

Chapter 3: John Navone, SJ's Theology of Failure and Its Importance for Pope Francis's Spirituality in Light of the Church's Pastoral Mission to Victim/Survivors of Abuse

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“In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds.”¹ Those words of Pope Francis, from his first major interview as pope, bear witness to the priority that he has given in his pontificate to addressing suffering in its various guises. Moreover, both before and during his papacy, Francis has put forth a spirituality of suffering that can offer guidance to victim/survivors of sexual abuse and those who accompany them pastorally.

Francis has acknowledged that some of the ideas he presents in his spirituality of suffering are inspired by a fellow Jesuit. When he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, he told his biographers that John Navone, SJ's insights in *Triumph through Failure* concerning the patience of Christ led him to understand patience as a boundary experience, one that enables those who endure it to attain true maturity.² Also while archbishop,

¹ Fr. Antonio Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis by Father Antonio Spadaro,” September 21, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

² John Navone, SJ (1930–2016), was a professor of theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio's comments concerning Navone's influence appear in Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words*, trans. Laura Dail Literary Agency (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 2013), 71–72. The edition of Navone's book that Francis read was John Navone, *Teologia del Fallimento* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1988), the Italian-language translation of *Triumph through Failure: A Theology of the Cross* (Homebush, Australia: St. Paul's Publications, 1984), which is itself an expanded edition of *A Theology of Failure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974). See Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart* (New York: Crossroad, 2013), 297, n. 19, where Bergoglio cites the 1988 edition of *Teologia del Fallimento*.

Francis published a reflection, "The Failure of Jesus," in which he adapted ideas from *Triumph through Failure*, with attribution.³

Phrases, images, and concepts from *Triumph through Failure* likewise appear in Francis's papal teachings on the spiritual meaning of suffering. Although many of the similarities between the two authors' spiritualities may be attributed to their shared Ignatian patrimony, there nonetheless remain numerous passages in Francis's writings where he clearly seems to draw upon or develop ideas found in the book.

Here, I examine how Francis has used ideas from *Triumph through Failure* to develop a spirituality of suffering that can aid the Catholic Church's pastoral mission to those who live with the spiritual wounds of sexual abuse. First, I identify concepts from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola that Francis draws upon in his spirituality of suffering. Doing so will shed light upon the lens through which Francis reads Navone, who, like the pope, was formed in the Jesuit spiritual tradition. Then I outline major concepts of *Triumph through Failure* that Francis has integrated into his own spirituality of suffering. I conclude with a reflection on the significance that Navone's insights and Francis's development of them hold for me personally as a victim/survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

Ignatian Foundations of Francis's Spirituality of Suffering

Pope Francis's spirituality of suffering strongly emphasizes that every Christian needs to engage in purification of memory. He speaks of memory in terms that suggest a sacred space or, given that we choose what and how we remember, a space that should be sacred. On Francis's account, we are to offer our memory to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, so that the Father might make it a privileged place of encounter with Christ.

³ Bergoglio writes, "On this theme of the failure of Jesus, I have taken some ideas from chapter 3 of the work of John Navone, *Teologia del Fallimento*." Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 297, n. 19.

In his first major papal interview, Francis, speaking to *Civiltà Cattolica* editor Antonio Spadaro, SJ, drew attention to the role of memory within the Spiritual Exercises. He discussed the topic in answer to a question asking his preferred method of prayer.

Prayer for me is always a prayer full of memory, of recollection, even the memory of my own history. ... For me it is the memory of which St. Ignatius speaks in the First Week of the Exercises in the encounter with the merciful Christ crucified. And I ask myself: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ?” It is the memory of which Ignatius speaks in the “Contemplation for Experiencing Divine Love,” when he asks us to recall the gifts we have received.⁴

Francis then described how God, specifically God the Father, through the vehicle of memory (both God’s own and that of the faithful), reveals to the faithful their identity in Christ:

But above all, I also know that the Lord remembers me. I can forget about him, but I know that he never, ever forgets me. Memory has a fundamental role for the heart of a Jesuit: memory of grace, the memory mentioned in Deuteronomy, the memory of God’s works that are the basis of the covenant between God and the people. It is this memory that makes me his son and that makes me a father, too.⁵

In this way, the pope highlighted three aspects of the *Spiritual Exercises*, namely (1) the role of memory in facilitating an encounter with Christ, (2) the “encounter with the merciful Christ crucified” itself, and (3) the *Contemplatio ad amorem* (the Latin name of the “Contemplation for Experiencing Divine Love”).⁶ It is worth taking a moment to examine Francis’s understanding of these aspects more closely.

