

STAN'S MARTYRDOM: SUPREME ACT OF LOVE

He was concerned only about walking with the most vulnerable, especially the Adivasis and the Dalits

BY JOSEPH XAVIER

With much anxiety and pain, on July 5 morning, I travelled from Bangalore to Mumbai. I returned to Bangalore on July 8 with a heavy heart, carrying the ashes of the martyr. All along, Stan taught me the deeper dimensions of following Jesus, by his life and mission, until his death. I am grateful to him for taking me into confidence and sharing his life.

On July 3, as the medical bail petition came up for hearing, Stan was praying and fasting, despite being confined to bed. However, the bail petition was adjourned to July 6. On July 4 early morning, I received a message that Stan's heart rate was falling, twice he was administered Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and that he was put on ventilator. The message that Stan is on the ventilator spread like a wildfire. By evening, he was looking slightly better.

Sensing that the inevitable was nearing, the following morning, I travelled to Mumbai to see him. While I was checking in, I received a message that Stan's acid levels were high, and he was totally dependent on the ventilator. A few minutes before the flight took off, Adv. Mihir Desai gave me good news that the High Court will be hearing Stan's case in the afternoon, in a special sitting. I told myself that I was fortunate, and I could see him soon.

As I landed in Mumbai, I was told that an hour ago Stan suffered a cardiac arrest, was critical and the doctors administered CPR and revived his heart. But soon I was told that Stan had reached his eternal abode. In consultation with responsible persons, a decision was made that it would only be appropriate that the doctor informs the court. As the Court began the hearing on July 5 around 2.30 pm, at the insistence of the lawyer, the judge permitted Dr. Ian D'Souza, the Medical Director of Holy Family Hospital, to speak. Dr. D'Souza said, "I am saddened



to inform the Court that Fr. Stan Swamy passed away at 1.24 pm".

There was silence. I am still trying to decode this silence. Were the judges moved by the death of Stan? I will look for an answer in the days to come. But I am sure of one thing. God pronounced the judgement

declaring Stan as the 'martyr of the marginalised' and did not allow mortal human judges to have power over Stan. The gospel passage from John, read during the funeral Eucharist, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn 19: 11), became true.

My last conversation with Stan was on June 27. He said, "I am going to my second childhood. You are the person who has been looking after me. As a Jesuit, I belong to the universal Society of Jesus and I surrender myself. Talk to the provincials and I will go with whatever they decide. Currently, I am in the good hands of Holy Family Hospital staff and Fr. Frazer".

Stan is a mystery

Stan was understood and loved by several persons and he was equally misunderstood by many, which included the Church personnel as well as the Jesuits. Those who closely worked with him and many who

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had attended social analysis courses at Indian Social Institute, Bangalore from 1976 to 1990 admired him. Many who came in contact with him were transformed to be better humans. However, some used to complain that he was not celebrating the Eucharist. He was not just a ritual priest. His life and mission were rooted in the life of Jesus. He was the happiest person when the life stories of the poor, their pain and suffering, hopes and aspirations, struggles and vulnerabilities and strengths and sacrifices were brought to the altar of the Eucharist. He wanted to connect the life narrative of historical Jesus and struggles of the poor. He saw Jesus' suffering today in the lives of the poor.

As a Christian, he used to participate quietly in the Eucharist and receive the Holy Communion. Even in the hospital bed, he used to eagerly wait to receive daily communion. While he was in Bagaicha, his daily morning prayer was in front of the 'patal' – a stone kept in the centre of Bagaicha in which names of the Adivasi martyrs are engraved. Everyday he used to stand silently in front of the pathal for 15 minutes. He will collect flowers and offer them. Once I asked him, "What do you do in front of the pathal?" He said, "I pray that my spirit may be infused with the spirit of the Adivasi martyrs". His dream came true. He is one with Adivasi martyrs today.

