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Theology of Community-Nurturing

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If your bedroom is facing the east, sunrise is your alarm. You notice all the movement of stars in the sky by the way (and the time) your bookshelves get lit by the oblique, saturated morning sun rays. The birds wake up, too, even before you do, and get to sing their songs immediately, never minding the sounds of air raid sirens, occasionally brought in from the city by the wind. As I drink my very first-est coffee of the day, the whole room gets soaked in light. With a volume of Polish poet and Catholic priest Jan Twardowski on my lap, I read a poem aloud, knocking down two drones with one shot: as I getting all warm and thoughtful inside from the depth and Christly coziness of Twardowski's homely words, my family, for some reason insensible to the sunrise hints, receives their own tender (and steadily flowing) alarm. Here, the snooze option is out.

"What is 'opłatek'?" – I ask my husband as I stumble upon a Polish word I don't understand. He explains the concept with a story. His family was deported from the territory that belongs to Poland to the Ternopil region, now Ukraine, then – the Soviet Union. The religion was banned, the believers were persecuted, and the families were scattered. Part of their family got relocated to the old German territories in the north of Poland. Somehow, the dispersed managed to find each other, and so the card exchange began. The words on the paper were scarce, but the cards conveyed a deeper, beyond-informational, meaning: we are alive, we remember you, and someday, we shall overcome.

Opłatek, or the Christmas wafer, was sent in a two-fold card from Poland to Ukraine, without a mention of its Christian symbolism. My husband's family broke and shared the opłatek before supper on Christmas Eve. In doing so, they observed an ancient historical tradition representing the family's unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Listening to my husband, I start crying for no reason at all, and then again, for all the soundless reasons at once. I am thinking of the thin, almost transparent piece of bread brought from the church, secured in-between words, sent across the border, received with wonderstruck joy, and shared at the table. Later, as I am traveling in the country with my girlfriends, stopping at a random old palace on our way, I find out that during the last, war-touched Christmas, the Polish nuns residing there have shared their opłateks with women and children who fled there from the constantly shelled Kharkiv. Somehow, the brutality of

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history makes sure the most sacred traditions of community nurturing are passed down.

It reminds me of the way Heinrich Heine once described Torah. He called it the "portable homeland" of the Jewish nation. Forced migration strips people not only of their homes, their relics and their belongings, the familiar places, and the accessibility of their ancestor's graves. It also takes away community, routines, customs, and safety. Not only a place to live, but even one's identity has to be found again, healed, reconstructed, or brought back by the narrative yet to be discovered and put together, piece by piece. To preserve the connectedness, to somehow stick to the roots, even if the link is strained, to hold on to that blurred sense of belonging, one must rely not only on ideas and memories but on something so very tangible to be felt and held close: the bread, for instance. Sometimes, it's only a recipe and a song that can be carried from home through the whole journey of resettlement and wandering. But when winter is over, and spring comes defiantly again, the recipe sprouts into a meal and a song into a celebration. And somehow, you are brought to remembering – wherever you are, however little you managed to know.

The hundreds of generations of Jews considered their difference a survival strategy. Since the Temple was destroyed, Judaism became a home-based religion. The dinner table became a place of worship and a place where family, community, and culture could be nurtured. The recipes, the cuisine core of the portable homeland of Jews, had immense significance.

The indigenous people of America, being resettled by the US homestead law, could not take much with them on the journey, too. They relied heavily on nature, and the landscapes of their new reservations were different. The trees were different, too, and the traditional knowledge was of little help when it came to recipes and details. But the notion of reverence toward everything alive, the belief in the animacy of the world around them, and the conviction that nature always has enough food and medicine to sustain all its species helped them to preserve their bond with the land and each other – at least, until the children were taken from their families to the boarding schools, and made to forget their languages and change their ways.

For a long time, I assumed these practices were too cruel to sneak into the 21st-century legal policies of any country, however barbaric. I was mistaken. Since February 2022, Russia has placed more than 6,000 Ukrainian children in so-called "re-education" camps. And the war still rages on.

I don't know how the weight of it all has not totally crushed us yet. The daily news in Ukraine is almost certainly terrible. There is almost no person left in Ukraine who has not lost a family member, a relative, a friend, or a neighbor in this war. The future does not hold the visible promise of peace yet. And yet, here we are, caring for each other, and, despite what we know and learn and remember, even enjoying the morning sun, the birds chirping, the light, the coffee, the poetry, the beautiful story. Also, the food – and our daily opportunities to share it with those in need, ministering others the way Jesus did.

