

SUFFERING, JOY & ETHICS

- Topic: "Suffering Joy and Ethics: A Discussion of Sidney Callahan's *Created for Joy: A Christian View of Suffering*"
- Convener: Paul Crowley, Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College
- Panelists: Christina Astorga, Duquesne University
Robert Daly, Boston College
Paul Crowley, Santa Clara University
- Respondent: Sidney Callahan

Sidney Callahan's new book, *Created for Joy: A Christian View of Suffering*, was the focus of this intriguing panel, and catalyst for a wide-ranging discussion of the classic issues raised by the problem of suffering and how Christian faith and theology can best accommodate it. The book itself is the fruit of some ten years or more of labor on the part of the author, and is a living testament to her own hard-won insights.

The panel opened with a most helpful presentation of the book by Christina Astorga. Astorga explained that Callahan wishes to frame the discussion of suffering within sight of the core of the Gospel, which is joy. "For all the focus on the passion of Jesus, he, who brings glad tidings, is a man of joy." Still, the question about why we suffer and how we cope begs for an answer. Part of the answer is given in an understanding of God's empathic relation to those who suffer. As Paul Wadell has noted, Jesus is driven into the heart of human suffering, both facing it and alleviating it. When he heals, life passes out of him, but suffering passes into him, a suffering arising from the empathy of a lover, parent, or creator. In light of this divine empathy, Christian hope is an eschatological reality—already but not completely realized. Callahan pushes it to the absolute limit where in the end, all will be well, close to a sense of universal salvation.

Astorga raised some classic questions: (1) Why does God not simply intervene to prevent suffering? (2) Why does God not intervene to stop suffering already underway? (3) Is God, who is omniscient, somehow capricious in luring us in our freedom to act, and hence to suffer? (4) How, then, do human and divine agency interrelate?

Daly observed that such a discussion of suffering as we find here reflects a sea change in Catholic imagination over the past fifty years. People no longer tend to believe in a God who would cause suffering, much less send people to a hell of eternal suffering. We are indeed created for joy. But how do we get to this conclusion? There is something sacred about the suffering of Christ, but it was not absolutely necessary; even the suffering of the Cross was a contingent suffering. It was not precisely the suffering of Christ that saved us but rather the love with which he suffered that saved us. Due to this love, one can take away the particularity of the suffering of the cross and still have salvation. What one cannot take away, however, is the love itself (cf. 1 Cor. 13). The cross is what we have done, not what God has done. If God were violent, then whom would

we imitate? But in Jesus we find a visceral aversion to suffering, and a revelation of God's attitude toward suffering, beginning with the self-giving love of the Father and the sending of the Son (which becomes the paradigm for a Christian sense of sacrifice). The same Spirit that was in Jesus is also in us by dint of faith, and by this faith we can begin to enter into the mutual and total giving and receiving of the divine love that takes place among the persons of the Trinity. Then, God thanks us, entering into our suffering and leading us to joy. Callahan has given us the point of departure into this vastly expanded imaginative universe, one that might be further informed, Daly suggested, by some of the insights of René Girard.

Crowley observed that for Callahan, suffering is not the greatest mystery, but rather the appearance of joy in the midst of suffering. Rather than start with theodicy, or a theology of the cross, Callahan frames the question within a theology of creation, which tells us something about God, God's intention for humanity, and God's relation to human suffering. This is a reversal of the usual ordering of a theology of suffering, and places the created end of the human creature in the forefront. Hence, her focus on the joy for which we are created.

In Christian terms, suffering asks us to look at the whole of the Paschal Mystery, and not only at the cross. Jesus reveals not the meaning of suffering as such, but of God's compassion toward those who suffering, a compassion constituted of both empathy and sympathy. On this foundation Callahan offers a map of joy, relying on insights from the social sciences and brain theory.

Still, the central problem of relating joy to suffering remains, especially when we survey the vast canvases of massive and tragic suffering in human history. Where is the joy to be found in the great abysses of history? Or, closer to home, in the suicide of a gay adolescent who cannot escape a sense of existential entrapment? How can we answer to such situations with the language of joy—the language of faith? This leads to other questions, not least concerning God in Godself. Is there a sense in which the joy for which we are created is reached by some only through an experience of God's harsh and dreadful love? Must we not also explore the terrifying aspects of God's love?

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