WHERE CHRIST SUFFERS TODAY: A CHRISTOLOGICAL, ECCLESIOLOGICAL, AND MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON HUMAN SUFFERING FROM WAR

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Introduction

As someone who served as a volunteer in various refugee centers across Europe, particularly in France and Germany, I encountered people whose lives have been deeply marked by suffering, displacement, and loss. They came from different corners of the world: war-torn Ukraine, bomb-stricken Syria, impoverished Bulgaria, politically persecuted Turkey, and even genocide survivors from Sudan. They were different in nationality, language, and culture, yet united in one common condition: human anguish and vulnerability.

One unforgettable moment took place during my visit to the Museum of the Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland. There, I saw an artwork created by displaced children from Kyiv, Ukraine. It was a simple drawing of the crucifixion. But instead of an adult Christ hanging on the cross, it was an infant. Instead of nails and a hammer, there were guns and bullets. Instead of the soldier's lance, there was a rifle. That image pierced me deeply. It was not just a representation of the crucifixion; it was a theological cry, a lamentation, a visual expression of innocent suffering. In that image, Christ was not only on Calvary; Christ was in Kyiv, in Aleppo, in Khartoum, in the camps, in the boats, and in every displaced child who carries the cross of violence, fear, and abandonment.

That image has stayed with me. It often returns during prayer and meditation, challenging me, provoking me, and calling me to deeper discipleship. I have listened to stories. I have seen tears. I have walked with them, shared bread with them, and sat in silence with them. Yet I ask myself: *After hearing so much, seeing so much, what now? What is my responsibility?*

Nathalia, one of my classmates in the language program at the University of Strasbourg, used to work in one of the top companies in Kyiv. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, she was forced to leave her home country with her son, Bohdan, because of the escalating conflict and the fear that they would inevitably be affected. Unprepared, they fled with only a few euros, some clothes, and a great deal of fear. They left behind her husband, who had joined the military to fight against the Russian invaders, and Nathalia's aging mother, who could no longer travel because of her age and illness. They sought refuge in the nearest country, Poland. But while they were trying to settle down, Nathalia received a call from Ukraine informing her that her mother had passed away due to depression. A month later, her husband was killed while fighting at the front. Because of the danger, she had no opportunity to return home to say goodbye to her mother or her husband. Still traumatized, she decided to move forward and later relocated to France with the help of various organizations like Caritas Alsace, where I served as a volunteer. A practicing Catholic, she shared with me that she questioned God many times, but she never lost her hope that this conflict would eventually come to an end.

As a missionary, I did not only promise to work for the Kingdom of God in the comfort of the pulpit or within the walls of our community. I promised to proclaim Christ, especially in the wounded, the displaced, and the forgotten. I promised not

just to speak about the Gospel but to embody it to become, in some small way, a sacrament of God's presence. My responsibility, therefore, is not only to listen to their stories but to recognize in them the crucified Christ, to respond with compassion, and to walk with them toward healing and hope. It is to help the Church not only uphold doctrine but also to live mercy. It is to help transform lament into prayer, despair into solidarity, and suffering into encounter with the God who still bears wounds.

In their faces, I saw theology not written in books, but etched in human hearts. In their tears, I heard a kind of Gospel fragile, silent, yet profoundly true. And in that moment before the crucified Child of Kyiv, I understood: to be a missionary is to stand at the foot of the cross in whatever form it takes today and to remain there with faith, compassion, and hope.

Christological Aspect

Christ and the Wounded People of Ukraine

The image described in the depiction of the crucifixion and the story of Nathalia are of the same essence, narrating the modern-day passion and death of Christ, with the hope of resurrection. It is not only a piece of art or another story to tell, but a deep act of theological revelation. It is a visual interpretation that Christ is present in the contemporary suffering of every innocent victim, especially the children and the vulnerable ones. John Sobrino, SJ said in his book Christology at the Crossroads, that "God continues to be the real cross of the oppressed" because "oppressed persons are the meditation of God."[1] These refugees are what Sobrino calls the meditation of God's face because it is through them that the cross of Christ is made visible to the world. With this, another Jesuit theologian,

1 Jon Sobrino, SJ, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 222-223.

Avery Dulles, wrote in his book, Models of the Church, "that the Church is permanently marked with the image of the Crucified."[2] This strongly affirms the Church's Christological essence by asserting that it does not regard the passion and death of Christ as merely historical events but recognizes that Christ is united with every person, especially those who are suffering, displaced, and forgotten.

Jürgen Moltmann's "The Crucified God" wrote that "the crucified Christ became the brother of the despised, abandoned, and oppressed."[3] This underscores that Christ is never separated from, but deeply involved in, their suffering. The experiences of refugees like Nathalia and the children of Kyiv are similar in that they are "brothers and sisters" of the crucified Christ because of their suffering. Thus, every encounter with them is more than personal but indeed a sacred service and encounter with God Himself, the Crucified.

