

The Holodomor of 1933 - Spiritual Reflections

Forgiveness - The Eucharist

It is the immeasurable mystery in Christianity that enables suffering to meet with and embrace thanksgiving. This is the essence of the Eucharist - to offer thanks to God for His creation although creation is presently marred by sin. But when we face the Holodomor we are struck with the incongruity of seeing a benevolent God behind the bloody history that envelopes mankind.

*All men, will eventually have to answer one question during their existence:
is the universe friendly or is it not? Albert Einstein*

When faced with the silence of the universe before the tragedy of the Holodomor, it is with great difficulty that one could answer the question posed by Einstein above - yes, the universe is friendly. Without faith, it is impossible to see through tragedy and discern love as the underlying base for all that is.

Our Father.....

In the first words of the Lord's prayer we have a summary of all that is most important for us, of the trust that we have in creation, of the fact that we are loved. This is a profound statement because it reminds us of the words written by the Apostle John that God is love; not merely that God loves but that the very essence of God is love.

This is my body which is given for you. Luke 22:19

All undeserved suffering is redemptive. Martin Luther King, Jr.

There are many lessons that we can glean from the above quotations. Those who died in the Holodomor were enfolded into the welcoming arms of the Ukrainian soil. And this soil, soaked through with the blood and bodies of the innocent victims, did not become sterile and refuse to feed those who had committed the horrible crime of Holodomor. In a universal act of forgiveness, this soil continued to be fertile and feed all, including the murderers.

*...for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the just and unjust. Matthew 5: 45*

There is a misconception that underlies much of what we imagine forgiveness to mean. We often have the simplistic concept that forgiveness means forgetfulness, that it is free without a cost attached to it. In fact, the process of forgiveness is more complex than we commonly think and it is always costly, sometimes, very costly.

In order for forgiveness to be complete, there has to be metanoia in the receiver of forgiveness.

When we forgive, this is only a part of the 'dialogue'. When we forgive, we neutralize the corrosive acidity of hatred and vengeance from our hearts. This is what we are called on to do and if we are to emulate Christ, we will do this. But our forgiving does not mean forgetting and it doesn't necessarily mean that the perpetrators go off scot-free. What has happened has been indelibly written into the fabric of time not to be erased but to be, possibly, redeemed. Thus, our forgiving does not mean that the matter is closed and has been 'cheaply' resolved. There is a huge cost in forgiveness - it is never an easy task. There is indeed an incalculable price to be paid in creation for its redemption, for its renewal and we see this price being paid on Golgotha.

We need to hearken back to the words uttered by Christ on the cross:

Forgive them for they know not what they do. Luke 23:34

Hidden in these words is a warning. Those who know not what they do can be children who because of their innocence of the ways of the world do not know what they do. But there are also those who do not know what they do because they have become mad - they have lost their humanity in such hatred and violence that they have become less than human and know not what they do.

We need to forgive but this does not mean that the horror of 1933 disappears or is somehow assuaged and lessened. The genius of Christianity lies in the fact that it reflects on the darkness and suffering of human existence and sees that God is met and engaged in the affliction of his people. This is a great help to those caught in the absolute terror of mass murder. We see more deeply through the eyes of faith and meditate on the fact that reconciliation and healing are born out of the meeting between God and suffering. Far from being absent in those silent and denuded fields of a gifted land, God is there with those dying - He has not abandoned them.

All undeserved suffering is redemptive. Martin Luther King, Jr

The method of enacting and multiplying death in the Holodomor of 1933 is suggestive and resonates with some of the deepest insights of our faith. One of the early martyrs of the Church was St. Ignatius of Antioch who, at the beginning of the second century was arrested and taken to Rome to die as a martyr. In a startling, and jarring, image, as he nears the place of his death in the Roman arena, Ignatius writes (Romans v) that he compares his body to grain that must be ground down to make 'pure bread', ground in this instance, by the teeth of the beasts of the Roman arena. Ignatius teaches that to be human is to be conformed to Jesus crucified. There is no shirking away from suffering and evil and the horror that roam the earth. They are faced with the weapon of deep faith that everything is held in the trustworthy hands of God.

The Eucharist is the medicine of immortality. Ignatius

And did not those innocents who were murdered in 1933 - were they not ground down - some buried while they were still alive - by their tormentors and did they not become 'bread' by returning to the earth and becoming one with it, the earth which continued to produce bread,

bread which fed even those who murdered? Wasn't their suffering also redemptive? Did they not redeem Ukraine so that it now is free?

Freedom is one of the deepest gifts of the Holodomor of 1933. The Greek Fathers constantly point to the presence of freedom in man as one of the most obvious images of God in man. The victims of 1933 died because they were enslaved by a foreign people and did not have control over their physical destiny. But the fruit of their death was the granting of the gift of freedom to the Ukrainian people.

It is deeply ironic that those who were responsible for the Holodomor of 1933 claimed atheism as their faith and yet, through their very acts, they could not totally exclude God, His presence, and symbols of His activity in creation. Through the very act of murder, the perpetrators of the Holodomor were enacting the supreme transformation of death and suffering into a source of nourishment and life. The very nature itself, through its intrinsic laws, conspires against those who deny God.

*Take, eat, this is my body (broken for you).....
Do this in remembrance of me....Luke22:19*

When we hear these words during the Liturgy, we think of Christ instituting the supreme sacrament of Christianity. But there is a sub-text to these words. We are called to commit an act of remembrance, but we are also called to imitate Christ, and we are warned that by following Him, we will also be broken for others and shared with others. It may be audacious but our faith is nothing if not audacious and stretching the boundaries of what we deem as possible. The Eucharist is closely connected to the activities of 1933. We think of the Eucharist in a sort of sanitized manner, but it, after all, involves a bloody death of an innocent human being. Do we not see the resonance of this with the death of millions of innocents in 1933?

The murderers of 1933 denied the gift of bread to those who were dying of famine. They were doing something that was diametrically opposed to the essence of the Eucharist. There is never any shortage of Christ's Body - there is enough to feed everyone. The symbol of the Eucharist tells us clearly that food must be shared and all must be fed and yet, in their hatred of God, which spilled into hatred for man, the perpetrators of the Holodomor denied God's most precious gift - food.

The Eucharist is the bringing of gratefulness before God and the first thing that we thank for is creation and the gifts that creation brings with it so that we may have life. We thank for the bounty of the land. We thank that we have been brought into existence and that we will never perish. And we thank those who died for us in 1933 so that we may have a life grounded in freedom.