

Resilience in a Troubled World

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference III



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

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III

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Table of Contents

Introduction <i>John Anthony Berry</i>	9
1. Opening Speech <i>Marie Louise Coleiro Preca</i>	25
2. Resilience in an Age of Uncertainty <i>Tomáš Halík</i>	29
3. Braving a Troubled World. Theological Explorations of Resilience <i>John Anthony Berry</i>	37
4. Sources of Resilience in Thomas Aquinas <i>Piotr Roszak</i>	61
5. Kierkegaard as a Theological Resource for Guardini's Resilience in his Time and Ours <i>Joshua Furnal</i>	75
6. Romano Guardini, Virtue Ethics and Resilience <i>Mirostaw Mróz</i>	87
7. The Nature of Religiosity in Our Time. Being Resilient through the Courage of Interfaith Encounter <i>Ambrogio Bongiovanni</i>	103

8. Nothing Can Stop God from Reaching Us. Transcending Aggressive Popular Sovereignty: Romano Guardini and Raphael Tjihuis, O.Carm <i>Charló Camilleri</i>	119
9. Resilience in an Age of Screens. The Challenge of Online Presence <i>Nadia Delicata</i>	133
10. Learning to Sail on the Open Sea. Bonhoeffer on Resilience <i>Joel Burnell</i>	151
11. Kenosis and Hiddenness. A Paradox for the Christian <i>Hector Scerri</i>	169
12. Resilience of the Marginalised. Exploring the Future of Christianity <i>Juan Pablo García Maestro</i>	179
13. The Commodification of Resilience. Rediscovering the Virtue of Christian Hope for a Troubled World <i>Eamonn Conway - Kerry Greer</i>	197
14. Thomas Merton. A Man for his Time A Prophet for All Times <i>Dorianne Buttigieg</i>	221
15. Guardini's Concept of 'Living Unity' in the Context of the Liturgical Act <i>Mariella Catania</i>	237

16. C.S. Lewis and Resilience as Key to the Cultivation of Virtue and Christian Identity <i>Nikki Felice</i>	249
17. Nothingness and Absence as a Means of Resilience. A Dialogue between the Spirituality of Simone Weil and Thomas Merton <i>Tyrone Grima</i>	259
18. A Humane and Humanising God. Karl Barth's Foundation for a Christian Praxis <i>Carl Scerri</i>	275
19. The Awakening Church. Resilience and the People of God in Guardini <i>Mark Joseph Zammit</i>	291
Biographies	325
Index	335

Braving a Troubled World. Theological Explorations of Resilience

John Anthony Berry

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) succinctly captured a profound truth about human nature in his famous phrase, “anything that doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”¹ This statement emphasises the resilient nature of the human mind when paired with a determined heart, enabling individuals to overcome disappointments, setbacks, stress, and sorrow throughout their life journey. Numerous artists and pop singers have consistently employed this concept to inspire those who have left toxic relationships, suffered from bullying, defeated depression, conquered cancer or addiction, survived mental or sexual abuse, and those who have contemplated suicide.² In this sense, resilience equips individuals with essential virtues to lead extraordinary lives, such as optimism, faith, self-determination, and creativity.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of three towering theological figures, Romano Guardini (1885–1968), Karl Barth (1886–

¹ Aphorism number eight from Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Maxims and Arrows” in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) is translated from German “Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich starker.”

² Various songs on this theme include “Stronger” by Kanye West in 2007; “What Doesn’t Kill You” by Rock group *Takida* in the 2009 album *Make You Breathe*; “Stronger (What Doesn’t Kill You),” a 2011 song by Kelly Clarkson; and “What Doesn’t Kill You” a 2013 song by Jake Bugg.

1968), and Thomas Merton (1915–1968), this paper endeavours to explore the significance of incorporating resilience into theological discourse and reasoning. Moreover, it suggests reflecting on the transformative work these figures championed in their respective contexts and the lessons we can learn from them. Finally, the paper proposes faith as a form of resilience that can be cultivated through theological inquiry and contemplation. In essence, the paper seeks to address a series of pertinent questions that arise in this context, providing a thoughtful and insightful exploration of the topic.

Titled “Braving a Troubled World,” this paper delves deeply into the human condition and the individual responsibility to face life’s challenges.³ While predicting the future as daunting, humans must avoid complacency when confronted with adversity. Resilience, therefore, becomes a crucial virtue that empowers individuals to move from passive observers to active agents of change. A troubled world is an enemy that requires above all a collective response. People must come together, inspired by personal beliefs, religions, and traditional values, and summon the courage to confront the unknown. This paper creates a space for theological contemplation on the criticality of resilience in promoting healing, faith, reconciliation, and solidarity, both personally and communally. In a nutshell, resilience is the master key to facing life’s obstacles with vigour, determination, and grace.

Contextualising Resilience in Theology

When examining theological encyclopaedias, one may notice the absence of the term “resilience.” Instead, the Christian tradition emphasises hope as a theological virtue and occasional resistance, as seen for example in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Nazi dictatorship (1906–1945) or Pierre Chaillet’s resistance to Nazism and antisemitism (1900–1972).⁴ This raises questions about whether resilience and fortitude are innate human qualities or can be developed. While some

³ On this theme, one can read Pasquale Riccardi, *Ogni vita è una vocazione. Per un ritrovato ben-essere* (Assisi: Ed. Cittadella, 2014).

