Evil and Providence: Toward a New Moral Order

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There is no doubt that the problem of evil in the twentieth century has been a stumbling block for many in their belief in God, and yet despite the atrocities recorded of man against man during this century—one has only to think of the horrors of the Holocaust, the extermination of six million Jews, and the deaths of over ninety million people due to the wars of this century—Pope John Paul II in 1995 at the United Nations exhorted us to believe that from the destruction and ashes of the twentieth century would come a "new springtime of the human spirit." And now, on the threshold of the new millennium, when wars and injustices of one human being to another are still very much part and parcel of every day news, one wonders if the words of the Pope are merely an instance of wishful thinking or if indeed they do contain truth. The Christian is not exempt from doubts, but in his more lucid moments when he might ponder on the *felix culpa* or on the life and glory that result from death on a cross or on the very paradoxical nature of the Christian life—the one who loses his life will gain it—he will realize that the tears of the twentieth century may in effect contain the seeds for a new flowering of humanity.[1]

[1] See Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1994), no. 18, pp. 24–25. The preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 was meant to contribute to the eventual "springtime of the human spirit," provided that there be docility to the workings of the Holy Spirit. The Pope notes that the tragic events of the twentieth century "demonstrate most vividly that the world needs purification; it needs to be converted," p. 24. See also the Pope's address to the United Nations General Assembly (October 5, 1995), in *Catholic Dossier*, 2, no. 4 (July-August 1996), pp. 38–44: "I come before you as a witness: a witness to human dignity, a witness to hope, a witness to the conviction that the destiny of all nations lies in the hands of a merciful Providence. . . . We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of man. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the 'image and likeness' of the One who is the origin of all that is.

The purpose of this paper will be first to explore briefly the problem of evil in selected texts of Aquinas, along with his treatment of providence, for in a world created by a loving and good God evil will not obviously have the last word. St. Thomas's solution to the problem of evil consists in two basic points, namely, that God permits evil and that He orders it to the good.[2] To the evil which God wills to permit there corresponds a prevailing good: for example, the existence of defectible natures is necessary for the integrity of the universe. God rules things according to their natures, which is a greater good than the elimination of individual defects; and in some cases the good of one thing cannot be achieved without evil occurring to something else. Examples of this abound in Aquinas: without persecution by the unjust there would be no patience of the just. God's goodness and omnipotence can therefore draw good from evil. Aquinas makes it clear that although evil is disorder with respect to its proximate cause, it is reduced to order by the superior cause. Moreover, the evil which God orders to the good is not always ordered to the good of the one in whom the evil occurs, but sometimes to another's good or to the good of the whole universe. All evil then contributes in the end to the good of the universe: not of itself, but by reason of the good joined to it. St. Thomas even sees a certain beauty in the presence of good and evil in the universe.[3]

Secondly, in this paper I wish to consider the close link between human suffering and evil: man suffers because of evil, which is a lack or a distortion

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We have within us the capacities for wisdom and virtue. With these gifts, and with the help of God's grace, we can build in the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do so! And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit," p. 44.

[2] "Even though evil inasmuch as it issues from its own cause is without order and, for this reason, is defined as a privation of order, there is nothing that keeps a higher cause from ordering it. In this way evil comes under providence," *De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 3. I am making use of Robert W. Mulligan's translation of *The Disputated Questions on Truth*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952).

