

Divine Compassion and Divine Punishment

By Rev. Aaron Pidel, S.J.

October 25, 2020 – Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Exodus 22.20-26; I Thessalonians 1.5-10; Matthew 22.34-40

Two of this Sunday's liturgical readings advert to a topic seldom broached in contemporary homiletics: divine punishment in this life. The reading from Exodus, like Jesus's own preaching, describes God as loving and "compassionate" (22.26). But it also presents God, precisely because of this compassion, as vindictive: "If you ever wrong [any widow or orphan] and they cry out to me . . . My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword" (22.21-22). In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul profiles the good news of the Gospel against a rather ominous background, recalling that the risen Jesus "delivers us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1.10). This raises a pastorally delicate question: Is God still in the business of punishing us? If so, can we identify which sufferings in the world represent divine punishment?

Punishment and the Natural Order

As with most tricky pastoral questions, distinctions prove helpful. Ever since Augustine, the tradition has distinguished between two different kinds of evil: "Fault (*culpa*) is the evil we do, but punishment (*poena*) is the evil we suffer" (*De lib. arb.*, bk. 1, ch. 1). Aquinas inherits this distinction, differentiating broadly between the evil of fault (*malum culpae*), e.g., sin and guilt, and the evil of punishment (*malum poenae*), or defects of "form or integrity" such as sickness or poverty (*De malo*, q. 1, a. 4). There is, moreover, a key difference between the two kinds of evil. Whereas the evil of fault is sheer waste, contributing nothing to the good of the universe, the evil of punishment is always connected to some other creature's flourishing. A stab wound is the consequence of steel being good steel; pandemics are the consequence of a coronavirus flourishing in its own way. The evil of punishment always takes place within an interconnected order, where creatures depend not only on God, but also on each other. As a result, one may say that the evil of punishment is not directly willed by God, but only indirectly, as the consequence of maintaining the good of order.

This idea that the good of order sometimes entails the evil of punishment forms the whole basis for legitimate punishment, both human and divine. Unlike sub-personal creatures, which are more or less determined to follow the natural order, rational creatures must freely choose to follow it. When they fail to do so, they introduce a defect into the just social order that can only be remedied by punishment. "Since by crime man transgresses the limits of the natural order, giving more to his will than he ought," Aquinas observes, "he is led back to the order of justice by punishment, through which something is taken away from his will" (*Compendium theologiae*, cap. 121). When legitimate civil authority punishes a criminal, therefore, he does so as an organ of the social order "healing" itself. He does not properly intend evil upon the criminal, as if motivated by a personal vendetta. The proper object of his will is maintaining and restoring the just social order.

The kind of indirect willing exercised by human judges is analogous to God's will in punishing. In many respects, then, to say, "This is a punishment from God," is not say that God "has it out" for me or is directly "smiting" me. It is simply to say that God is the ultimate author of the natural order, along with its inbuilt consequences. This comports well with God's threat of punishment in Exodus. God identifies the oppression of aliens, widows, and orphans—all violations

of the order of justice—as the cause of the punishment. God promises to administer the punishment not directly, but “with the sword,” a symbol of violence at human hands. The human social order is so constituted, in other words, that unaddressed violence begets violence. Exodus’ first-person language admittedly makes God’s action seem very direct and pointed: “My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword.” But we can understand this first-person language as Scripture’s vivid way of impressing upon its readers that the natural law shares in God’s own authority.

Even if we grasp that God’s “wrath” is often a biblical way of expressing the inbuilt consequences of sin, we might still wonder how broadly we should interpret our sufferings as divine “punishment” for sin. According to the tradition, we can do so quite broadly. But a distinction may help us to reconcile this answer with the image of a loving God. Thomas Aquinas (see ST II-II, q. 108, a. 4) distinguishes between punishment “as punishment” (*secundum rationem poenae*) and punishment “as medicine” (*inquantum est medicina*). The first applies only “in so far as he, who by sinning has exceeded in following his own will, suffers something that is contrary to this will.” Only those sins we have personally and voluntarily committed merit this kind of punishment.

Medicinal punishment, by contrast, concerns “not only healing the past sin, but also preserving from future sin, or conducing to some good, and in this way a person is sometimes punished without any fault of his own, yet not without cause. Such are many of the punishments inflicted by God in this present life for our humiliation or probation.” These medicinal punishments redress not only the sins we have personally committed, but also the sin we have corporately contracted through Adam and Eve. True medicinal punishments thus serve to test us and need not correspond to any particular crime of our own. They deprive us of temporal goods (health, wealth) to protect the spiritual goods (sanctifying grace) received through Christ Jesus, thereby saving us from what St. Paul calls the “coming wrath.”