⁴ Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis.”

⁵ Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis.”

⁶ Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis.”

The Role of Memory

When Francis spoke to Spadaro of the role of memory in facilitating an encounter with Christ, he was expressing ideas that he had begun to develop many years earlier. In a 1978 address to a provincial congregation of the Society of Jesus in Argentina, the then Father Jorge Bergoglio, SJ, observed, “It is memory that provides the most radical grounding for a Jesuit’s heart. When St. Ignatius says that we should bring things to our memory [in the *Contemplatio ad amorem (Spiritual Exercises, no. 234)*], he is speaking to us about a retrieval of our history of grace.”⁷

With his next words, Bergoglio co-identified Ignatian remembrance with remembrance of the mercy of God:

And the graces, given our sinful condition, are always gifts of mercy. It is the awareness of being grounded in the paternal mercy of the Lord making us sons that grounds us as true Fathers. For me, this meaning is also there in Ignatius’s desire that we should be ‘familiar with God’: the Jesuit familiar with God can be son, brother, and father.⁸

We see therefore that, for Bergoglio, when Christian individuals, in prayer and meditation, make an act of Ignatian remembrance, that act enables them to recollect their personal history within the overarching context of divine mercy. In this way, they come to ground their self-understanding in their identity in Christ. Francis brought this understanding of memory into *Lumen Fidei* when he observed, “Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory” (*Lumen Fidei*, no. 38).

The Encounter with the Crucified Christ

The examples of Ignatian prayer that Francis cites in Spadaro’s interview are effectively the bookends of the Spiritual Exercises: the encounter with Christ crucified (with the self-questioning that Francis mentions)

⁷ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “Holding the Tensions,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 45, no. 3 (2013): 25.

⁸ Bergoglio, “Holding the Tensions,” 25.

transpires within the first meditation, and the *Contemplatio ad amorem* is the final meditation in Ignatius's manuscript.⁹ Together they form the spiritual framework within which the exercitant opens his mind and heart to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

"Imagine Christ our Lord present before you on the Cross" (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 53).¹⁰ Those words from the first meditation mark the first of many times in the *Spiritual Exercises* that Ignatius invites retreatants to picture themselves face-to-face with Jesus. One could even say that the entire program of the exercises is designed to enable participants to encounter Christ directly, in the present moment. Why, then does Francis, in discussing the "encounter with the merciful Christ crucified," speak of that meditation primarily in terms of calling to mind something that is past? Why does he call it a "prayer full of memory"?

In answering that question, it is helpful to consider another statement Francis made in Spadaro's interview, one that is relevant to his understanding of Ignatian remembrance as "a retrieval of our history of grace."¹¹ He said, "We must let God search and encounter us. Because God is first; God is always first and makes the first move."¹² Francis's emphasis on the primacy of God's action is characteristic of the Ignatian

⁹ Ignatius places the *Contemplatio* outside his delineation of the four-week structure of the exercises, a decision which led to disputations among early commentators regarding at what point during the four weeks it should be undertaken. Today, there is general agreement that it belongs in the final week of the exercises. See the note by George Ganss in Ignatius of Loyola, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 418; also Giles Cusson, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988), 312–315.

¹⁰ All quotations from the *Spiritual Exercises* are taken from St. Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010).

¹¹ Bergoglio, "Holding the Tensions," 25.

