

# Contemplating Suffering: Liturgical Imagination and Ethical Conviction<sup>1</sup>

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## **Mysticism and Politics: a Liturgical Prolegomenon**

**C**hristian faith, no mere assent to ideas, is only genuinely known as a way of life, a praxis, an ongoing immersion in the *paschal mystery*. The salvific content of the paschal mystery is most fully revealed in the church's celebration of its liturgy, especially the sacraments of Eucharist and baptism. The performance of *liturgical* worship, however, far from being an end in itself, is for the purpose of revealing our entire lives as an ongoing act of worship, of glorifying God by sharing in God's creative and redemptive action in our world. Perhaps the most prominent metaphor for our entrance into the life of faith is Saint Paul's description of baptism as our being buried with Christ in death, "so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).<sup>2</sup> Having no sooner made this indicative proclamation of our death to sin in Christ, Paul immediately goes on to exhort believers not to allow sin to have any power over us (6:14). This is but one way of describing the mystery that *is* the Christian life of faith, a life patterned on Christ's God-given mission of redemptive solidarity with a suffering world. For his having faithfully carried out that mission even to death, God raised Jesus from the dead, making him the source of life for all who would embrace faith in him as a praxis of *following* him.

What prevents a Christian life patterned on redemptive suffering from being an exercise in divine-human sadomasochism<sup>3</sup> is our ongoing surrender to the paschal mystery, a tragically beautiful dialectic of mysticism and ethics.<sup>4</sup> If what sustained Jesus of Nazareth in his mission—especially as its social-ethical implications caused increasing conflict with religious and political authorities—was his mystical relationship with God, so, too, Christians sustain lives of solidarity with the suffering by their mystical practices of prayer and liturgy. The Eucharist, most importantly as celebrated on the Lord's Day, is the source and summit of the Christian life,<sup>5</sup> the enacted, lived proclamation of the Lord's death as the very revelation of God's life for the world. What so often threatens the possibility of knowing the joyful character of such a life is the loss of the tensive quality of the paschal mystery, the awareness that Christ's suffering and death are only redemptive because of the revelation of who he is—and, therefore, who God is *for us*—in his resurrection. Hence, the centrality of eucharistic worship as the weekly revelation in word and sacrament of ourselves and our world is the ongoing story of God's redemptive presence and action among those who suffer. The Sunday Eucharist, the original Christian feast,<sup>6</sup> draws together into one body, the living Body of Christ, all of our lives of prayer and service in union with all the world's struggling search for and unnamed encounters with God.

When Paul teaches, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12), he wants believers to understand that their lives are now bound in solidarity with all Christ's members: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). The challenge for Christians in the late-modern world lies in comprehending the scope of this one Body of Christ, with its many members. Following the dogmatic ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, we know that Christ's members, the church, cannot be limited to the Roman Catholic Church (even as it subsists therein), nor merely to Christian ecclesial bodies but, rather, embrace the breadth of humanity in this world.<sup>7</sup> The mission of the church, the mission of all its members, is a compassionate solidarity with the joys and hopes of all people, especially the poor and suffering.<sup>8</sup> As Edward Schillebeeckx argued more than two decades ago, the global proportions of systemic human suffering, as well as our awareness thereof through the telecommunications media, do not allow contemporary North Atlantic Christians a merely domestic, provincial, let alone nationalistic, view of the poor who constitute the suffering members of Christ's Body. For this reason, Christian holiness today is necessarily a political holiness, a

life of witnessing to God's universal salvific will for suffering humanity.<sup>9</sup> What distinguishes social-political action as a work of *Christian* solidarity is its mutually informing relationship with mystical activities of prayer and, especially, the liturgy: "Politics without prayer or mysticism quickly becomes grim and barbaric; prayer or mysticism without political love quickly becomes sentimental and irrelevant interiority."<sup>10</sup>

This paper is an exploration into how the solidarity envisioned by Christian tradition, as advanced by the Second Vatican Council, takes practical shape today through one particular medium, namely, the written text. My concern is with how the contemporary, well-educated, socially secure North Atlantic believer is able to read texts which testify to horrific human suffering—specifically, the Guatemalan narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and, more briefly, the passion narratives—so as not to be immobilized by their terror but, rather, to be moved with a desire to encounter God in the suffering humanity therein. Menchú's story and the passion narratives each bear both mystical and political dimensions, even though the former might be thought of more in political terms and the latter, the mystical. In starting with the Guatemalan narrative we shall see how a narrative of suffering, even one with a politically testimonial intent, relies on symbol and performativity for its viability as a persuasive text. A close reading of certain parts of the text, as well as consideration of the academic controversies which have surrounded it, will invite reflection on the role and function of memory in religious and political praxis. The results of that investigation will, in turn, invite consideration of how contemporary scholarship concerning the biblical accounts of Jesus' death carries the promise of a social-political hope, even as the passion narratives draw from deep mystical, prophetic wells for the images which draw us into solidarity with Christ in his suffering and death. I shall conclude with whatever insights about the praxis of solidarity in suffering can be gleaned from my engagement with these texts.

