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# Ratzinger on Evolution and Evil: A Christological and Mariological Answer to the Problem of Suffering and Death in Creation

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**Abstract:** This article argues that a compelling way to address the presence of suffering and death across evolutionary history lies in the thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI. By situating human evolution within the broader divine plan for man's salvation through the cross of Jesus, Ratzinger is able to show that the presence of natural evils in this world is not incompatible with God's goodness but on the contrary is an eminent means by which the love of God is made manifest. Exploring Christ's *kenosis* and the sinless suffering of the Blessed Virgin, it is argued that suffering properly embraced is the raw material for love and thus essential for true human flourishing in this life. The real problem for man, it is contended, is not having to suffer and die, but *how* to suffer and die well. Finally, it is suggested that the full Christian answer to the problem of suffering connected with evolution nevertheless lies in the eschatological hope for a new heaven and new earth, where man—and all creation with him—will undergo a definitive “evolutionary leap” of “transubstantiation” in Christ.

**Keywords:** Ratzinger; evolution; theodicy; evil; suffering; death; love; kenosis; Mariology; eschatology



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## 1. Introduction

The classical theological synthesis assumed by most Christian theologians until the mid-twentieth century emphasized that the presence of death in our world is the consequence of human sin (Rm 5:12 RSV; Lombardo 2019). However, advancements in evolutionary science have made it clear that nature had been “red in tooth and claw” for billions of years before *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene of history. For its part, our species is mortal and suffers from natural evils by virtue of having descended from hominin ancestors who were themselves the product of this history. Indeed, not only do we now know this, the theory of evolution by natural selection further reveals that death and the selective pressures associated with it played an essential role in the development of life from bacteria to the myriad flora and fauna that grace our planet today. Can the evolutionary story about suffering and death be reconciled with the Christian claim that the world owes its existence to the God who is love?

While his contribution to this topic has remained largely unexplored, Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI made many contributions in this regard over the course of his career.<sup>1</sup> Developing insights from this towering theological figure, the present essay will contend that a theodicy that would wish to unlock the mysterious relationship of evolution, suffering, and death requires an answer that lies beyond philosophy—in the self-emptying *kenosis* of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:6–8), the true Adam who reveals man to himself. In view of rethinking the interconnectedness of these realities, a fresh framework will be proposed that also explores the Virgin Mary's embrace of suffering—and possibly death—as a privileged lens of insight into the presence of these phenomena in nature. In the end, it will be argued that, while suffering and death are not desirable for their own sakes, they do not militate against the divine goodness but on the contrary are an eminent means by which the love of God is made manifest. For, paradoxically, the suffering inherent to our

world's evolutionary dynamic is precisely what conforms creatures to the cross of Jesus Christ, allowing man to share in the divine life and for all of creation to be renewed on the Last Day.

## 2. Putting the Last Adam First: Suffering and Death in the Light of Christ Crucified

Throughout his corpus, Ratzinger variously refers to Jesus as the “last man”, “second Adam”, “definitive Adam”, and even “Counter-Adam” (Ratzinger 1957, p. 6; de Gaál 2019, p. 98).<sup>2</sup> However, his most extensive systematic treatment of the relationship between Adam and Christ can be found in a section of *Introduction to Christianity* dedicated specifically to “Christ, the Last Man.” Here, Ratzinger teaches that to confess Jesus of Nazareth as the only begotten Son of God is to recognize him as the exemplary man, which in his view is “probably the best way to translate accurately the . . . Pauline concept of the ‘last Adam’” (Ratzinger 1990, p. 234). As he says elsewhere, Christ is the “index for how ‘person’ must be understood in the first place” and that in Christ “the truth about what is meant by the riddle named ‘man’ . . . first becomes fully evident” (Ratzinger 2011b, p. 192). Winsomely summarizing this view, Ratzinger elsewhere relates: “From the standpoint of Christian faith one may say that for *history* God stands at the end, while for *being* he stands at the beginning” (Ratzinger 1990, p. 242).

What, precisely, does Ratzinger mean in calling Christ the archetypal or “final” human being? As the definitive man, Jesus is “pure relation”, the one who empties himself in a complete gift to others. That is to say, “the decisive feature [*Gestalt*] in the figure of Jesus” is that he “oversteps the bounds of [his] individuality” by being “the completely open man in whom the dividing walls of existence are torn down, who is entirely ‘transition’ (Pasch)” (Ratzinger 1990, pp. 234, 236, 239–40). According to Ratzinger, this dynamism is captured perfectly in the notion of *exodus*, which he describes as “the definitive fundamental law of revelation and at the same time the fundamental law of the spirit”, adding that “[t]he Paschal way of the cross, the breaking down of all earthly assurances and their false satisfactions, is man’s true homecoming” (Ratzinger 2011a, p. 161).

