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RECONNECTING TO CONTEMPLATION, MISSION AND MARTYRDOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

面对新冠肺炎大流行
重新认识默观、使命和殉道

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The pandemic of COVID-19 has provoked massive economic crises and left many people wondering how they may manage to survive. In the midst of such a situation of profound uncertainty we may recognise a unique opportunity to reconnect to key issues of life and death which all too often risk being dismissed as a pure waste of time by people obsessed with money and power. As we experience a massive collapse of economic growth we need to welcome this moment as a wake-up call for reflection on what really counts in our lives. Present experiences of stress and loneliness, as well as unprecedented outbursts of racist abuse and killings, have exposed a deep permafrost of social malaise, missed legal reforms and a pervasive loss of the spiritual dimension of life, even among believers who stick to a certain creed. The insights of the participants of the Symposium 2019 which marked the 20th anniversary of the Macau Ricci Institute form an excellent road map for a much needed spiritual journey that each one of us may undertake as the coronavirus puts an end to the easy escape of tourist travel. The Zen tradition describes the inner journey as an “ox path” as it does not hide the pains of a dreadful and bumpy road that leads to inner freedom. Coping with the pandemic may open a decisive new opportunity for each of us to wake up to our own unique “ox path” marked out by Contemplation, Mission and Martyrdom.

CONTEMPLATION

Buildings can be perceived as exclusively a matter of stone, steel and glass. However, they may also inspire a “contemplative break” or a “contemplative view” in midst of a stressful life. Chang He links architecture and the “informal space of contemplation.” In traditional Chinese cities, the collective memory is present within spiritual spaces such as ancestral halls and temples. Yet many sacred sites were demolished in the wave of urbanization and replaced by skyscrapers. The expanded city reflects the efficiency of civil engineering and the continuous progress of technology as hallmarks of modernization. However, the urban expansion also suffers from

a loss of the sense of belonging and the loss of a spiritual home in the city, witnessed by the fast disappearance of religious buildings in cities where people live in the shadows of skyscrapers. In his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* on the “Care for Our Common Home” (2015, p. 86), Pope Francis highlights the need to protect those common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes that increase our sense of belonging, of rootedness, of “feeling at home” within a city which brings us together. The need for a spiritual home strongly resonates with a competition I conducted a few years ago with students of architecture from all over China on plans for a cancer hospital in Beijing. Several student groups strongly suggested the inclusion of chapels and sacred rooms in the cancer hospital in order to cater to the spiritual needs of the cancer patients and their relatives and friends.

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This need of a sense of belonging and deep embeddedness in nature is echoed in the Psalms and their way of thanksgiving, as Wojciech Rybka explores the Biblical roots of the term *contemplation*. The coronavirus pandemic certainly offers a welcome chance to rediscover the richness of the Bible as a kind of home coming. In particular the 150 Psalms of the “Old” or “First” Testament offer us a key insight into the different stories of the “Book of Life.” However, Rybka also describes how missionaries in China used the Rosary in the process of spreading

the Christian faith in China. From the point of view of the ordinary Chinese faithful, the outward appearances of praying the Rosary bore similarities to the Buddhist mantric practices they were familiar with, e.g. repetitive recitation of a given Sutra or a sacred text.

Within the horizon of Jesuit spirituality Pablo Juan Wang explores a crucial contemplative element of *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* which inspires the retreatant to answer the call of Jesus depicted as a King who calls each one to join him in his labours with the goal to join Him in His mission of salvation and liberation. As Wang highlights for us, Bishop Oscar Romero who was murdered in March 1980 while he was celebrating Mass and the other martyrs killed in November 1989 in San Salvador echo in a moving way this desire and commitment to become servant leaders through a genuinely contemplative listening to the voice of the people while they fight for justice and peace.

A particularly persuasive missionary method of fostering contemplative Gospel values was the development by the Jesuits in Shanghai of musical and artistic pedagogies. David Urrows is doing research on the letters of the French Jesuit François Ravary who is known for the workshop he established in 1856 at the *Zikawei* 'Jesuit village' outside Shanghai for the construction of bamboo pipe organs. The letter that Urrows translates for us here describes the killing of Father Luigi Massa by Taiping rebels in the context of the mission of the Jesuits in 19th century Shanghai. It suggests that even the most brutal killings can be transformed by the contemplative impact of music and art that makes the victory of the Risen Lord tangible.

