

Remembering the dead, reconciling the living: George Floyd and All Saints' Day

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Abstract

Rituals advancing reconciliation often do so by recalling a shared history or proposing a shared future. Racial reconciliation in the United States and recovery from the clergy sexual abuse crisis must reckon with how the past can be justly remembered. The George Floyd Global Memorial in Minneapolis, Minnesota, occupies a space of remembrance, raising up a representative victim of police violence as a symbolic ancestor. The All Saints' and All Souls' Day monastic liturgies at St John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, remember the dead and a future that transcends contemporary divisions. This article will explore how gestures toward an eschatological future in both of these memorial rites frame the memory of the past and mediate the relationship between the living and the dead amid a fragile movement towards reconciliation.

Keywords

Reconciliation; ritual; racism; symbolic ancestor

Introduction: Social reconciliation as ritual process

“Sankofa,” an image from Ghana, is found in numerous George Floyd-related pieces of art in Minneapolis, as well as being an important pan-African symbol worldwide. It depicts a bird craning its long neck around to reach a precious egg on its back. It is often interpreted as going back into

the past to retrieve something that allows for a new future. Social belonging likewise requires some agreement about the past (how did we get here?) and about the future (where are we going?). Ritual is one way that cultural groups reflect on their symbols to create and pass on narratives about their past and future. Societies that are deeply divided by their narratives on a topic, such as the United States on racialized violence, can benefit from a ritualized process of reflection that allows new, shared narratives to develop.

Clearly, extensive injustice demands an extensive process. In Western epistemology, ritual is often thought of only as a kind of capstone concluding a reconciliatory process, but in indigenous cultures in many parts of the world, it has an important role to play earlier in the process as well. I will focus here on the role of ritual and its symbols early in the process of social reconciliation, to diagnose the problem, imagine a shared history and future, and begin the process of repair.

Social reconciliation, as understood in both anthropology and peace studies, begins as a specific and limited act of the imagination. It does not come about from a total agreement of all members of a community on all (or any) matters of importance. Nor does it depend on members of two estranged groups to trust one another. It begins with their, as John Borneman puts it, “sharing a present, a present that is nonrepetitive,” that is, however tentatively, accepting a present that does not simply replicate intergroup violence.¹ Sharing this present does not mean agreeing on one account of the past, but it does demand renouncing histories that blame the other group for the bad things that have happened. Similarly, it does not demand a future of two groups merging, but it does demand that futures include more possibilities than victory or eradication.

The sense of a shared past and future is often ensured by the community’s reliance on symbolic ancestors (the term is from anthropology). In the Hebrew Bible, for instance, Israel’s unity is assured by their common descent from Jacob and by the promise of the coming Day of the Lord. The common descent might be mythological or adoptive; the point was not

1 John Borneman, “Reconciliation after Ethnic Cleansing: Listening, Retribution, Affiliation,” *Public Culture*, 14, no. 2 (2002): 282. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-281>.

genetic ancestry but spiritual or symbolic ancestry, just as most Christians today are descendants of Abraham in narrative but not in genetic terms, “spiritually Semites,” as Pope Pius XI put it.² Likewise, Christians have a shared history through their participation in Christ’s death and resurrection by baptism. They can point to an eschatological future marked by participation in God’s differentiated Triune oneness.

The problem is a society that is still debating what is wrong with its current structures does not generally have a sense of either a shared past or a shared future to guide and motivate reconciliation. Developing a shared narrative for the past and a shared image of the future is itself part of the process. One of the challenges of the racialized history of the United States in this current fragile moment, for instance, is the loss of the unifying force of symbolic ancestors that earlier generations took for granted as the very symbols of what it meant to be “American”: Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson. These names themselves have become emblematic of racism and its divisions. Similarly, between political polarization, destabilized hierarchies, and the revelations of the sexual abuse crisis and its coverup, the American Catholic symbolic world is undergoing extreme stress.

