

Roman Catholics Confront the Shoah, Part III



White Crucifixion-Chagall

Theological Reflections

There is still a question in all of this for me: the question of how one can continue to bear such a catastrophe in mind, a catastrophe which again and again is in danger of eluding our sense of history. To preserve the remembrance of Auschwitz, of the Shoah, so that it never happens among us again, we need to support our consciousness with something I call anamnestic culture. 1

These words by the Roman Catholic theologian J.B. Metz raise the critical concern for not forgetting the Holocaust or *Shoah*. He calls us to *remember* in the Christian way of bringing forward a past event as though it were happening now into the present and also bringing the future promise of the fullness of the Kingdom into the present to make every effort to work for the prevention of a Holocaust ever happening again. But why not forget it? Wouldn't it be easier for all people to just bury such negative memories of the horrid past? Wouldn't we be better off, happier and more content if we just erased this memory from our history? Absolutely not! There are several good reasons that such a memory should not be forgotten. The philosopher George Santayana reminds us that *those without a knowledge of the past are doomed to repeat it*.

Before this horrible genocide, which the leaders of nations and Jewish communities found hard to believe at the very moment when it was being mercilessly put into effect, no one can remain indifferent, least of all the Church, by reason of her very close bonds of spiritual kinship with the Jewish people and her remembrance of the injustices of the past. The Church's relationship to the Jewish people is unlike the one she shares with other religions. However, it is not only a question of recalling the past. The common future of Jews and Christians demands that we remember, for there is no future without memory.

We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Vatican 1998

There are other reasons why the Shoah must not be forgotten. We must remember the victims and try to understand the perpetrators. We remember the victims as the crucified people; the innocents that raise the disturbing question concerning the bankruptcy of any ideology or worldview without God. The victims always bring Christians back to the crucified Jesus. In him is the critique of any system or person that utilizes terror and murder to advance in power, wealth and status. We are reminded of this by the martyred pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled, in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. Christians are called to compassion and action.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

This *remembering* or anamnesis, is one that builds *bridges of empathy* to the experience of the victims.² Such *bridges* connect us to them in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ. They create bridges that allow us to hear the cries of the victims with the lessons learned so that in the future such suffering can be prevented and struggled against in the power of the crucified and risen Christ.



This *remembering* also raises the question of God. That is, how can there be a God, a good God, in the light of such unfathomable suffering? And if there is a God, what kind of God is God? Such questions arise not only for the Jewish people but also for Christians and all people concerned with the human situation in the world. J.B. Metz put it this way:

*Auschwitz concerns us all. Indeed, what makes Auschwitz unfathomable is not only the executioners and their assistants, not only the apotheosis of evil revealed in these, and not only the silence of God. Unfathomable, and sometimes even more disturbing, is the silence of people: the silence of all those who looked on or looked away and thereby handed over this people in its peril of death to an unutterable loneliness.*³

The need to remember, that is, to have an *anamnetic* culture is grounded in the effort to promote genuine dialogue, reconciliation and justice between Jews and Christians. For this dialogue to go forward it will be essential for Christians to listen to the stories of the victims before proffering answers to the Shoah. In other words we can only come into real dialogue when the victims begin to speak and Christians listen.

To be 'anti-anti' runs the risk of finishing up in denunciations of little effect. More is needed. It is not enough to be against someone who is against; rather one must be for

*someone and this in a consistent way. It is necessary therefore to be for the Jewish people, for their culture, for their values, for their human and spiritual riches, their history, for their extraordinary religious witness. It is necessary to be for those values that enrich all humanity.*⁴



Elie Weisel

Such a dialogue will confront a number of challenges. Christians will be challenged to recognize the messianic role of Judaism in bearing witness to the God of Israel while not downplaying Christian faith and truth. Christian triumphalism will have no place in this dialogue. Only a Christianity that identifies with the crucified Jesus, and hence all the crucified of the world, will be able to truly listen to the crucified people of Auschwitz. In his book, *The Crucified God*, Jurgen Moltmann quotes Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel offers a cry for us to listen from his book, *Night*.

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows..."⁴

The dialogue between Christians and Jews will require the Christian rejection of any form of triumphalism. The challenge of such an approach to dialogue is to not lose the essence of one's own faith while empathetically engaging with another faith. Furthermore, Christian theology may not avoid the catastrophe of Auschwitz, or its like, if it is to be real Christian theology. To avoid that such terrors happened in human history is no less than to deny the crucified Christ and to exchange the Crucified for a disincarnated mythical Christ without the cross, a Christ of the *victors* of history.

This dialogical approach is not to be confined to theological experts. It will have to take shape on the grassroots level in the forms of homilies, church communities, families, religious education, and schools. In a world still beset by a plethora of evils like racism, war, poverty and violence only a comprehensive approach addressing all levels of society will prove effective for helping to reconcile Christian and Jews. In this way the memory of Auschwitz will serve as a critical reminder of our need for conversion, and serve as a rallying point against all forms of tyranny-- in the power of the Spirit of crucified and risen Christ.

The questions about the existence of God and what kind of God we worship, for Christians, direct us to the crucified Jesus. In Christ God is the suffering God with humanity. God is the God of Good Friday. But God is also the God of Easter which makes possible reconciliation, joy and peace despite evil. It is the God, who in raising Jesus from the dead reveals the unending and transforming light that casts its glow over the many battlefields and graveyards of history. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit of God that this dialogue will prove fruitful and ultimately successful. So what do we do?

Footnotes

- 1 Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church*, (New York, Crossroad, 1981), p. 15
- 2 Monica Hellwig, *Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, (New York, Paulist Press, 1976).
3. Metz, *op.cit.*, pp.17-18
- 4 Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski, OSM eds., *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2001), pp.17-18
- 5 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1974), p. 273-274.