⁴ While resilience is often linked to the theological virtue of hope, this paper aims to explore its connection with faith – a notion that widens the extent of importance of one’s being, encompassing all the divine truths in the human soul. Despite this, faith and hope are inextricably intertwined, with their boundaries often blurred and interchangeable.

argue that resilience can be cultivated individually, Christians believe that fortitude is a divine gift granted through God's grace. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the theological concept of resilience, including its etymology and definition, to understand its relevance.

"Resilience" has two distinct etymological roots, both derived from Latin. The first comes from an iterative form of the verb *salio, salis, salui, saltum, salire*, which means "bouncing back" or "jumping back." The second root comes from the verb *insilio, insilis, insilui, insultum, insilire*, meaning "jumping up," "throwing oneself," or "climbing up." In the early Middle Ages, "resilience" was used to describe shipwrecked individuals who climbed back onto overturned boats.

Although providing a single definition of resilience proves challenging, examining how different scientific fields approach resilience can offer valuable insights for theological reflection. In physics, resilience is linked with Robert Hooke's law, which describes the relationship between stress, deformation, and an object's ability to return to its initial shape. In materials engineering, resilience refers to a material's resistance to dynamic fracture, measured through an impact test, and is the opposite of fragility. In biology, resilience involves a tissue's ability to self-repair after damage, while in ecology, it relates to an ecosystem's ability to recover from degradation. In economics, resilience concerns the quality of a business continuity plan, developed to cope with emergencies that may threaten a company, organisation, or economic system's vital functions. In psychology, resilience refers to individuals' capacity to cope with significant adversity and emerge stronger. Across these various fields, resilience is defined as an object or subject's ability to withstand a traumatic event, such as a shock or stressful circumstance, without damage or loss, or its ability to recover and regenerate itself.

Examining the historical context surrounding the three eminent theological figures and their lives and deaths offers a deeper understanding of the term resilience. This highlights its connection to history while also distancing it from the theological concept of grace. The brutality and harsh realities of the two World Wars, along with the resulting paradigm shifts in 20th century theology, form the backdrop for our discourse on resilience. The year 1968, when all three figures passed away, marked a significant turning point in the 20th century. Guardini faced the challenges of late modernity, Barth

resisted Nazism, and Merton reacted to the changing socio-political climate of 1960s America.⁵

This paper delves into a turbulent historical context to offer insights into our present. The events of this period cannot be ignored, such as the Tet offensive launched by the Northern army, which shifted global opinion on the Vietnam War, marking a significant defeat for American interventionism during the Cold War. Moreover, the Prague Spring, a period of political liberalism in Communist Czechoslovakia, was violently suppressed by Soviet tanks. The struggle for civil rights for African Americans reached a pivotal moment, with the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. The month of May witnessed a surge of student and worker uprisings across Western Europe, echoing throughout the cultural sphere. On July 25th, Pope Paul VI's encyclical on birth control regulation sparked intense controversy. Amidst these upheavals, the deaths of Guardini, Barth, and Merton went unnoticed by most.

The concept of resilience is crucial to address the current state of faith, where positive affirmations about a supernatural order revealed by God may risk losing significance. In a world where religion is on the decline, and many lead lives without religious connotations, it is our responsibility to demonstrate how to cultivate a strong desire to respond appropriately. Braving a troubled world may then be interpreted as 'How can Christian faith persist in an increasingly secularised and restless world?'

The primary objective of this study is to contextualise resilience within the framework of history and also connect it to the supernatural dimension, rather than solely relying on inner strength. This paper does not explore resilience for its own sake, but rather in the context of the "beauty" of God's presence, which humanity is drawn towards, captivated by, and ultimately oriented to.⁶ If 'humanisation is the

⁵ See Robert P. Imbelli, "Remembering Barth and Merton," *Commonweal*, December 10, 2008, accessed 7 April 2019, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/remembering-barth-and-merton>; Silvia Richter, "For the 50th anniversary of Guardini's death," Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Mar 29, 2019, accessed 7 April 2019, <https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/press-portal/Catholic-Theology/news/guardini>.

⁶ Beauty, according to Thomas Aquinas, is something that brings pleasure upon being seen (*id quod visum placet*). Indeed, the pathway of beauty leads one to seek God, affirms the Pontifical Council for Culture its document *The Via Pulchritudinis*:

path of divinisation,⁷ then the world's history must be perceived in connection to God's "history." There is no such thing as "secular history" that can exist independently of God's self-communication. Therefore, resilience should not be viewed merely as a powerful psychological concept, but rather in the context of the relationship between God and humanity. It is vital to recognize that the secularised world does not exist independently of God's actions. In the current socio-theological climate, resilience proves to be a more apt term than resistance or hope. At least three dimensions can illustrate this.

