

MEPDEV 2nd: 2016
Central & Eastern European LUMEN International
Conference - Multidimensional Education & Professional
Development. Ethical Values

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SICKNESS?
THE HOLY FATHERS' RESPONSE

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Abstract

Our mind is often troubled by the following question: what is the positive side of suffering? The matter of suffering is a complex and profound reality which has so numerous and varied problems, that is very hard to understand and to make sense of them. Human suffering is a mystery which one can only comprehend through divine revelation. Theologians have admitted in several instances that suffering as retribution for sinfulness or virtue remains a mystery for us. Orthodox Spirituality helps us perceive suffering in a positive light, as a means of spiritual progress in Christ and not as a meaningless experience. The patristic texts encourage introspection, profound and constant meditation, based on the content of Holy Scripture, of the Holy Tradition and on the paradigms they offer on the subject of the fragility, corruptibility, inconstancy and ephemerality of this world.

Among us, there have always been and still are blameless, righteous or even impeccable people that suffer. It is a great question and mystery which is hard to decipher: why do they suffer, too? This is the age-old issue of the suffering of the righteous. Taking patristic and hagiographic literature as a point of reference, I tried in this article to offer as much as possible, a satisfying answer to this burning question, naturally without asserting that I have issued the last word on the mystery of the suffering of the righteous.

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Keywords: Sickness, allow, God, Holy Fathers, response



1. Introduction

This article includes a succession of advice, recommendations and encouragements for those who intend to adhere to what traditional Christianity asserts in the matter of suffering. The reflections concatenated in this study will not alleviate the suffering of an individual, yet, the approach to suffering and to enduring it by one among our neighbours, as well as their experience will be truly beneficial in understanding sickness differently and accepting it more knowledgeably. The causes of suffering are multiple and it is not our intention to itemise them here, but we have tried to list and decipher, to the best of our capacity, the reasons why God allows suffering and sickness to some Christians and even to saints.

2. Problem Statement

For a man, this is the beginning of a new way which implies a redefinition of his priorities, the fact that he has to focus on his soul, because oftentimes, while running after urgent things, man actually forgets the fundamental and really useful ones, useful for his life; hence the exterior worldly worries become more and more pressing and enslaving, so they take up all the time which he should spend in prayer, meditation, reading, repenting etc. The secularized man loses his direction when he is in pain, in trouble, or he has some disease. He fails to understand their mystery and meaning or the manner in which to overcome them and to rise closer to God, by benefiting from them.

When discussing the problems that occur because of sufferance, logical reasoning and unilateral positions have reached a stalemate. Men progressed more in their fight against pain, than in understanding sufferance or the way how it can be endured or even made use of it through faith. Faith does not bring a theoretical solution, but a hope while walking on the path.

3. Research Questions

3.1. The Original State of Our First Parents, Adam and Eve

The state of relative flawlessness of the first man, subserved by the divine grace, refers both to the soul and the flesh. Intellectually speaking, the first man was perfect as his mind was pure, enlightened, straight and free from fallibility, as his cognition was unaltered, especially in knowing the supreme truth that is our Good Creator. This conclusion follows from the fact that he accordingly named all the animals, he rightly understood all God's commandments, with Whom he had the closest connection, and knew Him and the creation to the best of his capabilities. His will was free from any malice as he obeyed God's will without any conflict between the senses and the soul. The relative perfection of the first man did not restrict itself only to the soul as it included the body as well, the flesh being healthy, robust, full of stamina and did not experience any pain, suffering or sickness, whence it follows that pain, suffering and sickness are the natural consequences of sin. Weakness, pain, suffering had not concerned him nor could they ever restrain him and this is why the flesh itself was also meant for immortality. Some of these perfect characteristics such as the enlightened mind, the pure heart, the rigorous will and the healthy body pertained to the human nature itself, that means these were his innate characteristics, and without them man could not have been created as the Image and Likeness of God and they themselves earned him the superior state among the other creatures on Earth. Some others such as the immortality of the body and

the perfect harmony between the flesh and the soul were perfect elements with which God had endued him.

So long as our original parents lived a blessed life and obeyed God, they were free from passions and immune to suffering and death. Yet, as a result of their contumacy, all of that changed for the worse.

