

Human Suffering and Human Dignity

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The immediate trigger for these reflections has been the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020. This Private Members' Bill intends to give patients with a progressive and incurable terminal illness a choice to avail of 'assisted dying'. Its chief sponsor, Mr Gino Kenny T.D., has acknowledged that this is 'a profoundly difficult subject, no matter what side you're on' and has called for 'a respectful, rational and meaningful debate' (I. Times, Wed Oct 14, 2020). The Bill is due to be scrutinised by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality over the next few months.

I think most of us will empathise with the concerns underlying the Bill. Pain, suffering and dying/death are universals which affect us all deeply. We are threading on sensitive and sacred ground here, not least as we draw on our own experiences and those of our loved ones.

As human beings we commonly resent dependence on others – being a 'burden', as we often express it. This is so particularly as we get older and, as our powers begin to fail, irritability and grumpiness easily morph into mild and even sometimes severe depression. When this pattern of human decline, irrespective of age, reaches for some the more critical points of loss of control over bodily functions, incipient and progressive organ failure, acute pain and mental deterioration we find it hard to understand how such conditions are compatible with human dignity. It can seem compelling in these circumstances that the most compassionate, loving response is some sort of legally acceptable assisted dying, as indeed has been introduced in many other countries already.

When one digs a bit deeper, however, it strikes me that a major premise of this response is the assumption that there comes a point where pain and suffering, especially when involuntary, are incompatible with human dignity. It can be spontaneously assumed that the indispensable essence of human dignity is autonomy. This was well summed up by a doctor (Constance der Vries) from the Netherlands, quoted in a piece in the Sunday Times magazine October 25 2020, commenting on the legal practice of assisted dying in that country: 'I think it fits with the modern time: people who are autonomous and decide things for themselves also want to decide about their death'.

But what if pain and suffering, even involuntary, have meaning and value and can be considered compatible with human dignity? So, without commenting directly on the Dying with Dignity Bill as such, I want to offer some reflections on how Christians might deepen their own understanding of the relationship between involuntary suffering and human dignity, given the undoubted influence on us all of the prevailing culture of autonomy as central to dignity.

Anthropology/culture: autonomy in a broader context

Some of you may recall the Bob Dylan classic song from the 1970s called 'Forever Young'. The lyrics are in prayer form, and early on he sings:

May God bless you always

May your wishes all come true

May you always do for others

And let others do for you' (my emphasis).

'Let others do for you' – this strikes a counter-cultural note, opening up space for a less exclusively autonomy-centred anthropology. Letter-writer Padraig McCarthy commented recently (I. Times, Oct 12, 2020) on the Dying with Dignity Bill that 'I depend on others in almost every aspect of my life' even when my autonomy is at a "normal" level – we are, after all, inherently relational beings and our autonomy functions best in the context of a mutual giving and receiving that takes on different forms as we progress through infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. We have learned this again in this time of Covid – even the most fiercely independent have been freshly alerted our reliance on hospital doctors and nurses, porters, cleaning and catering staff; on check-out and other staff in food stores; on operators of public transport; on collectors of refuse and so on.

Similarly, McCarthy argues, pain is an integral part of human life – 'the human body is closely integrated with the world around us, and is affected by wind and rain and viruses'. All of us experience this from time to time, and we trust that our diminished autonomy on such occasions does not rob us of our human dignity. This pain can be very distressing and, particularly in end-of-life situations, hospice care is a blessing and central to how others show respect for the dignity of the person who suffers. Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 'turning the country upside down in ways we would never have thought possible' bears testimony, McCarthy argues, to our desire 'to ensure every human being, at every stage of life, knows the support due to our inherent and inalienable dignity'.

Geriatrician Desmond O'Neill (I. Times, Sept 28 2020) argues similarly that those suffering from different forms of dementia, no matter how acute, have a claim on a dignity which can only be understood within a vision of autonomy which factors in our relational nature and 'the impact of any individual's actions on those around them'. O'Neill is particularly concerned that the proposed Dying with Dignity Bill 'shows a lack of awareness of these dangers in subverting the care impulse into one which cuts life and possibilities short'. What O'Neill speaks about can be extended to those who suffer from depression, no matter how acute and long lasting: they do not lose their dignity.

