

The Mystery of Evil

And he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord. ~ 2 Chronicles 12:14

EVIL IS ALL AROUND US. Greed, lust for power or pleasure, and pride result in cheating, stealing, despoiling of others' goods and persons, arguments, broken marriages, fighting, and war. Selfishness results in the willful murder of helpless babes in their mothers' wombs. Hate abounds and results in murder, terrorism, and "ethnic cleansing." We see all around us entire nations locked in endless cycles of hatred, violence, and revenge. Evils of other kinds are with us as well. Storms, floods, drought, famine, pestilence, illness, accidents, bereavement, separation, and anxiety bring grief and sorrow to all of us.

We ask, "Why does evil exist?" We see God seem powerless in the face of evil and suffering. We may decide that God cannot be good if he allows the terrible evils of the world to exist, especially those that afflict innocents. Or we reject altogether belief in God because evil is so rampant. Instead of hating evil, some choose to hate God, embracing alienation and despair.

Yet evil did not exist in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God. God did not create evil; it exists because we choose to make it exist. God never intended to create an automated human being, a kind of robot. He created us to seek happiness — here and hereafter — by choosing the good. In his wisdom and goodness, he gave us freedom, freedom to choose, with a set of choices put before us by an intellect that we ourselves can govern. *Evil came into the world because our first parents chose it.* God did not prevent this dreadful calamity because he respected the very nature of humankind as he had created us: free to choose to love or reject God him-

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self. And evil remains with us because we still choose it. Even many "natural" calamities are the consequence of evil, although we do not recognize why we experience them: *"If a man does evil, it will roll back upon him, and he will not know where it came from"* (Sir 27:27).

During his life on earth, Jesus knew evil. He saw it all around him, and it caused him to shed tears and to act with abundant compassion. He wept over the fate that would befall Jerusalem (see Lk 19:41-44) and over the death of his friend Lazarus, whom he compassionately raised from the dead (see Jn 11:17-44). He healed the lame, the blind, the dumb, the possessed, the leper, the sinner — the wounds of all who sought his help in faith (see, for example, Mt 8:2-3; Mt 9:32-33; Mk 3:10; Mk 7:32-35; Lk 7:2-10; Lk 7:37-48; Jn 4:46-53; Jn 9:1-7).

If he wished, God could eliminate all evil. He would accomplish this, however, only by removing free will from us. Without free will, though, we would no longer be truly human. We would no longer be kind or generous or thoughtful. We would no longer love, for love requires freedom. Due to our fallen nature and tendency to sin, evil will exist until the end of time, as Jesus tells us: *"The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in*



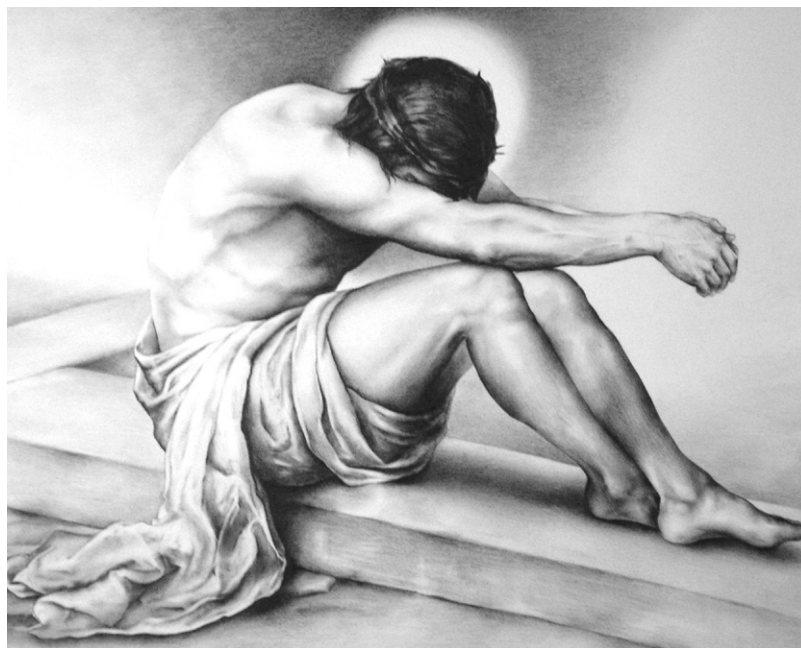
Martyrdom of St. Menas, 6th century ivory carving from Alexandria, Egypt

gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' ... Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the Kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father'" (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43).

God does not allow evil in the world without intending to bring greater good from it. How he accomplishes this shall be known fully only when we are with him in eternity. When our first parents succumbed to the temptation of the fallen angel Satan, God did not abandon us whom he loved. Despite Adam and Eve's choice of evil, God worked a miracle of love by giving us something even better than what they had thrown away: his Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we received redemption, a return to divine friendship, and Heaven, an eternal garden of paradise. In his overflowing benevolence and goodness, God himself gives us an example of how we are to respond to evil: "See that none of you repays evil

for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thes 5:15).

Jesus showed his power over evil when he endured, of his own free will, the sufferings of his Passion and crucifixion. The whole of Jesus' life is a demonstration of God's willingness to share our sorrows and sufferings, and to give us the hope and the



Prayer before Crucifixion, by Elizabeth Stefanick

way to bear the tribulations brought down on us by ourselves and others, renewed day in and day out by acts that reject the will of God. Jesus did not come to destroy suffering, but to sanctify it (see CCC 1521). The Father allowed these things to happen to his Son, even though he is all-powerful, has control of all things, and could have used

his power to save Jesus. St. Paul speaks of this mystery when he says, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:25).

