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Glenn Morrison

God's Stumbler: On Being a Martyr in the World

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The martyrs of the faith and charity reveal a dramatic narrative of Christian experience. Like Mary, the martyr's soul magnifies God rejoicing in the glory of God's salvation. Testifying to the Gospel, martyrs unearth the trauma of existence with the radiance and splendour of dying and rising with Christ. Equally, the Gospel calls the faithful to journey through the turbulence and stumbling of life towards the Kingdom of God. The Gospel life of the martyr provides an insight into the affectivity and otherness of Christian experience. For encountering people's suffering, we stumble at the gravity of their pain and outrage, falling over and cutting ourselves upon their wounds. A martyr's Christian experience teaches us at this humble and awkward descent to shed a little blood of compassion and become, to locate a metaphor, "God's stumbler".

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

How we look at the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), particularly the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12), may help to clarify our vision about the Christian experience of martyrdom. Jesus tells his disciples that the life of spiritual poverty (v.3) and righteousness (v.6) even to the point of persecution (v.11) reveals the Kingdom of God. We see here the initiation and proclamation of the vocation of being a martyr open to all the Christian faithful veiled within the language of Christian discipleship. To be baptised then signifies the possibility to live out a vocation of martyrdom as a sign of discipleship and faith in God's Kingdom to come (v.12). Although the gravity of Christ's message of discipleship is proclaimed a "blessed" vocation fostering the confidence to "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (v. 12) – even we see this in St. Paul's "Gospel" of the Risen Jesus in 2 Cor 6:1-10 – nonetheless martyrdom is something the Church holds carefully and reveals for the most part

Glenn Morrison is Associate Professor at the School of Philosophy and Theology, The University of Notre Dame Australia, P.O. Box 1225, Fremantle, Western Australia 6959.

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within a veiled language of theological reflection. There remains almost a vigilant concern that martyrdom should not mutate into a violent zealotry like the Sicarii as Judas's surname, Iscariot, signifies – one who kills for God. Furthermore, the Church is wary that one should not volunteer oneself for martyrdom so recklessly. For example during the time of persecution in the Early Church, the theologians, St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) and Origen (184-263 CE), took to heart the message of Matt 10:23: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes". St. Clement did not wish to encourage voluntary martyrdom lest Christians would fall into revenge of doing evil to oneself (could we think of suicide here?) and killing the persecutor (Clement). Origen too advised against "the rash exposure of oneself to danger – unreasonably or without grounds".¹ In contrast, the Christian theologian Tertullian (160-220 CE) stood in resilience testifying, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christian is seed" (Apology, Chapter 50) and so gave birth to the dictum, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church".² Perhaps we could say today in view of the grave challenges facing the Church (such as the scandal of sexual abuse or the drying up of "vocations to the priesthood and religious life"³) that this means that Christians are called to a great love paralleling the sacrifice of martyrs, to compassion and mercy and becoming witnesses of Christ's love for the world. We learn then to testify to a Gospel of life and faith that dies and rises with Christ. For martyrdom, the vocation to holiness, sacrifice and love for the Church lies definitively within the work of the Holy Spirit revealing pathways of hope to adore the Father and walk in the light of Christ. Accordingly, the vocation of martyrdom signifies a journey of self-discovery to become close the Father's heart like Jesus; a sacramental moment as we stumble to pronounce the word 'compassion' in the little goodnesses that characterise the life of faith, hope and love.

THREE STAGES OF MARTYRDOM

One example of the language the Church uses to reveal the vocation of martyrdom within the Church comes from the opening line of *Gaudium et Spes* no. 4: "To carry out such a task, the Church has

- 1 Williams, Fred M. III. "Reaction to persecution: a lesson from the early church," *Trinity Journal* 6, no. 1 (Jan 1977): 37.
- 2 Cavanaugh, William T. "Pilgrim People" in *Gathered for the Journey: An Introduction to Catholic Moral Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 98.
- 3 Eamonn Fitzgibbon, "Theology in Pastoral Practice," *The Furrow* 66, no. 12 (2015): 643.

always had the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel". The "task" referred to here is pointed out at the end of *Gaudium et Spes* no. 3: "Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not sit in judgement, to serve and not to be served".

