

Ministry, Disability and Brokenness: Orthodox Insights into the Authority of the Priesthood

John Chryssavgis

Abstract: Christian ministers must learn to acknowledge the authenticity – and thereby the authority – of their own weakness and woundedness. From an Orthodox Christian spiritual perspective, the awareness of one’s imperfection and brokenness can, paradoxically, become a source not only of personal blessing but also of ordained vocation. The idealisation of physical beauty and external wholeness, frequently at the exclusion of difference and brokenness, is more characteristic of classical Greek aesthetics than of Christian asceticism. The notion of prayerful waiting introduces a third expression of our brokenness, the shattered world around us as we stand – or kneel – before the twenty-first century. The brokenness of creation reveals a further aspect of the role of the priest.¹

1. INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHORITY OF MINISTRY IN THE NAME OF THE CRUCIFIED and resurrected Christ is rooted profoundly in the Cross. “We preach Christ crucified” says the Apostle Paul. And he continues:

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence. (1 Cor 1:23, 27-29)

Christian ministers and ordained clergy must learn, therefore, to acknowledge the authenticity – and thereby the authority – of their own weakness and woundedness, and not their supposed strength; their brokenness, not their apparent wholeness; their disease, rather than their

1. The original paper was delivered as a keynote address to a national clergy retreat (held in Chicago) of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, in the presence of His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew on the occasion of his visit to the US in October 1997.

seeming health. Even when standing tall in the dignity of the image of God which every person bears, the disciple of Christ and particularly the ordained servant to Christ's Church should be kneeling internally, in sincere repentance and in hopeful prayer to the Triune God. How might deacons, presbyters and bishops of the Church embrace brokenness? How might we make others aware of it? How might all members of the Church learn from and grow through increased awareness of our weakness? These are among the questions which I shall attempt to address in the following paragraphs.

The problem of "role" is faced by many in ministry today. People feel "called" to do one thing, yet find themselves thrust into something else. Some are effective administrators, others become liturgical specialists, others focus on theological instruction, and others on pastoral counselling. A smaller number, among the Orthodox at least, take on the important roles of social workers, community activists and public preachers. Many of us eventually experience symptoms of spiritual and emotional "burn out". A certain percentage become rather disillusioned, particularly with the institutional, "political" aspects of Church ministry. Nearly all the clergy, it would appear, aim or have aimed for success in one area or another, striving to produce results, whether primarily material or primarily spiritual.

With the many, seemingly overwhelming challenges and demands that ministry often entails, it is easy to lose sight of the Cross. It is easy for Christian ministers – and all Christians are called to "ministry" in one form or another – to become distracted from the centrality of humility and the significance of vulnerability in the Christian life. Yet, the priestly vocation arises precisely from and leads precisely to the Cross. It is identified with the broken Body of Christ, which the priest is called not only to celebrate ritually, but to live existentially and to become mystically. On the night of His Passion, the Lord said to His disciples: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

The priestly authority lies not simply in the commission to break the bread and share the wine, invoking the transfiguring power of the Spirit; it lies equally in obedience to the command to do as Christ did, which means to be broken and shared as body and blood. Although the power of the world may be expressed in a struggle for the survival of the fittest, "it should not be so among you" (Matt 20:26). The power of the Kingdom is the authority to give of oneself and indeed to give one's very self in imitation of Him who said: "Take, eat, this is my body [broken for you]; drink of this all of you, this is my blood which is shed [for you and] for many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:20-30; Luke 22:14-22). And when Christ commanded: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), He was "instituting" not merely a liturgical service

but a way of life. In remembrance and in imitation, of them, and in succession to Him, we are to be broken for others and shared with others. The task is quite simple. But it is far from easy.

