

There is no “Why?”

Last Thursday, I noticed that it was the Feast of St. Norbert and my mind was drawn to an old friend by the name of Norbert, whom I got to know while training for the priesthood at Mill Hill. Norbert had been born in Silisia, that part of Germany, which is now Poland, but which, at the end of the Second World War, was taken into the Soviet occupation zone. Norbert's father, however, was in a POW hospital in the Western zone, so Norbert's Mother decided to take her two young sons, Norbert and his brother, and escape to be with her husband in what was to become West Germany, for Russia was beginning to impose an Iron Curtain, which would cut German in two for a generation. She set off, in the winter of 1949, one of the coldest on record; he told me that they travelled sometimes by train, sometimes by begging lifts and finally by crossing the border on foot, in danger from the guards and in danger from the deep snow all around them. But they survived the terrible journey and were able to spend several years with Norbert's father, before his death from war injuries.

Norbert decided to join the Mill Hill Missionaries, a British Missionary Society, which was quite brave of him, for in the 1960s, the memory of the Second World War was still quite fresh and although there were some Austrians in the College, he was the only German. But this was not the only difficulty he had to put up with, there were personal and study problems as well, which caused him to be postponed for a year and asked to deal with these. He did – and when the time came for him to be ordained he was a well integrated member of the community and had many friends – amongst whom I count myself. We all felt that, considering the many troubles he had come through, God must have something special in store for him.

I was not at Norbert's ordination in Germany, but I saw him a few weeks later, when a group of us stayed with him, while on our way to an ordination in Austria. The next day, we wished him well in his new mission in Kenya and said goodbye. That was the last time I saw him. He went to Kenya and, I am told, settled in well. He was liked by the people and the people he worked with. However, one night, about a year after he arrived, thieves broke into his house and, in the course of the burglary, Norbert received a fatal spear wound. When they left, it seems that Norbert was still alive, but was too weak to get across the compound to where the Sisters lived. He just sat there alone and slowly bled to death.

When something like that happens, we are tempted to ask, “Why?” After all that he had gone through, why had God allowed his story to end like that? But there is no “Why?”, there is only an “is”. It happened. Evil has no divine reason. However, our belief in “original sin” speaks to this and says that bad things happen in our world - but they are not the Will of God. Hopes and plans are frustrated and brought to nothing - but this is not the plan of the Almighty. God is not a pawn-master – deciding arbitrarily who is to die and when. The world has its own causality, but not one which answers the question “Why?”, it only says, “This happened!”.

Does this mean that there is no Providence? Does this mean that the hopes and ideals, of people like Norbert, can be just doomed to failure? An answer to this was given me some years later, when another Mill Hill Priest, Declan O'Toole, who had been a student of mine, was stopped on a road in Uganda and gunned down. When I heard this news, I phoned a friend of his, who had been together with Declan,

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at Mill Hill, but who had later left. His reaction surprised me: He exclaimed, “Dammit! Declan has already done what the Lord sent him into the world to do – and here am I, still trying to discover what my task is!”

“Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom.8:35) – nor can anything separate us from the task that Christ shares with me in the world. I am sent into the world as a unique person, with a unique destiny and a unique mission – and God will not allow that purpose to be thwarted. I may never know what that task actually is, but, says Cardinal Newman, if I hold close to God, I will do it. I may have my own ideas about what my task is, but I will probably be mistaken, but this does not matter. For reflecting on the good I discover has been done through me and by me, but of which I was unaware at the time, I realise that my understanding of my mission is not vitally important. The Lord knows where my glory lies and that is enough to ensure that it will come to be – and not even those who kill and destroy can stop that happening. So, what did Norbert achieve? I do not know. But I do know that he was my friend - and who knows what effect that has had in my life?

Diary

Well, I have arrived in Kuching, Sarawak. I am back in the seminary I helped found over twenty five years ago and those around have really made it feel like a home-coming. It began when I got on the plane at Kuala Lumpur for the final lap of the journey. I was sitting at the front of the plane and several people, as they got on, smiled shyly and whispered, as they passed, “Welcome home, Father”.

Over the last few months, I have been preparing a course on Bio-ethics, which I thought I was due to teach this semester. However, I had been misreading the syllabus and it is a course on Political and Social Ethics that I am supposed to be giving. Fortunately, I gave that course here three years ago and so the notes do not need much revision. I really must learn to read things properly – not only in manuals, but also on notices!

The journey to Kuching was not very pleasant. I was using Air Asia, which is a cut-price airline and which now has a direct flight from Bali, but I had forgotten that last weekend was Dayak New Year, a public holiday, and many Sarawakians had obviously gone to Bali for that Holiday. So, when I tried to book the flight, I found that all the seats were taken and so I had to come via Kuala Lumpur, which meant that the journey lasted over eight hours. On these cut price airlines, you are made to feel that you are a cut-price passenger: there are no fixed seats – everyone has to scramble, unless you pay a little more, which I did, and get the first scramble. Then, you have to walk a long way across the tarmac and climb steps up on to the plane. The changeover in Kuala Lumpur was also a scrum, with long, slightly unruly waiting queues. The good thing about Air Asia, however, is that it is much cheaper than other airlines and it is the only airline that has a direct flight from Kuching to Bali – so the trip back will only take an hour and three quarters.

Now and then I get emails from you on my bloglist and I enjoy receiving them. So, if you would like to send me your thoughts about what I have written, you are

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very welcome to do so. Also, if you want to write to chat about something else, you are also very welcome.

God bless,

Terry