### Reading a Testimonial of Terror

#### 1. *The theological context of the reading*

From the moment of its initial publication in Spanish in 1983 and then its appearance in English translation in 1984, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* quickly gained status as the premier example of "testimonial literature" within the discipline of Latin American studies, as well as "a cornerstone of the multicultural canon"<sup>11</sup> of North American higher education. Latin Americanist scholars began identifying nearly

three decades ago an original type of writing emerging from marginalized peoples, a form of “resistance literature” whereby the subaltern narrator gives personal testimony to the suffering, injustice, and struggle experienced by her people so as to gain sympathy and support for their cause of liberation. The person giving the testimony (most often a woman) usually speaks the account to an anthropologist or some other scholar, who then attempts to convey the narration as accurately as possible in printed text.<sup>12</sup> The scholarly significance of testimonial literature lies in its ability to reorder the subject-object relationship between ethnographers and indigenous peoples; its hybrid structure, fitting the categories of neither autobiography, biography, nor historical novel neatly; and its ability to “militate against the increasing postmodern concerns that realism and representation are dead.”<sup>13</sup> The Menchú text has proven so popular in such collegiate departments as anthropology, history, and literature across North America due to the compelling way in which the narrator conveys in the first person the bitter reality of her Quiché (Mayan) people. While controversy over the veracity of key passages in the book has raged in recent years, professors, far from abandoning the book, have used it to explore further issues concerning the nature of the spoken and written word, the impact of politics on literature, the social construction of individuality and communal identity, and so forth.

I myself became engaged with *I, Rigoberta Menchú* both as a research scholar, preparing a doctoral exam in ritual and performance theory, as well as a fledgling college teacher, preparing a course in political theology for undergraduates at Emory University. Having first learned of the book as a notable bridge between oral and written performance, I skimmed its content and, discovering Menchú’s status as not only a Guatemalan Indian but a Nobel peace laureate (1992), decided to assign it as one of the biographical narratives for my nascent course, “Religious Experience: Suffering, Politics, and Liberation.” The book, a first-person account from the Christian base community movement in Latin America, would provide images and stories to animate and, hopefully, motivate the undergraduates’ subsequent reading of a text in liberation theology by brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff.<sup>14</sup>

When I first read the book in the summer of 1994 I found myself, like so many others, riveted by Menchú’s descriptions (as transcribed and edited by Marxist anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray) of the hard but rewarding life in her native mountain village, the brutal working conditions on the coffee plantations near the coast, her degrading experience as a maid in the capital city, and the mounting danger and then catastrophic visitation of the Guatemalan civil war upon her people.

Menchú interspersed this quasi-historical narrative with explanations of the folklore, religious beliefs, and customs of her people, all the while asserting that she was also withholding secrets her people are sworn to guard from the totalizing consumption of wider society. While Rigoberta’s account of the hardships of her people were at times difficult for me to stay with, it was when I began reading the protracted grisly account of her brother Petrocinio’s public torture and execution that I became unsettled and distressed, feelings which would return as I read of her mother’s prolonged rape, torture, and death.

When I reached the chapter recounting her brother’s torture and death, I could no longer read in the silence of my room. The terror was too much to endure alone or even to bear as an interlocutor with Rigoberta. I began playing a recently acquired CD of Maurice Duruflé’s *Requiem*, exquisitely recorded by the Symphony Orchestra and Boys Choir of Vilnius, Lithuania. For me the climax of this recording of the work occurs in the fourth of its eight movements, the *Pie Jesu*, in which soprano soloist Grazina Apanaviciute (b. 1940) begins in soft but stalwart supplication to the Lord Jesus, mounts a crescendo beseeching rest for the dead that by its own beautiful force bears already the assurance of the Lord’s presence and compassionate response, and finally recedes into a quiet dwelling upon the Latin words for “rest eternal.” My reading of the terrifying text in the secure comfort of my sunny room had become a performance in concert with Menchú’s narration, the Lithuanians’ musicality, and Duruflé’s composition.

I mention the specific recording of Duruflé’s *Requiem* because from my initial listening I had found the performance powerfully nuanced to the point of being genuinely prayerful, and yet I also found myself speculating on the fact that, given the recording’s date in the early 1990s, the performers (adults and children) had grown up and lived behind the Iron Curtain. Lithuania: What stories did these singers, musicians, and conductor themselves bear? How could the world of war into which the soloist Apanaviciute was born and reared in the Baltics, as well as the Stalinist-Soviet rule of her homeland, not have contributed to the passion with which she sang her *Pie Jesu*? What lives of faith—religious or otherwise—might these Lithuanians have practiced or were practicing still? Duruflé, I was motivated to learn, wrote his *Requiem* in the wake of the Second World War. When asked why the *Dies Irae* figured so minimally in his composition, he had remarked that more than enough wrath and terror had already been performed in the war. Drawing on the serene beauty of the Gregorian chants, he wrote his *Requiem* in prayerful honor for his fallen countrymen, for whom he wished only peaceful

rest. In minimalizing the *Dies Irae*, he was making the historicity of the terror of World War II a constitutive element of his aesthetic work. By employing the Gregorian requiem chants as the basis for his modern composition, Duruflé also made the believers who had practiced the Christian traditions for death down through the centuries a part of its every performance.

## 2. Encountering the narrative as a mystical-political testimony

It remains for me to describe my engagement with Menchú's account of her brother's and mother's deaths, accounts which I found draw heavily on biblical images of the Suffering Servant, the passion narratives, and the Second Book of Maccabees. Menchú thereby joins her people to all generations of faithful martyrs who have gone before. She begins the horrible story of her brother's torture and death by noting the date, 1979, setting the demise of Petrocinio, a catechist and political organizer, squarely in a period when the clash between the military-backed land developers and indigenous resistance fighters caused the army to react "in such a way that confrontations, killings, torture, and massacres [became] part of a generalized social experience."<sup>15</sup> Rigoberta places her brother's suffering and death not only in the context of a large group of rebels whom the army had rounded up for public execution, not only in the context of events that led to more than a million Guatemalan Indians fleeing or being displaced from their homes by the mid-1980s, but also in the context of biblical faith and narrative, centered around the crucified Christ.

