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## **Ecce Homo**

**To welcome the suffering is the sign of our humanity**

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### ***The home for dying destitutes in Calcutta: a founding experience***

“How old is the small boy lying on the pallet? Five, eight, ten? Misery and suffering are ageless. Emaciated, coiled up like a fetus, all his life has taken refuge in his eyes, immense eyes that look at me without any blink. He was picked up in the street two weeks ago. The sister thinks that he will soon die. “Try to give him something to eat.”

This is the only task that I can fill in this home for dying destitutes of mother Teresa of Calcutta. With my children, I have learned how to spoon feed a baby. From the motions of the lips, of the tongue, I detect when it is possible to delicately introduce a tiny bit of food in the mouth. The infants are so fragile that the only food they can accept is one that is given with tenderness. The proximity of death has brought back this child to his infancy.

In the position he has taken, lying on his side, it is not easy to get the grains of rice in his mouth. He would like to help in order to please me. But he does not have this strength any more. The grains of rice fall on the napkin that I have spread below his chin. Small windows through the upper part of the walls diffuse a peaceful translucent light that envelops the rows of bodies from which groans are rising. The street noise that comes from the outside strangely appears to come from far away. Yet this peace islet is in the heart of one of the most life teeming quarters of Calcutta. Above the child, against a pillar, a statue of the Virgin Mary is presiding over the exchange between the child and me, exchange that penetrates in the deepest part of my heart.

Who is this child that the tidal wave of human misery has deposited among the dozens of other “dying destitutes”, as announced on the board at the entrance: “Home for dying destitutes”. Why did I have to travel over ten thousand kilometers to meet him so that he would completely reorient my life?

Suffering has suddenly swept my soul: it has washed away everything in me. How so much suffering that I had not even noticed could be present next to me? As I had been standing on the crest of the advancing wave of our scientific and technologic civilization, I did not even glance at the debris left over by its flow. I was looking ahead. And suddenly, among the debris of my civilization, this child becomes for me a person, the most important person in my life.

*“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”*<sup>1</sup> In the eyes of this child, it is Jesus on his cross, in the mystery of his abandonment, who reveals himself to me. I never felt him to be so close. Jesus alive, taking upon himself the pain of the whole world, revealing to me that I had abandoned him. *“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not receive me as a guest, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”*<sup>2</sup> Mary, his mother, is there, also present. I now understand why she is always there, next to the cross. How is it possible without her to live this suffering without revolt? The peace that comes from this child, in the middle of his pain, I know that it comes from the presence of Mary.”<sup>3</sup>

This happened in Calcutta in 1973. It is at this instant that I suddenly discovered that my life would never be the same: I could not go back to my lab and continue to live as before. The “Poor” had knocked at my door. I had opened it. He had entered and was now with me forever. Borrowing the words of Isaiah<sup>4</sup>, I had recognized in this child my own flesh and I could not escape any more. I did not know his name and yet he had given me a new name that I had been expecting for years. Within his suffering, my new friend had a mysterious power of presence that had enlightened my own self. In exchange for the small amount of love that I had been manifesting in my own poor way, I had received the gift of the Spirit of God who was dwelling in him. Through this gift I had been confirmed in the depth of my living being, that is of my loving being, who needs presence and who needs at the same time to give himself and to be received fully within a unique relationship.

What had been for me a founding experience has been a founding experience for humans throughout the ages since the beginning of our human race. Throughout the ages we have to rediscover that our community is not only made of the highly motivated competing individuals as in my own scientific world, but that it includes fragile, vulnerable, suffering individuals who reveal to ourselves our own fragility, our own vulnerability, who actually lay bare our own sufferings that have been hidden in our deepest self. This fundamental discovery is at the heart of our humanity. And it is this discovery that I would like to share in this paper.

### ***The importance of weaknesses***

As I knew from my own scientific experience, the weaknesses, the imperfections, the faults facilitate the evolution of a system. A system, which is too perfect, is also too rigid because it does not need to evolve. This is true in politics; it is true within a society, within families, within nature. A perfectly, smoothly running system, without any default is a close system that can only evolve through a major commotion: the evolution occurs

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 27, 46, translation Nextbible

<sup>2</sup> Mt 25, 42-43, translation Nextbible

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Le Pichon, Kaiko, Voyage aux extrémités de la Mer, Editions Odile Jacob, 1986

<sup>4</sup> *“When you see someone naked, clothe him!*

*Don’t turn your back on your own flesh and blood”* Is 58,7, translation Nextbible

through revolutions. An example from my own geological domain illustrates this very important point: most of the earthquakes occur within the upper fifteen to twenty kilometers of the Earth. Let us take the example of California. The western portion glides toward the northwest at about four centimeters per year along a major fracture, which is called the San Andreas Fault. Yet during about one hundred years, the two lips of the fault stay in contact and the corresponding four meters of motion are absorbed by elastic deformation over a width of about one hundred kilometers on both sides of the fault. Then suddenly there is a break: this is the earthquake. The two sides jump back to their equilibrium position with a corresponding quasi-instantaneous relative motion of four meters (100 x 4 cm) of the two lips of the fault. Yet below fifteen to twenty kilometers, instead of these discontinuous, abrupt motions, there is a continuous creep at four centimeters per year without any earthquake. Why? This is because at this depth, the small defaults of the crystals within the rocks have been activated by the increase in temperature and relax the rigidity, allowing a continuous creep to release the plate tectonic forces and thus avoiding the necessity for periodic disasters. Above this depth, on the contrary, the defaults are “frozen in” because of the colder temperatures. The rocks keep their rigidity until they are fractured, thus producing the earthquake. One moves from rigid and brittle rocks, within the upper layer, to ductile rocks below that can deform in a continuous fashion under the action of tectonic forces.

The same thing is true for all systems that need to evolve. Contrarily to what is often assumed, the weak and imperfect parts are often those that allow the evolution to occur without any revolution. This is true for the evolution of life, which is in great part based on the occurrence of coding errors during the duplication of the genetic information. One can ask whether it is not also true of our societies. We tend to dissociate the individuals who are well adapted to our social life from those that have difficulties to follow the pace that is imposed on them by our life style. Yet a society that separates the producers from the others considered as dead weight, even as marginal or excluded individuals, is a hard society, characterized by conflicts and often by complete rejection of minorities. It is sad and pessimistic. On the contrary a society where all are well integrated has a much more adaptable structure, with a different, easier and more conciliatory mode of life. It is often happier and more optimistic.

One probably needs to go farther. A society, which is composed exclusively of uniform individuals, without any heterogeneity, is a more rigid, harder society. I have experienced such communities when living on oceanographic vessels, which I have done for a good part of my life. Most of the time, we only had young and middle aged men on board: the crew then formed a community, which was rather rough. The presence of a single woman oceanographer was often sufficient to completely change the atmosphere.

When examining any system, it is thus necessary to study it as a whole. Its working is determined by the interaction of all the parts. The elimination of parts that may appear as less efficient may significantly change the overall functioning and may actually completely prevent it from working!

***Fragility and vulnerability within our human societies***

In the following, I would like to discuss the fundamental place occupied by fragility and vulnerability within our own human societies. Note that my main objective is not to compare our Homo Sapiens species with others, such as the great apes. A lot of very interesting debate occurs on this subject. But being a human, I simply want to better understand what I believe to be fundamental characters of my own species. I would certainly have a different point of view if I were a great ape, but I am not.

