

# FINDING GOD IN SUFFERING

---

FR. CHRISTOPHER M. MAHAR



## Praise for *Finding God in Suffering*

“I wish I didn’t need this book, but I do. We all do, because so much of life is occupied with suffering—grief, disappointment, physical pain, shame. Jesus Christ showed us the way through every ordeal, empowering us not only to endure, but to triumph. In these pages, Father Mahar shows us that way, helping us to understand it as he provides clear, practical spiritual guidance.”

— Mike Aquilina, executive vice-president,  
St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology;  
author, *The Fathers of the Church*; EWTN host

“Suffering is often opposed to human happiness, and its incidence often robs life of its meaning. In *Finding God in Suffering*, Father Mahar evangelizes the human experience of suffering, illustrating how it can serve God’s purpose and is, therefore, not a sign of the absence of God.”

— Cardinal Peter Turkson, Chancellor,  
Pontifical Academies for Sciences and Social Sciences

“Despite the ‘broken families, broken promises, and broken lives’ all around us, [Father Christopher Mahar] effectively illustrates the astonishing Good News of our faith—that the ‘Gospel of Suffering’ allows every trial to be a rich encounter with Christ and an opportunity to embrace a creative vocation radiating hope.”

— Genevieve Kineke, author and speaker  
on authentic Catholic femininity

“Finding an answer to the question of suffering is one of the most crucial discoveries in life. Father Mahar masterfully and gracefully guides us into this difficult subject, helps us to find God in suffering, and in him discover its meaning and value. This work is an answer to the prayers and cries of so many presently in dark valleys, and it is a source of light and hope to all those who compassionately strive to love and care for them.”

— Father Roger Landry, Catholic Chaplain,  
Columbia University.

“The shadow of the Cross falls upon each of us in different ways and can plunge us into disorientating darkness, distress, and even despair. *Where is God?* we ask.

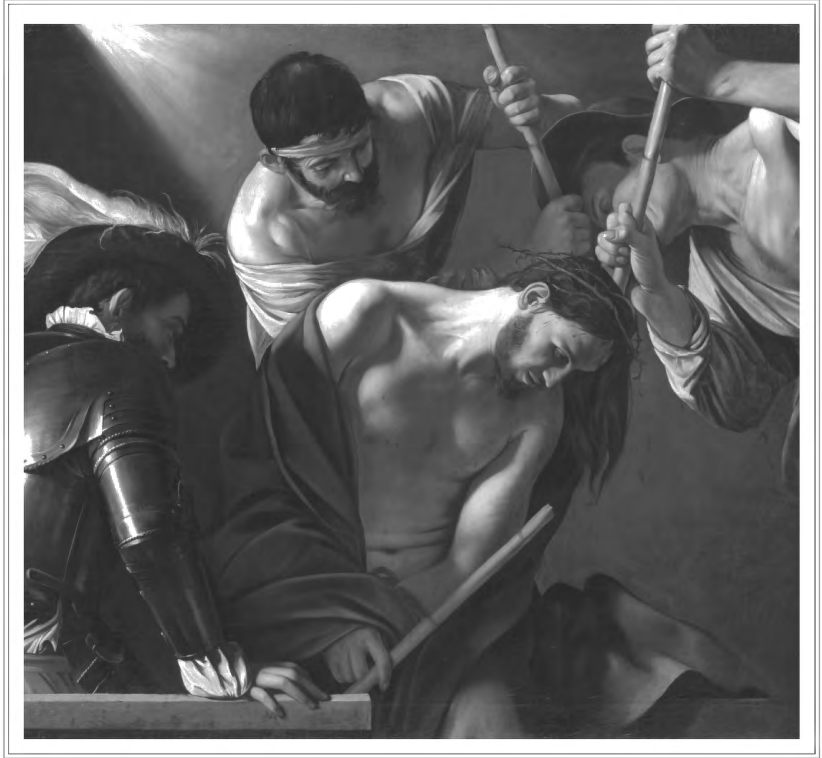
“Yet, for the Christian, the Cross is a sign of hope: its deepest shadows are cast by the light of Easter morning. The victory of Our Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death transforms our suffering and gives it redemptive value. In our suffering and through it we

can participate in that victory; we can encounter God with an intimacy and purity of heart perhaps hitherto unknown.

“Pope Benedict XVI taught, ‘Suffering accepted for love of Christ, for love of God and of others is a redeeming force, a force of love.’ May Father Christopher Mahar’s profound book help us to retrieve this power, this force of love, which is so often absent in the suffering of men and women today. May it inspire each of us always to persevere in the supernatural hope that suffering borne for the love of God betokens, for, as Our Lord taught, ‘He who perseveres to the end shall be saved’ (Mt 24:13).”