In this regard, the humiliation of the cross, however painful, was not merely a symbol of embarrassment but companionship for the oppressed, and in this case, with the war refugees and survivors because "the pain of God heals (their) pain."[4]

The Christological conviction of these situations is that it redefined the concept of crucifixion as suffering because of the hope that God is present amidst war and persecution. In effect, the anguish of Natalia and the children is not a cry of weakness and doubts but a legitimate encounter with God. "Christology must be done in the light of the cross"[5] because the glory of

2 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church,* (Colorado: PRH Christian Publishing, 2002), 188.

3 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

God is not revealed in its might and power but through the passion and crucifixion of Christ.

Church Teachings

"The one who has hope lives differently, the one who hopes has been granted the gift of new life."[6] The encyclical letter of the late Benedict XVI echoes the pleas of the numerous children from Kyiv and of Nathalia as they hold onto hope. This is not to invalidate or discredit their suffering and grief, but to set a clear message for the world that resurrection is born out of crucifixion. In addition, the predecessor of Benedict XVI stressed that "in every child that is born and in every person who lives or dies we see the image of God's glory."[7] The children of Kyiv, who portrayed a young Christ on the cross, made a strong theological declaration that Christ suffers alongside all people, regardless of age, race, or color.

On the other side, Pope Francis cautioned against embracing immigrants because some nations have closed their doors to them, believing that doing so would put them in a safer environment. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti,* it is said, "immigrants are seen as usurpers who have nothing to offer. This leads to the simplistic belief that the poor are dangerous and useless, while the powerful are generous benefactors."[8] This gives rise to the oversimplified notion that the powerful are kind donors

6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi,* Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html (Accessed October 19, 2025), 2.

7 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae,* Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed October 19, 2025), 84.

8 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti,* Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed October 19, 2021), 141.

and the impoverished are dangerous and worthless. Traveling with people like Nathalia is akin to traveling with Christ in exile or on his way to Calvary.

Ecclesiology

In times of conflict, the Catholic Church always welcomes those in need of help, such as shelter, food, and clothing. In one of the Angelus at the Vatican, Pope Francis asked parishes across Europe to open their doors to refugees. He said "Faced with the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing death on account of war and hunger, and who are traveling toward a hope for life, the Gospel calls us to be 'neighbors' to the smallest and abandoned, (and) to give them a concrete hope,"[9] he added that it is not enough that as a church would simply say, have "courage (and) patience because hope is combative, with the tenacity of those who go toward a safe destination."[10]

Karl Rahner states in his book *The Church and the Sacraments* that "she herself [the Church] attains the highest degree of actualization of what she always is: the presence of redemptive grace for men, historically visible and manifest as the sign of the eschatologically victorious grace of God in the world." [11] This indicates that the church finds a way to welcome the displaced people as a visible presence of grace during times of conflict and insurgency. Caritas is an example of humanitarian and ecclesiastical assistance for those in need through its numerous programs. It goes without saying that Caritas helps people of all races, religions, and beliefs. For war victims and

9 "Pope: All European churches to welcome refugees," *Catholic News Agency,* September 6, 2025 (Accessed October 19, 2025).

10 Ibid.

11 Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 22.

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refugees, in order to survive, hope is not just a naïve optimism but a brave and tenacious act in order to live.

In building the church, Cyril Hovorun wrote that "the structures of the church were designed to contain tensions" [12] because the church has never been completed and is forever under construction, especially in times of insurrections. This ecclesiological dimension helps establish the "hope" that is within the Church.

Hovorun went on to say that "it will be all the more able to hear and respond to the anguished cry of the unparalleled human suffering in the world today[13] because 'ecclesiology from below' is more grounded and flexible in accepting the realities of the world."[14] There may be a more structured "ideal church," but what matters is that it be concrete in facing human reality and embracing the situations, including their flaws.

Lumen Gentium, one of the Church's official documents, stated unequivocally that "since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race"[15] demonstrating the church's constant pursuit of unity and the restoration of the dignity that the victims typically lost when they fled abroad. Additionally, "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of

12 Cyril Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church* (Cambridge: Cascade Books), 2.

13 Ibid. quoted from Gerard Mannion, *Comparative Ecclesiology: Critical Investigations* (NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).

14 Ibid.

15 Second Vatican Council, *"Lumen Gentium,"* in *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2008), 1.

Christ."[16] The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* encourages the whole church to help alleviate the burden and effects of the war.

In the end, the members of the Church, together with its leaders, must have authentic zeal for this particular mission. John Paul II wrote that "solidarity.... is the path to peace and at the same time to development,"[17] and thus, everyone must have the fidelity to be missionary because the Church is a "missionary by her very nature."[18] As heralds of hope to the suffering, Dulles proposes to have the "courage, hope, and readiness to risk and sacrifice that should follow from a living Christian faith are much needed by the world in our day."[19] This is a clear message to the Church and an invitation that She must learn to serve and even to risk for the sake of the vulnerable ones so as not to diminish Her missionary nature.

Theology Becoming a Mission

The encounters with people who struggle to cope with traumatic experiences, such as those from Ukraine, are holy yet can become vague and hollow unless they lead to meaningful action. But beyond its sanctity, true understanding must lead to action, and theology must be lived to become a genuine mission. The stories of faith, rooted in suffering, are a call that the Church's teachings cannot remain abstract; they must be

16 Second Vatican Council, *"Gaudium et Spes,"* in *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2008), 1.

17 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1987), 39.