This concept of woundedness or brokenness may perhaps sound negative or morbid. Yet the idea of the priest as a “wounded healer”, as a person who – before all else and beyond all else – is aware of his own personal weakness as being the very occasion of divine strength through him, deepens and broadens the notion of the authority of ministry as service (*diakonia*). The late Henri Nouwen (d. 1996) describes this profound spiritual axiom in this way: “Making one’s own wounds a source of healing...does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but for a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men share.”²

The human experience of brokenness is universal. Moreover, from an Orthodox Christian spiritual perspective, the awareness of one’s imperfection and brokenness can, paradoxically, become a source not only of personal blessing but also of ordained vocation. In order to see how this can be so, it may be helpful to consider the theme of brokenness in terms of three interrelated conditions or realities: (i) the reality of personal sinfulness, (ii) the reality of physical and emotional brokenness and (iii) the reality of cosmic fallenness. With regard to the first, I should like to emphasise that the acknowledgment of sin can actually lead to communion with God, if only we can avoid what may be called “the cult of piety”. As regards the second, I propose that the acceptance of disability can lead to a deeper sense of belonging to one another, if only we can avoid what may be called “the cult of perfection”. And as for the third, I wish to suggest that our assuming responsibility for the distortion of the world’s image can lead us to a deeper connection with the world, if we can only avoid what I shall refer to as “the cult of pride”.

These realities are neither easy nor pleasant ones to face and, perhaps for this reason, they are not often discussed in detail by clergy and ministers. Yet, they are central to pastoral identity, authority and vocation. I believe all of us who hope to be witnesses to the gospel of Christ are called to appreciate fully the imperfection and woundedness we experience within and among ourselves. In this way we may enable others to appreciate the brokenness which they too experience as members of the human race. Only then, when the soil is broken and soft, may the seed of new life be deeply planted.

2. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 90.

2. SIN AND BROKENNESS

Perhaps one of the main reasons we often feel uncomfortable and remain silent about our weaknesses, failures and sins is that we are afraid of them and feel shamed by them. We fail to see that, through the wonder of God's love in Christ, our weaknesses are, in fact, opportunities for the divine strength which is "made perfect in weakness". Our reticence about admitting our own weaknesses and yet stepping courageously forward in faith, like the Apostle Paul, the "chief of sinners", reflects and fosters a false sense of humility and independence. Instead of leading toward greater solidarity and interdependence in the truth which sets us free, fear, shame and pietistic timidity lead ultimately to the dis-memberment of the community and to the dis-integration of our own souls.

It is precisely here that the Church as community offers a life-giving alternative. The Church identifies us as a people who are inter-dependently related to one another and to God. As Church, we are the "communion of saints" who acknowledge our sin. We are members of that "Body of Christ" which is ever broken and poured out upon the altar of this world for the salvation of all. We are imperfect and we know it. Yet, we also know that He is perfect, and that we are perfectly loved. Therefore, the community of believers welcomes and supports each person in his or her unique trials: "if one member suffers, then all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

At the same time, we live within the context of a western culture which places a high value on independence. We are told that we must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Independence is encouraged and expected of us; dependence is considered an evil to be avoided. To be dependent is to be weak, something tolerable only for children, the elderly, or the unhealthy. Dependence signifies dis-ability; it indicates dis-ease.

Regardless of these cultural messages, the tradition of the Church shows us that in some mysterious way we become more whole when we recognise that we are incomplete. We may become more complete once we see that we are missing something significant. Paradoxically, we are given the opportunity to gain something far greater when we lose or surrender something that is dear to us – whether voluntarily (through an ascetic discipline or effort) or involuntarily (through death, or divorce in the family, or some other form of brokenness, broken-heartedness, or breakdown). Only when we confess the hole in our soul, can we be filled to overflowing. Only when we are brave enough to *let go* and to acknowledge our limitations, our neediness and our imperfec-

tion does the possibility and promise of our lives then become limitless in Christ:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... when this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality. Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O Hades, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15: 51-2, 54-5)

