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Kevin Hargaden

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INTRODUCTION: THE PANDEMIC CESSATION

Irish Christians are raised to know the story of the Penal Law oppressions. Writing as a Presbyterian, the suffering my forefathers in the faith endured is overshadowed by the outright persecution inflicted on the Roman Catholic community.¹ The trek to the Mass Rocks are stories we are told in our childhood and are widely remembered, even if today their locations can thankfully be publicised without fear of recrimination!²

During the Spring 2020 Lockdown, numerous people raised the example of Mass Rocks with me, seeking to account for their experience of spiritual hunger with the closure of churches during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each person brought their own interpretation to bear on the stories they know. To some, the memory of the Penal persecutions relativized the loss of regular corporate worship: “We’ve had it worse!” To others, the memory served to chastise a lukewarm generation: “We submitted to these regulations when our ancestors risked mortal danger to secure Eucharist.”

While it might not be obvious at first glance, persecution, and particularly a consequence of that – martyrdom – is one way to bring illumination to the question of how the church should respond to the on-going crisis brought about by Covid-19. While Irish ecclesial discourse did not reach the level of frenzied rhetoric present elsewhere, certain prominent religious publications and journalists pushed hard to accelerate the reopening of churches for corporate worship. Implicit in these calls was a critique of government policy as overbearing. At times, the return to collective worship was pitched (to some degree) as a protest against anti-Catholic biases and the craven – almost treacherous – conformism among the church’s leadership. It was easy to get the impression that the believer who risked their health and even their life in going

1 Ian McBride, “‘When Ulster Joined Ireland’: Anti-Popery, Presbyterian Radicalism and Irish Republicanism in the 1790s,” *Past & Present* 157 (1997): 63-93.

2 <https://www.findamassrock.com/>

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to Mass was striking a noble blow in the fight for the freedom of religion.³ Some gave the impression that the reaction to Covid-19 warranted a response from the church as strong as when it has faced extreme political oppression. Others give the impression that the ecclesial conversation could begin only after the authorities from scientific, medical and governmental fields gave us the go-ahead.

Against both these perspectives, in this essay I seek to consider the decision to reopen churches in dialogue with the example of a modern martyr and a contemporary theologian. By considering St Óscar Romero, and the reflections upon his death crafted by the American moral theologian, William Cavanaugh, I hope to show that the decision to re-open churches ought to have been indexed primarily not against the advice of medical doctors or the exhortations of op-ed columnists, but by reflection on how Scripture describes the purpose and shape of the Eucharistic feast.⁴

ROMERO AS MODERN MARTYR

St Óscar Romero was assassinated by right-wing extremists while celebrating Mass in San Salvador in 1980. His outspoken support for the poor and dispossessed had made him a target. Those who came to mark his passing were victims of a concerted terror attack at his funeral, which claimed the lives of over 30 people.

Romero had considered the meaning of martyrdom before he joined the ranks. The year before his murder, he wrote of the civil war that “this hour of trial will pass and the ideal so many Christians died for will survive resplendent.”⁵ His vision for the church – which was subject to a dramatic shift after the martyrdom of Fr Rutilio Grande SJ⁶ – was profoundly directed towards the eschatological horizon. The church was neither a this-worldly social movement concerned simply with temporal causes, nor an ethereal entity lost in narcissistic spirituality. The church was that community called out by God and directed towards “a looking at God, and from God at one’s neighbor as a brother or sister, and an awareness that ‘whatever you did to one of these, you did to me’” without reference to “the structures of time.”⁷

3 There are many examples, but this shall suffice: David Quinn, “Why do church leaders worship at the altar of health and safety?”, Unherd.com, May 25, 2020, <https://unherd.com/thepost/why-do-our-church-leaders-worship-at-the-altar-of-health-and-safety/>. The piece ends with the suggestion that the leadership of the Irish churches did not think that worship is “worth the risk,” which seems to be a sentiment lacking in appropriate charity.

