

The Legend of St Martin of Tours, 316 - 397 CE, Patron Saint of France¹

The life of St Martin of Tours, who is credited as the founder of Christian chaplaincy, provides a direct source for understanding hospitality as it relates to chaplaincy today.

Little is known of many of the early saints of Christianity but thanks to a person called Sulpicius, we know quite a bit about St Martin of Tours. Sulpicius was so impressed with him that he devoted his life to following Martin, talking with those who were involved in his life and writing a biography of him before the saint died.²

The first meeting of Sulpicius Severus with Martin of Tours was one of astonishment. The good bishop had invited him, a simple, humble man without any rank or privilege, to dine with him at his residence!

Amazed at his good fortune, Sulpicius pictured himself at the bishop's palace. But soon he found out that Martin was no ordinary bishop - instead of the expected bishop's palace, Sulpicius discovered that Martin had forgone such entitlements and chosen to live in a monk's cell in the wilderness!

If Sulpicius was disappointed at the humble accommodation, he was soon in for more surprises. Not only did the bishop offer him a meal at his residence, Martin washed Sulpicius' hands before dinner and his feet in the evening.

Sulpicius couldn't get over that visit. He became Martin's disciple, friend, and biographer.

Martin was still an unbaptised catechumen³ when he was forced to join the army at fifteen. The Roman army apparently had a law that required sons of veterans to serve in the military. Martin's father had been a Roman soldier but Martin wanted to become a Christian monk. He resisted his conscription and legend has it that he had to be held in chains before taking the military oath. Once the oath had been administered he felt bound to obey. He was assigned to a ceremonial cavalry unit that protected the emperor and rarely saw combat. Like his father, he became an officer and eventually was assigned to garrison duty in Gaul (present-day France).

¹ The source of the following material on the life of St Martin-of-Tours is the Catholic Online Encyclopedia: http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=81 (viewed January 11, 2010)

Aspects of this history also appear in Geoff Boyce, *Models of Chaplaincy: Traditional, Professional Surrogate, Multifaith*. Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association Vol.2 No.2 2005

² Adapted from text found in the Catholic Online Encyclopedia http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=81 (viewed January 11, 2010)

³ A person taking classes to learn about the faith before being formally accepted into it.

Even in the military Martin attempted to live the life of a monk. Though he was entitled to a servant because he was an officer, he insisted on switching roles with his servant, cleaning the servant's boots instead of the servant cleaning his!

One day Martin was on garrison duty in Gaul when he noticed a beggar, freezing in the cold. No one seemed to be helping him. So Martin, moved with compassion, went to his aid. He took off his thick army cloak and cut it in two with his sword. One piece he wrapped around the beggar and the other he kept for himself.

That night Martin had a dream in which he saw the beggar with the piece of his cloak on his shoulders. But in his dream the beggar was Jesus.

This vision of Christ as the beggar transformed Martin, convincing him to give his life in service to the poor and neglected in his society as a monk.

Finally he was able to leave the army to take up his calling. His reputation grew quickly. The clarity of his conversion drove him to serve the poor and enabled him to resist any self-glorification. He saw the face of Jesus in all he met and had no desire but to serve.

Martin was a fierce advocate for the powerless to whom injustices were easily done. It was said that he was so dedicated to the freeing of prisoners jailed capriciously at the whim of town authorities, that even emperors, when they heard he was coming, refused to see him because they knew they would not be able to resist his advocacy.

The story of his consecration as a bishop is equally legendary. When the second bishop of Tours died, the people demanded Martin in his place, but Martin was unwilling to take the office. He wanted to remain a simple monk. But the people loved Martin and wanted him as their bishop. So they resorted to a ruse to overcome his resistance. They tricked him by sending a citizen of Tours to beg Martin to come to visit the man's supposedly sick wife. When the kind-hearted Martin arrived in the city, crowds of people came out of hiding, surrounding him. He was swept away by the multitude and carried into the church, where bishops had been gathered to consecrate him. The visiting bishops were repelled by this dirty, ragged, dishevelled choice and thought his unkempt appearance proved him unfit for the office. But the people insisted. They hadn't chosen Martin for his outward appearance, but for his compassion, humility and commitment to justice. Overwhelmed by the acclamations of the local clergy and the people, the bishops had no choice but to consecrate Martin, and he became the third bishop of Tours.