18 Second Vatican Council, *"Lumen Gentium,"* in *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2008), 2.

19 Dulles, *Models of the Church,* 131.

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incarnational, aware of the realities of human pain, hope, and resilience.

David Bosch emphasizes that "mission was no longer merely an activity of the church, but an expression of the very being of the church."[20] This insight captures the precise context of the mission's identity, and the Church must always go where Christ stands and remain in communion with those who are crucified in various forms throughout the history of Christendom. Bosch adds that

> one could no longer think of the church except as being both called out of the world and sent forth into the world. The world could no longer be divided into 'missionizing' and 'missionary' territories. The whole world was a mission field, which meant that Western theology, too, had to be practiced in a missionary situation.[21]

Christian mission is always responding directly to the needs of the Church, such as the victims of natural and man-made tragedies. For Gustavo Gutiérrez, mission is participation in God's liberating work. In his book, A Theology of Liberation, he said, "In liberation Theology, faith and life are inseparable. This unity accounts for its prophetic vigor and potentialities." [22] This impels us all the more that the mission also requires confronting the causes of suffering while evangelizing with hope. Like his predecessor, Pope Leo XIV called for an end to all armed conflicts in one of his first major addresses after his election as head of the Catholic Church. He said, "I, too, address

20 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 592-593.

21 Ibid.

22 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 13.

the world's great powers by repeating the ever-present call, 'never again war.'" [23]

The Church, in its missionary nature, must also challenge all forms of armed conflict, insurgency, discrimination, slavery, ecological abuse, corruption, and other injustices that further oppress the vulnerable, especially refugees of war. Another strong and compelling message from Bosch, deeply relevant to the signs of the times, is his definition of mission, which exposes the Church's responsibility to confront these realities and stand in solidarity with those who suffer. He narrated that "missiology acts as a gadfly in the house of theology, creating unrest and resisting complacency, opposing every ecclesiastical impulse to self-preservation."[24] Truly, a mission is being practical, relevant, provocative, and challenging of traditions by going beyond the context and comfort of religious homes.

Conclusion

Journeying with people like Nathalia and the war-displaced children of Kyiv has taught me that theology becomes most real not in reading books, not in classrooms, not in an abstract context, but in the fragile but sacred spaces where human suffering meets compassion. Seeing the reality war in their eyes, their anguish and wounds became, for me, a place of revelation of what Sobrino meant by "meditation of God." In my encounters, I understood in a deeper sense that Christ is not only remembered in the Calvary but continues to be crucified in the lives of the vulnerable of today's world, as it is written in Salvifici Doloris, "in the Cross of Christ not only

23 "Pope Leo calls for peace in Ukraine in first Sunday Address," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/11/pope-leo-peace-ukraine-first-sunday-address-never-again-war#:~:text=Pope%20Leo%20XIV%20has%20called,third%20world%20war%20in%20pieces%E2%80%9D. (Accessed October 19, 2025).

24 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 596.

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is the Redemption accomplished through suffering but also human suffering itself has been redeemed."[25]

This experience also clarified what Dulles meant when he wrote, "the Church is permanently marked with the image of the Crucified." The Church's identity might not be fulfilled unless it stands beside those who carry modern crosses, be it in the presence of armed conflicts, poverty, and all kinds of injustices. Rahner's selection of words profoundly resonates the same message: the Church must become "the presence of redemptive grace." In my encounters with them, I realized that, despite our language differences, my simple service and companionship became a source of hope for them. Moreover, mission became clearer to me after this experience, especially through Bosch's insight that mission is not "merely an activity of the Church, but an expression of the very being of the Church." Their cries push us to be authentic and zealous in our work, as Bosch warns that "missiology acts as gadfly" whenever we become complacent, comfortable, and entitled. Their anguish must disrupt us to act with courage and fidelity.

Yet, amid the trauma, I personally witnessed hope as well; quiet, fearful, but real. The resilience of those who lost almost everything taught me that Christian hope is not a naïve optimism. It does not disappoint, certainly[26]. It is a courageous decision to flee, trusting that God is present in the shattered pieces of their lives, as Nathalia does. Hope allows them to

25 Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris,* Apostolic Letters, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html (accessed October 19, 2025), 19.

26 Pope Francis, quotation from Romans 5:5, in *Spes non Confundit,* Papal Bulls, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html (accessed November 15, 2025), 1.

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believe in the resurrection even in the darkness of the crucifixion. And so do I.

Ultimately, these experiences have shaped my own vocation and drawn me back to what our Rule of Life demands. As an Assumptionist, I am compelled to work and "embrace the great causes of God and of man, and to go wherever God is threatened in man and man threatened as the image of God." [27] Hence, this taught me to become more selfless, so that I may serve and defend God's truth and the dignity of humanity. *Adveniat Regnum Tuum! Que Ton Règne Vienne! Mapasaamin ang Kaharian Mo!*

27 Rule of Life of AA, 2.

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