

The Blood of the Martyrs Can Be the Seed of Life: Violence, Abuse and the Prophetic Dimension of Theology

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As I read the beginning of Mr. Lundberg's paper, with its reference to the early church's understanding of martyrs and the quotation attributed to Tertullian, I was both troubled and intrigued, especially, by this quote regarding the fruitfulness of martyrdom. I was not thinking about the early church and the Roman persecution, however, but rather about the four thousand martyrs each year in our country who are killed by an abusive husband, boyfriend or ex, and the many others, who, while not yet on the coroner's records, have lost their lives to an abuser enduring a *living* death. I also thought of the many children abused physically or sexually by parents, neighbors, relatives, clergy or other adults, so that whether they live or die, their life is taken from them. As I read Lundberg's paper, I wondered how these deaths fit into his discussion of martyrdom and the prophetic dimension of theology.

While I think all types of martyrdom merit reflection and comment, for reasons of space limitations, I will, in my response, focus on domestic violence martyrs. The martyrdoms resulting from other types of abuse are equally worthy of reflection, and are both similar to and different from domestic violence martyrdoms. I can only hope that my extremely focused discussion here might shed a small degree of light on other situations of fatal abuse. Also, because ninety-six percent of domestic violence is male upon female, I will focus upon that particular dynamic in my discussion. This is not to deny that female upon male and same sex domestic violence occurs, because it does. But the vast majority of cases of domestic violence are male upon female.

While domestic violence deaths are not necessarily related to a refusal to apostatize, and would not therefore strictly fit the early church understanding of martyrdom, the classic scenario that Lundberg terms “martyrdom of confession,” points, I believe, to an important type of martyrdom. I agree with Lundberg that, while martyrdoms of confession have been and are significant to the history and witness of the church, they are not the only type of Christian martyrdom. Lundberg describes a second type of martyrdom which he terms “martyrdom of solidarity.” Domestic violence deaths, I will argue, fit within this type of martyrdom.

Domestic violence deaths are deaths inflicted by reason of a hatred of justice and a lust for power and control, just as in the case of martyrs of solidarity. But in the midst of their abuse, abuse victims rarely feel a sense of solidarity with others. Abusers usually work to isolate their victims from potential sources of outside support, weakening their defenses and making them more vulnerable to the abuse. Instead of feeling a sense of solidarity with others, victims of domestic violence often feel a sense of abandonment: abandonment by family, abandonment by community, and abandonment by God. The solidarity which draws and holds an abuse victim captive in their suffering, is the solidarity she desires to have with the predominant culture — a solidarity abuse perpetrators rely upon and foster. Whether she is a United States’ citizen, a Latin American, or a person living in the Middle East, it is the values and beliefs of her culture, including her religion, which draw an abuse victim into an abusive relationship and which keeps her there in spite of the abuse. Hers is a solidarity with culture which upholds the “sanctity” of marriage, the greater authority of the male, and the need for a woman to be taken care of. She longs for a sense of solidarity with a culture which glorifies coupledness and family life — a culture which is suspicious, at best, of singleness. For her, solidarity with culture means the acceptance of an outlook on marriage which shames, blames and often scapegoats the weaker partner. It is solidarity with a culture which minimizes domestic violence and avoids getting involved in defending its victims. The domestic violence martyr, isolated from direct solidarity with others, seeks solidarity through identifying with her culture. Her repeated hopes and attempts to make her life “right” are her attempts to be in solidarity with her culture, and thus with other people.

Martyrs of abuse may not have worked in solidarity with others, but they have struggled for justice and right relationship in their own lives. Theirs is a solidarity with truth and righteousness and love. They have tried every-

thing they could think of to improve their relationship with their abuser, in hopes that the abuse would stop. They want to believe in justice and righteousness, and to believe that if they act righteously that they will be truly loved, loved in a just way. In their lives, they act out their confession of their belief in forgiveness, true love, patience, and hope. Some see a clear connection between their actions or inactions, and their faith. Others, if asked, would not name the connection between their actions or inactions and their faith. In this way, they are like Ellacuria's and Sobrino's 'crucified people.' They are part of a larger impersonal power struggle. They are 'killed' by the forces of sin, a powerful reminder of the effect of violence, injustice, and the lust for power in our society.