In explaining the origins of her brother's demise, Menchú recounts a Judas-like betrayer: "a *compañero*, a person who'd always collaborated and who had been in agreement with us. But, they offered him fifteen *quetzals*—that's to say fifteen dollars—to turn my brother in, and so he did."<sup>16</sup> The army seizes Petrocinio as he is walking with a girl. They bind his hands and drive him with kicks "over rough ground where there were stones," and Rigoberta states, "My brother fell, he couldn't protect his face. The first part of him to begin to bleed was his face."<sup>17</sup> The testimony thus rings of the imagery of the Stations of the Cross, with the Christ-figure falling repeatedly, his face in need of Veronica's cloth. Rigoberta (without explanation) introduces the girl's mother at her side, such that the two women follow along as witnesses, not unlike the women in the passion narratives (Mark 14:40-41; Luke 23:27,55; John 19:25): "They were risking their lives by following my brother and finding out where he was being taken."<sup>18</sup> The military men berate the women with propaganda

which amounts to a sort of trial of Petrocinio for the women's benefit, telling the women that as a communist and subversive he deserved to die, phrases reminiscent of words spoken against Jesus in his trials before the Sannhedrin and Pilate.

As Rigoberta turns to the details of Petrocinio's torturous execution, she echoes passages of the Suffering Servant poems of Deutero-Isaiah. "It's an unbelievable story"<sup>19</sup> (Isa 53:1: "Who has believed what we have heard?"). "When they'd done with him, he didn't look like a person any more. His whole face was disfigured with beating, from striking against the stones, the tree trunks"<sup>20</sup> (Isa 52:14: "Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond that of mortals"). This soliloquy-like plaint initiates Menchú's pages-long description of the army's interrogation and unthinkable series of tortures inflicted on the body of her brother and numerous other people, several of whom her brother, she says, recognized as "catechists . . . who'd been kidnaped from other villages and were suffering as badly as he was."<sup>21</sup> The army demands to know why Petrocinio carries a Bible, why priests and nuns are subversives, whether the "whole community" is related to the guerrillas. Later, in the final scene of public execution, the commanding officer declares the prisoners subversives, Cubans, and communists (Isa 53:12b: "[he] was numbered with the transgressors"). The body of Menchú's account of her brother's ordeal functions as a testimony to the persecution of the Christian base communities in Guatemala, a movement which, in the language of liberation theologians, is a praxis of mysticism and politics that identifies the members with the suffering Christ.

The account is framed by a closing scene which once again proves itself an extended meditation informed by Christian Scripture and tradition. Once the victims have been burned to death before the forcibly assembled, terrified populace, the people move forward to take possession of the bodies. The cowardly army recedes. Rigoberta meditates on her mother's suffering with an image inspired by the tradition of the *pieta*, as well as the thirteenth Station of the Cross: "My mother was half dead with grief. She embraced her son, she spoke to him, dead and tortured as he was. She kissed him and everything, though he was burnt." Rigoberta does not neglect the role of the assembly, the faithful community: "I said to her: 'Come, let's go home.' We couldn't bear to watch, we could not bear to keep looking at the dead. . . . So we had to go, to leave it all behind and leave off looking."<sup>22</sup> One is reminded of Luke 23:48: "And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts." As in the

passion narratives, the forces of nature likewise give a dark response to the cosmic-historic disaster (Matt 27:45,51; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45): "And it started to rain; it rained heavily."<sup>23</sup>

The ensuing chapters of the book are about the deaths of Rigoberta's father, during the revolutionaries' siege of the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City, and of her mother, whom the army kidnaped in 1980. The account of her mother's death I find highly reminiscent of the martyrdom of the mother and seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7. Like the faithful, courageous Jewish woman in the biblical story, Rigoberta's mother has also first been made to witness the deaths of at least two sons, and her own death is as terrible as their fates. After repeatedly raping her the army "shaved her head," tried to coerce a confession and denunciation of the movement from her, "cut off her ears . . . cut her whole body bit by bit," and so on.<sup>24</sup> The ordering of bodily mutilation is likewise the king's response to the seven sons' refusals to denounce their Jewish practices (see 2 Macc 7:4, 5,7). After desecrating Rigoberta's mother's corpse, the army "left a permanent sentry there to guard her body so that no-one could take it away, not even what was left of it"<sup>25</sup>—an image which evokes the political-religious conspirators' concern about the body of the dead Jesus in the passion narratives. Might Menchú intend the reader's association of her mother with the crucified Christ? She closes the chapter by reporting that dogs feed on the corpse. It was left there in the elements for months until it utterly disintegrated, was totally gone. One can hear in this conclusion the Johannine women's distress over the disappearance of Jesus' corpse. Menchú's description of the scavenging dogs will return later when I discuss current scholarship on the passion narratives.

### 3. *The ethical imperative of reading*

The solitary reading of any text, whether aloud or in silence, is itself an act of performance. My act of reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, while solitary, was not in isolation from an array of historical "communities": Guatemalan indigenous peoples, Christian base communities, the Lithuanians, French, and all who had endured, died in, and lived beyond World War II, people behind the Iron Curtain, generations of Western believers celebrating requiem Masses, and American undergraduate students with whom I would soon engage the Menchú book. I read, moreover, in the company of Jewish biblical martyrs (those of the Maccabean and Jesus movements) and, most significantly, the Suffering Servant figure of Christ, as portrayed in Deutero-Isaiah and the passion narratives. Reading a text

of terror requires, it would seem, a multi-faceted performance, a recourse to art and image, poetry and music, prayer and worship, Scripture and tradition, *just as* these resources were (and are) essential to the one who produced the text herself. In Gadamerian and Ricoeurian terms, the world the reader creates in front of the text can only come about by engaging the world within, behind, and even ahead of it.

