

Suffering and doctrine

by [Katherine Sonderegger](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today*, by Cynthia S. W. Crysdale

"In midlife I found myself lost in a dark wood." This, the opening sentence of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, marks out a journey many of us know well. The suffering we must endure and see others endure is a mystery at once terrible and familiar. Cynthia Crysdale, professor of faith development and ethics at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., considers this "problem of suffering"—as it is so blandly called—the centerpiece of contemporary theology. Crysdale offers a meditation on the problem, not a solution to it. She explores how the long shadow cast by suffering touches all aspects of Christian life and doctrine.

The task Crysdale sets for herself is familiar to many feminists: to reinterpret or retrieve from traditional dogma elements that are consonant with and instructive to feminism. The relentless fact of suffering looms large in much feminist theology, and Crysdale both reviews and contributes to that literature. How should modern Christians understand Christ's suffering, and their own suffering in light of his?

Crysdale draws a stark portrait: women and those on the underside of history have been burdened by traditional doctrines of sin and redemption. Those without a voice or proper sense of self have been taught to see their humiliation as the virtue of humility. Those who have been asked to live for others have been instructed to see their subordination as noble sacrifice or, worse, as merited punishment for sin. For these reasons, Crysdale argues, feminists are justly leery of the doctrine of vicarious, suffering atonement. They are suspicious of the exaltation of suffering as the imitation of Christ.

Crysdale proposes an alternative doctrine of sin and redemption, fashioned largely with tools supplied by Bernard Lonergan. She presents Christ as a whole and holy self, who undergoes suffering not as an end but as the price of following the call of love and leading others there. Suffering is accepted, she writes, but not sought.

So how should Christians view their own and others' suffering? Should we fight suffering as the foe "not of flesh and blood"? Should we welcome it as imposed by

our just Judge? Should we receive it as beloved but wayward children receive parental chastisement? Should we regard it as the pathway into the mystery of our suffering Lord? Putting on the death of Christ is the great mysterium of the Christian life. It has never been a simple or straightforward act of either piety or doctrine.

Crysdale shows great pastoral sensitivity to the indirectness and mystery of human suffering. Through case studies and autobiographical stories, she underscores how suffering will enter each of our lives at different points, to different ends. But this "travail," as she calls it, remains within the embrace of God. It is not our purpose to suffer, but to suffer is the risk inherent in living authentically.

Such a brief book with such an ambitious agenda is bound to leave some gaps. For example, white feminists (of which I am one) are often tempted to use the work of African-American writers, activists and theologians to illustrate their own points. To do so risks minimizing the nuance and range of African-American feminism. Neither can one short book convey the complexity of the doctrine of atonement or the centuries of debate about sin and grace. Nevertheless, Crysdale's thoughtful and revealing meditation is a fine pastoral companion as we ponder the place of suffering in Christian life.