4 The sincere hope behind this essay is that its argument always remains a retrospective reflection on how to discern and that the situation would not arise where skyrocketing infection rates mean we again have to go into Lockdown.

5 Óscar Romero, *The Violence of Love* (Farmington, PA: Plough, 1997), 180.

6 Jon Sobrino, “A Theologian’s View of Romero”, in *Voice of the Voiceless* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 36.

7 Romero, 14.

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While contemporary common-sense sides more with George Bernard Shaw who had one of his characters declare that martyrdom “is the only way in which a man can become famous without ability,”⁸ Tertullian more accurately captures the historic position of the church when he famously declared that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the faith.⁹ Oscar Romero was beatified in 2015 and the reverence with which Christians hold his *witness* is inextricably tied up with his *martyrdom*. But if it is possible to draw a line distinguishing appropriate hagiography and sentimentality, we should endeavour to chart it. The church rightly remembers and honours the martyrs, but in an age of rampant individualism there is a great risk if we elevate these stories of individuals without remembering the context.

Romero was not shot as he prayed in solitude. He was ministering with the faithful in his last moments. Martyrdom is not something to be sought out, an inevitable victory secured because of the heroism of great individuals. The example of the martyrs is not an invitation to be reckless with life, but a caution to be careful with it.¹⁰ Death in the New Testament is never something to be idealised.¹¹ Martyrdom is a reality to which some are called but its value is always indirect, its context is (almost) always the community of the faithful. As Romero saw the church as an eschatological reality with political potency, martyrdom is not simply a tragedy, but this is so because of God’s reality and the potency of his action. Whatever oppression generates the context for martyrdom is overcome not by a greater show of force, but, in a fashion fitting the ways of God’s Kingdom, through a demonstration of subversive weakness.

The meal that Christians share as they gather for corporate worship was thus central to Romero’s understanding of the faith. Eucharist establishes us in a story reaching back more than twenty centuries, projecting forwards to an eschatological fulfilment, and directs us to a “definitive horizon that presents itself as a demanding ideal to all political systems, to all social struggles, to all those concerned for the earth.”¹²

Romero’s reaction to Grande’s murder was, famously, to summon the entire diocese to a single Mass the following Sunday. That *Misa única* was more than a symbolic gesture in a

8 George Bernard Shaw, “The Devil’s Disciple” in *Collected Works* (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2014), 2479.

9 Tertullian, “Apology” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1926), 3:55.

10 For an account of how central was the value of “life” in Óscar Romero’s theology, see Edgardo Colón-Emeric’s *Óscar Romero’s Theological Vision* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2018), especially chapter 6.

11 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/3* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), §47 - 639.

12 Romero, 153.

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context of profound disunity. It forced the wealthy elites to travel in from their estates to queue with the urban poor for the same sustenance. It enacted a reality that is often obscured by our social injustices: that we all approach the Lord's table as those who rely on grace.¹³ It also meant that some people were going to miss out on Eucharist. Romero was not unaware of that fact. He did not doubt that Eucharist was the source and summit of life. But when circumstances demanded wise and dynamic pastoral action, custom, tradition, (and comfort,) can be displaced.

Romero is a valuable figure to recall as we think about the reopening of churches and the return to customary public worship. He reminds us from a number of angles that life must be cherished and guarded. There are contexts where the demands of faithfulness lead us into harm's way; Romero's life painfully testifies to that fact. But we should not seek out harm. Similarly, for the sake of unity, for the healing of a community, Romero was willing to make dramatic decisions around Eucharist that inherently entailed restricting access. Christian leaders in Ireland can consider this saint's example and perhaps find useful analogical resources for considering this year's dilemma.