¹² Spadaro, "Interview with Pope Francis." The pope has made this point on many occasions. See, for example, Ambrogetti and Rubin, *Pope Francis*, 41; Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 13; Silvina Premat, "The Attraction of the Cardinal," *Traces*, July 2001, archivio.traces-cl.com/Giu2001/argent.htm.

understanding of human love as a response to the divine initiative.¹³ What is significant for our purposes is that his writings and statements, both before and during his papacy, indicate that he connects this understanding with Ignatian remembrance. On his account, our encounter with God gives us the eyes to see how God has already been present throughout our lives. Hence, Francis said in a pre-papal reflection that although prayer includes remembrance of salvation history,

at the same time, prayer goes beyond history, for it sees in God's historical deeds an ongoing theme that offers a key for reading the present and a promise that opens toward the future As a result, when human flesh settles down to pray, it rescues memory: our flesh is remembrance. And the memory of the Church is precisely the memory of the suffering flesh of God, the remembrance of the Lord's Passion, the eucharistic prayer.¹⁴

Francis's own experience of the "memory of the suffering flesh of God" is strongly informed by a prayer from the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* that, although not written by Ignatius, has come to be identified with Ignatian spirituality: the *Anima Christi*. In his address at the Jesuit provincial congregation, Bergoglio observed that "in the *Anima Christi*, [Ignatius] places us in contact with the Lord's sanctifying body in such a way that we are hidden in his wounds and thus have our own wounds and sores healed."¹⁵ As archbishop and as pope, he would continue to incorporate the *Anima Christi* into his reflections.¹⁶

¹³ See, for example, Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 123.

¹⁴ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 251.

¹⁵ Bergoglio, "Holding the Tensions," 26–27.

¹⁶ See, for example, Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 287, and Francis, "Papal Mass for the Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome," April 7, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130407_omelia-possesso-cattedra-laterano.html.

Contemplatio ad amorem (Contemplation for Experiencing Divine Love)

The *Contemplatio ad amorem* is a meditation that is entirely directed toward bringing the exercitant into greater gratitude toward God and therefore into greater love for him. Ignatius divides it into four points, each beginning with a contemplation of God as giver: (1) giver of all that the retreatant has personally received; (2) giver of creation itself and of life to all creatures; (3) giver of his own labor, working for the retreatant “in all creatures upon the face of the earth”; and (4) the giver of “all blessings and gifts” (Spiritual Exercises, nos. 234–237). In this way, Ignatius brings the exercitant to envision an ever-widening circle of thanksgiving, beginning with the personal and ending with the universal. It is surely for this reason that Francis cites this meditation as the example par excellence of Ignatian remembrance, “a retrieval of our history of grace,”¹⁷ as it unites personal history with salvation history.

Within each of the exercise’s points of contemplation, after engaging in the prescribed remembrance, the exercitant prays the prayer known after its first word in Latin as the *Suscipe*: “Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will.” The word *suscipe* is the present singular active imperative form of *suscipere*, meaning “to take, catch, take up, lift up, [or] receive.”¹⁸ Within the context of the prayer, it therefore denotes an offering of self that has Eucharistic connotations. (Indeed, the Eucharistic liturgy of Ignatius’s time employed a form of the word *suscipe* in the offertory; it also appears in the Latin text of the offertory today.)

Francis is highly attuned to the Eucharistic aspect of the *Suscipe*. Addressing his fellow Jesuits at the provincial congregation, he said that when we pray our own *Suscipe*, “Our devotion thus emerges from

¹⁷ Bergoglio, “Holding the Tensions,” 25.

¹⁸ T. Charlton Lewis, “Suscipio,” in *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York: American Book Company. 1890), www.perseus.tufts.edu.

thanksgiving, from Eucharist. We are following Jesus to the place where he has made a complete act of thanks to the Father who is in heaven.”¹⁹

The sacrifice that the exercitant makes begins, as we have seen, with his liberty, and then extends to his mental faculties, which Ignatius lists as memory, intellect, and will—the powers through which the human mind is an image of the Trinity, according to St. Augustine.²⁰ Francis, in a homily for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, observed that the foundations of this self-offering are intimately connected. He pointed to the day’s reading from Deuteronomy, when Moses reminds the Israelites how the Lord, after freeing them from slavery in Egypt, provided for them during the forty years when they were being led through the wilderness to the Promised Land: “The Lord your God ... fed you with manna, a food unknown to you” (Deuteronomy 8:2–3). In this way, Francis said,