Instead of using our daily difficulties to turn away from God, we need to turn our attention and hearts toward God and to concentrate, instead, on faith. Only our Christian faith — taken as a totality, as a whole — can respond to the mystery of evil: "There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil" (CCC 309; italics in original). Only faith can explain the unfathomable ways of God's almighty power. "Nothing is more apt to confirm our faith and hope than holding it fixed in our minds that nothing is impossible with God. Once our reason has grasped the idea of God's almighty power, it will easily and without any hesitation admit everything ... [that the Church will] propose for us to believe" (CCC 274). In confronting the mystery of evil —

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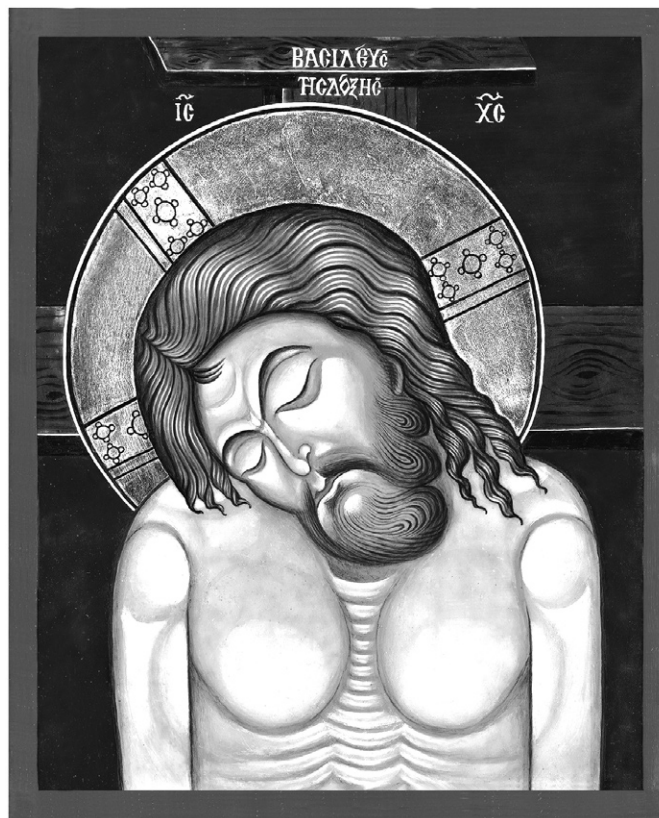
¹ Roman Catechism, I, 2, 13

and it is a mystery beyond our full comprehension even if not beyond our experience — faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ, is indispensable. In contemplating the mystery of evil, as with all mysteries, faith makes no explanation necessary, while lack of faith makes no explanation possible.

Evidence of God's care and love throughout all time abounds. We can dwell on the story of creation, of all that came from nothing, and on the splendors of the Garden of Eden and the gifted creatures who possessed it. We can reflect on all the covenants God made with his people despite their hardheartedness and unfaithfulness. We can meditate on the promise of a Savior

and the realization of the promise in the Incarnation, when God's own Son came to earth, knowing what would be done to him to bring the good of salvation out of so much evil. We can rejoice at all God continues to give: his Holy Spirit, making complete the outpouring of the three Persons of the Trinity for the express well-being of all humankind; the Church Jesus founded as his instrument to bring grace through the sacraments, and to bring all to the embrace of the Trinity in Heaven; and the many expressions of the divine in human lives — miracles, apparitions of the Blessed Mother, and, most of all, the saints that have been raised up among us as living examples of joy and freedom in a world drenched in evil.

We are still free to choose evil instead of good, to listen to the one who is *"a murderer from the beginning ... a liar and the father of lies"* (Jn 8:44) rather than to respond to the Father's invitation: *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him"* (Mt 17:5). We must continually use the gifts that God has given



Man of Sorrows, by Renata Grzan

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us: the intellect that seeks truth and the will that chooses good. With these gifts, aided by God's grace, we must work out our salvation. When we misuse our gifts of intellect and free will, and choose to do evil, we are solely responsible and must live with the consequences. The more we choose evil, the more we become trapped in the slavery of sin; we become creatures of vice. When we use our gifts to choose good, we embrace happiness and a sense of true freedom; we become creatures of virtue and holiness. The more we choose to do good, the more pleasing we become to God and, to at least a small degree, we help change the world back to the harmony that existed before the fall of our first parents, as St. Paul tells us: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Rom 12:21). We can learn to offer our own suffering and disappointments to a God whose mercy is always available. All this will remain the same until the end of time, when Christ will come in glory to judge the world (see Mt 25:31-33). The final judgment will mark the end of evil forever.

Saints give us the example of ways to live to overcome evil: to have the right desire, which is God; to have the right will, which is choosing Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (see Jn 14:6); and to do the right actions, which is living in holiness, the conscious avoidance of sin and evil. Herein lies the Catholic's answer to the mystery of evil, which is Satan and sin. And herein lies, as well, real happiness, joy, and freedom, here on earth and into eternity.

(CCC 272-274, 309-314, 385-387, 401, 403, 407-409, 412, 671, 677, 844, 1521, 1607, 1707, 1732-1734, 1865, 2851-2854)