To draw out this point, Ratzinger reminds us of Pilate’s infamous words in Jn 19:5: *Ecce homo!* The irony of the procurator’s unwitting prophetic utterance is that, when we behold the crucified and risen Christ, we are beholding the perfection of man himself:

The question “what is man?” does not find its answer in a theory, but rather the answer lies in the following of Jesus Christ, in living the project [of God] with him. In the steps of this path—and only in this way—can we learn with him day after day, *in the patience of life and pain*, what it means to be man and thereby become men. (Ratzinger 2009, p. 72, my translation)

The Letter to the Hebrews captures this same point from John’s gospel when it tells us that Jesus was “made perfect” only after he “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8–9 RSV). Putting these teachings together, we may therefore say that *to be human is to be like Christ, and therefore to attain perfection through suffering*. That is to say, the connection between the nature and perfection of man and the nature and perfection of Christ is so tight that, for Ratzinger, Christology is anthropology (Ratzinger 1969, pp. 118–19).

## 3. The Cause(s) of Suffering and Death in the Natural World

Ratzinger’s emphasis on Jesus as the exemplary man goes hand in hand with his view that the root rationale for human suffering and death is something other than sin: Namely, that these trials play an indispensable role in conforming our lives with that of Christ crucified and risen. That is to say, for Ratzinger, the structure of creation and of our finite creaturely existence within it is and was always intended to be *cruciform* (cross-shaped) or *paschal* (structured according to the pattern of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection). To affirm that creation has a paschal structure is to take Christ’s incarnation as the key to interpreting reality, to rejoice in God having modeled creation after the Paschal Mystery, with all the suffering and consequent glory that it entails. For, if Christ is the *logos* who bears the meaning of creation and man within himself (Col 1:15–16), and if the key to

understanding the person and mission of Jesus is his paschal mystery (cf. Lk 24:26), it stands to reason that the experience of redemptive suffering that characterized the Final Adam's entire earthly existence is at the heart of the human vocation as such.

In his 1985 Carinthian lectures, Ratzinger read Jesus's words in Jn 12:24 as teaching that not just man but the entire cosmos has a kenotic or paschal structure: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Ratzinger understands this dynamic to be a fundamental law of creation, whereby the suffering and death of organisms ultimately makes possible the rebirth and flourishing of life: "[T]he paschal mystery, the mystery of the dying grain of wheat appears before us already among the ideas of creation. Man must become with Christ a grain of dead wheat, to truly rise again and truly be lifted up, to truly be himself. Only then does he attain his real goal" (Ratzinger 2009, p. 63, my translation; Sanz 2014).

This cosmic vision traces all the way back to Ratzinger's time in the academy. Indeed, Professor Ratzinger's lecture notes—while early and unpublished—contain his most strongly worded statements to the effect that the world itself has a cruciform shape. Specifically, Ratzinger's teachings from his 1964 course on the doctrine of creation (*Schöpfungslehre*) illustrate this conviction. Noting that the fate of death is not a special destiny of sinful man, Ratzinger here remarks that "the whole creation bears the stamp (*Prägeform*) of the mystery of death" (Ratzinger 1964, p. 211, my translation; Sanz 2014).<sup>3</sup> Later in the course, Ratzinger teaches that suffering and death are the "foundational principles (*Grundprinzipien*) upon which the whole interplay of the world is built" and "are not peripheral, but belong to the structuring principles (*Bauprinzipien*) of the world." Ratzinger sees suffering as so important, in fact, that he makes this bold claim: "Whoever wanted to take that away would dissolve the world as such" (Ratzinger 1964, p. 215). In the end, Professor Ratzinger thus concludes that all the evidence we have at our disposal today "makes it impossible to uphold the said teaching (i.e., the connection between death and original sin) *in the usual way*" (Ratzinger 1964, p. 215).<sup>4</sup>

All this being said, Ratzinger does not pretend that his *aggiornamento* of the Christian tradition constitutes a definitive theodicy that resolves the problem of evil associated with life's evolutionary history. Indeed, even with an understanding that the very fabric of the cosmos is paschal, this theological giant still considers the "law of brutality" or the "riddle of the terrible element in nature" to be "one of the great riddles of creation" (Ratzinger 2002, p. 79). At a conference on faith and evolution, Pope Benedict expanded upon this point:

Despite the rationality that exists, we can observe a component of terror, which cannot be further analyzed philosophically. Here philosophy calls for something more, and faith shows us the Logos, who is creative reason and who incredibly at the same time was able to become flesh, to die and to rise again. With that, a completely different face of the Logos is manifested from what we can manage to glimpse on the basis of a groping reconstruction of the fundamental reasons for nature. (Benedict XVI 2008a, pp. 115–16)

This passage is noteworthy for our purposes; for, while not employing the precise word, the then-pontiff suggests that the fundamental structure of the universe—its rational nature—is at the same time a paschal one. Because Christians profess the Trinitarian mystery that love and reason together structure reality and that the dying grain will ultimately rise, we also believe that none of the terrible suffering and death in the created world is ultimately a waste. Ratzinger's approach invites us to see these trials less along the lines of absolute evils and more as variations upon a musical theme—as temporary dissonance or minor chords that contribute to the overall beauty of God's perfect symphony.