The Scriptures urge the people to recall, to remember, to memorize, the entire walk through the desert, in times of famine and desperation. The command of Moses is to return to the basics, to the experience of total dependence on God, when survival was placed in his hands, so the people would understand that “man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3).²¹

If we dream of foods other than the bread of life, Francis added, we are “like the Hebrews in the desert, who longed for the meat and onions they ate in Egypt, but forgot that they had eaten those meals at the table of slavery. In those moments of temptation, they had a memory, but a sick memory, a selective memory. A slave memory, not a free one.”²²

¹⁹ Bergoglio, “Holding the Tensions,” 27.

²⁰ See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 10.11.

²¹ Pope Francis, “Homily at Mass on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi,” June 19, 2014, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140619_omelia-corpus-domini.html.

²² Francis, “Homily at Mass on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi.”

The pope's words pose a special challenge to the listener whose personal history includes regrets or resentments. If we have been wounded by others or have endured other kinds of hardship, we may be tempted to self-pity, despair, or anger. How can we escape such thoughts, based as they are upon our past experiences? As Francis delivered the homily, he seemed to recognize this challenge, for he proceeded to offer a solution to it. He exhorted the faithful to choose to remember their encounter with the Father, who "tells us: 'I fed you with manna, which you did not know.'" "This is the task," he said, "to recover that memory," the memory that leads us to "our manna, through which the Lord gives himself to us."²³

The Influence of John Navone, SJ, upon Francis's Spirituality of Suffering

In the interview in which he credited Navone's *Triumph through Failure* with informing his understanding of Jesus's patience and his "failure," the then-Archbishop Bergoglio said he often used the expression "travel through patience." "By reaching the limit, by confronting the limit, patience is forged. Sometimes life forces us not to ['do'] but to 'suffer,' enduring—from the Greek *ypomeno*—our own limitations as well as the limitations of others."²⁴

The importance that Navone's book holds for Francis's understanding of patience extends to several other aspects of the pope's spirituality of suffering. In this section, I examine how Francis develops ideas from *Triumph through Failure* concerning three theological topics: (1) Jesus's "failure," (2) the salvific role of memory, and (3) the reality of the Resurrection.

²³ Francis, "Homily at Mass on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi."

²⁴ Ambrogetti and Rubin, *Pope Francis*, 72, translation modified according to the original Spanish. The English edition translates Bergoglio's "hacer" as "make." I have chosen "do." See Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *El Jesuita: Conversaciones con el cardenal Jorge Bergoglio, sj.* (Buenos Aires: Vergara, 2010), 69.

Jesus's "Failure"

"Failure" in Navone's theology comprises a synecdoche for all the effects of the physical and moral evil, *malum culpae* and *malum poenae*, that result from human finitude.²⁵ Thus, in referring to Jesus's Passion and death as his "failure," Navone emphasizes that Jesus, through his redemptive act, "has embraced and elevated human finitude," complete with its negative consequences.²⁶ What this means for the human person is that

failure, whether culpable or inculpable, can always be redeemed into a kind of *felix culpa* through the transforming power of love. This is the lesson of the Cross, where the very symbol of failure and death has been transformed into a symbol of love and life. Love overcomes failure by reversing its meaning, by giving it a new, positive, redeeming meaning that becomes the message and good news of the disciples of Jesus.²⁷

Navone's account of the Cross giving a "new, positive, redeeming meaning" to suffering evokes the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22, which says of Christ, "By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning."

Pope Francis in his first message for the World Day of the Sick appeared to draw from both the Council and Navone, writing,

The incarnate Son of God did not remove illness and suffering from human experience but by taking them upon himself he transformed them and gave them new meaning. New meaning because they no longer

²⁵ For example, the first line of chapter 1 of *Triumph through Failure: A Theology of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014): 9, is "Failure, whether culpable or non-culpable, is a universal human experience." Nine other times in the book, Navone speaks of failure in terms that encompass both culpable and non-culpable failure. See Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 9, 10, 14, 21, 24, 32, 53, 88, 103.