Our human species is situated within the lineage of sexed animal societies, which throughout their evolution have invested a lot of energy in the reorganization of the society around their offspring in order to preserve them, to educate them and to bring them to adulthood. An essential aspect of the evolution that leads to humans is the prolongation of the initial phase of growth and consequently of learning, with a concomitant reduction of the innate compartments. But the prolongation of the phase of fetal and infantile growth results in newborn infants who are quite immature, totally powerless. Their very long phase of growth and learning puts them under the complete dependence of their parents during many long years in spite of the fact that their mental capacities are especially developed. This long period of dependence would not have been possible without the development of privileged affective relations between children and parents. Sigmund Freud has helped us realize the importance of these parents-children relations in the build up of our personalities, importance which is so crucial that it conditions our survival. One should not forget that a significant portion of our brain is devoted to the treatment of our emotions. The very large growth of the brain from our pre-human ancestors to Homo Sapiens reflects for a good part the increased place taken by this type of process. The infancy thus constitutes an obvious pole of fragility and vulnerability about which human societies have been restructured.

But this pole is not the only one because the human societies devote a large effort to take into account within their organization suffering and death, thus constituting a second pole of fragility and vulnerability. Physical pain, like fear, are mechanisms of alarm that play a decisive role in the process of decision necessary for the survival of the individual, among animals as well as humans. They also play an important role at the community level. Beyond physical pain, there is the inner suffering. For example, the rupture, due to death or departure, of a relation of very strong dependence between two individuals, may lead to grief consumption or even death. Human societies integrate in their structure in an organic way the fragility and vulnerability manifested in this whole vast world of suffering and death. This is why they are called humane. In the French language the word "humain" is used to denote someone who is both human and humane. That is, he is sensitive to the suffering of his neighbor and tries to alleviate that suffering. In the same way, a society is humane in the degree that it takes care of the lives of those who suffer most without either rejecting or marginalizing them.

### ***Humane Behavior in prehistoric societies***

To illustrate this point, it is best to consider signs of humane behavior among prehistoric societies. The most extraordinary example is probably the one hundred thousand years

old Shanidar 1 skeleton. This skeleton belonged to a Neanderthal man about forty years old discovered by Ralph Solecki in the 1950's in a cave of the Zagros mountains in Iraq<sup>5</sup>. This man was so severely handicapped that he could not have lived to this age without the support of the group to which he belonged. According to Trinkaus and Shipman<sup>5</sup>,

*“careful study of his bones revealed a plethora of serious but healed fractures. There had been a crushing blow to the left side of the head, fracturing the eye socket, displacing the left eye, and probably causing blindness on that side. He also sustained a massive blow to the right side of the body that so badly damaged the right arm that he became withered and useless; the bones of the shoulder blade, collarbone, and the upper arm are much thinner than those on the left. The right lower arm and hand are missing, probably not because of poor preservation as fossils but because they either atrophied and dropped off or because they were amputated. The right foot and lower right leg were also damaged, possibly also at the same time. There is a healed fracture of one of the bones in the arch of the foot associated with advanced degenerative disease of various bones of the ankle and big toe. These problems would have left the foot with little, and very painful mobility. The right knee and various parts of the left leg also show signs of pathological damage; these may have been either further consequences of the same traumatic injury or lesions that developed in reaction to the abnormal limping gait that must have resulted from the damage to the right leg and foot.”* As Solecki argued, “someone so devastatingly injured could not possibly have survived without care and sustenance. Whether the right arm was severed intentionally, accidentally, or as a result of physical deterioration, a one-armed, partially blind, crippled man could have made no pretense of hunting and gathering his own food. That he survived for years after his trauma was a testament to Neanderthal compassion and humanity.”

When Ralph Solecki popularized his findings in a book entitled “Shanidar, The First Flower People”, because the skeletons discovered in the Shanidar cave appeared to have been buried below a bed of flowers, many scientists expressed strong doubts about his conclusions. Since then, it has been well established that Shanidar 1 was not an exception and that Neanderthals “*fed and looked after severely handicapped members of their communities who were too disabled to contribute to the food quest*”<sup>6</sup>. Actually the skepticism of the scientists appears to me to be a demonstration of how difficult it is for us to face this apparent contradiction with straightforward Darwinian theory. In order to be able to continue to live for many years (as the healed bones show) it would have been necessary for him to be entirely taken care of by his community. What was this community? It would have consisted of perhaps twenty or thirty people living by hunting and gathering, without a permanent camp. Every day the community would have moved

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Trinkaus and Pat Shipman, *The Neanderthals, changing the image of mankind*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993

<sup>6</sup> **Renfrew, J.** (in press). Neanderthal Symbolic Behaviour? In C. Renfrew and I. Morley (eds.) *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture*. Cambridge University Press.

on in search of new resources. We can only imagine the considerable effort, which this group had to make for many years in order to transport this person from camp to camp, in order to feed him and in order to simply allow him to live. Why did a small group of nomads, having each day to look for their food through hunting and plant gathering decide to radically reorganize their life so that a severely handicapped man would become the center of their efforts and attention? What did they receive from him to continue doing this during forty years? Why did they decide to bury him? In the past, the fact of being buried showed the great respect shown by the community for that person. Not everyone was given a burial during this era—interment only becoming general about ten thousand years ago. What did they discover about their own humanity through this long and arduous process of sharing their life with a severely disabled man? Was this their way of facing death and suffering? Why did this person become the new focus of society?

The Shanidar 1 individual demonstrates to me that this experience of welcoming the suffering of our neighbor is at the very heart of our identity of humans since the origin. Actually I have argued elsewhere<sup>7</sup> that when humans enter into the type of relationship that was lived within the Shanidar group of Neanderthals, the gift they receive from each other is the discovery of their own humanity. Our humanity is not an attribute that we have received once and forever with our conception. It is a potentiality that we have to discover within us and progressively develop or destroy through our confrontation with the different experiences of suffering that will meet us throughout our life.

We are therefore faced with a phenomenon as old as man himself: in the face of the utilitarian logic which dominates the world of living things, man came up with a way to put someone who no longer had any “utility” at the center of his community thus allowing him to live and to continue to occupy his place in society. This choice inevitably leads to a reorganization of society. As soon as this seemingly foolish choice is made, everything must be reorganized around the person who suffers the most, who is the most wounded and handicapped. It is the only way. That person becomes the center of everyone’s attention. Something completely new is created: this person becomes the new focus of society.

We are dealing with the emergence of the human *par excellence*, as he discovers the true and full meaning of his humanity. And in a way one can say that since his origins/beginnings, the human has not ceased to re-invent this humanity. When faced with the suffering of a sick, wounded, ageing or handicapped person, we are confronted with an extremely difficult and painful choice: we may say, “I cannot “ or “I don’t want to”, or “I don’t want this any more”. This is rejection. Either Society becomes hard by concentrating only on those who are productive or who will be in the future, or it opens out by refocusing on new avenues, new dialogue and a new way of life. In this way of life people will invent new goods for society like the goods of communication, openness and sharing: the person who is no longer capable of direct contribution to the survival of society discovers moreover that he is welcomed as a full contributor. And this welcome profoundly changes the community that practices it.

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<sup>7</sup> **Le Pichon**, Xavier, “Aux racines de l’homme, de la mort à l’amour”, Presses de la Renaissance, 1997.

