



Believing from the dark night (II)

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José A. García

The present Booklet is a continuation of no. 57 of our collection (Believing from the dark night) which appeared about four years ago. The enormous resonance of that booklet made us decide to prepare the second part, which we would also like to publish around Holy Week.

We suspect the success of the first Booklet was due in great part to the fact that in this type of writings, the ones who have spoken are normally people who have no voice. So, when they do speak, they can only speak about their own experience. And it is this personal experience that brings us nearest to men.

Besides this type of testimony usually expressed in *stories*: theologians have spoken much about narrative theology, but do not know how to put this into practice: and narration has a dose of “theological” truth which cannot be contained in simple theory: since narration communicates hope and this in turn integrates suffering which normally has no place in speculation, though it does play an important role in life.

We have tried to systematise the testimonies that have been collected in the following manner:

- There is a **first part**, which focuses on illness: they are the first three testimonies. The fourth, in which there is a mix of unemployment and depression, takes us from illness to another form of exclusion which is much more to blame because not only is it not well fought against by us but it is actually *produced* by us, despite our excuses.
- We enter thus in a **second part** which revolves around isolation: social exclusion and (more dissimulated) educational exclusion; if our society is not set up for the most needy, neither is our education set up for those who most need education. Here we have testimonies 5-7, which winds up with another form of isolation: the autoexclusion by others, which is entailed in celibacy.
- Finally, a **third part** speaks to us of distant Asia. There we will discover not only “how they believe” but how they have come to the Faith – peoples of another world and other cultures but whose suffering and whose possibilities where good and evil are concerned (as these testimonies bear witness) are extremely similar to our own.

At the end, the reader will have the right to be left with the question: a subjective setting or the real way of salvation?

Perhaps he will perceive too that, if he takes it as a setting, it is a question of a very strange escape since it does not free him from suffering; however, it does train him for it. And if he takes it as a reality, it is not a question of a material reality, palpable, like those which impose themselves on us, but which calls for a jump that is not easy to take: this is what J.A. García alludes to in the conclusion.

In the middle of this dilemma, we believe that every reader will be able to accept the conclusion that the question regarding God is profoundly reasonable and belongs to our reality. And many can take a second step: The affirmative answer to this question is also very reasonable.

Cristianisme i Justícia
March 1998.

THE ILLNESS I HAVE MAKES ME MORE HUMAN

Carlos Bravo, sj.

(Letter to friends after the operation of a brain tumour).

Mexico, April 1995.

... I do not know if I will be able to express adequately all the feelings I have and which I am hardly able to order internally. I can only tell you that the experience of my illness, disconcerting though it is, is turning out deeply human and humanising.

With many of you I have had the opportunity of sharing my hope in a miracle, but not in an ingenuous way. Several times, I have asked the Lord if the miracles of ancient times have ended. I hope to maintain an attitude of unconditional trust in God, happen what may, and a hope with something of a challenge to the Lord or, if one would have it this way, with the stubbornness of that widow in the Gospel who succeeded in getting justice from the judge simply because she pestered him. I feel that I am a long way from pestering Him enough. To achieve this I count on a little help from you to take heaven by assault.

But at the same time, without putting conditions to the Lord. If something has become clear to me, it is that with God you cannot put conditions, not because He takes pride in doing this or wants to make us suffer but because He is the only One Who has a full knowledge of life. A comparison: all that the sun produces is light; if there is shade, it is not due to the sun but to something that has got in the way. So too with God: Life is all that He produces; all that restrains and weakens life comes from another quarter, from our own weakness, from our own sin, from our

own limitations. And what God does is confirm our weakness forever with His resurrecting strength.

This is becoming quite evident to me. And I give thanks to God for this certainty that is being generated in my heart. However, this hope does not diminish in the least my desire to live yet with you nor my decision to keep on fighting for life which I love more than ever.

There have been moments, no doubt, when I have felt a hollow in my stomach. Moments in which a question surges up within me, a question when I think well, it seems, I should never ask. Because it has no answer. Why me? Deep down this question keeps blaming God for what is happening. And then I come to realise, from the depths of my faith, that it is not God Who sends us death, but it is He Who, in our death, is with us, by our side, in order that we may live it with faith and grace, with profound hope, even with deep joy.

As time goes by, routine becomes more boring: efforts to maintain the same spiritual tone and the same certainty about the future turn more difficult. Nevertheless, I think that if ever I have something to thank God for, it is for keeping me in an attitude of hope and readiness at the same time to do what He pleases with me: I do not place conditions to the Lord, neither do I lower my arms and surrender. It has not been easy to maintain this double attitude, but I believe that I am acquiring a readiness of disposition that has me waiting with open sails for the Lord to indicate what course I should take.

This is my present situation that I wish to share with you, not without many difficulties, but I feel that I am obliged for reasons of gratitude to express to you my deepest feelings in these moments. I thank you for the solidarity you have shown me and for the company that you have made me feel. I thank you very sincerely for the prayers that have comforted me in these times and have been a very great strength to me during these days.

(Carlos Bravo died in Mexico on October 29, 1997).

MY EXPERIENCE IN ILLNESS

Federico Bellido

(Written after receiving Extreme Unction on 14.10.97)

My God, my God, why hast Thou abandoned me?

Pain, inevitable reality, is part and parcel of the human condition. All inherit at birth a capacity for suffering. Nobody is free from this terrible slavery. Apart from the illnesses, which beset us at some time or other in life, there is always old age, the natural wasting away of the organism and, finally death. It is our universal destiny. We are all mortal.

If to this we add other evils of a thousand species, which produce pain, the balance is simply quite terrifying. One can justifiably say that we live in a “valley of tears”. I have had to go through a most hard experience owing to my last illness, which has lasted for 26 months now. I have suffered much. And I have asked myself: Why, Lord? The mystery of suffering has overwhelmed me; although I have always maintained my peace and trust in God, I have seen how “death in life” was taking me by assault. All this I have lived on my own, without feeling His presence, though I have been asking for it, desiring it. I have had to fight it out with my substantial finitude, contingency, pure impotence, and radical poverty. I have been brought face to face with my stark “mortality”. Everything is finished for me. All that is left is for me to “die”.

What answer is to be given to this situation, to so many questions that flood one’s mind? Once the devil whispered in my ear: “Jesus does not exist, you have been fooled, you don’t mean anything to Him”. I trembled with fright, fear, terror. That is the last thing that could happen to me, it was sharing the abandonment of the Son on the cross. I recalled that cry: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? In the face of human suffering, there are no human answers. What imposes itself on us is the “mystery”, silence.

Nevertheless, despite it all, there is a way out

The death of Christ, Son of God, made man, like us, and accepting fully the human condition, explains to us, without saving us pain and even death, the profound meaning of life. The glorious Resurrection is the last word. In the light of the Resurrection, human weakness, including the drama of suffering and death itself, takes on a new meaning.

What have I learnt in this illness, during which I have felt so many times the wish to die? I have learnt Jesus crucified. With this everything is said: wisdom, communion –even joyful to an extent- with the Mystery, patience, hope, peace, solidarity with other men, especially with the needy; full, suave, eternal love, freedom, liberation. I have almost been able to transcend my mortal condition to set myself up already in the Kingdom, seeing everything “from eternity”, fixed already in the heart of time, in the heart of the earth, in the heart of human life, wandering through and longing for plenitude. Almost as if I took part in the joyful life of the Risen Jesus, Lord of the World and head of the Church.

How good it is to have the “Crucified Christ” at the bed-head of a sick person! It can transform pain into pleasure, joy, hope, and happiness and radiate to all around us a sense of human salvation. If only we were all given the gift to associate life and death with the Crucified and Risen Jesus “for the salvation of the world”!

It is a fact: God carries on living and suffering in the world with all that suffer. Vatican Council II says: “ Christ did not suppress suffering, nor did He wish to totally uncover its mystery. He took suffering upon Himself, and this is sufficient for us to understand its full value”.

