

ANSWER TO PAIN

FABIAN MULHERN, O.P.



WHITE beds, a faint odor of many drugs streaking the air, quiet tread of noiseless feet, white capped heads bent gently over shrouded figures; quick, deft hands smoothing a coverlet, feeling a pulse, changing a bandage; over all, the atmosphere of reserved silence which speaks of suffering too great for cry or moan. It is a ward in a great London hospital. A young woman, her pain-aged face still bearing the unmistakable mark of youth, lies motionless. She cannot move; she has not moved this long time, for her back is broken. Pain?—it has become a part of her, her one constant associate in the long hours of the day, through the endless watches of the night. She is upon this merciless rack ere the first waltz in life's dance is over, pitched into the grey dye pot of pain while the glow is still fresh in her cheeks and the sheen still shining in her hair. Ahead, lie only the dull, ever same days, whose minutes are stabbing pains, until the one faithful—relentlessly faithful—companion looses his hold to let her slip into the sublime repose of death.

Why does this terrible thing have to be? This girl, just out of her teens, is but one of countless thousands. In the valleys, out of the din and dirt of London's streets, in the cities beyond the sea—everywhere, without the Empire as within it—the dread spectacle goes on. Broken, wasted, pain-wrapt bodies cling to the suffering spirits of the children of men. Why bear it? Why let the pitiful, hopeless lives drag on with only the vision of increasing and deepening agony ahead? The fair earth, which man calls his domain, is cluttered with and made hideous by these sights of broken humanity.

Human science, which has blazed a trail of conquest over the enemies of man, must have some foil in its rack of weapons with which to dispatch the interloper who steals comfort from so many lives. Science bridges the stars and shackles mighty rivers. Can it not dry up the mud hole of pain which is a sore on the earth? It seems not. Long ago scientists promised to

end it all. Disease was to be banished; pain was to be driven out. But somehow both still remain. There seems to be no end to our ills. One disease is conquered, another rises in its place; pain, driven out at one corner, is in at another. The brag was once trumpeted from the house tops: "Medicine will end suffering." The realization that it cannot is whispered in the by-ways. Since, then, medical research and practice cannot always mend the broken body, build the shattered tissue, heal the anguished nerves, the answer must be sought elsewhere. It is not the way of the twentieth century to admit gordian knots.

Of course, the problem of human suffering is nothing new. Men have always suffered. In some sense, the history of mankind can be called a history of suffering, a story of battle ceaselessly waged against the ills to which flesh is heir. The world is dotted with institutions whose end is to soften the pangs of pain; multitudes devote their lives to the cause. Every age has tried to care for its sufferers. It was, perhaps, inevitable that our generation, which sees this world as the only world, should aim, almost desperately, at abolishing palliative remedies for suffering by altogether wiping out the very idea of suffering itself. If pain cannot be prevented it can be abolished, once it exists. This is the modern answer.

Last year the presses of the world stamped that answer in print for all the world to see. An English mother and some English doctors met and solved the problem of human pain with extinction of life. A mother and a doctor, those very persons into whose hands is placed the so nearly divine task of conserving life, killed suffering by killing the sufferers. But a few short months ago the same answer was introduced into the Parliament of Great Britain with the demand that it be canonized as law. England's legislature rocked with the controversy over the Euthanasia Bill, a measure contemplated to legalize the administration of a fatal drug to sufferers who desire death. This plan to rid the world of pain by ridding it of the pained would seem an adequate way to terminate human ills which have hung like a poised sword over the paradise of this world since the world's first sufferers slunk away in confusion from the gates of Eden. The turn of a handle, a sweet smelling (and, of course, painless) drug—then relief from the terrible shackles in the blissful oblivion of death. Ere long the bill could be amended to extend its mercies to the unwilling who, clinging unreason-

ably to a life of suffering, clutter the earth. Contented, non-suffering but burdensome folk—the poor and the aged—could be forced to avail themselves of the facilities of euthanasia. What the doctors did for their patients and the mother did for her son without the law, the State would proceed to do as a part of its duty to its citizens.

The “mercy killing” mother was condemned to death and a pardon was refused her by the king. The Euthanasia Bill was defeated, due in part, at least, to the united opposition of the Catholic Hierarchy and the medical societies of the United Kingdom. But the *idea* has not been defeated.