McCarthy and O'Neill are illustrating in particular ways the deficiencies of what cultural anthropologists like Charles Taylor and others have noted as the 'purely immanent frame of reference' in which many of us moderns live, with an excessive focus on the autonomy of the individual. Within this frame human dignity is understood without sufficient opening of the 'buffered' or 'enclosed' self to the

common good or indeed to the natural world, much less to the world of transcendence. How can we begin to retrieve a more relational view of autonomy, and, even more challenging, one which integrates realities like involuntary pain and suffering?

Martin Luther King – ‘Unearned suffering is redemptive’

Civil rights activist Martin Luther King wrote a journal piece in 1960 about his method of nonviolence to which, at the editor’s invitation, was appended a reflection on ‘suffering and faith’. In this reflection he made it clear that his political approach, his ‘Pilgrimage to Nonviolence’, was deeply imbued with his religious faith – King was a Baptist minister. In particular he reflected on how his personal trials (death threats to him and his family, his home bombed, arrested and put in jail, attacked by knife...) had taught him ‘the value of unmerited suffering’, so that ‘I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive’.

King goes on to link these experiences with the cross of Jesus Christ, commenting that ‘there are those who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God and unto social and individual advantage. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus”. The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever I am convinced of the reality of a personal God’. (Suffering Faith, in the *Christian Century*, 77 [27 April 1960], 510).

Christian understanding of suffering: soteriology

In what way can unearned suffering be considered to have meaning, to be redemptive as Martin Luther King believes, to be, in other words, compatible with human dignity? Is there not a danger here that we may glorify suffering in an unhealthy way, or pander to the faux-messianic pretensions of a solipsistic figure like Donald Trump who, in the aftermath of his contraction of the Coronavirus and in justification of his reckless behaviour, claimed that ‘as your leader I had to do it – I stood at the front and led’? Martin Luther King, with all his flaws, is a figure of enormous moral significance, and it is proper to explore what understanding might support his claim.

Jesus Christ is a man admired by believers and non-believers alike. He comes across as someone who lived life to the full. His dignity resided in a humanity which integrated personal authenticity with relationship, and which learned through suffering. When you look at his final suffering and death there is no glossing over the awfulness and horror involved, with eerie resonances for our Covid time – this attractive man becomes ugly and hard to look at, he dies through asphyxiation and respiratory problems on a cross, his body is inaccessible so that his family can’t offer him the dignity of a normal funeral. He himself is clearly troubled as he contemplates what lies ahead of him – we are told that he wanted to avoid the suffering ahead (‘let

this cup pass'), and that he doubted it had any meaning at all (my god, my god, why have you forsaken me'). And yet, when his story comes to be written, we are also told that he trusted (into your hands I commend my spirit) and that he was vindicated. This vindication came not just through his own personal resurrection but through the saving value of his suffering and death for others.

The narrators of this story – be they the Scriptural authors themselves or the countless enquirers, including theologians, down through the ages since – have used a variety of words and phrases, often metaphors, to point to some understanding of how his suffering and death have value. He died 'for us', 'for our sins', as a 'ransom', a 'sacrifice', a 'representative', a 'substitute', a 'scapegoat', 'in reparation', to 'reconcile us', to bring about redemption, atonement, to expiate, to make satisfaction...and so on. How do we understand all this?

Different theories of how Jesus has saved us ('soteriology') will contain different forms and emphases. I propose to outline the gist of what a main approach has been down through the ages. It is appropriate to note that we are dealing here with a matter of faith and mystery – the undergirding understanding will have the status of what is likely/appropriate (*convenientia*) rather than what is logically, legally or conceptually necessary. Rightly, we stammer before the nature of this mystery, but rightly too we feel compelled to offer some account of its meaning.