I have something important left to say. In my illness, many people have helped and kept me company. Through them, the face of God was revealed to me. One day the devil asked me: “Where is your God? He has abandoned you. He has left you mortally alone”. Immediately the Lord replied to me: “I am in the brothers that surround you”, and the words of St. John came back to my memory: “Where there is charity and love, there there is God”. The devil went away. God exists in the community, in our brothers in who God and the Spirit live.

I wish to confide in you yet another secret. Just a few days ago, I think I had an ineffable experience of God. I read from my diary: “You invaded me, Lord. I felt as though my body was being torn apart. I had to breathe hard to survive, since my soul was leaving my body. I saw suddenly as something that has actually taken place in life: the synthesis of heaven and earth, of matter and spirit, of creation and grace. I had waited 68 years and now finally there appeared in me a plenitude, happiness, harmony, peace, joy, the Kingdom of God, love. Now I understand Teresa of Avila: “I live without living in me and I am waiting to receive so high a life that I am dying because I do not die”. Or John of the Cross: “Oh, living flame of love, that wounds the deepest centre of my heart. Since you are now no longer aloof, finish off, if you like, tear away the cloth of this sweet meeting”. As never before, I have felt in my life the joining point of Creation and Grace. Thanks, thanks, thanks, Father.

The final grace of God: I have always believed at heart that heaven I had to earn on my own the hard way, wearing out my fists. Without almost perceiving it, I have understood this deep inside me. My confidence in the present I have placed not in myself but in God. This perception has effected a deep change in me: “I do not live, *Christ* lives in me”.

Illness – punishment or gift?

There is no doubt in my case. The illness of the last three years and a half has been and is a big gift of God. Only the Lord and I know what good and what wealth this illness has meant to my personal life, to my dealings and relations with others, to my evangelical work. I have suffered a lot, but I have enjoyed and benefited a lot too. I have undergone a second conversion; I have become more of an apostle, more human, more understanding. I have drawn closer to the poor, to those who suffer, to the mystery of the Risen Christ, to the mystery of the Church, to the heart of the world. I am much happier than I have ever been in my life. I believe that in this illness, I have purified myself more, I have become more transparent, more humble, and more authentic. The illness has transformed me. No, it has not been a punishment from God, it has been a gift, a precious present from God, from God my Father. No doubt I am unable to explain the mystery of evil in the world but what I can affirm is that I have experienced the humanising and sanctifying value of suffering. Nobody can contradict me on this point because I have had and have experience of this. How is it like this? I do not know but it is so.

Now I understand better the mystery of the Cross of Christ, the mystery of death. Now, I understand a little more the wisdom that comes from the Cross, about which Paul speaks and which is above human wisdom.

(Federico Bellido died in Madrid on 26.7.93)

MY RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

Miguel Benzo

I believe my religiosity through life has been marked by seven factors, not of my design, but produced by my psyche and the circumstances of my life; a strong sense of the mystery of being; an incapacity to find a symbol for God which would satisfy me, be it ever so little; a dazzling feeling in the face of the humanity of Jesus in the Gospel; a main concern about the nature and destiny of man; a scarce sensitivity of guilt and its penitential sequels; a relatively low interest in ecclesiastical and liturgical topics; a feeling of permanent scandal that I was unable to overcome in the face of human suffering. Let us examine these.

1. My astonishment in respect of Being

I believe that it was always, much before I knew how to formulate it clearly, I experienced astonishment in respect of Being. That there should be being, instead of nothing; and that being should be like this and not in some other form which to our reason would appear equally possible – these considerations produced in me an admiration which lay at the root of my childish fascinations with respect to nature. For this reason, very much later, I found myself immediately on the same wavelength as the second Heidegger, that of the Letter on humanism, for me the best book on poetry which has ever been written: “Man is not master of what exists. Man is the shepherd of being”. These words constitute for me the maximum enunciation of a poetic and religious conception of the world... which is mine. I even feel myself very close to the famous page of *The Nausea* in which Sartre depicts to us the stupefaction of Roquetin before the absurdity of the chestnut tree which stands up straight in front of him in the public park. What occurs is that what for Sartre causes repugnance, for me as for Heidegger is the essence itself of the aesthetic personal experience.

And this was also my radical experience in the trip to India last August. I know that the Hindu theologians have said that only the Absolute is real. But what the Indian people feel is exactly the opposite: only the real is absolute. Mountains and rivers, animals and plants, men and events, births and deaths, sex and games, words and gestures... all is sacred, all is absolute. For this reason, Hindus say there are three million gods. The privations of ascetics and the infinite variations of the erotic in the relieves of the Khajuraho temples, all is equally sacred.

Perhaps what culminated my interpretation of primitive Hinduism was the supreme Nepalese sanctuary of Pashupatinath: the sacred river Bagmati with its steep banks, covered with dense vegetation, the home of monkeys galore, with corpses being incinerated or awaiting their turn on the river side, children bathing amidst laughter and games a few paces away, the multitude of chapels consecrated to sexual symbols, vultures and crows looming in the sky above... all integrated in sacredness. But not in one all-embracing divinity, which absorbs everything, with which everything identifies itself, in which concrete beings lose their individuality. This is the third degree of abstraction of the Upanishads.

Each concrete being is divine in its own right, sacred, mysterious, adorable, and unique... for the simple reason of being. This could be expressed in another way: Existence is divine. Alongside the dazzle which I experience when confronted with *being* is the amazement which overwhelms me in the presence of the *contingent*: the amazement that stems from *being* being as it is and not in any other way, which is the root of the doctrine of creation. If despite the fact that it could be another way, it is as it is, it means to say that the choice fell precisely on this concrete way of being. It was chosen by a Being who, could not be anything other than the way He is. Which requires that the concept of God be not affected by any positive determining element, or any limiting qualification, because if this were not the case, even about Him the question could be raised as to why He is as He is and not in any other way.

The supreme dogma of positivism is the opposite conception: only the real is possible. The structure of the object is the structure of thought. The only true reasoning acceptable is the reflection of factual causality. All thinking that starts from or ends in what is merely possible is futile. The concept itself of pure possibility is nonsense. But the positivist dogma demands a supreme act of faith. That it be intrinsically impossible that the constellations be distributed differently in space, that there be other types of insects, that there exist other men than those that exist in reality... that as a last consideration, the big-bang could have been produced an instant before or an instant after, that the intensity of original energy could have been a little bigger or a little smaller, that the nature of “what began everything” could not be other than what it was –all these are propositions that appear purely arbitrary.

2. God does not fit into symbols

Perhaps this same feeling of mystery has made it impossible for me to find a symbol for the divine, which could satisfy me. I have never known to whom I address myself when I speak to God. For this reason, I feel identified with the book of Panniker “The Silence of God”. The Old Testament prohibited any representation of the divinity, and the New Testament insisted on the fact that “nobody has ever seen God”. It is true Jesus said: “He who has seen me, has seen the Father”. But He Himself addressed Himself constantly to that Father.

The Church has rejected the theory of the single nature of Jesus: that His human nature is not the divine nature. Bonhoeffer has observed very profoundly that Christian transcendence is not that of metaphysics, but the love of Jesus, capable of transcending all limits. Perhaps this Love made absolute is the only symbol of God that a Christian can permit himself to make. “God is love” (1 Jn 4,8)

3. Jesus seduced me

The figure of Jesus in the New Testament dazzled me in my years in Granada. Perhaps it could be said in the strict sense of the word I fell in love with Him. At that time, I happened to lay my hands on Kahil Gibran’s beautiful picture of Jesus, illustrated with a text, which fascinated me for a long time:

“Last night I saw His face again, clear and precise as never before. It was not turned towards me: He was looking deeply at the vast night. I saw His profile. It was serene and austere at the same time; and I thought for a moment that He would smile but He did not. He was young, eternal and immortal; not God, no; He was the Son of Man, confronting Himself with all that a man had to face, knowing all that a man has known and has to know. His face was that of an invincible man; it was the face of a Brother, of a Friend. His hair flowed back in waves behind His face and

resembled bright wings on the sides of His head. His neck was tanned and strong; His eyes like dark glowing embers. Now, my friend, for the first time I feel sure I could draw that face. It will be like a beautiful face for the prow of a big ship. He was walking like a man who was going against a strong wind, feeling Himself stronger than the wind. He was wearing again the rustic woollen garment and his feet bare again were covered with the dust of the hard paths He had walked along. I saw again His firm and big hands, and saw His robust wrists, strong as the branches of a tree. He was holding His forehead up and in His face, I could see a great determination, at the same time an expression of infinite and silent melancholy... Today I cannot write or draw a single line; but tomorrow, when I return, I will draw that face”.