We can discern here from *Gaudium et Spes* three key stages of the vocation of martyrdom inasmuch as it is steeped in living out spiritual poverty and righteousness to the point of witnessing to truth and suffering persecution and humiliation. *First*, the martyr is called to know the Gospel. *Second*, in the Gospel's light, the martyr must seek to scrutinise and interpret "the signs of the times," that is to say, to learn to reflect critically from the heart about humanity and the world. *Third*, out of love for God and the Church, the martyr is willing to devote and give all of one's life for truth.

The life and mission of the martyr is animated by the work of the Holy Spirit who both veils (keeps ready for an acceptable time) and unveils (brings to the mind, heart and conscience) the knowledge of God. The life of the martyr then, like the theologian, needs to be both "humble and creative" encountering "what is beyond the scope of any human eye, ear, or imagination (1 Cor 2:9)".⁴ And beyond the scope of our everyday senses and experience lies the poor one, their personal pain, wounds and need for belonging and inclusion. The giving of care is not easy. It is not meant to be easy. It can be the hardest thing. The martyr, taking on the prophetic role of caring and learning about the shared wounds of humanity, will stumble upon the words and wounds of Christ (cf. 1 Pet 2: 8). In the loneliness of the moment of hearing God's word, the temptation of self-interest can corrupt even the martyr's understanding of the Gospel and the suffering of others.

Christ's teaching to be poor in spirit (Matt 5:3) or to witness to the materially poor (Lk 6:20)⁵ demands a sharp encounter with the transcendent truth of being, a resilience and courage to leave the Spirit free to orient *reason* through faith, *memory* through hope and the *affections* through love. It is here, in the darkness and stumbling affectivity of the martyr's encounter of truth and the mystery of God, that a learning takes place, namely to trust in the Spirit to reveal an "acceptable time" for "the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6: 3). The unveiling of God's will also be a spiritual encounter of bodiliness: to breathe through the breath and freedom of the Holy Spirit. At an "acceptable time" the Holy Spirit will unveil to the martyr a sense of mission. Until then it remains veiled as a trace

4 Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll NY, 2006), 162.

5 Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 84.

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in the formation and life journey of faith: of learning to be a child and image of God.

Now let us look a bit more closely at the three states of martyrdom. The *first* state begins with the Gospel itself, to hear the word of God, read it prayerfully and learn to live by its wisdom and testimony. The witness of the martyr through the lens of the Gospel begins to form, gestate as it were, and give birth to new beginnings towards conversion and the transcendence of mercy, spiritual poverty and righteousness. Altogether, this suggests that grace begins to form through a martyr's affectivity, decisions, stumbling and choices instilling the virtues and language of faith, hope and love.

The *second* stage of the vocation of the martyr is an intellectual one. God needs the martyr to possess a "thinking heart"⁶ to respond to all the suffering, tragedy and loneliness of a world bent on the desolation of self-interest, self-care and self-reward. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 4 gives a little help to discern "the signs of the times". The martyr, to whom the path of the vocation of martyrdom will seem at times largely unknown, may nevertheless find resonance with *Gaudium et Spes'* shared concern and call to understand the sufferings of others and to respond to their loneliness, pain and outrage.

Reading *Gaudium et Spes* no. 4, there are seven areas of which the Church observes are "signs of the times," that still bear the same resonance today. These are (i) "profound and rapid changes"; (ii) the failure of utilising the changes for human welfare; (iii) the "abundance of wealth"; (iv) that whilst possessing a "keen" appreciation and understanding of freedom, the world has fallen into new forms of slavery, namely "social and psychological" ones; (v) "the peril of war"; (vi) that despite the increasing "exchange of ideas," the world is becoming an incoherent community of aphasiacs losing the power of speech through "diverse ideological systems" where all that remains are the horror of half-truths and a jumble of words; and (vii) that our search for a "better" world bears no trace of "spiritual advancement".

Now looking at the seven "signs of the times" programmatically and prophetically brought out by *Gaudium et Spes*, we come to the *third* stage of being a martyr in the world, namely taking up the stance of truth. Jesus shares with his disciples, and correspondingly to the Church and world as a whole, that speaking the truth will lead to trouble! Such "trouble" will takes the forms of persecution and humiliation. If a martyr begins to speak clearly and simply with the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit, then the "hour" (Jn

6 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life. The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters From Westerborck* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 199.

