

# In Remembering there is Salvation. A Spiritual Journey within Judeo-Christian Tradition.

## Introduction

The theme of our present Religious Life Week, "Charting the Spiritual Journey: Non-negotiable elements from East to West", has reminded me about the famous Vatican document of Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (1983), "Essential Elements", that tried to address the crisis of religious life, particularly in the US. The argument of the document develops along the line that "religious life itself is a historical as well as a theological reality" (4). Conclusions can be easily drawn: history changes; theology does not. Among those 'theological essentials' are consecration to God by public vows, community, mission, prayer, asceticism, witness, relation to the Church, formation, and government. The document, then, proceeds with its fundamental statement that "historical and cultural changes bring about evolution in the lived reality, but the forms and direction that the evolution takes are determined by the essential elements without which religious life loses its identity" (4). The theme has also brought to my recollection the collection of "Tradition of Christian Spirituality Series" published by Orbis Books, with a goal to present to the readers the most vital elements of each traditions. The series includes, for example, the Lutheran Tradition (Hanson, 2004), the Evangelical Tradition (Randall, 2005), the Orthodox Tradition (Chryssargis, 2004), and Anabaptist Tradition (Snyder, 2004). Looking through the series, one can realize that some of the essentials are common to all traditions, faith in Jesus and the experience of grace, for example, but some are unique to certain traditions, like monasticism or hesychasim, for example. Are those unique elements negotiable and the common ones are not? And who is supposed to decide on that? A Christian community? A group of experts? The leaders?

Realizing the difficulties and risk involved in search for non-negotiable elements, I have turned to the other aspect of our theme, namely that spiritual journey from East to West and immediately thought about the Magi (Matt 2:1-11) coming from East to Bethlehem in the West and then going back to the East by another way. The story of Magi is very personal, because I once also made a journey from East - a small town in Poland - to the West - New York - in search for a better and more meaningful life. Like them, I found Jesus, and like them, I went back to the East a different person. We are not told what they did afterward, but my journey to the East did not end up with going back to Poland. It has brought me all the way to the Perl of the Orient, and made me today to stay in front of you, the people of the East, daring to share few memories and insights from this journey under the title

"In Remembering There Is Salvation: A Spiritual Journey within Judeo-Christian Tradition". The title was inspired by a story about a rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov who was always answering the questions of his disciples by telling them a story. Some of his disciples asked him why it is so, expecting to hear again another story. But the Baal Shem Tov answer with a sentence that has given the title to this talk: "Salvation lies in remembrance". So allow me to develop this topic the Baal Shem Tov's way, telling stories, reflecting upon their meanings, and asking questions, "for spirituality is conveyed by stories, which uses words in ways that go beyond words to speak the language of the heart" (Kurtz, Ketcham, 1992:9).

## An Act of Remembering

The Jewish profession of faith is done in a form of story (Joshua 24:2-13). It recalls the exodus of Abraham, Isaac, the journey of Jacob and his sons to Egypt, Moses and Aaron and the exodus from Egypt, the "covering" of the Egyptians by the sea, the victory over the Amorites, the story of Balak, and the entry to the Promised Land near Jericho. We have here names of peoples and nations, and the events interpreted as God's act on behalf of Israel. In all of this, it is God who is active. He takes Abraham from the Mesopotamia, leads him along the way, and gives him Isaac. It is God who takes the people out of Egypt, changes curse of Balak into blessing, and defeats all the enemies along the way. Finally, it is God who gives them the land. Remembering all those blessings, the mighty acts of God leads towards issuing a call to serve God. "Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD" (Joshua 24:14, KJV). Thus, it is the recollection of the past that was supposed to lead to a commitment. Our profession of faith, on the other hand, is done in the form of a creed: theological statements that we supposed to accept as truth. If the Jewish profession of faith begins with "Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods" (Joshua 24:2), Christian profession of faith begins with "we (I) believe". Our past is not being recalled. We are not reminded about the state of affairs we - our ancestors - lived before they became Christians and only in passim we are told that Jesus - for us and for our salvation - came into the world. We have to search somewhere else to keep our past from being forgotten, and the best place to begin is the Scriptures.

I am bringing the issue of memory here, because it shaped biblical faith. God remembers; people remember. God remembers people in their distress and people remember what God did for them. "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark" (Gen 8:1); "I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have

remembered my covenant. (Exodus 6:5); "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut 5:15); "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day" (Deut 8:18). Memory also plays an important role in the New Testament. In the letter to the Ephesians, we find a profession of faith that presents the transforming aspect of the message of the Gospel. We are told to remember where we were without Christ, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12), and see the huge difference in our present life: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). It would be difficult to overlook the centrality of Christ here. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* speaks about biblical memory as shaping the actions of the one who remembers and then reminds us a well-known fact that "for the Hebrew the recollection of the past means that what is recalled becomes a present reality, which in turn controls the will" (1962:344). We speak here about anamnesis.