Martin's activism for the poor and love of people was matched by his commitment to solitude and prayer. He developed regional spiritual communities as places of hospitality for anyone, regardless of their background, who sought direction or sanctuary. He instituted the practice, which continues today, of the bishop making pastoral visits to each of his communities at least once a year. This

visitation was significant at a time when authorities, who lived in the towns and cities, often neglected country people. He lived simply and humbly, resisting any status-seeking for himself.

When he died, Martin was buried at his request in the *Cemetery of the Poor*. The Frankish Kings kept Martin's half of the cloak as a relic. The guardian of this cloak became known as the 'capellanus', in Latin, which through use in old French, then English, became 'chaplain'. The place of keeping was known as the chapel.

The values and example of St Martin have provided a legacy for the work of chaplains in the university context since the inception of the early European centres of academic learning.

The Legacy Today

If hospitality means "the reception and entertainment of guests or strangers with liberality and kindness"⁴ then St Martin of Tours, the reputed founder of the vocation of Christian chaplaincy, is the chaplaincy prototype; for he was one of the most kind and hospitable of people.⁵ So what may we learn from him?

1. Fluidity

Although he had a centre, or an office, if you like, he often travelled out from that centre, to the countryside, meeting ordinary people neglected by town officials. So chaplaincy today is also a fluid occupation, not confined to a desk and a detailed appointment schedule, but mobile, unobtrusively engaging with people in their everyday life, particularly with an eye for those in need of support.

2. The compassionate impulse to help

Chaplaincy is defined by the same compassionate impulse as the incident of Martin with the beggar, and such acts are interpreted by the chaplain as sacred.

I remember watching a TV program about a chaplain in a country setting. The scene that struck me was the chaplain in old clothes out in a paddock with a farmer, helping him with fencing. The TV presenter asked the obvious question: how could this be chaplaincy? His reply was that he thought chaplaincy was about "doing whatever needs to be done!" This chaplain was acting in the spirit of St Martin: fixing the fences was like cutting a cloak and putting it on the farmer's shoulders. It was what the farmer and his family were crying out for, when, as the TV program went on to show, they were going through very tough times. This was more than fixing fences in the paddock. This was about the chaplain giving

⁴ Macquarie Dictionary, January 22, 2010

⁵ St Martin was not perfect, of course, and was a person of his time. He made mistakes and, paradoxically, was influenced by the striving of Christianity for dominance over other religions that was rife at that time. In particular, he was violently anti-Pagan. In this respect St Martin is not a source of understanding of, or model for, the multifaith aspects of today's chaplaincy.

the appropriate kind of help, actions that went beyond words, that raised the spirits of that farming family.

One of the most challenging situations I have faced has been in sharing the distress of overseas students who have found themselves in financial difficulty. The economy of their country may have collapsed and the value of the savings set aside for their degree evaporated. Or a medical emergency in the family has eroded the parents' capacity to pay. There may be any number of legitimate reasons for their predicament and invariably the person sitting in front of me represents the hopes of a family for a better future. Forgoing the quest and returning home are almost unthinkable.

There are no easy answers to solve these problems. If it "takes a village to raise a child" then it takes a community to provide support. Finding links to their religious and cultural communities is a first step. Keeping contact and providing a listening and encouraging ear is another. For one couple in this predicament it meant writing references and being a referee to help them get jobs. For another person, it was accompanying him, advocating for him and persevering with him, to find an appropriate job.

Today's chaplaincy is neither psychological counselling, nor is it welfare. St Martin acted in compassion in the absence of other helping agencies. But today, counselling and welfare are helps already generally available to today's "beggar" and there should be no need for the chaplain to duplicate these services.

So in this sense, chaplaincy does not seek to do what other agencies are already doing. In the university, chaplaincy avoids the temptation to become "alternative counselling" - the counselling you get when you want the "religious bit", or through lack of trust in "secular" counsellors. Rather, Counselling and Chaplaincy work together to complement each other for the total well-being of persons. This may sometimes mean the counsellor and chaplain sitting in the same room with a person. But essentially, chaplains are free agents to act in compassion to "do what needs to be done". If others are doing it already, the chaplain is free to move on. This freedom, this availability, is one of the great gifts chaplaincy has to offer. Chaplains are able to journey with people long term, not restricted to appointment schedules and limited time for meeting and also free to follow up people off campus, whether that be accompanying a student to hospital, to a law court or to a job interview.

