

X. LAW AND SUFFERING

THE resistance to sin nearly always involves some degree of suffering: in some cases it involves terrible suffering. And there are those who would relax the moral law when the suffering caused by obedience to it appears to be extreme.

Now, no one can alter God's law. Even the Church cannot do that: within the framework of His law she may make what we call by-laws, binding upon her members, but these must be in accord with God's law, which she cannot change.

This point is not always grasped. The Church has received from God the power to make laws binding upon her members. But this power, as I have said, is subordinate to the laws stated by God Himself as binding upon men. The distinction may be illustrated in the case of marriage. The Church cannot grant any of her children a divorce because when they make the contract of marriage (that is to say, agree to take each other as husband and wife for life) God brings into being a new relationship. Now, by God's act consequent upon their contract, they are man and wife. This new relationship, though it follows upon their contract, is not created by their contract, but by God. The Church can no more

LAW AND SUFFERING

make them cease to be husband and wife than it could make a father and son cease to be father and son. But within the law laid down by God, the Church *can* legislate. It can, for instance, decree that for the marriage of a Catholic, the presence of a priest as witness is necessary. These laws being its own the Church can alter. But she cannot alter the laws given to her by God to be taught to men. Nor does she want to.

First, and most obviously, because of the nature of the law, as already set out. As it stands, God's law is a statement by man's maker of the right way for men to act. It is an expression of God's knowledge, and for human knowledge to try and change it would be absurd. Human institutions may try to alter the law out of pity for suffering men: but the law they are trying to alter is the law given by one who is Infinite Love.

But even if God's law were a lesser thing than that, the effort of men to make it easier would still be futile. No one but the lawmaker can alter the law. If anyone else claims to, it is of no avail. For at the end of life it is the lawmaker who is to judge us, and He will judge us according to His laws as He made them, not according to the modifications introduced into His laws by men. It is as though one were doing an examination paper and some kindly soul, entering the room and discovering that we were in difficulties, altered the questions to make them easier for us. His act would undoubtedly make the writing

of our paper easier: but it might make the reading of the examination results less pleasant.

But there is something worse than mere futility in this altering the moral law to reduce suffering. To make clear what it is we must look a little more closely into the nature of suffering.

Suffering is not necessarily an evil. As we have seen, a thing is evil if it hinders a being in the attainment of the purpose for which the being exists. In the fullest sense, therefore, a thing is evil for man only if it makes it more difficult for him to save his soul. Now suffering does not necessarily do so. Only sin is always and necessarily an evil.

Ordinary observation of life shows that suffering may work in two ways. First it may be good for the sufferer: we know that a man who has never known suffering is soft and undeveloped. His character lacks substance. Immaturity clings about him. And not only do we find that this minimum of suffering is apparently necessary for man's proper development: we also find that really great suffering, if it had been dominated, has the power of enriching the character of the man or woman who has suffered. Suffering, if it ruins some characters, enriches others. It is not necessarily an evil, but may be an immense factor for good. Which it is to be depends, for every man, on the way he accepts it. It lies in him to dominate it or to be dominated by it.

Life is a period of testing: the suffering that arises in it is part of that test. Suffering may be either

LAW AND SUFFERING

curable or incurable. If it is physically incurable, a man must put up with it: he has no choice. If it is curable, but only by a breach of the moral law, a man need not put up with it, he has a choice; yet he is morally bound to put up with it. These two sorts of suffering—the sort that cannot be avoided at all and the sort that cannot be avoided without sin—represent the test that God allows every man to go through. Every man has not the same test: some men have more suffering than others: but no man is allowed by God to have more than he can, with the aid of God's grace, bear. Part of the Christian law is love of neighbour, and the relief of suffering is one of the noblest expressions of this love. But it must be within the limits of God's law.

Thus the effort of men to relax the moral law so that others shall not suffer unduly is aimed at altering the test devised by God Himself. And there is another thing. Life is not only a testing to see if a man is fit, it is likewise a preparation to make him fit. Suffering, as we have seen, can immensely enrich the soul. And the whole of life represents God's means of bringing a soul to its highest point of development. It is for God to measure the amount of suffering necessary for a man's perfection. And anyone who tries to modify God's law in order to reduce the suffering is ensuring that the soul shall not become as fine a thing as it might. Steel is a beautiful thing: but it has taken an immense heat to bring it to its right perfection. Anyone who, as

it were in kindness, cut down the heat to half, would prevent the metal from ever being more than a useless mess. Some suffering is necessary: God knows how much each man needs: and it is by the suffering that cannot be legitimately avoided that God shows the measure of what is necessary.

The essence of the conquest of suffering is that it should be voluntary. Now the suffering that one could avoid by committing sin is obviously, in the strictest sense, voluntary. One has exercised a choice. But the suffering that one cannot avoid at all may equally be made voluntary: a man can accept it as coming from God's hands, thank God for it as the means by which God is choosing to fit his soul for its eternal destiny, and offer it to God for his own sins and the sins of other men.

When man has thus voluntarily accepted suffering, he has made one of the greatest of human conquests. For men naturally flee from suffering in fear of it. By an act of one's will to accept what all men flee from is in itself a triumph. But to go further—as the saints have done and many who are less than saints—and inflict suffering upon oneself—that is the supreme triumph over human weakness: for it is a positive going out to seek what other men flee from.

This infliction of suffering is not, of course, a mere aimless love of suffering. Nor does it arise, as some asceticisms have arisen, from hatred of the body or any feeling of the body's worthlessness. It has the immediate practical end of helping to bring the body

LAW AND SUFFERING

into proper subordination to the soul—for a body not subordinate can ruin the whole being, and fail to achieve its proper freedom as a body. But mortification has another significance which can be no more than touched on here. As there was a suffering of Christ's natural body, so there is a suffering of His mystical body. The human member can unite his suffering with Christ's, and offer them for the whole body. "I fill up in my flesh," says St. Paul, "what is wanting to the suffering of Christ for His body which is the church."

Human life, then, we may see as the preparing for the life of Heaven. It means, on the one hand, complete self-conquest. The soul must conquer the body and bring it into full obedience to God's law: and the soul must itself come into full submission to God. It has, from God's Church, the truths it needs to know about God and man and its own destiny: from the same source it has the law which will govern it in the right use of itself and in the right relation of love and duty to others. But, as has been seen, given that man is to live a life above his nature, he needs those gifts above his nature which we call the Supernatural Life. In the next two chapters I shall discuss the Life.

X. LAW AND SUFFERING

Discussion Aids

Can anyone alter the laws of God? Can the Church? Can the Church within God's laws make by-laws that are binding on her members? Illustrate from the law of marriage. Can the Church alter these by-laws? What is there in the nature of God's laws that makes it impossible to change them? Illustrate the futility of trying to do so from the example of examination questions given in the text. Discuss attempts to change the moral law for the alleviation of suffering. Is suffering necessarily an evil? What constitutes evil? What is the only evil? In what two ways may suffering act? What is the function of suffering in life? What is to be said of attempts to alleviate it? How is suffering conquered? What is to be said of self-inflicted suffering? Discuss St. Paul's text: "I fill up in my flesh, etc." (Col. 1:24). What is the essence of our preparation for heaven?

Practice: When you suffer, try with all your might to see the will of God in your pain. Meet the problem with prayer.