

The Texts of the Convivium

HOW TO COMFORT A PARENT WHO HAS LOST A YOUNG SON OR DAUGHTER

Two very dear friends of ours, husband and wife, lost their son, snatched away by that “incurable” illness (as one unfortunately still says nowadays). The young man died after months of atrocious sufferance. Our friends are elderly and their son was a married adult. When he died he left a wife and three children behind him.

His mother was the one who was able to “react” (so to speak) the better of the two, however her husband withdrew into himself. He is a believer, but up until now his faith has been of little help to him. We recently found him totally grief-stricken the last time we visited him.

A thought which always comes back to him is the one he expresses in this way: “I am old and tired of living, and yet I am still in this world. Why did my son have to die before me, he who was so much younger than me? It is not right. But, then, is all that he had to suffer right, too? Is it right that he had to leave a family behind that needed him so much?”

In hearing these words pronounced by such a desperate person, I must confess I lacked the courage to answer him in any way. What I did not tell him, then I will confide to my reader, for the time being.

What could I say to my friend? That his son’s death after so much sufferance is certainly not “right”. It is an evil: it is one of those evils that have no justification.

An evil that could be justified would almost be good. On the contrary, here we are faced with an evil which rages in such a merciless and tremendous manner. Furthermore, we realise that the evil only has an explanation of material causes (like the aetiology of a disease that is also psychic, or the dynamics of an accident and so on); it has no ethical explanation, in rational terms: by definition it is irrational. It is very difficult to “accept the inevitable” of an irreducible irrationality.

However, our friend is now a religious man. He addresses God in whom he believes and says to Him: “My God, why did You allow all this?”

Far too many “unjust” things happen in this world. Our life is interwoven with pain. However, sometimes the pain explodes in the most horrendous, frightening and intolerable of manners. That which many call the “silence” of God, seems really irreconcilable to us with the idea that we have made of the divine goodness. How could a God, who is almighty and good, tolerate certain evils?

God is certainly good. I feel this in me. He is good: He is all and only good, purely good, without any shadow of evil even if wanted for good purposes. I have such a profound sentiment of God’s goodness, that it really seems infallible. But then am I really sure that God is almighty?

The ancient and traditional profession of Christian faith begins with the words: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth". This means that the orthodox Christian is well obliged to believe in the almightiness of God.

However, if we want to be a little more precise, what does God's almightiness mean? It means that God can do everything He wants, even if He does not do many things, even if He neglects many of them, even if He leaves them prey to all their evil? Or are there alternative possible interpretations of this word "almightiness"?

Let us consider this first interpretation, the one we have just formulated. There are many good and beautiful things in our world, but also many evil things, with peaks of sufferance which go beyond all our capacity of tolerance. In my opinion this seems to be a rather obvious observation.

Our friend, an excellent man, passing through one problem and another of less importance, had been gladdened by the birth of three children. Then the misfortune happened. He was hardly ever aware of other people's misfortunes; now that misfortune has affected him and his loved ones, he turns to God and, grief-stricken, asks Him: "My God, why have You done this to me? Why did You allow this to happen to me?"

Who is God, for him? His personal patron who, as a prize of his faith and devotion, should have sheltered him from all evil that rained down on the rest of humanity? A strange God, indeed, who takes no notice of the worst brutality, but then, every now and then, intervenes to help certain favourites of His, also to avoid having to hear their grief-stricken reproach.

It could also be that my friend, after having reproached God, after having accused Him, attempted to save his own faith by justifying Him. If God had taken away his son, if He had allowed him to die after so much sufferance, then it is a sign that He had His own good reasons: either He needed another angel in heaven, or He had wanted to punish his parents, or He had wanted to inflict evil with the best of intentions.

One cannot however understand the reason for the unspeakable suffering the young man had to go through. The thesis of God's almightiness which, first of all, up until now one has considered does not exactly conciliate with the thesis, with the intimate experience we have of the divine goodness.

We therefore have no alternative except that of falling back on a concept of the divine almightiness which appears more reasonable. It seems to me that it is precisely the Gospel which suggests this different interpretation. As long as one reads it with due attention and also with a certain freedom from the weight of the traditional readings.

The God of the Gospel is one who is born in a stable and dies on a cross, to rise up again at last in glory. He is an incarnate God. He is a God who is conditioned by His own creatures, in their power. He is a God whose kingdom is not of this world, because, if it were, a powerful army would defend Him, would efficaciously support Him: "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants

would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews”, Jesus answered Pilate (Jn 18, 36).

