BOOK REVIEW

Touch the Wounds:
On Suffering, Trust, and Transformation

by Tomáš Halík
translated by Gerald Turner
Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023, 147 pages

This book reads with clarity and urgency, as if Tomáš Halík writes with one hand on the keyboard and the other lodged firmly in Christ's torso. Like the apostle Thomas who inspires this book, Halík explores the meaning of Christian suffering and hope in the resurrection. His invitation to readers is startlingly simple: "I would like to present my readers with witness to a faith that lives even when it is sometimes painful and bleeds" (xvii). For Halík, Christianity's wounds are what it has to offer the world—a world caught between stale clericalism and public indifference toward Christian faith.

Halík is a Czech Roman Catholic priest and sociologist. Although his sociological perspective is sometimes apparent, *Touch the Wounds* is primarily a theological text. So this review will summarize his theological argument and conclude by drawing out its relevance for Christian sociologists.

The book begins with a personal narrative. Halík describes his visit to an orphanage in Madras, India, which is also the place of Thomas's martyrdom. Overwhelmed by the suffering at the orphanage, Halík felt the urge to "run away as fast as I could from there, to close my eyes and heart and forget." However, as he recounts, "At that very moment a sentence came back to me from somewhere deep inside: 'Touch the wounds!' And again: '*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side'* (7, emphasis in the original). Halík shares how this experience has led him to rethink the Paschal encounter between Thomas and Jesus, as well as its significance for Christians today.

Halík suggests Thomas does not lack faith as many Christians mistakenly believe; rather, he refused to accept a resurrection that would *"empty the cross of its meaning"* (9). By probing Christ's wounds, Thomas finds a resurrected Jesus who does not nullify suffering, but rather transforms it. Thus, Thomas's contribution to Christian discipleship is his recognition of the unity between the crucified Christ and the resurrected Christ. Halík illustrates this unity by juxtaposing Thomas' exclamation, "My Lord and my God!" with an earlier turning point in the Easter narrative, when Pilate is presented with a viciously tortured Jesus and announces, "Here is the man!" Both statements refer directly to Jesus's wounds: Pilate's statement conveys the

"truth of Good Friday," that humans stand naked before the whims of power. Thomas's epiphany recognizes Jesus has conquered death, and in doing so, stripped the powerful of their robes (19). Christ's wounds are precious, Halík suggests, because they remind Christians to keep these two realities intact.

The encounter between Jesus and Thomas offers a unique starting point for Christian social inquiry. Like many other Catholic social thinkers of the last half-century, Halík develops his inquiry by reading and responding to the "signs of the times": societal features that clarify the relevance of the Christian faith for a particular place and time. But whereas most Catholic thinkers read those signs in culture or social structures, Halík meditates upon how bodies are diseased, emaciated, and sometimes grotesquely displayed for entertainment. Halík is not naïve about how economic and political exploitation destroys some bodies rather than others. However, he suggests Christ's solidarity with the poor and afflicted is relational, intimate, and even visceral, rather than structurally induced. Just as Michelangelo's *Pietá* depicts Mary holding her deceased son, Halík argues, Christians must know Christ's suffering flesh to flesh, "without distance" from pains inflicted upon the world (15).

For Halík, solidarity with the poor is an epistemological journey toward Christ, not just an ethical mandate to be carried out by people who claim to "have" faith as if it were a possession. Witnessing the wounds of others refracts Christian insight like a mirror—insights into human suffering, Christ's presence, and one's complicity and hope for redemption.

Halík is most critical of Christian institutions that "avert their eyes" from the suffering of the world or fail to acknowledge hypocrisy within their own ranks (especially the Catholic Church's perpetuation of sexual violence). He admonishes the "god and faiths that skip through the world unaffected by its pain and suffering—without scars, stripes, or burns—in order to make a smooth-tongued presentation of their glittering charms—and nothing else—in today's religious marketplace" (6). As Christian colleges and universities vie for enrollment numbers and relevance to public life, Halík's words strike acutely.

The middle chapters take deeper theological plunges. Cautiously, Halík explores the meaning of a God who was not only wounded, but who also died. His conversation partners are Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Elie Wiesel, Martin Luther, and that keen observer of the death of God, Frederick Nietzsche. Halík's dedication to understanding this mystery led him to engage generously and seriously with atheism as well. He argues that atheism, especially atheists who do not believe in God because of human suffering, can offer necessary correctives to Christian faith (48). Here and elsewhere, one can appreciate Halík's precise engagement with interlocutors outside his own faith tradition.

Two additional chapters address how social power distorts Christianity, making truth and Christian witness servants to political expediency. Halík poses a fascinating counter-factual: What if Constantine, upon his conversion, had understood the cross to reveal the arbitrariness of political power, rather than to adorn its battle gear? Halík uses this question to outline a Christian response to power, grounded in Christ's witness during the Passion. His chapter on speaking truth to power probably strikes a chord in any modern nation-state. In the current political climate of disinformation and truthiness, it is not only relevant, but also prophetic.

As mentioned above, *Touch the Wounds* leans heavily into theological insight. Those insights draw extensively from philosophers and public intellectuals of which sociologists may be aware. However, there are also a few stretches of direct sociological argument. What does this book offer Christian sociologists? Thematically, Halík's book comes at a time when sociologists are taking renewed interest in the human body, especially how inequality and trauma influence cognitive, emotional, and physiological processes. That commonality creates opportunities to think theologically and sociologically about the body.

Of course, the bodies most likely to read *Touch the Wounds* are generally comfortable and safe. On one hand, Halík suggests such circumstances are theologically precarious, especially if they obscure or dismiss other people's pain. He writes that "a faith that would close its eyes to people's suffering is simply an illusion or an opium; both Freud and Marx would be right in criticizing that kind of faith!" (8). On the other hand, Christian sociologists may be well-positioned to examine whether and how Christian institutions recognize human suffering as a central feature of contemporary society. From this perspective, *Touch the Wounds* is an excellent counterpart to the study of segregation, social distance, and collective denial.

Finally, Halík's book implies a profound, if daunting, direction for Christian college and university sociology programs: to seek Christian understanding through encounters with human suffering. That direction would affirm Christ's solidarity with the wounds students already endure; they sometimes know pain much more intimately than professors imagine. And it would equip students to witness the work of the cross among the poor, sick, and condemned. For Halík, that witness is the way—maybe the only way—that Christians can fully echo Thomas' words, "My Lord and my God!"

Chris Hausmann
Northwestern College