I always say that if I have had a meeting with God, it was with Jesus of the Gospel. For this reason, I have not felt any excessive passion for the controversy between Jesus of our Faith and the Jesus of History. Even if, using an absurd hypothesis, the historic Jesus had not existed, it would still have seemed to me that God was speaking to us in the pages of the Gospel. If the Word had not become flesh, it would still have become literature. Even if we were to imagine that Jesus had not been inspired by God, Mathew, Mark, Luke, John and the first community were surely so and the New Testament has proceeded from them.

4. Judge not and you will not be judged

I have already referred to my reduced sense of sensitivity for the feelings of guilt, and for that reason, for penitential experiences. I feel such profound compassion for man, beginning from myself, that I very easily forgive even the biggest crimes. Human life is so hard, that nobody should try to be its judge. No man has inflicted on another such refined tortures as nature has inflicted on us. Society can and should prevent harm from being done, but neither society nor anyone else should judge the inner motives. Judge not and you will not be judged.

5. The Church at the service of man

I have never been excited about ecclesiastical themes, nor even about the clergy. Perhaps the anticlericalism that surrounded my infancy and adolescence, added to the study of Church history, experiences of the Seminary and of Rome and of the crisis of Catholic Action... have made me feel that it is nothing short of a miracle that the human material which forms the Church of Christ is still able to profess and propagate His ideal, despite its members practising it to so small a degree. For this reason, no amount of anything negative that arises in our community can scandalise me, and all that is positive that appears in the community I feel is a prodigy of the Spirit. I am only concerned about church and clerical themes in so far as they have a repercussion on the suffering or happiness of the members of the Church or of humanity as a whole.

6. Liturgy is life

Neither have I found the main fountain of my spirituality in the liturgy, but in the reading of the Bible, in theological reflection and in contemplative prayer. An example will serve to understand better the nature of my religiosity. Perhaps the most intense personal experience of the sacred that I have had in many years was the following: being once in Barcelona, I left at dusk to take a walk along Sarrià Street. There was nobody around. Suddenly on a bend of the street, there appeared before me at my feet a marvellous vision of the city, lit up with an occasional light here and there. At the bottom, the big blue spot of sea melting in the horizon with the sky from which the sun had just disappeared. Suddenly my thoughts went out to the millions of human beings, looking desperately for happiness in every direction: love, pleasure, money, power, alcohol, drugs...

And all walking fatally towards the night of disappearance; towards the darkness of suffering; towards the sea, which is death. I experienced this as a tremendous clamour of humanity in search of meaning. It was like the wrong side of God. He was present in His unbearable absence. I returned overawed to the monastery, and spent a long time in church, wrapped in thought.

7. The problem of suffering

This article would be without meaning without this key subject which, together with the yearning for love, truth and beauty, defines my existence: the problem of suffering. And I have to focus it with all the rigour with which I have been meditating on it for so many years. If somebody of those who read me –theologian, mystic or simply a Christian who has suffered- has some light to give me on this point, please let him go ahead and do so. It is my favourite “demon”. The clown that untimely questions me when I think I have found rest. “It is the sting of my flesh” (St. Paul), which buffets me. It has become more unbearable in recent years when pain has made me its constant companion.

Now, the theological dilemma presents itself to me in this form:

- “If God does not suffer with my suffering, He will not want to save me”.
- “If God suffers with my suffering, He will not be able to save me”.

That God does not suffer with human suffering appears *unacceptable* for three reasons: metaphysical, ethical and soteriological.

- a) *Metaphysically*, if God is wisdom He cannot ignore an aspect that is so essential to His creation as is pain. But pain is a personal experience. You cannot know it unless you have the experience of it. An abstract knowledge of it does not work. If God knows what is pain, it means He suffers.
- b) If God does not suffer, *He is not good*. Any creature who suffers for love of another or for love of any ideal, will be superior to this impassive God. Moltman has expressed this very eloquently in “The Crucified God”: “I get indignant, therefore, we exist”, says Camus. We exist insofar as we suffer and get indignant for reasons of injustice, and we are even more than gods or the God of Theism. Because these gods “walk above in the light like happy genies” (Hölderlin) and are immortal and omnipotent.

What an unfortunate being is the god who cannot suffer or die! “The experience of death is the surplus and advantage that leads to all divine wisdom” (H.G. Geyer). The highest point of metaphysical rebellion against the god who cannot die consists, then, in free death called suicide. It is the supreme possibility of protest of atheism because it is only suicide that makes man god of his own self in a way that says gods are not wanted here. But leaving aside this extreme stand, which Dostoievski alludes to on several occasions in his novel *Demons*, a god who cannot suffer is more unfortunate than any man is. Because a god incapable of suffering is an indolent being.

The God of Aristotle cannot love: the only thing He can do is be loved by other non-divine beings on account of His perfection and beauty, which attract them to Him. The “unmoved Mover” is an “egoistic lover”. He is the foundation of love of all things towards Him, and at the same time the reason of His own self, such that He is the lover-loved one of Himself; a metaphysically potential narcissist: “Deus incurvatus in se”.

But is He then a god or a stone?---- What sort of being will He be then, only an “Omnipotent God”? A Being with no experience, no destiny, a Being that no one loves. A man who has the experience of powerlessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent god, incapable of suffering and of loving, immortal.

- c) This gives rise to a *soteriological reason*: if God does not suffer, if He does not know what is pain, why and from what is He going to save me? Will He be like a Czar who is ignorant of the troubles of his subjects? And this problem is not resolved, as many theologians appear to believe, with the affirmation that God has become a sufferer in the person of Christ. There is no doubt that the proclamation of the “scandal of the Cross”, that God became Man to show us His love, sharing our sufferings and our death, constitute the greatness of Christianity. In the words of St. Paul: God has chosen what does not exist to destroy what does exist. But Christian reflection has understood that when God became Man, on taking the form of a servant, He could not have ceased being God. Therefore, in Christ one has to distinguish a human and a divine dimension. Then, the question about suffering rises again: Who suffers in Jesus, the human nature alone or the divine nature too? If only the human nature suffers while the divine nature remains plunged in infinite and indestructible happiness, then nothing has been resolved in the problem that is occupying our attention: Jesus is just another man that suffers, although this man ontologically is the Son of God.

But if we choose, as have other contemporary theologians, the solution that God suffers with our sufferings, what do we discover? Considering that God does not forget, that on the contrary everything for Him is present, we will have to imagine a God who all curled up in the background of being, suffers everlastingly the pains of all living beings who have existed, exist and will exist. God will be the suffering heart of reality. The last throb of what exists will be a sigh. But then we will be putting suffering as the ultimate metaphysical structure, from which consequently it is impossible to get out.

Many friends have asked me what influence has religious faith had in the personal experience of suffering. I have thought much about it. And I have to say that in me the suffering experience and Christian hope have maintained themselves on two totally different planes. Now I understand well that text of Bonhoeffer which says: “the resurrection is no solution to the problem of death”. Illness is lived in the immediacy of the palpable, of what is present, habitual, mundane; faith concerns “what we do not see”; is obscure, free, subject to temptation. Faith and hope require a permanent effort to keep opting for what is beyond; to stake our all on a single card. In faith and hope, one cannot be idle, one cannot rest. Believing is a permanent struggle as long as we live. It is true that hope *illuminates* but in no way *eliminates* the experience of finitude. The believer, like Jesus in Gethsemani, feels distressed in the same way as an unbeliever, but in his distress, he is accompanied by a mysterious angel whose presence comforts but does not impede the sweating of blood.