— Robert Cardinal Sarah, Prefect Emeritus  
of the Congregation for Divine Worship  
and Discipline of the Sacraments.

FINDING GOD  
IN SUFFERING



# FINDING GOD IN SUFFERING

By Father Christopher M. Mahar



Library of Congress Control Number: 2023934139

ISBN 10: 0-8198-2756-8

ISBN 13: 978-0-8198-2756-2

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

Cover design by Ryan McQuade

Cover art and frontispiece: *The Crowning with Thorns*, Caravaggio (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, wikicommons).

Excerpts of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are taken from the English translation for use in the United States of America copyright © 1994, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica*, copyright © 1997, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2023, Christopher M. Mahar

---

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Paul’s Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

[www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

28 27 26 25 24 23



*To my parents, Earl and Mary,  
and my siblings, Melissa and Matthew.*

# Contents

## INTRODUCTION

Salvific Suffering

*A Redeeming Force* . . . . . 1

## Part I

### When We Suffer

#### CHAPTER 1

The Encounter with Suffering

*Diagnosing the Disease* . . . . . 9

#### CHAPTER 2

The Problem of Evil

*Distortion of the Good* . . . . . 15

#### CHAPTER 3

Transcendence and Hope

*The Search for Meaning* . . . . . 21

CHAPTER 4

Castles East of Eden

*Freedom's Sacred Space* . . . . . 27

CHAPTER 5

Growth in Suffering

*A Difficult and Enlightening Path* . . . . . 35

CHAPTER 6

Innocent Suffering

*Seeking Balance in a Broken World* . . . . . 41

CHAPTER 7

Light in the Darkness

*Finding Love in an Unlikely Place* . . . . . 47

CHAPTER 8

Christ the Redeemer

*Overcoming the Ultimate Suffering* . . . . . 53

CHAPTER 9

Gethsemane

*Reclaiming the Garden* . . . . . 59

CHAPTER 10

Sign of the Cross

*Suffering Redeemed* . . . . . 65

CHAPTER 11

Eucharistic Suffering

*Christ, the Good and Loving Pelican* . . . . . 73

Part II  
How We Suffer

CHAPTER 12

The “Fortunate” One

*The Path to Freedom* . . . . . 81

CHAPTER 13

Proof for God

*The Heartbeat of Hope* . . . . . 91

CHAPTER 14

The Broken Road

*A Way for the Church* . . . . . 101

CHAPTER 15

Now I Begin

*Finding the Courage to Persevere* . . . . . 111

CHAPTER 16

Presence and Participation

*God Working in and Through Our Suffering* . . . . . 121

CHAPTER 17

The Patience of God

*Perseverance in the Face of Evil* . . . . . 131

CHAPTER 18

Encounter with the Living God

*Sharing in the Suffering of Christ* . . . . . 139

CHAPTER 19

Suffering for Christ

*The Cross of Martyrdom* . . . . . 147

CHAPTER 20

Suffering with Christ

*Listening for God's Voice* . . . . . 157

CHAPTER 21

Set Free

*The Descending Meaning of Suffering* . . . . . 165

Acknowledgments . . . . . 173

## Appendices

APPENDIX I

Sacred Scripture on Suffering and Hope . . . . . 177

APPENDIX II

Prayers for Times of Suffering . . . . . 193

APPENDIX III

Further Resources on Suffering . . . . . 207

## INTRODUCTION

# Salvific Suffering

### *A Redeeming Force*

**I**t was the Great Jubilee Year 2000 and I was a seminarian standing in St. Peter's Square. Saint John Paul II was celebrating Mass as I shuffled uncomfortably and tried to understand the homily. The Pope's words were labored and, at certain points, incoherent. The Parkinson's disease that he had endured for so long had taken its toll, but it did not hinder him from addressing the crowd of pilgrims that day. He was speaking about suffering and discipleship, subjects that interested me a great deal. In many ways it was the experience of the cross that had led me to a deeper understanding of God in my life. Through the conflicts I faced in my daily life, I had come to discover that Christ, who willingly took up his cross, desires to draw near to us when we endure difficulties and challenges. Listening now to the Pope addressing suffering, I found that his words rang with a magnetic authenticity.

The Mass continued, and at one point my attention was drawn to the jumbotron as the camera closed in on him. He was holding his crosier, the large staff that symbolized his governance and shepherding care of God's flock. At the top of the crosier was the crucifix graphically depicting the wounded and suffering Christ. Undoubtedly his own life had come to resemble the Lord's cross more and more through the accumulation of sufferings he had experienced. As the image remained on the screen for some time, I was flushed with emotion and thought, "*This is the homily he was preaching moments ago.*" The messenger was himself the message.