²⁶ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 28.

²⁷ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 21–22.

have the last word which, instead, is new and abundant life; transformed them, because in union with Christ they need no longer be negative but positive.²⁸

Another point of *Triumph through Failure* that Francis appears to have absorbed is Navone's account of the Father's intervention at the point of Jesus's "failure." In referring to "the transforming power of love"²⁹ that gives meaning to suffering, Navone sought to draw readers to reflect upon the Father's acceptance of Jesus's self-gift. He observed, "Failure is an invitation and a challenge to love. It is a cry for love epitomized by Jesus' agonized question: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"³⁰ Hence, he wrote, "the resurrection of Jesus is the light after the darkness of failure; it is the Father's loving response to the cry of Jesus on Calvary."³¹

Francis likewise views the Resurrection as the Father's answer to Jesus's call from the depths. In a 2014 general audience, he stated, "When all seems lost, ... it is then that God intervenes with the power of his Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending to a nice story, it is not the 'happy end' of a film; rather, it is God the Father's intervention there where human hope is shattered."³² By contrasting God's intervention with a "happy end," the pope emphasizes that Jesus's Resurrection is not the end. Rather, the Resurrection shows what God intends to do through Jesus for each of us—if we, like Jesus, are willing to endure utter humiliation, failure, and death for God's greater glory.

Thus, on Francis's account, our times of greatest weakness become privileged opportunities for sequela Christi. "When at certain moments in life we fail to find any way out of our difficulties," he said in a general

²⁸ Pope Francis, "Message for the Twenty-Second World Day of the Sick," December 6, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_giornata-malato.html.

²⁹ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 21–22.

³⁰ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 24.

³¹ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 24.

³² Pope Francis, "General Audience," April 16, 2014, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140416_udienza-generale.html.

audience, “. . . it is the moment of our total humiliation and despoliation, the hour in which we experience that we are frail and are sinners. It is precisely then, at that moment, [when] we must not deny our failure but rather open ourselves trustingly to hope in God, as Jesus did.”³³

The Salvific Role of Memory

In a chapter titled “The Remembering that Transcends Failure,” Navone asserted that “remembering is essential to the people of God.”³⁴ He called attention to the multivalent action of divine memory: “God remembers certain persons and shows them his grace and mercy (Genesis 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Exodus 32:13; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19; 25:31). His remembering is an efficacious and creative event, which enables man to remember God.”³⁵ Through the Holy Spirit, Navone wrote, memory becomes the field of action for an encounter with Christ. “Christ is really present among the people of God because they are being reminded of him by his Holy Spirit, who calls their attention to his presence.”³⁶ To illuminate this salvific role of remembrance, Navone examined references to memory in the Old and New Testament. He observed that, “throughout the Old Testament, God, like Moses, David, and Nehemiah, encourages Israel to remember . . . Israel’s future was promising on the condition that she remembered a path of promises.”³⁷

Moving on to the Gospels, Navone wrote that “the Old Testament patterns of remembering continue into the New Testament.”³⁸ Among the examples he cited was that of the women’s encounter with the angel at Jesus’s tomb:

³³ Francis, “General Audience.”

³⁴ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 144.

³⁵ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 199, n. 1.

³⁶ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 147, emphasis in original.

³⁷ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 150–151.

³⁸ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 152.

In the Lucan resurrection narrative, faith in the risen Lord is linked with the obligation to remember his words, when the angel commands: “Remember how he told you when he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful man and be crucified, and on the third day rise” (Luke 24:6). The women who had come to Christ’s tomb obey the command: “And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:8–9).³⁹

Thus, Navone wrote, “Luke recognizes the Lord’s remembering as the grace of salvation enabling the sinner’s entrance into the kingdom of God, as well as the Christian’s obligation to remember the words of the Lord, as a prerequisite for communicating and participating in the mystery of the resurrection.”⁴⁰

Pope Francis, commenting upon the same scripture passage in an Easter Vigil homily, arrived at a similar conclusion concerning the salvific role of memory. The women at the tomb, he said,

are asked to remember their encounter with Jesus, to remember his words, his actions, his life; and it is precisely this loving remembrance of their experience with the Master that enables the women to master their fear and to bring the message of the Resurrection to the Apostles and all the others.⁴¹

The Reality of the Resurrection

We have seen that Catholic teaching concerning Jesus’s salvific humanity and the reality of his Resurrection are important for Francis’s theology of suffering and redemption because they direct the Christian toward imitation of Christ. It is therefore significant that the chapter of *Triumph*

³⁹ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 152–153, emphasis in original.