This is very true! Why would one say that God reigned in such an adverse reality, where He is actually continually crucified in every way?

The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed which, for the time being, is nothing but a germ of that magnificent tree it will one day be (Mt 3, 31-32; Mk 4, 30-32; Lk 13, 18-19). The kingdom of God is also similar to the seed that is sown, which then germinates and grows, and becomes grass and then comes into ear to finally become fully grown wheat (Mk 4, 26-29).

The prayer Jesus taught us invokes: “Our Father, who are in heaven (who, in other words, are there in Your own dimension, the dimension of eternity, infinity, absoluteness), hallowed be Your name; Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth (also on this earth, where Your kingdom is still in germ, Your name is far too often forgotten and Your will is largely not applied) as it is in heaven (or rather as in Your own dominion)”.

Theologians and metaphysicians will ask themselves what could have placed such a compromised situation into being. Should one really have to go back to a sin of the creature, rather than a Creator who, in Himself, is perfect?

Should one have to go back to the sin of the first human beings? However, were not the premises of evil, the abuse of power, violence, cruelty, already widely practised in the animal world, not to mention that of the vegetable one? Furthermore, what about the cataclysms, which already raged on this planet well before the first living species appeared?

Would one therefore need to go back to a sin of even more original creatures? To the sin of the angels, which is very often mentioned in the Bible? These are attempts of explanations of the prime causes, which would be better left to the theoreticians, whereas the problem here proposes itself in more essential and pragmatic terms: it is the problem of orienting our life in reality, in our daily action.

Let us go back to the drama our friend is going through, and ask ourselves what the most reasonable orientation in an analogous situation, is. I would say that, first of all, laying the blame on God is not reasonable; neither is placing Him at the bar as the accused in a sort of trial; nor contesting Him; and even less so, at worst, hating Him and cursing Him.

God is crucified right to the end of the world. He is crucified in Jesus, but also in each one of us, and particularly in those who suffer more. Here the unfathomably transcendent God is near us and part of us. He suffers with us, in ourselves. If we really loved Him, we would love His creation, indeed to take an active, full part not only in its progress, accomplishments, conquests, but also in all the evils that torment it, in which God Himself is conditioned, a prisoner, crucified and killed. To love God incarnate also means to suffer with Him, to suffer that which He suffers in all His creatures.

However, to love God also means offering oneself to cooperate with Him so that His creation is completed and reaches its ultimate

perfection. In carrying out the creation of the world, God at last redeems it from all evil and, in the end, donates it all good, in infinite measures.

This is God's real almightiness: to affirm it can only mean that the final victory is His. The gates of hell will not prevail. In perspective, God can do everything. The negative forces will not prevail, since the divine infinite, the divine absoluteness is destined to weaken any opposition from finite and relative bodies. Therefore, already starting from now, that we are going through our worst times, we can comfort ourselves by raising our fore finger and middle finger up and make the decisive V sign for that Victory, which, despite everything, will be ours in the end.

Despite all temporary defeat, sufferance and torment, we have to have trust: not trust that God lets Himself down *ex machina* to resolve all our problems at any moment, but that in the end He will triumph over evil and establish His kingdom over the entire reality. God's final triumph will coincide with the completion of creation. Now an incarnate God appeals to His creatures so that they will help Him complete His creative work. It is a God who needs men. This is the real vocation that each man is called to discover in himself, as a bearer of God and His angel.

A grievous loss is so traumatic that it can lead the person involved to shake off many false values to discover the real meaning of life. As a consequence of a grievous loss, a man or a woman who, up until that moment, had lived a superficial existence, can convert themselves into apostles of good, in authentic servants of the Lord.

This is how their passage from being shut up in barren pain to opening themselves up and devoting themselves to a spiritual, cultural, social and significant commitment is accomplished. It is that which, in the life of man, of a woman, could be defined as an authentic resurrection.

We have already dealt with this question amongst ourselves, without our suffering friend knowing it, nor his wife, who suffers in a manner that is no less painful. Now, what can we say to our two dear friends? The question we have dealt with up until now could be clear and coherent as much as one likes, but will they be mature enough to acknowledge it?

Here we have a new problem: that of promoting a gain of consciousness. It is not easy to solve, because each one has his own vision of the world and his mental habits, which he preserves even more tenaciously as he gets older and his personality is formed. It concerns, so to speak, placing pedagogy into action, an art of communicating that not everybody has in equal measures and which requires extreme discretion, delicacy, enlightened love.