

# COLUMNS COMMENTARY

## Faith calls us to work to end suffering

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ  
Courier columnist

For Christians, the moral life is rooted in God. We seek to live our whole lives as a return gift of praise, thanksgiving and love to the One who has first loved us.

Today many theologians and moralists are stressing the fact that we need to reflect on the view of God we believe in and we present to one another. Good theology always reminds us of what we already know, and today we know very well that the state of our world presents particular difficulties as we try to relate to God. We are more aware than any people in history ever have been that there is massive suffering on this planet.

Some estimates indicate that two-thirds of the people alive today are living in conditions of enormous poverty. We are reminded daily that there are many "holocausts" of many peoples around our globe, and that the suffering peoples of our world have little reason to hope for improvement.

These conditions — and the awareness of them that our modern communications have brought upon us — cause us to reflect on our view of God. This, of course, is because we believe in a God who holds particular — and loving — plans and intentions for the creation and redemption of those He loves. Suffering has always been a stumbling block in the face of belief; the suffering, which today affects the majority of those alive, presents particular difficulties.



HE MORAL LIFE

Theologians, whose job it is to help us say what we are experiencing in our faith, are writing quite a bit about suffering. In his book *An Alternative Vision*, Roger Haight has written: "A good case can be made for the view that the human crisis of our time lies in the massive amount of human suffering and our new appreciation of it ... human suffering has been compounded in our day in terms of absolute numbers to a degree never before realized in the history of the human race ... we are aware of this suffering in a completely new way."

The contradiction between this situation of massive suffering and the God of Christian faith is obvious. If we reflect on what is probably the most prayed Psalm of our entire tradition, the 23rd Psalm, we see a God who wants to prepare rich banquets

for those He loves, who would lead us along peaceful streams, who would lavish us with the best of all that there is. This picture of God reflects very well the core experience most of us have of God — we know the God who wants to do good things for those He loves, which includes all of us.

In the face of this contradiction, Roger Haight and many others remind us that today more than ever before we need to advance a view of God who cares especially for those who suffer. Kenan Osborn, OFM, a wonderful scholar, has written in his book *Ministry*: "An unreflected view of God, which does not reach out in love and even in preference to the disposed and the poor of the world, to the racially others and to the culturally margined peoples of the created universe, has become suspect." Today we have to promote and believe in the God who will to end human suffering.

In fact, much of contemporary theology is intent on understanding "what God is doing in the world" — God's will — in terms of ending the massive suffering of human beings. Much of what is happening in human history appears to be happening "against God's will."

As I stated previously, our own moral lives are rooted in God. As we continue to clarify the view of God that forms the basis for our faith and our lives, we may find our attention and our energy drawn in new directions. Today, faith is calling us to react against human suffering. Our experience of God beckons us to work with

God and on behalf of God's will to change the conditions of our world that cause suffering to take place.

Some spiritualities I have known in my life have not helped me to promote this view of God. To offer an example, at one time in my life I would have reflected on the symbol of the crucifix in this way: "Look at Jesus, suffering in silence and not rebuking his tormentors. He suffered willingly and so should we. Suffering is God's will for us, and we should accept it. My response to the suffering of Jesus should be to accept my suffering and to encourage others to accept their suffering, too."

Today, conscious of the God who is in solidarity with suffering people, I might reflect on the crucifix in this way: "Look at Jesus, who came to love us and show us how to love one another. The suffering of Jesus happened because of our suffering. If we love rightly, we can help to bring an end to the many 'crucifixions' that are occurring because of human selfishness and sin. My response to the crucifixion of Jesus should be to work to end suffering and to encourage others to reject it, too."

Our proclamation of God occurs in our hearts and on our lips, and it occurs in our lives, too. Our actions, above all, should proclaim to the world that ours is a God who loves all of us, and who is in solidarity with the poor ones among us. If we do not proclaim this God, we risk making God "in-credible" to others and even to ourselves in this age of massive suffering.

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