Some time ago, my younger son, Julian, read *The Missing Piece* by the well-known contemporary children's author, Shel Silverstein. The book tells the story of a circle that was missing one of its pieces. So the circle travelled widely in search of this missing piece. This incompleteness, however, caused it to move rather slowly. And as a result, the circle was able to enjoy the scenery: it admired the flowers and the oceans, it chatted with the butterflies and the worms, it soaked in the sunshine, the rain, and the snow. When at last it discovered its missing piece, it was naturally able to roll along at a more rapid pace – but much too quickly to be able to notice or appreciate anything in its environment. So, the circle stopped, left its piece on the side of the road, and moved on, rejoicing in the fact that it was missing a piece.

The irony is that, in repentance, we are not called to look for our missing piece. We are called to search for "the one thing that alone matters" (see Luke 10:42), for "the pearl of great price" (see Matt 13:45-6) which is Christ. We discover Him, together with our own true selves, in one another, in community, in His Body on earth.

In the communion of the Church, the members that seem to be weaker are, in fact, invaluable and indispensable. God has so constituted the Body of Christ that everyone is necessary and important. Each person contributes to this divine-human community, not simply by the service that each renders but by the sacred mystery that each one is. This is the way that St Paul describes it:

There are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand: 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet: 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with great respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Cor 12:20-5)

The *ecclesia* is the place where we recognise that we are called not to be invincible but to be vulnerable, not to be perfectionists, but to be perfectly merciful, “even as our Father who is in heaven” (see Matt 5:48, interpreted in light of Luke 6:36). In the ecclesial liturgy – “the work of the people” – we learn to share our lives with one another (*koinonia*), to be thankful together (*eucharistia*), and to be mindful of how loved we are by God (*anamnesis*). The liturgy “begins” in the temple of the Lord, expanding from that temple to claim the whole earth as temple and all of life as worship.

The liturgy, too, is not afraid to refer to our imperfection. It speaks repeatedly of our failings, our neglect, our hard-heartedness. This is not because we are unaware of these, nor because the Church finds joy in contemplating them, but because they are real, and only in community can we fully face them and overcome them. We misunderstand the message of the gospel and of the liturgical services if we hear it as criticism, or correction, or condemnation. The gospel speaks to what is best in us. It is a message of communion and love, the love that is true and costly.

By allowing ourselves to be challenged by this love, by courageously facing our imperfection and our weakness, we allow genuine healing to take place and new life to awaken within us. This is the “great understanding” that is repentance, according to *The Shepherd* of Hermas.³ As we proceed along this path, we come to understand ourselves more fully. We begin to put into clearer perspective the voices of our parents and of our past. By understanding our history and our limitations, by sharing ourselves, by forgiving and accepting forgiveness, we widen “the gates of repentance” and the “doors of paradise” open unto us.⁴

All too often in the Church, however, particularly among clergy, an unhealthy pietism obscures the gospel message. This has occurred, in part, because we have identified sin and weakness with guilt and condemnation. As a result, clergy have sought to conceal the reality of their imperfection; they have tried to hide the brokenness of their existence, presenting a false image to others and to themselves. Clergy often feel that they have to be strong for others. They feel obliged to heal the wounds and bear the burdens of the people, forgetting that others may heal their wounds and bear their burdens as well. They fail to recognise, moreover, that their tragic ability to sin is a sign, not only of their imperfection but also of their dignity as beings who have been granted the gift of free will, and who can choose to repent. The human capacity to sin points also to the great mercy of God who has the even greater capacity to forgive sins. In the Church, in repentance, our sin becomes an opportunity, therefore, to encounter the living God. Sin is the

3. *Mandate IV*, ii, 2.

4. Orthodox Hymn from the Sunday Matins of Great Lent.

measure of our estrangement from God, but our awareness of our sin can be the occasion for our return to Him. This is the joyful and hopeful good news of the Church. We can be healed. We can be saved. In the crucified and death-defeating Body of Christ, fear gives way to love (see John 4:8).

