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**Keynote Address by Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski
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Human Suffering: Its Significance and Meaning for Patients

I would like to thank the organizers of this Annual event for inviting me to speak to this august assembly about human suffering and its meaning for us, especially for patients. I feel honored to be invited to promote the mission of the Pontifical Council that I head, because one of its duties is “to spread the Church’s teaching on the spiritual and moral aspects of illness as well as the meaning of human suffering.”¹

It is providential that we make a reflection on suffering during this Easter time, when we celebrate the mystery of our redemption, which was accomplished through the Cross of Christ, that is, through his suffering. “In the mystery of *the* Passion, death and Resurrection of *Christ*, human suffering takes on meaning and the fullness of light.”² This event which is the foundation of our hope for victory over our tribulations, also reminds us of the salvific value of human suffering.

Secondly, I come here fresh from the Beatification ceremony of Pope John Paul II, who twenty-six years ago established the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers. I would like to base this reflection on this great Pastor of the Universal Church, Blessed John Paul II, who among others has been described as the icon of suffering.

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, n 153.

² Benedict XVI, *Message for the Eighteenth World Day of the Sick*, Vatican City, 22 November 2009.

John Paul II is an exceptional witness in the realm of suffering. He has travelled the world of suffering, taught about suffering and experienced suffering in his own flesh. With the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, John Paul II, offered to humanity a broad and authoritative document on the perennial problem of suffering.³ I do believe that this great Pope will be remembered, among others, because of his relationship to the sick and suffering. In a volume of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, entitled *Giovanni Paolo II e la sofferenza* (John Paul II and Suffering), he is referred to as a Pope whose life was touched by suffering, explains suffering, a herald of the Gospel of suffering, one who loves the sick and is at the service of those who suffer.⁴ I therefore wish that this Pope, now Blessed John Paul II, helps us to reflect on the mystery of human suffering, through his teaching and life experience.

I. Suffering in the Teaching of John Paul II: *Salvifici Doloris*

1. The Mystery of Human Suffering

Suffering is a universal experience. It surrounds us and is at the basis of human existence. It is a reality in which we all, sooner or later, find ourselves involved and perhaps overwhelmed. It has been rightly affirmed that suffering is never neutral or indifferent; it tears our hearts and breaks our bodies. Since it accompanies man at every point on earth, suffering demands to be constantly reconsidered.⁵ We all know from personal experience that suffering and illness belong to the fragile and limited nature of man. It is not uncommon for people who are afflicted by suffering to yield to the temptation of viewing this as a “chastisement” of God and as a

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Vatican City, 11 February 1984. Henceforth *Salvifici Doloris*.

⁴ Fiorenzo Angelini, José L. Redrado and Felice Ruffini (eds.), *Giovanni Paolo II e la sofferenza*, Editrice Velar, Gorle (BG) 1995.

⁵ *Salvifici Doloris*, 2,3.

consequence begin to doubt the goodness of God, who has been revealed to us by Christ, as a Father who always and in any case loves his children.

It is true also that human suffering is multi-dimensional. Medicine as the science and art of healing tries to offer appropriate therapy to relieve human suffering. However, human suffering is much wider than what medicine manages to cover. Though medicine manages to identify and treat physical suffering, it does not always identify and reach moral suffering, which is the pain of the soul. “The vastness and the many forms of moral suffering are certainly no less in number than the forms of physical suffering.”⁶ Moreover, suffering is as deep as man himself, because it manifests that depth which is proper to man, but transcends it. It is one of those areas of man’s life, which in a mysterious way invite man to go beyond himself.⁷ Thus human suffering evokes compassion, respect and intimidates; for man in his suffering remains an intangible mystery.

Undoubtedly our own suffering and that of others, especially of people we know and those dear to us, provokes disturbing questions: Why? Why now? Why me, him or her? What significance does this have? How do I reconcile this with God’s love for me? The question **WHY?** is a search for the cause, the reason and also the purpose of suffering. It is a quest for the meaning of suffering. This question also makes the suffering precisely human suffering. As John Paul II observes, though suffering is present in the animal world only the “human being knows that he is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a... still deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer.”⁸ Man puts this difficult question to God. Related to this question there arise many frustrations and conflicts in man’s relationship with God, especially in the face of underserved suffering. Such situations underscore the importance of the question of the meaning of suffering.

⁶ *Salvifici Doloris*, 5.

⁷ *Salvifici Doloris*, 2.

⁸ *Salvifici Doloris*, 9.