#### 4. Two Reasons We Suffer

While Ratzinger the academic sees suffering and death as constitutive experiences of the graced condition of human nature in which we were created, it is perhaps even more telling that Benedict XVI continued to write along these lines throughout his tenure as

Supreme Pontiff. In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Benedict thus distinguishes two reasons that suffering is present as part of human existence. On the one hand, it stems “partly from the mass of sin which has accumulated over the course of history.” This evil trajectory, he adds, “continues to grow unabated today”, a problem that “none of us is capable of eliminating.” On the other hand, “Suffering stems partly from our finitude” that none of us is able to “shake off” (Benedict XVI 2007c, para. 36). In other words, a certain pain inevitably results from being an imperfect creature modeled after the image of the Triune God and called to divinization while not yet having achieved it.

Although suffering is inevitable in this vale of tears, believers look forward to that state in which God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more (Rv 21:4). In *Spe Salvi*, we thus find Benedict acknowledging that, despite the fact that man does not want to die, “neither do we want to continue living indefinitely, nor was the earth created with that in view” (Benedict XVI 2007c, para. 11). Indeed, in the then-pontiff’s existential analysis of the human condition, “To continue living forever—endlessly—appears more like a curse than a gift” and “more of a burden than a blessing”, as it would be “monotonous and ultimately unbearable” (Benedict XVI 2007c, para. 10). To this, Benedict adds that another reason we would not wish to live forever in this sphere of existence has to do with bearing the burden of sin. Citing the homily St. Ambrose delivered for his brother’s funeral, Benedict speaks of death as a mercy for man in his wretched state, a way of limiting the evils that can be inflicted upon him and, most importantly, a means to our salvation (Benedict XVI 2007c, para. 10). In the end, Benedict teaches that all of us—sinless or not—eventually have to undergo a miraculous and merciful transformation at the end of our earthly life before we can see God face to face and at last know fully what we now know only in part (cf. 1 Cor 13:12).

### 5. There Can Be No Love without Suffering

Not only does Ratzinger consider suffering integral to our created universe, but a remarkable feature of his approach is that he goes so far as to insist that suffering and death are necessary for human flourishing in the world here below. So strongly does he hold this conviction that Professor Ratzinger said that one who has never endured suffering is not truly a person: “[A] person without suffering in the world in which we live would be a monster and impossible . . . Suffering and death are essential (*wesentlich*) to the structure of things” (Ratzinger 1964, p. 215). Along these lines, Ratzinger would later add in *Eschatology*: “Of course, suffering can and should be reduced... But the will to do away with it completely would mean a ban on love and therewith the abolition of man (Ratzinger 1988, p. 103). In his interview *God and the World*, Cardinal Ratzinger spoke similarly while emphasizing the positive role that suffering plays in making us “more human”:

Pain is part of being human. Anyone who really wanted to get rid of suffering would have to get rid of love before anything else, because there can be no love [*Liebe*] without suffering [*Leiden*], because it always demands an element of self-sacrifice, because, given temperamental differences and the drama of situations, it will always bring with it renunciation and pain.

When we know that the way of love—this exodus, this going out of oneself—is the true way by which man becomes human, then we also understand that suffering is the process through which we mature. Anyone who has inwardly accepted suffering becomes more mature and understanding of others, becomes more human. Anyone who has consistently avoided suffering does not understand other people; he becomes hard and selfish. (Ratzinger 2002, p. 322)

It turns out, then, that in Ratzinger’s view, “suffering is the inner side of love”, and it is only in learning how to suffer well that each of us is “reshaped” (Ratzinger 2002, p. 323).

If Ratzinger is correct about the relationship of suffering and love, this sheds important insight into God’s will to create life by means of evolutionary processes. For, if man is to be truly conformed to the image of the crucified and risen Christ, we too must give ourselves

away in a sincere gift of self through suffering and death. As the above citations reveal, this appears to be the case not merely because of sin but rather because of the finite nature of our existence and the paschal shape of the world that serves as a means to conform us to Jesus Christ. Further, if it conforms us to the True Adam, our suffering enables us to do something even further: To share in the life of the Trinity itself.

Pope Benedict eloquently spoke to this point in a conversation with a group of Italian clergies. After affirming that humans are “truly the reflection of creative reason”, he explains that our conformity to the Creator’s inner life has much to do with how we lovingly bear suffering:

[I]n suffering there is also a profound meaning, and only if we can give meaning to pain and suffering can our life mature. I would say, above all, that there can be no love without suffering [*non è possibile l’amore senza il dolore*], because love always implies renouncement of myself, letting myself go and accepting the other in his otherness; it implies a gift of myself and therefore, emerging from myself . . . *The inseparability of love and suffering, of love and God*, are elements that must enter into the modern conscience to help us live. (Benedict XVI 2007b)

As we see here, the reason that Benedict considers suffering and death so essential to our experience in the natural world is that our ultimate fulfillment—*theosis*—is only attainable by means of suffering *kenosis*. Moreover, these comments suggest that he views suffering—like all things in this world—as somehow a reflection of the inner life of God himself.