Firstly, it is imperative to comprehend the present situation marked by a shift from the unified culture of the medieval Catholic world to a Church in a secularised world, a phenomenon described as the "transition from solid to liquid modernity" in contemporary terms.⁸ Only then can we genuinely understand and revitalise our faith in a resilient manner. This endeavour also encourages the use of language that embodies faith as "incarnate" and "present" in culture and history. The unified culture of the medieval Catholic world is no longer existent, and the environment that previously supported a faith that was in harmony with society and culture has been challenged. The questioning and potential abandonment of Christian identity is prevalent. Theology plays a crucial role in enabling us to engage in a dialogue with the new uncertain context of our age. The poetic verses of literary giants, such as Dante Alighieri or Gerard Manley Hopkins, and celebrated literary works of authors like Augustine or Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas or Thomas More, Romano Guardini or Karl Barth, or even those of Thomas Merton or Clive Staples Lewis seem increasingly remote from today's prosaic writings.⁹

Pathway for Evangelization (2006), accessed 7 April 2019, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html (accessed April 7th, 2019). Here, one thinks of Romano Guardini's contemplation of human life as a work of art, thus giving aesthetics a new perspective. See Romano Guardini, *La vita come opera d'arte: Scritti di estetica [1907-1960]* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2021).

⁷ Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Théologie et recherché interdisciplinaire," in *Recherche interdisciplinaire et théologie*, ed. François Houtart (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 68.

⁸ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012); Zygmunt Bauman and Thomas Leoncini, *Born Liquid: Transformations in the Third Millennium* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019)

⁹ For Guardini, it's always about 'looking with others' and 'thanks to others.' Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks that Guardini's great dialogical monographs

Secondly, resilience plays a critical role in a culture of uprootedness, where a resilient attitude is necessary to sustain faith amidst the dominance of narcissism and monetary trends that often overshadow or even eliminate any discussion about God.¹⁰ However, the prominence of political and economic discussions in the media should not discourage the inculturation of faith. This task involves establishing a connection between faith and culture. It is incorrect to claim that today's world is without the Church, morality without religion, science without theology, and man without God. Such a description fails to offer a genuine understanding of the contemporary world. The de-Christianisation of society is not a tragedy to be mourned nostalgically, but rather an opportunity for resilience and growth within the Church. Theology's purpose is not solely to preserve the deposit of faith that Christ entrusted to the Church, but also to re-examine and bear witness to it credibly, adapting to the language and cultures of the future. Resilience, in this sense, urges the Church to reinforce its mission of transmitting faith and making God's sacramental presence felt by returning to its sources.

Lastly, resilience enables individuals to rediscover faith as the guiding principle for theology and as the motivation for living, oriented towards the Truth. The renewal of theology has been achieved by

deliberately choose characters in whose company it is particularly worthwhile to look at the origins and to dialogue in the critical observation of reality. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini. Riforma dalle origini* (Milano: Jaca, 2000), 69. For Barth, it is revelation that awakens one's faith. See Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 67. Merton's timeless spiritual reflections on embracing uncertainty by placing trust, still endure as a classic: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen." Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Noonday Press), 79.

¹⁰ Here one might refer to Simone Weil who reminds her readers of the importance of religious and political social structures in the life of the individual as well as one's duty towards our community. See Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 2020).

directly referencing faith as its “principle.”¹¹ It is vital to recognize that faith is not merely an intellectual exercise, but rather a receptivity and response to the Triune God as Love. Just as resilience can be understood as an internal movement, faith is the state of being “seized” by and “situated” in faith, rather than being led by historicism or subjectivism. The believer is called to profess a faith that is both personal and ecclesial, living in the Truth of God as Love and responding to society’s needs with a deeper concern based on the demands of faith. In this light, resilience surpasses the ability to face the challenges of the world and conquer fears and obstacles. It also encourages individuals to exert a Christian influence on society, specifically by being the salt and light in the world for others. Following the introduction of three possible methods for integrating resilience into theological discussions, the focus will now shift towards examining how the three aforementioned theological figures relate to this concept.

Examples of Theological Resilience

Romano Guardini, Karl Barth, and Thomas Merton each had their unique approach to the concept of resilience. Their works convey a message of personal transformation as a means to achieve the greatest good for both individuals and society. Despite the authors living in different historical contexts (Guardini and Barth writing between the two World Wars, while Merton wrote in the post-war era), their perspectives remain highly relevant in contemporary society. Indeed, there are shared themes that bind their ideas together more closely than one might expect. In what follows, this paper examines Guardini’s holistic perspective on various realities, Barth’s emphasis on Christians maintaining their unique identity while engaging with the world, and Merton’s conviction that a sense of human purpose transcends despair.