In that same place, on a warm and sunny day in May of 1981, Pope Saint John Paul II had survived an attempt on his life that left the world in shock. The following Sunday, from his room in the Policlinico Gemelli hospital, he sent a brief, pre-recorded message to be played for vigilant pilgrims in St. Peter's: "I pray for that brother of ours who shot me, and whom I have sincerely pardoned. United with Christ, priest and victim, I offer my sufferings for the Church and for the world."<sup>1</sup> To hear the voice of the fallen Pope speaking anew to his flock was itself a triumph, but those words carried a profound and even daunting message that still awaited further expression and a deeper explanation.

Nearly three years later, on the Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes, patroness of the sick, the Holy Father gave the Church and the world the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, "On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering." One man's personal struggle with evil and the cross would become a gift

---

1. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, no. 20 (Vatican), May 18, 1981.

for those immersed in what he described as the “world of suffering.”<sup>2</sup>

The cross, in one form or another, enters into every human life. For some, it may seem overwhelming, a weight almost too heavy to bear. For other people, perhaps there are several, lesser burdens, but ones that last for long periods of time. Big or small, many or few, we all bear them. What Saint John Paul II teaches the Church and the world is that we are not alone in our struggle. There are answers from God, even in the midst of suffering. He who began his pontificate with an encyclical letter on Christ the Redeemer directs our gaze to the Lord of all, who has the power to transform even sorrow and pain into hope and new life.

In the sufferings that Saint John Paul II bore throughout his life, which were pronounced and widely visible at his life’s end, he taught us that there is meaning in suffering and that God draws near to those who struggle beneath the burden of the cross. Pope Benedict XVI, describing the ailing Saint John Paul II, explained how “he showed us that suffering accepted for love of Christ, for love of God and of others is a redeeming force, a force of love and no less powerful than the great deeds he accomplished in the first part of his Pontificate.”<sup>3</sup>

This book is inspired by both the messenger, Saint John Paul II, and the message of redemptive suffering that he

---

2. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1984), no. 8.

3. Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone,” *The Holy See*, August 6, 2008, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/august/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080806\\_clerobressanone.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080806_clerobressanone.html)



teaches us in *Salvifici Doloris*. In many ways the chapters of this book follow the questions, challenges, and themes of that apostolic letter. Each chapter, therefore, builds upon the material that comes before it and helps to form a composite of the complex and compelling reality of human suffering.

While we all struggle to find an answer to the question of suffering in our own lives, the solution is not so simple. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that “only the Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question.”<sup>4</sup> Our faith celebrates the amazing story of the God who created us in love and sent Christ into the world to find us when we became lost; in the most dramatic of ways Christ underwent the passion to redeem us and founded the Church to embrace the world with his message of salvation. This integral drama alone has the capacity to address the difficult and often overwhelming question of suffering. The chapters of this book attempt to unfold that drama and allow the reader to understand that God will stop at nothing to communicate his redemptive and healing love to those who suffer.

*Finding God in Suffering* is written with the individual person in mind and can serve as a personal guide through what may seem at times to be a labyrinth of suffering. It might also be helpful to read this book in groups, leaning on the assistance of others who can share our burden of suffering and help us to find the strength to move forward in faith.

---

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 309.

In the chapters that follow, there are many different stories of suffering and of healing. Some are compelling anecdotes or tales from the lives of the saints; others are taken from literature. All of the stories are intended to help the reader enter more deeply into the greatest story ever told: the drama of the eternal Son of God who loved us and offered his life for us on Calvary.

What the teachings of our faith propose, and what the witness and writings of Saint John Paul II articulate, is not merely that there is a meaning in human suffering. More than that, they communicate the profound and mysterious truth that, even in suffering, we can find love. They present nothing less than this astounding paradox: in the cross of Jesus Christ, love has found us.

PART I

When We Suffer



## CHAPTER I

# The Encounter with Suffering

### *Diagnosing the Disease*

**K**ristin sits uncomfortably on the cold paper sheet that covers the cushioned examination table in her doctor's office. The preliminary evaluation is over. She waits for the physician with mixed emotions: fear, impatience, resignation. In the last few weeks she has experienced several surprising episodes: tightness in her throat, shortness of breath, and the terrible feeling that she was going to be sick. It happened twice in the supermarket, and then again during a meeting at work. Something was wrong. Was it the onset of some terrible and debilitating illness?

She has explained it all to her doctor, who listened with careful attention and asked many questions. Some of them were about her health, while others seemed more personal.

Oddly, she felt relieved responding to inquiries about her increased responsibilities at work and challenges at home that were weighing heavily upon her.