3. Communities of hospitality and spiritual nurture

The hospitality of St Martin changed the lives of the people he met. To sustain their transformed lives, he encouraged them to form *communities* of hospitality. The chaplains at Flinders themselves have become one such community. *Oasis* is the host for the chaplains and the other communities who make their home there, each contributing to the ethos of Oasis, reflecting the values of St Martin,

who was unconditional about the acceptance of others seeking refuge, solace or spiritual direction.

I think there is a great need for chaplains today to recover St Martin's emphasis on community *among themselves*. Chaplaincy became individualised when it was re-caste as the priest offering the Mass to displaced adherents. St Martin, I think, would not approve. His mission was universal and unconditional. A communal model of chaplaincy in which the chaplains offer hospitality to each other provides a context for unconditional hospitality to others. It also provides a context for reflection and learning.

This communal approach may sound surprising or even threatening to those who are committed to a traditional, individualised structure of chaplaincy based on denominational interest, servicing members of a denominational "club". By focusing on denominational interest the rich tapestry of God's creation is confined. A communal approach creates the rich possibilities Volf describes, "where the divine energies of embrace can flow", "where the depths of life God meant for us to share together in God's diverse creation may be experienced.

Life in a community of difference helps us appreciate the perspectives of others, and in particular those to whom we minister, who live in a context of difference.

4. Advocacy for the disadvantaged

Advocacy for those who had no voice or were subject to the whims of the powerful was one of the hallmarks of the life of St Martin of Tours. This same sense of the chaplain being seen as someone people may turn to for fairness is still evident today. The chaplain is someone who is "outside the system" but has moral authority to engage with the system on behalf of others deemed by the chaplain to have been unfairly treated.⁷

Just as today's provision of counselling and welfare services releases the chaplain from these as a primary focus, so there are advocacy agencies within and outside the university who may protect the rights of those who consider themselves ill-treated.

But just as, from time to time, the chaplain may choose to engage in the kind of counselling described in the next chapter or in some cases provide emergency material assistance for the welfare of students, the chaplain may choose to

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing"*, in William A. Dyrness (Ed), *Emerging Voices in Global Theology* (Zondervan, 1994) p40, as developed in Chapter 2

⁷ In my view this is the strongest point in favour of chaplains being appointed by external agencies rather than by the institution itself, though there may be ways for such independence to be protected.

become involved in advocacy, when it seems appropriate, but always with an eye to delegate these functions to others who have expertise in these areas.

Before a Muslim chaplain represented the Muslim community on campus, it was necessary for me to acquaint myself with their needs and convey them to the appropriate university authorities. The need for this advocacy became more acute when I realised the cultural dynamic among people who come from a culture of hospitality, in which it is not the province of the guest to make demands of the host. It is for the host to shower hospitality on the guest. This may be a foreign concept among us Westerners! Advocacy for the needs of some groups of international students becomes important when university bureaucrats are oblivious to these significant cultural differences.

But I wonder whether today, St Martin's *advocacy* has become chaplain's *solidarity*. That is, in today's society there may be others better placed to speak (advocate) for those who have no voice but few who will stand alongside and accompany a person in need of support beyond office hours and appointment schedules.

Solidarity means standing with people. This is as much a pastoral act as a prophetic one.

I recall joining in a campus protest-march by post-graduate students when their fees had been raised. They were marching to the Chancellery to occupy the Council Chambers. It seemed to me they had good cause; but I joined with them, a little bemused amid the banners, chants and whistles because that's precisely where a chaplain should be, among the people, no matter what I might have thought about the pros and cons of protest marches.

That may sound odd, that I should join their protest march, because the convention generally accepted in society at large is that we only allow ourselves to be seen in such public demonstrations when we are aligned with people and causes we agree with. Political correctness often applies. This was the convention the AFES staff worker upheld when he did not want to be seen working collaboratively with the chaplains. For the AFES, the chaplains did not conform to their set of beliefs and culture of proselytization. So to be seen working alongside the chaplains was to be seen to be in agreement with all they stood for. And they couldn't have that!