Romano Guardini’s impact and influence continue to endure even after his passing, as he remains an intriguing and significant figure. Born in Verona, he moved with his family to Mainz, Germany at a young age, embodying a fusion of the reflective German spirit and a unique sensitivity to the Mediterranean world. Guardini was born in the latter part of the 19th century and witnessed the cultural shifts that would soon reshape Europe at the dawn of the 20th century. He

¹¹ See John Anthony Berry, *Yves Congar’s Vision of Faith* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2019).

approached his academic pursuits with an open mind, embracing critical thinking and an interdisciplinary approach that spoke to his intellectual agility.¹²

Guardini's approach to the events of his time was characterised by a profound sense of existential involvement, never observing them from a detached perspective. He possessed a remarkable capacity for empathy, and the fears, anxieties, joys, and hopes of his contemporaries were not lost on him.¹³ Everything that occurred in his surroundings touched him deeply, and he responded with a fervent and impassioned approach. Guardini did not engage in theology or philosophy of religion in isolation from the prevailing cultural and scientific developments of his time. Instead, he maintained a constant dialogue, both implicit and explicit, with the demands and aspirations that were shaping society.

Guardini's conception of resilience takes on a unique form, particularly in response to the secularisation and de-Christianisation of European society and culture. Rather than promoting some form of spiritual resistance, Guardini encouraged individuals to delve into the heart of Christian existence. He asserted that in today's world, Christians should refrain from relying solely on intellectual and abstract solutions. Instead, they are called to unite their scientific, cultural, and professional pursuits with their personal relationship with God, recognizing that these distinct layers interpenetrate in the Christian's concrete existence. By embracing this holistic approach, individuals can achieve a sense of resilience that transcends mere resistance to societal changes.

Guardini found inspiration in the life and writings of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), who offered both theoretical and existential responses

¹² See Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2013) as well as Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010) and Robert Anthony Krieg, *Romano Guardini: Proclaiming the Sacred in a Modern World* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1995).

¹³ One here recalls Guardini's reference to what he calls 'a symbolic character of reality,' through which the absolute inscribes an unmistakable trace of itself in the structure of the ontological difference. He writes: "All things attest that they are directly real and essential: but they immediately make us sense that they are not the ultimate reality, but rather a passage through which what is truly ultimate and authentic emerges: they are expressive forms that manifest it." Romano Guardini, "Fenomenologia e teoria della religione (*Phenomenology and Theory of Religion*)," in Idem, *Scritti filosofici*, vol. 2 (Milan: Fabbri, 1964), 207.

Braving a Troubled World

to contemporary issues. Pascal's deeply engaged and personal relationship with the living God, while simultaneously fulfilling his roles as a mathematician, physicist, engineer, psychologist, and philosopher, impressed Guardini.¹⁴ Like his predecessors, Pascal recognised the actuality that corresponded to each of these faculties of comprehension. However, he also became aware of a novel reality, the existence of the Living God. Guardini pointed to a passage in Pascal's Memorial that exemplified this approach:

For Pascal, the world remains the world, philosophy remains philosophy. But everything is called into a new coherence, and thought is challenged to a new effort through the discovery that God, grasped by the "philosopher" merely as "the absolute," is in truth the Living God, who enters into history in Jesus Christ; and that the relation of man to him, conceived by the philosophical theory of being as "relation to the absolute," is in truth the very life, oriented towards God, of him who is called by God.¹⁵

Guardini aimed to integrate theological, philosophical, and scientific reflections on reality into a cohesive intellectual life, believing that such unity was vital. He viewed intellectual pursuits as being more than just abstract contemplation; rather, they were enriched by personal relationships with God and others. This is illustrated in Guardini's *Letters from Lake Como*, where he initially expressed a nostalgic yearning for a bygone era, leaving readers with a disheartening impression. However, by the book's end, Guardini offered a positive outlook on the future of Western civilisation and humanity, despite the profound changes brought about by scientific and technological advancements. His interpretation of these changes and his optimism for the future effectively overturn the reader's initial impression. As Guardini himself stated:

Our place is in what is evolving. We must take our place, each at the right point. We must not oppose what is new and try to preserve a beautiful world that is inevitably perishing. Nor should we try to build a new world of the creative imagination that will show none of the damage of what is actually evolving. Rather, we must transform what is coming to be. But we can do this only if we honestly say yes to it and yet with incorruptible hearts remain aware of all that is destructive and nonhuman in it. Our age has been given to us as the soil on which to stand and the task to master.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Romano Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

¹⁶ Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como. Explorations in Technology and the Human*

Guardini's approach is far from passive acceptance of the forces of change; rather, it involves a discerning and critical embrace of novelty to guide it towards a humane and Christian direction. To assert that ongoing events are incompatible with Christian principles is misguided since these events, in and of themselves, do not contradict Christianity, even if those behind them do not adhere to its teachings. Guardini reminds us that Christians are not outsiders to modern society; rather, they are individuals of their time who are called to live as sincere Christians, free from preconceived biases, neither overly spiritual nor sceptical. Guardini's life exemplifies this call to embody the divine and the transcendent in our contemporary existence, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became human. Our focus now shifts to the next eminent theologian, widely recognised for his profound exegesis of *The Epistle to the Romans* and his ambitious, yet incomplete, multi-volume theological masterpiece titled *The Church Dogmatics*.¹⁷

To gain insight into resilience as viewed through the eyes of Karl Barth, one could refer to his powerful yet concise essay titled *Theological Existence Today*. In this work, Barth emphasises the importance of theological responsibility and defends the integrity of theology in the face of significant cultural challenges.¹⁸ By acknowledging the enduring relevance of theology throughout history, particularly in times of cultural upheaval and turmoil, Barth offers theologians a set of guiding principles, a moral compass, an attitude, and a structure to navigate their pursuits with clarity and purpose.