While fitting within the typology of the unified martyrdoms of confession and solidarity as Lundberg has described them, perhaps these 'deaths' are more appropriately called prophetic martyrdoms. These martyrs serve as prophets, daring — sometimes — in their deaths, to do what they perhaps could not do in their lives, that is, to speak of a reality that we, as a society and as the church, do not want to see. As prophets, that is, as speakers of God's truth, these martyrs bring God's witness, God's judgment, upon the church. And they call us to respond.

Let us consider the parallels and differences between martyrs in abusive situations and the martyrdoms discussed in Lundberg's paper. As in the martyrdoms of confession and solidarity, beliefs play a strong role in the deaths of domestic violence martyrs. Many women stay in abusive situations because of a complex web of beliefs based upon certain attitudes about the sanctity of marriage, the sinfulness of divorce, the need for a wife to submit to her husband, the need all women have for a man, love overcoming evil, retributive justice, the omnipotent power of God to help and protect her, her own sinfulness and culpability, and the model of Jesus as the suffering servant. Sadly, too many women stay because even when they do reach out for help from a pastor or friend, this belief system based upon these attitudes is only reinforced. Too often women are encouraged to try harder to make the marriage work, to pray more often, to work harder to submit, to be more like Jesus, and to suffer to make their relationship work. Women are even blamed for the actions of their abuser, as if there were something a woman could do stop the abuse — or as if the abuse were caused by something they had done. Abused women often repeatedly forgive their abuser, hoping that he will change and that the love he professes is real. Victims of domestic abuse stay because they long for the love and respect their culture

and the abuser say comes from love relationships, and they fear what might happen if they leave.

The domestic violence victim is a martyr who is killed, in part, because of her commitment to beliefs, beliefs prevalent in our culture and still upheld in too many churches. I would doubt that all of the beliefs the typical domestic violence victim operates on fall within what Lundberg calls the “true faith,” but beliefs that love will ultimately overpower evil, that one ought to forgive, even repeatedly, that one ought to seek to remedy one’s own sinfulness first, and that right behavior in the face of suffering and oppression will be rewarded, are certainly traditional Christian concepts. What is more, many domestic violence victims do take responsibility for their abuse, believing that if they could only try harder and live more righteously, the abuse would stop. Some even go so far as to believe that the abuse is somehow deserved because of something they have done. Many struggle to live by what they have been taught and have come to know as the “true faith,” and to reconcile their abuse with these beliefs.

In light of this, Lundberg’s discussion of the essential unity of the martyrdoms of confession and solidarity is quite striking. The unity Lundberg finds is that in both cases the martyr “is killed for attempting to maintain the true faith . . . in the face of forces that are hostile. . .” to it. Lundberg does not define “true faith,” but I would argue that the victim of any abuse, domestic or otherwise, is killed while attempting to cling to an important basic tenet of the “true faith,” one which their abusers work to deny, that is, the belief that each human life is a unique, individual and valued creation of God. Abusers could not do what they do if they truly affirmed this basic tenet. Victims of violence, whether domestic, sexual, or any other kind, dare to cling to this basic tenet - that they are an individual self and that they have value, rights, and liberties all their own. Their risk of being killed increases as their assertion of this belief increases.

Strikingly, and appropriately for this discussion, Lundberg, in his explanation of this unity in the martyrdoms, uses the feminine pronoun. He writes, “in both cases the person martyred puts herself in this situation actively, but then passively accepts violence and death, rather than doing what is required to put herself out of harm’s way.” How true this is of domestic violence victims!! A domestic violence victim puts herself willingly and actively into the relationship. She actively accepts those beliefs proclaimed as Christian, (or Jewish, or Confucian, etc.) which serve to keep her in the violent relationship. And because of her firm commitment to those beliefs

and to the community which holds them before her, and because of her desire to be in solidarity with her community, she will not and can not do what it would take for her to remove herself from harm's way, and thus, literally, save her life.