[3] In a number of texts, Aquinas compares God's care of the universe to the prudence of a man who allows a small evil so that a greater good may occur. In *De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 4, Aquinas says: "Any prudent man will endure a small evil in order that a great good will not be prevented. Any particular good, moreover, is trifling in comparison with the good of a universal nature. Again, evil cannot be kept from certain things without taking away their nature, which is such that it may or may not fail; and, while this nature may harm something in particular, it nevertheless gives some added beauty to the universe. Consequently, since God is most prudent, His providence does not prevent evil, but allows each thing to act as its nature requires it to act. For, as Dionysius says, the role of providence is to save, not to destroy, nature."

of the good. One could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not participate, from which he is excluded or of which he has deprived himself. Although suffering has been explained in terms of punishment for sin, it is also possible to consider the educative and creative value of suffering and to see in it the possibility of reconstructing the good in the subject who suffers, of consolidating the good not only in oneself but also in relation to God and to others. Suffering should therefore serve for conversion, for man's return to God and the return of the entire universe to God. For this part of the paper I intend to draw from some of the writings of Pope John Paul II on suffering, evil, reconciliation, and the renewal of world order.

Let us begin with St. Thomas's admission that divine providence does not entirely exclude evil from things. Given the nature and activity of God, Aquinas's discussion of divine providence as governing things and yet not preventing corruption, defects, and evil from being in the world, does not argue primarily from the presence of evil, but rather from the existence of goodness, beauty, and order in the world (since evil could not subsist without the good). God, in creating, communicates His goodness to things such that there is a diversity of creatures and thus grades of goodness, which are to manifest His perfection and glory: some things are better than others and some creatures are found to be more like God than others. According to Aquinas, if the order resulting from the distinction and disparity among things were abolished, then the chief beauty in things would also be eliminated.[4] God did not simply create diverse beings, but a community or order of beings: beings adapted or suited to one another, helped by one another, and harmoniously arranged. This order of the universe constitutes "the ultimate and noblest perfection in things."[5] St. Thomas also adds that the diversity and gradation among beings is a more perfect imitation or reflection of God than if God had created all things of one degree only.[6]

For the perfection of the universe both higher and lower degrees of goodness are thus required: "[T]he higher degree of goodness is that a thing be good and unable to fail from goodness; and the lower degree is of that which can fail from goodness."[7] Since it belongs to divine providence to preserve perfection in the things governed, God's providence does not entirely exclude

[4] *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, chap. 71. Hereafter cited as *SCG*.

[5] Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. 270. See also my article, "Beauty and the Perfection of Being," in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 71, (1997), pp. 255–68.

[6] See *SCG* II, chap. 45.

[7] Ibid.

from things the possibility of failing from goodness, and it is precisely from this possibility that evil occurs, since what can fail, occasionally does fail.[8] And this deficiency of the good is evil. In addition, God not only preserves perfection in things, He also provides for things according to their degree of perfection. Because creatures receive being, perfection, goodness from God according to a certain mode or measure, which is their nature, God also governs, provides for, creatures according to their mode or nature. It would be contrary to God's providence and government were creatures not allowed to act in accordance with their nature. And when creatures act thus, corruption and evil result in things: one thing may be corruptive of another because of the contrariety and incompatibility which exist in things.[9] Besides, in intending some good, an evil can sometimes be produced; knowing this, God who is the cause of all goodness, in His providence does not exclude from creatures all intention of particular goods; for if this were the case, much good would be eliminated from the universe. To this effect, Aquinas gives the following example: "[I]f fire were deprived of the intention of producing its like, a consequence of which is this evil, namely the burning of combustible things, the good consisting in fire being generated and preserved in its species would be done away [with]."[10] In fact, Aquinas argues that many good things would have no place in the universe were it not for evils: "[T]here would be no patience of the righteous, if there were no ill-will of the persecutors; nor would there be any place for vindictive justice, were there no crimes; even in the physical order there would be no generation of one thing, unless there were corruption of another."[11] God's omnipotence and His goodness therefore permit evil for a greater good, unlike the particular provider who sees only the part of which he has care and wants perfection for his part to the exclusion of all defects.[12]

[8] *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 48, a. 2, resp. Hereafter cited as *ST.*

[9] *SCG* III, chap. 71.

[10] Ibid. See also *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 10: "Since God, then, provides universally for all being, it belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered, for if all evil were prevented much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live if there were no slaying of animals, and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution. Thus Augustine says (*Enchir.* ii): 'Almighty God would in no way permit evil to exist in His works, unless He were so almighty and so good as to produce good even from evil.'"