According to Barth's definition, theological existence entails remaining committed to the Word of God as one's primary vocation.¹⁹

Race, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), letter IX: "Man and Technique," 78-85.

¹⁷ See Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). See also Karl Barth and R. Michael Allen, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An Introduction and Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

¹⁸ See Michael D. O'Neil, "As If Nothing Had Happened": Karl Barth's 'Responsible' Theology. *Religions* 13: 266. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030266>. O'Neil explains that Barth is not pleading for the freedom to practise theology – from either the government or the German Christians – but argues rather for theological responsibility.

¹⁹ See Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids Michigan:

Barth firmly asserts that those who deviate from this principle are no longer considered “in the Church,” having been led astray by alternative preoccupations.²⁰ For Barth, the fundamental question is what constitutes the Church as a Church. He opposes three concerns raised by the government’s intervention, namely, the demand for Church reform, the appointment of a Reichsbischof, and the nature and status of the German Christians. Barth contests their validity on various grounds. He believes it is time for the Church to take itself seriously, relinquish superficial pursuits, and reclaim its true faith and ministry. Barth implores the German Evangelical Church to abandon its aspiration to be a political movement and embody the essence of the Church, described as a “Fellowship of the Called, the Hearers, the Obedient, the Awakened, the Pray-ers, the Hoppers and Hasteners.”²¹

Barth is deeply troubled by the replacement of authentic ministry with Church politics in what was called the “New Reformation.” According to him, the real conflict is not about “polls, placards, and protests,” nor is it about forming alliances and fronts. Instead, the theologian’s struggle is an internal one, occurring within the Church itself. Rather than being preoccupied with protecting the Church, the theologian’s duty is to embody the Church through the practice of preaching and theology.²² It is within this context that Barth’s plea for a “spiritual centre of resistance” gains significance. In his own words:

One that would, for the first time, give a meaning and a content to Church politics. The man who understands this will not ‘gird himself for any fight,’ but will put on his programme, ‘Work and Pray.’²³

With forceful conviction, Barth emphasises the critical nature of theological existence, which requires theologians to be faithful to their true selves and the mission entrusted to them, namely, to serve the Word of God within their nation.²⁴ To pursue other goals and ideals would be to betray this calling, jeopardising both the people they are called to serve and the Word of God itself, which could be taken away

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Compan, 1979).

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today: A Plea for Theological Freedom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933, 14-17

²¹ Barth, *Theological Existence Today*, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 74.

²³ *Ibid.*, 76, original emphasis.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 82, original emphasis.

from them.²⁵ Through his rhetoric, Barth implies that the present-day Church is confronted with the danger of divine judgement for its unfaithfulness, and that this judgement has already begun in the events unfolding in the present.²⁶

At the heart of Barth's essay, "Theological Existence Today," was the conflict over the nature and purpose of the Protestant Church, a long-simmering struggle that had come to the forefront. Barth maintained that the Church's duty was not to wield the Gospel as a weapon, but rather to embody the divine people of God. The struggle was not about the Church's cultural or political standing, but rather its integrity as a community of believers. For this reason, authentic theological existence was crucial if the Church was to fulfil its role as the "Fellowship of the Called." Even in a totalitarian state, the Church could still serve as the boundary and frontier of society, even if it meant existing "under the cross."

The topic of resilience is also addressed in relation to how Christians should engage with the world. He stresses the significance of preserving their uniqueness and effectiveness. The conventional evangelical interpretation of the 'salt of the earth' metaphor implies that Christians should either enhance the taste of society or maintain its goodness by acting as a preservative. Both interpretations highlight the necessity for Christians to remain true to their faith while interacting with the world, even if it only involves presenting an alternative Christian culture.²⁷ He writes:

Secularisation is the process by which the salt loses its flavour. It is not in any sense strange that the world is secular. This is simply to say that the world is the world. It was always secular...but when the Church becomes secular, it is the greatest conceivable misfortune both for the Church and the world. And this is what takes place when it wants to be a Church for the world, the nation, culture, or the state – a world Church, a national Church, a cultural Church, or a state Church. It then loses its specific importance and meaning; the justification for its existence.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Leicester: IVP, 1978), 60.

²⁸ Karl Barth, "Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity," in Idem, *Church Dogmatics: Aids of the Preacher* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977), 525. See also *Church Dogmatics*, III.iv, 487; IV.ii, p 668; and IV.iii, 225, 619, 773 and 816.