We can sum up John Paul II's teaching on this question in the fundamental assumption of *Salvifici Doloris*: "At one and the same time Christ has taught man to do good by his suffering and to do good to those who suffer. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering."⁹

2. Doing Good with Your own Suffering

At the beginning of the Apostolic Letter, John Paul II, reminds everybody of the surprising words of St. Paul to the Colossians, and indeed to all believers: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body the Church" (Col 1,24). These words are a profound conviction of the apostle at the end of a long journey of suffering illuminated by faith, and they express the vocation of all members of the mystical body of Christ, who are called to participate in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

Salvifici Doloris speaks at length about the Gospel of suffering. Gospel means Good News of redemption through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ or Glad Tidings. It is "the salvific announcement of Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. If suffering is Gospel, it is because Christ became man, announced the Father, and rose again by suffering."¹⁰

This affirmation is a historical interpretation of Christ's mission. Thus the Pope states, "the Redeemer himself wrote this Gospel, above all by his own suffering, accepted in love, so that man would not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). This suffering, together with the living word of his teaching, became a rich source for all those who shared in Jesus' sufferings among the first generation of his disciples and confessors and among those who have come after them down the centuries."¹¹

⁹ *Salvifici Doloris*, 30.

¹⁰ Fiorenzo Angelini, "The Thought of John Paul II on Suffering", in *Dolentium Hominum* 6 (1988) 6.

¹¹ *Salvifici Doloris*, 25.

To do good by suffering refers to Christ's choosing pain as a tool of redemption, he overcomes the destructive power of suffering and turns it into a moment of grace, an instrument of salvation. Moreover "in bringing about redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ."¹²

Indeed if a person's encounter with suffering is accepted in love after the example of Christ and taken on in communion with Christ, it becomes a co-redemptive solidarity. It also becomes spiritual strength, even though suffering itself is fragility and weakness: "there is nothing I cannot do in the One who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). This involves an interior process that comes on with great difficulty. Individuals enter suffering with protest and at times with despair. How often do we find ourselves caught up in the sense of uselessness of suffering? It is a feeling that is strongly rooted in human suffering, which consumes the person interiorly and also makes him feel a burden to others, condemned to receive assistance from others.

However, Christ through his own suffering is present in every human suffering, and acts from within that suffering by the power of his Spirit. It is then that the suffering person notices that Christ wishes to answer him from the Cross, from the heart of his own suffering. One in fact may take a long time before he interiorly perceives this answer. Man hears the saving answer of Christ, when he gradually becomes, as the apostle says, a sharer in the sufferings of Christ.

This answer is above all a call, a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, instead he says "Follow me!". He invites the individual to take part in the work of saving the world, through his own suffering. "The discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ transforms this depressing feeling."¹³ It is true that normally every sick person rightly looks forward to the full recovery of their health. Nevertheless, we should not undervalue

¹² *Salvifici Doloris*, 19.

¹³ *Salvifici Doloris*, 27.

the difficult period of illness, of suffering and pain. It forms part of the design of Providence and thus has a value both for the sick person and for the salvation of the world. "Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the world's Redemption, and can share this treasure with others."¹⁴

For this reason the Church counts upon the value of the suffering of every Christian to achieve the salvation of the world. Thus John Paul II often invited the sick people to offer their sufferings for the salvation of the world. In his first address after his election to the Chair of St. Peter, he made the following appeal to the sick and suffering: "we look with particular affection on the weak, the poor, the sick, and those afflicted with sorrow. Now, at the beginning of our universal pastoral ministry, we wish to open to them our heart. Do not you, brothers and sisters, share by your sufferings in the passion of our Redeemer, and in a certain way complete it? (cf. Col 1:24). The unworthy successor of St Peter, who proposes to explore "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8), has the greatest need of your help, your prayers, your devotedness or "sacrifice", and this he most humbly asks of you."¹⁵ These were prophetic words, announcing a pastoral program that would be realized during his long pontificate, marked by the witness to salvific value of suffering.

