
HOPE AND TRUTH-TELLING: A RESPONSE TO ARISTOTLE PAPANIKOLAOU

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ABSTRACT

This article is a revised version of the paper given at the Anthropology of Hope conference in Prague, May 2023, in response to Professor Aristotle Papanikolaou's presentation on 'Hope and Truth-telling'. The first part responds briefly to the affective nature of truth-telling which was presented, and queries the use of martyrial language. The second part looks at three sites on hope and truth-telling in the contemporary Catholic Church: (i) responding to the abuse crisis; (ii) ecumenical relationships, through the lens of 'Receptive Ecumenism'; and, (iii) communal discernment, taking note of the current movement of synodality. A proposal is made to consider structures of (or structural) virtue as well as structural (or structures of) sin.

Keywords

Hope; Truth; Virtue; Synodality; Receptive Ecumenism; Catholic Church

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I would like to respond to Professor Papanikolaou's stimulating paper in two parts: first, a brief observation on how the paper situates truth-telling within the horizon of Christian hope, and second by noting some resonance, applications, and challenges in my own context.

I was struck by the decision to focus on truth-telling which has an *affective* quality. The implication of this is that truth-telling, even with reference to objective truth, is not a neutral act of specifying

correspondence, accurate or otherwise, which leaves the participants unmoved, but a self-involving act with repercussions for the formation of character. The 20th Century Catholic writer Romano Guardini recognised this, understanding the will for truth as necessary for true selfhood, while more recently Wendy Farley has argued that ‘the desire for truth is always a practice and never an accomplishment’.¹ So too, hope – if it is to be more than simple wishing – appears as equally involving of the person. It ‘shapes how we lie and act in the midst of a suffering and unjust world’, and ‘functions to reorientate how we live in the world’,² whilst conversely, ‘hopelessness is an attack on the very possibility of action’³ as the behaviour of totalitarian states demonstrates. Both truth-telling and hope, then, have effects beyond the interior life of an individual and are situated in fields of *relationship* and of *action*. While space does not allow a fuller exploration here, these wider effects do inform the second part of my response.

Before moving to explore this relationship of truth-telling and hope in some contemporary Catholic contexts, however, I would like to pose a question. Is the language of dying and martyrdom which we heard an entirely appropriate register in which to address the cost of truth-telling in a horizon of hope? Certainly, we must die to sin and put foolish ways behind us, but I think a distinction can be made between, on the one hand, jettisoning such undesirable elements, and, on the other hand, embracing the risks and costs of truth-telling which form the currency of martyrdom, as generally understood. The cost of truth-telling for the martyr is surely the loss of some *good* – perhaps social standing, damage to a relationship, even life itself, not just the loss of bad habits.⁴ I would not want to lose this language altogether, only to recall the

¹ Wendy Farley, *Gathering those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 207, cited in Jan-Olav Henriksen ‘Taking Responsibility for Truth: Ecclesial Practices in an Age of Hypocrisy,’ in *Truth-telling and Other Ecclesial Practices of Resistance*, ed. Christine Helmer (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 11–20, 16.

² Elaine A. Robinson, ‘Faith, Hope, and Love in an Age of Terror,’ in *Faith, Hope, Love, and Justice: The Theological Virtues Today*, ed. Anselm K. Min (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2018), 163–184, 175.

³ Min, ‘Transcendence and Solidarity: Conditions of Faith, Hope, and Love Today’ in *Faith, Hope, Love, and Justice: The Theological Virtues Today*, ed. Anselm K. Min (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2018), 197–218, 217.

⁴ Nonetheless, it is not the loss itself that constitutes martyrdom, but disposition: ‘endurance of death is not praiseworthy in itself, but only in so far as it is directed to some good consisting in an act of virtue,’ Thomas Aquinas *ST* II.2, Q.124, art. 3.

difference as well as similarity in making an analogy between a ‘death of the old self’ and physical death, or real deprivation of goods (freedom, prestige, money, etc.). Nevertheless, the truth-teller is indeed a ‘martyr’ in so far as they are a witness to truth, although the transaction is much more costly for some than for others, not only in degree but in essence. The language of virtue formation and self-transformation, which Papanikolaou also engages, however, seems highly appropriate on many levels, especially if one understands possession of virtue as a continuum, capable of progression, and not a binary state which one either possesses or does not. Our appropriation of hope, therefore, existing on a scale rather than a range, offers space to grow in the way akin to that which Papanikolaou has demonstrated for truth-telling.

In the main, the discussion so far has focussed on *individuals* as agents in truth-telling – whether as teller or listener – and how that might relate to the theme of hope. However, I was pleased to read this paper not just because of its interesting observations and arguments but also because of the light it casts on my situation (British, Catholic, ecumenical) where I am concerned with the truth-teller and the listener as *ecclesial* – that is corporate – entities. I would like to sketch three sites of ecclesial truth-telling and hope in this context.