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13:1) has come. At this stage, the martyr may even risk having a living knowledge about the nature of the difficult vocation at hand. So a "Gethsemane" begins all the way to Calvary just to express a little truth about the world and the sufferings of others. And this is all a martyr can do, to speak a little truth and do a little good for others. However, with the risen Jesus, hope always remains for truth beyond measure, that is to say, for the joy of resurrection and of making a commitment towards a new and better world. Martyrs can rejoice that the hour of sacrifice, mercy, compassion and justice is an invitation to be at the Lord's table (Lk 22:14) and share in the Eucharistic feast of love in the Kingdom of God.

THE HOUR OF THE MARTYR

Given the witness and "hour" of the martyr transcends time, a little goodness to testify to a little truth has the power to unveil, through the workings of the Holy Spirit, the timelessness of Christ's sacrifice for us (1 Jn 3:16). Accordingly, the vocation of the martyr reveals the heart of proclaiming what it means to be "blessed", "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt 5:1-16): to be like Christ close to the Father's heart (womb) (Jn 3:18) and the teaching of the Gospel.

In the timelessness of entering into the "hour" of expiation, the martyr discovers the vigilance of love from the melancholy of sharing the other's pain and outrage and equally from the spontaneity of opening to the Holy Spirit's work of grace and guidance. The martyr, then, embracing spiritual poverty and a life of righteousness and love for others speaks a word of truth. Stumbling upon the travails of persecution and humiliation, the martyr sheds blood, as it were, for having hungered for and responded to the voice of the living God in the depths of the soul. Such hemorrhaging reveals the affectivity of grace overflowing from the great love of the martyr's heart to become a good shepherd like Christ. In essence, Martyrdom reveals a kenosis of God, learning to be like God, the self-emptying and poverty of being a gift of self for others; the humility of being, to suggest a metaphor, God's stumbler.

CONCLUSION: STUMBLING UPON A MARTYR'S FOOTPRINTS

Let us imagine that if but ten or twenty people respond through the course of life to become one of "God's stumblers", perhaps then the world will soon be converted to the love of Christ. Or alternatively, we can reflect that in every age in history, there have been thousands of martyrs, stumblers, who have come and gone

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almost unnoticed, giving witness to the hidden love and workings of God. The martyrs who are saints are but testimony to the salvific work of God and of the Church in the life of humanity and the world. For the life and blood of all martyrs we can rejoice, give thanks and walk in hope towards the Kingdom of God. And if by chance we accidentally stumble upon any trace of a martyr's footprints, may we see this as a miracle of God, an annunciation and revelation of a vocation, a Marian moment to bear the love of Christ for the world.

Martyrs teach us to possess the spontaneity of building up faith in any area of the Church's life and faith like pastoral care, the role of a Bishop in a diocese or even within the family. The vocation of martyrdom, to the hour of sacrifice, has its own kenotic momentum leading to collision course of stumbling upon and come close to the other's suffering such as the wounds of depression, grief and loneliness or the horror and outrage of feeling persecuted. The encounter of the other's suffering and pain remains a shock and an overwhelming, turbulent surprise. However, by allowing the melancholy of the moment to translate into encountering a little truth and little goodness, God's stumbler, falling into the vigilance of love, learns to love others offering a heartfelt surprise of understanding and being present.

The very vocation of martyrdom takes us to the unfathomable reasons of the heart to learn to love the other and become close to the Father's heart like Jesus (Jn 1:18). Everywhere there are people hemorrhaging wounds of the heart and soul. Possessing a martyr's gift of presence in the weakness of compassion - stumbling, panting and shivering - can do much to bring hope for healing. In this way, by passing through the hour of sacrifice, by stumbling upon a martyr's footprints, by praying with Christ at Gethsemane, the Christian martyr takes courage and confidence to share in the Eucharistic gift of Christ's death and resurrection. And if we "poor potsherd" listen closely to Jesus's words ("immortal diamonds")⁷ in our hearts, we may hear him proclaiming to his stumbling disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matt 16:24).

7 A reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins' Poem, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection". Hopkins writes in the last lines of the poem, "I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and This Joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, Is immortal diamond". Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, selected with and introduction and notes by W. H. Gardner (Ringwood VIC: Penguin Books, 1988), 66.