(Miguel Benzó passed away in August 1989)

A DOCTOR'S EXPERIENCES WITH SUFFERING HIS OWN AND THAT OF OTHERS

Ángel García Forcada

I would like to begin explaining why and for whom I am writing. I am doing so because I have come to the conclusion that sharing my personal and lived experiences with others can turn out helpful both to them and to me. Regarding who I am writing for, I wish to say this article is not addressed to the “establishment” of the Church. In this respect, I make mine the words of the 1994 Nobel Prizewinner, Kenzaburo Oé: “I fear faith that has been transformed into institutional, but I respect the man who prays to no matter which God”. I am writing for men and women of this society that suffer or accompany people who suffer. And I write because I feel it is time that the Church, the simple people of God, make their voice heard and speak –if they can and dare- words of hope, authenticity and justice.

I will begin narrating experiences of other people’s suffering that I have shared in my thirteen years of medical practice. And I will follow up from there with my own experience of the 18 months I spent unemployed and I will share with my readers all the sentiments that kept rising within me during this period, sentiments ranging from hate to hope, and how being out of a job can turn out to be a meeting with God.

1. Personal experiences about other people’s suffering

As a doctor, I have attended hundreds of sick people. I have worked in wards of patients suffering from cancer and AIDS in one of the hospitals in Barcelona that has the most number of these patients. I will begin with the patients suffering from AIDS.

In the AIDS’ ward I took my personal “walk through resurrection and death” (as the title of the book of González Faus goes). Death made its presence felt daily. Practically every day some boy or girl expired amid the desperation of their parents and the hospital staff. The questions that kept forming in our minds were: Up to what point should we treat these patients? When should we stop administering antibiotics, serum, blood transfusions?... The answer was given to me by the patients themselves: as long as they struggled to keep alive, we struggled too. When in a subtle way, they gave you to understand that they could bear it no longer, that it was not worth the trouble, at that point we stopped our efforts and waited for the liberating arrival of death.

The second personal experience I wish to transmit refers to a cancerous patient. He was suffering from tongue cancer, and in successive surgical operations suffered the loss of his tongue, jaw and cheeks. Towards the end, he being unable to speak, we communicated to each other in writing. I remember well the time I visited him after I got married. He requested a piece of paper and wrote: “Doctor, I see a ring on your finger. So, I suppose you are now married.

Congratulations. And please do not address me with the “usted” form (I normally use “usted” –the “respectful you” form- when speaking to my patients). That man, with a probe through his nose and a continuous morphine drip, was capable of forgetting himself to take interest in me and my recent marriage. I left his room, went to my office and burst into tears.

I was single and lived alone. As any undesired solitude, I found it painful and very bitter. Some time later when I finished my specialisation, I returned to my native city, found my partner in life and got married. All these experiences aroused in me and in the patients multiple questions regarding suffering: Why should this happen to me? Where is God? Why does He send me this illness? What have I done to merit it?... Obviously, the image of God is questioned here. In the measure I could, I tried to transmit to them my own image of God, which kept changing as time went on.

For some time, I could not find God anywhere. There was only silence in and around me. The suffering of others was something that others lived in solitude, with that terrible and profound loneliness of a suffering person, to which it is impossible to gain access, much as one might hold the other’s hand or caress his or her forehead. Later, I had recourse to the book of Job, and his words sounded in my interior: “If we accept from God good things, why then should we not do so the bad?” (Job 2, 10). This possible answer I found all right for some time; but I realised it was not really sufficient: it set God a little far from us, like a “Deus ex machina” that sends good and bad things. Later I went to St. Mark’s gospel and re-read chapter 15, the death of Jesus. Now my answers were different and different too were my prayers. At times I would burst out in desperation: “My God, my God, why hast Thou abandoned me?”

2. My own suffering: depression and unemployment

The foregoing lines would have little meaning if they were not accompanied by my own experience of suffering. It was not a physical pain, but rather a pain in my soul stemming from eighteen months of unemployment in the course of three years, with twelve months of full employment and the rest working under-employed. This situation brought along clinical depression.

As a doctor, I know well the somatic and psychological repercussions that joblessness has for those who bear it: greater incidence of depression, infections, heart attacks, cancer... However, one thing is to know, quite another to suffer it. I will relate my personal experiences over the last three years, from the time I finished my specialisation in a Catalan hospital. My motive in doing so is to share my personal experiences with those who have gone through a similar situation, so that others who live with jobless people, but who have never been so themselves, might sit up and take notice and decide to speak out for those who have no voice.

I have been trained by the Jesuits, which means to say in my case, a brilliant school and university career, a good dose of volunteering and a strong super-ego, great expectations of social success....; all this in a context of a perhaps mistaken Ignatian “magis” . In 1993 I finished my specialisation in a hospital in Barcelona and decided to return to my hometown. I took along great hopes, projects, techniques and knowledge that I knew did not exist in my home region. Nevertheless, I began the year without a job, and every interview I went for ended with “your proposals are not on our priorities list at the moment”. Neither were there posts available to do night duty or substitute for other doctors, nor the possibility to incorporate oneself in a consulting practice. As a result, I began to accept the situation: I was unemployed and needed to receive welfare unemployment benefits.

Then began my repeated visits to INEM (the National Institute of Employment) with the indifferent and often discourteous treatment of the staff. At the beginning of each month, the usual lines would form up to collect the unemployment subsidy. I would find myself surrounded by men and women with the terrifying colour of despair depicted on their faces. Every time I left home, I would feel real anguish, thinking within me: what will people think of me when they see me strolling in the afternoon? Will they realise that I am jobless? I began to feel guilty for not being able to find a job. I realised my expectations were falling apart. I wished that Monday morning would never arrive.

During those three years I worked 13 months, often under the so-called “rubbish contracts”. I got accustomed to doing night duty on days nobody wanted to, to working odd hours which time and again, I would be told I would have to stop without a friendly word or without a sign of gratitude for the task I had done or without a sign of hope of future contracts.

I felt hatred towards those who enjoyed a stable job, I felt bad when I had to deal with them. I realised this when one day I was invited to a concert. I found myself in the midst of the city’s “beautiful people”, top officials, all of them with a secure salary at the end of the month and being able to permit themselves a good car and good holidays (in recent years, all my summers have been spent doing night duty). I felt sick and abandoned the concert hall. I understood in my own flesh the accurate analysis outlined by the last congress for poverty and which I transcribe as follows: “...there is a social dualism being consolidated among us: while those who have stable and well remunerated jobs live better every day, there are many others who have no jobs, or live with the fear of losing the job they have or are obliged to accept precarious employment with little or no social protection”.

I also learnt how painful it is to compare oneself with others, and the internal anger which this can generate. I met old university colleagues who were holding good posts in public institutions without having to sit for any competitive exam, simply because they knew how to take advantage of the political moment. People who now forget old ties, old relationships. Whatever it be, hatred and anger are sentiments that do harm and I tried leaving them behind.

During this period of evolution, I found myself abandoned by the Church. Rarely does the Church speak with truth and justice about unemployment. I tried to understand this fact, and the only explanation that I found was that the clergy have never ever lived or will ever live a similar situation (except a few honourable exceptions of priest-workers). But I did not feel myself abandoned only by the Church - syndicates too hardly ever mention the unemployed, except to use demagoguery with them.

However, not everything was pain and despair. I was able to feel myself a brother to so many thousands of fellow countrymen. I did not know who they were, I did not speak directly with them, but I understood that they were living a reality similar to mine, and this gave me a feeling of solidarity. Unemployment also makes one more human: it has made me expect less of myself in what refers to social success, it has made me understand that the most important thing in life is comprehension and mercy. In joblessness, between tiredness and disillusionment, I could pray once again, although it was to say “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

I suffered in my own flesh the effects of a clinical depression, which in so many patients I had seen from a distance. The tiredness one feels when getting up in the morning, living permanently with “dark glasses” which tint with darkness the present, past and future, as also human relationships and the relationship with your partner in life. I have lived through the

deterioration of one's self-esteem and one's own worth. It is in this context that the temptation to commit suicide can arise, when in the loneliness and darkness of one's room, one hears within oneself a voice that says: "I have no longer the courage to carry on living". On two occasions this occurred to me and on both of these I thought of the surgeon's scalpel, which I kept in my small surgical kit. However, I believe it was the very fear of what was passing through my mind that saved me. Fortunately, these moments passed and today I am able to write these lines.

