

# MORAL RESPONSE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

## *What Can One Do?*

**T**he only moral response to human suffering is to assuage the pain of the sufferer. But how one relieves suffering is the challenge. Bioethics literature spills a lot of ink talking about pain management, complementary therapies, use of opioids and authentic application of the principle of double effect. Although ethical reflection on these topics is important and needed, especially in high-acuity units, it is not adequate to the problem of suffering. Physical pain and human suffering are two distinct realities. This reflection looks at a moral response to misery based on our rich theological tradition.



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In his book, *Night*, Nobel Prize-winning author Elie Wiesel described the hanging of a child in a German concentration camp. Another inmate, witnessing the horror, cried out, “Where is God? Where is He?” The teenage Wiesel heard deep within himself the response, “Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows. ...”<sup>1</sup>

Years later, after writing his account of internment during the Holocaust, Wiesel related the story to author and Nobel laureate François Mauriac. The famed French writer recounts his horror and sadness as he listened to the young Wiesel’s narrative. In Mauriac’s introduction to the first edition of *Night*, he recalls all the unspoken words that he, a Christian, might have said to his young Jewish brother. But he was so moved by Wiesel’s story that he was unable to utter even a word of comfort. Instead, he reveals, “I could only embrace him, weeping.”<sup>2</sup>

Any response to suffering, to be sufficient, must be a fully human response. It must be a response that connects people at the deepest level of their beings. In the profoundest suffering, we need one another. Maya Angelou, the acclaimed American poet, spoke to this reality when she said in a poem, “Alone, all alone. Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone.”<sup>3</sup> Human contact and comfort is what we desire. It is what heals.

In all of Scripture, there is perhaps no better analysis of a moral response to human suffering than in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). St. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Salvifici Doloris*,<sup>4</sup> asserted that the parable of the Good Samaritan is intrinsic to understanding the human response to suffering. He called the parable “one of the essential elements of moral culture and universally human civilization.”<sup>5</sup>

When drafting their encyclicals, popes intend for their letters to be inspiring and instructional for the world, and especially for believers. In this particular encyclical, John Paul II also was eminently practical, laying out progressive steps needed for a moral response to suffering. They are: stop, sympathize, act.

The first thing we have to do is to stop and see the one suffering. This act requires attentiveness. It means putting down one’s smartphone, looking up from a computer, disconnecting one’s listening device. In today’s technologically hooked culture, it requires Christian discipline and asceticism. John Paul II told us that we can’t “pass by on the other side” with a sense of indifference. We have to stop and see the one who is suffering. He instructed us that “this stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Pope Francis alluded to the same concept in one of his Sunday Angelus instructions to pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square. The current

pope urged us to get over ourselves and look at others. He said, “The Good Samaritan indicates a lifestyle, the center of which is not ourselves, but others, with their difficulties, who we meet on our path and who challenge us.”<sup>7</sup> But, even this attentiveness and looking-at must extend beyond observation.

Although the eyes are the windows to the soul, what they see and notice must also touch our hearts. John Paul II advised us that we must move from stopping and seeing to opening our hearts to feel the pain of the other. Compassion is central to our whole attitude about the sufferings of our fellow humans. He told us, “one must

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cultivate this sensitivity of heart which bears witness to compassion towards a suffering person. Sometimes this compassion remains the only or principal expression of our love for and solidarity with the sufferer.”<sup>8</sup>

Pope Francis continues to explicate the centrality of compassion in a Christian response to suffering. In one of the pope’s Wednesday audiences, he taught about the Good Samaritan parable, explaining that “he had compassion” meant that his heart and emotions were moved. Contrasting the Good Samaritan with the passing priest and Levite who saw the robbery victim, Pope Francis notes that their hearts remained closed and cold. The Samaritan, on the other hand, felt compassion for the victim.

“Indeed,” the Pope said, “compassion is an essential characteristic of God’s mercy. God has compassion on us ... He suffers with us, he feels our suffering. Compassion means ‘suffer with.’ The verb indicates that the physique is moved and trembles at the sight of the evil of man.”<sup>9</sup>

However, yet again, stopping and experiencing compassion are still insufficient. This would be similar to contemporary politicians and commentators who consistently express “thoughts and prayers” to the families who have suffered loss because of school shootings.

The truly moral person must act to alleviate suffering. John Paul II reminded us that “the Good Samaritan of Christ’s parable does not stop

at sympathy and compassion alone.”<sup>10</sup> These feelings compel him to action that will help the man he finds by the side of the road. And the help is extremely practical, “help which is, as far as possible, effective. He puts his whole heart into it, nor does he spare material means.”<sup>11</sup>

The Samaritan acted. He bound up the wounds, he lifted the victim onto his own steed. He brought him to the inn. And he paid for the continued care of the wounded man. He didn’t just send a Hallmark card or send out a press release.

As health care professionals, we often quickly move toward technological responses to human suffering. Machines, treatments, procedures that can be tracked, measured or quantified make us feel as if we are doing something concrete for our patient. And so they do. But often it is the most human of actions that “soothe the sin-sick soul.”<sup>12</sup> Like François Mauriac enfolding the grieving Elie

Wiesel in his arms, sometimes an embrace is the highest expression of human compassion. A look, a touch, a smile, a tear, a word of comfort connects us as brothers and sisters who are bound together in solidarity — sons and daughters of the same loving God.

The founders of our Catholic health system, those heroic and dedicated sisters and brothers who joined their ministry with the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, knew this well. Relieving the suffering of another might be something as simple as bathing the patient, changing his or her gown or sheets, bringing a cup of tea or a favorite cookie. Possessing deep faith, our founders knew that these very simple, low-tech actions expressed meaning beyond their seemingly prosaic presentations. They were sacramental. They demonstrated the love of God for each suffering person, thus infusing the simplest actions with the grace of God.

John Paul II reminded us that “the eloquence of the parable of the Good Samaritan ... is especially this: every individual must feel as if called personally to bear witness to love in suffering.”<sup>13</sup> Although institutions are one way to care for the world’s suffering, he said that “no institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love or human initiative, when it is a question of dealing with the sufferings of another.”<sup>14</sup>

When faced with the suffering of another, the

truly moral response compels us to see, to sympathize and to act. It is what François Mauriac did when he listened to Elie Wiesel. It is what the founders of our health systems did as they cared for Civil War wounded or persons suffering from epidemics, and they tended to the needs of rejected and reviled immigrants. It is what we are called to do if we are to heed the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan, "Go and do likewise."<sup>15</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1958), 76.
2. François Mauriac, introduction to *Night*, 10-11.
3. Maya Angelou, from the poem "Alone," in *Oh Pray*

*My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (New York: Random House, 1975).

4. This encyclical was promulgated on February 11, 1984, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Pope John Paul II considered this such a significant feast that in 1992, he designated it the World Day of the Sick, an event still commemorated by the Catholic Church.

5. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 29.

6. *Salvifici Doloris*, 28.

7. Francis, July 10, 2016. Sunday Angelus.

8. *Salvifici Doloris*, 28.

9. Francis, Wednesday audience, April 27, 2016.

10. *Salvifici Doloris*, 28.

11. *Salvifici Doloris*, 28.

12. Term used in the American spiritual "There is a Balm in Gilead."

13. *Salvifici Doloris*, 29.

14. *Salvifici Doloris*, 29.

15. Luke 10:37.

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