

PEOPLE FOR ALL SEASONS

A. Paul Dominic

When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: 'It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him.' (2 Maccabees 6:30)

PUBLIC MEMORY IS PROVERBIALY SHORT; personal memory may be longer and may prove to be redemptive. Among all the terrible events that have happened around the world since, the attacks on Christians in Orissa, India in 2008 continue to affect me profoundly. Following the murder of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, Hindu extremists blamed local Christians and responded with a campaign of violence. The first reports of the cruelty to which these Christians were subjected did not shake me much, as they were sadly familiar. But as they continued to pour in, telling of an unabated danger that the Christians could not escape even by fleeing, their effect passed beyond telling or imagining. They left me with an overwhelming sadness. Even as I wonder what others *did or did not do*, I ask myself, what did I do? And what would I have done had I been there?

First of all I prayed, in the low, tin-roofed, brick-walled church of St Ignatius Mission, near Lethem, far away in Guyana. But I did not stay for long, any more than the apostles did watching Jesus in his unfamiliar suffering at Gethsemane. Perhaps I did even worse, dulled by pain: I sought my bed, whereas they just fell asleep wherever they were in the garden. I hope that as I slept I also prayed, like David lying on the ground beseeching for his dying child (2 Samuel 12:16). Knowing I had failed to pray as I ought, in wakeful earnestness—finding how difficult it can be to exercise true sympathy—I tried the second best: thinking about those for whom I ought to pray. All

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through the day—it was the day I received news from India that the ‘troubles’ had not come to an end even after about a month of violence—I kept the harrowing experience of hundreds of poor, frightened souls in my thoughts before the Lord.

I felt an acute need for like-minded people with whom to pray. Even Moses had this experience. When his people were attacked by Amalek he prayed, lifting up his hands; but there came a moment when he could no longer carry on by himself because his hands were weary, and so Aaron and Hur held them up, one on each side (Exodus 17:8–12). There was no lack of such united prayer, however, once the tragic story of the sustained and frenzied attacks on Christians became daily news. The general secretary of the Catholic Secular Forum in India, Joseph Dias, rightly urged Christians: ‘Keep the prayers going. It is the only thing that has helped Karnataka from going the Orissa way.’¹

In my own praying I tried everything in my repertoire of faith. ‘Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours’ (Mark 11:24); God ‘... is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine’ (Ephesians 3:20); ‘it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:13). Or simply, following the Master, I kept repeating now and then the hallowed words of the Our Father, or the psalmists’ frank lamentation. The thought that in our very helplessness the Spirit prays in us ‘with sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8:26–27) kept me engaged, quietly breathing in and out and attuning myself to whatever the Spirit was doing in me, hoping that the same Spirit was comforting my fellow believers suffering for their faith. At the end of the day I noticed a profound change of mood: a surprising peace. My pain had ebbed and I had an unusual sense that, as Julian of Norwich said, ‘all shall be well’. For the first time I understood what happens in many of the Psalms, that lament and praise are linked together.

I found myself asking questions about the suffering that had engulfed the people of Kandhamal in Orissa. Thomas Chellen, a priest and director of the Pastoral Centre, spoke to the Catholic News Service from his hospital bed on 28 August 2008: ‘They had

¹ See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MangaloreanCatholics/message/7662>.



poured kerosene on my head, and one held a matchbox in his hands to light the fire. But thanks to divine providence, in the end, they did not do that.² When an enraged mob made for the Pastoral Centre around noon on 24 August, Chellen and Sister Meena, a local nun who worked at the centre, fled and took shelter with a Hindu friend. The following morning their friends moved them to a vacant house and locked it to give the impression there was no one inside. However, some in the vengeful crowd overheard the priest speaking on his cell phone, broke into the house and dragged the occupants out. 'They began our crucifixion parade', said Chellen. A gang of about fifty armed Hindus beat them up and paraded them along the road as worse than criminals. They even started pulling off Sr Meena's clothes and raping her. The priest protested, only to be hit with iron rods. The police simply watched. Their four-hour ordeal, which ended in the evening, was like being tortured for Christ, Chellen said.

Chellen's experience was far from unique; two other priests, Edward Sequeira SVD, originally from Mangalore, and Bernard Digal from Kandhamal itself, met with the same kind of violence (the latter succumbed to his injuries and died about two months later on 28

² See <http://www.vaticans.org/index.php?/archives/1240-A-Hindu-mob-began-our-crucifixion-parade-Fr.-Thomas-Chellen.html>.