Adam was thrown out of the Garden of Eden which represented for him the foreshadowing of the future perfect life and an icon of the Eternal Kingdom and the remembrance of which he and his progenies would cling in their earnest willingness to return. From this moment on he will work his way through a series of suffering, pains and sickness, a road that will make him bear inexorably the burden of the curse that falls upon him. Generally speaking, all mischief, sorrows, invalidities, suffering, viciousness and death, as all the evils that bear on the human nature are consequences of the original sin and the sorrowful, but indubitable, proof of its reality. Saint John the Chrysostom asserts with his characteristic directness: 'Sins are the cause of all evils. They cause pains, torments, wars, diseases and all our hard to cure passions.' Man's personal volition while misusing his free will when he committed the first sin in the Garden of Eden is the original source of sickness. This is how pain and suffering entered his life. This was the inherent consequence of man's disobedience. The Fathers of the Church assert that through Adam all human nature fell and the consequences of our first parents' disobedience have become congenital for us all.

3.2. Why Does God Allow Suffering?

The Christian as God's disciple and follower has the vocation of conveying the same sympathy into deeds, of working in his turn like Jesus, in order to heal, to relieve, to caress, to release from evil or to give a helping hand where it is needed. The Christ himself is present in each of the Christian's sympathetic gestures.

Even from the beginning we have to emphasize the fact that the christic message related to suffering is not that of urging us to indulge in it. Throughout the Saviour's short earthly pilgrimage, suffering represented an evil, an adversary against whom He fought ceaselessly. By gestures, by words and by deeds. He came to establish the Empire where "there will be no weeping, no crying, no pain" (Apoc. 21, 4). We have read in the Holy Scripture that the Saviour not only that he does not refuse anybody who asks for His help, but also He offers it to him first.

Suffering can become something meaningless and pointless – if we let it. But that same suffering could also be handled in a very different way. We could entrust it to God, in the firm belief that he will be able to use it. We must learn to offer our sufferings and distress to God, assured that he can, and will, use them to bring us to new depths of faith and service.

Undoubtedly, no man can ever itemise all the ways, manners or different degrees of the intensity of suffering that God – our Creator, our Saviour and our Lord – finds fit for many of our neighbours, as the list of human sufferings is beyond limit.

One cannot imagine that God, Who is 'beyond goodness' – as the Fathers of the Church assert – allows sickness and suffering. Yet, these diseases do not represent an aim, but a tool to avert the true pain from us. God acts as a Father and Doctor: 'For whom the Lord loves He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth' (Heb. 12:6). Saint Paul the Apostle also recommends: 'Endure chastening for

wisdom, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?' (Heb. 12:6f).

Saint Pious Barsanuphius answers as follows to a disciple who asked him to mention him in his prayers, so that the disciple could bear sickness with rejoicing: 'Sickness is acknowledged as inflicting punishment upon man to improve. Thus, sickness has been sent to you as to a disobedient servant. If it is hard for you to accept chastening, then refrain from being foul. And in case you are foul, then accept chastening. And if you receive forgiveness, then you are not foul. And the one who is not foul, that one is loved. And "For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes" (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6). So mind how you really are and opt for one of these words' (St. Barsanuphius, 1990, p. 189).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, resorting to a frequent parallelism in the patristic literature, underlines the fact that those who have their stomach laden and fraught with venom lap up a bitter drink, so that they could avert the cause of the disease, similarly does the one who is rushed by the evil one and turns to God, the Remedy for suffering, Who extinguishes the negative effect of pleasure. The one who has not endured suffering, cannot rejoice.

The signification of suffering is also rendered by St. Maximus the Confessor, who, on the basis of the tradition of the Holy Scripture, teaches about the two-fold appearance of temptations: one is represented by pleasure and the other by suffering. The former one chooses willingly, the latter unwillingly. The former breeds sin and we have been advised to avoid it as God teaches us: 'And lead us not into temptation' or 'Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation' (Mt. 26:41). Suffering chastens sins and torments through pain, and mischievous disposition that cherishes sin. Both temptations, the one that we accept willingly and the one that enters our lives unwillingly, are machinated by the evil one: the first category is bestirred by tempting the soul through the bodily pleasures so that man's will could be persuaded to break off from the divine Love; the second category is stimulated and aimed at by the evil one on the sly, as his intention is to spoil man through suffering, to compel the soul that fell under suffering to think evil thoughts against the Creator. 'But, as we comprehend the evil one's plans – as St. Maximus asserts – let us pray not to allow temptation to approach us willingly and not to go astray and not to fail God's love; and we shall endure stout-heartedly the unwilling temptation, that comes upon us from God's mercy so that we could appear ourselves as men who regard higher the Creator than the creation.'