### *The radical novelty of the pole of fragility and vulnerability*

I wish now to explore further the radical novelty of this pole of fragility and vulnerability within human societies. Why did we humans have to “invent” our humanity as we discovered that we were fragile and vulnerable? Why does human society take into account sick, aged, handicapped persons? Why does it try at all to integrate them, even if it is often in an imperfect way? By not excluding them, or letting them disappear, humans give up at least partially the law of survival through efficiency that prevails in the world governed by the harsh laws of evolution. Is not the fact that a sacred character, whether positive or negative, has often been attributed to mentally handicapped or psychologically disturbed persons the indication of this attitude of questioning, deference and fear of humans when confronted with the mystery of psychic suffering?

Not only do humans care for those who do not have any direct biological utility, but they care for those who have disappeared and want to keep their memory, as demonstrated by our Neanderthal ancestors of the Shanidar cave one hundred thousand years ago. They may actually spend an incredible energy to keep the memory of the dead. The construction of dolmens and pyramids must have mobilized whole populations during tens of years. Was not art in its infancy an attempt to alleviate the two major concerns of humans, fecundity and death? To overcome death through this double strategy: have descendants and keep the memory of deceased was an explicit preoccupation of humans since their origin.

Thus human societies have reorganized themselves about a new pole governed by the presence of suffering and death, which is related to the realization of the fragility and vulnerability of its members. Actually, we tend to judge the degree of humanity of a society through the way in which it takes into account in its organization the presence of suffering and death.

Jane Goodall, in her book “Through a window”<sup>8</sup> notes the emotion that seized her team when they discovered that the chimpanzees they observed were carrying extermination wars and that “cannibalism” with respect to the infants was not rare. Their team could watch as a female chimpanzee and her son attacked a physically handicapped mother to grab her newborn, kill him, and eat him with obvious satisfaction. This happened a second time and the mother chimpanzee that had tried to defend her baby was gravely wounded and died shortly after. What I find most significant in these observations is not the violent comportment of the chimpanzees but rather that this comportment had disturbed so much the team of observers. As stated by Jane Goodall,

*“although the basic aggressive patterns of the chimpanzees are remarkably similar to some of our own, their comprehension of the suffering they inflict on their victims is very different from ours. Chimpanzees, it is true, are able to empathize, to understand at least to some extent the wants and needs of their*

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<sup>8</sup> Goodall, Jane, “Through a window, My thirty years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe”, Houghton Mifflin Cy, Boston, 1990

*companions. But only humans, I believe, are capable of deliberate cruelty – acting with the intention of causing pain and suffering”.*

Indeed, this feeling of horror that fills most humans when they watch such apparently unjustified violence does not appear to exist in other species. It testifies that a sense of “good” and “bad” has appeared in humans.

In Genesis, when God creates Adam and presents to him the different living creatures, Adam realizes that none of them resembles him.<sup>9</sup> Pope John-Paul II has commented about the discovery by Adam of what he called “his metaphysical solitude”. What is the origin of this solitude? Is it possible to identify it with precision? Is it not related to the discovery made by Cain after the murder of his brother Abel when he hears an inner voice ask him: “*Where is your brother Abel?*”<sup>10</sup> “What did you do to your brother?” is the question that haunts humans and that has created the metaphysical solitude discussed by John Paul II.

One can then ask: “What did trigger the development of such new capacities that do not appear to fit the request for efficiency of evolution?” As has often been said, humans are the living beings who know that they are going to die. This is not only because they have a reflexive capacity. Great apes also have a reflexive capacity: Gordon Gallup had already shown in 1979 that a chimpanzee was able to recognize himself in a mirror! But humans have also developed a remarkable capacity to remember the past and anticipate the future. And this capacity is most probably the source of their existential distress that may be so intense as to become a real agony. Humans know that their ageing will ineluctably lead to death.

“*Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark.*” mentioned Francis Bacon<sup>11</sup>. In a beautiful book on palliative care, Michael Kearney<sup>12</sup> writes that “*we all share that primal and instinctive fear of the dark which Bacon speaks of and I believe that it is this existential and primal fear of the unknown that can generate that particular form of human suffering I call “soul pain”.* He adds: “*The prime mover is .. the ego which is happiest when in control of a familiar and predictable world.., but which is profoundly threatened by the approach of death which it sees as utter chaos and the ultimate unknown.*” The effort accomplished by humans to escape the chaos that he believes to be present beyond death is the backdrop of the process of humanization.

Since Freud and even more Jung, the role played by the discovery of death in the formation of the personality during the adolescence has been widely discussed. A human knows that he has been an infant, a child. He knows that he will become aged and will finally die. When confronted with an infant, a child, a handicapped or aged person at the end of his life, he recognizes himself. He knows that he has been, he will be or could be

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<sup>9</sup> Gen. 2, 20

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 4, 9

<sup>11</sup> Bacon, Francis, Essays.

<sup>12</sup> Kearney, Michael, “Mortally wounded ; stories of Soul Pain, Death and Healing” Marino Books, Dublin, 1996

the person to whom he is confronted. The exclusion of the other would then be the exclusion of part of himself, of “his own flesh” using the expression of Isaiah that I mentioned earlier. The one who excludes is as much and perhaps even more excluded. In summary, a human is indeed affected by the suffering or the death of someone with whom he has developed a strong relation of dependence. But a more important fact is that the encounter with somebody plunged within a deep pain and whom he has never met before may provoke as much empathy in him.

Thus, the most revealing character of human societies seems to me to be that they take care of those who, when considered on the sole basis of immediate efficiency, appear to be debris that should be eliminated. Taking care of fragile and vulnerable individuals has revealed to humans their own fragility and vulnerability. It has forced them to enter this dark world of fear in order to learn to live with it. They have realized that the human individual is a unique reality that keeps its unity under widely changing aspects from the fetus to the aged person at the end of his life. This process must have played a decisive role in the psychological mutation of humans and their acquisition of an artistic and metaphysical capacity. As a result, the social presence of an individual within a human society is related to the tight network of relations, of emotions and more deeply of love that has been progressively woven throughout his life, and not primarily to its immediate material usefulness.

Antonio Damasio, specialist of neurosciences, arrived to a conclusion that is not similar but that goes at least partly in the same direction. Considering that

*“the most elaborate social conventions and ethical structures by which we live must have arisen culturally and be transmitted likewise., it is likely that they evolved as a means to cope with the suffering experienced by individuals whose capacity to remember the past and anticipate the future had attained a remarkable development.”*

He adds later on:

*“ Pain and pleasure are not twins or mirror images of each other, at least not as far as their roles in leveraging survival. Somehow, more often than not, it is the pain related signal that steers us away from impending trouble, both at the moment and in the anticipated future. It is difficult to imagine that individuals and societies governed by the seeking of pleasure, as much as or more than by the avoidance of pain, can survive at all.”*<sup>13</sup>

### ***The suffering person, source of our humanization***

The story of life on Earth shows that man is inserted within the flow of life and that there is no radical rupture either in the genetic structure or in the behavior when passing from

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<sup>13</sup> **Damasio**, Antonio, “Descartes’ Error, Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain”, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1994

primates to humans<sup>14</sup>. Aristotle wrote that all that is common to man and animal is not specific to man. With the discoveries of science, the domain of what is common to humans and animals is growing all the time. Threatened in his identity the human tries to establish a separation between himself and the rest of the living beings by defining himself, following Descartes, as being able to reason. As stated by Damasio<sup>13</sup>, to define the existence on the basis of thinking was the error of Descartes. “I think, therefore I am.” Modern scientific studies lead us to state on the contrary: “I am, therefore I think.” All that we are and the way in which we think and react to the surrounding world depends from our feelings and emotions in which those that are related to pain and suffering play a major role. Reason is not an autonomous entity separated from our body. It can only be understood within the complex system of interaction of our body within its environment.