The most visible and traumatic site of truth-telling in the Catholic Church at the present time is undoubtedly the ongoing wound of abuse by clergy and church institutions. In naming this as my first site of truth-telling I do not presume to speak for survivors, let alone make any presumption of hope, but simply note the imperative arising from this systemic failure for growth in virtue on the part of the church as listener. For the church to truly listen not only requires individuals involved in listening to be non-manipulative and humble but demands that this virtuous practice be encoded into ecclesial structures and processes such that the church becomes a habitual site of iconic listening. Not only select individuals have a calling to be iconic of Christ, but the church precisely as the Body of Christ, has this challenge *a fortiori*.

The Catholic Church has become familiar with the concept of ‘structural sin’ emerging from Latin American liberation theology and has at the very least acknowledged the existence of ‘structures of sin’.⁵ This has proved an essential component of ecclesial truth-telling regarding the systemic dysfunction and evil of perpetration, downplaying, and

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1869.

cover-up of abuse (as also other systemic failings, regarding race and gender, for example). To situate such truth-telling in the horizon of Christian hope, perhaps the church needs a complementary theology of *structural virtue*: What habits, structures, processes, and cultures create the conditions for a systemic reinforcement of growth in virtue?⁶

But truth-telling in situations of clerical abuse does not stop in *listening* well (in what may be a private, indeed confidential space). There is a reciprocal truth-telling expected in which the church is the one speaking truthfully – or *confessing*. Returning to my earlier point – for the church to be a ‘martyr’ in witnessing to the truth here, it must do more than abandon self-interest and abuse of power, and be exposed to genuine loss of prestige, material goods, and privilege, some of which may never be recovered in this life: ‘death’ is generally permanent.

A second, rather different site of truth-telling and hope can be found in ecumenical relations. There is an ever-present fundamental temptation to imagine one’s own tradition as the possessor of objective truths – attested to in doctrine and order, with which we can correct our ecumenical interlocutors and defend our position. But there is another perspective on truth, more attuned to the kind of truth-telling we have been discussing, which is truth considered in relation to the subject. The growing literature and praxis of Receptive Ecumenism seems to have some useful contribution to make to virtuous practice here.⁷ This approach does not ask us to abandon claims to truth in our traditions (which would be irrational)⁸ but it does require us to not dissociate that ‘objective’ truth-telling from a more subjective (but not relativistic) truth-telling about our tradition’s dysfunctions, wounds, and limitations (not an ideal). It is explicitly rooted in Christian hope, making a case

⁶ A similar point is made by Elaine Robinson who argues that incarnation and ministry must be as strong a symbol for us as the cross. Human hope is not limited to hope in the drama of Christ’s death and resurrection, and perhaps the down-to-earth hope symbolised in the incarnation and life of Jesus needs recovering in our current post-truth hopelessness. See Robinson, ‘Faith, Hope, and Love in an Age of Terror,’ 168–174.

⁷ See Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, and Paul Lakeland (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) and Murray (ed). *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a comprehensive bibliography, <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism-/>.

⁸ Underpinning this notion of rationality is Paul Murray’s adoption of some ideas from Nicholas Rescher’s philosophy. See Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

that if churches can learn from each other how to conform more closely to the gospel and address internal and relational dysfunctions, then new things, hardly conceivable now, might become possible. The hope in Receptive Ecumenism is that *practice changes the landscape*. It is a transformative pattern of ecclesial and ecumenical virtue formation.⁹

Practices of truth-telling and nurturing hope are of course also necessary for internal dialogue within a church. This leads to my third and final site of truth-telling and hope in the contemporary Catholic Church: *communal listening and decision making*. In England, as elsewhere there has been a burst of activity in diocesan reorganisations over recent years, largely in response to reducing numbers of clergy and churchgoers, including *Forward Together in Hope* (Hexham and Newcastle); *Future Full of Hope* (Clifton); and *Sharing the Hope* (Salford) – you can see the common theme! By way of a thought experiment, what would we make of diocesan renewal projects called ‘Forward together in Truth’, ‘Future Full of Truth’, ‘Sharing the Truth’? With a moment’s theological reflection, they do all make sense, but nonetheless sound like slogans from George Orwell’s *1984* (in which ‘Truth’ means nothing of the sort). What then are we to make of instinctive reactions to slogans of Hope, which seem to be pleas for healing, as opposed to slogans of Truth which can so easily sound like confident battle-cries in a culture war?

In Orwell’s dystopian future, of course, the powerful use oppression to destroy hope. In contrast, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* imagines a world where distraction lulls truth to sleep. Here are two genuine temptations for the church if Hope and Truth-telling are separated. In the sociology of science, decisions to be made between continuing with research into a hitherto unsuccessful treatment or redeploying the resources elsewhere have been described as a clash of involved (not neutral) actors aligning with ‘regimes of hope’, which look towards the future for the good of the individual’s wholeness, or ‘regimes of truth’ which look at the facts which are known, for the good use of common

⁹ On Receptive Ecumenism and virtue, see Pizzey, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and the Virtues,’ in *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning*, ed. Murray, Ryan, and Lakeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 448–462 and Ryan, ‘A Total Ethic for a Broken Body: Receptive Ecumenism’s Hermeneutical Virtue,’ in *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning*, ed. Murray, Ryan, and Lakeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 321–333.