Ritual is one tool by which cultures reflect on, adapt, and pass on their most significant symbols. Social reconciliation is a process, some parts of which can be advanced by symbolic negotiation in ritual activity. Cas Wepener in his work in South Africa has refined Victor Turner’s theory on social reconciliation as a ritual process for its applicability to pluralistic political contexts. A social crisis arises, according to Turner, when “the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public arena”³ becomes a matter of sustained public debate: “members of a group inevitably take sides.”⁴ The normal social smoothers, “The elders, lawmakers, judges, priests, and law enforcers” attempt to defuse the situation, but if their interventions are inadequate, “a mounting crisis

2 Pius XI, *La Documentation Catholique* (1938), 1459–1460; cited in Gavin D’Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 116.

3 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. Performance Studies Series 1 (New York, NY: PAJ Publ., 2008), 70.

4 Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 10.

follows ... seeming peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible.”⁵ Social crisis reveals and exacerbates existing tensions and disputes in society. It takes place when the recognition of a breach as an intolerable injustice bring the very norms that are expected to govern society into question. A social crisis presents a rare opportunity to shift the moral status quo of a society, because it signifies that a community has found the ethical and social values that previously guided them are inadequate.

The process of reconciliation upon the exposure of damage is a learning process, consisting of continual exposure and redress of new layers of injustice and division. We need to learn to narrate a shared history or future, to agree on what has gone wrong. In westernized cultures, we often confine this task to historians, judges, and truth commissions, but ultimately, this work needs to belong to the entire culture, which makes it a ritual task. We cannot give in to weariness, saying, “what more do you want?” when new dimensions of damage are exposed. Part of redress is learning to tell a fuller story about what has gone wrong. At the same time, embarking on the heavy task of exposure and redress means being able to envision, however inchoately, a future marked by forgiveness, rebinding, and a common mission.

Diagnosing a problem and finding a common history includes transmitting knowledge (including affective as well as cognitive modes) from some social groups to other social groups. In such a process the usual educational modalities are of course essential, but ritual also plays a role. Ritual or liturgy is a specific way of knowing; because it involves repetition or practice and a synthetic exercise of one’s perceptual and behavioural capacities, it has the potential to shift one’s worldview, which I define here as the attitudes that one takes for granted and that are tied to one’s way of being in the world. Anthropologist Talal Asad, for example, talks about the way the daily practice of the liturgy of the hours inscribes on the body certain commitments to truth and humility, making an unconscious habitual virtue out of one’s conscious values.⁶ The knowledge that can

5 Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 10, 70.

6 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

be disseminated through ritual includes, then, transitions in knee-jerk attitudes about what is fair or unfair, just or unjust, tolerable or intolerable. In the context of social crisis and the work of exposure, then, rituals as well as other modes of communication are used to negotiate the breakdown of an assumed set of values and symbols, to propose new ones, and to evaluate both.

The memorial shrine to George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Disproportionate violence, including by law enforcement, against Black Americans has of course been a fact since the colonial period, and it has always been intolerable. When it was intolerable only to a few, mostly to Black mothers and fathers and neighbours, there was social damage but no social crisis. In fact, their awareness of an injustice that it was impossible to speak of openly became a further tool for their oppression. Most Americans were unaware of disproportionate violence and unwilling to learn about it. The pre-crisis status quo can be maintained by priests, judges, and journalists who treat individual instances as explicable outliers instead of a larger pattern. There have been attempts to impose these explanations on individuals killed by police violence: for example, by alleging minor lawbreaking (counterfeiting or homemade cigarettes) or police fear (mistaking a wallet for a gun) as an explanation for why a particular person was killed. There are also systemic explanations based on racial stereotypes or statistical differences. The killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 was more ritualizable than other instances of state violence, partly because it contradicted some of the “outlier” explanations that have been offered to explain other similar cases of violence.

To say the event was more ritualizable simply means it was capable of being spoken of, disseminated, and symbolically represented in a way that exposed systemic problems; that is, that it could be taken as like enough to other instances, and inexplicable by these “outlier” narratives, that it could represent other instances of racialized violence. It is not to say that Floyd’s death was more important than other deaths: on the contrary, the symbolic representation asserted ritually for Floyd makes other instances of violence more, not less, visible. The most important factors were the existence of

eyewitness video and the enforced leisure of many during the COVID-19 lockdowns, which permitted millions of people to check “exception” narratives against the evidence of their own eyes and also permitted time to protest to millions who might normally have been engaged in their own everyday activities. In the video, Floyd was unarmed, polite, pleaded with police. He was restrained casually, cruelly, for eight long minutes, despite saying “I can’t breathe” numerous times. His pleas for his mother and love for his children were also powerful. These elements are deployed ritually at the George Floyd Global Memorial in Minneapolis.

