
The Holy Spirit: Baptismal Resistance for Such a Time as This

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For I am certain that the afflictions of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Romans 8:18

Paul is writing to a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians; people who are experiencing tension, living under Roman Imperial rule. They are people living “in the Spirit” (vv. 1-17), waiting for full redemption (vv. 19-25), needing the Spirit’s help in weakness (vv. 26-27), questioning if anything can separate them from God’s love (vv. 28-39). And in verse 18, Paul is addressing the community’s real and present suffering. He is not presenting a metaphor. This is not Paul creating imagery for the sake of arriving at a punchline. Paul is introducing himself and the gospel message before his planned visit and is letting the community know that God has given him eyes to see and a heart to empathize with their reality.

I first came across this verse when I was 16 years old in Puerto Rico as part of a Pentecostal church youth group. I remember reading it and repeating it over and over again until I had it memorized. There was something in this verse that lured me in. I “knew” it was a true statement; one that I was to value and hold near. I can now testify that it was the Holy Spirit in the letter; the Spirit hovering over my lived experience as she did in Genesis, over the waters; giving me words I would rest in and believe with stiff-necked hope all throughout my pastoral ministry and discipleship.

At the age of 16, my affliction was in the form of heartbreak. As a young adult, the sufferings came in the form of poverty and the decline of my mother’s health. As an adult, grief overwhelmed me when it came in the form of systemic evil, racism, pandemic, ecclesial crises and a series of deaths. On the journey, I came to recognize afflictions in daily living as described by Isasi-Díaz: “*Lo cotidiano* [daily living in the struggle] the space of the divine-human encounter, the locus theologicus where we meet the divine.”¹ With this ever-renewing realization came the “certainty” Paul writes of; for the divine encounter came precisely on the darkest day and in the most difficult seasons of life. God’s unrelenting faithfulness and unapologetic commitment to show up proved, and continues

1. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 66.

As a young adult, the sufferings came in the form of poverty and the decline of my mother’s health. As an adult, grief overwhelmed me when it came in the form of systemic evil, racism, pandemic, ecclesial crises and a series of deaths. ... This lived experience with the Spirit has taught me to read *mi vida cotidiana* and the afflictions of the present time through the lens of resurrection: no affliction in the present time can or will have the last word; revelation comes, and it is glorious.

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From personal to communal: The Spirit forms resistance communities

But Paul is not writing to isolated individuals holding on to personal promises. He is writing to a community whose afflictions are collective. This is a community facing imperial oppression; enduring ethnic tension between Jewish and Gentile members along with the daily hardship of being marked as followers of a crucified criminal. Their afflictions were not merely spiritual or metaphorical; they were material, political, embodied. And the Spirit who met them in *lo cotidiano* was not forming isolated

mystics but a people; a resistance community capable of practicing resurrection amid an empire's death-dealing; a people who understand that the Spirit does not remove them from their struggle but empowers them within it.

The community in Rome is a community not unlike our own. Oppression, tension, and hardship are our *vida cotidiana*. We wrestle with dehumanizing rhetoric that reduces our neighbors to "violent gangs," "drugged out maniacs," and "violent criminals." We organize as policies separate families, criminalize compassion, and prioritize punishment over healing. We observe spiritual forces that bind up God's beloved creation and prevent the flourishing of life abundant, and we suffer principalities that thrive on fear, division, and despair. We dwell within systems that count on God's people not knowing their baptismal power.

You have been sealed ... You have been marked

"You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." These are not merely comforting words whispered over babies at baptismal fonts. These are words of authority: divine authority to resist the powers that deal death. In baptism we are incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5), which means we share in Christ's prophetic authority to name evil, denounce injustice and proclaim liberation. It is God who establishes us in Christ and has anointed us, by putting God's seal on us and giving us God's Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). This "first installment" speaks to God anointing us by the Spirit with our first identity.

Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*: "In baptism, human beings are torn away from the world and enter into Christ's community."² Gordon Lathrop makes a similar point in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*: "To be baptized is to be part of a people whose vocation is to enact God's alternative to the world's violence and division. Baptism gives us our deepest identity, more basic than nationality, race, class, or any other marker. This identity empowers resistance."³

As such, to be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ from the moment of our baptism is to be authorized by the Triune God to live and lead in response to the demands of the gospel. It is to speak and act in Christ's name against all that diminishes life. It is not to adhere to partisanship or cultural expectation over and against our baptismal identity. It is to be rooted, guided, and motivated by the promise inherent in our baptism: death-dealing works and afflictions cannot, will not, have the last word. And God will use us to make it so.