From the above observations we can rightly deduce that sick and suffering people, have a mission to carry out. "*Even the sick are sent forth as laborers into the Lord's vineyard.*"¹⁶ The apostle Paul experienced suffering as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel: "indeed you remember that it was an illness that first gave me the opportunity to preach the gospel to you, but though my illness was a trial to you, you did not show any distaste or revulsion; instead, you welcomed me as a messenger of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself" (Gal 4, 12b-14)." The suffering provoked by illness is in itself a place of witness, of peace or anxiety, of humility and

¹⁴ *Salvifici Doloris*, 27.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *First Radio Message "Urbi et Orbi,"* 17 October 1978.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, nn. 53, 54.

encounter or rejection, as well as a moment during which what is in the heart of the suffering person expresses itself. One finds himself face to face with his own spiritual and moral resources.¹⁷ “Happy is the person who manages to make the light of God shine forth in the poverty of a suffered and diminished life.”¹⁸

There is need therefore to evangelize the world of suffering so that the immense pain experienced may be raised to Christ to be converted into a place of encounter, of conversion and sanctification of humanity. Moreover, the Christian community must discover that “the sick person is not a passive member of that community, but rather that he leads us to relativize many things, above all to open ourselves to the transcendence because his state reminds us that everything in this life passes away; the sick person leads us to live hope, patience, the modesty of life...he makes us better, he evangelizes us.”¹⁹

3. Doing Good to Those Who Suffer

The other aspect that reveals the meaning of suffering is, in accordance with Christ’s teaching, to do good to the suffering. “In his messianic activity in the midst of Israel, Christ drew increasingly closer *to the world of human suffering*. ‘He went about doing good’, and his actions concerned primarily those who were suffering and seeking help.”²⁰ Consequently the solicitude for the suffering is an integral part of the Church’s mission.²¹ It is true that in Christ every man becomes the way for the Church,²² and he becomes the way of the Church in a special way, when suffering enters his life. This way

¹⁷ Cf. José L. Redrado, “Illness, Suffering and the Cross as Places of Encounter and New Evangelisation,” in *Dolentium Hominum* 54 (2003) 31.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Message for the Second World Day of the Sick*, Vatican City, 1994, n. 2.

¹⁹ José L. Redrado, “Illness, Suffering and the Cross as Places of Encounter and New Evangelisation,” in *Dolentium Hominum* 54 (2003) 31.

²⁰ *Salvifici Doloris*, 16.

²¹ John Paul II, *Motu Proprio Dolentium Hominum*, n.1.

²² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 14, 18, 21, 22.

is one of the most important ones. Consequently Benedict XVI, affirms that “the true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through “com-passion” is a cruel and inhuman society. Yet society cannot accept its suffering members and support them in their trials unless individuals are capable of doing so themselves.”²³

To do good to the suffering is the response to suffering, the transformation of suffering into an act of love. John Paul II emphasizes this in *Salvifici Doloris*, by his explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.²⁴ This parable indicates what relationship each one of us must have towards our suffering neighbor. We all like the Good Samaritan ought to stop beside the suffering neighbor not out of curiosity, but in form of availability. We are not supposed to stop at sympathy and compassion alone; these become an incentive to actions that bring help to the suffering person, whatever its nature may be.

Thus the Pope affirms that “following the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one’s “I” on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for...the world of human love.”²⁵ To do good to the suffering is the greatest, the most important and unsettling revolution that the Church is called to carry out in the course of history.

The parable, the Pope says, “belongs to the Gospel of suffering, goes hand in hand with this Gospel through the history of the Church and Christianity, through the history of man and humanity. This parable witnesses to the fact that Christ's revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of*

²³ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, n. 39.

²⁴ *Salvifici Doloris*, 28-30.

²⁵ *Salvifici Doloris*, 29.

passivity. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. Christ himself is especially active in this field."²⁶ The messianic program of his mission is described in terms of doing good to those who suffer.²⁷ This mission is so important that we will be judged according to the good done to the suffering, to those in need: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25, 34-36).

II. A Sick Man amongst the Sick: a Suffering Man amongst the Suffering

The teaching and ministry of John Paul II were so emblematically marked by suffering. Indeed it is a peculiar welding together of thought and action related to suffering in his experience as Pastor of the universal Church. This created a coherence that makes his teaching extremely trustworthy.

From the beginning of his pontificate the great love of John Paul II for suffering people and his wish to be near 'to the sick, the poor, the suffering, his smallest brothers' were evident. He gradually became the 'Pope of the sick and the suffering'.²⁸

This nearness of his was deepened through his own pain and his own suffering: the assassination attempt of 13 May 1981 and the consequent complications, numerous admissions to the Gemelli Polyclinic of Rome, which became the '3rd Vatican', his gradual physical weakening, his *Via Crucis*, his dying, and his death (2 April 2005). In his life and above all during the last years of his Pontificate, John Paul II was a living testimony of the Gospel of suffering. At one

²⁶ Salvifici Doloris, 30.

²⁷ Cf. Lk 4, 18-19; Is 61, 1-2.