[11] Ibid.

[12] *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2: "[A] particular provider excludes all defects from what is subject to his care as far as he can, whereas one who provides universally allows some defect to remain, lest the good of the whole should be hindered."

Thus, while there may be a deficiency of the good in a part of the universe, God looks to the good of the whole.[13] As Aquinas puts it:

> [I]t belongs to a prudent governor to overlook a lack of goodness in a part, that there may be an increase of goodness in the whole. . . . Now if evil were taken away from certain parts of the universe, the perfection of the universe would be much diminished; since its beauty results from the ordered unity of good and evil things, seeing that evil arises from the lack of good, and yet certain goods are occasioned from those very evils through the providence of the governor. . . .[14]

It would appear then, as Aquinas argues, that man's good would be lessened were there no evils in the world: "For [man's] knowledge of the good is increased by comparison with evil, and through suffering evil his desire of doing good is kindled,"[15] just as the sick appreciate the good of health and are more desirous of its recovery than those who are in possession of it. Thus, from what has been said, the presence of evil in the world should not lead to the denial of God, for without the order of good, whose cause is God, there would be no evil. To those, therefore, who argue that there is no God because of the obvious evil in the world, Aquinas counters: "If there is evil, there is a God."[16]

Moreover, while it is true that God is the cause of all effects and actions, of being and perfection, and that agents act by the power of God, evil and defect themselves, as well as evil deeds, are not due to God but rather result from the condition of the secondary causes, which are or may be defective; thus, the motion in the act of limping is caused by the motive power, whereas what is defective in it does not come from the motive power, but from the crookedness of the leg.[17] "And, likewise, whatever there is of being and action in a bad action is reduced to God as the cause, whereas whatever defect is in it is not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause."[18] From the preceding, it is evident that God's providence of permission, that is, His permission of evil in the things governed by Him is not inconsistent with His goodness: for to completely eliminate evil from things would be tantamount to governing them according to a mode which does not correspond to them and thus would be a greater defect than the particular defects eradicated; also, as was seen above, the exclusion of evil renders impossible much good in the

[13] *ST* I, q. 48, a. 2, ad 3.
[14] *SCG* III, chap. 71. See also note 3.
[15] *SCG* III, chap. 71.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. See also *ST* I, q. 49, a. 2, ad 2.
[18] *ST* I, q. 49, a. 2, ad 2.

universe; evil is thus ordained to some good; and the good is, according to Aquinas, rendered more estimable when compared with particular evils.

Now the only real evil, as Aquinas puts it, is the evil of fault, since man's will, whose object is the good, can withdraw itself from the order of good. Thus, although Aquinas does speak of evil as being twofold, either as a taking away of the form or of any part required for the integrity of a thing, such as blindness, which evil has a non-moral nature, or as a withdrawal of a due operation in voluntary beings, which has the nature of fault, since he who has mastery of his acts through his will is responsible for his disordered act of the will, it is clear that the gravity of the evil of fault consists in man's becoming evil, in his frustrating his perfection or actualization, by opposing himself to the uncreated good, that is, by opposing the fulfillment of the divine will and refusing divine love. (Man's original refusal of love must then be countered by a show of love.)[19] Through fault man becomes, as Aquinas puts it, worthy of punishment, and thus he makes it necessary that the evil of penalty be dealt out to him, since the order of justice belongs to the order of good, to the order of the universe.[20] Men who do not respect the order of their nature, who act in discordance with their dignity as rational creatures, will suffer the evil of punishment. Aquinas tells us that if men act contrary to their rank in nature, that is, as brute animals,

> then God's providence will dispose of them according to the order that belongs to brutes, so that their good and evil acts will not be directed to their own profit but to the profit of others. . . . [Therefore], God's providence governs the good in a higher way than it governs the evil. For, when the evil leave one order of providence, that is, by not doing the will of God, they fall into another order, an order in which the will of God is done to them.[21]

Man's rebellion from God's will through the evil of fault or sin thus incurs God's just punishment.