Divine Punishment Today

This distinction between God’s direct and indirect willing, between punitive and medicinal punishment, perhaps helps us to think in a more nuanced way about how divine “punishment” might be operative in the world today. Three examples may help: racial unrest, the pandemic, and spiritual desolation. As we have seen, the Book of Exodus would have been quite comfortable calling the racial unrest experienced in this country since the killing of George Floyd as a kind of divine punishment. This is not to claim divine sanction for those who loot and riot, nor to impute racial motivations to any recent police action. It is enough to acknowledge that the United States long treated black citizens unjustly. To apply the language of Exodus, America oppressed the “widow, orphan, and alien,” introducing a grave defect into the divinely sanctioned social order. As Exodus predicted, we still live “with the sword.” It’s worth noting that Exodus foresees this divine punishment in temporal goods affecting not only those who have directly oppressed the vulnerable, but also their posterity as well.

The novel corona virus pandemic, along with other natural disasters, fits the profile of medicinal punishment. COVID-19 belongs to the interconnected order of the universe. And even if the pandemic is nobody’s personal fault, it may nevertheless conduce to the aims of medicinal punishment. By depriving us of certain temporal goods (freedom of association, employment, health, etc.), it can preserve us from future sin by humbling us, making us feel more keenly our dependence upon God. Even the temporary loss of the sacraments has the potential, at least, to renew our desire and gratitude for them. According to F. van der Meer’s *Augustine the Bishop*, St. Augustine abstained from the Eucharist during the last days of his life so as to meet the Lord with hunger and thirst for righteousness (p. 273).

Bearing in mind this broader, medicinal sense of punishment, we can more easily understand how Christians of centuries past could simultaneously interpret plagues as divine punishment and take public-health precautions to mitigate their effects. During the so-called “*peste di San Carlo*” (1576-1578), for instance, St. Charles Borromeo led three penitential processions through Milan, donning a noose around his neck and drawing hundreds of flagellants in train. At the same time, St. Charles took care to organize the procession according to districts, reasoning that he could thereby diminish contagion across neighborhoods. By such public acts of humility, Borromeo showed that he took the plague as a medicinal punishment from which his flock could profit spiritually. By trying to minimize contagion, however, he showed that he understood the punishment to originate only indirectly from God, as the author of a natural order operating according to its own internal laws. By contrast, the Ottoman Empire, which had a more direct theory of divine punishment, did not develop quarantines until well into the nineteenth century, reasoning that resisting God’s wrath was futile. Perhaps we do well to imitate Borromeo’s attitude today, intensifying our penance, while following medically indicated precautions.

The last example, spiritual desolation, merits consideration not just in light of recent events, but in every age. St. Ignatius of Loyola's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits tacitly presupposes the distinction between punitive and medicinal punishments when discussing the three reasons why we might find ourselves spiritually desolate (see *SpEx* [322]):

The first is because we have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation has been taken away from us.

The second reason is because God wishes to try us, to see how much we are worth, and how much we will advance in His service and praise when left without the generous reward of consolations and signal favors.

The third reason is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire and attain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation; but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. God does not wish us to . . . rise up in spirit in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation.

The desolation for the first reason would represent a more nearly punitive punishment, healing the disorder introduced through "our own fault." But desolation for the second or third reasons would represent medicinal punishments, aimed at "probation" and at "preserving from future sin," such as pride and vainglory. Regardless of the grounds for the desolation, in the end, Ignatius tends to describe God's agency as indirect: "When one is in desolation, he should be mindful that God *has left* him to his natural powers *to resist* the different agitations and temptations of the *enemy* in order to try him" (*SpEx* [320]). The enemy directly induces desolation, whereas God only permits it—and with a very different purpose.

When understood with sufficient nuance, then, one can say that God's divine punishment is a feature of this life. Though we can never be sure that a given temporal punishment corresponds to a given sin (except original sin), we can always be sure that it is aimed at our healing. In this way we can reconcile God's justice and mercy.

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For Further Reading

- **Dean Phillip Bell**, [*Plague in the Early Modern World: A Documentary History*](#)
- **Timothy Gallagher, OMV**, [*The Discernment of Spirits*](#)
- **Peter Karl Koritansky**, [*Thomas Aquinas and the Philosophy of Punishment*](#)

In Short . . .

- *Punishment is an aspect of God's providence.*
- *God's punishment is not a matter of his directly intending evil to anyone, but of his willing to uphold the natural order, the violation of which has inbuilt consequences.*
- *God's providence includes "medicinal punishment," which, by depriving us of temporal goods, heals the consequences of original sin in us and protects from the loss of spiritual goods.*
- *Bearing in mind this broad sense of punishment, one can see racial unrest as a kind of divine punishment analogous to that threatened against Israel (see Exodus 22) for oppressing the resident alien.*
- *One can also see pandemics and other plagues as medicinal punishment, again, in this broad sense.*
- *St. Ignatius Loyola presupposes that God permits both punishment as punishment and punishment as medicine when explaining why we experience spiritual desolation.*