Shrines and the ritual behaviour surrounding them played an enormous role in medieval responses to plague and other natural disasters. Memorials like that set up at the intersection of 38th Avenue and Chicago in Minneapolis, similarly, are analogous to pilgrimage shrines, especially of martyrs. Protests and shrines are closely interrelated: both are witnesses (in time and in space, respectively) to particular truths. Shrine ritualisations inscribe on space symbols of identity and value. An individual visitor to a shrine, by controlling their passage through space and their attention to particular details, engages in reflection and negotiation about the symbols and values represented and their own relationship to them. The whole community, in turn, by taking part in this and other types of social diagnosis, tries to come to a working consensus, a history and a future that all those who are able to speak in the community can bear. If no consensus can be reached and the damage and crisis fragmentation is ongoing, Turner says, the community will eventually have to split.

On November 5, 2022, I was following my GPS to the intersection that is identified (though not on maps) as George Floyd Square when I saw the fist and sign that reads “You are now entering the free state of George Floyd.” I parked and walked the block to the main square, passing murals reading “This is a place of Love,” “You changed the world, George,” and “RIP.”

The memorial stands outside a Cup Foods, where Floyd was suffocated. As of November 2022, the space is bounded by barricades to keep out automobile traffic, an eventual compromise with local law enforcement, who initially tried to impede the creation of a shrine. The barricades read: “LOVE. Stop the Violence.” There is a mural of George Floyd’s face on what used to be a bus stand. At one end of the memorial, there is a handwritten piece of

cardboard that says in large capitals, “This is a sacred space.” At the other end is an official brown highway sign that says, “Historic George Floyd Memorial.” Between them, the memorial is a sprawling spiral of signs, silk flowers, teddy bears, candles, prayer beads, all showing the wear of months in the sun and rain. At the epicentre of the memorial is a large floor mural of Floyd against a sky-blue background, his head in his hands, wearing a crown and wings. The words at the bottom of the mural read, “Mama, I can’t breathe.” Even as they use the same symbols of innumerable public shrines to the deceased, the mural and the shrine highlight the facts about Floyd’s death that I called “ritualizable” earlier: assertions of a longing for love and freedom, not violence or revenge; his cry to his mother at his death. The wings and crown speak to hope for Floyd’s personal future, independent of a future of social reconciliation, but together with his posture, they also show him as unarmed and not dangerous.

What is “ritual” about this ritual space? Rituals tend to be characterized by superabundance and differentiated repetition. So on the one hand, this space is strikingly oversupplied with symbols, actually flooded with symbolic items, and then there is both a similarity and difference, a kind of motif, to the items. For example, the spiral around Floyd’s mural includes numerous candles, all different, all burned. I cannot know the individual intent of each person that brought an item (perhaps they are marked by a similarly differentiated repetition), but the collection conveys an inarticulate lament that speaks across cultural and religious differences in the United States. Similarly, with images, mostly of George Floyd’s face, and with slogans on signs and murals, we see fragments of the same images and words that appear over and over, superabundantly, but with a great deal of variation in each individual repetition. There are hand painted signs and pieces of art as well, each personal and at the same time variations on well-established themes. And there are prayer beads, many rosaries and other types of prayer beads or beads that are not easily recognizable as from a specific tradition. Prayer beads and candles become a kind of condensation of prayer, an invisible activity, into something that lasts and takes up space so it can be visible.

There is also a silk flower motif. Flowers occur again and again, each set similar to the set before, but also differentiable. Differentiation prevents the mind from treating them as just one object or as a simple pattern. Stuffed

toys, too, form a motif: a little white bear and one or two other things on a tree trunk stand, a dog among the flowers, a doll, a giant bear. Stuffed toys, flowers, and candles have been a part of the global ritual memorial vernacular since 1997 at least.⁷ Among other things, they symbolize the innocence of the victim – not necessarily “blameless” but “undeserving.” The assertion that the victims do not deserve their fate is one part of the difference between something that is merely a sad event and something that is a crisis that needs intervention.⁸ There are easily hundreds of stuffed toys at the memorial, all a bit weathered but not enough so to have all been there since 2020. Offering these items is clearly an ongoing, quiet ritual action. Like the candles and beads, the stuffed toys and flowers make lastingly visible an invisible, ephemeral ritual act.

