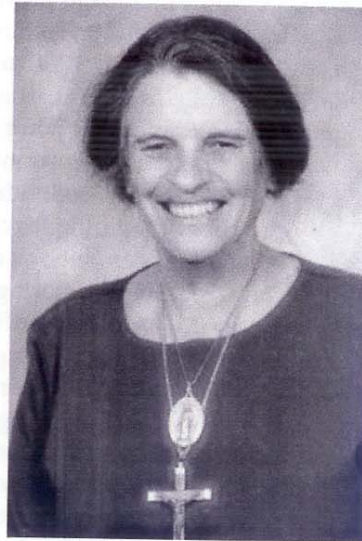


**For More Leaflets Like This**



Feel free to Xerox this leaflet as you like. For other leaflets like this one, go to [www.rondachervin.com](http://www.rondachervin.com) and select Leaflets from the sidebar on the left.



Ronda Chervin

*Tell Me Why  
I Should Be a  
Catholic When...*

There is so much Pain  
in the World it seems  
there cannot be a God  
of Love?



by

Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.



he greatest cause of doubt about the Catholic philosophy of life is the reality of suffering in this world. How could a good, loving God allow so much pain when he could stop it immediately by means of his miraculous powers?

High on the list of such baffling sufferings are these:

- The death of infants.
- The destruction of whole communities in earthquakes, floods, drought, and famine as well as painful, lingering death caused by illness.
- A food chain that depends on each species devouring another species to survive.



Some suffering — such as that resulting from war, murder, abortion, incest, rape, abandonment, infidelity, theft, drug and alcohol abuse — is clearly caused not by God but by mankind. A great portion of human suffering is caused by people (against whom we lock our doors and bar our windows at night) — certainly not God!

When we reflect on these evils, however, we tend to feel that there was a moment when God could have but did not intervene! "If only my child had left home two minutes earlier (stopped by God), she would not have crossed the path of that rapist!" "If I hadn't lost my good job (God could have changed the boss's mind), we wouldn't be living in the bad neighborhood where my son joined the gang that got him into drugs." "If I had gotten pregnant three months later, I would have met Joe and we would have gotten married and kept any baby we had."

The basic dilemma is this: if God is loving and good he would have made his creatures happy, for God is by definition almighty, and an all-powerful God can do anything. But so many people are unhappy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness or total power (as Woody Allen jests: maybe God isn't evil, he's just an underachiever).



Actually, to get down to it, it is hard to understand why God created human beings at all. It is easy to picture a world of oceans, mountains, plants, animals, all just there flourishing but not needing to cause any pain — the world we usually imagine Eden was. It is when we add free-will characters such as angels and humans that the problem begins. It is the bad angel, Satan, who tempts man to explore disobedience and evil, and Adam and Eve who take him up on it. From that flow all the evils we listed earlier.

So why did God create persons who can disobey him? Why did God create anything at all, for that matter, since he was happy in his goodness with just the Trinity for company?

Religious philosophers have racked their brains over that one for many centuries. One of the best answers to be found is in the writings of Thomas Aquinas: goodness is naturally diffusive. What does that mean? It is the very nature of something good either to overflow or to create. For Jews and Christians, Scripture is our source of truth. The Bible tells us that God created. An analogy might help. Why is it that usually at the very peak of love between two people, when they feel most full, they start thinking of starting a family? Then after two children if not sooner, full of delight, they start thinking about a house, and maybe pets, and maybe more children. In fact, the greater their happiness, the more they want to create! Maybe God is like us

that way. Maybe he is so delighted with his creation that he planned for more and more.

Scripture tells us that angels and humans are the most like God because they are conscious intelligent beings who can know and will and love as God can. But, given the fact that angels and humans can disobey God and cause endless evils; shouldn't God have trashed the idea of creating them? Well, consider the fact that when you dream of a child of your own you know that this child will probably sin and also be the victim of sin. This thought causes some people never to procreate, but most believe it is worth it. Somehow they hope that the good in life and the good they hope for in an afterlife will make up for all the pain. Maybe God thinks that way, too.

It seems so!