Baptismal resistance: Daily dying and rising

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tinual struggle against the powers of sin, death, and the devil. We respect, but we do not shy away from, the powers and principalities that wish to claim our sanity, agency, authority, and life itself. We grapple with Luther's teaching on baptism as a "daily dying and rising."⁴ We daily die to that which keeps us from recognizing the neighbor, the need, the injustice, and rise resisting evil in all its forms: particular and systematic. We suffer the realization of biases and stigmas that have made us complicit in abuse of power, oppression, and marginalization. We awake to the myriad possibilities, resources, connections available to us; that we might bend all our life and work toward justice. We daily drown the temptation to be an idle bystander in the face of evil and stand up to participate in what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls "God's liberating work in history."

For in our baptism, "we are incorporated into a death and resurrection that is at once personal and political" and therefore, "we die to the structures of sin" and become participants in co-creating abundant life for all.⁵ In keeping with Gutiérrez's assertion, Oscar Romero preached to his community in El Salvador during the Civil War and declared, "By our baptism we are committed to follow Christ in his mission of liberation. We cannot be neutral."⁶ Four decades earlier, while leading an underground seminary in Poland during the Nazi era, Bonhoeffer said something similar, insisting that "the baptized have no choice but to stand with the oppressed."⁷ And Romero would continue, "Every baptized Christian is called to be a prophet; to denounce sin and announce God's reign of justice."⁸

4. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 465-466.

5. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 206.

6. Oscar Romero, Homily, February 17, 1980. Available in *The Violence of Love*, comp. and trans. James R. Brockman (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1998).

7. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

8. Romero, Homily, February 17, 1.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 21.

3. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 65.

Baptismal renunciation in word and deed

And so as twenty-first century baptized Christians, living and leading in a time of our own socio-political turmoil, we affirm our baptism. When our neighbors are being dehumanized by harsh rhetoric and threatened by policies rooted in fear; when deployment of the National Guard and Immigration and Customs Enforcement to cities in the United States terrorizes us and occupation of and in other countries is trending; and when white supremacy and white nationalism has claimed “Christianity” as superior, motivating and justifying its privilege and entitlement, we affirm our baptism. And when asked, “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?” we refuse to confuse our affirmation of baptism as a mere liturgical recitation. We respond, “**We renounce them!**” in word and in deed. We understand our affirmation as a call to spiritual warfare: the good fight of faith that we are equipped to engage through active prayer and supplication.

This renunciation has concrete implications. Martin Luther himself, often mischaracterized as unquestioningly obedient to temporal authority, insisted on limits. In *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, he wrote: “St. Peter says in Acts 4 [5:29], ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ Thereby, he clearly sets a limit to the temporal authority.”⁹ When asked if people are bound to follow a prince who is wrong, Luther answered plainly: “No, for it is no one’s duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men.”¹⁰ When temporal authority commands us to participate in systems that dehumanize, we say with Luther and with the apostles: “We must obey God rather than men.”

The Spirit sustains us in the struggle

To be who we are, baptized children of God, and act accordingly is costly. To march with or for the oppressed when empire demands complicity, to denounce injustice when silence would be safer, to renounce powers when our livelihoods depend on their goodwill—this is baptismal resistance; this is the way of the cross. This is exhausting and isolating; it can lead to persecution and even martyrdom. How, then, do we endure the good fight of faith? How do we, leaders committed to the gospel along with our communities, sustain prophetic witness across years and decades when systemic powers overwhelm and the afflictions persist?

To begin, let us be reminded that the Holy Spirit is more systematic still.