Hence, St. Maxim the Confessor asserts that irrational pleasure resulted in suffering and now man should experience a different kind of suffering so that he could earn true rejoicing. Irrational pleasure is represented by every form of sin. As a result of sin, man suffers and is deprived of grace and rejoicing. So that this evil could be mended, God allows for suffering of higher or lower intensity, shorter or longer, which is a surgical instrument that dismisses passions, makes man leave his sinful ways and attaches him to God, where true pleasure and rejoicing is, that means the blessedness of the saints.

Saint Theophan the Recluse summarises the words of St. Maxim the Confessor and writes as follows: 'there are five reasons why God allows torments, distractions of thoughts and temptations: 1. as we are fought against and we fight we should accustom ourselves to distinguish good from evil; 2. as we labour in our fight, our good deeds should become persevering and steadfast; 3. as we increase in virtue we should not flaunt our virtues, but strengthen ourselves in humility; 4. as we have patience and fight

diligently the more substantial the bestowal; 5. as our life is cleansed of passions we shall not forget about our inability and the power that supported us.'

Many of us consider suffering as punishment that God operates on men so that we return to submitting to the divine will and awake in us repentance. 'Neither the eyes avail themselves of not being scourged and they sometimes become filled with tears and suffer, and thus they could become healthier. The same for the soul: there is nothing more dangerous than perpetual pleasuring.'

Experiencing the throes of sickness, some are inclined to throw the responsibility for their situation not on themselves, but exclusively on God. Providence, as they say, carries the entire responsibility for our misfortune, as He arranges everything above us. As we have already stated in the previous chapter, we emphasise here again that God created the body, not the ailments; He created the soul, not the sin. Yet, man's soul falling away from its original state of creation and perverting his characteristics became seriously sick.

It is not sin that always causes ailment (Jn. 9:3), as it can be a recondite divine pedagogy, a preventive impediment for the one who intends to taste the bitter goblet of sin, a form of chastening, a prompt for perfection, an urgent call to spiritual progress, to humility, to a more ardent faith, or, better said, a call to examine the salvation of the soul. Fear of sickness can represent for some people the best safeguard against any temptation to abuse. God also allows for and sends us sickness to make us even brighter and partake in a heavenly grace beyond imagination. Talking about the torments that put the soul of the Christian to the proof, the patristic literature also highlights the following parallelism: as the helmsman of a vessel faces the storm; the athlete, the arena; the commander of an army, war: so is the benevolent put to the proof by torments and Christians by adversities. 'One should be grateful to God when He makes us partake in His goodness, but one should not take offence at not being offered His gifts' (St. Basil the Great, epistle I, col. 221C). Adversities put the soul to the test as fire does with gold. When men's souls are affected by sickness and torments, as St. Basil says, these events occur so that these difficult examinations cansingle out those who are good, no matter how poor or rich they are as they endeavour to pass the trial with equal patience. These moments test the man on generosity, his love for his neighbour and gratefulness or they might reveal him to be preoccupied with cursing and erratic thoughts, as determined by the ups and downs of life (St. Basil the Great, 5, col. 316BC). To strengthen our patience in facing the trials of life, the Fathers of the Church teach us that the best remedy in every trial is to think about the more serious endeavours that our neighbours and especially the saints of our Church have gone through.

From the writings proper to the Orthodox Spirituality we can obtain knowledge of the fact that taking to ascesis, physical or spiritual endeavour, we mend our negative tendencies and shun passions, thus cleansing any trace of mischief in us. The difficulty and the pain of endeavour lead to a state of calmness, peace and rejoicing, of hope and strength in abiding. When the Christian does not endeavour, does not practice any sort of ascesis for the purification and the benefit of the his body and soul, God allows for sickness, trials or adversities, etc., to come to that man. All these are because He loves man so profoundly, as these do not torment or make man suffer, but they help him so that through ailment, trial or torment man can raise to the point where he would have reached if he had taken up ascesis. And in case man is virtuous and faithful, he uses that ailment to get better knowledge about himself, to be more fully aware of his possibilities and human limitations.

A period of physical suffering may be a chance for a person to improve, thus meditating on the fact that God allows for suffering to bring out something that would have been impossible. This might represent a positive and correct manner to have approached things.

