Executive Summary of *Salvifici Doloris*  
(On the Christian meaning of human suffering)  
Apostolic Letter by Pope St. John Paul II

What follows is an executive summary of Pope St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter from 1984, *Salvifici Doloris* (“redemptive suffering”).

I. Introduction (nn. 1-4)

1. Suffering, like all human things, finds its true meaning in Jesus Christ. It is both a burden and a joy. Why it is a burden is evident; why it is a joy requires reflection into the mystery of redemption in Jesus Christ.

2. Suffering is a constant theme throughout human existence. Human suffering is deeper than animal pain, because suffering is transcendent and involves a sense of injustice.

3. Redemption came through Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross: it came through suffering. Thus, our redemption is directly related to Christ’s suffering, and our suffering is linked somehow to our redemption.

4. Suffering leads to compassion (“suffering” *passio* “with” *com-“), respect, and intimidation.

II. The World of Human Suffering (nn. 5-8)

5. Man suffers in many different ways, including physical, mental, emotional, and moral. While medicine can seek to ease physical, mental, and emotional suffering, it cannot approach moral suffering. We all suffer in different ways and to different degrees.

6. The Bible is largely about suffering. People suffer in spite of their “election” by God, and people suffer when they stray from God’s “election” of them. Moral suffering is often described in physiological terms in the Bible.

7. We suffer when we experience evil. In the Old Testament, the vocabulary implied that suffering *is* evil; with Greek (and the New Testament), language emerges that inverts the relationship: evil *leads to* suffering. What is evil? Christianity sees the Creator and creation as good, and sees evil as a lack, limit, or distortion of good. Man suffers because of a good in which he does not share.

8. Suffering is a widespread phenomenon: we all suffer “in dispersion” throughout the world and throughout time. Suffering is an exile of sorts, a world of its own. Every personal instance of suffering is a small part of that greater world of suffering, but
that whole world is present in each person’s suffering. Suffering also leads to solidarity and communion among those who suffer. In certain times in our history, suffering seems to be greatly concentrated, such as during famines or wars. During this era of nuclear weapons and possible mutual destruction, the amount of suffering appears proportional to the sins of our age.

III. The Quest for an Answer to the Question of the Meaning of Suffering (nn. 9-13)

9. Why do we suffer? Why is there evil? Man suffers and wonders why, and often suffers more deeply when he cannot find a satisfactory answer. Evil obscures our vision of God, sometimes to the point of atheism, as if to say, “an almighty and benevolent God wouldn’t allow this to happen, thus God is either not almighty or not good, which means He’s not God.” This confusion is often a reaction to so much undeserved suffering and unpunished evil.

10. The Book of Job poses this question of suffering. Job’s friends think suffering is simply retribution for wrong-doing, a just punishment for sin. The Old Testament strongly supports that line of thinking: the existence of moral evil (sin) justifies the existence of suffering as punishment. To sin is to break the divine Law, it is to transgress against the divine Law-giver, God; it is an objective necessity that a just Law-giver should punish evil and reward good.

11. Job challenges the principle that all suffering is the result of sin. God acknowledges that Job is innocent in the matter, but the suffering of the innocent remains a mystery which God does not reveal. While some suffering is punishment for sin, not all suffering is: it can be a test of righteousness. This all points to the suffering (Passion) of Christ in the New Testament.

12. While the question is “answered,” it remains without a solution in the Old Testament, but there are indicators of a deeper meaning. Suffering as punishment (such as Israel endured when it strayed from her covenant with God) had an educational value as well. Punishment repays evil, but it also provides an opportunity to rebuild the good that was missing. Punishment is ordered towards penalty, but also conversion, mercy, and rehabilitation.

13. The “why” of suffering is answered truly in the revelation of divine love: God gives the definitive answer and solution to the problem of suffering through the cross of His Son Jesus Christ.

IV. Jesus Christ: Suffering Conquered by Love (nn. 14-18)

14. God “gave” His Son so that man might have eternal life and not perish. This “giving” implies a suffering: God did not just send His Son, He gave His Son. Jesus
came to give us eternal life, which is the opposite of “perishing”: redemption, then, is about being saved from the eternal and definitive suffering of being separated from God for eternity.

15. Christ does not just address this eternal, definitive suffering, but also our temporal suffering, both of which are rooted in an experience of evil. Jesus comes to save us from sin and death. Because of sin (ours or others’) we experience suffering. Death is a final destructive blow to our persons, soul and body: the soul survives, though separated from the body, and the body decays. It is the final experience of suffering in this world. Jesus saves us from sin by offering us Sanctifying Grace, and He saves us from death by His Resurrection which is a pledge of our future rising from the dead. In Heaven, there will be no suffering at all. Christ’s redemptive work does not abolish temporal suffering for us, but shines a redemptive light on it.

16. Christ was well-acquainted with suffering in His Messianic work: He was around the suffering and the sick, and He became more and more isolated and the target of hostility as He approached the culmination of His work on earth. He spoke of this suffering to His Apostles many times, and rebuked Peter when he tried to prevent Him from facing His destiny: the Cross. He was fully aware of His mission and what it would entail, and the Scriptures prophesied the suffering He would have to face, as Jesus affirms several times. Jesus faced this suffering with full knowledge, in full obedience to His Father.