Finally, her physician returns and takes a seat beside the examination table. Kristin is fighting back tears, convinced that this will be very bad news. "Everything looks great so far," the doctor says. "There are no major concerns." Kristin sighs, expressing both relief and confusion. The doctor goes on to explain that Kristin may be suffering from increased anxiety and something called agoraphobia. She smiles and hands Kristin a small booklet with that strange name on the cover. "Let's start with this," she says. "We'll call it homework for your health. It's a different kind of medicine, but it has proven very helpful for the very thing you are struggling with. Look it over, and we can check back in a few weeks." Kristin takes the booklet home and reads it, feeling consoled by the descriptions detailing her own personal experience. She is still facing a difficult climb. It is not the last time she will struggle with anxiety, but now that she knows more about what she is up against, her response from this point forward will be different, better.



Reading a book on suffering will not remove our difficulties and crosses any more than a booklet on agoraphobia will take away anxiety. But knowing more about suffering, and reflecting on the insights of the saints and the teachings of our faith, can help us to see what we are up against. More than that, we come to discover that we are not alone.

The experience of suffering is universal, indiscriminate, and often devastatingly cruel. Suffering can occur instant-

neously or accumulate over time. It can manifest itself in a single moment or last for several years. Suffering can quickly lead to a sense of isolation as it generates conflict within our physical and spiritual lives, with those around us, and even with our understanding of the meaning of life. Thus, the world of human suffering, says Saint John Paul II, is a highly personal one in which “suffering seems almost inexpressible and not transferable.”<sup>5</sup> One of the first non-starters counselors are taught to avoid is the platitude, “I know how you feel.” You don’t.

Within the experience of isolation and disorientation, “there inevitably arises *the question: Why?*”<sup>6</sup> We often ask questions such as: Why is God allowing this to happen? Why is this taking place at this time in my life? Why am I suffering in this way?

Suffering may even challenge our belief in a good and loving God. In the opening part of the *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas Aquinas frames the argument with blunt precision: “The word ‘God’ means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.”<sup>7</sup> At the surface, the argument seems somewhat simplistic. Aquinas himself will go on to refute it handily, offering several of his famous “proofs” for the existence of God. On a personal level, however, the case against God’s

---

5. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 5.

6. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 9.

7. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948), 1, Q. 2, A. 3.

existence in the face of human suffering often gains surprising strength. Philosophical propositions do not always motivate us. Pain does.

When we try to make sense of suffering, we are not seeking scientific data nor analyzing the physical symptoms of some puzzling illness. What we are seeking is something much more innate and proper to humanity itself. In *Salvifici Doloris*, Saint John Paul II says that a more complete picture emerges when we are able to perceive the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering.<sup>8</sup> Physical suffering can accompany any of a number of illnesses and ailments, from chronic back pain to cancer. Another form of suffering related to the body is psychological suffering, which encompasses the entire spectrum of mental illness, from clinical depression to crippling neuroses.

Moral suffering, however, is different. Saint John Paul II describes moral suffering as “pain of the soul.”<sup>9</sup> There is no prescription to alleviate that affliction; no therapy or surgery will correct or mitigate it. Moral suffering is pain of a spiritual nature. Witnessing a grave error in judgment or ethics in a leader or a revered family member could result in a moral injury; we may feel a sense of betrayal when we become the victim of another person’s transgressions. Likewise, we often suffer spiritual consequences for the sins that we freely commit. Moral suffering, in other words, produces a wound that is felt deep within the soul.

Recognizing the difference between physical suffering and moral suffering is important, because we are created by

---

8. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 5.

9. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 5.

God as human persons, body and soul. God can and does speak to us through the sufferings that we experience and helps us to become aware of our need not for just a medical remedy but for the Divine Physician, Jesus Christ.

When suffering enters into our lives, it is perceived as an offense. This is personal. We rise up and protest because it is something keenly felt, and on a much deeper level than the merely physical. What we encounter when we come face to face with suffering is an experience of negativity. In a word, "Man suffers whenever he experiences any kind of evil."<sup>10</sup>

1. Where has suffering entered into my life? How has it touched my family or community?
2. Have I honestly confronted God with the question of "Why?" What kinds of fears can hold me back?
3. Where have I gone to seek a "remedy" for the wounds I have received in the past? Where do I desire to go in the future?

*O GOD, YOU CREATED us in love and made us for yourself. Our bodies and souls are a gift from you and you direct our lives so that we may share in your love and your life. In those places where we feel the wounds of the brokenness of this world, give us your strength and the healing that we long for. Help us to recognize you in the midst of our pain, and to know that you are near. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

---

10. Saint John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 7.