John-Paul II in his book “Varcare la soglia della speranza” (“Cross the threshold of hope”)<sup>15</sup> criticizes in the same way the pure rationalism of Descartes “*who has in a way detached thought from the existence in its integrality and has identified it with reason.*” John-Paul II adds: “*How different he is from saint Thomas Aquinas for whom it is not thought that determines existence but on the contrary existence, the fact of being, that determines thought. I think as I think, because I am as I am.*”

To discover who he is, the human should not fear to replace himself within the flow of life and to recognize the common inheritance that he shares with the contemporary living beings. It is in the measure that he recognizes the similarities that he will be able to identify his specificities. A great deal of research today tries to evaluate the role of the altruistic capacity in the workings of the human societies.<sup>16</sup> Most of the theories proposed view benevolence as self-interest in disguise. Whatever the motivations of this altruistic comportment, the recognition of the “neighbor”, within his suffering, within his death, as another “oneself” may lead us to the rejection of the other, rejection which accentuates our isolation by increasing our fear of the other. Or it may lead us to welcome him with his injuries, thus allowing us to transcend our suffering, to transcend death. Transcending our fear of pain as we welcome the suffering person and put him in the heart of our community, and transcending our fear of death as we keep the memories of our deceased were in my opinion major factors in our humanization. As humans are confronted to suffering and death, as mirrors of their own suffering and death, they are confronted to their own fragility and vulnerability and this confrontation forces them to go beyond themselves by entering into a transcendent world that can be metaphysical, artistic and (or) poetic. This has probably been the origin of metaphysics, of art and poetry, which give us the capacity to project ourselves beyond the immediate reality of the difficulties of our life.

But what is the source of this prodigious effort? It is non other than the injured, suffering, handicapped, dying or even deceased person. This suffering person is the ferment for the transformation of men and women, and beyond them of the whole human society. One is touching there the deep mystery that surrounds suffering and death. Everything happens

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<sup>14</sup> **De Waal**, Frans, “Our Inner Ape”, Riverhead Books, New York

<sup>15</sup> **John-Paul II**, “Varcare la soglia della speranza”, Mondadori, Milano, 1994

<sup>16</sup> **Flescher, A.M. and Worthen, D.L.**, “The altruistic species”, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia

as if the humanization appeared with the progressive discovery by humans of their own fragility and vulnerability as their reflexive conscience and their capacity to project themselves in the past and the future were growing. Humans were becoming more human in the measure in which they were discovering their suffering neighbor as “their own flesh”.

Physiologic factors such as the progressive backward tilt of the skull or technologic factors such as the tool making capacity are often privileged when considering the evolution leading to the apparition of Homo Sapiens whereas psychological factors are generally not even considered. Yet is it possible to doubt that psychological factors have played a major role in this evolution? Living in a heterogeneous society, with those who precede him and announce his future as well as with those who follow him and whom he will have to quit, hurt by the pain and the disappearance of those with whom he shares his life, the human has a vital necessity to transcend this brutal confrontation with the fragility and vulnerability of others that send him back to his own existential distress as he is plunged in the dark world of his own fears.

This does not mean that human societies become more and more humane with time. To be humane a society should take into account the unique value of each of its members, and more particularly of those who are too weak to defend themselves. Clearly, human societies have never perfectly realized this objective. Some have been especially harsh and the evolution of humanization is not linear. There are highs and lows throughout the long history of Homo Sapiens, highs and lows that can be identified by considering how these two poles of fragility, related to the infancy and to disease, handicap, aging and death, were taken into account.

### ***The prophets: the extraordinary sixth century B.C.***

As humans increased their capacity of transformation of the world and consequently increased their power, they also increased the abuses they made of this power through unjustified violence. But these massive abuses pushed some of the members of the societies to act as “prophets” of the human dignity who react to violence and intolerance by increased benevolence, tolerance, respect and love for the weakest and most suffering members. Everything happened as if these surges in violence were actually “forcing” humans to discover ever more the nature of their eminent dignity. These extraordinary “inspired” men had an enormous influence on the evolution of human culture. Humanity had been constructed by the daily struggles of men and women confronted to their own fragility and vulnerability. Among them, there must have been myriads of people who acted as innovators but history has not kept trace of them. With these prophets, men appeared who had an immense influence on their contemporaries as well as generations to come and who permanently affected the human culture through the growth of our common human heritage. This new phenomenon asks in a new way the question of the nature of the “inspiration”, the personal capacity by humans to transcend their confrontation with suffering and death within a personal unique experience.

I will take as an example the sixth century B.C., or rather the century, which goes from the second half of the sixth century to the first half of the fifth one, following the philosopher Karl Jaspers who could not help but marvel when evoking the men who enriched this remarkable century. This is the time of Buddha, of Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of Taoism, of Confucius, of the Second Isaiah, with the four poems of the Suffering Servant which mark the summit of the reflections of the Bible on suffering. They all dealt with the problem of suffering. The first three tried to answer the question: "What do we know about life?" starting from the evidence of the central place occupied by suffering. In a way, all three tried to answer the question "What can we do with our own suffering and with the suffering of others?" The first truth that the enlightened man discovers, said Buddha, is that everything is suffering. "*Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, .. the union with what we do not like is suffering, not to obtain what we like is suffering.*" Actually, all that composes our being is suffering. This intuition of the universal suffering was central in the evolution of the thinking of Buddha. Buddha, Lao Tzu and Confucius all three aimed at the suppression, or at least the attenuation of suffering.

Buddha is assumed to have lived between 556 and 480 B.C., and Confucius, between 551 and 479. As for Lao Tzu, tradition reports that he lived at the time of Confucius and that he might have been his master. Was this a coincidence? Is it a coincidence too that brahmanism was progressively formulated in India during approximately the same period and that the second Isaiah that marks the summit of the reflection of the Bible on suffering was written near 540. Actually the following century is also quite astounding. In China there is the extraordinary master Mo, Mo Tzu between 479 and 390 and Mencius, slightly later, between 370 and 290. One could also mention Zarathustra whom Plato called Zoroaster, who reformed the old Iranian religion and that tradition reports as living between 660 and 583. And is it possible to ignore Greece with Socrates (469-399), Plato (428-348) and Aristotle (384-322) but also Eschyles (525-456), Sophocles (496-406) and Euripides (480-406)? Between 600 and 300 before our era, with a summit during the second half of the sixth century, the reflection of humans on their nature, reflection that revolved implicitly or explicitly about the mystery of suffering and death, greatly progressed simultaneously and independently in regions that had no or very few communications.

This was the time of the generalization of the iron age and the systematic use of horses in the regions where these great thinkers lived. These new discoveries allowed great progress in agriculture but also in the techniques of war. As a result large empires were built through a series of conquest wars, with consequent society upheavals and utmost suffering. It is thus not surprising that prophets were inspired to speak up as they were watching over the collapse of whole communities and the annihilation of their members. It is not surprising either that they contributed so much to the establishment of the notion of the dignity of humans. It is consequently important to better understand the nature of the philosophical and religious answers that these men proposed when confronted to a flood of new suffering due to the brutality and perversity of men.

