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The Spiritual Claim of a Dying Mother – A Complement to Paul’s Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

I have never been with a patient who had to endure unbearable physical pain. My faith has not been tested so crucially. I am not sure whether it would already be up to the task. The tale told by Father Schotsmans (2003, p. 331–336) makes me realize how much I have to work at making that faith grow. But I still want to tell another story, not about unbearable physical pain, but about an experience of unbearable suffering. It recounts my mother’s terminal illness, and it plays on two levels. One level concerns my betrayal to her, the other God’s faithfulness to both of us.

II. MY BETRAYAL

We were Protestants of the customary European sort. We never forgot to pray before meals, led (within reasonable limits) a morally upright life, omitted Sunday services, but frequently thanked God for all his blessings. For my mother, God was a background source of consolation and assurance that all would end well. But there was a proviso attached to her confidence: In the event of unbearable suffering, and if she were unable to kill herself, she would wish that someone would give her a mercy shot. Noticing that this was a substantial fear and concern, I immediately volunteered. I was young, my mothers’ only partner in life, and confident that I would master the technicalities, the courage, and the legal consequences.

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This promise became an important element of our relationship. My mother found ample occasion to be disappointed of me, and I also in many ways failed to live up to the deep friendship that had developed between us during my youth. There was much bitterness in her as she stayed back alone. But she could trust my word, and that was something.

I, on the other hand, had always known that I would care for her whenever this became necessary. I fiercely dreaded the thought, though. It would disrupt our family life and hinder the numerous professional and social activities I pursued. But I dreaded even more the thought of abandoning her to an elderly care facility, and of my own ultimate failure. And so, even though she had firmly resolved not to be a burden on any one, and to refuse a help which she felt came too late (and the motivations of which she keenly divined), I overcame her resistance. It was not disrespect for her autonomy. It was a clear sense of what I owed us. It also recognized that a purer sort of love was alive underneath the guilty feelings which could not bear leaving her in the hands of other people. And she permitted herself to be thus overcome because in the depths of her heart she also knew about that love, and she would not permit her fear of another disappointment to hinder me. At that time she was 79.

These last three years were a time of intense suffering for her. We had moved her to a little apartment next to us, but she hated the village, the neighborhood, the noise of children playing in the street, my eternal shortness of time, her increasing blindness and decreasing mobility, and the pains which remained in spite of the medication. The doctor was reticent about that medication because, as she said, we need to keep some resources in hand, and must avoid the side effects as long as possible.

My mother wanted to die. She experienced her suffering as unbearable. In an almost childlike turn, she must have hoped that her move close to me would restore our earlier two-someness. Her daily disappointment about the limits of our visits or outings was a daily agony for her. She wanted to die, every day. She told our physician; she talked to me about it. She did not explicitly call me to my promise. But that promise had a haunting presence between us. It exposed within me the temptations of wishing that her sufferings might end – and that my burden would be relieved as well. It exposed the many occasions at which I almost gave in to the latter wish and, thus, to the crime of a mental murder.

Finally, I came right out with it. Since I had just become orthodox (another blow to her!), I could not kill her. Her reaction was not as I had feared. She almost seemed relieved. Now no one could reproach her for being a burden.

She, at least, had done her duty. At bottom, she even knew that I was right. This knowledge often subsided, however. Then she railed against her powerlessness and her being at others' mercy. There were times when neighbors called me at night: She had wanted to get away, incredibly managed the stairs, and had fallen in the snow. The medications and the difficulty of getting her to drink enough caused her to begin hallucinating. Several minor strokes put her out of touch for a day or two. During these times, I stayed with her day and night, and entertained her with rational conversation. She always regained her remarkable intelligence and awareness. We changed the medicines and watched the liquid intake. I continued to read to her the memoirs of Emperor Wilhelm II, Speer, and Dönitz. Still, even during the last months, while already living with us, she tried to get to the window, and once asked for matches.

On a merely human level, I lived with the sense of failing her profoundly. But my hands were bound. So I could only persuade, time and again, and to put my love and care for her on the other scale. Each time, the struggle ended with her being at peace, and sustained by a sense of gratitude that dispelled the yearning for death. It became our common warfare against our common enemy.

III. GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Fortunately, during the years before my mother joined us, I had been through another hell. Compared with that experience, my mother's aggressions were harmless. Disappointed love is a hotbed for expertise in humiliating back, but my own pride was already in pieces. Actually, this very condition had triggered my ability to turn to the Orthodox church, where my despair found healing. The work at that turn had already forced me to keep my spiritual life at a boiling point. Now again there was no way but throw myself into constant prayer, pleading for the power of love to overcome self-pity, and to gain humility so as to accept her criticisms. In that sense, being over-taxed can be a (difficult) blessing. I simply imagined myself a nun and my mother a very efficient (ego-crashing) abbess. My memory opened up for details from our common past that made me welcome this chance of offering a loving penance.

Then the miracle began. My mother found courage to look at her failings. She worried about one particular sin. Our Lutheran minister could not help her, even though he tried bravely. With her consent, I asked my spiritual father.

Accepting his advice, she found relief. Ever more often, a tenderness and softness lit up her face and changed her very features. The inveterate rationalist recovered the prayer of her childhood. When I had put her to bed, still cleaning things away in the living room, I heard her saying the words she had wanted to learn: Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Her gratitude transformed my caring chores into what felt like an undeserved privilege. A very slow movement went under way, with starts and stops, and profound backdrops: she yearned for that Orthodox faith and reconciliation. I could hardly believe it. There was no way of exerting pressure: in a moment of anger she would have turned around and blasphemed. I entertained no hopes at all. But she asked questions and found the answers satisfactory. On her prompting, we laboured through the relevant service texts. It took weeks.

But she also told me how difficult it was to reach a decision. At the beginning of December, I once suggested that I could just make that decision for her once she let me know it was time. We settled for that. On Christmas we had a rather little tree. It sat on the ironing board in her room, so that, with the last bit of her sight, she could at least divine the glimmer of the candles. During these days, she breathed with difficulty. An emergency doctor helped her with some shots. On Christmas day, my daughter and I sat on the two sides of her bed singing Christmas carols for her. She suffered very much. I asked her, "Shall I decide for you now?" "No, not yet", she replied. When things got worse, my daughter leaned over her face and asked "Grandmother, should I drive to the monastery and get Father? I can be back in five hours." "Yes, do that", was her answer. Both of us gasped. I asked "To be baptized?" to which she replied, "Yes". So, fourty days before the priest blessed her burial, already lying on her death bed, she was taken into the church.

I was not prepared for the quite different kind of suffering that awaited her after that. My own acceptance into Orthodoxy had been preceded by the torment of repentance. For her, the baptism of tears followed that of water. Her mind was haunted by spectres of relatives and friends who had been a trial during her life. I sat by, powerless, with no lasting access to her consciousness. During these four weeks I was somehow "next to myself". I saw both of us from afar – me helpless and her fighting a past that was threatening her after life future. Of course we took care of medications and all the comforts. But that agony was on another level. I asked a neurologist friend about medication to "calm her down". She advised against it: the suffering would go on "underneath" the subdued expression, and we would not know what was

going on. I asked our spiritual father to pray for her. It got better, but was still bad enough.

Often, I felt supported by a love that encompassed both of us. During such times, I prayed that this suffering should become a blessing, and that my mother would go to the Lord purified. And I could even share that suffering, being aware how much more I need that purification myself. At other times, I was simply desperate, even feeling guilty. Had I not tacitly encouraged her hope that all would be well if only she turned to God? Sometimes, I would even abandon her mentally, close my heart so to at least keep functioning with the daily routines.

Two days before she died, she told me to stop all that talking. One day before she died, she told me to stop touching her. She seemed like an animal, wishing to hide – a final trial for the vanity of a caretaker who could not read the signs. At midnight, I heard her restlessness. Already several times before I had read the prayers for the departing of the soul, being certain that she was dying. She never was. These prayers, on the other hand, take much more than an hour. There was this almost irresistible temptation to obey my own exhaustion, considering a feared next day which had to be gotten through, to close the door, stuff my ears and get some sleep.

I was saved from that trap. Holding her cold hands, I read the prayers while she went through her transition. As my voice recited the sacred words, I gained strength and something like a wild serenity settled within me. I saw her horror and had to hold her down, but it was nothing to worry about. That voice sustained both of us, and as the hours went by, and the prayers went round and round, my mother's face relaxed, she lay back, listening attentively, and then slowly and peacefully went to sleep.

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