

Perspectives



Learning from Bishop Younan

Conversion or conversation? During his recent visit to the Luther Seminary campus, Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan (Palestine), spoke of a “third way” of bearing witness, namely, “our presence.” The presence of Palestinian Christians in a region where one cannot reasonably expect conversion (neither of the Muslims nor of the Jews) is itself, he said, a form of *martyria* (witness, martyrdom).

In other places, too, where conversion is either actually illegal (politically) or virtually impossible (culturally), “presence” becomes witness—not passive presence, to be sure, but an active presence in which, because of their faith, Christians live for others and live without fear. Christians bring a different ethos, said Younan, informed by a theology of grace and a theology of the cross.

Living and speaking grace in a world of retribution is a radical act. So is witness under the cross, witness done for the sake of God and neighbor, not for the sake of reward. This ethos, marked by both the death of Jesus and his resurrection, will produce solidarity with the victims of injustice while, at the same time, giving power to speak and work against the same injustice.

Younan’s own witness at Luther Seminary was strong. He reminded us again (and by his very presence) of what we in the West have to learn from churches elsewhere about being Christian in an inhospitable climate. We can learn this from our brothers and sisters in Palestine and from those in other regions who daily face clear and present danger simply by daring to speak and act in the name of Jesus. As I write this, Zimbabwe’s *Sunday News* reports the Home Affairs Minister as saying that the government is “aware of churches, NGOs and human rights groups that are actively involved in undermining the nation’s internal security”^{*}—where, according to recent legislation, “subversive” means essentially any criticism of Robert Mugabe and where this announcement in the state-run paper is a deliberate and none too subtle threat. The churches of Zimbabwe bear faithful witness when they are denounced along with “human rights groups,” and such witness bears the real possibility of martyrdom. We can learn from these friends even as we pray for them, deeply and daily.

What will a “witness of presence” look like in our own culture? Happily, we are not denied the possibilities of open conversation and calls to conversion as are Christians in other quarters, but folks do now speak of an inhospitality toward the gospel here, too. This is, to be sure, nothing at all like the terrible possibility of mar-

^{*}Reported online at zwnews.com on May 21, 2002.

tyrdom faced by followers of Christ elsewhere, but the cultural opposition to particularity and difference; to a prophetic proclamation of the biblical God; to faith, hope, and love in the name of Jesus is increasingly real. In the face of this, we will continue to converse and proclaim, with all the appropriate humility and careful nuance described in the articles of this issue, but we will be called also to a witness of presence. “You are the light of the world,” said Jesus, and “a city built on a hill.” “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14-16). Jesus here preached on the Zion tradition of the Old Testament that proclaimed that the nations would be so attracted by the light on God’s holy hill they would come unbidden.

What would that kind of attractive presence look like in our culture? Certainly, it would include active, vocal, political, and financial support of Christians in places like Palestine and Zimbabwe. Certainly it would join our voices to theirs in calling for justice, human rights, and the freedom to announce the kingdom of God as an alternative to the kingdoms of this world—there and here. Certainly, it would live the First Commandment, demonstrating in our own lives an alternative to bowing the knee to the many idols and icons of our unapologetically materialistic culture. Certainly, it would proclaim a God bent on saving all rather than annihilating many. Certainly, it would call attention to itself not by neon brassiness but by self-giving compassion. Certainly, it would model a joyful absence of anxiety, taking no thought for the morrow, secure that God has done that already. Certainly it would demonstrate in daily life the surprise of “greater love,” shown by giving oneself in Jesus’ name (John 15:13), and “living hope,” won by God through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).

All easier said than done, of course, so just as certainly our witness would confess its own (our own) failures and seek to overcome the arrogance that so often afflicts the “righteous.”

And if we do all that, not as we ought but as we are able, will the nations or even the neighbors come streaming in? The Spirit will make of our witness what the Spirit will. In the meantime, we will be “present”—to our neighbors, to ourselves, to God—and more than that is not required.

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