In India and China, the preoccupation then was to give an answer to the two types of suffering that affect humans, those that come from nature and our own body and those that are provoked by men. Among these great inspired men, Siddharta Gautama Sakyamuni, the solitary from Sakya, who will become the Buddha, is certainly the one who illustrated best the role played by suffering and death in the discovery by men of their humanity. A Catholic, cardinal Henri de Lubac stated:

*“If I except the unique fact of the Incarnation, where we adore the trace and actual presence of God, Buddhism is probably the great spiritual event in history.”*<sup>17</sup>

He quoted the words of Romano Guardini<sup>18</sup>:

*“The founder of Buddhism has not only wanted to become a better man and to find peace within the world: he attempted to do something unprecedented which was to put the human existence off its hinges while still dwelling within it. No Christian has understood in a Christian way what he calls nirvāna, the enlightenment, the annihilation of the illusive being. Any Christian who would attempt to do it should have been completely liberated by the love of Christ and at the same time should be very respectably united to the mysterious man of the sixth century B.C.”*<sup>18</sup>

*“The person and the life of the Buddha can only be seen through a thick fog of legends”*<sup>19</sup> wrote André Bareau who tried with emotion to evoke the figure of this man *“who tirelessly practiced and taught the renouncement to the pleasures of the world, demonstrating their vanity, and who led a very ascetic life, being insensible to praise as well as to insults so as not to disturb the serenity that he had acquired through a long fight.”* Siddharta Gautama was born on the hills at the foot of the Himalaya. According to André Bareau, he was probably the son of a modest lord from the brahmanic clan of the Gautama who belonged to the cast of warriors. He left his family after the birth of a son, probably following a deep affliction which led him to the intuition of the universality of suffering. From then on, he would lead the life of a wandering religious mendicant in search of the Truth.

Cyrus had just conquered part of the Indus valley and the first kingdoms had been established in northern India which was entering into the iron age. The people there believed in transmigrations. Ascetics were discussing how to be delivered from the endless succession of these lives dominated by suffering. The future Buddha also believed that these reincarnations were determined by the nature of the acts made during previous existences, good acts leading to happiness while bad acts lead to unhappiness. Any act made by a responsible agent ineluctably produces its good or bad consequences in a future existence. Thus there is an immanent justice that ties us within the succession

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<sup>17</sup> De Lubac, Henri, “Aspects du bouddhisme”, Le Seuil, 1951

<sup>18</sup> Guardini, Romano, “Le Seigneur”, Alsatia, I, 345, 1955

<sup>19</sup> Bareau, A., « La voix du Bouddha », Philippe Lebaud, Paris, 1996

of reincarnations and makes us slaves of time. It is actually a solution to the problem of the innocent suffering.

But how then could one be completely freed from the suffering inherent to our existence? How could one be freed from the slavery of time? After years of research, he obtained the Enlightenment to the Truth, after a night of meditation, reaching the inalterable peace of the Extinction of passions and of errors and the definitive deliverance from the succession of lives and associated suffering. From then on the Buddha would spend his life teaching the way to deliverance. In his teaching, I would like to highlight the fundamental attitude of benevolence toward any human as well as any living being. It is a disposition of the soul that is unpretending and gentle but warm. The ideal monk *“should only speak to create union”*.

This evolution within Buddhism toward benevolence and care for the other reached a summit later on in the teaching of what is called the Great Vehicle, at the end of the first century A.C. *“If all is suffering, then all must be compassion.”* *“All the means employed to obtain a religious merit do not have the value of one sixteenth of benevolence”* would have said the Buddha *“who had mercy for armor”*. The great Vehicle actually goes even farther in presenting what is called the Great Compassion, that is at the root of all the virtues and must inspire them. The compassion then should push one to self-sacrifice for the deliverance of others.

*“Rather than entering oneself into nirvāna, it is better to conduct others to it.”*  
*“By putting their joy in the soothing of the suffering of the others, the bodhisattva plunge in hell as swans in a bunch of lotus. The deliverance of creatures is for them an ocean of joy that drowns everything.. Have a single passion, the passion of the well being of others.. One should exchange one’s own well being against the pain of the other.”*

The multiplication of “kamikazes” who voluntarily kill themselves to destroy those they consider to be their enemies has increased the great suspicion of our contemporaries for the notion of sacrifice. But the sacrifice praised by the Great Vehicle is neither masochistic nor sadistic. It is the fruit of pure love. Compassion for the others pushes one toward the complete oblivion of oneself. It was first independently advocated in the four songs of the Suffering Servant in the second Isaiah written during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. It will become the keystone of Christianity.

But I need first to briefly discuss the very different approach of Confucianism in China to the confrontation with suffering.<sup>20</sup> It is important to realize that humans have indeed explored many different ways to fight the vital struggle related to the discovery of their deep fragility. Until the fall of the Chinese empire, in 1911, the throne of the emperors was surmounted by a shellac panel on which was inscribed “Wu Wei”, which literally means “do not act” but can be interpreted in a more exact way as “do not inappropriately

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<sup>20</sup> What is written here is in great part based on conversations I had in 1996 with Tang Yi Jie, Professor of Chinese Philosophy at the University of Beijing who shared with me his deep insight into Confucianism and the Chinese thought.

interfere with the action”. To Confucius, the sovereign who governs using his virtue can be compared to the polestar which stays fixed as all the other stars salute it. He does not need to reprimand nor to punish. His virtue alone will enable a favorable evolution of the events as well as of the men.

This is because for the Chinese, the universe is an immense organism. It is vain to seek its origin or its cause. In it nothing is stable nor fixed in a definitive way. Man is an integral part of it. It is thus useless to try to understand things and phenomena. These happen because they happen. What we need to know is how they evolve, in what direction they are moving; one needs to show the rhythms, to identify the variations which are the actual reality. The Chinese is consequently prompted to be careful and humble with the nature to which he should learn how to conform himself. The aim is to restore harmony between humans and cosmos and this will enable the establishment of peace and justice.

Confucius wanted to save man by freeing him from the weight of his suffering. The greatest suffering for him would have been to be unable to do anything to prevent the human suffering. His first aim was to allow men to become “ren”, benevolent men, to restore harmony between men and cosmos teaching them filial piety and the virtue of humanity, of benevolence. The key to the virtue of humanity is :“Do not do to the other what you do not want to be done to yourself.”

Mo Tzu, one century later, was a true beacon in the history of this discovery by humans of their humanity. He fought injustice and tried to help oppressed people through both his teaching and his actions. He had founded a sect to serve oppressed people in which members had to pronounce a poverty vow. The second half of the fifth century was a period of rapid demographic growth. China had fifty seven millions inhabitants in year 2, more than the Roman Empire. It was also a period of long and bloody wars. Revolted by this state of grave injustice, master Mo did not believe that destiny is blind and predetermined and he attributed the injustice to men. He condemned war: *“If a man robs a dog or a pig, he is accused of crime against humanity; but if he robs a state or a town, he is considered to be virtuous.”* Not only did he condemn wars, but he tried to stop them and went to the help of besieged towns. He condemned excessive expenses, including somptuous funerals.