I was helped along by medicines and also by the affection of who today is my wife, who loved me and accepted my real situation at this moment of time. Now I am no longer jobless though I feel myself under-employed. I became a free-lance doctor and I spend two days a week in the consulting room of a polyclinic. I still go for interviews and send CVs...

It is in this context of more than two million countrymen without a job, that I ask men and women of the Church not to keep silent. To speak out for those who have no voice. To denounce the immense profits of the big banks, the corrupt actions of those in power, with continued misappropriation of funds, who make a criminal use of "reserved funds", the construction of works that are destined to be enjoyed by a privileged few (auditoriums, elite sports facilities), the multimillion expenses incurred in the signing up of players by football clubs, the excessive salaries of parliamentary people and those occupying high offices, the lack of solidarity of many who enjoying high and sufficiently good salaries keep on claiming for more ...

I conclude with this conviction: Having gone through the personal experience of solidarity, compassion, mercy, suffering and unemployment, all these can serve as the meeting point with God.

(Extract from the magazine Sal Terrae. September 1997)

GOD IN THE GARBAGE

(From a letter of Fernando García Gutiérrez to the Jesuits of Andalusia)

Last September 29, the sacerdotal Ordination of Fernando López Pérez was held in Asunción (Paraguay), at which I was present. The ceremony took place in the municipal landfill of the city, next to the district in which he works and where he lives with two other Jesuits....

The circumstances of the Ordination were charged with emotion on account of the place and the people attending the ceremony: next to the immense piles of garbage, in a wide open space and surrounded by the poor who eke out a living, poking through the garbage that the trucks bring from Asunción to dump here, six human foetuses who had been aborted and one new-born child (still alive) were found amidst the garbage. These poor people had picked them up and the baby with life was adopted by a couple. At the penitential act, six little children stood out holding six images of little angels in representation of the foetuses that had been discovered amid the garbage and buried affectionately in the houses of the poor. The couple with the adopted baby in their hands was also present: forgiveness was asked for these and so many other sins of injustice that were committed there.

The ceremony was officiated at an altar, which was none other than a wooden box turned upside down and covered with a sack; in front were several cardboard boxes, salvaged from the garbage and laid out as a carpet. On these, Fernando prostrated himself while the Litany of the Saints was chanted. During the ceremony, he was barefooted, as though overwhelmed by the divine presence manifested in the poor that surrounded him; the crossed deacon's stole that he wore was made from sackcloth. After the Jesuit Provincial had introduced Fernando to the Ordaining Bishop, other men and women of the district followed suit, asking spontaneously that he be ordained priest because of the testimony of his life and his dedication to them. His father also gave testimony of his son and requested that he be ordained. Mgr. Piña imposed his hands on him and recited the formula of Ordination. Silence prevailed all around, broken only by the sound of trucks

coming in to dump the garbage they were carrying for the landfill. Suddenly a mighty applause corroborated all that had just been enacted. It seemed that the presence of the Holy Spirit could be tangibly felt here.

When the first part of the ceremony was over, we moved towards a large hut in the middle of the district where the Eucharist was to continue. We concelebrated with the Bishop and Fernando and these two gave out Holy Communion to that enormous group of neighbours that filled the hut and its surroundings.

The Press in Asunción published wide reports on this ceremony: “A Spanish Jesuit was ordained in Cateura by vertical choice of the poorest”; “A priest is ordained in the municipal landfill”; “An example of humility and total dedication to the poor is given its true value”; “In an original ceremony, a Jesuit was ordained priest in the landfill”... To one of the journalists, Fernando made the following statement, which appeared in one of the newspapers: “I am grateful to the Lord for permitting the garbage dump to be converted today into a big cathedral. This I feel was the plan of God for His poor, because the Lord is always present amid the most humble and needy. The poor people were the ones that helped me to discover my vocation, my priesthood, and to them, I owe this grace of God. I feel just like one of them. My parents supported me, as also my two other brothers who are also priests”. And when the journalist mentioned that Fernando was a graduate in Nuclear Physics in Spain, Fernando added: “I put this aside because I felt a much better call, a much better choice”....

HEAVY!

María García Maseda, rscj

(To a student)

This year I have stopped to think how difficult it is for you, student N° x, of group n, to find a place for yourself and to survive in a public centre which aims to be educational.

I know the situation very well. I too arrived new at the Institute and this year too I was mistaken on the first day for a student. Last year when the same thing happened, I felt quite ashamed and tried to put it behind me, but this time I decided to stop for a moment to think.

I cannot say how grateful I am that we sat at long last in that cold, dark and damp corner of the Institute which to you appeared so comfortable... You say you are “heavy” and everybody calls you so. I see very tight jeans in cross-country boots, an aggressive leather jacket and a T-shirt whose colour I would never be able to tell, curls in front of the eyes as woolly dogs have that give one the impression that they are unable to see well, a blank face, sometimes a half-smile playing around the lips, a string around the neck with all those symbols I am ignorant of except that of a yinyang and the reverse side of a cross... I am Christian, and your teacher of religion and all of you call me “a monxa” (the nun), what do you see?....

Since the beginning of the academic year, when you hardly ever came to class, I had asked you to lend me a tape of “heavy” music. I was sincere when I asked you for this, I wanted sincerely to hear it. You came very seldom and you never said anything. I suppose you considered my asking you for this tape a challenge that I was making out to you from the standpoint of “my authority” because you are aware that I know that your groups insult God and the Church in their songs. It was not a challenge, although you might not believe me, and I can understand you since the educational system tends more to expel you rather than to draw itself nearer to you. I only want to hear your music and when you do not come, I miss you.

Today it happened. You play a song and I instinctively turn down the volume. You accept and smile with that half-smile of yours. We begin to speak of music: heavy, punk, rock....; I know nothing and listen, me your pupil delighted to have our roles reversed. For you all music is important and “goes down well”. You astound me when you confess that you also listen to Haendel and Mozart, that you enjoy Flamenco. The only music you do not tolerate is “Bakalao” because “this is not music” but a mix made by a machine, with no feeling, no personality, no message; and it even goes against your principles to listen to it because it is all a “snobbish” style that you reject with a gut reaction.

You speak of heavy, of punk, it seems these types of music concern themselves about world problems and sing against the consumption of drugs, (and we always think your motto was “sex, drugs and rock and roll”. They make strong denunciations and do not swear allegiance to any particular ideology.

The form of heavy music is better developed musically than punk music because punks are “more left out”. Punk music is gentler, and is therefore easier at the beginning. You can hear it while you are speaking to somebody and also when you are alone you can “feel it” and vibrate to the point of a body shiver... You give me your testimony on heavy, and I ask you to give Catechesis a try. It is the first time that I notice the special shine in your eyes and I feel caught up with this connecting current that has sprung up between us and which -today more than ever- appears to be a miracle and something absolutely marvellous.

I say nothing but you understand, with much tact and delicacy, that it is going to be quite difficult for me to listen to the tape you have lent me and which I do not like at all. You appear very patient and pedagogical and recommend that I start with something more gentle to be able to slowly get the hang of it because at the start “it is normal that one finds it tough”, and you say that you too did not find it easy either at the beginning!

The bell rings and we leave; I with your tape and you I do not know with what, I believe with a little bit of expansive heat emerging from this vital centre of interest. I try to hear from time to time “Kreator” but have been unable to stand more than three minutes at a stretch (despite my best efforts). The relief I feel each time I turn off the cassette with my head bursting at its seams and my stomach turned inside out, I imagine what in the world you would give to “switch off” the class and make me stop talking of the history of the Church.

Experiencing how difficult it is for me to enter your world, I have quickly understood how difficult it must be for you to reach mine. I realise how far I am from anyone of you and how near to those missionaries who I so often criticise because of their little knowledge of “*lack of culture*”.

From that day onwards the news spread and several students approached me in the corridors with tapes of their favourite groups and they helped me to listen to many trends. Heavy was right, the other music is “a little lighter” but even so it is very tough, difficult, but says things that I think we should listen to if we want to understand something. Perhaps they only feel panic that it might be known that they are not indestructible and that they do not feel at ease in the system which all of us bear, although some are more trained in it than others.