Our baptismal identity, sealed by the Spirit, marked with the cross, sustains us precisely in our doubt, our frailty, and our weakness, not in our strength. As Nelson Rivera writes, reflecting on Romans 8:26, “The Spirit takes upon itself the responsibility and

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task to pray and plead in our place... the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”¹¹ The Spirit who seals us in baptism doesn’t remove us from *la lucha* but meets God’s people in the thick of it; when words fail and we do not know what to pray. It is the Spirit that perceives the affliction and intercedes with sighs too deep for words. In these moments, according to Rivera, the Spirit’s intercession, the Spirit’s cry comes precisely “out of protest against an inhospitable world,” and this groaning is “an external act and not merely an internal or internalized dynamic, but a public and loud groaning.”¹²

Drawing from Rivera’s pneumatology, we can recognize a pneumatological dynamic: the affliction of God’s beloved creation evokes the Spirit’s intercession. The Spirit’s groaning, in turn, emboldens creation’s loud and public cry. This is baptismal resistance: the Spirit systematically empowering communities to groan publicly for justice, to refuse the silence that empire demands and speak even, and especially, when their voices shake and bodies quake.

This is not abstract theology. I think of congregations providing sanctuary to families facing deportation. I think of clergy who take risks: preaching and teaching Matthew 25 even when they know some in their pews adamantly disagree with Jesus. I think of antiracism collaboratives like the one I work with in the New England Synod of the ELCA; gathering month after month, year after year, trusting that the Spirit who groans with us will sustain the long work of dismantling white supremacy in our church structures. I think of bishops, such as the Rev. Regina Hassanally of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA, who after the murder of René Good wrote public statements, protested, and boldly declared on the public square:

We show up in our flesh on this day because our hope compels us to say we are for justice. We are for peace. We are for courage; we are for integrity. We are for truth. We are for process. We are for a commitment to common humanity and dignity for all of God’s people. And we will not be swayed. Because we have this hope

9. Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed” (1523), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 105.

10. Luther, “Temporal Authority,” *Luther’s Works* 45:125.

11. Nelson Rivera, “Speaking of the Spirit,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 275.

12. Rivera, “Speaking of the Spirit,” 274.

as an anchor, and it is hope not just for some day; it is hope for this day.¹³

This is what it looks like when the baptized claim their Spirit-sealed authority.

The glory being revealed

At 16, I memorized Romans 8:18 without fully understanding what I was claiming. The Spirit hovered over my teenage heart-break, teaching me to read *mi vida cotidiana* through resurrection's lens. Through poverty and my mother's illness, to racism and pandemic, through ecclesial crises and deaths, this verse has held me. The afflictions have been real. The suffering has been material, not metaphorical. And yet, the certainty remains: these afflictions are not worth comparing with the glory being revealed.

Speaking of that which is revealed, it should be noted that God's promise in Romans 8:18 is not only about enduring affliction; it is about revelation. "The glory about to be revealed to us" (or more accurately, *eis hēmas*, "in us" or "through us"). We are not to interpret this verse and assume the Spirit is preparing us merely to receive some instant heavenly glory. Instead, the text is pointing to what the Spirit is already doing; the Spirit is already revealing glory through leaders and the community resisting the Roman Empire. From this interpretation we can recognize a living word for us: the Spirit meets us in *lo cotidiano* not to extract us from the affliction but to reveal resurrection life right where we stand. In fact, we are not only recipients of glory; we are participants in its revelation.

When baptized communities share bread while empire hoards, when we speak truth while empire insists on deceit, when we practice resurrection while empire deals death—this is glory breaking through. When Bishop Hassanally stands in the public square

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declaring hope as an anchor "not just for some day but for this day"—this is glory. When congregations risk legal consequences to provide sanctuary—this is glory. When antiracism collaboratives persist month after month, year after year—this is glory. When preachers preach even when it's costly—this is glory being revealed.

This is the Spirit's work in *lo cotidiano*, in our daily struggle, in our congregation's faithful witness, and every act of baptismal resistance. The Spirit who sealed us, who authorized us for this prophetic work is the same Spirit who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, sustains us in weakness, and reveals glory through our faithful struggle.

I am certain that the afflictions of this present time, real as they are, overwhelming as they feel, cannot compare to the glory being revealed in and through us. This is our baptismal promise. This is our Spirit-sealed calling. This is the certainty that sustains the long struggle: no affliction in the present time can or will have the last word. Revelation comes, and it is glorious!

13. Rev. Regina Hassanally, public statement at memorial for René Good, January 8, 2025, memorial site near 34th and Portland, Minneapolis, Minn. Video available at <https://www.fox9.com/video/fmc-7kobrytl7895vm4z>