It is interesting to see how the verb 'to remember' is often used at the beginning of a prayer of request. There is Samson who in his humiliated slavery cries, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judges 16:28). There is Hannah praying for a child and saying, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son" (1 Samuel 1:11). Then, there is the Psalmist who asks the Lord not to remember the sins of his youth (Ps 25:7), but to remember the entire people of Israel and Zion (Ps 74:2), according to His steadfast love (Ps 25:7). But, nowhere the importance of remembering is so beautifully highlighted like in the Psalm 42:6: "My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you." This act of remembering God leads to revival, makes faith and hope alive. After pouring out his soul in front of God, the Psalmist tells his downcast soul to hope in God, "for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps 42:11).

### When We Seem to Forget

Being aware of the importance of memory, we also have to be aware of its pitfalls. An act of remembering is not as simple as we may think. Memory often fails us, and I do not mean only the fact of forgetfulness, but also those three instances when facts become non-facts, fiction become fact, and non-fact become fact (Crossan, 1998:59-68). According to Crossan, the first instance - fact becomes non-fact - occurs when "we remember an event and mistake the details" (1998:60). This happens very often

and contributes to our daily quarreling in our families and communities. I do not remember at which age I had begun to travel alone by bus to my grandparents. Was I eight or nine, or perhaps even older? This lapse of memory is usually not serious, as long as one does not touch the Scripture. Was there a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Was Jesus born in a manger or a house? Did an angel appear to Mary or Joseph? How many possessed men were in the country of the Gerasenes, one or two? When did the Last Supper take place? This lapse of memory is usually not serious, as long as, one of your students does not come to ask you about the difference between mariology of Paul and Luke. Take note that the first one wrote his letter to Galatians in 50s CE, the second one wrote his Gospel-Acts probably in 80s.

The second instance takes place when a fictional story becomes a factual story. There was an interesting event during the last US presidential campaign which sheds light on our memory problem. In many of her speeches, Mrs. Clinton was recalling her trip to Bosnia from 1996. According to her memory, right after the plane landed in Tuzla, she and her daughter had to run for cover under a hostile fire. Unfortunately, a video recorded something else. There was no hostile fire and no running for cover. She and her daughter are shown to walk from the plane and participating in a small welcoming ceremony. Being presented with the video recording, she said that she had a "different memory" about the landing (Wilson, 2008). We stumble here upon an interesting point: a different memory of certain details within a historically occurring event. Mrs. Clinton went to Bosnia in 1996. The event took place. The landing, as the part of the event, was remembered differently than it actually happened. We can bring it to our tradition and think about the four witnesses to the Jesus-event. How much they differ in so many details. Let me bring here one example, which is particularly troubling, namely Jesus' rejection in Nazareth. The story is recorded by the three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30) but only Luke tells us that the inhabitants of Nazareth wanted to kill Jesus by throwing him down the cliff (Luke 4:29). The problem is that there was no cliff in Nazareth and, even more important, no murderous inhabitants (Crossan 2001:61-73). Although not a video recording, biblical scholarship and biblical archeology was still able to establish historical accuracy of that event and thus upholding "honor and dignity of a tiny Jewish hamlet in a small country long, long ago. Jesus did not grow up in a village of killers" (Crossan, 2001:73).

The third instance takes place when not just a detail within an event, but an entire event is being invented. Non-fact becomes fact. I am not talking here about a situation when someone, in order to protect himself/herself, creates a false event. That is a lie. It is a situation when one is convinced that an event occurred whereas others involved in it cannot recall it. Crossan brings here an example of a psychological experiment on remembering the names of classmates from high school. The experiment continued over months with many sessions. During each session the people

involved could remember more names. The highest score belonged to a person who during 10 sessions could recall correctly 220 names out of a possible 600 names. But, at the same time, that person incorrectly recalled 100 names. Moreover, the more that person tried to recall more names, the more mistakes were being committed (Crossan, 1998:65-66). Since it was an experiment, it was easy to verify the facts, but in real life such 'incorrect remembering' may not be easily verified and it often leads to a situation when a person tells us with full conviction about something that actually never took place. Now, you think about the hypothesis of an oral tradition that claims that a collective memory of Jesus' eye-witness followers, their accounts and their testimonies, is a bridge between Jesus and Jesus' story recorded for us in the New Testament. Was their memory working better than ours? Think also about Borg's "history remembered and history metaphorized" and his rather negotiable claims that certain things recorded in the Gospels actually took place, but certain things are just metaphors used to explain the meaning of Jesus' story (Borg and Wright, 2000:5-6). One is free to decide which one are which.

However, there is still one more disturbing aspect of our memory, namely forgetfulness. "Yet my people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthless idols, which made them stumble in their ways and in the ancient paths" (Jeremiah 18:15). This spiritual Alzheimer is as tragic and deadly as the physical one. By disconnecting ourselves from our past, by forgetting our personal and communitarian stories, we forget who we are and who is our God. According to the prophetic tradition, this forgetfulness led to the tragic consequences of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC. "For you have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and sow the vine-branch of a stranger, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain" (Isaiah 17:10-11).