In different ways the mainline soteriological approach has sought to safeguard the enormous divine respect for human freedom. This freedom, as well as resulting in human good, also includes the potential and actual harm, evil, and sin, personal and social, due to human agency and indeed omission. Such sin is a kind of 'surd' – it comes, in the language of Lonergan, from a lack of intellectual, moral and religious conversion, so that as well as progress in history there are also cycles of decline. We can and do think and act irrationally and irresponsibly, we are tempted by 'false idols' so that our scale of values becomes inverted. The consequent harm to individuals and communities is unimaginable: we experience some of this in our personal lives (our broken relationships, our failed projects, our personal dissatisfactions and regrets with life) and witness it dramatically in the lives of others – the poor, prisoners, migrants, minorities of all kinds, our wounded planet. And we intuit how this virus of sin goes beyond individuals and even communities to enter into the very fabric of society itself – its culture, structures and institutions.

There is no easy way to mend all this harm. Of course, as free human beings, we are always called to conversion and through intelligent, responsible and God-directed behaviour to repair and build up what has been broken. But how do this when so many lives have been lost, so many lives broken, so many systems in seemingly intractable decline? How repair the affront to all the victims, and to God who stands in their place?

This is where the birth, life and, above all, death of Jesus Christ gets its significance. Jesus as human but also as divine Son of God points in a way that surprises us to what human potential is about. He is a kind of

Everyman/Everywoman, the epitome of what it is to be human, our representative, a figure of what we are called to be, in whose image we are made, source of what constitutes our dignity.

God does not repair the terrible evil of the world by a work of power or force of arms (see the scriptural temptations of Jesus Christ) which would annihilate perpetrators and over-ride human freedom. Instead God ‘empties’ God’s self (Philippians 2: 5-11), lowering himself to become a human being and, even further, to death on the Cross. This ‘emptying’ is revealed as a profound act of love and touches into that basic instinct which recognises that, in the context of sin and evil, love is costly, involves suffering. The one who laments on the Cross, then, ‘...is suffering the consequences of responding to the laments of the people of God’.¹ Suffering and pain, because they are constituents of healing love, have been revealed to have dignity.

And so, unlike Anselm whose ‘satisfaction’ theory has often been understood as the demands of an angry God looking for punishment to satisfy the strict demands of justice, the transposition of this theory by Aquinas into the framework of friendship and of Lonergan into the realm of interiority allows us to imagine an always loving God who yet, as any parent suffering on behalf of an errant child, enters into that suffering as part of the redress that Anselm rightly understood as required to heal relationships and to bring about reconciliation.

Lonergan in his ‘Law of the Cross’ outlined, inter alia, in *Redemption (1958)* speaks of ‘satisfaction’ as ‘work more pleasing to the offended person than the offence was displeasing’ (539), ‘the voluntary acceptance of punishment in order that pardon may fittingly be asked and granted (125)’ and ‘a penal work undertaken out of detestation for sin, sorrow for sin, and the intention of wiping away sins and guarding against them’ (555). Von Balthasar notes how the co-proposal (not just acquiescence) of the Son in the Father’s plan to save the world through the suffering of the Son *humanly speaking* touches the heart of the Father more deeply than the sin of the world does. The language of both Lonergan in speaking about ‘punishment’, and ‘penal work’ and that of von Balthasar in highlighting the ‘anger’ of God (at sin, not the sinner) resonate anthropologically when we consider the terrible harm done by evil, the strong reaction it evokes, and how love suffers to repair damage. Their approach benefits from being accompanied by the insight of Liberation Theology that the Father is in solidarity with all the victims of unjust oppression throughout history – the offence is not just to God, but to God’s creatures too. But this is a God who, unimaginably, woos victims and perpetrators alike, so that the cost of reconciliation is enormous, and that is what we see played out in the drama of the Cross.