Such reflections may provide insight, but they never totally satisfy the human mind, especially when one is confronted with severe pain or when one sees loved ones suffering. In fact, suffering remains a mystery in the sense of never being resolved on this earth.

But being a mystery does not mean that no light can be shed on it. The result of deeper and deeper thought is not so much to be convinced that there is no problem as to become convinced that it is right to love God, believing him to be good, even though it is not clear why everything happens as it does with such painful results.



Among the most convincing insights to be found in contemporary religious literature concerning the problem of how a good God could allow so much suffering in the world is the book *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis.



Starting with the dilemma as stated above — namely that since God is almighty and supposedly good, he must be able to make us happy, not to live with pain — Lewis finds a solution in a close examination of the key words in this puzzle: almighty, good, and happy.

First, let's look at the concept of all-powerfulness. Many people get confused because they do not understand that to be able to do everything does not mean to be able to do what is self-contradictory. A famous old riddle goes this way: If God can do anything, can

he create a square circle? This question is actually absurd, for to be able to create anything doesn't mean to create a nothing. A square circle is really a nothing because it is a contradiction in terms. There cannot be a square

circle not because God is limited but because it is an empty word — a nonentity.

Now, according to Lewis, the same analysis can be done with respect to the possibility of God creating a person (angel or human) who is free yet totally controlled by God! Since it is the very nature of a person to be free, a totally controlled person is just not a person but a robot.

What does this have to do with the problem of suffering? Well, consider the matter. Huge hunks of pain are caused by free-will decisions of humans, such as murders, thefts, wars, and incest. Now if God simply waved a wand and destroyed the gun of the murderer, the hand of the thief, the bomb of the enemy, the organs of the rapist, how would these people be free?

It appears that given the choice of not creating any persons at all and creating persons whose freedom could hurt others, God chose to create us. Why? Augustine says because God can bring good out of evil. "Really? I don't see it," you might reply. On earth we don't find justice, but in

eternity God can make justice reign. There all our tears will be wiped away, promises Jesus. This means that an all-powerful God must allow for the possibility of the sufferings caused by evil persons as long as he wants to create persons at all. Would it even be worthwhile to create only robots run by himself instead? Would you rather have a robot than a friend, a child, a niece?

What about God's goodness? Here Lewis distinguishes between two meanings of good in our own human way of speaking. Sometimes by calling someone good we mean that the person gives us

whatever we want. Other times we call good someone who gives us what is best for us even if there is pain involved. We may sometimes wish to think the dentist is an ogre, but we really admit with all the pain that he is good to put up with all our grimaces and shrieks and groans in

an effort to help us retain our teeth in good shape. We may sometimes think that a friend who deals drugs is good because the customer wants these toxic drugs and will feel pleasure for a while after getting them, but we really know the drug dealer is evil.

Now it is clear that God is not good in the wrong sense of being one who gives us everything we want. One witty writer pointed out that if God gave all of us everything we ever wanted there would be no people left since at one time or another most of us wish at least one person would drop dead quickly!

But does God give us what is best? This is what we believe. We believe that he allows us to suffer because he sees that it can purify us! So, who needs that much purification? That is hard for us to see, especially about ourselves. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis penetratingly explains how much of our unfeeling indifference to others comes from not



understanding their pain from within. The more types of suffering we endure, the more likely that we will relate to others with healing empathy.

Pain also weans us from the world. Since our true home is in heaven, it is not good for us to settle down to the temporary or partial joys and pleasures of what is only an inn on the pilgrimage. It is as if a child would only watch TV dogs and never touch a real one. Real dogs might bite, but they are worth it. A kid addicted to TV might need to be forcibly pulled away from the set and persuaded to explore the real world. An adult addicted to the mixed pleasures of this world might need some goad to look upward at unimaginably greater sources of happiness, such as union with God. Kahlil Gibran writes in the famous book *The Prophet* "Your pain is the breaking of the shell



that encloses your understanding. And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields. And you would watch with serenity through the winters of your grief."

This brings us to the last word Lewis analyzes: happiness. By happiness some people mean a feeling of contentment, pleasure, absence of pain. Another meaning of "happy" is "joyful and hopeful."