To this point, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict goes so far as to affirm that *eros* (yearning, need-based, suffering love) may be ascribed to God in an analogical sense (Benedict XVI 2006a, para. 3–10). As creatures made in the likeness of the one true and compassionate God, Ratzinger says that we humans too are “beings of word and of love, beings moving toward Another, oriented to giving themselves to the Other and only truly receiving themselves back in real self-giving” (Ratzinger 1995, pp. 47–48). As creatures made in the image of the God who “suffers with” us, Ratzinger views the ineluctability of suffering in this life as a reality that flows from the “logic of self-giving”, which is grounded in the inner life of the Trinity and “written into creation and into the hearts of men” (Ratzinger 2013, p. 82; Benedict XVI 2007a, p. 87).

Benedict’s thought on the relationship of suffering and love is especially poignant when he explicitly casts our experience of suffering in a Christological light. At a General Audience we hear him saying: “The Cross reminds us that there is no true love without suffering, there is no gift of life without pain” (Benedict XVI 2008b). In other words, “The world in which we stand is marked by suffering and can grant joy only through the Passion . . . [T]he grief of death itself carries the final, true joy of man (Ratzinger 1964, p. 211). Given this view, it will come as no surprise that Professor Ratzinger called the suggestion that sinless man would have gently and painlessly fallen asleep at the end of his life “no solution” to the problem of death (Ratzinger 1964, p. 209).

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Benedict adds that, while we can try to limit suffering, we cannot eliminate it entirely. If we do make this our goal, he continues, “we drift into a life of emptiness, in which there may be almost no pain, but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater.” Offering some sage pastoral advice, he concludes, “It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.” In sum, Benedict teaches that, “if we embrace our pain in closeness with Jesus Christ and his *kenosis*, then our suffering “without ceasing to be suffering becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise (Benedict XVI 2007c; Ramage 2020a, pp. 112–19).

## 6. Suffering, the Raw Material for Love

To drive home Benedict’s thought on the relationship of suffering and love, I would now like to connect it with some complementary reflections from Bethany Sollereeder, a BioLogos author and researcher at the University of Oxford who specializes in evolution



and the problem of suffering. Drawing the same conclusion independently of Ratzinger, Sollereeder argues that the mass of suffering and death that has littered evolutionary history does not constitute an argument against the goodness of God but on the contrary bespeaks his loving plan for man's sanctification. Echoing Andrew Elphinstone, Sollereeder argues that "the present primacy of pain and unrest in the world is part of the raw material of the ultimate primacy of love" (Sollereeder 2014, p. 24; Elphinstone 1976). Expounding this claim at greater length, Sollereeder writes:

By going through the process of pain, love opens up a new option of finding healing, and turning the pain from the agent of evil to the use of good . . . [Pain] is the key to understanding our high calling of love. When we are in pain, more than any other moment, our passions are invoked and shaped. When our pain leads us to violence, hate, or revenge, our desires turn to evil. If instead, in the moment of pain, we choose to forgive, the power of pain is broken, it is not passed on in aggression or turned upon the self in shame. Forgiveness is the ultimate defeat of evil and freedom from it. While we may still be in pain, we may also find joy in the transformation of love". (Sollereeder 2014, pp. 24–25)

Developing a helpful analogy that captures Benedict's teachings from another angle, Sollereeder argues that the many shades of pain in our world are much like the raw ingredients of a good beer or loaf of bread. These sources of nourishment are not found in nature, and thus it takes human culture and industry to produce them. More to the point, the sweetness we find in them is the product of ingredients that are of their own accord bitter and distasteful to us. Rich beer is made from bitter hops. Savory bread requires sharp salt and foul-smelling yeast. More fundamentally still (and with Eucharistic associations), bread comes from grain that is *ground*, oil from olives *pressed*, and wine from grapes that allow themselves to be *crushed*. In the same way, suffering and pain of all kinds are the raw ingredients of a rich and holy life. Though certainly not desirable in themselves, the experience of being "ground" and crushed" is the means by which God mysteriously transforms us into something altogether new and glorious. As Josetxo Beriain writes, death is "a major contributor to the evolutionary enhancement of life, and thereby it becomes a significant part of the aggregate 'gift of life' that all particular lives" (Beriain 2020, p. 684).