“I keep on dragging my disillusionment from one setting to another. I do this without having anything to say and what I say, you know only too well. Laugh at me as I am your mirror, you and me are under control. To break is our only vengeance. We are showing openly that nothing motivates us. We are small bombs of hatred. That is our only solution. We are the last, the worst. We are the works of this civilisation. By telling people off, we let off steam. The louder we tell people off, the more we offend. They do not want to see us but here we are. Nothing will move us. There is no hope. VENGEANCE!”

The Institute where I work admits students -boys and girls- that are very much on the fringe of society but even so, they are very privileged inasmuch as they receive education and still keep going to school. From the time the academic year started, there have been 12 dropouts, 12 adolescents in the street! The school system is set up in such a way that students who most need education are expelled.

The teaching staff is very afraid of you, students; perhaps you will never ever suspect but even the youngest among us dread the ear-ring, the leather and the very pretentious interpretations of all that you paint in places which should not have been painted upon in the first place. We are afraid and it is for this reason that we keep our distance with an imperative tone –which practically does not listen at all to what you have to say- so that you all stay quiet within the chalk circle we have painted for you on the floor.

Here too are children of the street who, although running no risk of being assassinated by sinister squadrons, are on track, nevertheless, towards delinquency and exclusion, and it is these who ask if true delinquency is not precisely ours:

“Having their pockets filled, delinquency is a social plague. A despicable race, a race that ought to be exterminated, Bankers! robbers operating in broad daylight with no need for levers, Politicians! swindlers who play and live off you. Arms Manufacturers! They have hides like elephants. Religions that serve as tranquillisers and bands that are uniform. Advertising drugs, a premeditated crime and real estate swindles.... Delinquency, delinquency. That is yours. You make the law. Exploiters, professionals, delinquency is all that which takes away from you the special bargains you enjoy.”

Some of my students are heavies or punks (not all, obviously. I have some who are bakalao) and they are students of religion but for nothing special, they have not chosen to be there. They are there because they are forced to.

I was accustomed to and can live with the atheism of the “philosophers” that is to say, with an atheism that focuses on the existence of God, that questions from the psychological viewpoint a spiritual experience; among other things, because it is the environment that has formed me and faith has always stimulated me; and because as a human believer, I harbour within me these same search questions.

But now we have young people arriving, and they are already here, that never ever question certain things since for them the non-existence of God is as natural as was His existence for so many people who were born and educated before the year 50 (who did not question things either) and if nothing else, look over the shoulder and with disdain all later generations who they call “the yoghurt people” and who do no more than tolerate the world that adults (with the best of intentions) have created.

More than once I have asked myself what I am doing preaching in this environment; “If at least we could succeed in transmitting the powerful experience of God”, a companion, a teacher like myself of religion would say..... but the mediocrity of our lives and of our testimony corroborate the obstinacy and prevalent bourgeois spirit; more than anything else we make God more obscure, we do not allow God to be seen. Can God be a closed person? Can God be mediocre? How can we dare go on His behalf in this way?... There are so many questions that people ask themselves that the worst part is we do not imagine for ourselves what these questions are, but we think that we do and we cover their mouths with answers which we take from Catechism, instead of blessing and encouraging the question.

At other times I wonder: How do you cope with so much?... I need all the courage I can muster to face children who have a deep and hurt look in their eyes and ask them in an innocent way: “Can a mother forget her child at the breast?” (Is 49, 15). And see how they reply in silence:

“Yes, mine has abandoned me”. It is then that one has to begin to look for the way of telling them: Well, even if she has forgotten you, God has not; but this is very difficult, I know...

In the middle of all this is Sandra, aged 15, a very beautiful girl and the class representative. She had never before been enrolled for religion and nobody had ever spoken to her about God. This year she wanted to know what it was all about and here she is seated in the front row. She listens intently and asks many questions (some so elementary that to answer them I have been lead by her to the essential: why did they kill Jesus?). At the beginning, her companions laughed at her, and made gestures every time she raised her hand, but then her personality and freedom prevailed and her interest for religion became infectious in the class and all started listening intently and I couldn't believe my eyes...

I am one of those people who see and suffer acutely the ever-widening gap between faith and culture. It may sound foolish but it gave me hope to hear the following song -I ask forgiveness beforehand if the lyrics hurt the sensibility of some. According to the song, it is profoundly outrageous to confuse the love of God with certain ideologies and, perhaps it could signify sparking off what all of us have within our breasts which acts as a radar to detect what is good, true and just:

“HAIL....
under the guise of promising the Kingdom of Heaven
what some smart guys are doing,
is making for themselves their particular heaven on earth
-Buy a piece of heaven paying your monthly quota-.
HAIL...
One has to be crazy to speak about the love of God
And at the same time in their schools
Prepare the control panel of fascist repression.
How can one be so pharisaic?
HAIL...
Economic control is control of power
Mental control, sexual control.
Really, guys, I have never seen religion
wanting to save us..... (by blows).
HAIL...
Opus Dei, oh no.”

The sign of the title is in the original handwriting of J.A.H., alias “heavy” and can be seen written in graffiti on all the walls of the Institute, especially on those of Std. II B and on the doors of the WC.

BEING A PRIEST AMID THEM

Guy Gilbert

“And the priest there in the middle? Who am I, who are we, Christians or priests, lost in this immensely big city amid the young people of the street? Who are they? How do they live? What are their aspirations? What do they make us discover for ourselves?”

80 % of these street boys are not baptised. One half is Muslim. The immense majority is atheist. God is completely outside their concerns: God cannot exist! A God Who loves you is comical. Your good God and father never speaks to me; talking about myself, do you know my father abandoned me?!... Yes, I understand, and the street teaches us every day: that a person who has not really been loved in his life with a free and true love, cannot know God.

“Do you make love?” The boys with this question attack my priesthood. For them, it is inconceivable that a man does not have sexual relations. I answer them that the Church has imposed celibacy on me and I have accepted it. They try my patience to the limit with these questions, and I reply: “I respect the way you live, and I ask you to do the same about the way I live. It is not surprising that a newcomer asks me this question in the presence of a boy who knows me a longer time and it is this latter who replies: “It is three in the morning. Guy is ready to listen to your shit. If he has chosen to live like this, it is for you, friend, and for your other companions. So, leave him in peace”. I think they are the ones who have best defended my celibacy.

I wish to point out that the street boys are very sensitive to the testimony of people who live up to fidelity. In the face of a serious lack of affection, that almost all have had to live with, they look around for people who love each other, who are not afraid of having staked everything in the fidelity of a spoken word. One night, finishing a very tiring day, I understood clearly this observation of a boy: “You are lucky to have been able to put your life at the service of someone”. It was something I could not define exactly but which I sensed through the gift of a life.

For my part, I feel myself a priest within the Church. I see all that has to be changed. I understand that others wish to change things from the outside. I have chosen to do so from the inside. I form part of a team of priests with who I get along well (better than when I lived with them and the boys came knocking on the door at three in the morning). I was a delegate of the "Presbyterian board". I try to maintain strong links with the bishop. Every Maundy Thursday I go to Notre Dame de Paris to feel and express this bond in person. At night, before going to sleep, I read part of my breviary in which I come across some marvellous psalms. This is my way of meeting again the entire Church. But I shun tranquillising good Christian consciences in relation to delinquent youngsters.

Whatever be the case, a Church for these boys simply means collection boxes to steal from. In this matter I tell them they have a very amusing way of gauging the crisis of the Church: they appraise the crisis from the fact that there is less and less money in the collection boxes. Hence, the observation of one of the boys: "The last time I opened the collection box of St. Joseph I found twenty cents. Really the Church is badly administered..."

For them, the Church is fundamentally constituted of priests and nuns. Later they are able to verify that the Church is rich and on the side of the rich. What proves this is the fact that the priests always give them alms. I know a youngster who in one year succeeded in obtaining one thousand five hundred francs just by calling on priests. It is one of the worst things that one can do: almsgiving incites youngsters to beg, foments begging and ruins these young people in the bargain.