CAVANAUGH ON MARTYRDOM AND THE EUCHARIST

In a paper, entitled *Dying for the Eucharist or Being Killed by It?*, written almost twenty years ago, the American moral theologian, William Cavanaugh, used Romero's life as a means by which to illuminate the meaning of the Eucharist. What differentiates a martyrdom from mere death is not heroism or bravery but the extent to which the faithful are able to "discern the body of Christ, crucified and glorified, in the body broken by the violence of the powers."¹⁴ Romero's death helps the Christians of El Salvador remember the death of Jesus, which is remembered at the Lord's Supper. Cavanaugh is clear that this remembering is not just a mental recollection of past events that have some form of echoing influence today. Eucharist re-members the church, gathering *the body* of faithful Christians around the table for sustenance. Romero and the martyrs matter supremely in this interpretation because the fact "that Christ suffered in human flesh on a hill in

13 I used to think that the awesome verses at the beginning of Isaiah 55 were a consolation to the poor, but I now realise they are also a caution to the wealthy. Those who have nothing are welcome to dine at the Messianic feast, but anyone who thinks they can pay their own way is devastatingly deluded. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

14 William T. Cavanaugh, "Dying for the Eucharist or Being Killed by It?: Romero's Challenge to First-World Christians," *Theology Today* 58, no. 2 (July 2001): 181.

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Jerusalem impelled the martyrs likewise to make a sacrifice of their own flesh.”¹⁵ The martyrs are dangerous to forces of oppression to the extent that their narrative, their memory, is integrated into the history of Jesus’ death at the hands of Roman oppression and resurrection at the hands of the Father.

As we consider the return to public worship, this argument has profound resonance because it is true that we were unified together by the experience of Lockdown. Even as we were unable to come together in the same sanctuary, we were together in a shared collective effort of care, the like of which has not been seen in generations. Absent of communion, we were nonetheless involved in a communion-ing event of sorts. The martyrdom of Romero re-membered by the people of El Salvador was a definitive communion-ing event. Might it be useful to think about the tragedy of those lost in this pandemic and the monumental societal efforts to lessen that harm as a similar phenomenon? The collective sacrifice of Lockdown was a radically different struggle from faithfulness during civil war, but there was a shared preoccupation with the common good and the protection of the weak that seems like fertile ground for reflection.¹⁶

If this is the case, it makes sense of why some were exercised to return to worship as rapidly as safely possible. The unity we have as Christians is ultimately forged around the Lord’s table. It also explains why some were slow to return to “the old normal” because there is clear evidence from around the world that public worship can serve as a super-spreading event for a highly contagious and dangerous virus.¹⁷

As we reflect on the disunity exposed in the conversation about when to return to corporate worship, Cavanaugh’s discussion of Paul’s famous “church as body” passages from 1 Corinthians 10-11 help illuminate the political meaning of Eucharist and may assist us as we reflect on the meaning of the strange days of Covidtime. There we find Paul claim that we eat judgement upon ourselves if we eat at the Lord’s table without consideration for the weaker partners (1 Cor 11:27-30); more than that, we would escape that judgement if only we were honest about our status and motivations (1 Cor 11:31). Cavanaugh places these texts into dialogue with Romero’s

15 Cavanaugh, 182.

16 I think it would take an actual prophet elected by the Lord to tell us what this strange time means for the church and like Amos, I – and my father, Eamonn Hargaden – can confirm that I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet.

17 Consider, representatively: Youjin Shin, Bonnie Berkowitz, and Min Joo Kim, “How a South Korean church helped fuel the spread of Coronavirus”, *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/coronavirus-south-korea-church/>, and Zeeshan Aleem, “One German church service resulted in more than 100 Coronavirus infections”, *Vox*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/24/21268602/germany-church-coronavirus-lockdown>.

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life to suggest that martyrdom serves, like Eucharist, to constitute the church as that community which perceives “the irruption of Christ’s kingdom into history, a revelation that both judges the divisions that exist and, at the same time, points hopefully forward to the day when such divisions will be overcome.”¹⁸