The introduction of hermeneutical theory, however, points to ethical issues of reading, issues concerning valid readings, that one simply cannot avoid. Was my reading of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*—a reading I would describe as a prayerful, paradoxically consoling, if not a quasi-liturgical experience—valid? To what end? Or in drawing upon such an array of historical figures, religious-musical resources, and biblical imagery—with the redemptive suffering figure of Christ pervading them all—had I subverted the power of the *testimonio* by ameliorating the startling alterity of the marginalized woman and people who would want to "speak" to me? How does my reading of this text function both mystically and politically? How do those two categories relate within the performance of reading itself and in relation to other practices, both political and mystical, by me as a first-world Christian? And, specifically, what is the relationship between my performance of reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and my participation in the church's liturgy? In raising these issues I need first to report further some of the North American scholarship about testimonial literature so as, then, to proffer my own analysis of the role of such textual and liturgical performances in the life of a mystically-politically committed faith.

## How to Read Testimonio: Scholarly Debate and Theological Response

### 1. *Scholarly debate*

Although from the time of its initial publication the subject of much lively—and highly sympathetic—scholarly debate in scores of conference papers, scholarly articles, book chapters, and dissertations, *I, Rigoberta Menchú's* controversial character reached its greatest notoriety in late 1998 when the *New York Times* published a cover story, "Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged," along with the subtitle, "Tarnished Laureate." Picking up on U.S. anthropologist David Stoll's book-length study which led him to conclude that Menchú's book "cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be,"<sup>26</sup> the *Times* sent its own investigative reporters to interview people in Guatemala who would, in the newspaper's estimation, be in a position to judge the veracity of Menchú's narrative.

Not surprisingly, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* picked up on the controversy within weeks, with articles, essays, and letters to the editor on the topic appearing well into 1999. Highlighted was the evidence that Menchú must have fabricated several of the key experiences and episodes of her narrative: her working as a child on the oppressively exploitative coffee plantations, her lack of any formal education and only recent acquisition of Spanish, the nature of the land dispute unsettling her people and, most notably for this present paper, the detailed account of Petrocinio's public execution.

Scholars had from the start acknowledged and discussed the genre of Menchú's narrative as *testimonio*, in terms of her speaking in the first person *singular* as witness to a reality she shared in the first person *plural*.<sup>27</sup> Repeatedly noting how in the opening lines of the book Menchú declares her story to be not merely about herself but her entire people,<sup>28</sup> academicians have enjoyed extended inquiries and debates into how the *testimonio* amounts to an original form of literature, breaking the paternalistic, heroic, hegemonic genres of the Western autobiography and historic novel.<sup>29</sup> In the dozen years of this scholarship prior to the internationally publicized charge against Menchú's personal moral character,<sup>30</sup> various analysts acknowledged and discussed the ways in which Rigoberta's narrative synthesized a range of her people's experiences much wider than her own individual or personal ones (to use utterly modern, if not postmodern Western academic categories). This very quality of her text contributed to its cause for study as an original political-literary form.

The key to the uproar over the *Times* and *Chronicle* stories and, by association, Stoll's book was how they amounted to charging Menchú with being a flat-out liar, with the *Times* article taking little to no account of the years of scholarly analysis concerning *testimonio*'s obviously strong political, persuasive intent. A little over a month after the *Times* article broke, Menchú acknowledged to the press that her portrayals of her family members' deaths were not based on her witnessing them with her own eyes and that she had more education than she depicted in her testimonial. She nonetheless remained unapologetic, the *Times* reported, for the "truth" about the injustice and oppression her people suffer, a truth she sought to bring to a world audience.<sup>31</sup> At the end of that *New York Times* article Stoll claimed he never intended to accuse Menchú of lying.<sup>32</sup> Some professors view Stoll's work, beginning with his dissertation at Stanford, as providing a correction to Northern academicians' uncritical reading of texts in support of leftist revolutionary movements in Latin America.<sup>33</sup> Others hold a darker opinion of Stoll's intentions.

One article in a magazine published by Duke University Press claims that Stoll announced the publication of his *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of Poor Guatemalans* "by stating that the 'liar' Rigoberta Menchú would finally be unmasked."<sup>34</sup> Another voice in the Northern academic minority has been Denish D'Souza who, while on the faculty of Stanford, denounced the Menchú book as part of the University's multicultural general-education curriculum. Now a research scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, D'Souza has continued to criticize the academic value of the book, notably using a metaphor from Christian tradition to condemn its social-political purpose: "Rigoberta is a modern Saint Sebastian, pierced by the arrows of North American white male cruelty; thus her life story becomes an explicit indictment of the historical role of the West and Western institutions."<sup>35</sup>

The views of those both negatively and positively critical of Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* certainly provide evidence for the narrative's power to elicit a political, social-ethical response from its Northern readers. Indeed, among the vast majority of scholars who write supportively of the book a major topic of concern is the nature or type of truth this textual genre conveys. A survey of letters to the editor in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the wake of that journal's and the *New York Times*'s explosive 1998-1999 articles, as well as scholarly articles written since then,<sup>36</sup> yields the following pairs of opposed categories: literal truths versus larger truths, fact versus fiction, collective memory versus history, narrative versus legal testimony, narrative truths versus historical truths, strict veracity (of modern autobiographies) versus embroidered facts (of testimonials). The authors of the essays in which these dialectics function must take a moral/ethical position on the social-political conditions in Menchú's native Guatemala and perhaps, by extension, on the those of the entire Third World. A scholar's position in this regard carries, as well, one's judgment concerning the social and political positions of the citizenry and government of the United States. Issues of class and gender and, dare I say, religious commitment come into play. In a word, the debates over the veracity of Menchú's *testimonio* shed as much light on the ethical thought-world of us academicians as on Rigoberta herself, leaving open the question of our ability to allow her and her people genuinely to confront us, as well as our ability to join them in an ethically viable solidarity. If the genre of *testimonio* is what marginalized, oppressed peoples need in order to elicit help from those who enjoy, even take for granted, the quotidian privileges and powers they experience as rights on the basis of their economic and political locations, then must not we who read such texts, while doing so critically, not maintain a position of



respect for the strategies their narrators find essential to conveying the “truth” of their situations?

