son Yuri helped her with this work. The pastor of the abode was a Russian priest called Nicolas Klepinine. When world war II occurred, she started receiving jews that were chased by racist Nazis in order to send them to the extermination camps. Mother Mary was protecting them from a certain death exposing her life to danger. Her humanitarian work couldn't but get noticed by the Gestapo who captured her at the end, and sent her, together with her son Yuri, and Fr Klepinine, to the concentration camps where they perished. Mother Mary died at the Ravensbruck camp in 1945, a martyr of her love. On the 16th January 2004, the ecumenical synod in Constantinople which her Russian diocese in Paris belonged to, declared her a saint together with her son Yuri and Fr Klepinine.

I mentioned this brief about Mother Mary's life and circumstances of her death as an introduction to a text she left. It is one of her last poems that witnesses her high sensitivity to what I mentioned about God's suffering from the universe tragedy.

I found this text, in French, in an article written by one of those who told the biography of Mother Mary. I hereby copy some excerpts:

"(...) Here I am reaching my limit (...)

I have paid in gold the debt of my suffering,

The account is settled now.

Here is the last instalment: Leaving life.

For the cold abodes

With a broken breath, my sight gaze into yours (...)

No, I didn't see you as such

Through the images of this miserable and sullied earth

In your gaze, here is all the bitterness of the world

Everywhere is the fire of love of your suffering at Golgotha (...)

I shake: you extend your hand to me.”

Cité par Paul Ladouceur: L'expérience et l'idée de la mort chez sainte Marie de Paris, pp233- 234, Contacts, 57e année, no 211, juillet- septembre 2005, pp216- 235

In this text, Mother Mary finds herself at the end of her suffering life. Initially it appears to her that the pains that she suffered all her life, especially from the death of beloved: her father, her brother, her two daughters, were like a settled debt for her sins, and that her imminent death is the final settlement that the divine justice demanded. However, in that precise moment, she lifted, broken hearted, her gaze towards God, and plunged in the depths of His mystery. Suddenly she discovered that she wasn't seeing Him truly for what He is. She was projecting on Him all the ugliness of the world, whereas, He, through the cross of Jesus, has took upon Him all the tragedies of the earth. She realised then, trembling with affection and astonishment, that she's not alone in her misery, because He who shared, with love, her misery, and drank its bitterness to the full, is extending to her the hand of companionship and tenderness.

35- See:

France Quéré: L'homme né aveugle (Jn 9, 1- 41), p63, in Une lecture de l'évangile de Jean (1987), DDB, Paris, nouvelle edition, 1995, pp51- 64

36- See:

Pail Ricoeur: Le scandale du mal (1986), Esprit, no. 140- 141, juillet-août 1988, pp57- 63.

37- See:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.” (Mark 13:8)

“For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed (..) that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:19-22)

38- See:

Pierre Le Hir: Au Musée de l'homme, dans les méandres du cerveau, Le Monde, Paris, 22 octobre 2005, p23.

39- Let us remember for example the role that the "revolution" that Pasteur caused in the world of medicine, in discovering bacteria and the way to fight it, and after that the other "coup" that resulted from the discovery of antibiotics. These two "revolutions" lead to the conquering of diseases such as plague, that used to kill thousands of people in one go, and to the restriction of fatal and widely spread sicknesses such as tuberculosis.

40- In France, at the end of the 19th century, 500 out of 1000 infant used to die before reaching their first birthday. In the beginning of the fifties of the 20th century, this proportion decreased to 50 out of 1000, and in 1995 it decreased to 5 out of 1000.

See:

Brigitte Thévenot avec Aldo Naouri, Questions d'enfants (1999), Poches Odile Jacob, no.44, Paris, 2001, pages 25 et 51

41- Relying on statistics prepared by sociologist Susan George, the average life expectancy in the world was 46.2 years in 1960. It increased to 63 years in 1992. See:

Susan George, in le Monde Diplomatique, juillet 1995, pp 22-23

In a developed country like France, statistics indicate that the life expectancy average increases by 3 months every year:

RFI (Radio France Internationale), 19.9.1995

However social injustice that causes huge discrepancies in the quality of life, also causes a noticeable difference in the life expectancy between countries, and between the rich groups and these groups suffering from deprivation.

See:

Marc Ferro: Le Monde Diplomatique, décembre 1997, p26

42- One of those, Martin Luther King, lead, inspired by his faith, from 1955 until his assassination in 1968, an amazing non-violence struggle to liberate the African-Americans of the United States from injustice and inferiority. This struggle contributed to their acquiring of their civil rights and to the cracking of a strong colour discrimination system. He wrote in this regard:

"We need to remember that God works in His universe. He is not outside the universe, observing without care. On the contrary, He is, on all life's avenues, taking our struggle. As an ever-loving father,

he works in history to the salvation of his children. When we strive to conquer the powers of evil, the God of the universe is struggling with us...”

Martin Luther King: *La Force d’aimer* (Strength to love, New York, 1963), translated from English by Jean Bruls, Casterman, Paris, 1982, p110

43- with the exception of bacteria, it is known that bacteria multiply by splitting into two, and so on, without dying. This could extend to billions of years. See:

Jacques Ruffié: *Le Sexe et la Mort*, cite in *Questions d’enfants*, op. cit., p.107