In this light, how do we adjudicate between the different sides that faced off over the summer months? Were those who would return to worship – willing to “risk it” – showing bravery as a sign of their devotion similar to the martyrs, or was their haste a form of pastoral malpractice? Cavanaugh says that if “we are not dying for the Eucharist, the Eucharist might be killing us” as we invite judgement on ourselves in our callous or arrogant or complacent lack of discernment.¹⁹ To discern rightly, he suggests, entails being able to name divisions and to see where those divisions are self-serving, as well as committing us to honouring the weakest among us as our treasures in the Kingdom of God. If we wish to be wise as leaders, our task was neither to rush ahead with best practices or proceed painstakingly with health and safety advice. It was to patiently discern, as we were physically distant, what it would mean to return together as a discerning community in close proximity. This was not the space – when is it ever? – for martyrdom complexes. Because we are not confined by the structures of time, but are directed towards the eschatological horizon, the pilgrimaging people of God can still journey closer to their goal even as they appear paused. Resolving the dilemma we faced ought to have involved consulting the best medical advice, the experiences of societies further ahead of us in the Covid-curve, and government authorities. But it should primarily have been a theological task: how do we discern the body and how do we honour the weakest among us? We may have been starving for Eucharist, but that does not licence killing for it.

CONCLUSION

I am an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Lucan. We stopped meeting for worship on March 8, 2020. Elders meetings were conducted by Zoom. Our leadership became much more familiar with webcams. Our minister, Rev Richard Houston, adapted with astonishing speed. Our seminary in Belfast never offered modules on pastoring in a pandemic, never mind how to use video editing software. Yet his creativity and dedication meant that each Sunday we were blessed with sermons and prayers and music, often led by our youth, who are natively adept with the mediums older people struggled with. The churches of Lucan came together to produce

¹⁸ Cavanaugh, 186.

¹⁹ Cavanaugh, 187.

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a beautiful, inspiring video for Good Friday,²⁰ but as uplifting as that was, we would all have swapped it in a second to meet, as is our custom, on the green in the middle of the village to pray together. The Presbyterian tradition typically shares Eucharist rarely, seeking to cultivate a spiritual hunger as our default setting. But by early summer, that hunger felt like starvation.

I look forward to the day when I can resume my habit of arriving ten minutes late, with my straggling toddler in tow, to weekly worship. I lament that the debate which raged between Christians was sometimes acrimonious, publicly so. But I also lament that it was too often atheological, consisting of political calculation or sophisticated rhetoric, but little reflection on what the Scriptures instruct and what is theologically at stake.²¹ Paul addresses the strong in the churches of Corinth who were able to make it to worship before the weak and who consumed the feast to leave only scraps for those who came behind. There is no great leap to read such texts in the light of those who wished to rush with haste back to Mass. The martyrs, likewise, were not saintly superheroes who sought out harm's way to advance the Kingdom; they sought out faithfulness and were willing to suffer the costs involved in a world filled with oppressive forces. Whatever else we might say about a virus, it is impossible to imagine it capable of martyring someone.

Cavanaugh concludes his reflections on Romero by stating that “the Eucharist can bring judgement if Christians do not attend to those who suffer in their midst.”²² Romero understood that the pilgrimage that constitutes the identity of the church is an eschatological journey, not trapped by the confines of measured time and not subject to a culture's impatience. Covid-19 is not like the Penal Laws. I look forward to the day when our little Presbyterian congregation in Lucan can gather again as we once did, without extensive precautions and with our full number intact, to hear the Word preached and the sacrament rightly administered. But between now and then our decisions about how to proceed must be thoroughly theological and faithful to the teaching of our Scriptures and the witness of our martyrs.²³ This is the only way to avoid the malpractice of the soul which results from both unwarranted haste and undue caution.

20 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z_PVUMIEXM&feature=emb_logo

21 There are, of course, many exceptions. For example, Fr Eugene Duffy, “We should look at fundamentals rather than practicalities of reopening churches,” *The Irish Times*, June 2nd, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/we-should-look-at-fundamentals-rather-than-practicalities-of-reopening-churches-1.4267032>.

22 Cavanaugh, 189.

23 I am indebted to my friend Greg Daly for summing up this position when he wrote in private correspondence that socially-distanced Masses almost ensure that the first will be first and the last will be last and that is not primarily a failure of logistics, but theology.