Braving a Troubled World

In this context, resilience is comparable to the metaphor of salt used by Jesus in that it not only resists the norms of the surrounding culture, but also enhances it by permeating and enriching it. According to conventional evangelical hermeneutics, Christians are to add flavour to society and act as preservers of what is good. However, the role of religion, like salt, extends beyond mere preservation and enrichment of the surrounding culture. Instead, it serves as a life-giving force in an otherwise sterile culture. The purpose of salt is not to maintain its distinctiveness, but to enrich society by diffusing into it. Over time, its distinctiveness is absorbed and lost, serving to create a synthesis between culture and faith. Such a synthesis is necessary for both culture and faith. A faith that does not become a culture is not fully received.²⁹ This brings us to the third distinguished theologian, whose unwavering commitment to a meaningful existence through spiritual nourishment conveys a remarkable sense of resilience.³⁰

Thomas Merton's astute comprehension of resilience is most poignantly illuminated in his contemplation of anxiety. According to him, anxiety is a manifestation of spiritual uncertainty resulting from unaddressed queries. However, the crucial aspect of receiving answers is first posing the right questions. Conversely, there is a more severe form of anxiety, a deeper sense of insecurity that arises from apprehension about asking the appropriate questions, as they may not have satisfactory answers. Merton identifies three types of despair: the first being indolence, which masks itself as despair and instigates avoidance of both the query and its solution; the second is a despair that feigns as science or philosophy, indulging in clever responses to intelligent queries that do not have any relevance to life's real problems. The third and most pernicious form of despair is that which masquerades as mysticism or prophecy, proffering prophetic answers to prophetic questions.

²⁹ One might here refer to Karl Barth's essay "The Gift of Freedom" dealing with practical problems of the Christian life. See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996). See also Vincent Nichols, "The Role of the Church College in the Mission of the Church in Education," in *The Church Dimension in Higher Education*, ed. James Arthur and Elizabeth Coombs (Canterbury: The Council of Church and Associated Colleges, 2001), 28.

³⁰ Merton's timeless works on spirituality continue to be a favourite for all time. See for instance *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948); *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961); and *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

With eloquence, Merton expresses the notion that even in the midst of devastation and despondency, humanity's inherent sense of direction and significance persists. If comprehending the purpose of existence were simple and the ultimate goal easily attainable, life would be undeniably meaningful, and there would be no need for rebellion. However, the fact that humans wrestle with inquiries about life's purpose and their ultimate destiny demonstrates that life must hold meaning.³¹ Despite the present lack of full comprehension of this meaning, it is humans' responsibility to unveil it and live in harmony with it. This provides them with a rationale for living, and as they mature and grow, they gradually become more cognizant of this meaning.³²

When grappling with the question of how to navigate the world, particularly amid a rising tide of secularisation, the solution lies in contemplation of the Truth, which is a bestowed gift, and surrendering oneself to its captivating and transformative power. As the world progressively loses its sacredness, it becomes imperative to reacquaint ourselves with the core of Christian faith. Spiritual life, through integrating us into the divine order, offers the most complete possible interaction with reality – not as Christians perceive it, but as it truly is. This transpires by awakening us to our genuine selves and placing us in the presence of God.³³

Thomas Merton's exceptional persona bears an indelible impact on the lives of people, one that cannot be overstated. His seemingly simple yet deeply insightful ideas empower individuals to recognize that humans are all interconnected as members of the human race. Merton believed that each person is a fragment of himself, and every Christian is part of his own body, owing to our shared membership in Christ. Thus, the actions we undertake are not only for others, but also with them and by them, as their actions are carried out in us, by us, and for us. However, we are each accountable for our individual contribution to the collective existence of humanity. Merton observed that aspects such as solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, the sacraments, the monastic life, the family, and issues of war and peace are only fully understandable when seen in relation to the central reality of God's love, which dwells within us as members of Christ.

³¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Image Books, 1967), 9.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

In 1978, Rowan Williams (1950–) lauded Merton’s extraordinary capacity to inspire individuals with his profound and transformative ideas. Williams writes:

Merton’s genius was largely that he was a massively unoriginal man; he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment he finds himself in ... All these influences flow into one constant place, a will and imagination turned Godward.³⁴

To pursue God in the midst of despair is more beneficial than living in complacency without ever seeking forgiveness. In fact, a life without challenges may be more hopeless than one that grapples with despair. As people recognize themselves as part of a human race meant to function as a single organism, they begin to appreciate not only their successes, but also their failures and misfortunes. Accomplishments are not solely theirs to claim, as they are built upon the foundation laid by others and pave the way for others’ success. Similarly, failures may stem from the inadequacies of others, but are balanced by the achievements of another.³⁵ Having examined the works of Guardini, Barth, and Merton on the topic of resilience, the attention now shifts to faith as a means of resilience that can be developed through theological exploration.

Faith as Resilience

In this last part, we will delve into the intersection of faith and resilience. It is increasingly evident that a resilient faith is vital for navigating the challenges of life. What exactly is the connection between faith and resilience? Until recently, there has been a dearth of research on this topic,³⁶ but in the past decade, there has been a growing body of literature examining this link.³⁷ To begin with, faith pertains to

³⁴ Rowan Williams, “A Person that Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton,” *Cistercian Studies* 13, no. 4 (1978): 401.

³⁵ Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 16.