In the context of a ritualized memorial like Floyd’s, the superabundant provision of symbolic items calls attention to the individual insufficiency of each particular offering. Flowers and candles are conventional memorials for the dead, but their profusion in this block of claimed public space suggests that even a cloud of such candles and flowers cannot fully express the loss of Floyd and the others whose names appear all over the memorial site. The differentiated repetition also points toward the acts of offering by many individuals, showing the way Floyd’s unjust death has bound a community of strangers together through shared ritual actions. Thus, the superabundance of variations on established motifs for lament ritually proclaims the value of the life of one in the custody of police; symbolically, by extension all those in custody of police. These characteristics begin to establish Floyd as a symbolic ancestor: he represents both those who died like him and those who, living, have been gathered into a community by his death.

Some elements, such as the irreplaceable uniqueness of the dead person and the coalescence of a grieving community, would hold true for any death. Yet they are heightened here by the elements that distinguish the death

7 Paul Post et al., *Disaster Ritual: Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire*. Liturgia Condenda 15 (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003), 72–73.

8 “Undeserved” is one of Post’s five characteristics of a disaster. Paul Post, “Introduction. Some conceptual and historiographical explorations on ritual, disaster and disaster ritual,” in Martin J. M. Hoondert et al., *Handbook of Disaster Ritual: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Cases and Themes*. Liturgia Condenda 32 (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 9.

as not merely tragic but also unfair and by the breadth of the community that reaches beyond Floyd's personal connections. The mural and other depictions of Floyd subvert racialized assumptions about black men by depicting him as non-violent, afraid, and attached to his family. For instance, the images of his face show him looking relaxed and thoughtful; the mural on the pavement shows him with his hands over his face, wearing fragile white wings, and inscribes part of his last words: "Mama, I can't breathe."

Similarly, the superabundance of variations on established motifs for lament ritually countermands the presumption that the life of those in the custody of police, who are suspected of a crime, are disposable. The ritual language of a profusion of candles, flowers, beads, and art is very familiar in the Christian tradition, and the recognition of Jesus as an undeserving victim of state violence also resonates with the shrine's symbolic imagery. At the same time, candles, flowers, beads, and art, as well as violence against the unarmed, are interpretable across religion and non-religion in North America. In short, the memorial ritualizes Floyd's death as that of a martyr in a language that can be interpreted in pluralistic, urban North America. "Telling the story" becomes a kind of re-narration⁹ that undoes some of the damage that has been done by unjust norms to the Black community and to society at large.

The shrine's ritualization posits Floyd as a symbolic ancestor, not merely to those who knew him personally, but to a larger community. The ties of the community to Floyd include membership in the African diaspora (which explains the ubiquity of the Sankofa) as well as being subject to police violence. The latter aspect is most explicit in the existence of a simulated cemetery around the corner from the shrine, in an old retention pond. I saw the letters spelling "Say Their Names" on the side of the hill, a very praxical rubric. I walked up and down the rows of the memorial, saying the names aloud and reading the place, year, and age of death. Floyd's symbolic "gravestone" is at the front alone, with its similar companions in rows behind him. Making Floyd a symbolic ancestor or a martyr raises

9 See "redress" in Cas Wepener, *From Fast to Feast: A Ritual-Liturgical Exploration of Reconciliation in South African Cultural Contexts*. Liturgia Condenda 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 113.

his narrative as a possible revelatory narrative about these other persons whose deaths might be less easily ritualized, less known, or more subject to distortion. It asks visitors to consider a history that reflects on the violence in this narrative and others like it, and to envision a future in which the needs of these people and those like them would be respected.

