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**Catholic Philosophy - Part 4 - General Articles -
Does God Sympathize with our Sufferings and Joy?**



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"Jesus wept"—John 11:35

The gospel speaks of Jesus, God in the flesh, as having shared sorrow, pain, joy, and love with his disciples and followers. So the question which has been posed, "does God sympathize with our sufferings and joy?" seems to have an immediate answer within the gospels. Yet, Catholic theologians and philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas have held the notion that God has no passions. Are they correct or did they make a mistake? Given the biblical evidence it seems that they are mistaken, but a closer look at the nature of God helps to reveal the solution to this puzzle and proves that the medieval philosophers were correct.

The following article is the context of a private debate I had with a secular philosopher of religion at the University of Texas. Our philosophy class had read and debated on an article written by Charles Hartshorne entitled, "The Divine Reality: A Social Conception of God". Essentially, the article was an attack on the Catholic dogma of the impassibility of God. Impassability is traditionally defined as the lack of passion, although some of the ancient philosophers (such as Aristotle) used the term to describe unchangeableness. I engaged in a debate with the professor about Hartshorne's problematic views during class and we continued our debate through e-mail.

The following text is written in a question and answer format. Essentially, I took the material from my professor's previous email and turned it into a question and an answer format for my e-mail reply. My professor's views are given in the 'objection' section of the question. I then answered the objection with a biblical quote ('on the contrary') and a philosophical answer ('I answer that').

The issue of God's emotions is a very complicated one and would require an enormous amount of effort to fully answer (if it is even possible). Therefore, I was not able to answer the question to the satisfaction of my professor. Ultimately, the idea of God's sympathy hinges on an acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity, which cannot be proven by natural reason. Nevertheless, whenever one delves into a mystery of Catholicism there is always intellectual fruit to be savored.

The following response to my professor will make more sense to the reader if they have previously read Hartshorne's argument against God's passability. However, for those who are not philosophically or theologically trained to root out error in philosophical papers, I wouldn't advise reading it. There are a lot better things to read than Hartshorne's books.

Reply to Objection 4

The relation of time to eternity is a restriction on man but not on God. We see the divine plan as unfolding within temporality such that we can say God became flesh at time X. The eternal nature of God demands the complete actualization of God within eternity. As such we can properly say God lives in an "ever-present now" such that he sees everything as present. The effects of God (incarnation) are thus seen from our vantage point as unfolding in time while to God they are ever-present. As such, our way of seeing God is the manner in which we see God interact with temporality. I theorize that the God-man Jesus was susceptible to temporality by way of his "person" and human nature but not by way of his eternal nature. Jesus' divine nature consumed all eternity in an ever-present now, yet his human nature allowed him to interact with temporality. So while he resided on Earth, his humanity interacted with temporality while his divinity co-existed within him in the ever-present now. From the vantage point of eternity (where is Jesus body after the ascension? Did Jesus' body leave temporality during the ascension into heaven?) I must admit my ignorance.

Reply to Objection 2: I have addressed this question in the main body of my answer. I admit the Trinity to be incomprehensible to the philosopher and an article of faith. I will address the apparent contradictions as best I can.

Reply to Objection 3: This seems to be a problem with personal identity. In response, I will define the Catholic definitions of the Trinity. It is said that God is one nature (the divine Nature) and three persons. By nature, it is means that the powers of God and qualities of divinity (impassability, knowledge, power, goodness, absolute veracity and other "great-making" qualities of "that which nothing greater can conceive") are God's nature. Yet, in God there are three persons who possess the exact same divine nature. This means that the persons of God (a person is an individual substance of rational nature according to Boethius) are individual in the sense that the Father is distinct from the Son by way of relative opposition. It is said by Aquinas that, "a real distinction between the divine relations can come only from relative opposition. Therefore two opposite relations must needs refer to two persons: and if any relations are not opposite they must needs belong to the same person [within the Trinity]." Thus the Father and Son have an eternal relation of paternity and filiation in which the Father eternally generates the Son (or the Word if you prefer) by way of Intellect. The Holy Spirit is a person in that the eternal love of the Father and Son "cause" (spirate is the theological term) the Holy Spirit. Thus we say that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds (caused by spiration) from the Father and the Son.

This seems unimaginable and I confess it can't be imagined because there is no parallel within the nature of the world to compare it with (which is why it can't be philosophically explained or arrived at). I will now explain the doctrine in comparison with humans to help clear up any confusion. Humans have one person (who we are) and one nature (what we are). The doctrine states that God is one nature (what he is) and three persons (who he is). This is the sense in which Catholics profess 'One God' but three persons. I maintain that there is not a parallel to human nature in which we can compare God. I posit the identity of God within his three persons such that each can be distinctly admitted be the rational personal God. Yet, because they share the same identical nature it can be said that the three identities of the Trinity are still the one Divine Nature. Thus it is validly stated in the Nicene Creed, "We believe in one God".

In order to keep this reply relatively short, I will assert that the second person of the Trinity (Jesus) has two natures, which are joined within his one person (theologians call this a hypostasis of his human nature with the Divine Nature). Thus we can correctly say that the person of the Son was made incarnate while the person of the Father was not made incarnate. We still call both persons the one God because of their common Nature. From here it follows that the person of the Son could suffer and die while the person of the Father did not suffer or die.