He proclaimed a universal love. If love makes distinctions, it is not a virtue any more. *“If a universal mutual love existed throughout the world, if men loved each other like themselves, would there be a single person who would not respect filial piety?”* It is very interesting to note that Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, replied to that: *“To love anybody in the same way does not recognize the special affection that one owes to the king or the father. This is living like an animal.”* But the universal love that preached Mo Tzu was not a way to evade obligations with respect to the sovereign or the parents. Mo Tzu loved in a concrete way those who were most oppressed and most needed his love. He was even going farther as he requested self-sacrifice: *“Kill a man to save the world is not an action for the good of the world. But to kill oneself to save the world is an action for the good of the world.”*

But this concept of voluntary self-sacrifice was deeply foreign to Confucianism and Taoism. As a consequence the teachings of Mo Tzu have not left any significant traces in the Chinese culture in spite of the fact that they were very well received during his life. This is not a peculiarity of Chinese society. When prophets like Mo Tzu, seized by a sort of folly of human love that goes to the extremity of self-sacrifice, try to transmit their burning desire to followers, they give rise to controversies and rebuttals: reasonable men want to keep the just middle way that the excess of love seems to ignore. Mao Tse Tung tried to revive this idea of Mo Tzu, promoting self-sacrifice to free the future humanity, thus contributing even more to the devaluation of this notion of self-sacrifice.

### *The Suffering Servant and sacrifice*

I want to come back to the poems of the Suffering Servant who suddenly appear out of nowhere within the Second Isaiah, toward the end of the Babylon exile between 550 and 539 B.C. René Girard has specially noted their great originality, interpreting the Suffering Servant as the “*victime émissaire*”, the religious scapegoat.<sup>21</sup> The exegetes have recognized the unity of these four poems, inserted separately within the Second Isaiah, the “Book of the Consolation of Israel”. They have the same vocabulary, the same style and the same thinking. They note their extraordinary originality, unique within the Bible. This servant who is chosen and loved by God is not only sent to Israel but to all the nations to expiate the sins of others and take over him their suffering in humility, kindness and mercy. It is through his suffering and death freely accepted that he saves them. The songs of the Servant are a climax in the discovery by man of his own dignity as he appears to be submerged by suffering. It is so important that I wish below to quote significant excerpts of the fourth song.

*“Look, my servant will succeed!  
He will be elevated, lifted high, and greatly exalted –  
(just as many were horrified by the sight of you)  
he was so disfigured he no longer looked like a man;  
his form was so marred he no longer looked human –  
so now he will startle many nations..*

*“Who would have believed what we just heard?  
When was the Lord’s power revealed through him?  
He sprouted up like a twig before God,  
like a root out of parched soil;  
he had no stately form or majesty that might catch our attention,  
no special appearance that we should want to follow him.  
He was despised and rejected by people,  
one who experienced pain and was acquainted with illness;  
people hid their faces from him;  
he was despised, and we considered him insignificant.  
But he lifted up our illnesses,*

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<sup>21</sup> Girard, René, “Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde », Grasset, Paris, 1978

*he carried our pain;  
even though we thought he was being punished,  
attacked by God, and afflicted for something he had done.  
He was wounded because of our rebellious deeds,  
crushed because of our sins;  
he endured punishment that made us well;  
because of his wounds we have been healed..”<sup>22</sup>*

*“My servant will acquit many,  
for he carried their sins.  
So I will assign him a portion with the multitudes,  
he will divide the spoils of victory with the powerful,  
because he willingly submitted to death  
and was numbered with the rebels,  
when he lifted up the sin of many  
and intervened on behalf of the rebels.”<sup>23</sup>*

The highly discussed identity of the Suffering Servant is still mysterious even though Christianity has unanimously recognized in his figure an announcement of the mission of Jesus. There is no doubt however that these poems were written after a period of extreme suffering. Since the fall of the kingdom of Samaria and the deportation of its inhabitants by Sargon II in 721 B.C. until the fall in 587 of Jerusalem and of the whole kingdom of Judah followed by the deportation in Babylon by Nabuchonodosor, the Jewish people had gone from disaster to disaster. As the poems of the Servant were composed, the dawn of a new hope was breaking through because Cyrus, king of Persia, was going to authorize in his edict of 538 the Jews exiled in Babylon to return to Jerusalem to practice their religion. This is when the second Isaiah discovered the voluntary and free sacrifice as the proof of the most extreme depth of love. Hit by the magnitude of the grief of his people due to an extreme outburst of evil, the author of the poems seems to have seized that only the folly of love could give an appropriate answer to evil under all its forms. Only the total and definitive gift of oneself could restore hope and overthrow the apparent order imposed by the evil forces. It is deeply moving to observe that, as I discussed above, later but independently the disciples of Buddha in India and Mo Tzu in China made the same discovery as they assisted to the inexorable rise of the tide of human suffering.

I believe that the author of the songs of the Suffering Servant was convinced that the suffering endured by the Jewish people during the deportation to Babylon had not been useless. Their God full of kindness and mercy had seen the misery of his people, had listened to their cry for mercy. One could say that their suffering had obtained from God the joy of their return. Beyond that, he attributed to the suffering of the Servant a universalist dimension : “*He will startle many nations*”. What happened to Israel was prophetic and concerned the whole humanity. But I believe that the author had made a much deeper and mysterious discovery. Is it possible that he recognized that the suffering person is not only the one who attracted the mercy of God but that she could become

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<sup>22</sup> Isaiah, 52,13-53,5, translation Nextbible

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah, 53, 11-12, translation Nextbible

within her suffering an instrument of salvation, that she could become an agent in the transformation of the whole community to whom it belonged? This is what I would like next to explore in what I call the power of the weak.

*The power of the weak: “whenever I am weak, then I am strong”<sup>24</sup>*

I am inspired in these considerations by the extraordinary apology of weakness made by Paul in his writings, in particular the letters to the Corinthians. Anybody who has experienced fatherhood or motherhood knows about the power of the infants. The arrival of a baby completely changes the structure and life of the whole family. One could say actually that the infant is the one who has the authority. The activities of the whole family are ordered to his needs. What is true for infants is also true for sick, handicapped and aged people. As I have argued above, they have a real power of reorganization of the human communities. But I believe that the experience repeatedly made by humans is that there is something beyond. Entering into relation with the weak may become an experience of discovery and acceptance of our own weaknesses. Discovering indeed that whenever I recognize that I am weak, then I am strong. And entering through this experience into a world of fragility and vulnerability that we share with our friends who have made the same experience, a world that becomes a world of kindness, mercy and love.

This is a very delicate notion that can only be approached through personal experience. This is why I will illustrate it with a personal example<sup>25</sup>. It concerns my mother who died of Alzheimer’s after twelve very long years of progressive decline during which my father continuously accompanied her. The first serious manifestation of the disease occurred in 1976. It was a period of mental absence that was attributed to a small stroke. Alzheimer’s slowly destroys the neurons in key areas of the brain. As a result, the affected person progressively plunges within a dementia that attacks her character and her capacity to relate with her environment. It is thus the cause of extreme anxieties and suffering for the diseased as well as their parents and friends. My father Jean would devote the twelve following years to his wife H el ene as she was slowly descending toward death. It is only very progressively that he discovered that this was the new love task that he believed God had reserved for him at the end of his long life. This ordeal became so significant for him that he decided to write about it, just before his death, an article titled “H el ene, my love” that he considered as his testament.