Sinners and saints in the All Saints' and All Souls' feast days in Collegeville, Minnesota

The martyrs' shrines of the early church and the pilgrimage sites of the late antique and medieval period would analogously have used some form of ritualization to posit the deceased as a symbolic ancestor; recognition of a deceased Christian as a saint, generally by celebrating their feast, constitutes acceptance of this claim made on their behalf. The modern canonization process is both a proxy for and a check on this grassroots process of reception.

All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2), as expressed in the monastic liturgy of the hours at Saint John's Abbey, 80 miles northwest of the George Floyd Global Memorial, issues a challenge to any oversimplification of symbolic ancestry of the dead. All Saints' Day is a holy day of obligation for Catholics, but it is only obligatory to attend mass. The texts of the mass for that day and the mass for remembrance of the dead on All Souls' Day can give a sentimental and idealized impression of both canonized saints and the deceased. The monastic liturgies on All Saints' and All Souls' Day, in contrast, stress the praise of God offered by the saints, who have been saved by mercy, and the life-giving communion between the living and the dead, who are united in their praise for God and their need for mercy.

At Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, many of the relics from the relic chapel are distributed through the church for the feast of All Saints. Here, as at the shrine, there is a similar kind of differentiated repetition as that displayed at the George Floyd memorial: in this case, it shows of the unimaginable scope of the communion of saints. In fact, as the monk from the Abbey gave a tour of the reliquary chapel before the Vigil liturgy, he went through the relics still in the chapel. "This one in the cross is a relic of

the True Cross. Here's St Therese of Liseux. This one is the True Cross. This one has St Benedict the Moor, St Anna, St Clare of Assisi, and some other saints. The True Cross."

St Peregrine, in the glass reliquary under the altar, might be more difficult for these 21st century people to take as a symbolic ancestor as Floyd. A child martyr from about 192 CE in Rome, he was also put to death by state violence with three companions. They were not tortured to reject Christ as such, but rather to reveal the wealth given to the church by a senator converted by their proclamation. Other Roman officials, including their jailor and one of the torturers, also converted to the Christian faith because of their jubilant courage under torment. Their patient endurance and even joy under suffering convinced those who listened that the Christ who conquered death was genuinely upholding them. Like Floyd, Peregrine and his companions were remembered by the living after their death. Their memory strengthened others in their resistance to state injunctions against the community's gatherings. The Catholic cult of the saints has its origin in the role of the martyrs in building up the community.¹⁰

The All-Saints' Vigil liturgy, evening prayer, begins at St John's in the baptistery, where the gathered crowd is in the hundreds and includes a mix of monastics, college students, and others. Immediately, the focus of the liturgical texts is not on the saints as such, but on our own call by baptism to manifest God in the world. The Abbot begins the liturgy with an exhortation: "By baptism into Jesus Christ, we are called to bear in our bodies the likeness of our God and to share with all the saints the peace that is God's gift." This liturgy, like the rest of the All Saints liturgies, resists an easy emotional classification: the psalm progression at the Abbey, for instance, goes from Psalm 31 (a thanksgiving), to Psalm 61 (a lament that recalls the sufferings of the saints on earth, but set with the antiphon "God tried them and found them worthy of himself; they will receive the reign of splendour from the hand of the Lord"), to Psalm 34, "The angel of the Lord is encamped / around those who revere him, to rescue them. / Taste and see that the Lord is good. / They are happy who seek refuge in him. // Revere the Lord, you, his saints." Psalmody in the liturgy of the hours produces

10 Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

meaning both by repetition and by intertextual play with antiphons and other texts surrounding the psalm. In this case, Psalm 34 both conjures up images of the saints in heaven (because it resonates with the canticle, Revelation 11–12, sung during the procession of the assembly) and becomes aspirational for those on earth (because we pray it all the time at mass).

Discourse about reconciliation and justice might be understood as a demand for an impossible singleness of emotion, as if one must collapse agents into categories (oppressor, oppressed; criminal and agent of justice; innocent victim and damnable perpetrator) and then identify with the right categories to reconcile. A simple narrative. But symbolic ancestors and contemporary persons cannot be mere representations of their categories, or our categories betray us.