During his imprisonment in Taloja, he asked me to send a book – *Jesus: A Historical Approximation*, by José Antonio Pagola, originally published in Spanish in 2007 and translated into English in 2014. In this

admirable book, Pagola has attempted to put Jesus at the centre of Christianity, which entails having the poor and the marginalised in the foreground, living with compassion, accepting people as they are, being inclusive, taking up the Cross and trusting the Father. Stan tried to model his life as a true follower of Jesus.

This book was read not only by Stan but also by a few other inmates in the prison. During the discussion, Stan has told his co-accused, "How difficult it is to be a follower of Jesus". One of the accused seemed to have stated, "Till now I was a non-believer, but Stan showed me the compassionate, merciful and just face of Jesus. He brought the historical Jesus alive in the prison. He never complained about his pain and suffering. His concern was always about others".

Actions louder than words

In November 2020, he asked me over phone, "Could you send me a pair of pants, 36 inch in size and a shirt, 42 inches and a lungi". I was surprised. I said, "I am sure it is not for you, Stan". He said, "Lungi is for me. Even if it is used one, it is fine. But the pants and shirt are for a co-prisoner. He has no decent clothes". I managed to reach them only after 45 days. On another occasion, he sent details of another prisoner, with name and case details. He said, "This prisoner has no one to reach out to. He does not know the charges against him. Could you take out the charge sheet and send it to me. I would like to help

him". In yet another letter, he wrote, "Mr. Varavara Rao is suffering. Please do something urgent so that he may have good medical treatment".

Stan was not familiar with most of the accused falsely implicated in the Bhima Koregaon case. After going to the prison, he picked up friendship with them. Listening to their life stories, he said, "The co-accused have done much more to the poor for their dignity and rights than me. These are all married persons. They have families. I am a religious priest. I should have done much more than these people. When I compare myself with their works, my contribution is very little."

His life is his vision

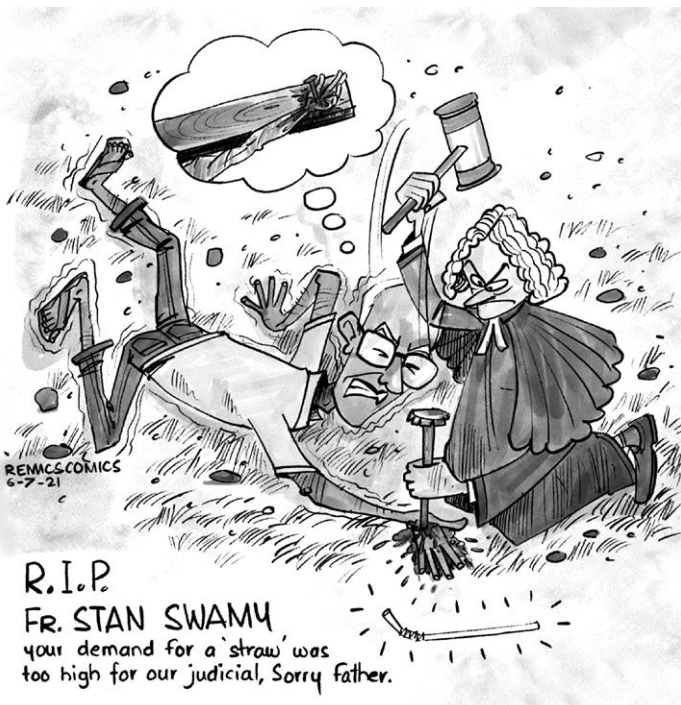
Non-complaining, non-compromising and religious poverty were three defining characteristics of Stan. In 2020, when he was staying at Indian Social Institute Bangalore, he came up to my room and said, "For the past one week, I have had severe pain in my abdomen. It might be something to do with appendicitis. I have been operated upon twice. You do not worry. If the pain does not reduce in a day or two, I will tell you". As I knew Stan well, I told him, "Thank you Stan, for informing. I will see what needs to be done." I was deeply aware that he could not bear the pain and that is why he came to inform me. The doctor who attended to him in St. Philomena's

hospital wondered how Stan was bearing pain for so long. Even while he was in Taloja prison, he never complained. Our telephonic conversation was about the court case, the health of his companions, and the needs of other prisoners. Whenever I asked about his health, he had a routine answer. "I am finding it difficult to get up from bed. My knees are in pain. But I am managing."