One of the first faculties to be affected by Alzheimer’s is the short-term memory. We had noticed for several years that mother kept repeating endlessly the same stories. This was not like her. She used to be reserved and restrained. We assumed that it was due to ageing. It took six years to diagnose that she had Alzheimer’s. But much earlier she had realized that her memory was slipping away. I was very moved when I discovered, soon after her death, her diaries for the years 1980 to 1982. They recorded the struggle she

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<sup>24</sup> 2 Cor 12,10, Nextbible translation

<sup>25</sup> I have described the last years of my parents in **Tang Yi Jie** and **Xavier Le Pichon**, “La Mort”, Descl e de Brouwer, Paris, 1999

made to try to hide this progressive memory loss. In the beginning she was noting the main events of the day and the names of those she had met. She attempted to anticipate the anniversaries of her numerous grandchildren. Then the notes kept sparser. "I had lunch with..". As time passed, the suspension points became more numerous and the notes less frequent. The writing was deteriorating. She would mostly be concerned with the weather. "It rains.. It is cold." The last pages were blank. She had given up the fight, which she now knew to be vain.

There is a beautiful poem of Sully Prudhomme that my mother had taught me:

*"The vase where the verbena is dying  
Was cracked by the blow of a fan.  
The blow barely grazed it  
As no noise revealed it.  
But the light bruise  
Biting the metal each day  
With an invisible but sure hand  
Slowly progressed around it."*

The flower had already withered before we had realized that the vase was cracked and that it would break. But mother fought against the disease without confiding to anybody. Yet the experience of progressive loss of memory is one of the most distressing that one can make. Who has not experienced the anguish that rushes like a tsunami when one suddenly wakes up in a place that one does not recognize? Our security comes from our memory. And Alzheimer's that first attacks the short-term memory progressively takes away all security and ends up plunging the diseased in a quasi-permanent anguish.

When the diagnostics of Alzheimer's was made, the physicians advised my father to put my mother in a specialized medical care housing. "You will not be able to hold on", they told him. But he refused to take her out of the stable environment in which she had been living for years and that had structured her interior and affective life. He now had to put all his energy into an intense fight to preserve her possibility to keep an affective life, a life of the heart, as her intelligence and memory were fading away. It was going to be an exhausting struggle that would push him to his extreme limits.

*"In her behavior, wrote my father, Hélène seemed more and more lost, straying, foreign, in a world that was not hers any more and that she often considered to be hostile."* My father had been a man of action and reflection, highly independent. He had to become a man of service whose life was entirely determined by the needs of his wife. He could not travel any more. The environment and the way of life had to be as unchanging as possible. Breakfast, lunch, tea, late afternoon mass and dinner punctuated the immutable course of the day. But it was the presence of my father at the center of this life that was so uniform that it seemed to be out of time that enabled my mother to live in the present without letting her spirit roam within the world of her dementia. She would come constantly in his office to ask: "Jean, what time is it? Is it teatime?" then she would go to the window to check the weather. But as soon as she had turned away her eyes, she would immediately forget everything and come back to ask again if it was not teatime.

My father strived to discover the words, the gestures, which would still be signs for my mother and helped her to communicate and escape from her anguish. They would often come out of her child's memories that would be able to clear somewhat the haze of her long-term memory. For example mother had forgotten her prayers in French but still knew them in Latin. Thus, when bedtime was coming, my father would kneel next to her bed and recite with her the prayers in Latin. Then she would wait for the kiss on her front that she used to get from her own mother and turn away to sleep. How much ingenuity, how much patience, how much affectionate attention had been required from my father to discover the possibility of this privileged time of communication with her! A few months before her death, although we all thought that she could not read or write any more, in one of these flashes of lucidity that became very rare, she sat at the desk of her husband to write clumsily: "I wonder, my God, when I finally will be happy?" As she plunged within the darkness of her increasing dementia, she still clung to the hope of future happiness.

Yet in the middle of this great suffering, we could all notice the deep transformation of the heart of our father. His spouse never had as much influence on him as at this time when she appeared to be so weak and so powerless. This man of action who placed himself at the heart of anything he would undertake had learned to move aside to let her occupy the centre. He had understood that love grows very slowly. Before the presence of the loved one can fill the whole space of the present instant, there is a need for a lot of faithfulness, a lot of patience, and mostly a lot of gratuitous time. Nothing replaces the time given to the other. Our being must empty itself of his own interests to greet without restrictions the fragile and mysterious gift of the love, fragility and mystery that increase with the weakness and depth of the injuries of the loved one. He thus discovered a new depth of the love he had for his wife, love that he had thought to be already so deep. "I had never loved her so much," he told me the last time I saw him. And the conclusion of his article was: "*Hélène, in the depth of her weakness – but she was not alone – who had become in her body and her spirit the poorest of the poor, had enriched the treasure of our love of our poverty.*" These words may seem mysterious, perhaps even offending to those who have not had a similar experience. They agree however with the testimony of the greatest mystiques. And I can testify that this discovery made by my father inside an apparently very ordinary life was anchored in realism. This new phase of his marriage made him discover that the alliance with his spouse was much deeper than what he had imagined at the time of their mature strength.

With the progression of her disease, her own person appeared to dissociate itself in the collapse of her memory. She did not know any more that she was our mother. She recognized her husband but did not know that she was her wife. He had become for her "Jean", the one who would always be there when she needed him. He thus had received a new name that was inhabited by their whole new relationship. She could not follow the conversations any more but she became very attentive as soon as one spoke of death or after-life. One day she asked my father: "Where is grandma? She should be here." – "But you know, Hélène, that your grandma is in heaven with your mother." – "And myself, will I go to heaven?" – "Of course, Hélène" – "And you?" – "Yes" – "Great!"

Soon before she died, mother came very fretful in my father's office: "Jean, there is somebody in the house." – "No, there is nobody. Come and check with me." – "Yes,

there is somebody. I am sure of it. It is death. It is coming to get me.” Was it death that was looking for her? Was it not mother, tired of her life of suffering, hoping to “finally become happy”, who projected herself toward an after-life that she expected without knowing what it would be? One afternoon, she slipped out of the house. She was knocked over by a car and died shortly after in the hospital.

***“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”<sup>26</sup>***

What my mother and father experienced together during her long and painful illness helps us to understand a little better the nature of this mysterious transformation of relationships which comes when we welcome handicap, suffering and illness. If this welcome is made with dignity and love, the person we welcome becomes the one who leads us into a new deepening of our true humanity. That person changes us deeply as she also changes the nature of the community around them. My mother who had played such an important role during her active life to form the bonds that unified our family had at the end of her painful life an even greater influence in maintaining our unity and in deepening the heart of my father while she appeared to be utterly powerless. One can say that she radiated much more love than what she had received. She had revealed to those who had welcomed her with love a new depth of their humanity. They now better understood that they had a heart and could only find happiness in love.

The author of the poems of the Suffering Servant may have made the same experience. These poems have their origin in the anxious interrogation by humans confronted to the apparently senseless suffering. They do not try to explain why there is suffering. But they open a new path as they approach the mystery of the suffering person, outlining in a still obscure way her triple possible dimension: she attracts the mercy of men and of God; she transforms in a hidden and often unconscious way those who exert this mercy; she may go to the extreme of love in the personal and voluntary sacrifice in a total and definitive gift of oneself to restore hope and overthrow the apparent order of the evil forces.

Whatever our own personal beliefs, it is difficult not to discern in this mystery a dimension of transcendence. As expressed so beautifully by Paul in the First Epistle to the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” This dimension of transcendence is clearly expressed in the Jewish tradition as shown by a commentary of Rabbi Anan reported by the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.C. Talmud Babli. I discovered this commentary in a paper by Claude Birman<sup>27</sup>. Rabbi Anan comments on verse 4 of Psalm 41:

*“He who comes to visit someone who is sick must not sit on the edge of the bed nor on a chair; he must cover himself entirely and sit in front of the one who is sick, because the divine presence is over the head of the sick person. This is*

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor 4,7 Nextbible translation.