3. DISABILITY AND COMMUNITY

In addition to spiritual brokenness, there is another dimension that is not always readily appreciated in our communities. I am referring to the reality of physical, emotional, and intellectual disability. We do not talk about these matters much in society and, perhaps, even less within the Church. We belong to an age and culture that can accept only with great difficulty the reality of human mortality, vulnerability, and frailty. Nevertheless, we stand judged by the way we treat the weak, needy and disabled among us. And who among us is not, at some point in life and in some way, weak, needy and dis-abled? The disabled show us and our relationships and values for what they are. They remind us of our priorities and our choices. I shall endeavour not to analyse mental or physical disability in abstract terms. Each person is unique and faces his or her own particular set of challenges. Likewise, each possesses his or her own set of strengths and talents. My own son, who has cerebral palsy, is a constant reminder to me that I have far less to teach him than I have to learn from him. I shall also avoid entering too deeply into the question of terminology: "disabled persons" or "persons with disabilities" or "differently-abled" or "challenged". Rather, I should like to address what I shall call "the cult of perfection" which is prevalent in our culture and which acts to stigmatise disability and to distort reality. As an alternative to this, I invite you to consider an ecclesial way of life which emphasises spiritual wholeness and communal interdependence.

So let us begin with a simple question: is a disabled person a whole person? Surely the immediate response of most people, particularly of Christians, would be "Of course!" Yet, the issue becomes less clear when we critically examine certain historical Christian traditions and continuing practices, including those of the Orthodox Church. Even the witness of scripture seems ambivalent. The Old Testament, for instance, presents a diversity of views on the matter. On the one hand, the disabled must not be mistreated or oppressed: "You shall not revile the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind." (Lev 19:14; see also Deut 27:18-19). On the other hand, persons with disabilities are forbidden to undertake sacred roles:

No one of your offspring...who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb

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too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. (Lev 21:17-20)

Even animals that appeared lame or sick were deemed unacceptable before God (see Mal 1:6-8, Lev 22:21-5). Central to such prohibitions are the concepts of pollution and sin or, conversely, of purity and perfection. These important concepts may be, perhaps, best understood in terms of the brokenness and pain which arise "from the depth of the human condition which all people share", as Nouwen put it. The exclusion of such persons – whether from a community or from some sacred activity – signifies their less-than-acceptable status before the altar of God. Those who serve at the altar are seen as close to God, indeed as representing Him. There can surely be no "flaw" in the image of God, it is assumed. The presumption in this way of thinking, however, comes closer to a Hellenistic worldview than to the Patristic understanding. The idealisation of physical beauty and external wholeness, frequently at the exclusion of difference and brokenness, is more characteristic of classical Greek aesthetics than of Christian asceticism.

One of the reasons for excluding disabled persons from priestly service was the assumed conjunction between disability and sin. Under the old covenant, disability was sometimes presented as God's punishment for sin (see Deut 28:15, 28-29). This view is apparent, for example, in the account of Christ's healing of the blind man in the Gospel according to St John: "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (9:1-2). Christ's response, in fact, debunks the identification of disability with sin: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (v 3). Christ's "gentle touch" (see vv 6, 11) allows us to move forward into a world where humanity is no longer torn or divided.

The idea of sin is no longer often used with reference to disability. Yet, in many cultures, the cult of external perfection prevails and there is frequently stigma associated with disability. This is evident, it seems to me, even in the way people respond to the question: "should disability be healed?" Most would without hesitation say "yes", regarding healing as necessary and thereby implying that disability is wrong and unacceptable. Yet our Lord did not heal everyone with an illness. Remember His words: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him". I was born with sight so that God's works might be revealed in me. My child was born with cerebral palsy so that God's works might be revealed in him. Each of us is as we are, as clergy or as laity – so that God's works might be revealed in us.