Gerhold Becker analyses the role of contemplation in the life witness and theological reasoning of the German Jesuits Alfred Delp and Karl Rahner, both deeply involved in the personal experience of God, cultivated in the spirit of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Imprisoned in Berlin-Tegel prison by the Nazi regime, Alfred Delp on November 17, 1944 experienced most deeply that the world is full of God. Delp and Rahner thus point to the centre of Ignatian spirituality, which lies in the authentic experience of God

that enables the individual to bear and endure the ups and downs of life and give witness to the presence of God. The later writings of Rahner are particularly inspiring, as for example, when he explores the contemplative dimension of daily life such as walking.

MISSION

Facing the atrocity of the murders at the University of Central America in November 1989 Martin Maier asks: Why were the six Jesuits and the two women killed? The shortest answer can be read on the gravestone in the university chapel. Here the most important mission of the Society of Jesus in our present time is described in the words of the landmark Fourth Decree of the 32nd General Congregation which is the highest legislative body of the Jesuits: "What is it to be a Jesuit today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes." This mission which integrates the struggle for faith and justice is always rooted in the profound experience of God, as the martyrs of El Salvador surely testified.

The experience of the encounter with God in midst of a murderous Nazi regime, as Dennis McCann points out, naturally fostered the ecumenical movement. Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer an evangelical pastor and Alfred Delp collaborated with members of the Kreisau circle seeking to construct a constitution for Germany once the Nazis were defeated, based on Christian social principles common to Catholics and Protestants. Mission in this context was defined as Christocentric responsibility as well as a concrete and personal response to God's calling as Vocation which admits of no distinction between religious and secular activities. In accepting his share of the guilt involved in the assassination plot against Adolf Hitler and acting with responsibility in it, Bonhoeffer's only concern was whether his action was truly the obedience that God demanded of him, in his life. Bonhoeffer joyfully surrendered his life, fully convinced that his obedience was true.

Antoine Ren further expands our

awareness of the demands of obedience in the context of facing such dilemmas within religious life. With the help of Karl Rahner he explores the dilemma emerging from commands the subject

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith as in the example, recalled in David Urrows' piece describing how Luigi Massa was killed during the Taiping rebellion in 1860. Similarly, Joseph

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must obey which in the objective order are wrong or even evil. In given circumstances orders have been issued with real culpability on the part of the superior. In cases of this kind it is not easy to say why and in what sense the fulfilment of such an order could be the will of God, though we must trust that somehow it is.

As Alessandro Andreini recalls the Encyclical letter "*Maximum Illud*" (1919) that Pope Benedict XV issued after the catastrophe of the First World War, we can easily recognise the "*mea culpa*," apologizing for the Church's failure to adapt its missionary activities to the needs of local cultures, especially in China and Asia. When Pope Francis highlights the paramount importance of "*Maximum Illud*," he advocates a dialogue of the Church with local cultures especially with their wisdom traditions. The Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, for example, not only provides fresh insights on interreligious dialogue, but also advances toward a new frontier of shared truths that, beyond religious differences, affirm our common commitment to human dignity, peace and mutual respect, reciprocity and care. Clearly, this is another litmus test for measuring whether or not we learn our lessons in crises.

MARTYRDOM

Mission has its prize: martyrdom, no matter if it is paid for by blood or just by simply enduring the dreadful ups and downs of daily life.

Lee explores the exemplary life of "Watchman Nee", *Ni Tuosheng* 倪柝声 (1903–1972), and his eminent role in Chinese Protestant Christianity. When countries in East Asia developed into centralized nation-states, the secular governments often perceived Christianity as subversive and mobilized official resources to marginalize indigenous Christian communities. Watchman Nee, who founded an indigenous Protestant movement in the early 20th-century, was arrested in 1952 and died in a Chinese labour camp in 1972. His witness as a Christian martyr has had considerable influence beyond the boundaries of the communities he founded.