Sollereeder contends that this analysis applies to the violence we observe in nature as a whole—what we have seen Benedict call the "law of brutality" that is one of the "great riddles of creation." Contemplating the apparent gratuity of pain and waste throughout the natural world across evolutionary history, Sollereeder draws a parallel between the process of a person's spiritual transformation and that of the physical formation of the cosmos. The conversion of a man to the state of being fully alive—that is, becoming ever more conformed to the image of Christ crucified—is a "cataclysmic" process analogous to the manner in which volcanoes, earthquakes, and meteorites shape our universe's development. Though destructive in one order, these forces are eminently creative in another. Volcanoes destroy life, for example, but in doing so they make possible great new things like wine. Pruning a vine increases its quality and quantity of its yield. The death and decay of organic matter gives life to bacteria and plants. Supernovae result in the destruction of stars but the creation of elements.

In light of the new understanding of the natural world that we have thanks to evolutionary science, Sollereeder thus proposes that we update our narrative of human origins in the following way that has many points of affinity with Benedict's approach:

[I]n place of a perfect couple in a pleasant garden, our nonhuman ancestors were engaged in a long struggle for survival. They moved sharply in response to pain, they were protective of their own and aggressive toward perceived threats . . . They had skill, strength, intelligence, even altruism, but not love. Love is a uniquely human attribute—or perhaps we should say it is a divine attribute, imparted to humanity—that transcends the evolutionary process and shapes us into hybrids of earthly and heavenly forms. Somewhere along the evolutionary process, nascent humanity acquired the ability to exercise a moral will over our

innate desires, and with that came the capacity both to sin and to receive divine love and make it our own. (Sollereeder 2014, pp. 22–23)

Building on this analysis, Sollereeder sees the experience of suffering and death—indeed, even the tempestuous emotions that we inherited from our evolutionary ancestors—as “the raw ingredients of love, awaiting ‘divine alchemy’” (Sollereeder 2014, p. 22). This leads her to a conclusion that is very close to that which Benedict draws: “We therefore cannot object to God’s goodness when we see around us a world of violence. This is the means to produce love” (Sollereeder 2014, p. 23). This perspective just may allow us to see how evolutionary theory works not *against* but *with* the Christian understanding of divine goodness, as Sollereeder explains well:

In light of evolution, the existence of violence and hatred in the world appears not as an insoluble theological riddle but the outcome of a long and necessary process that is still in development. The bitter raw products of evolution are slowly being brought to transcend evolution itself. We are, through the painful process of forgiveness, being transformed into the image and likeness of Christ. (Sollereeder 2014, p. 25)

Benedict’s successor writes along the same lines as he and Sollereeder. Creating a world that unfolds through evolution, Pope Francis remarks that nature is such that “many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator” (Francis 2015, para. 80).

Yet, as Ratzinger taught for decades, the reality of this dynamic we have been exploring is not something that can be proven in a deductive manner or whose truth would be evident to anyone who has not first lived it. For the emeritus pontiff, rather, the beauty of many things in life—from a work of art to a human person we encounter, to the experience of suffering, to the divine revelation of God himself—comes only through the *laboratory of life* by engaging in what he terms “the experiment of faith.” To adapt an image deployed by Benedict himself: While a Gothic cathedral’s stained-glass windows appear dark and dreary on the outside, seeing the same work from the inside reveals a resplendent beauty with the capacity to draw man upward toward the infinite—provided we are willing to enter into its domain.

Perhaps nowhere is this expressed more eloquently than in the following words of Ratzinger’s dear friend Hans Urs von Balthasar: “In order to experience its form, a person must become interior to the work, must enter into its spell and radiant space, must attain to the state in which alone the work becomes manifest in its being-in-itself” (Von Balthasar 1983, p. 619). So, it is with the good world that God made. If we wish to experience the truth and beauty of God’s work in creation through redemptive suffering, we ourselves must “become interior” to it by aligning our entire being with its cruciform, paschal structure.

## 7. Sinless Yet Sorrowful: The Blessed Virgin and the Problem of How to Suffer Well

Having reflected on Benedict’s conviction regarding the reciprocity of love and suffering and the crucial role of the latter in our universe, we are in a position to catch a glimpse of how this cruciform existence might have been lived out in a sinless world. This exploration will further reveal that suffering is not contrary to God’s goodness but on the contrary is present in the world in order to reveal it by conforming us to the image of Christ.

As Christians know well, the cross of Christ reveals that virtuous suffering—and even death—can coexist with sinlessness. Jesus’s earthly life gives us the perfect picture of what suffering before the Fall would have looked like. While it still would not have been a desirable experience for its own sake, suffering nevertheless would have been the occasion for a synergy of wills in which man handed himself over to God, saying, “Not my will, but thine be done!” (Lk 22:42).

That said, Christ was not the only individual to live a sinless earthly life. Importantly, Ratzinger’s corpus includes material devoted to unfolding what sinless suffering would

have looked like in the life of a mere creature: That is, in the sorrows of the Immaculate Conception. In what follows, then, we will consider what Ratzinger has to say about the Blessed Virgin Mary's embrace of suffering—and possibly death—and how this may serve as a privileged lens into the origin of these realities and a guide to help us face them in a more Christ-like manner in our own lives.