October 2008).³ Hundreds who tried to escape torture and death by running into the forests were not spared. The statistics are shocking: in Orissa alone 14 districts and 300 villages were affected; 4,300 homes were burnt; 50,000 people were made homeless; 57 were killed; 18,000 were injured; and 149 churches and 13 educational centres were destroyed. A Hindu member of an NGO in Orissa said: 'For those poor Christians it is like being in a well and being attacked by crocodiles while many are watching from above, some enjoying the show and others shaking their head in helplessness'.⁴

In my own helplessness I wondered how the Christians of Orissa coped through the resources of faith in their fear and in their flight. I could not help questioning the value of the faith that was endangering the lives of simple people, especially women and children. Would it not have been better if they had kept their original beliefs, especially as 'those whose predecessors baptized them and who are responsible for their spiritual and physical well-being left them to their fate'?⁵

Where is the victory of Christ, who conquered all sin, evil, pain, cruelty and death, in the lives of these people? From a priest in the north-east of India I had heard the story of a Christian woman who was victorious through suffering, as a result of her new belief in Christ. Her uncle beat her in order to make her renounce Christianity, but then he suddenly fell down, stammering, 'No more will I be against you; you can be a Christian as you want!' No such intervention—miraculous or other—occurred in the case of Orissa attacks. Wanton violence, often with the connivance of those in authority, continued for many weeks while God's succour was not visibly forthcoming.

Job's experience is paradigmatic here. It tells—without explaining—how a person who is suffering acutely passes from sorrow to joy, from pain to comfort, from defeat to victory, from death to life, from hell to heaven. If no succour comes immediately from a God who remains silent, it may come nevertheless, in a surprising way, to the sufferer who keeps on crying out to God. It is no small thing that Job stayed

³ See www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=13606.

⁴ Joseph Keve, 'Orissa Updates'.

⁵ Joseph Keve, 'Orissa Updates'.

grappling with his suffering and sought out God, even when he dared and questioned God. But the far greater thing is that God surprised him and reduced *him* to silence—the silence of peace, wondering at God’s stunning way of saving the sufferer.

I thought of the faith of Daniel and his friends, who would not apostatize even if their God chose not to save them from death. Were these simple tribal Christians so full of courageous faith and invincible hope? Had I been among them what would I have done? I remember an Indian sister sharing with me years ago her fear that she might not stand the test of persecution. I comforted her by saying that if God was to test us God would also provide the necessary fortitude.

There were some who came to Orissa from safe places, far away, and who, knowing the danger involved, nevertheless sought out the victims of hatred to bring comfort. They had courage, to be sure, but the next day their bodies were floating in the river.⁶ They had been killed by fanatics, but was their faith in a saving God defeated? Well, yes, in a sense it was, for some or many of us. But they themselves seemed to have thought otherwise. Were they stronger than the rest of us? Does that mean anything to me, and to others like me, scared out of our wits at the idea of what they did? Can I believe Jesus, who said ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul’ (Matthew 10:28)? Or others, such as Chiara Lubich, the founder of Focolare, who followed him: ‘Don’t fear for your life. It is better to lose it for God than to lose it forever. Eternal life is a reality.’⁷

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How can we take this in? Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence* focuses on those who fail as they face God’s silence during persecution, and deals with the agony of those who end up apparently denying their faith. Such issues are more relevant than ever today, and *Silence* has a resonance for many, including me, in my own fearful and questioning response to the torments unleashed on unsuspecting Indian tribal Christians, who have shown such faith and courage in their suffering.

All this may well occasion a crisis for comfortable, respectable Christians. Would they or could they share the courage of Christian

⁶ Nirmala Carvalho, ‘More Christian Homes Set on Fire, Three Bodies Fished out of River’ at <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=13342>.

⁷ Chiara Lubich, *Words to Live By* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1980).



St Kim Andrew

martyrs (young and old, men and women) down the centuries? We do not value the memory of these martyrs enough. Some people seem to think that the age of martyrdom was over with the Roman empire, and do not consider the fact that there have been many Christian martyrs since, most recently in countries ruled formerly by communism, or currently by Islamic extremism. For all its public opposition to terrorism, Pakistan has anti-Christian laws, such as the so-called anti-blasphemy law; and the situation of Iraqi Christians has worsened in the last couple of years. Even in supposedly Christian countries Christians have even been persecuted and made martyrs by others who are professedly, sometimes fanatically, Christian themselves.