Doris Sommer, a professor of Latin American literature at Harvard, in a 1995 essay explores Rigoberta’s repeated assertions that she is withholding much information from the reader, her interlocutor, out of respect for the Mayan people’s traditions and, Sommer seems to judge, as a strategy to elicit sympathy and support. Elucidating at length the ethical quandary generated for the reader by the secretive-disclosive tension in Menchú’s narrative, Sommer arrives at this quandary:

Do I continue to think about testimonials as a subgenre of the autobiography, and so to take their strategic coyness as a permissible departure from the familiar genre; or does the departure constitute a generic and political difference? Evidently this presents another moment of tension between *can* and *should*. At what political and aesthetic price might I favor one generic category rather than highlight the nagging lack of fit? Does the difference boil down to an ethical imperative? Should I defend the difference as an extension of Rigoberta’s own cultural self-defense, even in the face of an apparent overlap with a familiar form? Again, the question finally may be undecidable outside of tactical concerns. Some readers will prefer to project themselves in familiarly heroic autobiographical terms through this apparently available text; and others will take note of its warnings against appropriation.<sup>37</sup>

While Sommer makes an important contribution to the ethical inquiry into the academician’s reading of this testimonial, she seems to privilege Rigoberta’s *Mayan* tradition as the sole authentic cultural source of Rigoberta’s alterity or “difference” from North American academia. I would argue, however, that this is to neglect another fundamental social-cultural source for Rigoberta’s ethical strategy in narration, namely, biblical Christian tradition.

## 2. Theological response

I find Menchú’s narrations of her brother’s and mother’s protracted, torturous deaths anything but coy, not only in terms of the excruciating detail with which she describes their terrors but also the (to me) obviously *open* use she makes of biblical imagery and texts to persuade the reader—at least the *Christian* reader as a subset of potential Northern sympathizers—to join in solidarity with her people’s cause. I must confess to finding Sommer inordinately skeptical or even jaded about the role of Christian faith in Rigoberta Menchú’s life and, thus, its role in

Rigoberta’s political strategies. Sommer discusses Rigoberta’s Christianity as one of several strategies for forming revolutionary alliances, a matter of Rigoberta’s rejecting institutionally committed, conservative Catholic priests and nuns while, “careful to keep opportunities open,”<sup>38</sup> providing a positive description of “some” nuns and priests who converted to the cause of the oppressed. I assume that the opportunities Sommer implies here consist of supportive liberal Christians to the North. Sommer never acknowledges Rigoberta’s repeated self-identification as a catechist, nor her application of that title to her martyred brother. Could Sommer’s seemingly jaded estimation of Menchú’s appropriation of Christianity as one among “multiple unorthodoxies”<sup>39</sup> for her testimonial discourse contribute to Sommer’s utter ignoring of Rigoberta’s use of Christian Scripture and tradition as crucial sources not only in her *narrative-textual* strategy but for her very life itself?

The ethical burden of Sommer’s laudable argument—that Menchú’s textual secrets prohibit any easy identification of the Northern academician with the Mayan woman and her people—need not be defeated by the Christian reader’s identifying with Rigoberta’s mystical meditation upon the agonies of her tortured and executed people. Finding myself so deeply moved by the stories Rigoberta crafts by means of biblical symbolism and texts, I do not thereby immediately, facelessly identify with her or the victims. I do not intimately whisper back to her, “I know exactly what you mean. I feel the same pain.” I do not, I cannot because the very nature of biblical faith in Christ, of traditional faith in the paschal mystery, of faith in the historical-political event of his torture and execution as the revelation of *God’s* identification with all victims prohibits it. To participate in the church’s liturgy is to know that the totality of identification with and, thereby, the redemption of all human suffering resides and comes forth only from the God of Jesus Christ in the power of their Spirit. We know, as we go *to* the liturgy as the summit of our lived praxis of faith and *from* it as the source for our continued following of the Servant Christ, that of the fullness of that redemption “seated at the right hand of God” humanity still only partakes some small share, revealed in the pieces of the one loaf repeatedly broken, the one cup poured out. To be baptized into Christ’s death is to join in the divine-human project of Christ that is not yet completed in history—be it the broken, sinful history of any one of our lives or that of all the world—but which nonetheless is experientially known in ethical and liturgical moments of solidarity in suffering.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing appreciatively on Sommer’s work as a literary theorist, one can say that the Christian identification with victims of oppression and

sin is one of metonymy, of identification-through-relationship.<sup>41</sup> This is a tricky point, for Sommer opposes metonymy to autobiography, by which she means the heroic substitution of one for all others, an identification-through-substitution for which she considers Christ to be a prime example. The Christ of biblical-liturgical faith, however, does not simply represent and totally sublimate all human suffering but, rather, is now a life-giving Spirit<sup>42</sup> animating a Body with many members, none of whom, as St. Paul teaches, can presume to dispense with the others, especially others in their concrete, historical suffering.<sup>43</sup> Yet Sommer is right in pointing toward the totalizing way in which Christianity has so often, in its institutions (including the sacraments) and its leaders and the faithful, used the figure of Christ, even the corpus on the crucifix, as an evasion of social-ethical praxis. I conclude, then, with a brief consideration of the Christian tradition concerning Jesus' death, especially to argue how current biblical scholarship in relation to the passion narratives promises new support for their mystical-political role in the lives of contemporary believers.

