Avis Clendenen and Robert Barry, O.P.

Pastoral Care in Time of War

People pray for direct encounter with God: to hear, see, feel, taste, and touch God’s design made clearly available to them. Once when such a moment unfolded and the voice of God was heard by a desiring people, Exodus 20:18 records: “All the people shook with fear at the peals of thunder and the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the smoking mountain; and they kept their distance.” There it was: an encounter with the living God they so desired. The very next verse, however, tells us that within seconds they had had enough: turning to Moses, they said, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die” (Exod 20:19). They were not up for a direct encounter. They needed someone whom they trusted to accompany them on the journey they desired, yet feared. They needed someone to steady their hearts and minds as the ground shook beneath their feet. They needed someone who could go the distance, take the heat, and stand in the fiery midst of it all. By v. 21 we hear: “So the people kept their distance while Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.” At that moment, says the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, “ministry was born” (Taylor, 1998, 57–59).

When life confronts our frail finite existence with stripped bare, unrelenting anxiety, we cry out for the omnipotent God to make God’s presence manifest. People pray for such an encounter, to see the Holy One alive in their midst, and to hear the still small voice amid the smoke of so much doubt and death. Cries of anguish and despair plunge the desperately suffering into the extremes of emotional incapacity or acts of rage. When we are pushed to and beyond our limits we yearn for one among us who can quell our rage, hold us in the moment, hold us to the moment, and accompany us through the terrible and terrifying time. This is the raw stuff of pastoral

Avis Clendenen is professor of religious studies at Saint Xavier University and adjunct professor of pastoral theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She is co-author with Sister Irene Dugan, R.C., of Love Is All Around in Disguise: Meditations for Spiritual Seekers (Chiron Publications, 2004).

Robert Barry, O.P., is adjunct instructor in the department of religious studies and chaplain in campus ministry at Saint Xavier University in Chicago. He is a Wing Chaplain for the 183rd Fighter Wing and Lt. Col. in the Illinois Air National Guard and was deployed on seven occasions to hostile fire zones in the Gulf and Iraqi wars.
care in a time of war, the kind of pastoral care that arises from the dark cloud where human pain and divine healing yearn to meet. We believe such a place exists, but its grace does not come cheap.

The 1983 U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, “The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response,” identifies the rigorous conditions that must be met for a decision to go to war, maintaining the presumption in favor of peace and against war. The complex and often ambiguous ethical issues of warfare, however, retreat when we are faced with the immediacy of the catastrophically injured, the devastated lives collapsed in grief when loved ones perish, and the estrangement of those returning from battlefield to home towns, soul-wrecked by the unseen emotional wounds inflicted by war. Amidst this dark abyss theological reflection arises from a cry for meaning; the courage to ask ourselves the classic Christian question: what does God as creator, redeemer, sustainer, and vivifier have to say to us in a time of war? The question of suffering and the question of God cannot be separated. The threat of nonbeing, nothingness, and perpetual meaninglessness must meet the courage to be, as Protestant theologian Paul Tillich said.

As a twenty-nine-year-old man in Germany in 1915, Tillich (1886–1965) acknowledged that the war changed everything. His experience as an army chaplain on the Western front was, as he called it, his “personal kairos.” The war made him acutely aware that life—his life, every human life—is finite. The experience of the destructiveness of war—the demonic side of human capacity—revealed “an abyss in human existence that could not be ignored” (Sayer, 2003, 117). We carry the reality of nonbeing within our everyday existence, but ordinary, everyday “chronos” living on the continuum of time sedates us away from the existential fright of our inability to control our mortality. In war, no such luxury exists.

It was from his immersion into the exigencies of war that Tillich crafted a dynamic theology that led him to recast the ancient claims of the Judeo-Christian faith. In the face of the threat of nonbeing one must risk being grasped by the Infinite Unconditioned is the courage to be. This act of courage bridges the gap between the unrelenting human anguish of the loss of meaning and the recovery of the divine spark of hope and healing within the human soul. The will to meaning pulls us toward wholeness. Such power/grammar accompanies the experience of being grasped by the Ground of Being and Depth of Meaning, in spite of Following Tillich's own plunge into depression and his striving to regain his foothold from the abyss of war and a series of personal trials, he came to experience the power of the personal spirit and God's Spirit—Spiritual Presence—as existentially available in spite of life’s brutalities. Theologically, the great in spite of is at the heart of a Christian understanding of grace and its power to make all things new.

What guidance do reflections such as these give to our pastoral care in a time of war? How do we—pastoral ministers—get the courage to confront our own fear of being overwhelmed by fear? How is the courageous capacity to choose to be in spite of going to be fueled in a permanently numbed, disfigured young man or woman or, for that matter, in his or her spouse? How do we stay with the suffering of others so that they don’t bail out on their own
possibilities in spite of? Can the minister submit to this kind of relatedness and pay the emotional/spiritual price of bearing with and through the pain, allowing the telling of stories laced with deep disturbances, spiritual groaning, and the uncertainty about the future, and agonizingly sitting with and in silence and emptiness? Can war’s devastation be a fertile moment of new creation?

There is no human situation that is not also a divine milieu. Those charged with the burden and blessing of pastoral care in a time of war are, on a daily basis, engaged in the ministry of reconciliation—bringing forth the light of healing hidden in darkness—which is tending the treasure in fragile and finite broken earthen-vessel lives. This ministry of reconciling presence is about the mystery of the new creation that exists in spite of every physical and human reason for it not to be so (2 Cor 4:6-12; 5:16-18; Isa 43:18-19). The Pauline and prophetic understanding of new creation does not mean that someone substantively becomes different from who they once were; it means that someone discovers in the hard reality of their present moment “the more,” and thus encounters his or her own unique, sacred, inner nature, capable of transcending the old self, for the new self is re-creating in spite of.

The consequences of war “strip off the old self with its practices,” as the letter to the Colossians says, and can “clothe one with the new self, which is being renewed” . . . in spite of . . . “according to the image of its Creator” (Col 3:9-11). This new creation spoken of by Paul and before him, the prophets, is the transformation wrought by the Spirit. In other words, Spiritual Presence wearing the courageous compassionate skin of human loving kindness is a description of the pastoral minister.

Compassion is the first quality noted by the author of the letter when talking about this renewal of the inner self, when the old self must surrender its power to the new. He admonishes, “Clothe yourselves with compassion . . .” (Col 3:12). Compassion exists as a natural virtue in human character. It is such insights as these that the pastoral minister figuratively wears, believes, breathes, and brings as he or she attends the wounded and their loved ones, grieving with them up from the dregs of despair, the valley of dry bones, and the fearsome dark cloud toward the new creation that waits hidden in the horrid disguise of human devastation.

People pray for encounters with the depths to find the meaning they both yearn for and fear. They need somebody whom they can trust to steady their hearts and minds as the ground beneath them shakes and upturns the once stable footpath. They need someone who can go the distance, take the heat, and stand in the fiery, fierce midst of it all. Like Moses, Elijah, and Paul, all people of the Book who are also ministers, are those whose courage and compassion is enough in spite of. Such is at least part of the mystery of pastoral care in a time of war.

References