We should not be surprised when we discover, as Americans have done about their founding figures and as Catholics have done about their priests and bishops, that symbolic ancestors are sinners. Symbolic ancestry is a dynamic act of unification of a community, not a statement of absolute righteousness. The first psalm for All Saints morning prayer, Psalm 65, reminds us: “To you all flesh will come with its burden of sin,” “Too heavy for us, our offenses, but you wipe them away” (Ps 65). If we are tempted to honour our ancestors too much, Psalm 146, the last psalm for morning prayer, is another corrective: “Put no trust in the powerful, mere mortals in whom there is no help ... It is the Lord who keeps faith forever, who is just to those who are oppressed.”

The Catholic church today is still learning the depth of the sexual abuse crisis. With each layer of exposure, we change our very understanding of what sexual abuse means. The ambiguity of the depiction of the saints in Psalms 65 and 146 remind us that the ultimate witness of the saints is to the glory of God, not their own innocence. We honour them not by forgetting their imperfections but by joining with them in the worship of the Lamb who has cleansed them.

All Souls’ Day midday prayer at St John’s Abbey usually takes place in the monastic cemetery if weather permits. In 2022 it was almost too warm for a sweater, nearly apocalyptic, as we walked up the hill from the lake to the large cross that marks the head of the cemetery. The hill slopes gradually up from the road beside the lake, first through varied tombstones of families

and individuals who have been buried in the Abbey cemetery, including families of the monks and oblates, then past a short grassy space into the monastic cemetery, each with a Benedictine cross and the monk's monastic name on the front, last name, and dates on the back. If the dead seem too strictly divided, clergy and laity, the living cluster near the cross, many monks in street clothes chatting with friends from the larger community. The atmosphere is festive though solemn, quite distinct from a funeral liturgy. The first words Abbot John says, before the service begins, are "Friends and confreres, come closer." Everyone laughs – perhaps for them as for me, this seems a summary of his entire ministry.

The psalmody of this service is performed very much like the psalmody of any other noon prayer in the Abbey Church. Here, outside, the two sides are "North" and "South" instead of "choir 1" and "choir 2." On any given weekday, I have usually only seen 5–10 people at noon prayer, but when the antiphonal recitation of the psalms begins, it is clear by the effective unison that all of these people know the slow, measured, listening way the psalms are prayed here. The community is broader than my eclectic experience can measure.

After the psalmody and the reading from Revelation 22 is the remembrance of the dead. First, Abbot John asks for rest and reward for many, according to what kind of death they had: hunger, violence, old age, and all the dead. Then, he asks peace for the three monks that have died this year. Then, for those who have been buried in the Abbey cemetery this year: a long, long list, in alphabetical order, in which I distinguish a few names. It is staggering, but also steadying, to pray for these dead. After the list and the community's firm "Lord, hear our prayer," Abbot John says we pray for "those we now name." The names of beloved dead bubble up from the crowd all around me. Some people say one name, some rather murmur quite a few names. Abbot John, in his ordinary, not-presiding-at-liturgy voice, says his parents' names. The names all fall overlapping around us and then there is silence, and Abbot John says, "For these we pray." "Lord, hear our prayer."

After this, there is a sprinkling rite. Abbot John takes up a 10-inch sprig from an evergreen tree. His MC brings a large stoneware bowl of blessed water, which he tries to take and then has to hand back; it is too heavy to

be held in one hand. He dips the branch into the water and flings it at the crowd, smiling hugely. I am smiling too, grinning even, touched by the hope of our prayers for the dead. He goes around the crowd, sprinkling us all and dripping plenty of water on his windbreaker as well. After the crowd, he and the MC begin on one side, sprinkling the abbots' stones, and circle much of the cemetery. He goes down out of sight, but along with the rest of the crowd, I wait in silence. The dead, the baptized, in this cemetery are also waiting. There are holy men buried in this cemetery, no doubt, and there are notorious sinners buried in this cemetery. The gravestones of all saints and all sinners here, bathed in baptismal water, make a symbolic ancestry and a future that radically levels out all of humanity. We will all be buried, and the eventual act of our solidarity will be praising the Creator in a redeemed heaven and earth. The truth of history, as much as the truth of the future, can only be fully understood by God.