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In a human-rights sense, persons with disabilities are entitled to services that enhance their well-being. In a political sense, they deserve a fair share of community resources. In a community sense, they ought to be accepted as full citizens. However, there is another sense, the spiritual sense, according to which they should be accepted as they are.

What is, perhaps, of more serious spiritual concern is our notion of perfection. For the disabled present an uncomfortable challenge – especially for clergy – to the illusion of human greatness, perfection, and progress. We must cease imagining God in our own image, for it is we who are made in God's image (Gen 1:26). We have already recalled that, when Jesus appeared to Thomas after the Resurrection, He said to him: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." (John 20:27) The risen Lord presented His impaired feet, His wounded hands and His pierced side. Disability does not contradict divine-human integrity. Rather, it becomes, in the crucified and resurrected Christ, a new model of spiritual wholeness. Jesus rose with His wounds; so too shall we.

Returning to the notion of community, we might once again note our dependence on one another and on God. Often we prefer to speak of interdependence, which suggests mutuality and the ability to give and receive. While there is truth to this, it is crucial in the spiritual life to understand that the situation is not one of parity. God gives, we receive. We are indebted to God (see Luke 17:10).

Dependence is, in fact, a defining characteristic of the human person. It is an essential quality of the spiritual life and the quintessence of freedom in Christ. Such thoughts are not congenial to the modern mind, which looks on humility as abasement rather than as the rational response that it is to an honest and accurate appraisal of our place in the world. Dependence, or humility, is our true nature without pretence. We should, then, pay closer attention to the disabled and to our own disability, because it is in them that we discover models of spirituality and ways of salvation. They can show us what true humanity is in this world – far from perfect, and yet fully and totally loved by God. The reality of disability must serve as a critique of our illusions and ambitions. Spiritual growth is not obtained by effort or achievement. Gifts are bestowed, not earned. They must prayerfully and humbly be waited upon. This "silence" is the proper corrective to a minister's incessant activity and clerical busyness. It provides an authentic measure of our spiritual standing.

The notion of prayerful waiting brings us to the third and final expression of our brokenness which I shall now address. I am referring to the shattered world around us as we stand – or kneel – before the twenty-first century. The brokenness of creation, I am convinced, reveals a further aspect of the role of clergy.

4. THE SHATTERED ENVIRONMENT

There is a paradox in our concern for the environment. In spite of our efforts to respond to the global eco-crisis, the situation is deteriorating. We are becoming all the more articulate about the contributing factors to the destruction of the ozone layer, much more informed of the alarming statistics. So why is it that we are still so far from any solution? A simple answer, at least from a theological perspective, is that we are not doing that which we are "ordained" to do. As an ordained clergyman of the Orthodox Church, I am called to preach the death and resurrection of Christ, to hear confessions of fellow sinners, to shed tears for the world, and to bury the dead.

The first step in ecological repentance is precisely confession. Perhaps the most mystical of all experiences is the profound realisation of who we are and what we have done. With regard to the environment, we are not the "good Samaritans" but the "highway robbers" (Luke 10:29ff.). It is self-righteousness to imagine that it is otherwise. We have not properly cared for this world. God has granted us life upon this beautiful earth and we are crucifying it even as we crucified Him. The least that we can do now is repent, confessing rather than repressing our sin. When we assume responsibility for our sin, just as God took responsibility by "assuming the sin of the world" (see the Great Doxology) in all its horror, cruelty, and pain, then the environmental crisis may be gradually transformed. Then restoration may begin.

Think of it in this way: I cut down a tree. I want, in all fairness, to be creative, to build a home. But I simultaneously create a problem. And so in making a home, I have – perhaps unwillingly, possibly even unwittingly – prepared a coffin. This is not a far-fetched image. It is the startling revelation of the interconnectedness of all things. For in cutting a tree, I have cut down the level of oxygen. I have buried not just the tree and the earth, but my own child. Now I behold my own soul and my own child laying in the coffin, in the earth's very soul. How can I dare preach repentance without repenting? How can I speak on behalf of the environment without first bearing responsibility for the tragedy of its brokenness? How can I become part of the solution until I cease to be part of the problem?

