

# SPIRIT MOVES US TO ACTION

**H**ave you ever heard someone say, “it is my cross to bear”? One might use this expression when dealing with a particularly bad circumstance, or when misfortune has befallen them. Sometimes we use these words when someone else is suffering, “it is just your cross to bear,” intending to recognize that, like Christ, we too might have to endure hardship for the betterment of ourselves and perhaps others. Some refer to this as redemptive suffering. However, our theology demands more than a simple platitude when someone is suffering. As the story of Christ’s death shows, he did not stay on that cross. Rather, he came down and rose again into new life.



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Our theology about Christ (Christology) and our theology of salvation (soteriology) express a two-step process for the liberation of people from suffering. The first step involves the declaration of the inherent dignity found in all life. The second step moves us toward action.

Let’s start with the person. German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes on human desire and flourishing, noting that, “Every life that is born wants to grow and arrive at the form of configuration towards which it is aligned.”<sup>1</sup> The form to which it is aligned surely harmonizes with the will of God. So, Moltmann makes this simple formulation “the Mission of Life is when we follow the Mission of God.” In *Consider Jesus*, Elizabeth Johnson, an American feminist theologian, expresses a similar view of human flourishing: “the more human we become, the more God is pleased.”<sup>2</sup> Since Jesus was fully human and thus the most perfect model of humanity, for us to become more human only makes us more like Jesus. And since Jesus also was fully divine, being like Jesus brings us closer to the divine.

Moltmann believes that people can sanctify themselves and others. He writes that we “sanctify something when we encounter it with rever-

ence and view it as unfringeable, because in it we sense and revere God’s nearness.”<sup>3</sup> We uphold the dignity and sanctity of the lives of our neighbors. We “rediscover the holiness of life and the divine mystery in all created things.”<sup>4</sup> We defend the dignity of life “against the arbitrary manipulation of life and the destruction of the earth through personal and institutional acts of violence.”<sup>5</sup> In today’s world of unprecedented oppression and suffering, reverence for life calls each of us to renounce violence and diminishment of life. If we truly believe in the dignity and holiness of each other, we must then move to protect that which God loves.

We have a very large obstacle to overcome if we hope for people to go out and liberate their neighbor — apathy. Moltmann observes that, “Humanity is likely to die of apathy of soul ... before it founders in social or military catastrophes.”<sup>6</sup>

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We can be shown thousands of images of human suffering, dozens of videos following the compromised lives of migrant children, and hear stories about the consequences to those who speak out. Yet, for many there exists no sense of urgency, no

sense of personal responsibility or even capability. It is all so overwhelming.

For us to break out of apathy and toward action we require the help of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moves us into communion with Christ. The Spirit empowers us to create relationships. As Christian disciples we are called to act Christlike — to love our neighbor. We are empowered to do his will here on earth and to live out his love for all.

For Moltmann, the Holy Spirit sent by God through Jesus Christ gives rebirth, or new birth, to humankind. Moltmann writes that there is a “Kingdom of Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The Kingdom of God “is heralded in the kingdom of the Spirit, where it already has power in the present.”<sup>8</sup> This is a powerful image for agency and change. We needn’t wait for the end of times and ultimate reign of God. Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit acting in our lives, we can bring about a world that aims toward the new kingdom, right now, in the present moment.

The Spirit also calls us to hope. It is “a command to resist death and the powers of death, and a command to love life and cherish it and every life, the life we share, the whole life.”<sup>9</sup> This command must seize us. It must bring us out of our apathy and into action. Johnson argues that, “what is not possible for believers in the end is indifference to the systemic forces in the world which create so much terror and misery.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, the Spirit will only enter into the lives of those who open themselves to its influence and “clear away the hindrances that stand in our way.”<sup>11</sup>

So, the entering of the Spirit has a two-way relationship, or at least requires action on the part of the receiver. Moltmann believes that those “who feel the faintest spark of this love become conscious of their own dignity, get up and walk upright and live with heads held high.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the Holy Spirit not only grants us the gift to enter into communion with God’s will, but it actually commands us to do so. Laurenti Magesa, a theological leader in Africa, speaks even more toward this command; “human beings MUST involve themselves in [the] soteriological work of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

When we witness so many of our neighbors suffering, when we and others are up on crosses

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caused by injustices in the world, we call upon the Holy Spirit to give us the motivation to break through our apathy. In Catholic health care, we witness the many crosses in our patients’ lives. Let’s ask ourselves how we can bring about Christ’s kingdom in order to remove the burdens on our neighbors. As Christ came down from the cross into new life, we have a responsibility to bring down our neighbors from their own crosses. The next time someone says, “it is my cross to bear,” let us respond with “how can I help shoulder your burden,” or “how can I help bring you down from your cross?”

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### **NOTES**

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 33.
2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 28.
3. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 47.
4. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 48-49.
5. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 49.
6. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 21.
7. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 11.
8. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 11.
9. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 39.
10. Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 79.
11. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 53.
12. Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 21.
13. Laurenti Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” in *Jesus in African Christianity*, eds. J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), 156.

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