When I preach in a church, some youngsters come frequently to listen to me. Their reactions are very varied: "Poor young boys are never seen in churches". "They look at us as though we were some freaks of nature."

One Sunday, one of them sat next to a lady who quickly picked up her handbag and held it tight. "Don't be afraid, old woman, I have not come to steal your things. I have come to listen to my friend, the priest." And the old lady, changing her opinion, at Peace-giving held out her hand to the boy who was astonished to see that hand stretched out after that peculiar beginning.

In the early stages, when I had finished preaching I accepted people giving me money after the Mass was over. But one day when I was talking outside with some people, a boy came up to me and said: "Have they not finished yet licking your ass?" I understood what he meant to say: "They do not give you money for us. They give it to you for yourself. They give it for your good works. For these good works they put notes into your pocket." Now I shun being the safe for good consciences. I do not accept money tied to the word of God.

On various occasions, I have celebrated the Eucharist on a weekend outing. I have always thought on these occasions that it was better to meet in some hall, rather than have the youngsters fill the town church where they would have caused panic. We would gather round a table and I feel they have a true attitude to prayer. At the beginning, an impressive silence. Later at the time of the Gospel, they would make especially interesting comments about Mary Magdalene or the Good Samaritan. At the end of one of these "masses", one of them said to a companion when I was arriving: "After this, I feel new, totally new."

Only those who truly share in life know from personal experience what the Eucharist is: a sharing from the platform of love. How many times I have heard one or another of these youngsters who live like pariahs in our society, sunk in their own misery, say to me: "Guy, look

after this chap. He is more down and out than myself...” Only the poor really share what they have. Only they can participate one day in a true Eucharist.

As for ourselves, the potentates of this earth, we have monopolised the message of Christ and we use it, diluting it, happy and tranquil we are, oblivious of those around who are hungry for justice and love and who remain at the doors of society.

A priest in their midst, living with them, a wild priest without a Christian community, but sent by the Church, working in her name and in union with her, a man of contradiction, totally dedicated to the social and political struggle, implicating myself whenever required, a priest for a community that does not expect him. I want to be with my team-mates, a testimony of justice and love. With all the men of good will who have understood that these youngsters, who we have rejected, need the true face of a brother to be able to live free and standing on their own feet. This is what it means to me to live my priesthood in the heart itself of the Church.

(Taken from G. Gilbert, *Un prêtre chez les loubards*. Ed. Stock, Paris)

LETTER TO MY SON WHO WAS NEVER BORN

Marisol, rscj

Dear son: Although I do not know whether I should call you son, since you have never existed except in my woman's imagination and in my maternal desires. But today I need to talk to you; I need to desire you, love you, and have you as I have always dreamt. Many times, I have conceived you in my womb, I have longed to hold you in my arms, caress you, kiss you and pinch your cheeks.

Today, while I was kissing with tenderness and reverence your little feet, you asked me a very intimate question (I would say almost indiscreet): "Mummy, why was I never born? Why have I never lived in your real world?" You left me almost breathless, but I am aware that you have a right to know why and I will tell you the reason, though you should know first that you exist in my imagination, in my heart and in my maternal womb which is capable of being made fecund; and I have seen you in many children who have run to meet their mother, in many others who have been held by their mothers close to their breasts, and in some babies who have been looking for a physical contact with maternal love...

Do not feel that I want to dodge your question, no. Today I want, I desire... to confess to you my secret why you were never born like Álvaro, Carlos, Soraya, Belén, Jordi...? Why you never existed with your own body? But before that, let me speak to you of the man who could no doubt have been your father. He was, and is a person with light eyes and a heart full of love: a being who when he looks at you makes your woman's body tremble all over with emotion. He is a person I have loved, yes, loved a lot, and perhaps today I still keep on loving him in my own way. He is someone who has given life to my female womb, who both harmoniously and painlessly has put life into my being and yours.

But the truth is you were not born because your mother -that's me- was always a dreamer, an ambitious woman, who was looking out for the best in life and one day actually found it. She discovered that she wanted to devote herself to other people's welfare, she wanted to have many "you"s and for this she had to love, love many "others"... I am sorry about it, but I am not a woman to have just one son, one man, one friend... I am a woman of many relationships and of

accompanied loneliness, a woman who lives with others and is shared by others. Do not think that on account of this I do not love you, that I do not feel you in my motherly womb, since every time I have the opportunity to help a child discover something new, when I teach him to respect and to love others, when we take care of life together and smile however difficult life might be... it is you who live, move and grow inside me.

Each time I accompany God's process of salvation in the life of a friend, it is you I accompany, you I guide in your walk towards LIFE in capital letters.

Each time I look after a plant, contemplate the sky, fuss over nature... it is you I squeeze within my arms. When Álvaro, my nephew, was born, I felt the need to pour on him all my accumulated mother's love, but you took charge of the situation and made me love like a mad woman, giving him only the love of an aunt, which was as it should be, thanks to you!

Every time I cry over your physical absence, you have filled me with positive energy and I have felt the need of transmitting it to others with joy.

As you see, you have been born not just once, but every day, giving me the opportunity to allow you to grow in each happening of my life. You have helped me get the intuition of what it means to love, to love as a mother, dedicating myself to others wholeheartedly, with no reserve or restraint. And this is what I try to do for you: dedicate myself entirely to Jesus! to this man who I do not see with my eyes (as I would see your father) but who I feel and who feels me with the heart; who I do not touch with my hands, but who makes me shiver with emotion whenever I sense his presence; who loves me silently but passionately.

Today, after speaking to you, after listening to you in my loud silence, my womanly being is full of joy, because it can be happy imagining you, thinking of you, holding you and loving you in my world. Thanks because your deep look caresses and gives life to my maternity. Ah! I forgot to tell you that every day I spend a long time in intimate union with Him and it is in this free space of time that He maintains you alive within me; without Him, you would have ceased to exist a long time ago.

I hope I have replied to your question.

A big hug from your mother,

Marisol

WHY I BECAME A CHRISTIAN

Paul O. Unha

It was the month of February 1988. My son had just been hospitalised. The diagnosis was clear: Leukaemia! Hopes of survival were minimal. I was 38 years old. We had two children: a daughter aged 12 and this son, ten years old. He was the apple of my eye!

I did not believe in anything and I had no interest whatever in religious issues. All I wanted was to earn money, much money, to be able to enjoy life. To achieve this, at the time I was living away from my wife: she remained in the country while I lived in Seoul, as a paying guest with a family to be able to have the liberty of acting and making money.

And then the news of my son's illness! I had him come out to Seoul and I had him examined in one of the most famous hospitals in the capital. My world came crashing down. I became victim of a horrible crisis of depression: my son was going to die and I could do nothing. I felt utterly lost, impotent...

Then some people around me spoke to me of God: it was to console me. From what I remember, they spoke to me of providence, of grace, of the call of God, of the ways that God has of His own.... Why did I pay attention to those words? Do not ask me why. I would not be able to tell you. At other times, I would not even have listened. But the truth is I listened and the idea occurred to me that my child perhaps belonged more to God than to me. It did not seem to make sense. And on March 8, 1988 for the first time in my life, I entered a church: it was Sunday, in the cathedral of Seoul. I gazed at a big cross and I said to God that my son, my property, all that I imagined was mine, was not really mine but His. I told God that He could do what He wanted, and that if He took away my son, who was His, I would not protest.

That same day I got myself enrolled in a catechism class and wished that everything would be quick. My time as a catechumen was a time of grace that I had never lived before: I spent much time in the hospital. I concentrated on the family and learnt to pray. I became another man and got to have surprising experiences. I was baptised very quickly and took the name of Paul: it was August 15 of the same year. My son, before dying was baptised and confirmed on April 3. It was Easter day. A nun used to come to see him regularly to prepare him for these sacraments. And then the incredible happened. *My son got cured.* Today he has finished his secondary studies.

My Christian life is not as fervent as I would wish it to be. I beg forgiveness from God for this. But I belong now to His family, I am happy and this will last -I don't doubt it- till my death...