Broadly speaking, ailments, the various endeavours and torments are considered by the Fathers of the Orthodox Spirituality as remedies for the benefit of our spiritual life. The only healthy attitude that we should adopt toward them is patience and not revolt. As we can endure and accept bitter remedies that are beneficial to the body, and sometimes, the more tasteless, bitter or insipid the remedies and the more painful and excruciating surgery, we believe the stronger the effects and the more efficient the cure, in the same way we should accept and take spiritual remedies as beneficial to our souls. Suffering is a remedy for the world and God is our physician. As the doctor does so much good, although he causes suffering and pains in the body, God is good and merciful, as the One Who sentences partial punishment to redeem us.

Experiencing bodily suffering provides the opportunity offered by God to achieve restoration: as we have already shown, in many situations, God brings or allows for sickness for the health of the soul. Thus, suffering could be perceived as being allowed by God as it purifies, cleansing the soul or as a trial from Him to provide us with the favourable circumstances to enhance faith.

God would not send or allow in our life trials, sickness or torments if these did not have the power to deliver us from the eternal torments of hell. Not all passions are useful for the soul, not all are expiatory, not all of them raise us and lead to the Kingdom of Heaven, only those that are abided, with thankfulness, with hope in God and without muttering.

RuedigerDahlke assays – as it states in his book(2008)and as its readers and editors remark – to persuade us that ailment is at the same time an opportunity. Through the intermediary of an organ in the body or of an area of the body, the soul attempts to make known a pain, tenseness, imperfection, concisely said, an unsolved issue. If we can decipher the hidden message of an ailment, we stand a chance to be freed from sickness.

4. Purpose of the Study

In this article, we intend as well to underline the fact that Christian Spirituality has the force to transfigure suffering, to alleviate and validate it. Our Saviour's words about taking up one's cross represented for numerous Christians a saving solution, a remedy, a clear answer in approaching their own suffering: 'And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.' (Mt. 10:38). The Saints teach us that by accepting the suffering on the cross we do attain our salvation. Only through subduing the passions do we take ourselves to a distance from the wrongdoings that the evil one and his servants use to tempt us and entice us from the path of life and rejoicing. Should we accept it, the meaning and significance of suffering will be gradually revealed to us. Only through enduring it, does suffering purify the Christian, bringing him to likeness with Christ.

5. Research Methods

The patristic texts encourage introspection, profound and constant meditation, based on the content of Holy Scripture, of the Holy Tradition and on the paradigms they offer on the subject of the fragility, corruptibility, inconstancy and ephemerality of this world.

Among us, there have always been and still are blameless, righteous or even impeccable people that suffer. It is a great question and mystery which is hard to decipher: why do they suffer, too? This is the age-old issue of the suffering of the righteous.

In my approach, I used theological and scientific method.

6. Findings

6.1. Eight Reasons Why Saints Endure Suffering

Among us there have been and there still are righteous, pure-hearted and those living a consecrated life, people who endure suffering. It still remains a major question and mystery that is not perceptible to human understanding: why do they suffer? This is the age-old dilemma of the suffering righteous.

The Holy Fathers of the Church advise us not to think of it in this manner: ‘why has God not endured the saints exclusively with things that make them rejoice?’ This would have meant leaving them without being tested and not having to endure so as to be patient, not experiencing suffering and they would not have benefited from the precious and superior existence as a gift bestowed for being virtuous, but their life would have rather been a result of the tendency of a will that had not suffered through any hardship. It was necessary that they be tested and proved worthy in front of God through their pro-action in trials as an example even to the people living after them.

Generally speaking, those whom men consider righteous still have, from the Creator’s perspective, something that needs mending and improving. ‘Likewise’ – as St. Gregory the Great remarks – ‘we, being unaware of subtleties, sometimes look at carved but unfinished statues, praising them as if they were perfect, yet, the master still concerns himself with them and hones them; even if he hears he is being praised, he does not cease to work over his works and improve them.’ Saint Barsanuphius, also called the Great Elder, was asked once why a great Abba had taken ill of red lumps as when one’s death was approaching. The *philokalic* father would answer: ‘As for those red lumps and the ailment, they came upon the Abba because he once had been gloried in the appreciation of people beyond measure; thus this ailment came to him so that men should not deify him. In reality, he actually partook of the Holy Spirit and perfection. For this reason God covered, under this appearance, man’s glory, so that God’s grace and glory should abound in him.’