But chaplaincy is primarily about supporting the spiritual life of people, whoever and wherever they are, perhaps in much the same way as consular assistance is provided to Australian citizens, no matter who they might be or what they might have done, who find themselves at odds with authorities in overseas countries. Being "chaplain to the university" means offering unconditional support to all. Such solidarity with people is an act of vulnerability, easily misunderstood and easily used against a person. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that defence force chaplains condone war, simply because

they are wearing a uniform and exercise ministry among defence force personnel. Like St Martin of Tours, they are there because they might do some good by being there.

As we marched with much commotion into the offices of the university administration, the Vice-Chancellor came out of his office and looked out through the glass partition of his reception area with a wry grin. We caught each other's eye, and acknowledged each other with a smile. I felt that he was giving fatherly approval to it all – though he could never officially acknowledge it. There had been another time, etched into the collective memory of Flinders, when the students had occupied the Council Chambers for good cause. I felt that behind his grin he quietly approved this show of challenge to the University; that it was a refreshing sign to him that student life was alive and well, no matter how misplaced he may have thought the protest. Students were being students. And it was pleasing for him to see the chaplain among them, as he should be.

As we proceeded along the corridor of the Chancellery I thought I would drop into the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. We had a good relationship. I asked her about the raising of the fees and got a short reaction, informing me about another side of the story and an inclusive process that had taken place to arrive at the decision. I quickly saw that the DVC was upset by the demonstration and, for her, the unfairness of it all. She didn't like to have to make such a decision either, but, having weighed up all the options, this seemed to be the best choice. Representatives of the post-graduate student body had been part of the decision-making process, but in this protest they were painting her as the enemy, as if she alone had made the decision. The inference was that she was displaying some kind of spite against them. This must have been very painful for her, and I caught a little of it!

This was a good lesson for me, still learning the ropes of chaplaincy. It had been relatively easy for me to identify with the student cause and to see myself in solidarity with them. But I quickly realised I did not have sufficient information to make judgements about who was right or wrong. Could I ever be in such a position to judge, being outside decision-making processes?

More fundamentally, I came to the conclusion that it was not my role to be a critic. There were already enough people doing that! Rather, it was to have the courage to stand among all. After all, the DVC was also aggrieved at the hard decision that had to be made and equally in need of my support.

My encounter with the DVC didn't change my mind about continuing to support the students as they locked themselves into the University Council Room. But I had learnt a valuable lesson. It wasn't the chaplain's role to play the blame game, but to stand among conflicting parties, be hospitable to each, and particularly share each other's pain. It was not my place to solve their problems – other

agencies were likely to be better equipped for that and, in any case, I had no such official mandate.

Does this mean that I don't have opinions about many aspects of university life? Not at all, but they are provisional thoughts usually based only on anecdotal information. And whatever my own thoughts, chaplaincy, more often than not, demands that I put these opinions to one side to nurture the spirit of each person, to be in solidarity with them on their human journey.

Oasis as a community of hope

Chaplains of all religious traditions may claim the legacy of St Martin, and through their collegial service to others, model a vision of wholeness and humanity. This may stand as a beacon of hope and promise for those who are crushed and dehumanised, collateral damage of enterprises driven by the dollar.

We all engage with the economic systems of our age, but when economics becomes the master, rather than the servant, surely the die is set for dehumanisation. Crass materialism and commodified consumerism are spiritual killers. Hospitality stands over and against these contemporary forces. Negotiating ways to reconcile economically driven realities with the way of hospitality is an urgent need for our times.

So the chaplains at Flinders not only provide a *Refugio* to meet the religious and spiritual needs of individual students as they pass through their university education, and of staff increasingly being asked to do more with less and to toe the line with a system often at odds with their values and vision, but they encourage and nurture the formation of communities of hospitality within Oasis itself, and as far as they are able, in all corners of the university. The hospitality among the chaplains is itself an encouragement to those who have come from cultures for whom hospitality is the norm. The "leftovers" from the "improbable feasts" of hospitality offered within Oasis contain seeds which accompany the knowledge and skills gained by students from their studies, seeds of hospitality to be scattered to the four ends of the earth, springing into new life in their own time and in their own ways as they find fertile soil. Oasis is also a centre making a quiet and modest contribution to world peace.