1. Evil helps us appreciate good

Augustine's first answer is that the existence of evil helps people to appreciate the good in the world which otherwise they might not notice. Sometimes we don't appreciate the good things we have until they are not there anymore. Most of us don't appreciate how wonderful being healthy is, until we have the experience of being unwell.

2. Evil is not a thing

Augustine's second answer is that God does not cause or permit evil because evil isn't even a thing. Evil is just the absence of good things. God makes a world full of good things but through our poor choices we sometimes cause those good things to become absent from the world. Anything that is not good is an absence of good. When we experience evil and suffering we are not experiencing anything at all, we are just being deprived of the good things we have. God does not want us to be deprived of these good things but either our choices have led to these privations or God allows them for the sake of some greater good.

3. Evil makes us better

Augustine’s third answer is God allows suffering precisely because he is omnipotent and good. He allows evil because in his goodness and power he is able to bring a greater good out of suffering. In this answer, St Augustine is saying that sometimes we arrive at a place of much greater happiness through overcoming evil and suffering, than we could ever have done without it. In other words, sometimes suffering is good for us!

The Meaning of Suffering is a Mystery

For Catholics, the meaning of suffering is a MYSTERY and it might be the case that God uses suffering to bring about GREAT GOODS that would not have been possible without it. In the biblical Book of Job, God tells the long-suffering Job that he is just not capable of understanding the reasons why God chooses to do, or not do, certain things.

The Goodness of God

When Catholics use this term for God, they mean that God is the cause of goodness in others. God’s goodness is called essential – that is to say, it is an unchanging aspect of who God is: God is supremely good. This is probably the best way to think about God’s goodness, especially if God is beyond the human ability to describe what he is really like.

Catholics would say, we call God good because the things he made are good: light, sea, earth, sky, animals, plants and human beings. God finished Creation by looking on all that has been created and he ‘saw that it was good’. This is what Catholics mean when they say that the world reflects God’s goodness – they mean, they can tell that God is good, because the world God created is good.

Suffering as a sign of love

Many wise thinkers have pointed out that love is impossible without suffering. Loving another person means that you would do anything for them, even if it means sacrificing your own pleasures and comforts. There is also another way that suffering and love are connected and that is because nothing lasts forever. If you love anyone, or even a pet, there will come a time when one of these people or animals leaves you, or dies. Few human beings go through life without ever experiencing the pain of grief and parting, but the suffering we experience when we lose someone we love reflects the depth of love we felt for them. The more we love a person, the more painful it is when we leave them. Suffering and love, therefore, cannot be separated.

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Suffering as a proof of commitment

Jesus makes clear that being a disciple always requires sacrifice and a cost: To show we are really committed to something, we must experience suffering. 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Mark 8:34)

Suffering as blessing

One of the most difficult ideas to understand is that suffering can somehow be a blessing. In Matthew, Jesus lists those people that are ‘blessed’ and includes some strange categories of people: those who are poor, those who mourn, those who suffer. We would not usually consider these things to be blessings, but Jesus is pointing out that God’s way of seeing the world is not our way, and that those who are lowest in the world’s eyes are often closest to God.

The suffering and death of Jesus

At the heart of all the Gospel accounts is something called the Passion narrative. ‘Passion’ comes from the Latin word for suffering, and these parts of the Gospel describe the last week in Jesus’ life when he was arrested, tried, tortured and crucified. This story is so sacred to Christians because they believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus saved all humanity from sin. Therefore, the suffering of Jesus brought about something very good.

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