Saint Pious Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis, whose feast is celebrated by our Church on the 28th of January, wrote a soul edifying work extensively publicized in our country and among other Orthodox peoples. In its pages, we are taught an important lesson about patience in enduring suffering. From it we learn not to wonder at, nor to allow ourselves to be distracted when we see the righteous suffering. An account tells about a man named Benjamin who lived in Mt. Nitra for eighty years. There he practiced intense asceticism. He became worthy of the gift of healing. Any man that the old man would put his hands on or would be given oil blessed by him, would be healed of any ailment. This man, worthy of such a

charisma, eight months before his death, fell sick of hydrops and his body swelled so severely that he looked like Job. One day the Bishop Dioscorus, who was at that time a Priest in Mt. Nitria, took Palladius and Evagrius with him and told them: 'Come and see a new Job, who strays in such a swollen body and suffers of such a remediless ailment, but evinces such an unbounded thankfulness.' Thus, the three of them went and saw that body so severely swollen that the old man could not use his fingers. Not standing that unbearable suffering, they turned their eyes away. Then Benjamin told them: 'Pray, my sons, so that my soul should not catch hydrops. My flesh cannot make me rejoice nor endure passions.' He had been sitting in a chair for eight months, a chair that was permanently adjusted to fit his body as he could not stay in bed because of other needs. But in his suffering he was still healing others. Palladius told this story about this suffering so that we should not wonder why the righteous suffer. When he died, the door frames and the thresholds of his cell were removed to take his dead body out of the house.

In other instances, God allows for the righteous to suffer to reveal to others the love the unerring have for Him and to give cause for us praise His holy name through the intermediary of His saints. It is God Who allots them power to endure thankfully. 'Once, the pious father Artemios of Gregoriou was bewailing:

'My God, why am I enduring so much suffering?'

Then, in a vision, he saw Christ Who showed him His hands and His side and told him:

'Can you see what I suffered? And you, for your love for Me, can you not endure and be patient?'

The Fathers exhort us to remember what happened to the righteous when we see one who is righteous suffering! However righteous the one we consider righteous might be, he does not rise to Job's righteousness and no matter how much suffering he would endure, there is no possibility that he could compare his state with Job's! God does not allow for the righteous to endure suffering because He has abandoned him, but because His intention is to enlighten him and place a crown on his head. In addition, St. John Chrysostom (1996) says: 'Then remember that when the evil one saw Job was so ardently doing good deeds, he disparaged him. "Is it for nothing that Job fears God?" But, as Job proved so enduring in his patience while facing suffering, the evil one covered his face and left ashamed as he had nothing else to say against Job.'

Hence, as you will see a righteous man who, although his virtues are numerous, is tried by a multitude of afflictions, do not become filled with wonder. And when you see that someone who distributes alms and does numerous deeds that please God falls into temptation or is being menaced by spiritual threats, do not question yourself about the reason. The reason why such a situation occurs is the evil one's aggression that tries to deceive that man. You may ask: "For what reason has God allowed that?" The answer is that He has allowed this so that He could coronate the righteous and punish the evil.'

Reading the saints' writings, we gather, among other matters, that God occasionally sends or allows to come to the faithful bodily sufferings – although these are not chastisements for the cleansing and delivery from their sins – to teach them not to consider this world as the ultimate reality and not to commit oneself to it, as sickness and suffering remind us we are transient mortals in this world and 'here have we no continuing city, but we should seek the one to come' (Heb. 13:14) and seek the One who is eternal to abide forever with Him where there is no pain, nor sorrow, nor any sighing.

The writer of the Church, Palladius, speaks about a man named Stephen, a Libyan, who had been living for sixty years on the coast of Marmarica and Mareot, Marmarica being the coastline between

Egypt and Cyrene and Mareot a region in Lybia, a neighbour of Egypt. He had become an ardent ascetic and a profoundly righteous man worthy of the charism of healing the people who would merely approach him. The account about that man relates that St. Anthony learned about him and that Palladius had not met him in person because of the distance between them. People close to Anthony and Evagrius met Palladius who was told as follows: "We found him suffering from an illness like this, having developed an ulcer of a cancerous sort. We discovered him being treated by a doctor, and working with his hands and weaving palm-leaves and talking to us, while the rest of his body was being operated on. He was behaving just as if another man were being cut. Though the flesh was cut away like hair, he was insensible, thanks to the greatness of his religious preparation. But while we were on the one hand grieving and on the other hand feeling disappointed that such a life had ended in such suffering and such surgical operations, he said to us: 'Children, do not be troubled by this affair. For God does nothing of what He does for malice, but for a good end. For perhaps my flesh deserves chastisement, and it is fitting that it should pay the penalty now rather than when I have quitted the arena.' So he edified us with his exhortations and encouragements. I have told his lest we should be disconcerted when we see saints suffering such afflictions" (***, *The Lausiac History*, 1918, pp. 103-104).

