

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY

Useless suffering



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Today's readings: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128:1-5; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-23

It is argued that with Emmanuel Levinas, the theodicy project attempting to reconcile a benevolent and just God with the existence of evil reached its conclusion. Scriptures, philosophers and theologians have long addressed the problem, but a comprehensive theodicy in the modern sense does not emerge before Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz coined the term in 1710.

In *La souffrance inutile* (1982) Levinas elaborates the non-meaning of suffering, rejecting any attempt to justify it, in trying to find its meaning. Instead he reorients discourse around ethical responsibility when faced by the suffering of the other. Like other philosophers and theologians of the 20th century, Levinas wrote in the shadow of the Holocaust,

when the world arose to the problem of excessive evil, which unfortunately is still threatening us.

Writing in *Gregorianum* (2006), Orietta Ombrosi comments that at the end of a century of nameless suffering, the disproportion between suffering and any attempt at theodicy is glaring in the face of totalitarianisms, wars, genocides, violence, nameless and useless sufferings. For Levinas, passive, imposed suffering in itself has no meaning or purpose whatsoever, not even ontological or metaphysical, as it reduces the victim to sheer vulnerability in a traumatising experience of being annihilated.

Unlike personal and voluntary sacrifice, embraced for a higher goal, this type of suffering is neither cathartic nor redemptive. It is instead an ethical scandal on the suffering of the innocent. For Levinas, an ethical response to such useless suffering, requires action rather than transfer onto an ontological plane. For example, a Levinasian reading of the Herodian massacre of the innocents, implicit in today's Gospel narrative of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, rejects any interpretation of the story as a tragic but necessary moment in the

economy of salvation, fulfilling prophecy.

If anything, Matthew's citation of Rachel's lament attempts to give voice to nameless suffering. To say that the death of innocent, voiceless children becomes meaningful in a comprehensive story of salvation is ethically suspect, as it justifies the suffering of the innocent, making us complicit with the powers that perpetrate evil. An ethical understanding of these narratives, therefore, shifts their meaning to human responsibility from metaphysical causality.

It is significant that in the message for World Peace Day, Pope Leo XIV decries that "it has become increasingly common to drag the language of faith into political battles, to bless nationalism, and to justify violence and armed struggle in the name of religion". He points to the ethical responsibility of all believers who "must actively refute, above all by the witness of their lives, these forms of blasphemy that profane the holy name of God".

Similar statements come from theological institutions like the Mediterranean Theological Network (RTMed), calling "to find new and incisive words to promote the knowledge and

diffusion of sacred words and symbols that foster peace, and to condemn all forms of manipulation of sacred texts aimed at inciting hatred" (June 21, 2025).

Theologians like Pierangelo Sequeri and Vito Mancuso, in line with other 20th-century theologians like Dorothy Sölle, refuse to speak God if not in reference to the One revealed in Jesus Christ; a totally different God from that of deistic philosophy. Read through Levinas, today's Flight into Egypt Gospel appears as an ethical narrative of responsibility rather than a story of prophetic design.

The child's threatened life interrupts ordinary order and compels Joseph, the just, to act without hesitation and explanation. Matthew's reversal of the prophecy "from/out of Egypt, I called my Son", indicates that God calls out of systemic danger. God is in the victim.

Exile, fear and displacement are not redeemed or justified by prophecy. Prophecy exposes violent powers for what they are. Meaning arises not from destiny, but from the concrete, vigilant responsibility taken to protect the vulnerable other.

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Pausing at the gate



ALEXANDER ZAMMIT

Gates have long served as places of transition. In architecture as well as mythology and literature, gates are seen as liminal spaces, creating a boundary between two spaces or realities. The last days of the year are like a gate between a year that is ending and another one that is at its dawn.

Writing the last article of the year for the Christian spirituality section begets a sense that this time is ripe for a gatekeeping exercise. In antiquity, a sculpture of the two-faced god Janus would be placed at the gates of cities, a symbol of protection marking both the exits and entrances of the city. Like Janus, our gaze is both behind and before us.

A carousel of important moments streams before our eyes, episodes that have shaped us and set our path. Nowadays using our memory muscles is becoming harder. A memory effort is needed to not only recall but to ruminate on the significant events of this year.

Humanly speaking, it would be a loss if one would just barge through the gate into the new year before taking time to acknowledge

this year's important moments: learnings received, promises made, grief that is still carried and blessings that have been given. Because everything is sped-up beyond our capability to absorb what is happening in and around us, gatekeeping becomes all the more important to orient oneself into the new year.

Gates are also heralds of what is to come, the first step into a journey that has yet to start. As this year comes to an end, we are at the gate to enter a new one. These liminal places are ripe with expectations, intimations, hopes and fears.

At the gate one can presume the nature of what one will find ahead, and yet the precise picture of what will be found on the long, winding road is a mystery that is only revealed along the way. At the gate into a new year, one starts to make plans and hopefully set meaningful aims that go beyond the apparent and material, entertaining ideas that aspire beyond self-enrichment and aggrandising.

Many gates also have a porter or guardian, be it the angel in Dante's *Purgatory*, the Guardian at the gate of Emerald City in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, or St Peter with keys in hand into the Kingdom of God. At the threshold into a new year, one gets to choose the porter with whom to converse and discern the year that has gone and the one that is coming.

For many of us this conversation partner is Jesus, who proclaimed himself to be the gate



A visitor walks through the tunnel of over 100 torii gates at Motonosumi Shrine in Japan. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

(Jn 10:7-10), through which the sheep go in and out in search of safety and abundant pastures. He promises free movement and circulation, a listening ear and a life-giving Word for the journey. He forces nobody to go through him, but freely calls forth to journey, explore and take rest when needed.

These days are not ordinary ones, they are an opportunity to reflect and look ahead. The gate that separates 2025 from 2026 is less of a barrier, and more of a privileged space that makes one's humanity richer and worth living.

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QUOTES & NEWS

Humans not capital

Addressing labour consultants, Pope Leo XIV said he considered three aspects of particular importance "the protection of human dignity, mediation, and the promotion of safety".

"At the centre of any work dynamic there should be neither capital, nor market laws, nor profit, but the person, the family, and their well-being, to which everything else is functional. This centrality, constantly affirmed by the social doctrine of the Church, must be kept in mind in all business planning and design, so that workers are recognised in their dignity and receive concrete responses to their real needs."

Christian influencers' importance

Catholic news website *Cruz* reported that Millennial and Gen-Z Christian influencers are increasingly filling a void in American religion. According to the report there is a growing audience across digital platforms by steering young people to biblical answers to tough questions that aren't always answered in Sunday sermons.

The report says influencers come from different backgrounds and they talk frankly to their listeners about everything, thus galvanising young people looking for meaning in a culture that lacks it at a time when years of declining church attendance has slowed.

Christmas must transform us

Pope Leo said: "Advent is the time when the sense of the Lord's return is alive, for we all die and we all must present ourselves to the judgment of the tribunal of God."

"We must make room for him, prepare the manger within ourselves, not only the external one — a beautiful tradition that must be preserved — but above all within ourselves. Christmas must transform us inwardly; otherwise, its meaning remains empty despite the celebrations."

He said the Nativity scene is "reminds us that we are part of a wondrous adventure of Salvation in which we are never alone, but, as St Augustine said, 'the human inhabitants of earth might become inhabitants of heaven'."

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)