²⁸ Cf. GUERRIERO, E., 'Presentazione', In: DZIWIŚ, S., DRAŹEK, C., BUZZONETTI, R., and COMASTRI, A., *Lasciatemi andare*, pp. 5-6.

time while recovering at Gemelli hospital, he offered this testimony: “in these days of illness I have had an opportunity to understand better the value of service that the Lord as called me to render to the Church as a priest, as a bishop, as the successor of Peter: it is possible to complete in one’s own flesh the debt which the afflictions of Christ still leave to be paid, for the sake of his body the Church (Col. 1:24)”²⁹

He had particular sensitivity towards the sick and the suffering. In them he saw and found the suffering Christ himself. During his general audiences, pastoral visits and apostolic journeys, he drew near to handicapped people in wheelchairs, to the sick, and to the elderly; he spoke to them, he asked them for their spiritual support for his mission, he shook their hands, and he blessed them. On each of his journeys he entrusted that journey to the prayers and the sacrifice of the sick and suffering.

During his visit to Great Britain in 1982 he invited people to have special care for them: ‘Do not forget the sick and the elderly. Do not abandon the handicapped and the gravely ill. Do not relegate them to the margins of society. Because if you do this, you ignore that they embody an important truth. The sick, the elderly, the handicapped and the infirm teach us that weakness is a creative part of human life and that suffering can be accepted without a loss of dignity...*But the wisdom of Christ and the power of Christ are visible in the weakness of those who participate in his sufferings*’.³⁰

When speaking to the sick Pope John Paul II also addressed those people who cared for them, medical doctors, women nurses, hospital chaplains, volunteers, and consecrated men and women, and thanked them and exhorted them to follow the example of the Good Samaritan.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Totus Tuus Ego Sum, Angelus Domini dal Polclinico Gemelli*, 13 ottobre 1996.

³⁰ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. V, 2 (1982) (Libreria Ed. Vaticana, Vatican City 1982), pp. 1909-1912, quotation pp. 1911-1912.

His personal experience and his numerous encounters with sick people led him to write the apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* on 11 February 1984, in memory of Our Lady of Lourdes. A year later, through the *motu proprio Dolentium hominum*, he instituted a Commission for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, which in 1988 became the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, as an autonomous dicastery of the Roman Curia. Among others, the mission of this Council was to spread and explain the Church's teachings on the subject of health care and the spiritual and moral aspects of illness, as well as the meaning of human suffering. On 13 May 1992, John Paul II instituted the World Day of the Sick which is celebrated on the occasion of the liturgical memory of Our Lady of Lourdes. This initiative sought to sensitise people to the human and Christian value of suffering, to the needs of the sick and the suffering, to the problems connected with the defence of health, and to solidarity and cooperation at a national and international level.³¹

Cardinal Roberto Tucci, who worked closely with Pope Wojtyła, remembers his encounters with the sick and the suffering in the following way: 'How can I not remember with emotion the tenderness of John Paul II towards the sick, above all the children, for the disabled, for the elderly; whatever their numbers he wanted to greet them one by one, he caressed them, he sought to listen to them and to comfort them, he told them that he relied upon their prayers and the offering up of their sufferings. In these encounters there was an intense participation which demonstrated how keenly he saw the face of the crucified Christ in suffering people. From his first journeys as Pope, I was deeply impressed by this attitude of his: he seemed to stand almost in veneration before each sick person. This became even more striking for me when I saw the way in which the Pope himself bore in himself the signs of suffering'.³²

³¹ Cf. DZIWIŚ, S. and DRAŹEK, C., 'La sofferenza nella vita e nel magistero di Giovanni Paolo II', in DZIWIŚ, S., DRAŹEK, C., BUZZONETTI, R., and COMASTRI, A., *Lasciatemi andare*, pp. 19-29.

³² TUCCI, R., 'I viaggi internazionali di Giovanni Paolo II', *Civ. Catt.*, quad. 3717 (7 May 2005), pp. 245-257, quotation p. 256.

