

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Sept 14, 2021)
Seminary of Our Lady of Providence

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov wrestles with theodicy throughout the novel. How can God permit the suffering of innocent children, Ivan asks. A self-described Euclidian, Ivan understands the parameters of logic.

Punishment for sin makes sense. But innocent children? The thought inches toward madness.

The chaos of a cruel world threatens Ivan's faith. He thus appeals to his brother, the reticent monk Alyosha: "Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me please? ... I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too; but there can be no such solidarity with children ... It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket" (pp. 226-227).

Admittedly, Ivan's rebellion against God is nothing new.

Today's first reading reveals a kind of archaic distrust of divine goodness, echoed in the complaints of the Israelites reminiscent of the Book of Job.

Israel's memory of redemption from Pharaoh quickly sours.

"Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert?" they lament.

Both Ivan and the ancient Israelites are too smart to deny the existence of God outright. Instead, they fight against divine logic.

A just God could not permit suffering.

A good God could not abandon the people he promised to save.

Both objections make a convincing case, but only one is, strictly speaking, "logical."

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The Israelites may loathe the suffering they endure. But in many ways—and I think Ivan would agree—they deserve it. They disobeyed God. They complained about something as insignificant as food.

But in a truly just world, how can innocent children suffer?

Theologians give us many explanations, axiomatically deduced from the principles of original sin, justice, and punishment as a result of the fall.

For the mother who loses her child, however, or the father who sees his son suffer, these words offer little comfort.

God doesn't give us—or the Israelites or Ivan—a set of logical axioms to answer the questions which stem from the depth of our pain.

We ask *why*, and He appears silent.

Instead, God changes the question from “why” to “who?”

God's answer to theodicy is, in a way, far greater than something like an explanation. Instead, he sends someone—a person—the sinless One, more innocent even than a child. He sends his own son, permitting him to suffer in order to save mankind.

Our liturgical feast today commemorates the exaltation of the means of that sanctification: the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Vicarious, expiative suffering opens the gates to a new kind of life.

“Just as the serpent was lifted up in the desert,” Jesus tells his disciples, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have Eternal Life.”

A cursory glance at today's Gospel seemingly portrays a kind of blasphemy. How could the Son of God compare himself to a serpent—the same diabolic creature who tempts Adam and Eve in Eden?

The irony of the suggestion is exactly the point.

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God took what killed the Israelites—the seraph serpent—and made it into a bronze symbol hung upon a pole, so that when they looked at it, they would be healed. So too does Christ take everything the serpent represents—pain, sin, suffering, and death—and bears it upon his shoulders. Now, when we look into his eyes—the gaze of divine mercy, of Love incarnate—we will be healed, freed, and saved.

Before the infinite majesty of the Sovereign Lord, the mystery of theodicy will sometimes still haunt us. At the end of the day, we all share bits of the Euclidian rationalism of Ivan and the tempestuous outbursts of the Israelites, who are not always rational in the Old Testament. This occurs most especially when the cross we experience is our own, or the cross of a loved one.

We won't find a logical explanation or a magical escape from suffering, even though we want these things. But if we look close enough at the cross, we will find that God bears our suffering with us, *for* us, and that makes all the difference.

In his book on theodicy, *The Doors of the Sea*, the Orthodox philosopher David Bentley Hart writes, “God will not simply reveal the sublime logic of fallen nature, but will strike off the fetters in which creation languishes; and that, rather than showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, he will instead raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes—and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and he that sits upon the throne will say, ‘Behold, I make all things new’” (p. 104).

What Ivan and the Israelites both needed to hear was precisely that—not a what, but a *who*—the subject “I,” whom we adore, and praise, because by His Holy Cross, He has redeemed the world.