⁴⁰ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 153.

⁴¹ Francis, “Easter Vigil Homily,” March 30, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130330_veglia-pasquale.html.

through Failure that Francis acknowledged as a source for his own reflections,⁴² “Jesus’ Response to Failure,” treats those topics specifically.

In that chapter, Navone wrote, “The theology of failure counteracts the tendency to minimize the humanity and the historical condition of Jesus.”⁴³ He went on to assert that this tendency, which was manifest to an extreme degree in the Docetist heresy, remains with us:

In its most subtle forms, Christians whose belief is otherwise orthodox hesitate to attribute to Jesus those aspects of the human which in more refined societies are thought to be gross or unseemly That the historical Jesus died a failure and that his death was that of a publicly shamed and disgraced scoundrel are elements of history which the neo-Docetists shy away from.⁴⁴

Bergoglio, in “The Failure of Jesus,” drew upon Navone’s points as he wrote,

We need to “touch” the flesh of Jesus. Our certain sense of “politeness” may tempt us to avoid what seems “scandalous,” but in so doing we would be denying the role of Jesus’ flesh in his failure. We would simply be adopting a form of the enlightened neo-Docetism that is found so often these days among our ecclesiastical elites, our agnostic leftists and our unbelieving rightists.⁴⁵

Bergoglio went on to reinforce his critique of “enlightened neo-Docetism” by asserting that the “ecclesiastical elites” exclude themselves from Jesus’s call to practice the Beatitudes, which refer mostly to “the failures that humble folk experience”; upon hearing Jesus’s message, “they turn up their

⁴² Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 297, n. 19.

⁴³ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 44.

⁴⁴ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 44.

⁴⁵ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 283, punctuation modified to match that of the Spanish edition (the English edition contains a comma after “leftists”). See Jorge M. Bergoglio, *Mente abierta, corazón creyente* (Madrid: Editorial Claretiana, 2013), 227.

noses at the thought of failure and are scandalized.”⁴⁶ Above all, the archbishop said,

They are neo-Docetists because they basically do not believe that Jesus the Christ is bodily alive, is truly risen. At most, they accept a spiritualist idea of resurrection, something closer to what Bultmann proposed, and they do so simply because they refuse to accept the reality of Christ’s failure and so deny his flesh.⁴⁷

In other words, on Bergoglio’s account, to deny the reality of Christ’s “failure”—i.e., his “complete humiliation”⁴⁸—is to deny his Resurrection.

The parallels between Navone’s reflections concerning “neo-Docetists” and those already noted by Bergoglio are readily apparent. Both identify the modern exponents of the heresy with Christian elites who are scandalized by Jesus’s “failure.” There is, however, a subtle difference of emphasis. Whereas Navone seeks to counter “the tendency to minimize the humanity and the historical condition of Jesus,”⁴⁹ Bergoglio has a more specific aim: he wishes to identify the error of those who “basically do not believe that Jesus the Christ is bodily alive, is truly risen.”⁵⁰

At the same time, the substance of Bergoglio’s core message—without Jesus’s “failure,” there can be no resurrection—is likewise central to Navone’s reflections in “Jesus’ Response to Failure,” as it provides the grounds for Navone’s argument that eschatological hope does not conflict with the Church’s healing mission but rather enables it. Navone wrote, “the theology of failure does not encourage fatalism, passivity, indifference to the world; rather it affirms that the man who cannot freely lay down his life is one whose ideals and values are already compromised.”⁵¹ Hence, Navone wrote,

⁴⁶ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 283.

⁴⁷ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 283.

⁴⁸ Francis, “General Audience.”

⁴⁹ Francis, “General Audience.”

⁵⁰ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 283.