How many Roman Catholics even know about the martyrs newly added to the liturgical calendar? Hundreds of Korean Christians faced waves of persecution for nearly a century, almost from Christianity's very arrival in Korea in 1784, and 103 of them were canonised in 1984. Their spirit can be seen in letters like this (written by St Kim Andrew, the first Korean priest):

Although the fact that we are Christians is important, if there is no internal sincerity, of what use would that be? ... it would be better

for us not to born than to be unfaithful to Our Lord Keep in mind that Our Lord Jesus has come to this world, suffered a great deal of pain, and founded and fostered His Church by pain and suffering Since the Catholic Church was introduced into Korea 50 or 60 years ago, our people have suffered many severe persecutions and many Catholics, including myself, have been put in prison. How agonizing it is for us to suffer as one body and how humanly sad it is for us to part!

But the punchline is this: 'As the Holy Bible says that Our Lord takes care of even our tiniest hair, *aren't these persecutions according to His providence?* We must follow Our Lord's providence'⁸

The spontaneous faith of this martyr shocked me no less—indeed more—than the cruelty of the persecutors themselves. Thinking of Christians hounded out of their homes and pursued by blood-thirsty bigots one may play Job, asking God to break the majestic silence and answer divinely why they have to suffer for their very commitment to God. But this unexpected, unperturbed faith-response shocked me out of my own terror and transported me into a life of freedom from fear and of victory that mocks at cruelty. It was a resurrection of joy through the death of loss and sadness as well as of life itself.

For myself I may wish to escape the challenge of martyrdom geographically, psychologically and theologically. The safest and sincerest way not to deny my faith is to be out of the way. At the scene of martyrdom I might rationalise or theologize my reluctance out of fear. But who am I to underrate the contemporary martyrs who follow the same path as so many forebears, ancient and recent, in little-known areas of Asia or Africa, or in much-known Europe? If their faith can find sense in Christ's bidding them not to fear the killers of the body but to rejoice in the Providence at work in persecutions I can only bend my head in shame for my poor, pusillanimous faith! And possibly, and hopefully, if strangely, I may grow in my faith. This did seem to happen to me when I stumbled upon a quotation from St John Cassian: 'The disturbance caused by

⁸ Quoted in Kim Chong-seok Thaddeus, *Lives of 103 Martyr Saints of Korea* (Seoul: Catholic Publishing House, 1984), 24–25 (emphasis added).

anger or sadness is, above all things, to be eliminated at its sources'.⁹ The quotation itself seemed less illuminating than the explanation offered by the Cistercian Michael Casey:

Both anger and sadness represent a refusal on our part to accept a situation that God's providence has allowed to develop. Whether our reaction is manic or depressive, we are expressing a lack of faith that in some way the present crisis is a gift from God, designed for our ultimate good. Taken far enough, even the most 'innocent' annoyance becomes a doubt about God's love for us.¹⁰

I thanked God for these lines, which brought me new understanding.

The great Korean novelist Yi Kwang-su, who is not a Catholic, has said, 'it was a great honor and pride for the Korean people to have so many Korean martyrs, who had shed their blood and given their lives for what they believed'.¹¹ The time is not far off, in my view, when a growing number of Indians will reverence the Indian martyrs of today in the same way. Much has been done by Indian Christians in response to the most recent persecutions: public protests, candle-lit vigils, appeals to the government, provision of material and legal aid to victims, and offers of forgiveness and reconciliation to the perpetrators. But all of this will be more significant if we add one last thing: to probe our faith and find whether it is worth the salt. The other efforts may not be for all, but this last thing is essential for everyone.

For there is never a real end to the age of martyrs. Many, including myself, would not hesitate to say with Erasmus, 'Not all have the strength for martyrdom. I am afraid if conflict should come I would imitate Peter.'¹² This need be no betrayal in advance, but it could build up a certain humble readiness for, as Bainton assures us, 'he who mistrusts himself may be more courageous under test than one who like Peter boasts in advance'.¹³ I admire the few who are fervidly eager

⁹ Quoted in Michael Casey, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* (Liguori, Mi: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 108.

¹⁰ Casey, *Toward God*, 108.

¹¹ See Thaddeus, *Lives of 103 Martyr Saints of Korea*, v.

¹² Desideratus Erasmus, letter to Richard Pace, 5 July 1521, quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (London: Collins, 1970), 206.

¹³ Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 206.

for martyrdom; I understand the many who are fearful; the majority of us I hope will be content to trust, like Jesus at Gethsemane, that Abba God will dispose of our fear when the need arises.

Remember ... those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. (Hebrews 13:3)

A. Paul Dominic SJ was born in 1941 at Karikaranpudur, Tamil Nadu, India, and ordained in 1972. He has been a Jesuit for a little over fifty years. After a stint of lecturing in Maths, from 1980 he worked at Satyodayam, the retreat house in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, giving the Spiritual Exercises and writing. He has published many books and articles in India, the Philippines, Europe and the USA. Since 2008 he has been based in the Jesuit Region of Guyana (part of the British Province).