17. The fourth Song of the Suffering Servant (in Isaiah 53) is a powerful prophecy of the One chosen by God to suffer for His people. It accurately depicts the events of His Passion and the depth of His sacrifice. In it, the Servant suffers for His people, to redeem and restore them. Only Jesus Christ, Who is true God and true Man, can take all the sins of humanity upon Himself in a complete and redemptive way. Jesus’ sufferings are truly human, but with a depth unmatchable by any other man, because He is Man and God.

18. The Song continues, showing that the Servants suffers voluntarily and innocently. Jesus proves His love for the Father through His obedience to Him, going to the cross freely and innocently. He proves the truth of love through the truth of suffering. When Jesus says “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” from the cross, it is not because He (God the Son) is separated from or abandoned by God the Father; the Son and the Father are inseparably united. Rather, by taking the weight of all sin upon Himself, Christ perceived – in a way inexpressible by man (who can only perceive it by experiencing it himself) – the evil of turning away from
God: the suffering of man’s separation, rejection, and estrangement from God. Christ’s Passion is the culmination of human suffering, but suffering has now been linked to love which can draw good from the suffering.

V. Sharers in the Suffering of Christ (nn. 19-24)

19. Christ, the Suffering Servant, gave suffering a new meaning and a redemptive quality. Not only is man redeemed, but suffering itself is redeemed. Thus, as every man shares in the redemption, he is also called to share in the suffering through which redemption was gained for him.

20. The New Testament testifies over and over to the connection between participating suffering for Christ (persecutions specifically) and participating in His glory. He who identifies with Christ in His Passion and death is likewise identified with Christ in His Resurrection and glory.

21. Suffering for Christ also means suffering for His Kingdom, which means suffering for others as well. This participation in suffering “makes us worthy” of that Kingdom, so we are in a sense repaying the infinite price of Christ’s Passion and death.

22. Precisely because Christ identified His “glory” with his Crucifixion (particularly in John’s gospel), human suffering has a hidden glory in it. This suffering is a call for moral greatness and builds spiritual character.

23. Suffering is a trial, but in our weakness, the glory and strength of Christ is made manifest, as St. Paul pointed out. Christ’s “weakness” in being “lifted up” in the Crucifixion was infused with power because of its redemptive quality. So too, Christians who suffer on account of Christ have no need to feel shame. Suffering leads to endurance, which leads to character, which leads to hope; thus, suffering is a call for virtue.

24. Because the Church is the Body of Christ, that Body shares in the sufferings of Christ Himself. As St. Paul says, we “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His Body, the Church.” This means that man’s suffering is joined with the Paschal mystery. The suffering Christ endured is by no means incomplete or insufficient, but our participation in it, as His Body, is what must be completed. Christ leaves this redemptive suffering open so that it can be completed in us. Christ’s Body, the Church, lives this redemptive suffering throughout its history.

VI. The Gospel of Suffering (nn. 25-27)

25. There is a “Gospel of Suffering” written by the witnesses of Christ’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Mary, His Mother, is the foremost witness, because she was
present at the side of Christ throughout His life, sharing in His suffering from Simeon’s prophecy through to the Crucifixion. Christ told His disciples to bear hardships, carry their own crosses, and deny themselves, all of which are a sharing in His suffering, and which join His disciples to Him. The promise of suffering (often in the form of persecution for Christ) requires courage and fortitude, placing hope in Christ and His victory over the world through His suffering. The fact that Christ retains the wounds of the crucifixion even on His resurrected body is a testimony to suffering being more than an encounter with evil.

26. This Gospel of Suffering is also written by those who suffer with Christ, uniting their sufferings with His. Suffering has a revelatory character: it conceals a grace which draws a person close to Christ, resulting in a deep conversion by which the person is changed to the core. Suffering in the body also creates the opportunity for a display of interior maturity and spiritual heroism, setting an example of perseverance for others. Christ gave Mary a special motherhood over all men: as she was His mother in His suffering, so shall she be for all men in their suffering, teaching them to unite themselves to Christ. This interior process of uniting one’s self to Christ does not come easily, because of the great question of “why”. But Christ answers this question from the cross, saying “Take up your cross and follow me.” In this way, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed.

27. Suffering is a source of joy because, with its salvific meaning uncovered, it is no longer an experience of uselessness and burden to others. Rather, the one who is suffering is actually doing their part to complete the sufferings of Christ in His Body the Church. Suffering provides an opportunity for grace.

VII. The Good Samaritan (nn. 28-30)

28. The parable of the Good Samaritan, in answering the question “who is my neighbor?” teaches that love of neighbor means sensitivity to those who suffer. This includes sympathy and compassion, but extends most importantly to action. The Good Samaritan gives his all, even his very self, for the suffering other. This self-giving is at the core of Christian anthropology.

29. Suffering creates an opportunity for others to show love. The natural human response is called being a “Good Samaritan”, but this act of love is a vocation and an apostolate when it is done with an evangelical motive driving it on. Thus, added to human solidarity are the Christian virtues (especially love of neighbor) which together overcome indifference to suffering. These acts of love are carried out by
individuals, and not simply institutions, which can never replace the pure human element of compassion.

30. Christ’s words in Matthew 25:31-46 provide a final perspective on suffering: in ministering to one who is suffering, we are ministering ultimately to Christ. All human suffering is an opportunity to serve Christ as we ought, which will be taken into account in the Final Judgment. Human suffering is revealed to be a conduit of grace, both for the one suffering and the one who ministers.

VIII. Conclusion (n. 31)

31. Suffering is supernatural because God has bound it up with salvation, and human because it is endured by all men. Through human suffering, men find their identity in themselves and in Christ.