Of course, there are problems with the existence of two Natures within the person of Christ and we are left to ponder whether the hypostasis can resolve this problem. Perhaps I can address this issue at a later time.

Question 1: Does God sympathize with human joy and love?

Objection: (my professor's comment)

...I should say that I think what St. Thomas means by God's experience of "joy" in His creatures is quite different than the way we use the term or, more to the point, what Hartshorne has in mind in speaking of God's sympathetic experience of our own joy.

I answer that,

Aquinas believes that it is not in the nature (the properties) of God to sympathize with the experience of pain and suffering in the same way that we do. By this I mean that God's impassible nature is such that there is no existence of passions (desires) that a human would have. I still contend (and I'd like you to provide proof against this view from the Summa Theologica or Summa Contra Gentiles if you disagree) that Aquinas believed God has emotions (not passions) such as joy and love.

In the discussion of the Trinity I explained that the persons of God (Father, Son, and Spirit) experience love and joy on an infinite level. Catholics believe that humans can experience love and joy also (as derived from the creator) but without the infinite bliss of God. In this sense, I argued, that our experience of love and joy are analogous to God's love and joy. Perhaps I do not understand your objection, but I still do not understand why our joy and his joy are incompatible to the point where God does not "sympathize" with our joy. I maintain that our experience of joy (such as the joy of faith or the joy of marital love) may not be equal to the bliss of God, but it is still recognizable to him. If we read a beautiful poem about the joy of romantic love to God, I think he would identify and sympathize with the "feelings" of joy and bliss as well as the joy of relationship between two people who love each other.

Question 2: Does God sympathize with distinct human emotions such as pain and suffering?

Objection 1:

...Even granting that God can rejoice (in the ordinary sense of the word) in our actions, Aquinas does **not** think that He sympathetically experiences our pain and suffering and is saddened by them, which is of course the flip side of the coin of Hartshorne's desirable dependence claim.

On the contrary,

Scripture records in the Prophet Isaiah that the messiah is "the suffering servant".

I answer that,

From the outset I must admit that I cannot philosophically prove to you (by way of arguing from natural religion) that the concept of the Trinity is true. Of course, I did mention that I would only answer your ad hominem arguments on Catholic grounds, so I'll continue my argument. I speculate that it is not necessary for God to empathize with our pains and sufferings by way of his own nature. By this I mean that it is not in his nature to sympathize with our sufferings and pain by way of experience. In fact I think God's omniscience and omni benevolence provide him a way to understand the "badness" of pain and suffering without recourse to experiencing the pain and suffering on a first hand level.

Hartshorne would probably argue that this knowledge of evil and suffering by way of omniscience and omni benevolence is not the same as our experience of evil and suffering. I must concur with this view, and I think Aquinas would too. We must acknowledge that the experience of pain and suffering (and especially the grief that may result from sinning and repentance) cannot be known experientially to God by way of his nature. His divine nature is incompatible with the experience of sin and the effects of the human states of grief, pain, suffering etc.

I believe that it is not necessary for God to experience these emotions and indeed it is impossible for God to experience sinning. Basically, the effects of sin (of the angels and men) made it possible for man to suffer. Since this was not the will of God, it shows that it is not of the necessity of the divine nature to experience sympathetic grief, suffering, repentance etc. With the introduction of sin into the world by way of the free will of angels and men, God chose to incarnate the second person of the Trinity. This provides divine access to human nature and the experiential knowledge of suffering, grief etc. This leads into the next problem you posed, the problem of a Triune God.

Question 3: Is the doctrine of the Trinity nonsensical and is God Triune?

Objection 1:

...The doctrine of the trinity seems to strike pretty much everyone who is not antecedently committed to it as nonsensical.

Objection 2:

I think it is, as I said, little more than a contradiction dressed up in very fine language... To put it mildly, they seem to me very close to a good deal of fancy talk about square circles

Objection 3:

[There is a problem with the idea that] God the Father was not crucified nor even incarnate, while the Son was both

Objection 4:

[There is a problem with Jesus being] subject to temporality.

On the contrary,

Scripture reveals the Triune nature of God by stating in the Gospel of John, "baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and I will be with you always to the end of the world."

I answer that,

The doctrine of the Trinity can be admitted to be incomprehensible and unimaginable to the philosopher of natural religion. The doctrine of the Trinity, however, does not contain true internal contradictions of logic. Instead, the properties of God (such as his nature, hypostasis and person) only seem to bear contradictions from the vantage point of fallible human nature. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is an article of faith and derives its basis from the words of Christ and the teaching of the Church and not from human wisdom.

Reply to Objection 1:

The doctrine of the Trinity cannot be proven by the philosophy of Natural Religion. I agree that such a doctrine must be antecedently admitted as true without the possibility of ever fully resolving its difficulties. The doctrine of the Trinity is called "a mystery of faith" and I am sure such a term results in scoffing by the skeptic. However, it strikes me as plausible that if an infinite God exists then we cannot hope to fully understand his nature. Scripture records that we are made "in the image of God" and as such, we can only understand God by what he reveals and by the similarity between the universe, God and ourselves. I do sympathize with the skeptic who feels that the Trinity raises more problems than it solves; the Trinity can only be believed antecedently by faith.