Instead of preaching, I must kneel silently; I must weep. The dismissal hymn of the ascetic fathers and mothers tells of the way that "the stream of tears gives fruit to the sterile desert". St John of Damascus (d. 749) reminds us that "the whole earth is the living icon of God's face". And Dostoevsky exhorts us to embrace the earth: "the whole of it and every grain of sand". So I must venerate the earth. I must desire back my child. I must grieve the loss, perceive the sin, sense

the decay, sincerely want back even the tree. I must ask forgiveness. This is my only hope of resurrection. And so it is death that teaches me about life; it is the acceptance of brokenness that once again brings about healing.

So when I hear that there is a hole in the ozone layer, I feel nothing unless I sense the hole, recognising my own child in that hole. Only then can God's hand reach through the hole and transform the emptiness into the openness of His grace. It is only when I can see in the face of the world the face of my own child, and the face of all faces – the image of Jesus the Christ – that I also recognise in each tree a face, and a name, and a time, and a place, and a voice, and a cry that longs to be heard. "Can we," asks St Augustine (d. 430), "ask for a louder voice than that?"

My confession before the environment then becomes a conversion. And so I can change my attitude to and my treatment of nature. I know that I should not treat people like things; but I need now also to learn not to treat things like things. My presence in this world must enhance and embrace nature, not threaten or destroy it.

Pride is a uniquely human quality; it belongs to Adam. All other species seem to know – instinctively, in fact – where they fit in the order of things. Human beings alone seem unable to understand how far to go, how much to gather, when to stop. There is a "cult of pride" that characterises humanity, and the only remedy for our excess consumption is *ascesis*, an ascetic restraint and discipline, which acknowledges that the earth belongs to heaven, not to us. It is a matter of doing with less – in terms of food, clothing, work, entertainment and all manner of consumption. It is a question of simplifying, of "travelling light". We can almost always manage with a lot less than we imagine. An ascetic approach helps us not only to be more sensible in our attitude to the world, but also more sensitive to the people around us. For the truth is that we respond to nature with the same delicacy, the same tenderness with which we respond to people. By some connection that we do not always understand, the willingness to exploit one becomes the willingness to exploit the other.

St Nikiphoros of Chios (d. 1831) once preached that "people are poor if they do not love the trees". "If you do not love trees," he said, "you do not love God." Clergy are called to serve at the altar which is the heart of our community. Likewise, they are called to minister to others at the altar of the heart and to celebrate God's presence in the cathedral of the universe. They must communicate the truth that if we lose the forest, then we lose not just an aesthetic but an essential quality of life: we lose our imagination and our inspiration; we lose the mystique of nature and the mystery of life; we lose our sensitivity and our soul. The most endangered species is not the whale. It is not even

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the human being. It is the very earth that we all share. This is our home, our *oikos*, where we, whales and people alike, live and die.

5. CONCLUSION

As we stand at the threshold of the third millennium, it may seem fitting that we review our past achievements and failures and set our agendas for the future. As we do so let us remember that the scriptural model of the priestly vocation should not be sought in the arrival of Moses into the Promised Land, but rather in the departure of Abraham into the dark unknown. This is the dark side of discipleship. Yet the Church fathers speak of God Himself in terms and images of darkness, for it is in darkness that we see God. "The darkness", says the Psalmist, "is no darkness with you, but the night is as clear as day. The darkness and the light are both alike" (Ps 139:12). When the clergy are prepared to face the darkness that is within, and are not anxious to validate or justify their authority from without, then we shall observe what the Greek poet Nikiphoros Vrettakos observes in his stunning poem, *The First Thing of Creation*:

I don't know how
But suddenly there is no darkness left at all
The sun has poured itself inside me
From a thousand wounds.