### Witnessing to Jesus' Execution: Redemptive Solidarity in Suffering

Anyone acquainted with the scholarly, ecclesial, and pastoral debates repeatedly sparked by modern biblical scholarship for more than a century has most likely recognized in my rehearsal of the controversy surrounding Menchú's *testimonio* issues concerning Scripture as well: questions of historical fact, narrative integrity, collective identity, the literary nature of realism, representation, symbol, and myth. Pervading all these issues, whether concerning the Bible or contemporary testimonials, is the question of truth itself, a problem which can only be entertained and discussed by differing parties if they recognize that the very notion of truth bears with it some form of commitment. The contextual reality of truth-as-commitment animates current Catholic biblical scholars' disagreements over the direction they think their discipline should take. This is no less the case in reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The debate over the veracity of the text sheds as much light on the readers, on the world in front of the text, on the political world of North American scholarship, as it does on Menchú's motives and narrative strategies.

The reader of the text must always ask: What do I want to hear in this story? Why do I want to hear this story? What am I listening for? Such questions always need Sommer's insistence (drawing from but going beyond postmodern methodology) that difference genuinely be

respected, that in reading the Other we not seek a self-serving intimacy, resulting in the failure to "distinguish doing good from feeling good."<sup>44</sup> To seek honestly some measure of truth in the reading of the text—whether Rigoberta's or the Gospels' narratives of terror—requires a conscious articulation of the reader's desires so that both positive and negative intentions can be acknowledged, so that ethical imperative not be distorted, let alone avoided.

What disposes me to hear the story? Why do I want to listen to what Rigoberta has to tell? The ethical imperative of that question motivated my writing the political-liturgical prolegomenon to this essay. I desire to meet the God of Jesus in the mystery of suffering. I do so politically and ethically with the paschal mystery as source and summit of the quest. For this reason, I believe, I was especially drawn into hearing perhaps the most controversial of episodes for those who question, if not reject, the veracity of Menchú's book, namely, the terrifying chapter recounting her brother Petrocinio's torture and execution. Although memory can always be deceiving, I am confident in my recollection that as I read that chapter for the first time I quickly found Rigoberta to be fashioning the story as a passion narrative, as a performance in which she could grapple with the horror and unspeakable loss of her brother by proclaiming the events of his cruel demise as the revelation empowering solidarity for a people on a mission. Without attending here to details, I can report that as I first read the chapter I was well aware that the sequence of events was disjointed, as was her own placement as witness to them throughout. I recognized that she was constructing a narrative drawing upon multiple images from Christian Scripture and tradition, and was doing so, it seemed (and still seems) to me in order both to find the wherewithal to stay with the terror of the event and to share it with the Christian reader/interlocutor in a way which would elicit one's sympathy with the cause of her people. Indeed, literary theorist Georg Yúdice argues that, just as participants in the Christian base communities reinterpret and apply the Bible to their lives, "testimonial writing also emphasizes a rereading of culture as lived history and a profession of faith in the struggles of the oppressed. . . . [Menchú] clearly conceives of her testimonial as a kind of gospel. . . ." <sup>45</sup> Marc Zimmerman, another Latin Americanist, avers, "[Rigoberta's] testimonio is like that of one who is going to die, one uttered as a last will and testament to a ceremony-respecting community . . . The testimonio is a sacred, ceremonial act."<sup>46</sup>

The key textual factor, which not only sustained my reading of the Petrocinio chapter but nurtured my desire for solidarity with Rigoberta and her people, was its affinity with the biblical, traditional, and



ritualized images of Christ's passion with which I am so familiar. My reading of her book those several years ago and several times since has, in turn, influenced how I read the biblical passion narratives and try to understand how they function redemptively for people today. It has likewise piqued my interest in current methodological debates over viable objectives for Scripture scholarship, the latest quest for the historical Jesus, and implications of historical-critical scholarship for the ecclesial reading of the Gospels. The question of greatest interest to me concerns the extent to which the passion narratives are literary constructions interpreting Jesus' death in terms of Jewish biblical traditions, that is, "prophecy historicized," and to what extent they recount events which actually historically occurred. This should be of little surprise, since it so directly parallels the controversy over Menchú's account of her brother's death (as well as other parts of her book).

One biblical scholar who has constructed a complex methodology and welter of research to argue his case for why and how Jesus died is John Dominic Crossan. His work is widely noted, not only because of his association with the media-hyped Jesus Seminar but also due to his academic peers' taking him seriously. Anything approximating a detailed rehearsal of Crossan's research and theoretical arguments about the death of Jesus and the passion narratives is beyond the scope of this present paper. A succinct summary of his position, in his own words, can suffice for my present purpose:

My best historical reconstruction of what actually happened is that Jesus was arrested during the Passover festival and those closest to him fled for their own safety. I do not presume at all any high-level consultations between Caiaphas or Pilate about or with Jesus. They would no doubt have agreed before such a festival that fast and immediate action was to be taken against any disturbance and that some examples by crucifixion might be especially useful at the start. I doubt very much if Jewish police and Roman soldiery needed to go too far up the chain of command in handling a Galilean peasant like Jesus. It is hard for us, I repeat, to bring our imagination down low enough to see the casual brutality with which he was probably taken and executed. The details in our gospels are, in any case, *prophecy historicized* and not *history remembered*.<sup>47</sup>

What makes me so sympathetic to Crossan's theory, as well as that of Paula Fredriksen's work in this area,<sup>48</sup> is my own opinion, slowly developed over many years, that the dramatic proportions and details of the passion narratives simply cannot be squared with the abrupt and summary way

in which brutal police states and occupying military authorities deal with dissidents, peasants (whether actively rebellious or among the masses caught in the middle of conflict), and outright revolutionaries. All of Pilate's agonizing over Jesus contradicts every piece of historical evidence about his character, to name but one key example. To name one other: Scripture scholars across a wide spectrum have long recognized in Barabbas an historically untenable scenario which, nonetheless, functions in a highly symbolic fashion. Then there is the ongoing historical inquiry into just what sort of Jewish authorities there *were* in both Galilee and Jerusalem, how they functioned in relation to their own people and to the Roman government. These issues, far from threatening my faith in Jesus' divine mission, let alone his identity, unsettle whatever perceptions of dignity or exceptional treatment (whether kind *or* cruel) I might want to find in his passion. Discarding these, I find myself all the more moved, beyond reason or discourse, by the utterly gracious mercy of God in kenotically identifying with the most deeply despised and horrifically cut down. It *is* "hard for us . . . to bring our imagination down low enough to see the casual brutality" of Jesus' abduction and execution, but it is also essential to our faith. This is faith in the *kenotic* Christ.