As the Church is trying to figure out its relevance to the people disrupted by the

war, the question of the soul-care of its own ministers becomes more pressing: who will feed those who are called to feed God's sheep? The war has unveiled it for us in Ukraine, but even in areas that seem as peaceful as can be, the structure of the church is changing so much so quickly that ministers are worn and depleted. The resurrected Savior, with the wounds still fresh on His limbs, appeared on the lakeshore in the wee hours of the morning to cook breakfast for the people he sent out to share His word: his very own tired, crabby, and cheerless disciples in need of a good rest. If I feel his calling to care for others, I must let him care for me first. Blessed are the feet of the one who "brings good news, proclaims peace, brings glad tidings of good things, proclaims salvation." Yet, before sending the disciples' feet on the go to proclaim salvation, Jesus knelt and washed them. The ones who fed the hungry and clothed the naked in Jesus' name did so "not in any way for Christ," wrote Simona Weil, "they could not help doing it because the compassion of Christ was in them." The compassion he showed to me, a sinner, kneeling before my dirty feet to wash them, ignited my desire to follow him. But also, reminded me of the neediness of my soul, created to be made complete not by my own striving but by His grace.

When my Mom, a missionary to Kenya, was sent by her team to a three-day retreat at the Indian Ocean after years of non-stop, no-holiday ministry, she felt that everything suddenly changed. Before, she had her eyes set on pain and need daily, month after month, year after year. And then, with the change of decorations, Mom experienced an unexpected jackpot: she had her long-night sleep, all the quiet hours she needed, and someone taking deliberate care of her very own comfort, and she saw beauty instead. It was a life-changing experience, Mom recalls. She was brave enough to admit her neediness and accept God's grace by letting others pour the love of Jesus into her own life.

If we were to paraphrase Jesus' instructions on love, we could say (to ourselves and each other): have compassion toward your neighbor as you have compassion toward yourself. But then again, what if the latter is nonexistent? When we are weary, will we love the uncomfortable others around us; the pushy, the edgy, the post-traumatic? Love them through all of our actions, our voice tone, and facial expression? And then again, when discouraged, will we let others love us back into being ourselves?

War magnifies personal angst and deepens societal trauma.

Recovery resources are declining and sapping. The crises get more tangled. Communities, even the ones based on shared values and experiences, shard and crumble. Polarization is steadily creeping in. The external, visible suffering is topped (multiplied?) by Anfechtungen – according to Luther, the test of faith in the goodness of God through evil contemplated or experienced.

Our feeling of bondage gets denser: having learned what is good, we remain in the gravity field of evil; the "devil in history" stays right there, and the awareness of finitude becomes not just imaginary but tangible instead. With every piece of news, with every obituary we read, it thickens and builds up. At this point in history, we no longer believe in the myth of super-abundance and irreversible evolutional changes

of historical progress. Instead, together with the groaning creation, we are travailing in pain, awaiting liberation.

And the Liberator is already in our midst.

Acceptance of our vulnerability makes it perfectly clear: our need for Christ is continuous and ever-present. The moment of conversion (the change of course) is as crucial as the continuity of transformation by renewing of our mind (the ongoing movement in the direction of our vocation). Neither the world, history, nor human nature gets better over time; there is no self-fulfilling "bright future." (Political programs don't work; medical programs prove themselves useful only once in a while; and all the magic there was had settled into Gandalf's staff and sailed away together with the elves, alas). Our traumas remain (as did Jesus' wounds), but as long as life continues and we are willing, His healing is at work within us.

When I was a little girl, my mom often told me God had no other hands here on earth but ours. The Body of Christ remained here, boots on the ground: Christ is not an image or an idea. He is incarnate and present in His Church. Since the first Christmas, when God revealed himself to the world as Emmanuel, he has lived among his people, sharing our reality, making eternity palpable in our present. He stayed, continuing his work and inviting us to co-serve and co-create.

And the process of ministering together with him is bilateral. It might be described with the metaphor of inhaling and exhaling. The practical realization of our interaction with God through the church community requires both ministry and humility. Ministry is our openness ad extra, a way from ourselves outward, persisting in the love we deliver to the other. Humility, on the other hand, is allowing someone to serve us in the same way; a declaration of dependence and acknowledgment of our need for Christ present in the other person.

The space of our love is also a space of our vulnerability. God became vulnerable by creating us. Jesus Christ endured suffering on the cross out of love. It is love that makes both God and us, created in His image, exposed to pain. Pain leads us to God. And having found Him in the darkest spaces, we embark on the path of healing through love. This is the path that begins with the Encounter but continues as long as we are imprisoned in time. Healing does not happen overnight but is accomplished in the process: step by step, through the (often tachycardic) rhythm of inhales and exhales. Becoming an answer to someone's need; recognizing a question within ourselves; accepting the answer from the outside; coming to the aid of someone once again. Weaving interdependence to the rhythm of breathing love.

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