When the sipper straw issue was picked up by the media, with an angry tone he asked me, "Why has such a small issue become so huge? Is this issue so important? I brought an ever-silver sipper when I entered the Taloja prison, along with my voter identity card and a few hundred rupees. I was not allowed to take the sipper inside. I thought that it must be somewhere lying unused. That's why I had asked for it". He has been using an ever-silver sipper for over four years. He thought along with the sipper, he had also lost the voter identity card, the lone document he had to prove his citizenship. He asked me to get a soft copy from Ranchi, print and send him. After his death, when Stan's properties were given back to the Jesuits in a small polythene bag, I found the original voter identity card, the scanned copy printed and sent to him, along with some petty cash and clothes. That was all his property.

Stan was non-comprising on principles. He was an advocate for combining Gospel ethics and Constitutional ethics. Within the framework of the Constitution and various laws of the country, he demanded that justice be done to the Adivasis. He questioned the governments when the Constitutional provisions were violated brazenly by the state and authorities, in nexus with corporate companies. He said, "We live in a country where law and order agencies neither follow the provisions of the Constitution nor the judgements of the Supreme Court. Panchayati Raj Extension in the Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act is only the tip of an iceberg. How long will the Adivasis be victims of systemic oppression?"

The Gospel ethics of Stan was neither philosophical nor theological. He propagated acts of mercy, compassion, solidarity and justice. In public meetings, he would quote from the Bible and from the Jesuit documents and demand that the Jesuits faithfully follow what we proclaim. What we own is the patrimony of the poor and we should always be on their side. His words were so powerful and uncompromising that some found his words and thinking unpalatable. However, Stan never had anger towards

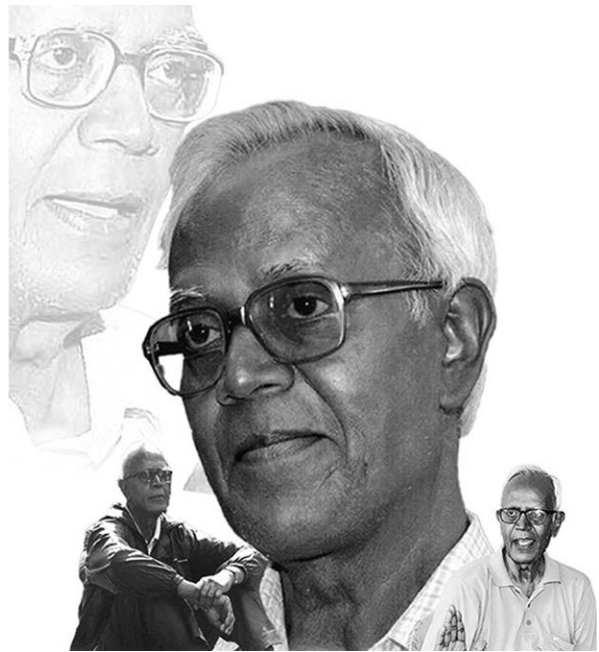


any individual. He would reiterate that we are called to act justly and to love and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:6-8). He had special love for Pope Francis and found him truly a Jesuit and prophet of our times.

He was par excellence in following religious poverty, totally detached from position, power or money. He was concerned only about walking with the most vulnerable, especially the Adivasis and the Dalits. Even in his old age, he preferred to travel by sleeper class in the train. In 2019, when he was in Bangalore, whenever I had offered him a couple of thousand rupees during travel, he would say, "Whenever I go, people are taking care of me. I do not need any cash". When he returned from travel, he would give me some new clothes forcefully offered by his friends or family members and would say, "I do not need more than two sets. Give them to the poor". Stan was totally detached from his family members. Once in four years, he would travel to South from Jharkhand to visit his friends. Even during the last days, he was very much interested in speaking to his friends who were his companions on mission. His friends were his family.