<sup>27</sup> Claude Birman, *Souffrance et signification dans la Tradition Juive*, Colloquium « Le malheur de l'autre : souffrance et culture, 22- 23 September 2000 à la Fondation Hugot du College de France.

*because the psalm says « The Eternal, who is above the bed of the one who is sick, upholds him.»*

Claude Birman explains that the divine presence manifests itself particularly to those who suffer:

*To be in the presence of suffering, he says, is to be in the presence of God. The visitor, parent, friend, carer, consoler is in the image of God. He is present to the sick person in the same way that God is there, bending over him. But this resemblance remains respectful and leaves the divine presence its rightful place; no one takes the place of God.”*

What suffering does for the one who is sick is in some way to lay bare his humanity and reveal him as a child of God. Everything else is of lesser importance.

In this commentary we touch on what Pontius Pilate reveals when he presents Jesus to the crowd. Jesus who is suffering, scorned and humiliated is for the first time in the Gospel presented as the “man”, “*Ecce Homo*”, “*Behold the man*”<sup>28</sup> Man in his suffering, man wounded and tortured, at this moment more than any other, reveals the mystery of his humanity which makes him the image of God. Let us not forget that it is as the Suffering Servant that Jesus chose to reveal his humanity to us.

In the same way as the sick person is supported in his bed by the presence of God, and becomes a sign of God, Jesus in his extreme agony reveals to our eyes his humanity as the God-Man, “*Ecce Homo*”. Rabbi Anan in the 5th Century made the discovery long ago of the mystery hidden in the hearts of those who suffer. Following them, following so many people who have approached the mystery of suffering, and of course, following Jesus who invites us to engage ourselves fully, we must now respond to this call to deepen our humanity. The only way is the way of the suffering person, as John Paul II has written, “*The suffering person is in a special way the path of the Church.*”<sup>29</sup> The rejected, the suffering, the handicapped are put on our path so that we will welcome them and will enter into a dialogue with them, not knowing where it will lead us, except that it will lead us to heaven.

This brings us directly to the teaching that Jesus gave us on how to enter his Kingdom. As is true for all that He taught us, we are not given a cut and dried recipe. We have signposts pointing out the way, following in Jesus’ footsteps. Whom did he welcome? Toward whom did he go? Toward those who were most rejected by society, those who suffered, the wounded, the mistrusted and those who were avoided. One of his key teachings is given at the end of Chapter 25 of St. Matthew’s Gospel where he deals with the Last Judgment. Here Jesus tells us that those who live their earthly life in poverty and rejection are the ones who hold the keys to his kingdom.

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<sup>28</sup> John 19 :5

<sup>29</sup> John Paul II, *Le Sens Chrétien de la Souffrance Humaine* (Paris : Le Cerf, 1984) p. 89

*"Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.  
For I was hungry and you gave me food;  
I was thirsty and you gave me drink;  
I was a stranger and you made me welcome.  
Naked and you clothed me,  
Sick and you visited me  
In prison and you came to see me." Trans. Jerusalem Bible<sup>30</sup>*

It is those who are fed, cared for and visited, who open the door of heaven to those who come towards them. Note that we are talking in each case about services to the body, services which imply our presence and therefore the gift of our time. Finally Jesus speaks to us in this passage of welcoming the "poor". The poor person we welcomed on earth is the one who welcomes us in heaven. Christians have speculated on the interpretation of the Last Judgment throughout the history of the Church. What is Jesus saying to us when He affirms that He is present in the person who is rejected, suffering or wounded? These days, more and more people are discovering in this teaching the "sacrament of the poor". A sacrament for the Christian church is a sign of God's presence. The poor is a sign of God's presence. But have we really entered into the mystery of this sacrament? Have we understood that the poor really possess the keys of the Kingdom? What is the Kingdom? "*The Kingdom of God is in your midst*"<sup>31</sup>, said Jesus. It is the Kingdom of God, where peace, fraternity and love reign. And in fact, these people hold the key to the Kingdom for if we do not welcome them, how can there be peace, love and fraternity? How can we take possession of God's Kingdom on earth?

There is something very mysterious and very profound in this welcome. It conceals a secret. Jesus says to us, "I am showing you these people. They have a hidden secret, which is the secret of my Kingdom. It is up to you to discover this secret with them and through them". Again, He does not give us a recipe. He invites us to enroll in their school; this rough school of suffering, but suffering lived in community. Without us, they cannot get away from their unhappiness and risk falling into despair. But without them, we cannot enter the Kingdom. Father Thomas Philippe co-founder of L'Arche<sup>32</sup> with Jean Vanier said: "If we take away from someone who is suffering, any meaning to his suffering, if we make him feel even indirectly that his suffering is useless and is a burden to the community, what is left for him? Despair." We must welcome each person in such a way that she retains her full dignity and still have a sense of having something to offer to the community.

The challenges we face are perhaps not so different from those faced by our ancestors, those prehistoric men over one hundred thousand years ago. Did those ancestors not need

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew, 25: 34-36

<sup>31</sup> Matthew, 12:28

<sup>32</sup> L'Arche is a community founded at Trosly-Breuil near Compiègne in 1964 by Jean Vanier and Father Thomas Phillippe, to welcome mentally handicapped people as full human persons. It has since become an international federation of communities, which share a common charter, inspired by the Beatitudes of the Gospel. The author has lived at Trosly-Breuil with his family since 1976.

just as much, if not more courage to accept what appears to be the intolerable burden of taking care, long term, of a disabled person in a small group of hunter-gatherers who had no permanent home? In feeding and carrying him, in putting him at the centre of their lives they discovered that they were creating a new way of living. They did not know that it was a human/humane way, but they invented it. Is it more difficult for us today? Perhaps. But we have to take up the challenge in the same way. In order to do this we must change the way we look at the “other”, the one who is suffering, the one Jesus calls our neighbor. Those who have never had contact with the mentally handicapped are often afraid at the first contact. But in visiting the L’Arche communities, they lose their fear because they see how the people who live there are loved and regarded. Their ideas change because their heart is touched.

They discover what Father Thomas Philippe said, that the poor who are accepted become “peacemakers”<sup>33</sup>; they radiate peace. This peace is visible to all hearts that allow themselves to be touched. Thus, through the disfigured features of the Suffering Servant we begin to see the mystery of man, “Ecce Homo” “Behold the man.” Jesus chose to be presented by Pilate as the “man” at the mock tribunal, in all his derisory finery, so that we would discover the secret of this man. He offers us this secret so that we would have the possibility to enter his Kingdom. But are we able to see behind the mask of the Suffering Servant the beauty of his heart?

### *Acknowledgments*

I thank the Templeton Foundation for inviting me to expand an article modified from an address made to the 76th session of the Semaines Sociales de France, November 23-25, 2001: “Que ferons-nous de l’homme?” (Bayard Ed. Paris, 2002, 51-66.). I first developed these ideas in a book entitled “To the Roots of Man, From Death to Love” (Aux Racines de l’Homme, De la mort à l’amour) published by Presses de la Renaissance, Paris, in 1977 and republished as a pocket book in 2007. With the permission of the publisher, I have adapted some passages of the book in this expansion, especially for the part concerning the sixth century B.C. The story of the end of life of my mother was first published in a book about death “La mort” published simultaneously in French and Chinese (see reference in note 25).

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew 5:9