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Tomáš Halík: A Voice of Faith in a World in Pain

A Response

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1.

Although some hardheaded atheist may think otherwise, theologians can be highly intelligent, especially when they try to prove the atheists wrong showing that that it is much more reasonable to belief in God than it is not to believe in God. But there are, I suppose, not that many people that read theology for its cutting edge logic. And although I do not doubt for a moment that Tomáš Halík is highly intelligent and has read widely, I do not think that many people read him to be informed on the latest fashion in philosophy, or cultural or religious studies. I know I do not. To be frank, I read Tomáš Halík to be consoled: consoled that there are other theologians like me.

O yes, I know that we learn the most from people different from us, having a different perspective on life and the traditions of faith, as Tomáš Halík told us in his lecture. I have said it many times myself and I meant it, I still mean it. But it can also make one feel rather lonely. With whom do I share my world, who will explain the world in terms that I spontaneously recognize as enlightening? One could call it a sort of theological counseling by being reassured that what you think is not just weird or idiosyncratic. For this reassurance I turn to Tomáš Halík. When I read him, I feel myself being understood, the world imagined in ways that I spontaneously recognize as familiar, the Catholic traditions presented in a way that is very close to how I would want to represent it and to how I think it should be represented to make sense.

2.

This also implies that I am both comforted and surprised by the success of Halík books, especially in the Netherlands. It comforts and encourages me, because it shows that the theology we try to present has a much wider readership than is often supposed to be the case.

If a young theologian would go to a publisher, or to the office of her university that organizes lectures for the general public, and she would say that she will tell her readers or her listeners about the importance of suffering and pain, and how the Christian tradition is not solving this problem but in a way keeps the wound open and makes the pain even more deeply felt, I do not know whether she would be granted the space needed. And if she would be given the opportunity to tell that her next step is, and she would say that she will speak about the mystery of Good Friday and Easter, of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as revealing the ultimate structure of all creation and the core of our personal lives, it is not very likely that she will be told: go ahead. We in the Netherlands, even in the offices of theological faculties and publishers seem to have decided that secularized people need optimism, and that the hard core theological themes of the Christian tradition are no longer of interest. Fast food instead of slow food.

But here is Tomáš Halík, speaking and writing freely about touching wounds, make contact not just with our own pain but with the pain of the world, about the kingdom of the impossible residing in our wounds and pain, about the continuous resurrection of the divine and of Good Friday and Easter as the key to unlock the meaning of existence. And his books are a success: amazing.

3.

So I stand before you being grateful and hopeful. Grateful to Tomáš Halík that he shows us that hope is not optimism, that pain is not a problem to be solved and suffering not something to get rid of as fast as possible. Not because suffering is good in itself, or something people falling

victim to it apparently deserve, but because their lives are of value, even if their lives are lives of suffering more than lives in which goals are achieved, or targets are reached. Blessed are you poor, Jesus says, for yours *is* the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, that weep now, that are hated and excluded now. Because in these wounds, which really are wounds, resides the kingdom of God and Christ present in the process of resurrecting. So you shall be satisfied, laugh, and be rewarded in heaven.

Grateful also to Tomáš Halík's Dutch publisher, who took the risk of translating him, first cautiously *Patience with God*, then *The Night of the Confessor*, both concentrating on the unavoidability of uncertainty in faith, and last year his most theological book, and his best book at the same time, in my opinion, focused on dealing with suffering: *Touch the wounds*, in Dutch *Raak de wonden aan*.

4.

To be sure, this is not an innocent topic.

In the summit that took place two weeks ago in Rome on 'The Protection of Minors in the Church', in the first statement after the introduction by Pope Francis, the statement by Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Archbishop of Manila in the Philippines, Tomáš Halík's *Touch the Wounds* was quoted extensively:¹

I cannot believe until I touch the wounds, the suffering of the world'. Halík writes, 'for all the painful wounds, all the misery of the world and of humankind are Christ's wounds! I do not have the right to confess God unless I take seriously my neighbor's pain. Faith that would like to close its eyes to people's suffering is just an illusion.

The message at the meeting in Rome was to make clear that knowing the pain and healing the wounds of sexual abuse is at the core of the tasks of pastors in the Church. That there is also a rather uncomfortable aspect to this message, however, is easily overheard. It suggests that of course we must do all we can to stop the weak and the vulnerable from being abused and wounded, because to take suffering seriously means to try to end it. But it also suggests that how hard we try, we will ultimately not be successful. There will be new abuses, new sufferings, new wounds: no matter how safe we try to make our world, we will always need new field hospitals for new casualties, casualties probably partially from our well-intended attempts to make our world a safer place. I think we should be grateful to Tomáš Halík for making this clear to us, but I am not always convinced that his aspect of his message is clearly heard.

For Tomáš Halík this anti-utopianism seems at least partially a lesson from living under communism, that has shown that the attempt to bring heaven to earth usually results in making life on earth hell, but there are signs that Western societies are much less clear on this. We seem in the process of attempting to ban all evil and risk from our lives. Which I consider highly problematic and dangerous.

5.

But as I said, I am hopeful thanks to the success of Tomáš Halík's books, his presence here among us, and your presence to hear him speak. I am hopeful that the anti-utopian message of the Christian tradition, the realism that knows that there is always pain and there are always

¹ See L.A.G. Tagle, 'The Smell of the Sheep: Knowing their pain and healing their wounds is at the core of the shepherd's task' (21 Feb. 2019), 2.

<https://www.pbc2019.org/fileadmin/user_upload/presentations/21feb/21_Feb_1_Cardinal_Tagle_PBC_ING_.pdf>

wounds and that the only way of dealing with that is not turning away, but is solidarity and accompaniment. The success of Tomáš Halík's books make me hopeful that there will be a new space for presenting this message, and a new opening for receiving this message. Cardinal Tagle said, on the 21st of February in Rome: 'My dear brothers and sisters, we need to put aside any hesitation to draw close to the wounds of our people out of fear of being wounded ourselves.' I think he is absolutely right, and not only in relation to victims of sexual abuse by the Church. He is right in relation to all victims of all kinds of violence or misfortune. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers even if they tell us that they are perfectly all right and that they don't need anything. Because that is what our societies teach us: not to need anything, not to admit that we do need anything.

Maybe this could be a task for the Church in our secularized societies: living out a maximalist interpretation of the so-called Golden Rule, usually presented as: Do not do unto others what you don't want others do unto you. According to the Gospels Jesus presents it as: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Mt. 7:12; cf. Lk. 6:31). Speaking in 2015 in the United States Congress, Pope Francis explains it as:

Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow as we would like to be helped ourselves.²

As we read in the liturgy yesterday and the week before from the Gospel of Luke: 'Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap' (Luke 6:37-38). In a word: 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36).

6.

No, this is not an impossible assignment, it is ultimately a gift. As it was for Thomas a gift to be able to touch the wounds of his master which led to the discovery that he was not alone in his own wounds and pains. If we leave one another with our own pain, the pain will be unbearable: we should know by now. If we share one another's pain we will discover how our pain is shared, and thus that we can bear it.

We can touch one another's wounds, because our wounds are touched. As the *Credo* says: *crucifixus etiam pro nobis*. The Son of God has become flesh in Jesus Christ and is crucified for us: it is hardcore theology and it is immediately relevant for our lives. Thank you, Tomáš Halík, for making clear to us again that this can be the case.

² Pope Francis, address to the joint session of the United States Congress (24 Sept. 2015). <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html>.