It is no surprise that a Catholic theologian like Ratzinger holds that Mary experienced a great deal of suffering and sorrow over the course of her earthly life. After all, one of her titles is "Our Sorrowful Mother", and indeed Simeon prophesied to her at Jesus's presentation that a "sword will pierce through your own soul" (Lk 2:35). Because of this, the fact that suffering and sinlessness coexisted in the earthly life of Mary is so clear as to appear trivial.

What is not so obvious to many today, however, is something else that Ratzinger holds regarding the Blessed Virgin. While many believers today assume that Mary was taken to heaven without undergoing death, this is a relatively recent view that has never been taught by the Magisterium. Ratzinger, on the other hand, follows the ancient tradition that the Blessed Virgin died before her dormition. What I would now like to propose is that this dimension of Ratzinger's Mariology is an extension of his Christology that we have been examining. As such, it may be of added benefit in our quest to understand the relationship of sin, suffering, and death.

A number of Ratzinger's statements take for granted that suffering and death were essential features in the life of this creature who, while "certainly . . . free from all sin", nevertheless "knows pain suffering, and death" and even "matured as Mother of God" in such a way that "her merits increased until her death" (Ratzinger 1957, pp. 47–48). Mary suffered and died on Ratzinger's view. Unlike the rest of us, though, she made the perfect choice when it came to *how she would respond to suffering and death* with the help of God's grace, that is, *receiving them as gifts that lead to greater conformity to Christ*. Ratzinger thus taught in his Mariology course that the Blessed Virgin's death was not merely a passive affair but the active bursting forth of love in a final grand *fiat*: "Mary's death is not the answer [*Antwort*] to sin, but the self-giving away of love, or the overwhelming power of love, which broke the outer shell and prepared the way for [its] true form [*Gestalt*]" (Ratzinger 1957, p. 51).

To better understand Ratzinger's thought on this matter, it is instructive to begin by pondering his words on the Assumption. In *Daughter Zion*, a book specifically dedicated to explaining the Catholic Church's key Marian beliefs, he teaches that this dogma is not concerned with the issue of whether Mary died but rather with the veneration of Mary who has "arrived at her goal *on the other side of death*." To this, he immediately adds a sacramental dimension, "In her, everything still resisting baptism (faith) has been conquered without remainder *through the death of her earthly life*" (Ratzinger 2005, p. 74). What is perhaps most telling about these texts is that Ratzinger takes it for granted that Mary died and does not even feel the need to argue for it.

After affirming the historical reality of Mary's assumption, Ratzinger considers the meaning of death, grace, and the immortality that the Blessed Virgin gained through her Assumption. Addressing what these mean from his characteristic existential perspective, Ratzinger replies:

Man is not immortal by his own power, but only in and through another, preliminarily, tentatively, fragmentarily, in children, in fame, but finally and truly only in and from the Entirely-Other, God. We are mortal due to the usurped autarchy of a determination to remain within ourselves, which proves to be a deception. *Death*, the impossibility of giving oneself a foothold, the collapse of autarchy, *is not merely a somatic* but a human phenomenon of all-embracing profundity. (Ratzinger 2005, pp. 78–79, emphasis added)

For Ratzinger, in other words, biological death is one thing, but *true* death is something we bring upon ourselves when we live our life as if we were self-sufficient. The reverse side of



this, the good news, is that this more important death can be conquered (as happened with Mary) even as we meet our bodily demise and shuffle off this mortal coil:

Nevertheless, where the innate propensity to autarchy is totally lacking, where there is the pure self-dispossession of the one who does not rely upon himself (=grace), *death is absent, even if the somatic end is present*. Instead, the whole human being enters salvation, because as a whole, undiminished, he stands eternally in God's life-giving memory that preserves him as himself in his *own* life. (Ratzinger 2005, p. 79, emphasis added)

In sum, the above texts strongly suggest that Ratzinger viewed Mary as having suffered and died like the rest of us, with the difference lying in her *response* to these trials. Because she was perfectly receptive to God's gift of suffering, Mary did not experience death as an evil to be dreaded—much less as evidence against God's goodness—but rather as the definitive path to conformity with her son.

### 8. The Main Problem Is Not Having to Suffer and Die, but How to Suffer and Die Well

The above texts indicate that Ratzinger considers Mary to have died before being assumed into heaven. This, combined with the fact that he did not even feel the need to argue for this position, confirms Ratzinger's broader understanding that suffering and death are in the world not primarily because of sin but in order to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. In light of the above discussion, we may now add that redemptive suffering and death also unite us to the New Eve, his blessed mother. I would now like to draw out some implications of Ratzinger's approach to the Blessed Mother's immaculate acceptance of suffering and death.