Saint John Chrysostom mentions eight reasons why the saints endure suffering: "For the diversified and manifold affliction which be falls the saints, I have reasons, eight in number, to declare unto your love. Therefore let all direct themselves to me with the strictest attention, knowing that there will be no pardon nor excuse left us here after for stumbling at the things which happen, if after all, when there are so many reasons, we are just as much perplexed and disturbed as if there were not one to be found. The first reason then is, that God permits them to suffer evil, that they may not too easily be exalted into presumption, by the greatness of their good work and miracles. The second, that others may not have a greater opinion of them than belongs to human nature, and take them to be gods and not men. The third, that the power of God maybe made manifest, in prevailing and overcoming, and advancing the word preached, through the efficacy of men who are infirm and in bonds. The fourth, that the endurance of these themselves may become more striking, serving God, as they do, not for a reward; but showing even such right-mindedness as to give proof of their undiminished good will toward Him after so many evils. The fifth, that our minds may be wise concerning the doctrine of a resurrection. For when thou seest a just man, one abounding in virtue, suffering ten thousand evils, and thus departing the present life, thou art altogether compelled, though unwillingly, to think somewhat of the future judgment; for if men do not suffer, those who have labored for themselves, to depart without wages and recompense; much more cannot God design, that those who have so greatly labored should be sent away uncrowned. But if He cannot intend to deprive those of the recompense of their labors eventually, there must needs be a time, after the end of the life here, in which they will receive the recompense of their present labors. The sixth, that all who fall into adversity may have a sufficient consolation and alleviation, by looking at such persons, and remembering what sufferings have befallen them. The seventh, that when we exhort you to the virtue of such persons, and we say to everyone of you, 'Imitate Paul, emulate Peter', we may not, on account of the surpassing character of their good works, slothfully shrink from such an imitation of them, as deeming them to have been partakers of a different nature. The eighth, that when it is necessary to call any blessed, or the reverse, we may learn whom we ought to account happy, and whom unhappy and wretched." (St. John Chrysostom, 1996, pp. 552-553).

God abides with the righteous both in suffering and at the moment of their death. The one who stays truly faithful is content with this simple presence. Faith, prayer and a virtuous life are the wellspring of power, patience, encouragement, peace and rejoicing of the suffering righteous. It is the same great and ardent faith that heartened the saintly Apostles and Martyrs at the last moments of their earthly life, when they were subjected to violent tortures and suffered a martyr's death on a cross. Faith, hope in God and prayer presently still constitute the source of comfort for every heart that is flooded by pain, that weeps and for every suffering body.

As God comforted the faithful Hebrews through the Prophet Isaiah, promising them He would not forget them: 'Will a woman forget her child and so as not to have compassion upon the offspring of her womb? But if she should ever forget these, yet I will not forget thee.' (Isa. 49:15): so does He comfort His faithful today.

7. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, by speaking of these explanations and parallels we have not exhausted the mystery of suffering and why God allows it. The full understanding will remain a mystery hidden in God. We can read in the *Paterikon* how Abba Anthony, exploring the profoundness of God's judgment, once asked: "When the same Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgements of God, he asked, 'Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag on to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper and why are the just in need?' He heard a voice answering him, 'Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgement of God, and it is not to your edification to know any thing about them.'" (Abba, 1984, p. 2)

At a time when Christ the Lord does not ease us from suffering by working a wonder it is sure that He endues us with the power to endure it to the end, to transfigure and transform it into an ever increasing participation in God, through the power of sacrificial love or prayer that is a source of strength and courage in suffering, of blessing and consolation. Christ Himself prays in us and for us when 'He is offered a prayer or asked by us': 'He prays for us as our High Priest; He prays in us as our Head; we offer prayers to Him as He is our Lord (Blessed Augustin, 81, col. 1081).' Anyone who intends to get a deeper insight into the teachings of the Fathers of the Church should aim at a personal connection with these saints, a relationship based on prayer and on living a holy and virtuous life, not only through academic analysis, but especially through personal experience, does the theological profoundness of the relationship between sin and sickness reveal itself in this way: that suffering is designed as a method to amend moral distractions and reintegrate oneback into the natural course of life.

The one who cannot find any meaning in suffering will learn nothing from experiencing it. The man who believes that God may use suffering *in His favour*, to speak in and through it, will be aware of God's hand being at work in this adversity. For Christians, God works as much through failure as through success, through suffering as much as through rejoicing.

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