³⁶ Maria Romeo, “Fede e resilienza: quale relazione?” *State of Mind. Il Giornale delle Scienze Psicologiche*. June 25, 2021. <https://www.stateofmind.it/2021/06/resilienza-fede/>

³⁷ See for instance David W. Foy, Kent D. Drescher, Patricia J. Watson, “Religious and Spiritual Factors in Resilience,” In *Resilience and Mental Health: Challenges Across the Lifespan*, ed. Steven M. Southwick, Brett T. Litz, Dennis Charney, and Matthew J. Friedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90-102; Savvas Daniel Georgiades, “Christian Faith as a Resiliency Factor in Coping with Immigration and Unemployment: Mental Health Implications,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental*

one's personal religious experience, where events in the material world are attributed to a divine being or a supernatural will. On the other hand, resilience refers to an individual's capacity to maintain a state of psychological and physical equilibrium even in the face of adverse events, leading to personal growth and development.

In recent years, empirical studies have demonstrated the positive impact of faith on individuals during challenging times, both at an individual and communal level. The personal dimension of spirituality, comprising an individual's interpretation and perception of events, provides a source of meaning and purpose even in difficult circumstances, which may otherwise be distressing and overwhelming due to their emotional intensity and complexity. Furthermore, religious communities foster a sense of social connection and support, which may not be available within the confines of one's immediate family or social network. However, there are instances when personal experiences or beliefs may conflict with religious teachings or practices, and may lead to a sense of disconnection and disillusionment with the faith community.

Recent research on resilience suggests that by confronting their problems and embracing new experiences with courage and hope, Christians can more effectively achieve their aspirations. These and other themes rooted in the rich tradition of faith are not merely theological abstractions, but hold significant pastoral relevance, offering hope, nurturing faith, and sustaining charity. They can be thought of as theological seeds that are planted in Christian thought, which then blossom in the current pontifical magisterium, thrive in contemporary ecclesial experience, and influence contemporary culture.

In the Christian tradition, there has been a tendency to equate human fragility with the consequences of original sin. However, this view fails to acknowledge that fragility is an innate aspect of created liberty, and thus precedes the fall. This raises a theological question: if vulnerability is not only a consequence of sin, but is inherent in

Health 18 (2016): 24-42; Maundeni T. Mhaka-Mutepfa, "Development: The Role of Faith (Spirituality/Religion) in Resilience in Sub-Saharan African Children," *The International Journal of Community and Social Development* 1, no.3 (2019): 1-23; Ögtem-Young, "Faith Resilience: Everyday Experiences," *Societies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1-13; Kenneth I. Pargament and Jeremy Cummings, "Anchored by Faith: Religion as a Resilience Factor," In *Handbook of adult resilience*, ed. John W. Reich, Alex J. Zautra, and John Stuart Hall (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), 193-210.

our created freedom, how should we understand it in the context of Christian faith?³⁸

Pope Francis does not provide a theoretical framework for vulnerability, but instead guides us towards paths where Christians can acknowledge and care for it.³⁹ Vulnerability permeates all aspects of existence, affecting both humans and animals who are sensitive, fragile, subject to change, ageing, and death. The question of vulnerability raises numerous issues for Christian thought and practice. The first step is to focus on the most vulnerable members of society, a group to whom Pope Francis pays special attention. Next, we must explore the challenges posed by vulnerability and find ways to embrace it in a generative manner. Ultimately, we can examine its theological significance.

Faith enables us to ascribe a particular sense and value to experiences, including those that are painful. Hence, nurturing our connection with the Divine serves as a buffer against the deleterious effects of adverse circumstances.⁴⁰ The assurance of being lifted and aided by a benevolent God in trying times is reassuring.

Resilience is not merely a product of mental and emotional fortitude. It requires something deeper, something spiritual, in order to truly make a difference. Physical and psychological strength can only take us so far in the face of conflict and hardship. To truly overcome adversity, we must have faith, certainty, and trust. As the psalmist proclaims in Psalm 17, the Lord is our rock, our fortress, our deliverer, and our mighty salvation. When we call upon Him in times of trouble and distress, He hears our cries and delivers us from our enemies. Even

³⁸ See for instance, Paul Gilbert, "Libertà e impegno," *Civiltà Cattolica* 147 (1996): 17-20; Sergio Ubbiali, "Il peccato originale. L'esistenza dell'uomo e l'aporia del male," *Questioni sul peccato originale*, ed. Ignazio Sanna (Padova: Messaggero, 1996). One can find a theological interpretation of freedom in the following definition: "The first pillar of freedom is unequivocally 'given'; the second is both 'given' [*gegeben*] and 'laid upon us' [*aufgegeben*]. We are given the necessity (this is our 'thrown-ness,' [*Geworfenheit*]) of going out from ourselves in order to make decisions and prove ourselves in the environment of our fellow men and fellow things. The manner and degree of our self-realisation remain open." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* (San Francisco: Ignatious, 1990), vol. 2, 212.

³⁹ See Pope Francis, "Recognizing Our Vulnerability," A Morning Meditation in the Chapel of Domus Sanctae Marthae, in *L'Osservatore Romano* 158, n.138 (18 June 2017).

⁴⁰ Georgiades, "Christian Faith as a Resiliency Factor," 24-42.

when we are surrounded by death and danger, we can find shelter and protection in the Lord.⁴¹ In conclusion, to maintain a vibrant and authentic faith, it is essential to cultivate a corresponding way of life. Without an inward dimension, it is impossible to sustain a Christian lifestyle.⁴² To truly answer the call of Christ, believers must seek to engage in some form of mystical experience.