### When God seems to forget

God remembers; people remember. We know our memory problems, but what happens when God seems to forget us. "But Zion said, The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49:14); "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God" (Isaiah 40:27); "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Moreover, what happens when we do not forget and yet he hides his face from us. "All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way. . . . Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. . . . Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (Psalm 44:17-18.22.24)

Any theological discussion of the twenty-first century cannot shy away from the tragic realities of our world, particularly those in which "homo homini lupus", and which are epitomized in that single historical event known as the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel (1992) in his memorable speech "the Perils of Indifference" has this statement: "Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by humanity then was not the ultimate. We felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one. For us to be ignored by God was a harsher punishment than to be a victim of His anger". And yet, that was the feeling of many. It was "as if God has abandoned his covenant" (Solomon, 1997:250). Here, Jewish tradition brings something unique, something which Wiesel (2006) calls "suing God" by bringing Him to rabbinic tribunal. Even if we do not go as far as a group of rabbis in Auschwitz who were supposed to put God on trial and pronounced a verdict that God has broken His covenant with His people (Wiesel, 1995), we still need to face the problem of evil, not as absence of good, but as a destructive reality, an alliance of sin and death - to use Pauline thought. People continue to be crucified. Why is God so seemingly silent? If it is punishment for our sins, why this punishment is so disproportionate to our guilt? The book of Job has already questioned the traditional concept of relationship between suffering and sin. Job stubbornly refuses to accept that he is guilty of sin and keeps saying that he does not deserve what happened to him. We can easily recognize the drama of the nation that struggles with its tragic fate and is unable to comprehend it. This question keeps coming back every time a tragedy hits. We usually submit to the tragic fate - what else can we do after all - and say something about the will of God or excuse God altogether and put all the blame on ourselves. It is human-made, we say. But, the Jewish tradition shows us a unique way of taking God's word seriously and making God accountable to His own words. If we are expected to keep our promises, the more we expect God to keep his promises, and if He does not keep them, we have all the rights to ask why. But, we seldom dare. At yet, by telling his story of surviving Auschwitz, Wiesel keeps reminding us and God the promises we have made to God and God has made to us. The Jewish rabbi who put God on trial during their ordeal at Auschwitz, ended the trial with prayer. That is another uniqueness of truly Jewish tradition. It did not end with atheism or a theology of the death of God. It ended up with prayer. Since we believe that God is everywhere, since we believe in God's providence whose eyes is on a sparrow, we cannot run away from the question about evil and suffering. And as Wiesel (2005) rightly pointed out "these are heartbreaking questions to those who believe, but then, again, the tragedy of the believer, it is deeper than the tragedy of nonbeliever".

## Conclusion - The Rainbow and the Cross

The whole Judeo-Christian tradition could be summarized with the following biblical statements: "And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen 6:6) and "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). The former was followed by the Flood; the latter by the Cross. In the former God rejects humanity; in the latter humanity rejects God. But, of course, things are not so black and white. Noah found favor in God's eyes and there was a group of those who received the Logos who became flesh. Moreover, the story of the Flood is followed by God's realization that destruction is not a solution to the problem of human heart which thoughts are "only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). So God promised, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21), and he placed "the bow in the clouds" to remind himself of the promise (Gen 9:13-16). The story of the cross is followed by a beautifully constructed testimony of a blameless Pharisee whose zeal for the law blinded him to an obvious fact that by persecuting the followers of Jesus he was actually transgressing the very law he was trying to defend. The light of the cross exposed his blindness and set him free from his addiction to violence.

The rainbow and the cross. The former reminds God His promise, the latter confronts us with our unenlightened zeal for religious and cultural values, rules, and laws that often brings about suffering and death of innocent people. Gottlieb (1999) made a plea for spirituality of resistance that would stand up to a challenge of responding to "injustice and needless suffering" (p. 139). I would suggest to imitate Isaiah by putting God in remembrance. "You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth" (Isaiah 62:6-7). But, I would also suggest to take Jesus' words seriously and shape our lives in remembrance of Him. Thus, it can be a plea for a spirituality of remembering. We remind him about the rainbow; He reminds us about the cross. In the presence of tragic events of our history, we bring Him to remembrance and give him no rest till he establishes His kingdom of peace and justice here on earth, and He brings us to remembrance and gives us no rest till we repent of our violence and stop crucifying people and nature. In this mutual remembering lies our salvation, an open possibility for a different and a better world, which till now remains only a dream.

I have begun this talk by stating that it was difficult for me to search for non-negotiable elements, only to find out that the Baal Shem Tov led me to the fundamental spiritual truth: *those who have no past, have no future*. "Our past continues to live in our present, and the way we live this day, the way we live this moment determines our future" (Kurtz and Ketcham, 1992:155). And what that future is going to be?

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