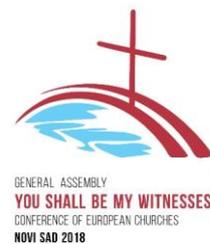


DOC ID	GEN_25
LANGUAGE	ENGLISH
ORIGINAL	English



## **The Therapeutic Witness of Christianity**

Tauri Tölpt

The act of giving witness of our faith in Jesus Christ, the savior of all humanity, has been the cornerstone of Christian life and strength already from its beginning. Apostle Peter's witness created the foundation of the Church and the witness of the penitent thief gave him a life in paradise. Witnessing the salvific role of the Triune God and the identity of Jesus Christ has held a central role in every baptism, that formed the first baptismal creeds and later conciliar dogmas. One might say that the central issue of all the Ecumenical Councils of the first millennia, evolved around the soteriological exactitude of *what we witness*. The same notions seem to govern also nowadays, but have shifted from dogmatic and creedal exactitudes to statements on the exactitude of Christian moral values, that the modern secular world seem to ignore more and more. Under the pressure of a potential conflict with the secular world, Christians feel the need to give even more emphasis on *what* they believe to be the truth.

Though the *what* aspect of witness remains and must remain important for Christians, the world notices other aspects of our witness. As reverend Robert Fulghum has pointed out: "Do not worry that your kids never listen to you; but worry, that they always see you." Kids don't see the truth in the formation of our words, but in the way we present these words, the way our attitude is, when we give witness to these words. The world that sees our witness is very often the same child, that does not pay attention and neither is affected by what we witness but on how we witness.

And it seems to me, that we are very persistent to never make compromises in our truth, but we have no problems making compromises in the way we give witness to this truth. And this is one of the most tragic aspects of witnessing, because forgetting the way we witness, will most probably lead us into a Christian diabolic witness of God, without us even noticing it.

But how is it possible that a Christian witness of God may be diabolic? For that I will tell you a story of Adam and Eve by St John of Damascus, one of the most

authoritative Church Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church. According to St. John, God created us with the passion and desire to seek God and to be like God. The Devil, says John of Damascus, took advantage of this desire that God had implanted in us. The Devil offered Adam and Eve the exact same thing God had already offered them, the same exact thing, that God made them desire. The bait that the Devil used to deceive humanity, he says, was God himself. As chapter 3 of Genesis tells us, the promise of divinity, offered by God is now offered by the Devil himself. Adam and Eve could not distinguish the difference between these two, as the truth and the destination of their movement seemed to be the same: it seemed to be God. But their life and witness became diabolic, because they forgot to follow the way God gave them towards this destination and followed the Devil's way. Whereas God offered a humble and a patient way, where divinity was given by grace in the course of a dynamic history towards maturity, the Devil proposed another way: the way of power and demanding that would egoistically and with impatience take what rightfully and justly should belong to us. In other words, the confusion that the Devil created to Adam and Eve did not take away the aim of becoming like God, but gave a wrong diabolic way of becoming like God. Adam and Eve fell by thinking that they are giving witness to God. In the same way we all fall, every time our witness forgets its divine way and becomes diabolic.

And what witness is diabolic? Every witness that creates and seeks separation instead of unity, war instead of peace, conflict instead of harmony. The Greek word *diabolos* which means to set or put apart, is a spirit that guides every diabolic witness and guided also the old Adam. The Greek word *ecclesia* which proclaims us new Adam, and means coming together, is a spirit that always seeks unity and communion.

The previously cited story of Adam and Eve shows us, that a seemingly secure act of witnessing God may become quite dangerous and that there is a thin line that separates the witness of destruction from the witness of unity.

And I believe that this thin line flows between the two witnessing faces, that St John Chrysostom symbolically calls the Church as a courtroom and the Church as a hospital.

It seems to me that very often we Christians have not decided yet, whether the Church should give witness and reveal herself as a hospital, a courtroom or both.

When we emphasize the Church as a courtroom, then the notions of justice, ethics, value and moral must take a central place. And though all of them are good things they are also very risky things and become dangerous when used solely as a central way of approaching things or as a spirit or mentality.

And all this, because when the Church is a courtroom by human standards, then sinners must be corrected and approached with the same way we approach criminals: condemning and punishing them. In a secular society this law and justice centered

approach is considered very normal and we wouldn't imagine it otherwise. Condemning and punishment seems to be the most universal ways to control the often violent homo sapiens and keep order. But it also satisfies our demand for justice and creates a secure feeling.

Our modern secular society seems to know this aspect all too well. A child rapist or a #metoo harasser, will be crucified by the media and society as an exiled outlaw and if it goes well, then also by the court law. Destined to feel guilt and shame the rest of its life without forgiveness and forgotten by us all. This sadly is the harsh consequence of being a sinner in this justice demanding reality we live in. But as a friend of mine geneticist says: "This is how nature works and this is how species keep their order, survival and stability." And though judicial is the way how the fallen world works, it's not how the church should work. Because we are not called to witness the reality of the fallen world, but the reality of a resurrected world.