(Taken from the magazine: Spiritus (Quito). Year 38/2. N° 147. June 1997).

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Somaratne's story

I was born in a small town in the district of Gampaha (Sri Lanka). We were two sons and a daughter. I was the second child. My father and mother were both very individualistic, egoistic, people with hearts of stone. We never felt loved. Moreover, my father was a drunkard. Since our earliest childhood, my brother and I would flee from this loveless home. We tried to live here and there: nobody took care of us.

My younger brother returned home one day, when my father was dying. He felt such hatred towards him that he took a piece of wood and plunged it into the eyes of the dying man. This showed very poignantly up to what point his hatred towards his father had reached.

When I was still young, I found a girl whom I married and formed a family. I had two daughters. In the early seventies, I joined a rebellious group called "The Popular Liberation Front" (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna). At this time, I was around 35 years. I was living then in the central-north Province and I would devote all my time and energy to working for this organisation. Our objective was to overturn the government by whatever means. I had little schooling and I was unable to read and write well, but I had the gift of the gab. On account of this, at many meetings, I used to be the speaker who would indoctrinate the young people with our ideology. Following the failure of the 1975 insurrection, I was captured and put in prison. I was transferred to *a jail in Colombo*. And there it was that I found *my liberation*.

My cell was situated in front of the small hall where the nuns used to meet with the Catholic prisoners. Every Sunday, I would see the two Sisters visiting them. I was Buddhist and so had no right to join or talk to the Catholic prisoners. However, much as I wanted to, *I was afraid to do so. These nuns attracted me, aroused my curiosity*. They were the only foreigners who were allowed to enter the jail. Fortunately for me, one of the Sisters came to visit the sick in the hospital of the

jail; I was in there with a small infection and got the opportunity to speak to her. She told me not to be afraid. I put aside my fears and wanted to be present in the hall when the nuns came there.

I had noticed that one of the Sisters had a small book which she consulted when teaching us and which she would give the priest to read during Mass. I strongly wished to see this book, which contained messages that were so appropriate that I could not help but reflect on them. I asked her for the book and she lent it to me. She never got it back. As I had nothing else to do, I started reading avidly the New Testament. I would read one passage in the morning and another at night and on the basis of this reading, I would reflect on my life. Conversion came slowly upon me. Nobody knew anything, not even the Sisters. I did not speak to anybody *about this interior transformation* which was taking place in me.

During this period, my brother had returned home and was sleeping with my wife. She wrote to tell me that she had no choice: she had to submit to his advances as her life and that of the children were in danger. I replied to her that she should not worry, as I harboured no negative feelings towards her. In fact, I was responsible for her loneliness. I understood that she was in a difficult situation and I felt very close to her. I carried on reading the New Testament, from which I drew much inspiration for my life. I tried to put that into practice.

I returned home. On knowing that I was free, my brother disappeared. My wife had given birth to a child from him. I resumed my life. With very few resources and with the help of the Sisters, I started cultivating the land. Everybody in the town was surprised at this change in me. I spoke to them a lot about forgiveness. One day I went to the convent of the Sisters and expressed to them my desire and that of my family to be baptised. This happened without any difficulty and my whole family was made Christian. I began living my life as a Christian, knowing very well that I had been doing so a long time ago in my heart. I became very fervent and felt within me a deep interior peace.

One day when I was visiting friends; somebody came yelling to say that my wife had been stabbed. I ran home and discovered my wife bathed in blood. The stab wound inflicted by my brother had been fatal. We carried her to hospital but she died in my arms on the way there.

It was here where the New Testament had touched me deep down. It taught me patience and helped me to forgive. I understood up to what point Christ had forgiven in His life. Following His example, I learnt to forgive those who had wounded me deeply. I forgave my brother for this big crime. I refused to testify against him at court. Let God take charge of all that! My brother remains to date in jail. I do not harbour any resentment towards him.

Now I am more than fifty years old. My two daughters study with the Sisters. I try to earn a little money to be able to leave them something. Apart from this, I try to practise what Jesus taught: "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you... If somebody strikes you on the right cheek, show him your left also". And, despite my problems, -because I am not well at this moment- I am in peace.

(Taken from the Magazine Spiritus (Quito). Year 38/2.N° 147. June 1997).

CONCLUSION: THE PASSIVITIES OF DIMINUTION

José A. García sj.

Passivities, that is to say, what occur to us without us causing them, occupy more than fifty per cent of our lives. “I receive more than what I do for myself” (Teilhard). Something warns us, therefore, that though we have to prepare ourselves for the time of action in the first place, it is also equally important that we prepare ourselves to process properly the time of reception. Of these passivities that befall us without us having caused them, some are conducive to “growth”, as friendship, love, etc. and others to “diminution”. Apparently they create nothing, serve no purpose other than destroy: illnesses, complexes, ageing, death... Can this suffering for nothing be integrated in the establishment of the Kingdom of God, be a “divine means”?”?

We will have to affirm in the first place, putting fear aside, that the passivities of diminution have more potential to being a curse rather than a blessing, that they are more prone to blasphemy than to prayer. He who is scandalised by this only repeats the senseless story of the friends of Job. But, having said this, it must be affirmed too that in these passivities of diminution –that God does not cause nor permit, but which He uses to reach us through them- God emerges for us in the form of a question and an opportunity: like a rudder for deep waters that operates a change of direction, like a pruning agent that directs growth, or like a channelling agent of internal sap. This is how Teilhard de Chardin saw this. The passivities of diminution are inclined to bring to light the worst we have within us which makes us curse, but they are also capable of bringing out what is the best in us. What is the price we have to pay for the latter to happen? One should hand oneself over to the mystery, welcome it, adore it.

To unite oneself to somebody is to run away from oneself, to lose oneself, to hand over to the other all the initiative, keeping pure adoration alone for ourselves. It is emptying oneself out to allow oneself to be filled by the other. It is being in communion with God through diminution until He becomes everything in us. Fr. P. Arrupe expressed this beautifully in his spiritual testament, which he was not able to read personally: “My passion has been to be always at God’s disposal, more so now when all the initiative is now totally His”.

Lived and processed in this way, this type of suffering does not generate cursing but silence and adoration. It takes us down from our horses, which we have mounted so frequently to oppress others. It gives new direction to our self-understanding. It does not allow us to lean our “ego” on our own worth, on our different strengths, or our achievements but only on Him and on His love. Only on Him. It does not allow us to lean our ego on our failures and on our suffering. It puts us in the hands of a mystery, which we have so often experienced as a welcoming mystery.

- To hand oneself over to God and to His Kingdom through action, work, untiring effort, and to offer Him the suffering, which accompanies all this, is not the most difficult part of the picture. What is even less difficult is to hand oneself over to God and to His Kingdom through the passivities of growth which suppose an immense joy. But to hand oneself over to God and to His Kingdom through the passivities of diminution is something of a total miracle. For this reason, those who do so amaze us so much: those old people, for example, who age so peacefully, blessing all around, or those men and women who treated unjustly, humiliated, do not react from the wounds that have been inflicted upon them, but from goodness and forgiveness. That this should happen is something of an authentic miracle.
- The passivities of diminution which make us age, fill us with complexes and wounds, eventually killing us, place us before the sacred limits of our being (A. Tornos). And we are faced with one or the other choice: Either we reject these passivities, in which case we reject the world and God, as they are in themselves, or we elaborate them in a Christian sense, and then we come to an acceptance, eventually adoring, of the world as it is, and God as He is. The failure to elaborate in a religious sense the passivities of diminution can provoke in us dangerous reactions, as these diminutions are capable of preventing us from loving well both life and God.
- To unite oneself to another is to satiate oneself with the other, to emigrate to the other, without ceasing to be oneself. Death is the definitive emigration of oneself to the Other, the total union with Him, without ceasing to be ourselves.
- In a culture like ours, in which a “hyper-investment of energies in the matter of oneself” is produced, we have to pay attention to this third form of suffering, which because of its very personal element, should not make us lose sight of the suffering of others, the suffering of the world. To live this culture well, we have to connect it with the first and second. Because if our own suffering fills the stage, what do we have left to be able to have compassion on the world?

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