Another event which has had an impact well beyond Latin America happened on the evening of 15 November 1989 when the El Salvadoran army dispatched a special commando group to the José Simeón Cañas Central American University "UCA" run by the Jesuits. The soldiers dragged six Jesuit priests out of their apartment, forced them to lie face down in the grass and shot them at close range. Besides Ignacio Ellacuría, the rector of the university, those murdered were Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno and Joaquín López y López. The cook Elba Ramos and her daughter Celina were also executed because the soldiers had been ordered not to leave any witnesses of the massacre. Along with Bishop Oscar Romero the martyrs of El Salvador are truly servant leaders as their lives taught many people how to listen to the problems and sufferings of the oppressed, how to help them to analyse their social situation and

most importantly how to find concrete solutions in their fight for justice and peace especially in the area of land reform and self-empowerment.

This type of servant leadership embodied in Bishop Oscar Romero and the Jesuit martyrs reflects a profound inner conversion. In the case of Bishop Romero, who was regarded as an overly cautious and conservative priest when he became bishop, his friendship with Father Rutilio Grande who served as a parish priest in the rural parish of Aguilares had a profound impact on him. When the death squads ruthlessly killed Father Grande, Bishop Romero was profoundly shocked. More and more it dawned on Romero that it was precisely the struggle for faith that had become a decisive factor in the process of proclaiming the Gospel, in a context of rampant corruption and abuse of power. Such a renewal of faith inevitably provoked the hatred and violence of the landowners and fraudulent political parties.

Adapting a central objective of Confucian spirituality as interpreted for us by Edmond Eh, we can recognize that Romero was inspired by his friend Father Rutilio Grande to become a 君子 *junzi*, “a morally refined person,” in the fullest sense. Romero came to realize the deeper meaning of social solidarity by discovering the most profound meaning of being human in the midst of the ordinary affairs of daily life. The Confucian *junzi*, like the Jesuit performing the Spiritual Exercises, trusts in human nature, which is an endowment from Heaven, and even to the point of risking his life for his friends.

Along these lines, Martin Maier shows how the profile of the University of Central America, “UCA”, was developed to inspire students and professors to opt for the struggle for faith and justice especially for the urgently needed land reform. The blood of the martyrs of El Salvador of November 1989 refers thus not just to personal sacrifices but also to an institutional culture of Gospel values embodied in the whole curriculum of a Catholic University, challenging students to care for the benefit of the whole society. Recalling their witness, the people will constantly be reminded of the enormous sufferings and problems of the countless left behind. The memory of the Crucified Christ

became a source of strength and courage of faith after the devastating civil war ended. While never giving in to the temptation to use violence, the lives and martyrdoms of Bishop Romero and those who died at UCA became a living witness to the demand that the ministry of the Church must concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools and those who are deprived.

In midst of the present pandemic, the massive demonstrations against racist abuse all over the world, is there any unique opportunity for reconnecting with the core spiritual dimensions of Contemplation, Mission and Martyrdom? As many people and groups just struggle to survive, the need to reshape the profile and aim of Catholic institutions of higher learning for the benefit of the larger society becomes increasingly more urgent.

As Roland Jacques demonstrates by recalling the process by which the martyrs killed by guerrillas in the period between 1954 and 1970 in Laos, in moving toward their beatification in 2016 the Church wanted to go beyond a notion of martyrdom which risked being rejected as one-sidedly Western, by putting the focus firmly on the notion of “ancestors” of the faith as a basis for mutual understanding between believers and non-believers. Therefore, the term “beatification” now was used to elevate the most meritorious members to the rank of ancestors for the community to remember, venerate and imitate. As we learn from Jacques’ account, the Church in the context of interreligious dialogue also wanted to make a point to acknowledge Buddhist teachings on the contemplation of death to overcome the deep-seated Laotian aversion toward those who have died a violent death. By doing so the Church went beyond the previous perception of being an “enemy of the nation” or “enemy of the revolution” which could have resulted in renewed persecution.

The nuanced exploration of the intrinsic link between Contemplation, Mission and Martyrdom inspires therefore not only the courage to trust as a major act of faith but indicates also how the proclamation of faith is intrinsically linked with the struggle for Justice

and with the outreach to other local wisdom traditions. Contemplation inspires the process of faith genuinely taking root in local structures and never giving up while seeking reconciliation and peace.



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