This notion that man is the master of life and death is not novel. It is no mere fad, harmless and impermanent as a cloud. Rather is it representative of an attitude of mind which refuses to be changed but persists in asserting itself in the halls of law-markers with the plea that its demands be placed upon the statute books. The rejected Euthanasia Bill represents the only answer which the modern world can give to suffering. Half a dozen years ago Father Vincent McNabb saw that such a remedy would be proposed; Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson foretold it almost at the beginning of the century. He saw extinction of human life as the ordinary policy of the wiser and more highly developed civilization of the future. His prophetic conclusion is one which follows naturally and with grim logic from a conception of life which finds wider and wider acceptance as time goes on. This latest wrinkle of the humanitarians, who see man’s sojourn among the living as a dead-end alley, is of a piece with birth-control. Both are the spawn of materialism which, governing the entrance and the exit of life, has made the space between them a bondage to the goods of this earth.

When English solons signified their unwillingness to support the measure which would legalize this death-control the opponents of the Bill were scored in bitter language by its backers. The revulsion, which such arbitrary murder and suicide aroused in most minds and hearts is testimony that some dictates of the natural law still find recognition in a society growing unnatural; but the bitter reflection of the abettor of this bill on the clerical and medical groups opposing it indicates the almost total lack of agreement between Christian society and the new hedonism. The remark, that this opposition is but another occasion on which priests and doctors have placed obstacles in the path of human progress, was to be expected. Human prog-

ress! If we are human, and thus different from insects which breed in multitudes and die in an hour, it is because we have a reason which sees and follows the law which the Author of Nature has made. Minds working rightly see well that a dictate of that law puts the disposal of life in the hands of Him Who sees the upper side of life's weaving. We, who see the under side only, have not the right over life and death. If the life of man were a sealed cavern with no eternity above to strike an echo of the chords sounded there, we might well consider it progress to drown our sick children as kittens and shoot our ailing adults as horses. Progress in anything means an advance toward perfection. Human perfection does not consist in a gloriously healthy body, for the body is human only insofar as it is vitalized by a spiritual soul. It is in this, that man is destined for the vision of God, that primary human perfection lies. A broken, suffering frame, laden with pain, may well be the ladder of human perfection. It can lead a man to the end for which he was made—the love of God.

There can be but little hope—naturally speaking—that those who see human existence as a fleeting moment, useless if not pleasurable, can understand just why Christ's Church fights their answer to pain. Across the centuries the Church has seen in suffering an anvil, on which saints can be hammered out. It was on the same anvil that Jesus Christ wrought the key which opened Heaven's gate, that saints might enter it. He made the bearing of pain for His Name's sake a passport to a land without pain. The Euthanasia Bill would annihilate suffering. Christ's "euthanasia" transubstantiates it into the elements of a divine metal, which makes counters at the gate of eternity.

It was this bartering in pain which caused Father McNabb to call the young woman mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a "professional of pain." The problem of suffering was not a problem to her, yet she knew more of it than many who discuss it. She smiled through the dreadful hours. She fled this world with a smile on her lips, because the rays from Christ's cross had illumined her own and burnt the hardness out of her pains. The last days of her short enough life were devoted to instructing a child in the next bed in the story of Christ. She was preaching from a cross, and she offered her agonies that the little one beside her might have life.

She gave the other answer to suffering. It is the only one which really is an answer, for pain, like so many things in life,

is a riddle unsolvable, when God and man's higher destiny are lost sight of. The moderns do not untie the knot; they throw it away. Killing sick people may do away with unhealthy bodies, but the race must be exterminated if all suffering is to be blotted out. No drug exists which will lull heart aches into insensibility; no acid can wipe from the human heart its tendency to yearn for something greater than is here on earth. Euthanasia, which the hedonists would introduce, is a control over death; it stealthily opens a gate whose keeper should be God. What I have called Christ's "euthanasia," which blends His suffering with our own, is a control over life. It leaves the opening of death's door to its rightful keeper in order that, once within it, man may have the key to the door beyond death—the one which opens to Life.

PLEA TO A FRIEND

SEBASTIAN CARLSON, O.P.

Often I shared rich blood
 To thy thin vein.
 Why hast thou started back?
 In fear the throbbing stream
 Would leave a stain?

Long did I writhe in flames
 To light thy night.
 Why hast thou turned away?
 Because the scorched flesh
 Stank in thy sight?

Knife and charrèd stake
 Fouled me for *thy* sake!