However, while we generally accept the fittingness of punishment for sin, it becomes more difficult to accept why those who do not sin, those whom we may call just, are punished, as it were, or subjected to trials. What appears in Aquinas's answer to the tribulations of the just or innocent is that the evil befalling the just can be or will be ordered to their good: "Justice or mercy," Aquinas says, "appear in the punishment of the just in this world, since by afflictions lesser faults are cleansed in them, and they are the more raised up from earthly affections to God. As to this Gregory says: 'The evils that press

[19] *ST* I, q. 48, a. 6, resp.
[20] *ST* I, q. 49, a. 2, resp.
[21] *De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 7, resp.

on us in this world force us to go to God.'"[22] It would seem then that the evils afflicting the just serve not only to purify them but to attach them, to convert them, to the One who alone is Good. Through suffering, through the endurance of trials, the just are, so to speak, spiritualized (to live spiritually is to remain in communion with God); they are able to recognize the value of material goods, whatever these may be: health, riches, physical beauty, honor, in contrast with the One True Good.

Given what we have said regarding evil and providence in Aquinas, I wish to turn now to a brief consideration of evil and suffering in a few of the writings of Pope John Paul II. Conversant as he is with Thomistic thought, the Pope's analysis of the evil of fault is reminiscent of Aquinas; for both of them, evil of fault is contrary to man's dignity, to his order or rank in the universe, and constitutes a refusal to submit to order and to God's will. In his encyclical letter *Reconciliation and Penance*, the Pope describes sin as being disruptive of the original order of good which God meant there to be: sin wounds man in himself by severing or weakening his relationship to God and to his fellowmen. In speaking of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, mystery of sin or evil, the Pope cites as prime examples the first sin in Eden and the story of Babel, and says that by sinning the creature not only disobeys God but implicitly rejects the one who gives him being and conserves him in life. Besides, "[Man's] internal balance is also destroyed and it is precisely within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world."[23]

The rupture of man's relationship with God is poignantly recounted in the parable of the prodigal son, which is given a prominent place in the encyclical *The Mercy of God*. There this severed relationship gives rise to the drama of man's lost dignity, his dignity not only as a rational being, but more importantly, his dignity as a son. After the prodigal son has squandered his inheritance, he suffers from hunger and the loss of material goods, he suffers due to a good from which he has deprived himself. He measures himself against the hired men in his father's house who have bread in abundance, whereas he is dying of hunger. Hidden in his reference to the loss of material

[22] *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4, ad 3. Aquinas also speaks of the "excellent" way in which God provides for the just in *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 4: "God . . . extends His providence over the just in a certain more excellent way than over the wicked, since, He prevents anything happening which would impede their final salvation. For *to them that love God, all things work together unto good* (Rom. 8:28)."

[23] *Reconciliation and Penance* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1984), no. 15, p. 35. Hereafter cited as *RP*.

goods is the drama of his lost dignity, the consciousness of being responsible for his lost filiation. Thus, when he decides to return to the father's house, he knows that his sin has made him unworthy of being called a son, and so wants nothing more than to occupy the place of a hired man. Through his situation and because of sin, the prodigal son has been able to mature and to realize the meaning of his lost dignity. The suffering that he undergoes effects an internal change in him. In wishing to be treated as no more than a hired man in his own father's house, he accepts the humiliation and shame which the rejection of his father and of his place rightfully deserve. Such reasoning on the part of the prodigal son demonstrates that he has finally become aware of that dignity which he lost in severing his relationship to the father.[24] And so the recognition of that relationship and of his worth due to his relational being allows for the return to the truth of himself, a being known and loved for himself. He has finally been able to grasp the meaning and value of spiritual goods over material goods; the evil which he has experienced has thus brought him to the recognition of the true good.