History has shown us that a Church that presents itself with the face of a courtroom, will usually also start implementing herself, as apostle Paul refers to it, via the weapons of the "flesh", that is via the means of the fallen world: via demanding, threatening, fear, via position of power that demands obedience, self-justification and preservation of its historical position. Such a judicial face will see its witnessing dogma only as a tool to seek out heretics and to condemn them with pleasure and without the hope for salvation. It will use its ethics and values to bring out others' imperfections and errors so that it could shine with its ruling perfection. The Church as courtroom will show to the fallen humanity its verdict: guilty in all charges and condemned to punishment. Even Martin Luther refers to this a condemning, judicial and guilt creating face of the Church, that made him want to escape this reality. A judicial Church will use the same ways to fight the threats of the secular world, witnessing God as yet another political control and condemning mechanism, which does not differ from all the other mechanisms of the fallen world. For my secular co-patriots this is the first thing that comes to mind when they think of the Church, and a primary thing that diabolically keeps them far away from it. But may it be as it is, the biggest thing that such a witness will never take in account, is that our world has fallen sick and should be approached as we approach the ones who have fallen ill.

The judicial way of witnessing does not understand what St John Chrysostom understood while he wrote: *"The Church is a hospital and not a courtroom for souls, she does not condemn on behalf of sins but grants remission of sins. Nothing is more joyous in our lives than the thanksgiving we experience in the Church. In the Church the joyful sustain their joy. In the Church, those worried acquire merriment, and those saddened joy. In the Church the troubled find relief, and the heavy-laden rest. "Come", says the Lord, "Near me all you who labor and are heavy-laden with (trials and sins) and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)"*

If John would have lived nowadays, he could have easily been a good marketing agent of a healing spa or a sanatorium, that helps us the northerners to have relief from the harsh reality of darkness and cold. The Church, according to St John Chrysostom, should therefore be something similar: a sanctuary for the people who live in the darkness and cold of the fallen world and are in a desperate need of care and therapy, and not of condemnation and punishment.

For the Orthodox tradition the fallen humanity and the world are seen as victims, who by a diabolic confusion have made themselves ill from sin and suffer from it. The fallen world is not a divine punishment that would satisfy a just God, but a mental reality we create ourselves. There is no need for extra divine punishment neither from His side and neither from our side, because the tragic situation of the fallen world is already all the punishment it needs. For salvation, God does not offer the same thing that the fallen world already offers and represents. Such a witness wouldn't give our aching world anything new that it already doesn't know, leaving it no choice, but to stay away from the Church and seek for solutions in illusionary positivism and forgetful hedonism. But God offers us an alternative and a hope of a way out from this self-inflicted punishment. And that is why God approached us in a different way and became a witness to salvation and true divine justice in a therapeutic way.

St. John of Damascus writes: *"While we were running away from God and hated Him, He ran after us and when He came to us, then He did not control us with strictness and He did not convert us close to him with a whip, but he was as a wise physician, who was reviled by the sick that had become mad, but to whom he offered his therapeutic service. And despite the fact that He was reviled and persecuted, He showed patience, so that we would all follow his steps. And all that, so that the ill would become well."*

For John of Damascus, Christ wanted the world and the old Adam to give witness to the new Adam by imitating the way He redeems the world. His witness and call was therapeutically gentle, so that we would not be frightened and would have the courage and hope to enter the healing process. His witness was therapeutically patient because He knew that we are ill and often not aware of what we do. In a harsh world, governed by a self-centered judicial dictatorship, Christ gave us an alternative way of self-denial and self-sacrifice.

Though Christ is the only judge, He gave up being judge for the sake of our salvation; though He is the source of all power and governance, He became a servant and a slave for our sake. And all this, because He knew that only a therapeutic approach of love would make a stoned and a cold heart melt and be flesh again. All that He taught us.

But how to truly know that the judicial approach of witness is not love and does not lead us to salvation? May be the whips and punishments are the only disciplinary ways

that lead us to true salvific love? Again I will use St John of Damascus to give us a way to check whether our witness is truly therapeutically loving and whether it will lead to salvation or not.

He writes: *"We must remember that Christ loved us despite the fact that we are His enemies and He has mercy on us and when He does, He humbles Himself and because He was humbled, humanity was saved. Because from love comes mercy and from mercy humbleness and from humbleness salvation."* If our witness of love is not followed by mercy and humbleness, then it's not Christian love and will give no witness to the hope of salvation. Our witness is therapeutic and loving only then, when it is merciful and we are truly humble. Christ showed us, that such a witness, imitated by us, will create a powerful recipe that melts the cold hearts of a mad and ill humanity. Such is the witness that we all should give and such is the only protecting weapon of our warfare to use, when our values seem to be attacked and undermined by the secular world. "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh", writes apostle Paul, but they are of Spirit.

Sounds beautiful, doesn't it. So why don't we believe in it and why do we secretly think it's an impossible utopia? The problem with the therapeutic witness is that it is one the hardest things in life. It's easy to judge, be impatient, condemn, demand from a position of power and fight with the weapons of the "flesh". These acts seem to come out naturally. But love, patience, mercy and humbleness - the weapons of the Spirit - are so hard to keep and so easy to lose. And that, because they need training, constant reminding and asceticism. The judicial witness of a Church as a courtroom will usually become diabolic, because its existence doesn't need ascetics, whereas the therapeutic witness needs constant training of faith that would keep us in communion with the experience of a merciful and humble love. If we lose this communion, then without even noticing it, we will also lose the capacity of a therapeutic witness. But with the witness and example of Christ, who gave us His guiding Spirit, and with the training of our free will, it is possible to give the same imitating witness of our wise divine Physician, who knows that illness never defines the ill. As Clement of Alexandria has put it: *"To love your enemy is not to love evil, apostasy, adultery nor theft, but to love the thief and the adulterer; not in relation to the sin, because sin is an energy that poisons the name of humanity, but to love because it is human and a creation of God."*