resources (time, money, expertise, etc.).¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann offers a theological and ecclesiological parallel to this dichotomy. He identifies hope and truth as the antidotes to, respectively, *despair* and *denial* in the world. But he also accuses the church of mis-prescribing, of presenting cold, brutal, truth into situations already lacking hope (aligning with the regime of truth where hope is needed),¹¹ and conversely prescribing comforting opportunities for inaction, in the form of denying anything is wrong, or that we can change it, into situations where truth is lacking (aligning with the regime of hope where truth is needed).¹²

Our church programmes often include grim projections of numbers of clergy and laity over the coming decades, yet the espoused theology seen in the programme titles is one of hope – for the church, for the individual, for the local community, and for the world. What is the range and quality of this hope? Is it open to eschatological newness? Or are we fearful that even what we have will be taken from us? Learning from Papanikolaou’s presentation has made me realise just how essential it is to weave truth-telling into any such programme of hopeful renewal. Truth and hope together might allow churches to address complex – and costly – truth-telling about traumas of lost identity, the lure of nostalgia, grieving for the loss of genuine but unrepeatable goods and moving on, confessing and confronting attachments that are not of the gospel. A virtuous path will steer a path between extremes. It will avoid presumption – that hope will be realised through a programme modelled on secular business. It must also avoid despair that shuts out newness because of an absence of genuine hope for the future glories. And it must go beyond denial which manifests in proposing the need only for superficial changes such as merging parishes, shuffling priests around, or rearranging mass times. Brueggemann offers a scriptural countermodel to worldly thinking which can apply here. In the psalms, genuine lament is sounded but there is no victim-blaming, but rather

¹⁰ See Nik Brown, ‘Shifting Tenses: Reconnecting Regimes of Truth and Hope,’ *Configurations* 13, no. 3 (2005): 331–355, doi:10.1353/con.2007.0019.

¹¹ Pope Francis recently addressed this particular danger, emphasising that the Church needs ‘prophets of hope as well as truth’, and that a prophet is not simply a critic but rather someone who ‘corrects when needed and opens wide the doors looking to the horizon of hope ... [who] restores the roots, restores one’s belonging to the people of God in order to go forward’: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/38218/the-church-needs-prophets-of-truth-and-hope-pope-francis-says>.

¹² Brueggemann, ‘Full of Truth and Hope,’ in *Truth and Hope: Essays for a Perilous Age* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 114–138.

a realisation of the sinful structures in the world, whilst the constancy of the Lord is named in old glories remembered and lost, and in new glories promised and impatiently desired, yet unseen.¹⁵

As we speak, the Catholic Church is four years into a worldwide synodal process, one which has been influenced by the kind of ecumenical learning proposed by Receptive Ecumenism.¹⁴ It has embarked on a process of listening and discerning at every level from parish to diocese to bishops' conference to continent on the subject of synodality.¹⁵ This has become a site of both hope and lament writ large, and it has incorporated a form of truth-telling into its process. Despite pressures from some quarters, the temptation to close down difficult topics has largely been avoided, often with the formula that not all issues can be resolved at the local level, or in this synod, but will be heard and noted (at least in the initial listening phase). The Church has shown it can be a good listener – and here I mean not just the bishops, as if they are 'the Church' listening to the voice of the other, but that parishioners have been able to hear other voices, and if they wish, can hear voices from other communities, cultures and theological or spiritual traditions. The 'truth' being told is of course complex, and mixed with all kinds of human impurities, opinions, and agendas but can it ever be otherwise? But it seems to me that it is precisely the act of truth-telling, of being a more Christlike, iconic, non-manipulative listener that gives the emerging Catholic understanding of synodality a genuinely hopeful quality. This invitation to truth-telling offers hope for growth in 'structural virtue' for the church, through adopting and nurturing a 'synodal style' and synodal dispositions as its 'ordinary way of living and working', realising that style in structures and processes which facilitate and encourage the practice of further truth-telling. In becoming a more

¹⁵ Brueggemann, 'Truth-Telling as Well-Making,' in *Truth and Hope*, 215–225.

¹⁴ See ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be Church – Local, Regional, Universal* (London: SPCK, 2018). See also Ryan, 'Receptive Ecumenism in a Synodal Catholic Church,' in *Proceedings of the 21st Academic Consultation of Societas Oecumenica 'Living Tradition: Continuity and Change as Challenges to Churches and Theologies'*, ed. V. Coman and J. Berry (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2024).

¹⁵ There is a rapidly-growing literature on synodality in the Catholic Church. An excellent place to start is with two books which complement each other in providing both theological and pastoral perspectives (and which are published in a single volume in Spanish and Italian editions): Raphael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist, 2022); and Serena Noceti, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023). See also resources at www.synod.va.

synodal church, it will – *hopefully* – be better equipped to embrace the costly, challenging truth-telling demanded *ad intra* and *ad extra*, and live as an icon of hope for the People of God in a suffering world.

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