It is evident here that the mystery of sin does not have the last word. As the Pope puts it:

> [I]n [the economy of salvation] sin is not the main principle, still less the victor. Sin fights against another active principle which—to use a beautiful and evocative expression of St. Paul—we can call the *mysterium* or *sacramentum pietatis*. Man's sin would be the winner and in the end destructive, God's salvific plan would remain incomplete or even totally defeated, if this *mysterium pietatis* were not made part of the dynamism of history in order to conquer man's sin.[25]

Without entering into a whole explanation of what is meant by the *mysterium pietatis* which makes reference to the mystery of Christ, let us say briefly that the iniquity of sin, man's rebellion from God's will, is countered by the mystery of Christ's passion and death, by His loving submission to the Father's will, and by His resurrection and glorification. The *mysterium pietatis* revealed in the excellence of Christ's submission to the Father makes possible the reconciliation of man with God. The mercy and love of God, as well as His omnipotence, become manifest in the mystery or sacrament of *pietas*. John Paul II says: "[The] mystery of God's infinite loving kindness toward us is capable of penetrating to the hidden roots of our iniquity, in order to evoke in the soul a moment of conversion, in order to redeem it and set it on course

[24] *The Mercy of God* (*Dives in Misericordia*) (Boston: Pauline Books, 1980), no. 5, pars. 4–5, pp. 19–20. Hereafter cited as *DM*.

[25] *RP*, no. 19, p. 49.

toward reconciliation."[26] The task of reconciliation is to harmonize man internally, to harmonize him with God and with neighbor, and with the whole of creation.[27]

The mystery of divine love, revealed in the person and redemptive mission of Christ, as well as in the creation and sanctification of man in His Son attests to the overabundance of goodness bestowed upon man; God always gives more than is due to us. The parable of the prodigal son exemplifies the mercy and love of God through the figure of the father. The faithfulness of the father to his paternity, to the love for his son, is totally centered on the humanity of his lost son, on his dignity. Upon his return the son, who is the object of the father's love and mercy, does not feel humiliated and ashamed—even though he recognizes that he deserves this—but rather as the recipient of the father's loving kindness he is found again and revalued, since the father's sole concern is that the good of his son's humanity be saved.[28] The suffering which the prodigal son experiences prior to his return to the paternal home—a suffering which is both physical and moral, the privation of both material and spiritual goods—opens the way to the grace which transforms his soul and serves for his conversion. The suffering which he undergoes is transformative: it is a call to virtue, to hope and trust in someone other than himself, a call to an interior maturity, to a recreation of the self, a reconstruction of the good in him.[29] The prodigal son's recognition of his lost dignity, of his sonship, and the father's loving kindness, which calls out to the son, even in his misery away from home, make possible the son's return to the paternal house; good has triumphed over evil, and we might say that the painful experience of his alienation from the true good enables him in a sense to become worthy once again of the paternal home, of being welcomed into it. Interestingly, when Pope John Paul II writes on the Christian meaning of suffering he makes it clear that through suffering we make ourselves worthy of the kingdom of God.[30] Although the objective redemption was accomplished once and for all through Christ's passion and death, the subjective

[26] *RP*, no. 20, p. 51.

[27] *RP*, no. 8, pp. 21–23.

[28] *DM*, no. 6, pp. 20–23.

[29] *On the Christian Meaning of Suffering* (*Salvifici Doloris*) (Boston: Pauline Books, 1984), no. 12, p. 17. Hereafter cited as *SD*.