That is why he said in the court, "In the last 8 months in Taloja prison, my organs have deteriorated. My only desire is to go to Ranchi and be with my people", whom he always fondly called, my Adivasi sisters and brothers. He was so much one with the communitarian world view of the Adivasis. Trained in Marxism and social analysis, he was transformed into an Adivasi, as he felt that the Adivasi world view had much more to counter a caste-ridden and profit-oriented corporate world, and make it more humane.

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Stan's poems from prison

Prison life was new to him. In one of his earlier letters from prison, he wrote, "Despite all odds, humanity is bubbling in Taloja". He was longing to meet all the co-accused in BK16. But there was no opportunity as they were lodged in different prisons. So, he wrote, "We will still sing in chorus that a caged bird can still sing". He found Prison life, a great leveller and wrote:

Nothing is mine
Nothing is yours
Everything is ours

Lo, this commonality is wrought by compulsion
If only all humans would embrace it freely and
willingly
All would truly become children of Mother Earth

As the world was celebrating New Year, Stan wrote:

May the New Year
Bring a New Awakening
To all of us

May the new awakening
Light a New Flame
In our hearts

May the new flame
Help us discern Truth from untruth
And hold fast to truth

May Truth embolden us
To speak truth to power
And be ready to pay the price

In death he rose again

His death was mourned by many. Stan knew that he was nearing the inevitable and what he said just before his arrest in October 2020 that 'I am not a silent spectator but ready to pay the price whatever it might be', was coming true. He accepted it magnanimously. He was angry with the justice system as it favoured only the rich and powerful and denied the due rights of the poor. The laws are made to serve the human and organize the society to make it better. In Stan's death, it became very clear that human beings are inferior to Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Though Stan was in prison for nine months, not even once he was interrogated.

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He extended full cooperation to the inquiry. He was deceived and arrested. On October 8, 2020, the NIA officials met him in Bagaicha and told him, "We want you to come with us to Ranchi NIA camp office and answer some questions of our higher officer. He believed them and went, never to return".

Medical bail petition was delayed for 5 months by the Sessions Court in Mumbai. His age was never considered, despite established international conventions. It was obvious that there were no plans to begin the trial. So, bail was the only option. Fundamental principles of jurisprudence that bail is rule and jail is an exception, and the presumption of innocence were thrown to the wind, just because a case has been filed under the UAPA.

When he was suffering in Taloja seriously, Ayurveda doctors were providing antibiotics. The prison has no allopathic doctor. Under the court order, he was taken to JJ hospital for medi-

cal checkup three times. RT-PCR test was not done. He was given one dose of vaccination after an antigen test. In the last two months in prison, his letters were withheld. These scenarios raise many questions about the intentions of the State. It looks the state was interested in punishing Stan even before he was proved guilty. If the state says this is the law of land, such a law has no place in a civilized society.

It is only appropriate to quote what he wrote on April 7, when the world was celebrating Easter and his bail petition was rejected by the Sessions Court.

Light overpowering darkness
Hope replacing despair
Love winning over hate
Is the message of Jesus risen

Darkness, despair descended on me
At lower court declaring me complicit
Of waging war against the State
As such not deserving bail

And what was the evidence?
Some documents planted in my computer
Which were supposedly addressed to me
Something I myself was not in the know

My co-accused colleagues
Assured me this accusation is nothing new
They too have been accused similarly
I was thus consoled to be in their good company

But fight we will till the end
Not so much just to save our skin
But to speak truth to power
Counting all the while you all are with us in mind and heart.

Despite Stan's death, the case will still remain as BK16 and not BK15. The Jesuits are committed to the cause for which Stan gave his life. He is born again in the lives of many. His legacy will continue until the country becomes a better place for the poor, realising the vision of the founding fathers of our country, enshrined in the Constitution of India. He was born a Tamil, embraced the Adivasi world view, worked for the realization of the Constitution and kept his faith in Jesus till the end. May the blood of the martyr cleanse our nation. Stan, RIP. ©

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