

October 31, 2023

Taking Up One's Cross

Greetings and bonjour from our Haitian headway. I've already made friends with a turtle after he extracted a promise from me that I had no interest in turtle soup.



I relish this time to simply rest and read one of three books I brought to Haiti by my new favorite author, a Czech priest and best-selling author, Tomáš Halík. I have five of his thought-provoking books, and a sixth is on the way. Yesterday, my focus was on his 2012 book, *Night of the Confessor: Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty*. We all know we are living in uncertain times...in dark times made even darker by the war of horrific violence between Hamas and Israel, as well as on the on-going war between Ukraine and Russia. I have been living in the unrelenting, barbaric violence of Haiti for the last two years. As I was flying to the Haitian war zone, a female police officer was killed in Pétionville by the gangs.



Another thoughtless, pointless loss of a young Haitian life.

People around the world are fearful; optimism is in short supply. Halík addresses this shortage in the book *I am ready*. I am taking the liberty of typing a lengthy quote from early in the book and sharing it with my *Journal* readers.

At a time when evil is becoming globalized in a striking fashion—its most blatant manifestation being international terrorism, although natural disasters also constitute one aspect of it—and our human intellect is incapable of sufficiently grasping these phenomena, let alone averting them, there seems like little chance of resurrecting the optimism of the modern era. Our epoch is definitely a *post-optimistic* one.

Optimism, as I understand it, is the conviction that “everything is OK,” and a naïve tendency to trust that *something* will ensure that things will get better and better—that if, at this moment, we don’t happen to be living in “the best of all worlds,” we shall some achieve that *optimum*. That redemptive “something” that optimism relies on can be scientific and technological progress, the power of the human intellect, revolution, social engineering, various schemes dreamt up by “engineers of human souls,” or pedagogical and social experiments in social reform—this is the secular version of optimism. But there also exists a religious version of optimism, which consists of reliance on a consecrated stage director who extricates us from our problems like a “*deus ex machina*,” because, after all, we have religious tools (all we need is to “believe with all our strength” and hold “prayer crusades”) whereby we can induce Him to satisfy our requests infallibly.

I reject both secular and “pious” optimism alike, on account of both their naivete and their superficiality, and because of their unavowed striving to make the future (and possibly God) fit into our limited vision visions, plans, and perceptions about what is good and right. Whereas Christian hope is openness and a readiness to search for meaning in what is to come, I sense at the back of this caricature a cockeyed assumption that we always know in advance, after all, what is best for us.

Much has already been written about the naivete of secular optimism (an Enlightenment faith in “progress” as the panacea) and its failure. However, I would like to stand against “religious optimism”—*facile belief*, making use of people’s anxiety and suggestibility for a manipulatory ‘bargain with God,’ and providing simplistic ‘pious’ answers to complex questions.

It is my deeply held belief that we must not conceal our crises. We must not evade or elude them. And we must let them scare us. Only when we have passed through them can we be ‘remolded’ into a state of greater maturity and wisdom. I would like, in this book, to show that the crisis of the world around us, and also the “crisis of religion” (whether that is taken to mean the decline in the influence and the stability of traditional religious institutions, the dwindling persuasiveness of existing systems of religious interpretations of the world and faith, or personal crises in “spiritual life”) are enormous windows of opportunity opened to us by God. These are challenges for us “to put out into the deep.”

Just a little more...here comes the main point.

I regard the awakening of just such an attitude to life—not avoiding crises but *taking up one's cross*—to be one of Christianity's most valuable contributions. Christianity is not primarily "system of dogmatic texts," but instead a *method*, a way, a route. [Footnote: Let us not forget that in the mother tongue of the Gospels *mehodos* means "a way."] Following the way of the one who did not evade the darkness of Gethsemane, Good Friday, or the 'descent into hell' of Holy Saturday.

Every Christian has heard plenty of reflections and sermon on the theme of the Easter events, but has Easter really become the key to understanding our life and the present situation of the Church? For many of us "the cross" tends to evoke purely personal problems, such as illness and old age. I fear that the notion that *a great deal within ourselves, within the Church, within our faith, and within our certainties has to "die off," to be crucified, in order to make room for the Resurrected one* is quite alien to many of us Christians.

When we confess the Easter faith, at whose center is the paradox of victory through an absurd defeat, why are we so afraid of our own defeats, including the demonstrable weakness of Christianity in the world today? Isn't God speaking to us through these realities, similar to the way He spoke through the events we commemorate when we read the story of Easter?

Yes, the form of religion that we are accustomed to is truly "dying off." The history of religion and the history of Christianity consist of periods of crises and period of renewal; the only religion that is truly dead is the one that does not undergo change, the one that has dropped out of the rhythm of life.

In this post-Christian era, Fr. Tomáš Halík is a prophetic voice of hope. His is a fascinating, challenging, and encouraging vision. He is unafraid to confront hypocrisy in high places and fearless in identifying the self-inflicted wounds of society.

In closing, I want to mention that Officer Richard and Bernard the driver will pick me up this afternoon and take me to Santa Chiara, where I will spend a few hours with Gabens and the kids before they return me to my secret hideaway with Steph. Our time alone has been good for us which makes it good for Santa Chiara.

Also, two million people from four nations are still waiting for a response to their parole visa application...580,000 are from Haiti. Last Friday, there were more than twenty chartered flights to Nicaragua from Port-au-Prince transporting Haitians who can't wait any longer for a response to their parole visa application because of the fear of violence. From Nicaragua they will work their way to the Mexican-US border in hopes of crossing into America by any means possible. The situation in Haiti is so dire people will do anything to get out of the hell of Haiti. Their chances are far from optimistic. If Steph does not hear anything by the end of the year, we will take some form of a drastic action (not including Nicaragua) to get Dr. Stéphanie someplace safe outside of Haiti.