Conclusion

In recovery from a true crisis, what is lost can never be recovered: in racialized police violence, in the crisis arising from sexual abuse, our need to make narrative in order to make sense of our world is constantly stymied. Our understanding of a future, then, has to have some uncertainty in order for there to be room for a shared narrative between estranged parties. An eschatological framework permits God to hold the inevitable loss, who also has a mysterious way of accomplishing true reconciliation. Public memorials and feast days posit innocents like Peregrine or Floyd as symbolic ancestors, in which one represents many. Their work catalysing a reconciling community, however, is not based on their individual qualities, to be troubled by later revelation, but on the way their narrative reveals God at work.

The “forgotten saints” are specifically remembered on All Saints’ Day, a category that calls attention to the way that symbolic ancestry is grounded in God’s knowledge, not our own. The Litany of the Saints, with its structure of named saints, followed by “all holy men and women,” does not just round out the list of canonized saints but invokes the saints uncounted whose holiness (by God’s cleansing) has been forgotten. In the monastic liturgy, Sirach 44 sings of the renowned and the forgotten, both

illustrious: “Through them the Lord worked glory, revealing his majesty throughout the ages. Some wielded authority as rulers, renowned for their deeds; others were sage counsellors, or spoke with prophetic power.” Then: “There were others who have no memorial and died as if they had never been, became as if never born, and their children with them. But these were the illustrious, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.” God knows the illustrious deeds of the forgotten, the innocence of the vilified, and the secret sins of the memorialized. Meanwhile, we keep memory as best we can, representing the memory of the illustrious forgotten by their resemblance to those whose names we know (or think we know). The symbolic ancestors are merely human sinners like us. At the same time, their names serve for those history has forgotten.

In this late-stage wave of the Catholic sexual abuse crisis, the age-old symbolic representation of priests as saintly, otherworldly figures is in many ways outweighed by the representation of them (and sometimes of all Catholics) as child abusers. The result is that the wedge between clergy and laity has both widened in some ways and destabilized in others. One way of ritually circumventing this polarization is by periodically changing up the environment and its oppositions. Symbolically, the opposition in the Abbey Church between altar and baptistery, monastic choir, and pews, can echo these clergy-laity and religious-secular false dichotomies. All Souls’ Day, with its emphasis on the equality of the dead in Christ, also changes the spaces of prayer. Before the graveyard liturgy, there is a short prayer service at the Abbey Día de los Muertos altar. The transition from the sparseness of the Abbey to the symbolic profusion of this altar lodged beside the church, at the doorway between the monastic cloister and the public space, speaks to another important ritual principle for navigating challenging social tensions. Social crisis tends to provoke dichotomies, which then propagate ongoing factionalism. Anything that interrupts the either-or thinking of a dichotomy, then, can help diagnose the cultural norms that have given rise to the crisis. This liturgy on the threshold, in a third direction away from both altar and font, mixing canonized saints with deceased monks and laypeople, flowers and candles and garish skulls, complicates our understanding of the church. Going sideways from our polarities helps us think through social and political division in the church by means of an eschatological framework.

Even in the pluralistic symbolic world of the George Floyd memorial in Minneapolis, there is an eschatological foretaste. When I first saw the greenhouse behind the “This is a sacred place” sign at George Floyd Square, I assumed it would be locked – my non-eschatological imagination at work. It is not. As I walk in, I am stunned to go from the cold wetness of the street to the warm wetness of what immediately seems to be Paradise – as all greenhouses seem to be in Minnesota in November. There are numerous flowers and decorative plants in here. The garden beds are wood and are decorated with slogans and signs of hope. There is a corner full of the tools one would need to care for these plants. In the centre there are images of the dead. Here in the centre of a city full of people who cannot trust each other, in the face of the evidence of the good reasons people might not trust each other, there is this beautiful and fragile and unguarded evidence of a community silently taking care of one another, planting for a shared future.

Just as the Sankofa imagines reaching into the past to find something to bring into the future, the remembrance of symbolic ancestors also demonstrates the way that they are more important for their grounding in a shared, imagined future than in a real, historical past. Both the George Floyd Global Memorial and the All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day feasts demonstrate how liturgical remembrance reinforces, alters, and overturns deeply felt assumptions about representation and belonging.

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