Evolution, Incarnation and Cross

Often drawing on the insights and inspiration of Teilhard de Chardin in the first half of the 20th century, Christian theologians over the last while, and in particular over

¹ Bradford E. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience*, New York: Orbis Books, 2016, 77

the last 20 years or so, have begun to locate the Christian story more systematically within the evolutionary paradigm associated principally with Charles Darwin and our emerging knowledge of the origins of the universe. Irish theologians like Dermot Lane, Donal Dorr and Sean McDonagh have been to the fore in this dialogue between science in general (and evolutionary theory in particular) and theology. This approach can help make talk of incarnation and cross, of soteriology, more accessible to contemporary ears.

Within this new approach (variously described as ‘deep ecology/deep Incarnation/the new cosmic story’) the basic intuition of de Chardin of the ascent of matter to life, and then the life of spirit that is the mind, is vindicated. It is recalled that the Word of God is always already involved in creation and then, in the Incarnation, takes on that linkage between cosmology, evolution and humanity – ‘the flesh/*sarx* adopted by God in Jesus is part and parcel of the flesh/*sarx* that was born out of the expanding elements of the Big Bang story fourteen billion years ago and subsequent evolution. In this sense, Jesus of Nazareth is a child of the cosmos and so, when the Word/*Logos* was made flesh/*sarx*, the Word adopted the materiality of cosmic and biological evolution as well as the full reality of the human condition in Jesus’.² This approach is premised on the underlying unity of creation and Incarnation.

Of additional interest in this context is the account of new discoveries by evolutionary theorists concerning ‘cooperation’ whereby, as Sara Coakley explains,³ part of evolutionary strategy seems to involve an immediate *loss* to an individual in terms of fitness (in a population in which another thereby gains) which can nonetheless become stable and go on recurring in populations. Coakley notes this occurrence across the entire evolutionary spectrum (from bacteria right up to *homo sapiens*) and references Harvard evolutionary biologist Martin A. Nowak’s contention that cooperation must be counted a third evolutionary principle alongside the classic Darwinian duo of mutation and selection. Higher up the evolutionary scale there is the widespread ‘cooperative’ (self-denying) activities of social insects or the practice of a school of dolphins in surrounding a dying companion even at great risk to themselves. Nature as ‘red in tooth and claw’, Coakley argues, has a subtle maintaining matrix of another sort, the rich ‘purple line’ of sacrifice, a kind of community solidarity, which may be a kind of evolutionary preparation for a higher and fully intentional *human* altruism that can arise only once the cultural, linguistic realm is reached. ‘In other words’, Coakley concludes, ‘ethical tendencies to self-sacrificial and forgiving behaviours, themselves productive and creative within populations, may have their preliminary roots in forms of life much lower than human’.

It is interesting at this juncture to return to the Philippians 2: 5-11 text once again: its meaning clearly is to suggest a salvific unity between incarnation and cross,

² Dermot A. Lane, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue*, Dublin: Messenger Publication, 2020, 84

³ Sarah Coakley, Evolution, Cooperation, and God, *Church Life Journal*, October 2020

grounded in God's selfless love. Other scriptural texts point to the presence of Word and Spirit in creation too. Evolutionary theory is now affording grounds to allow us a better insight into how all this may hang together.

It is interesting too that this Christian 'take' on cosmic meaning, the epic struggle between good and evil, is often replicated in different forms of classical or pop culture literary and/or cinematic storytelling and myth (including comic and video game form) – think of Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Camelot and King Arthur, the Odyssey... A biblical version of all these is, of course, the book of the Apocalypse: 'After that I saw a huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language; they were standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands...these are the people who have been through the great persecution, and they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb' (Apoc. 7: 9-14).