Conclusion

As humans journey through life's tumultuous seas, the winds and tides of circumstance can shake their soul. But if they recognise the resilient nature of the human mind and heart, they can find the courage and strength to face any challenge. Humans possess a unique blend of tenderness and tenacity, adaptability and versatility, allowing them to cultivate and refine their spiritual and material gifts. The central argument of this paper is that resilience captures the very essence of human existence, encompassing the capacity to confront the shattering of one's integrity in the face of hardship, embracing one's wounds with fortitude, and relinquishing all entitlements. As Saint Paul reminds us, God has given us a spirit of strength, love, and self-control, not of fearfulness.⁴³

Although the term "resilience" may not have been explicitly mentioned in theological and ecclesial writings, its spirit and essence have always been deeply ingrained in them. Braving the world or conquering life difficulties means recognising the power of coming together to overcome any obstacle. The recent pandemic has brought to light the importance of the many people who have been our companions and fellow travellers in life, especially in times of fear and uncertainty.⁴⁴ Resilience is fundamentally built on relationships, just

⁴¹ See Pasquale Riccardi, "La forza d'animo; tra resilienza e Fede," in *Notizie cristiane* 27 August 2019, accessed 7 April 2020, <https://www.notiziecristiane.com/la-forza-danimo-tra-resilienza-e-fede/>

⁴² See Yves Marie Congar, *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, edited and introduced by Bernard Lauret (London: SCM Press, 1988), 5; Sebastián Fuster, "Aportación a teología del seglar," *Ciencia Tomista* 123, no.1 (1996): 77-98.

⁴³ 2 Timothy 1,7.

⁴⁴ See Paul Galea et al., *The Effects of the Covid19 Pandemic: Religion and Spirituality during the Challenging Times*, 2021. University of Malta. Faculty of Theology. Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law, accessed 7 April 2022, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/92351>

Braving a Troubled World

as human life is essentially relational. Human lives are intertwined and sustained by ordinary people who have made an extraordinary impact on our shared history, such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, supermarket workers, caregivers, transporters, volunteers, priests, and religious individuals.

The pursuit of resilience, as illustrated by the theological contributions of Guardini, Barth, and Merton, extends beyond relying solely on one's inner strength. These towering figures assert that courage and hope are critical attributes for confronting life's challenges, especially in the context of theological reflection, Gospel illumination, and Christian living in society. In this vein, their insights align with the profound words of the late Pope Benedict XVI, who notes that "we have been granted a dependable hope that enables us to confront the present, even when it is arduous, provided that we have a clear objective that justifies the journey's exertion."⁴⁵

In this light, resilience can be understood as the strength of mind necessary to persevere despite obstacles and hardships with, "sure hope that God holds the world in his hands and that, ... in spite of all darkness ... Love is the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working."⁴⁶ Christianity provides a perspective that highlights a prominent theme of hope in the Judeo-Christian biblical heritage, which ultimately culminates in the resurrection of Jesus and the possibility of new beginnings and rejuvenated life. The social doctrine of the Church draws on this and other related texts to assert that every individual possesses an intrinsic spark that motivates them to act in a manner that reflects their dignity, and this spark cannot be extinguished by any opposing forces. Jesus' teachings illustrate that life is more powerful than death, and even wounds can heal and lead to new growth and opportunities. This perspective does not seek to rationalise or glorify suffering, but instead offers solace and comfort in the face of wounds that might seem entirely devastating. The story of Thomas encountering the resurrected Christ serves as a powerful illustration of this concept: although Christ's wounds remain visible,

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, Encyclical letter on Christian Hope, 30 November 2007, 1.

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, Encyclical letter on Christian Love, 25 December 2005, 39.

they have become a new pathway towards hope and renewal.⁴⁷

In closing, I would like to share a poignant quote from St. Paul's second letter to Timothy, which speaks to the human spirit imbued with strength, love, and self-control by God himself.⁴⁸ Whether or not one chooses to subscribe to Paul's teachings is a personal matter, but his words resonate powerfully as an inspiring call to courageously navigate through life's challenges. While social and friendship ties can serve as important protective factors, in particularly difficult situations, faith in a merciful and saving God can be even more crucial. Resilient individuals who have embodied the spirit of *Evangelii gaudium* have been described as "small but strong in the love of God, like St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), called to take care of the fragility of the people and of the world in which we live."⁴⁹ In addition to its conventional definition, resilience may also manifest as an acceptance and embrace of the divine presence that permeates our world. By fully surrendering our will and emotions to this omnipotent force, we can genuinely relish the magnificence and enchantment of life.

⁴⁷ John 20:27

⁴⁸ 2 Timothy 1:7. See also Pasquale Riccardi, "La forza d'animo; tra resilienza e Fede," *Notizie cristiane* 27 August 2019, accessed 7 April 2020, <https://www.notiziecristiane.com/la-forza-danimo-tra-resilienza-e-fede/>

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, Apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world, 24 November 2013, 216.

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