[30] *SD*, no. 21, p. 33. See also no. 22, where Pope John Paul II says: "To the prospect of the kingdom of God is linked hope in that glory which has its beginning in the cross of Christ. The resurrection revealed this glory—eschatological glory—which in the cross of Christ was completely obscured by the immensity of suffering. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings, to share *in glory*."

redemption will continue until the end of time: each one of us, through physical and/or moral suffering have the opportunity to prepare ourselves, to mature, and thus become worthy of the kingdom, of glorification. In suffering, contrary to what many think, God's providence is manifest, for He is calling us to the higher goods, to the One who alone is good, to that which will truly make us happy.

But not only can suffering and evil effect an interior transformation in the one who experiences it, by making the person aware of his spiritual worth and of God's merciful love; there is also an interpersonal dimension of suffering: the one who suffers should be assisted by others. Suffering should evoke in those who observe it compassion and an effective desire to help. In his reflections on the parable of the good Samaritan, John Paul II says:

> [S]uffering, 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, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions. The person who is a "neighbor" cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another: this in the name of fundamental human solidarity, still more in the name of love of neighbor.[31]

So human suffering can give rise to both individual and institutional forms of activity to relieve suffering, to do good to those who suffer. Through the sufferings of others, God makes us participants in a special way of His providence, so as to provide for others, help them, love them, and so cause goodness, as God Himself does.[32] Again, John Paul II says: "[S]uffering is present in the world to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbor, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a 'civilization of love.'"[33]

Certainly, the twentieth century has seen suffering and evil as perhaps never before; now at the beginning of this twenty-first century, it is possible that we are also at the threshold of a new civilization which each person through an interior conversion such as that of the prodigal son can help to

[31] *SD*, no. 29, p. 50.

[32] St. Thomas also refers to the participation of God's providence in creatures, which participation is another manifestation of His goodness: "[T]here are certain intermediaries of God's providence, for He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness, so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures," *ST* I, q. 22, a. 3, resp.

[33] *SD*, no. 30, p. 54.

bring about,[34] a civilization of interconnected persons being a moral support for one another and thus reflecting the understanding and love of the supreme communion of persons that exists in God, and in this way corresponding to God's creative and salvific love. Just as the physical and moral suffering of the prodigal son was a call to hope and trust, to a reconstruction of the good in him, so also the sorrows of the end of the twentieth century are a call to the construction of a new moral order. The "new springtime of the human spirit," of which Pope John Paul II speaks, will be possible if we never forget man's dignity, his transcendent dimension, his aspiration to the true good, and that his destiny lies in the hands of a merciful Providence.[35] The recreation of civilization into a "civilization of love" may seem a utopian dream, so I end with the words of T. S. Eliot: "For us there is only the trying, the rest is not our business."[36]

[34] Perhaps we are now at a moment in history, in which the conversion of individual persons will bring about a reconstruction of social and political structures for the transformation of civilization into a "civilization of love." It may also be the moment of which St. Paul speaks in Rom. 8:19–20: "For the eager longing of creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God."

[35] In his address to the UN General Assembly in October of 1995 (see n. 1), Pope John Paul II says that in order to ensure "a new flourishing of the human spirit" in the new millennium, "we must rediscover a spirit of hope and a spirit of trust" and thus conquer our fear of the future. The Pope's description of hope is grounded in the merciful love of God and in man's aspiration to goodness: "Now is the time for new hope, which calls us to expel the paralyzing burden of cynicism from the future of politics and of human life. . . . Inspired by the example of all those who have taken the risk of freedom, can we not recommit ourselves also to taking the risk of solidarity—and thus the risk of peace? . . . Hope and trust are the premise of responsible activity and are nurtured in that inner sanctuary of conscience where 'man is alone with God' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16) and he thus perceives that he is not alone amid the enigmas of existence, for he is surrounded by the love of the Creator! . . . The answer to the fear which darkens human existence at the end of the twentieth century is the common effort to build the civilization of love, founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice, and liberty. And the 'soul' of the civilization of love is the culture of freedom: the freedom of individuals and the freedom of nations, lived in self-giving solidarity and responsibility," pp. 43–44.

[36] "East Coker," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943), p. 17.