Such historical awareness, then, does not lead to my dismissing the passion narratives. Far from it! Like Rigoberta, who could only grapple with the historical abduction and evidently typical, brutal, routine execution of her brother by enlisting the whole range of biblical and traditional symbols and narratives at her disposal, I enter into the reading of the passion narratives—whether individually in prayer or corporately amidst the liturgical assembly—as a mystical performance, a much needed mystical performance. How can she or any of us, albeit in genuinely *different* social-political locations, cope with the terror of evil, of human injustice and sin, but by means of some sort of faith, religious or otherwise, that keeps a person or a people hopefully committed to some truth. The commitment intrinsically bears an ethical imperative and, in this age, political involvement. Telling and hearing passion narratives, texts of terror proclaiming divine redemption *even in* the painful struggle for human justice, is at an once mystical and ethical-political action.

For Rigoberta and myself, faith and truth reside in Christian tradition, even as she and I and all believers across time and space draw upon biblical and other sources in distinctive but mystically bound praxes of following Jesus. The mystical binding is the Holy Spirit. A detailed discussion of the singular importance of pneumatology for today's church and the mission of all believers is, again, beyond the scope of this paper. My point here is that the Spirit of the executed-and-risen Christ inspired

Christian communities in the earliest decades to draw upon the resources of Jewish biblical tradition to construct narratives of his torture and execution that enabled them to know that God was with Jesus through it all<sup>49</sup> and beyond. The beyond, of course, is *their* life of following Christ in suffering and service, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is, of course, our life today as well, whether in Guatemala or the United States, but always in solidarity with all of suffering humanity.

With Crossan and Rigoberta we must not avoid the startling reality of the suffering *even as* we need to do so accompanied by all the textual, musical, and other resources of tradition at our disposal. When Crossan turns to see what finally happened to Jesus, he contemplates and then develops the following:

What actually historically happened to the body of Jesus can best be judged from watching how later Christian accounts slowly but steadily increased the reverential dignity of their burial accounts. But what was there at the beginning that necessitated such an intensive volume of apologetic insistence? If the Romans did not observe the Deuteronomic decree, Jesus' dead body would have been left on the cross for the wild beasts. And his followers, who had fled, would know that. If the Romans did observe the decree the soldiers would have made certain Jesus was dead and then buried him themselves [in a hasty, shallow grave] as part of their job. In either case, the dogs were waiting. And his followers, who had fled, would know that, too.<sup>50</sup>

The dogs at the foot of the cross. It is this governing image for Crossan's theory about the demise of Jesus and his body that Luke Timothy Johnson, one of Crossan's most energetic critics, dismisses as an "odd insistence" and, more seriously, holds up "as emblematic of the finality and insignificance of Jesus' death" for Crossan.<sup>51</sup> But I, for one, do not read Crossan that way. Whereas Johnson considers Crossan's contemporary interpretation of the biblical Jesus to be the utterly self-serving, "idealized ethos of the late-twentieth-century academic," seeking a Jesus who "is nonpatriarchal and noninstitutional,"<sup>52</sup> I find a far more ethically challenging and life-provoking Jesus *for the church* here. To embrace Crossan's reading of Jesus' death does not necessarily require a rejection of faith in God's having raised him up to be a life-giving Spirit. Quite the opposite. To realize that the Son of God shared the fate of millions of forgotten victims summarily disposed of in the shallow graves of history is not to cast aside faith in Christ the Savior but, rather, to deepen our longing for him.

What we need today are readings, liturgical and otherwise, that bespeak the sheer incomprehensibility of the scope and depth of human suffering and the ongoing desire for God to meet us therein. This is a religion much more of questions than ready answers, but one not lost or without direction. We question and search in a world revealed by baptismal faith, caught in the ongoing tension of the already-not yet revelation of salvation in Christ. Far from aimless and lacking direction, we have Scripture as the primary resource for forging the always needed prophetic vision for the given age. But that is just another way of saying that we are responsible for tradition's being a *living* tradition, a tradition for the life of the world. In his later writings, Johann Baptist Metz repeatedly utters the apocalyptic cry, "What is God waiting for?"<sup>53</sup> The mystical-political reading of the texts of terror turns the question back on us: What are *we* waiting for? Why would we not seek the Christ who promises to meet us now in the suffering humanity catalogued in Matthew 25? As the sole or even primary motive, the fear of final judgment has, we must admit, proven largely ineffective. We go to meet him, rather, in the suffering of our world so that we might go to meet him, the Bridegroom, who comes to us each Sunday in the Eucharist. We live a mystical-political praxis in anticipation of celebrating with him and all victims of history at the heavenly wedding banquet.

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#### NOTES

1. A version of this essay is forthcoming in *Missing God? Cultural Amnesia and Political Theology*, ed. John K. Downey and others (Münster: LIT Verlag [2006]).
2. Biblical quotes are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*.
3. See Dorothee Soelle, "A Critique of Christian Masochism" in *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 9-32.
4. See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad/Seabury, 1980) 70-77 and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 66-99.
5. See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) no. 10.
6. See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 106.
7. See *Lumen gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) nos. 14-16.
8. See *Gaudium et spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) no. 1.
9. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 272.

10. Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 274. For an extended study of Schillebeeckx on this point see, Bruce T. Morrill, "Practicing Political Holiness: The Call to a Life of Contrasts in the Work of Edward Schillebeeckx," *Doxology* 18 (2001) 71-94.
11. Robin Wilson, "Anthropologist Challenges Veracity of Multicultural Icon," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 15 (January 1999).
12. See Stacey Schlau, "Rigoberta Menchú, Chronicler," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 3 (1991) 262-63.
13. Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, "Voice for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America," *Latin American Perspectives* 18 (1991) 4-11.
14. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).
15. Marc Zimmerman, "Testimonio in Guatemala: Payeras, Rigoberta, and Beyond," *Latin American Perspectives* 18:4 (1991) 29.
16. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. and intro. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray (New York: Verso, 1984) 173.
17. *I, Rigoberta*, 173.
18. *I, Rigoberta*, 173. Consider the resonance with John 20:13, Mary of Magdala at the tomb: "[The angels] said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.'"
19. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 173.
20. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 173.
21. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 174.
22. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 180.
23. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 180.
24. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 198.
25. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 199.
26. Larry Rohter, "Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged," *New York Times* (15 December 1998) A1.
27. "[T]he *testimonialista* gives his or her personal testimony 'directly,' addressing a specific interlocutor. . . . The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective" (George Yúdice, "Testimonio and Postmodernism," *Latin American Perspectives* 18 [1991] 15).
28. "My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people" (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 1).
29. See Yúdice, "Testimonio and Postmodernism," 16-18, 27.
30. Indeed, the *New York Times* contacted the director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, asking whether the Institute planned to revoke Menchú's 1992 Nobel Prize; see Rohter, "Nobel Winner," A10.

31. "Ms. Menchú said today that the central reality for her was that her father, mother and at least two brothers were all murdered by Government security forces during the ferocious violence that descended on Guatemala's Indian communities in the years before her book was published—all facts that have not been disputed. 'I didn't find anything in these reports that changes the fact that my people are dead,' Ms. Menchú said. 'And that is my truth'" (Julia Preston, "Guatemala Laureate Defense 'My Truth,'" *New York Times* [21 January 1999] A8).
32. "'That would be to dismiss her morally, and that is definitely not my view,' [Stoll] said. 'You can understand and defend her narrative strategy, of folding others' experience into her own, making herself into a kind of all-purpose Maya. She was in an emergency situation. She was trying to bring down pressure on the Government and the army. To do that, you have to make a complicated situation seem simple'" (Preston, "Guatemala Laureate Defense," A8).
33. See "'Historical Truth' vs. 'Narrative Truth' in Rigoberta Menchú's Autobiography," Letters to the Editor, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (12 February 1999).
34. Dante Liano, "I, Rigoberta Menchú? The Controversy Surrounding the Mayan Activist," *Hopscotch* 1 (1999) 98.
35. "Nobel Peace Prize Winner Has Other Claim to Fame," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (28 October 1992); see also, Wilson, "Anthropologist Challenges Veracity."
36. See especially, Patrick Smith, "Memory without History: Who Owns Guatemala's Past?" *The Washington Quarterly* 24 (2000) 59-72.
37. Doris Sommer, "No Secrets" in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 148-49.
38. Sommer, "No Secrets," 154.
39. Sommer, "No Secrets," 154.
40. "For the sacraments are anticipatory, mediating signs of salvation, that is, healed and reconciled life. And given our historical situation, at the same time they are symbols of protest serving to unmask the life that is not yet reconciled in the specific dimension of our history" (Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* [New York: Crossroad, 1981] 836).
41. Sommer, "No Secrets," 146.
42. See 1 Cor 15:45.
43. See above, p. 119.
44. Sommer, "No Secrets," 140.
45. Yúdice, "Testimonio and Postmodernism," 26-27.
46. Zimmerman, "Testimonio in Guatemala," 32-33. For discussion of biblical testamentary tradition in relation to cultic tradition in the Last Supper accounts of the New Testament, see Xavier Léon-Dufour, S.J., *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 85-95, 243-47.

47. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 152.

48. See Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 2000) 232-34.

49. While the Marcan Jesus' cry from the cross depicts his feeling of abandonment by God (15:34), still I would argue that Jesus' every breath 'til his last (15:37) is the presence and action of the Spirit of God that uniquely took possession of him from his baptism (Mark 1:10).

50. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 154.

51. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 48.

52. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 46.

53. See Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1998) 57-58, 63-69.

## A Perspective on the Scrutinies of the RCIA

John W. B. Hill and D. Jay Koyle

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The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults<sup>1</sup> provides scrutinies for celebration on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent and these scrutinies define the primary agenda of the third and final period of pre-baptismal formation.<sup>2</sup> In this period the initiates are no longer merely exploring the Christian way of life. They are the "elect": having accepted the call to die with Christ in baptism, they are discovering what it means to open themselves to the radical transformation of life which is celebrated in baptism.

It is expected that this period will be a time of intensifying hope and longing for the elect, but also a time of inner spiritual struggle. Facing the stark choice between the life of the world and life in Christ means entering a time of renunciation and loss. The parallel within the Gospel story is the emerging struggle experienced by "the Twelve" between their own ambitions and their dismay at the direction in which Jesus was taking them.

Thus the RCIA provides for rituals of solemn prayer for the elect individually, called "scrutinies," within which are forms of prayer called "exorcism." What these terms might mean is probably best sought through an examination of the shape of the rite itself.

### The Shape of the Rite

The ritual follows upon the Liturgy of the Word (and precedes the prayer of the faithful and the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist). For