The human role

The vast range and depth of human and natural suffering and injury make it fitting that Jesus Christ and his Cross play an indispensable representative and substitutory role in the drama of salvation. This cannot mean, however, that our freedom is overridden, that we have no role to play. Just as the close followers of Jesus were asked to 'stay and watch with me', and the women stood around his Cross and quite spontaneously went to anoint and honour his dead body, so all human beings are asked to say our 'yes' to what Jesus did on our behalf. We do this through the human quest to live life to the full, to move towards intellectual, moral and religious conversion, to act according to conscience, to love others. Some people do this in conscious imitation of Jesus or of God in their own tradition, others do so by being authentic according to their own lights – to thine own self be true. All of us discover that, inevitably, loving others involves receiving as well as giving, 'being done to' as well as doing, pain and suffering as well as joy and happiness. We can all in our own way say 'yes' to this, to that ultimate point of deciding to freely give ourselves over in death to Jesus Christ – Karl Rahner conceives of dying and death as our ultimate decision and act of freedom, a handing of ourselves back to God, which remains valid even if we subsequently enter into a phase of dying when effective autonomy has been removed. We will be helped to decide like this if we understand our role to be a part in the cosmic drama I have described, such that no act or attitude of love, no suffering or pain borne through love, go to waste. And we can do so by committing ourselves to this stance even when, like Jesus himself, we doubt and even to the point when, as I have noted, our will becomes incapable of expression, when 'we are handed over'.

Paul has a line in the Letter to the Colossians where he speaks as follows: 'It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church' (1:24). It may be surmised that most of our own suffering is a

consequence of our own errors and sins, a kind of pre-death purgatorial experience, expressive of repentance. However, this verse opens up the gracious possibility that somehow God has also chosen to invite us to help in his own saving work on the Cross by uniting our suffering with his – not just, as Paul says, for the Church but, as ecclesiology would now have it, for the saving of our world, the purpose of the Church. If, by God’s grace, we experience a little of what this means, we will surely also experience that left to ourselves (like Peter walking on the waters of the lake in Galilee in Mt. 14) we sink – this is only possible through the gracious support of God.

Conclusion

It has become more fashionable to consider the saving aspects of Christ’s life as residing in his Incarnation and life, with his cross and death bearing witness to the ever-faithful love of God. The approach taken here echoes this stress on God’s ever-faithful love, shown by coming among us and living with us in Incarnation and life, but it highlights the particular place of the Cross. It does so in recognition of the lament of victims – human and natural – down through the ages, and the cost it takes to repair the horrific damage done by human agency and omission.

This ought not to lead to any unhealthy cult of suffering *per se*. Much suffering will be of the kind Martin Luther King experienced – the accompaniment of his political and social struggle for a better world. Much involves the pain involved in trying to heal and restore broken relationships among families, friends, communities, and the body politic. And, it has been suggested, some may involve that intimate sharing (often seemingly involuntary) in the sufferings and cross of Jesus Christ on behalf of our world.

This is what the late Pedro Arrupe, inspirational leader of the Jesuits, experienced in the last ten years of his life, after he suffered a debilitating stroke. His prayer, entitled *In the Hand of God*, expresses it well:

More than ever I find myself in the hands of God.
This is what I have wanted all my life from my youth.
But now there is a difference;
The initiative is entirely with God.
It is indeed a profound spiritual experience
To know and feel myself so totally in God’s hands.

All this is rehabilitation, if you like, of the old Morning Offering prayer, in which we offered our day – and especially our sufferings – to Jesus Christ for our world. ‘Offering it up’ became a kind of cliché and sometimes betrayed an unwise acquiescence in this-worldly pain. But, like many clichés, there is a kernel of truth there. In our time the young Italian computer programmer Carlo Acutis, recently beatified, prayed before his death from cancer aged 15: ‘I offer to the Lord the suffering that I will undergo for the Pope and for the Church...’ – a variation on that line from Colossians emanating from Paul. And in our time too we think of the

Jesuits in Cherryfield, our own relatives and friends in similar settings, the millions of people suffering from serious physical and mental illness, and we intuit that there is more to what is going on than meets the eye, and dare to believe and hope that God is at work in them too in a way that, despite all, preserves human dignity and is a source of reverence and even joy.

As you will have discovered by now, this has not been an attempt to answer the political question posed by the Dying with Dignity Bill. It has, rather, been an attempt to expand our horizons, so that we might catch a glimpse of something important which our dominant culture occludes. This may help us when we come to the political discussion: but more likely it may invite us into a different existential space when we reflect on our own mortality.