⁵¹ Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 43.

The theology of failure, based upon the rediscovery of Christ's historical failure (the cross) and trust in a divine solution (the resurrection), has a resonance with today's revolutionary ferment throughout the world, with the longing for a new society based on social justice and peace Such a theology must remind us that there is no authentic Christianity without the willingness to risk failure and that to attempt to insulate ourselves from the possibility of failure is a betrayal of the Christian spirit, so that our attitude toward failure measures the degree of our self-transcendence in Christ.⁵²

The thrust of Navone's argument, and even some of his phrasing ("divine solution," "revolutionary ferment") is closely echoed by Bergoglio in a passage of "The Failure of Jesus":

It is there on the cross that Jesus feels the full force of failure and evil, and it is there that he transcends them In the crucified Jesus, we see the culmination of all those ancient failures that we read of in the Old Testament in particular times and places Now only one solution remains: the divine solution, which in this case is resurrection as revolutionary ferment. This means that Christians today must incorporate into their daily lives the conviction that Jesus Christ is fully alive and walking in our midst.⁵³

Given that Navone wrote in English, Bergoglio read him in an Italian translation and summarized him in a reflection composed in Spanish, and the Spanish reflection was then translated into the English that we now have before us, the visible similarity between Bergoglio's words and *Triumph through Failure* testifies to the depth of Navone's influence upon his thought.

⁵² Navone, *Triumph through Failure*, 43–44.

⁵³ Bergoglio, *Open Mind, Faithful Heart*, 284.

Concluding Observations

From a pastoral standpoint, Navone's account of Jesus's "failure" accomplishes three things. First, in presenting the drama of redemption and the human person's response, it places the focus upon the gratuity of divine mercy rather than upon the human person's moral obligation. Second, it challenges the human person to an *imitatio Christi* that necessarily entails death to self and therefore death to sin: the road to Resurrection for each Christian must pass through the "failure" of the Cross. Third—and this, I believe, is key for Francis—once the Christian sufferer is brought to understand *malum culpae* and *malum poenae* as two complementary dimensions of the state of subjection from which Jesus redeemed humankind, he or she is able to experience psychological and spiritual healing on a new level.

Psychological and spiritual pain comes from feeling one's self to be wounded by evil. Out of this pain come classic questions of theodicy like "why do bad things happen to good people" and "why do children suffer." Navone's account of Jesus's "failure," as adapted by Francis, offers a positive counter to these questions because it asserts that God transforms us, re-creates us, to the extent that we have participated in Jesus's "failure." On this understanding, our pain bears the new meaning of which the Second Vatican Council speaks in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22: whatever evil we have suffered is our share in Christ's redemption of the world.

An objection could be raised to this from readers who, like me, are victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse: is not Francis's spirituality of suffering, as I have articulated it here, simply a repackaging of the old admonition to "offer it up"? I grant that, in a certain sense, it is, in that it invites identification of one's own sufferings with those of Christ. But there the similarity ends. For, whereas the "offer it up" approach emphasized the passive aspect of suffering (sometimes in ways that were

profoundly harmful),⁵⁴ Francis's spirituality of suffering—and its precedents in Ignatius, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22, and Navone—returns personal agency to the sufferer.

I cannot erase the wounds that I bear from the abuses I suffered. But I can, with the aid of God's grace, re-conceive my wounds so that the power of my abuser no longer dwells in them. God enables me to participate in my own re-creation, giving me the strength to appreciate my weaknesses as opportunities for divine power to show forth in me. Then, in the words of Francis,

Our wounds begin to be strengths when we discover by grace that the true enigma is no longer “why?” but “for whom?”; for whom did this happen to me? In view of what result did God mold me throughout my history? Here everything is overturned; everything becomes precious; everything becomes constructive. How can my even sad and painful experience become, in the light of love, a source of salvation for others—for whom?⁵⁵



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⁵⁴ See Robert Orsi, “Mildred, Is It Fun to Be a Cripple? The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth Century American Catholicism,” in *Between Heaven and Earth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19–47.

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, “General Audience,” September 19, 2018, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/co/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180919_udienza-generale.html.