In light of Ratzinger's understanding of Mary combined with the integral role of suffering and death in the evolutionary design of the cosmos, it seems appropriate to conclude that mankind's ultimate problem is not suffering and physical death per se but rather our *resistance to accepting these crosses as our path to sanctification*. To put it in Ratzinger's personalist language, the ultimate problem is rather our *orientation towards* or *relationship with* these trials through which we all must pass—i.e., whether we play the victim, raging and rebelling against them, or rather whether we overcome them by receiving them as gifts. From this perspective, the grace lost by our forefathers was not something that would have prevented us from suffering and dying but rather that which *allows us to suffer and die well*—with Christ and like his Blessed Mother in a cruciform gift of self-abandonment to the Father's will.

Ratzinger's vision is one of a human race that has likely always experienced suffering of many kinds. However, as we have seen above, this would not have caused in Mary or our first parents the experience of misery, absurdity, and dread that the rest of us experience because of our inept response to trials. I find that C.S. Lewis captures this point well when he, like Ratzinger, says that the problem of how to bear suffering well is crucial to our fulfillment as human beings: "[T]he proper good of a creature is to surrender itself to its Creator . . . the problem is how to recover this self-surrender. We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are, as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms" (Lewis 2001, p. 76). From here, Lewis makes a poignant suggestion that sheds light on how Christ, Mary, and our first parents may have experienced their suffering:

Even in Paradise I have supposed a minimal self-adherence to be overcome, though the overcoming, and the yielding, would there be rapturous. But to surrender a self will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death . . . The self-surrender which he practiced before the Fall meant no struggle but only the delicious overcoming of an infinitesimal self-adherence which delighted to be overcome—of which we see a dim analogy in the rapturous mutual self-surrenders of lovers even now. (Lewis 2001, p. 76)

This portrait of sinless suffering is sublime, yet everyday experiences may also serve to illustrate what an unfallen response to pain and suffering might look like. Consider the

satisfaction that comes from having completed a hard day's work or the gratification that ensues upon completing a demanding workout with all the sweat and pain it involves. Frequently, the sense of fulfillment that we receive from achieving these goals comes not *despite* but precisely *because of* hardships endured and obstacles overcome along the way. Indeed, while the journey was not necessarily pleasurable, it was not miserable and indeed was ultimately a source of great joy.

This, then, is the key: Even if the human race has always suffered and died, the experience—like that which we ourselves sometimes glimpse in the midst of great trials—need not be one of affliction and despair. For, just as the self-giving that we find in the life of Christ and the Trinity itself is one of sheer bliss, so too man in his graced state could have found rapturous joy through his surrender of self in loving suffering. While we today cannot simply return to this original state, the good news is that God *does* offer us the grace to live our sufferings well, and he has left us examples of how to do so in Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

### 9. Conclusions: Evolution, Evil, and Eschatology

As I have argued in this essay, the person of Jesus Christ and our participation in his *kenosis* are essential to any theodicy that wishes to do justice to the problem of suffering and death in the evolutionary path that led to the emergence of human beings. I hope to have shown that, for Joseph Ratzinger, man's real problem does not lie in suffering and death *per se* but rather our disordered *relationship with* these trials. That we rage and rebel against our pain is not evidence against God's goodness. Rather, it is a summons to look to the cross of Christ as the model for *how to suffer and die well*—with Christ and like his Blessed Mother in a cruciform gift of self-abandonment to the Father's will. That said, in drawing this essay towards a conclusion, I would be remiss not to mention one more key dimension of the Christian response to the problem of evil: The ultimate answer to life's sufferings lies in the hope for resurrected life in a new heaven and new earth. In this vision, man's *kenosis* of bearing the cross leads to *theosis* and resurrection—and not just of human beings but the transfiguration of all creation at the end of time.

Significantly, for our purposes, Ratzinger has often described this eschatological transformation as an "evolution." For instance, in his classic *Introduction to Christianity*, he writes that Christification—the transformation of all in Christ—is "the real drift [*die eigentliche Drift*] of evolution . . . the real goal of the ascending process of growth or becoming" (Ratzinger 1990, pp. 236–37). This applies to individual human beings but also to the glorious transformation of all creation (Ramage 2020a, pp. 106–9). Ratzinger's lofty claim about the destiny of the created world finds its basis in multiple New Testament texts. With their exalted expectations for the future of the created universe, these letters clearly share the profound conviction that the evolving world we inhabit is "very good" (Gn 1:31) and therefore destined in some way—however inscrutable it is to us here below—to share with us in eternal glory.

Perhaps most famously, St. John envisions "a new heaven and a new earth" to be revealed in the fullness of time (Rv 21:1; cf. Is 11:6–9; 25:7–9; 65:17–25; 66:22) and sees the Lord declaring, "Behold, I make *all things new*" (Rv 21:5, emphasis added). In the same vein, 2 Pt 3:8–14 informs us that, when the day of the Lord arrives like a thief, "then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire"—not in order to abolish creation but rather to *renew* it as a "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." Expanding on this eschatological vision in his own turn, Paul depicts the whole creation "groaning [*systemazei*] in travail" as it waits to be "set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rm 8:21–22).