Obviously God does not keep us content in this life on earth. But that does not mean that all is misery. He gives us joy that is not lasting, and hope in everlasting joy for eternity.

Here is a thought exercise you might do to understand this distinction better. Someone



invents a miracle drug. Shoot it into your arm and you will never experience pain again. On the



other hand, it will numb you in such a way that you cannot make any decisions or carry out any fresh actions. You will just sit in a corner smiling and content for the rest of your life! Would you take it?

At first it might sound good, especially if you are in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain at the moment. But after a while most human beings would rather put up with a mixture of pain and delight coming with freedom, especially if they anticipate a time in the future when all will be not numb pleasure but real delight caused by the presence of beauty, loved friends, and God himself.

In this way we can see that a real God of love does not create robots to avoid the pain that comes with our sin. He gives what is best rather than what is wanted and postpones our happiness, giving glimpses of it through occasional joys. Consider the beloved Psalm 23, popularly called "The Lord Is My Shepherd." The shepherd doesn't provide a giant insurance policy; rather, he is our Savior who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death that he himself endured, and who will lead us ultimately into the green pastures of eternal happiness. As a matter of fact, even an insurance policy doesn't guarantee that your house won't burn down but only that you will be compensated later.

A careful reader will not be satisfied yet. What about all that suffering that comes not from free-will decisions of angels and humans but from nature? Couldn't God have made nature without any painful aspects to it?

Lewis came up with an intriguing insight here also. He claims that to have free-will creatures

with bodies (such as humans), there has to be some kind of natural background. A body needs food, shelter, clothing. Now, a piece of rock honed sharp enough to cut can also pierce the skin of someone you want to murder. The natural being, the rock, is not at fault; it is our free will that uses it wrongly. The rains that are necessary for crops to grow can become floods. Earthquakes needed to restore balance to huge underground plates can also destroy houses. This is an ecologically framed answer. Some present-day economists point out that



many old tribal customs are the result of individual tribes preparing for all eventualities (such as drought and flooding) by storing necessities. The terrible sufferings of nations nowadays come largely, according to these students of society, from inequitable and inefficient ways of distributing wealth brought on by modernization. For instance, peoples who stop growing beans and rice in order to specialize in strawberries and asparagus for exportation to richer countries usually find themselves lacking in necessities in times of drought. We have the technology to rush emergency aid to any nation on earth, but we often lack the will to organize distribution effectively.

Theologians add that with the fall of mankind into original sin, nature fell as well, as understood in the famous passage of St. Paul where he tells of all "creation . . . groaning . . . [for] the coming of the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23). All creation includes the animal kingdom, which fell because of mankind.

And yet, and yet, and yet . . . that much pain? Do we need that much pain? Lewis himself had to ask that question when his beloved wife died of cancer. Suddenly all his arguments in *The Problem of Pain* seemed meaningless to him. His grief was so

great that he began to imagine that, after all, God might be some demon torturing us. Like Job of the Old Testament he wished that he himself were dead: "Why give life to those bitter of heart, who long for a death that never comes. . . ?" Ultimately Job was saved from despair not by reasoning but by the overwhelming experience of the presence of God. So, too, did Lewis slowly gain strength not from his own reasoning but from God's grace.

In the concentration camps of the Nazis some Jews such as Viktor Frankl were able to find meaning in suffering, a meaning that eventually brought him years afterward to belief in Christ. The Protestant woman Betsy Ten Boom, who was tortured in the camp for having hidden Jews in her house in Holland, told those in despair of God's love: "If you know Jesus, you don't have to know why."

Ultimately, Catholics believe, it is the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross that stand as a mute answer to all those who would deny God



because their pain has been so great. The voluntary suffering of the God-made-man proves that God does not watch our pain from a distance, wondering if we will keep a stiff upper lip through it all. No! God himself came to earth to show that in his love he

shares our suffering and wants to bring us to the only place where there will be no more pain, only joy. What does the ticket to that "magic kingdom" cost? Only that our horror of suffering may help us to try to alleviate it, following the guidance of Jesus, the Savior.