Domestic violence victims not only share a commonality with other types of martyrs through passive acceptance of suffering, but they also share a similarity with prophets. The prophetic cycle as described in this paper, which is based on the Hebrew Scriptures, parallels the usual abuse cycle for domestic violence situations. The prophetic cycle begins with a denunciation of sin. The abuse cycle begins with an escalating tension stage, in which the victim is criticized, denounced and put down. The second element in the prophetic cycle is the announcement of judgment. In the abuse cycle, the escalating tension stage often results in threats being made to hurt the victim or those she loves, and it usually culminates in a major abusive event, in which the abuser's judgment is brought down upon her. The third stage of the prophetic cycle is the call to repentance, an invitation to return to right relationship with God. In the abuse cycle, the repentance stage can take one of two forms. Often the abuser will become contrite, apologizing and promising to never do "it" again, seemingly bringing the couple back into right relationship with one another. Alternatively, the abuser may blame the victim for the abuse, forcing her contrition. Similarly, he may deny that the abuse happened or that it was as bad as it seemed, suggesting that through her 'repentance,' that is, through her denial of her experience, she can make the relationship right. In any case, the victim is led to have hope that through repentance, the abuse will not happen again, either because he has repented and changed, or because she has taken responsibility for his actions and hopes, therefore, that she can do something to keep it from happening again. As in the prophetic cycle, this repentive stage leads to a fourth and final stage of hope for a better time and a better life.

While the cycles certainly have their differences, I believe that the uncanny similarities between the biblical prophetic cycle and the domestic abuse cycle make it difficult for both the domestic violence victim, and for us, to recognize abuse cycles for what they are. Renita Weems has pointed out that in many of the marriage metaphors in the prophetic literature, God is depicted as the innocent and righteous husband and Israel as the whoring or otherwise immoral wife. These metaphors only serve to further cloud our understanding of domestic violence, by subtly injecting stereotypes and limited possibilities into our cultural ethos. In Scriptural texts such as Hosea

and Jeremiah, the husband is presented as justified in threatening violence, abuse and even death to his wife. (Weems 1995:44-50) These texts serve to influence our thinking as to “what is true, real or possible” as well as what is theologically justifiable. (Weems 1995:115-116)

In light of this, it is not surprising that domestic violence victims struggle to be heard. Just as the uncredentialed prophets struggled to be heard, domestic violence victims’ reports are too often not understood for what they are. They are discounted as mere domestic quarrels or as personal matters. As the Old Testament prophets found, when one speaks against the dominant culture, one often is discounted or even attacked and blamed. Domestic violence victims, like victims of other forms of abuse, are often blamed either for the reality of their abuse or for telling about it.

In this way, abuse victims are like Jesuanic martyrs in that they bear witness to reality. If not in her life, then in her death, the domestic violence martyr points to injustice in our society, a society that does not adequately protect women and children from battering and abuse in their own homes. If not in her life, then in her death, she also points to religious syncretism and the misuse of the cult. In American culture, this often means using Christianity to perpetuate the oppression of women in our society via the assumption that the Bible teaches the subordination of women to men. It means, therefore, using Christian scriptures and tradition to encourage unequal, and even lethal, power relations between partners in a supposed love relationship. If not in her life, then in her death, the domestic violence martyr points to the reality of the church’s and society’s failure to recognize domestic violence for what it is and to “. . . tell the truth about that reality, search out its causes, and ask what the gospel says about that reality. . . .” (Lundberg 2004:16)

I greatly appreciate Lundberg’s discussion of the hermeneutics of martyrdom. Martyrs are not always perceived as martyrs by everyone. If the truth their lives and deaths speak has not been widely heard, and if the reality they represent is not completely known, martyrs often wind up being blamed as somehow responsible for their own deaths. “She must have done something to deserve this.” We’ve heard it all before: “She made me so mad I couldn’t help myself,” or “The boys had an eating disorder, that’s why they were so underweight,” or “She asked for it with the way she dressed,” Lundberg rightly says that “the martyrs can offer no credentials.” Opacity when dealing with people’s lives is such a constraint. Yet, silent acquiescence on our part to the daily martyrdom of domestic violence victims and other victims of

abuse allows us to avoid looking at the role of power and greed, of violence and abuse, in our society. It allows us to avoid looking at sin — individual sin and corporate sin — and its effect on our society and on each one of us.