For the whole of his pontificate – and in particular in his growing physical weakness, in his suffering and in his dying – John Paul II gave a great personal confirmation of the value of human life. One need only remember certain elements of this: his special participation in his last *Via Crucis*, his wish to speak on Easter Sunday (27 March 2005) after his tracheotomy, the last week of his passion and his *triduum mortis* (31 March-2 April 2005), which through television and radio created eloquent and moving moments throughout the world. Pope John Paul II did not conceal his physical weakness and infirmity. When he was already unable to speak the words of the blessing, when he was without speech, in silence, he could only make the sign of the blessing. At that time, when he already could not speak with words, he spoke with the language of suffering and love and touched the hearts of many believers and of men and women of good will.³³

During his long pontificate, Pope John Paul II on only one occasion could not be present at the Coliseum for the traditional *Via Crucis* of Good Friday (25 March 2005), because of his state of health. It was Cardinal Ruini, Vicar General for the diocese of Rome, who presided over the rite. John Paul II could follow the *Via Crucis* on television in his private chapel in the apostolic palace, where a television had been placed in front of the altar. The Pope was filmed from behind by two television cameras and these silent images of his were broadcast from the chapel onto large screens next to the Coliseum. A double audio-visual link between the private chapel of John Paul II and the Coliseum allowed a special spiritual presence of the Pope at the Coliseum. He was ‘the great, present, absent man’.³⁴

But for this occasion as well he sent a message which was seen as his ‘public confession’ of his public participation in the Passion of the Lord: ‘I am with you in spirit at the Coliseum, a place that stirs up

³³ Cf. MARCHESI, G., ‘La morte del Papa’, *Civ. Catt.*, quad. 3716 (16 April 2005), pp. 167-176, quotation pp. 170-173; POLITI, M., *Papa Wojtyła. L’addio* (Morcelliana, Brescia, 2007).

³⁴ Cf. FANTUZZI, V., ‘La “Via Crucis” al Colosseo con Giovanni Paolo II’, *Civ. Catt.*, quad. 3716 (16 April 2005), pp. 159-166. See also MARCHESI, G., ‘La morte del Papa’, *Civ. Catt.*, quad. 3716 (16 April 2005), pp. 167-176.

within me so many memories and emotions, in order to take part in the evocative rite of the *Way of the Cross* on this Good Friday evening...I also offer my sufferings so that God's plan may be completed and his Word spread among the peoples. I, in turn, am close to all who are tried by suffering at this time. I pray for each one of them. On this memorable day of Christ's crucifixion, I look at the Cross with you in adoration, repeating the words of the liturgy: "*O crux, ave spes unica!*". Hail, O Cross, our only hope, give us patience and courage and obtain peace for the world!'.³⁵

We certainly still remember very well that unforgettable *Via Crucis* when the Pope, with the great crucifix on the altar and the Cross carried on the various stations of the cross to the Coliseum. Before the last station, a large crucifix was placed in the hands of the Pope. He was filmed from behind. The crucifix in his hands was filmed and shown beyond him. This strong and moving scene could be understood as an injunction on the part of the Pope to all those who followed him: 'Don't look at me. Look at him!'.³⁶

John Paul taught a lot about suffering, he visited many sick people and called the attention of the Church to the sick and suffering. He was rightly described as the great, but his ministry and testimony was particularly incisive also because he suffered a lot. He lived in the love of Christ, under the maternal protection of Mary and died after a long journey of suffering, which intimately united him to the Cross of Christ. In all this, he drew energy from his faith in Christ Jesus, as he himself said to the sick during one of his audiences: "the Cross of Christ invites us to respond to love with love. We can give to God, who loved us first, the sign of our deepest participation in his saving plan. We do not always succeed in understanding, within the limits of this plan, the reason for the pain marking the path of our lives. Nevertheless supported by faith, we can be sure that it is a loving

³⁵ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. XXVIII (2005) (Libreria Ed. Vaticana, Vatican City 2006), pp. 241-242.

³⁶ Cf. FANTUZZI, V., 'La "Via Crucis" al Colosseo con Giovanni Paolo II', *Civ. Catt.*, quad. 3716 (16 April 2005), pp. 159-166, quotation p. 163.

plan, within which the immense range of crosses, big and small, tend to fuse into the one Cross, the Cross of Christ.”³⁷ It is only in the suffering Christ that man finds the meaning of his own pain.

Allow me to conclude this reflection with an extract from a prayer of the sick and suffering for the intercession of Blessed John Paul II, prepared by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers:

Blessed John Paul II,
Always near to the sick,
you experienced pain in all its dramatic
facets, but you defeated it by filling it
with courageous faith and generous love.
Illness entered your life and came to deprive you
of speech and to halt your swift and decisive steps.
But in your eyes hope continued to shine
and your hand continued to caress the pain of others.
Help us to be witnesses to hope, in moments
of pain and suffering as well.

Blessed John Paul II, pray for us. Amen

✠Zygmunt Zimowski
President of the Pontifical Council
for Health Care Workers

³⁷ John Paul II, General Audience, 30 March 1983.