Pope Benedict described this grand eschatological vision in Scripture as having a "great Christological—indeed, cosmic—dynamism" (Benedict XVI 2007a, p. 270). In his first Easter homily as pope, Benedict preached along the same lines using biological terms to describe Heavenly life analogically:

If we may borrow the language of the theory of evolution, [Christ's resurrection] is the greatest "mutation", absolutely the most crucial leap into a totally new dimension that there has ever been in the long history of life and its development: a leap into a completely new order that does concern us, and concerns the whole of history . . . It is a qualitative leap in the history of "evolution" and of life in general toward a new future life, toward a new world, which, starting from Christ, already continuously permeates this world of ours, transforms it, and draws it to itself. (Benedict XVI 2006b; Benedict XVI 2011)

As an indication of just how close this theme was to his heart, it is telling that the emeritus pontiff chose to expand upon it in his rare writings penned in retirement. For instance, in one he writes, "If we really wanted to summarize very briefly the content of the Faith as laid down in the Bible, we might do so by saying that the Lord has initiated a narrative of love with us and wants to *subsume all creation* in it" (Benedict XVI 2019). In his landmark volume *Eschatology*, Ratzinger spoke of this state that encompasses all of creation as a "pan-cosmic existence" that leads to "universal exchange and openness, and so to the overcoming of all alienation." Making his own the words of St. Paul, he expounds, "Only where creation achieves such unity can it be true that God is 'all in all' [Eph 1:23] . . . where each thing becomes completely itself precisely by being completely in the other" (Ratzinger 1988, p. 192; Eph 1:23; Col 1:20).

In another, even more stunning text—this time a brief post-retirement address given on the sixty-fifth anniversary of his priestly ordination—Benedict went so far as to speak of this transformative dynamic as one of *cosmic transubstantiation*:

The cross, suffering, all that is wrong with the world: he transformed all this into "thanks" and therefore into a "blessing." Hence he fundamentally transubstantiated life and the world [*fondamentalmente ha transustanzionato la vita e il mondo*] . . . Finally, we wish to insert ourselves into the "thanks" of the Lord, and thus truly receive the newness of life and contribute to the "transubstantiation" of the world [*transustanziazione del mondo*] so that it might not be a place of death, but of life: a world in which love has conquered death. (Benedict XVI 2016)

In this short paragraph, the emeritus pontiff emphasizes that the "transubstantiation of the world" is a reality that has at once already begun and yet which will continue to unfold to the extent that we disciples insert ourselves into Christ's saving work as his co-redeemers. While Benedict certainly thinks that happiness can be found by embracing suffering and death in the earthly realm, this text manifests his conviction that all our present sufferings will one day come to an end in the joy of eternal bliss.

What, exactly, will it look like in the new heaven and new earth when the entire cosmos and its sufferings are transformed in Christ? The truth is that Scripture reveals to us *that* this is the vocation of all creation but comprehending *what it means* is another thing. As Scripture teaches, no eye has seen, no ear heard, and no heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9, citing Is 64:4). Yet what believers do know is that what awaits us on the other side of death is infinitely more glorious than we could ever imagine. We also know that the path there comes by way of embracing the experience of suffering and death that is so crucial to the evolutionary dynamic of the cosmos.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This essay at times refers to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict by his surname and at other times by his papal name in the effort to distinguish writings composed during his pontificate from those preceding it. When not referring specifically to a text, the name Benedict or “emeritus pontiff” is also employed since this text has been written during the period of his retirement. For another treatment of Ratzinger on evolution, see (Novo 2020; Ramage 2015; Ramage 2020b). For a notable endeavor to explicate Ratzinger’s approach to suffering, death, and original sin in light of advancements in evolutionary theory, see Sanz (2018).
- <sup>2</sup> The lecture notes of Ratzinger’s (1957) Mariology course at Freising Seminary are housed in the *Benedikt XVI Institut* in Regensburg and have been expertly summarized in de Gaál (2019). In what follows, I will refer to this manuscript of Ratzinger’s Mariology lecture notes as *Mariologie* and reproduce de Gaál’s translations of the text.
- <sup>3</sup> A thorough survey of Ratzinger’s (1964) *Schöpfungslehre* manuscript can be found in Sanz (2014). For a discussion of the weight that ought to be accorded these unpublished works along with a helpful comparison to the value that we duly accord to Aristotle’s lecture notes, see (de Gaál 2019, p. 82).
- <sup>4</sup> Beyond Ratzinger’s approach, for other valuable positions regarding the relationship of original sin with the onset of suffering and death in the cosmos inspired by Thomas Aquinas and Maximus the Confessor, respectively, see Austriaco (2015) and Lombardo (2019). For a remarkable ecclesial document that treats the relationship of sin, love, and suffering, see John Paul II (1984).

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