The one caution I would like to offer in response to Lundberg's thoughts is a warning against expecting that martyrdom can be valued only in analogy with Christ's death. The parallels Lundberg points out between the prophetic cycle and the life of Jesus are useful. However, just as hope in the Old Testament prophetic texts came not from anyone's death, but from the generous mercy of God toward those who had turned their lives toward God, so too in Jesus' life, hope comes from the merciful and salvific actions of God. The glorification of Christ's suffering and death is too often a contributing factor in domestic violence martyrdoms, and when used in this way, is not salvific. The life-giving power of domestic violence martyrs' lives and deaths is found in their potential to help us recognize and name the problems of power, greed, violence and gender bias in our society. Their deaths do not reproduce anything salvific, but they do offer us a warning. They are like prophetic martyrs, speaking in their deaths a word of truth, which they could not speak for long in their lives. The most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is the forty-eight hours after she first reaches out for help or tries to leave. She is much more likely to be killed during this time when she has prophetically dared to name the reality she has lived. If not in their lives, then in their deaths, domestic violence martyrs proclaim that violence and abuse does exist in *our* society, in ways — and to degrees — that we don't recognize, and don't confront.

The deaths of domestic abuse victims are not, in and of themselves, salvific. But our response to their deaths can be salvific. In the early church, as Lundberg points out, the death of the martyrs did not have "their intended effect - the destruction of the fledgling Church. Rather, in some inexplicable fashion, they only energized the ones they were intended to frighten and disperse, and the church grew." The early martyrs became not just murder victims, but martyrs, because of the response of those who *remained*. The response of those who witnessed these deaths, who saw them for what they really were, insured that violent intimidators did not have their way.

'When we in American culture today witness deaths from domestic violence, do we see mere "victims" — participants in a domestic squabble? That, I believe, is the key choice for the theologian and for the church. Will we hear the prophetic witness of the martyrs of domestic violence and then respond with compassion and action, or will we be silenced by the intimidators? As

Lundberg says, the martyrs' lives and deaths are "a hermeneutical lens that enables further understanding of the world and the Christian faith." Will we use the lens they offer us to see more fully? As Jon Sobrino says in his article in the newly published *Rethinking Martyrdom*, the masses who suffer and die around the world daily, the 'crucified people,' "summon to conversion." They "keep the question of theodicy alive" and "in doing so they force us also to take the reality of our world seriously." (2003: 21-22) Can we as theologians, and as a church, stand in the "prophetic sphere of martyrdom" to reflect on domestic violence "martyrdom as it relates to the church's witness in the public realm?" Will we dare to stand *with* these martyrs and *against* all forms of domestic violence? Will we dare to consider how we as the church have both tacitly and overtly supported domestic violence? Will we dare to consider how historical interpretations of the Scriptures have encouraged domestic violence?

Clergy are among the top four professions, along with professional athletes, military and the police, who are perpetrators of domestic violence. When will we, as the church, dare to confront this? Those of us who "remain" can choose to take action in partnership with God, bringing God's hope and transformation of life. Only then will the blood of domestic violence martyrs become the seed of life. As Lundberg has written, "in confronting martyrdom we confront an undeniable witness to the truth. And only with such witness to the truth, . . . do we stand within the sphere of the prophetic."

I thank Mr. Lundberg for this stimulating paper, and I challenge all of us to dare to confront the martyrdoms of abuse, that is, to confront the physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse of the weaker members of our communities and of our world. It is only through our daring to stand in the prophetic sphere — and through our responding courageously to domestic violence martyrs — that the blood of these martyrs will become the seed of life, the seed for a new way of life in God's realm.

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