

## **The Church and the Crucified Peoples**

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Was Jesus a revolutionary? Well, ... obviously not in the conventional sense. Yet, with the pope in Brazil last week to open a meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean, the question has surfaced again. Why? Because this region, which has the most Catholics, is also the most unequal in the world. While Catholic leaders worry about growing secularization and the hemorrhaging of the faithful to Pentecostal churches, the press also seemed preoccupied with abortion. But pervasive poverty in the region is impossible to ignore.

The press also repeatedly stated that the present pope, and the “church” or “the Vatican” have condemned liberation theology. In fact, while the pope is no friend of liberation theology, neither he nor the church has condemned it. The current pope has rejected what he considers to be certain “aspects” of liberation theology. (Cf. the first “Instruction” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, of 1984. The liberation theologians failed to recognize themselves in the doctrines criticized, however.)

In April 1986 Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the Brazilian bishops that few seem to remember. In it, the pope wrote that “liberation theology is not only timely, but useful and necessary,” provided it was in continuity with church tradition. That remains the case today. Concepts like the preferential option for the poor and structural sin and the language of the idolatry of money and power have been incorporated into official ecclesiastical documents.\*

Poverty in Latin America is impossible to ignore. So is the familiar question, What would Jesus do?, and another, What should his followers do?

Most agree they should feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But what about the policies and institutions that generate death-dealing poverty? Not all agree on a response. Bishop Hélder Câmara of Brazil used to say, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Many here in the U.S. were surprised when the pope strongly criticized not just Marxist socialism

but also capitalism. People who are familiar with the pope's writings were less surprised.\*\*

Still, I think it's fair to say that Benedict and Hélder Câmara, who identified with liberation theology, represent two visions of the social meaning of the gospel and the mission of the church in the face of massive injustice. These two visions clash in Latin America and in the church at large. Some, including some bishops, see the church's mission as the salvation of souls –of rich and poor alike. For these Christians, promoting justice, although important, is not strictly “religious.” It ranks low on the church's agenda. For others, social justice is central to the faith. The poor –meaning all oppressed and vulnerable people-- are the crucified vicars of Christ today. Unless the church walks with them, it fails to walk with him. As Jon Sobrino says, *extra paupers nulla salus*, outside the poor there is no salvation.

Take Guatemala, where half the children under five are chronically undernourished and wealth and income are extremely concentrated. How can the church announce a credible good news (“gospel”) there, if it fails to denounce that situation? Fortunately, the church in Guatemala does protest --and suffers for its trouble.

Christians with this justice-oriented faith place the poor at the center of their worldview and at the top of the church's agenda. For them, the same Jesus who said, “My kingdom is not of this world” also said, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth.”

His kingdom (or reign) does not “proceed from” this world, with its lies and violence. (If it did, Jesus said, his followers would have fought to rescue him. He came “to bear witness to the truth.”) Jesus was telling Pilate, “My politics are very different from yours and Caesar's.” His are the divine politics of truth and service, of a “reign” that transforms social relations as well as souls. This implies that the clergy do well not to run for Congress. Caesar as a job that is different from theirs. On the other hand, we dare not privatize religion, isolating it from politics. Rather, let church leaders stay free enough to remind Caesar that he will have to render to God an account for the fate of the poor and the weak.

A faith with justice at the center reflects an awakening to worldwide poverty and injustice awareness in recent decades, but especially since World War II, inside and

outside the church. Decolonization was occurring in waves. The information explosion and widespread travel were underway (the beginnings of globalization). The World Council of Churches spoke out on decolonization, world poverty and apartheid. Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* and, especially, Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, gave expression to the Catholic Church's part in that awakening to global inequality and poverty. But the Council was above all a coming-to-terms with the modern world of the North Atlantic, and it was not until after the Council that we find the Church moving more decisively toward what John XXIII had hoped for at the beginning of the Council, that the Church become "the church of the poor." Concern for world poverty was the central concern of Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* (1967), which called for "integral development" (the development of all peoples and of the whole person). Still more decisive was the second general conference of CELAM at Medellin in 1968, which reflected on the vocation of the church in light of the dramatic suffering and hopes in Latin American and the Caribbean, committing the church to the poor. Medellin spoke of "integral salvation" and sent ripples through the universal church. The document *Justice in the World* (1971) of the world synod of Bishops crystallized how the poor and their cause had moved, for many, to the center of the picture and toward the top of the church's agenda. The bishops affirmed that "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world [are] a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (JW 6)

But this is not just the discovery of a complete novelty, but a re-discovery of the social meaning of the gospel and the Word of God as a whole. In his little-known encyclical, *Redemptoris missio* (1990) of John Paul II, the pope wrote "that Jesus came to bring *integral salvation*, one which embraces the whole person and all humankind" (RM 11). The expression integral salvation comes from the historic second CELAM Conference, in Medellín in 1968. The pope goes on:

At the beginning of his ministry [Jesus] proclaimed that he was "annointed . . . to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4,18). To all who are victims of rejection and contempt Jesus declares: "Blessed are you poor" (Lk 6,20). What is more, he enables such individuals to experience liberation even now, by being close to them, going to eat in their homes (cf. Lk 5,30; 15,2), treating them as equals and friends (cf. Lk 7,34), and making them

feel loved by God, thus revealing his tender care for the needy and for sinners (cf. Lk 15,1-32).

The liberation and salvation brought by the Kingdom of God come to the human persons in their physical and spiritual dimensions. . . . Jesus' many healings . . . signify that in the Kingdom there will no longer be sickness or suffering . . . . In Jesus' eyes, healings are also a sign of spiritual salvation, namely liberation from sin. . . .

John Paul continues:

The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another. Jesus sums up the whole Law, focusing it on the commandment of love . . . . The Kingdom's nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings--with one another and with God.

. . . Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. (RM 14-15)

These paragraphs unambiguously affirm the integral character of salvation-liberation. Critics have frequently assailed liberation theologians for writing similar texts which fail to make a sharp distinction between salvation and secular human development. But this is a recovery of the central tenets of the scriptures: “Blessed are you who are poor” –and weeping and hungry—for God is coming as king to change your situation. In the reign of God there will be no more poverty, hunger or tears. The rich oppressors will have to answer to God. God takes the side of the poor not because they are good but because God is good and merciful. It is not because God hates the rich –God loves everyone—but because God acts like a mother who defends her smaller child against the bullying of her bigger child, even as she loves both.

This point is central to the message of the Bible. Echoing the prophets of Israel, James writes, “This is genuine religion: helping orphans and widows in their need and keeping oneself unstained by the world” (James 1,27). Many other biblical messages affirm this message: the unity of the love of God and the love of neighbor; the Golden Rule as the whole of “the law and the prophets” (that is, of the will of God for us); the parable of the Good Samaritan (which teaches that love is not just generic; it is mercy toward the victim); “I desire mercy and not sacrifice [that is, cult]” (Matt12,7); Matthew’s last judgment; and a long etcetera.

What are the implications for the church? Our mission, both here and in Latin America is to bear good news in the midst of so much bad news surrounding us, to bear good news especially to the victims of the bad news.

There is hunger of the spirit but also a profound crisis of credibility that threatens all institutions and traditional authorities today, and especially the church. I notice the hostility of the cultured elites and their media and the effects of scandals and poor leadership. In this climate, we, the church, win our credibility only by living authentic witness in action. Now more than ever, as the Bolivian Jesuit martyr Luis Espinal put it, “a religion that doesn’t have the courage to speak out on behalf of human beings has no right to speak out on behalf of God” (1). If we don’t walk with the victims, and suffer the consequences, we are no longer credible. From now on, only a credible love will do, a love that defends the victims and suffers the consequences.

Here, too, the church loses members, but the only worthy response is to be faithful to Christ. A church dedicated to saving its own life will lose it, but if it “loses” its life in defense of the crucified Christs of today, it will save it.

This will mean exercising a prophetic mission in defense of life, the life of individuals and the community. These are the classic Catholic themes of the sanctity of life and the common good.

*The sanctity of life.* The reign of God is abundant life. No one doubts the commitment of the church to defending life before birth and proclaiming eternal life after death. And that’s how it should be. But the great unmet challenge is frequently to defend life after birth and before death. That is what is really costly. And that is the condition of credibility today for anyone who speaks about eternal life.

*The common good.* Both in Latin America and in the United States today, governments are increasingly abandoning the task that is their reason for being: the common good, that is the defense and well-being of the community as a whole and especially of its most vulnerable members. We are living more and more a common, or shared, evil. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina is a powerful symbol of failure to promote the common good –before, during and after the disaster. And we could multiply many other examples. Other examples in which the church needs to speak out are

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1 Luis Espinal, “Religión” en *Oraciones a quemarropa*, Sucre, 1981, p. 83.

obvious: this unjust war, the erosion of a state of law, pervasive corruption and abuse of office, the violation of the most fundamental human rights, including habeas corpus and freedom from torture.

In this time of war, I dream of a church that works to build a culture of peace, forming people in the nonviolent management and resolution of conflicts; transforming punitive and racist penal systems into systems of rehabilitation and restoration of justice. We have several countries in the world without military forces, and they seem no more the worse for wear: Costa Rica and Panamá, as well as Japan, where the absence of military spending frees money for the kind of social spending that can help build real national security. This is not the immediate solution for everywhere. But for me the most important political lesson of recent years is that there is no real military defense against terrorism. The means of vast destruction have been democratized, and we are now forced to address violence and resolve differences by police methods, diplomacy, disarmament and equitable development. There are no more military solutions, only escalating military problems.

Finally, to carry out its vocation as bearer of good news today, the church will have to be more and more a community of vital communities, modeling a different way to live together, in mutual service and in resistance to the consumerism and individualism of the dominant culture. Here we can learn from the basic ecclesial communities of Latin America.

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In recent years, the church has had literally thousands of martyrs, mostly unsung, who have given their lives living out this vocation to love and so defend the poor in the face of opposition by the rich and powerful. Bishops Oscar Romero in El Salvador and Juan Gerardi in Guatemala and Sister Dorothy Stange in Brazil are only three of the contemporary Christian heroes whose example spurs us on to live out this vocation of a prophetic church in solidarity with the poor.

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\* Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has never been sanctioned. No sanction was imposed on Jon Sobrino in connection with the recent Vatican “Notification” concerning his theology. On the other hand, Leonardo Boff was silenced for criticizing the form and structure of church government in his book, *Charisma and Power*.

\*\*Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, 13 May 2004, to the Italian Senate: “But in Europe, in the nineteenth century, the two models [the lay state in Latin countries and the northern model of close church-state collaboration] were joined by a third, socialism, which quickly split into two different branches, one totalitarian and the other democratic. Democratic socialism managed to fit within the two existing models as a welcome counterweight to the radical liberal positions, which it developed and corrected. It also managed to appeal to various denominations. In England it became the political party of the Catholics, who had never felt at home among either the Protestant conservatives or the liberals. In Wilhelmine Germany, too, Catholic groups felt closer to democratic socialism than to the rigidly Prussian and Protestant conservative forces. In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness.”

Medellín: “el sistema empresarial latinoamericano y, por él, la economía actual, responden a una concepción errónea sobre el derecho de propiedad de los medios de producción y sobre la finalidad de la economía”. El “sistema liberal capitalista [y el] sistema marxista ... atentan contra la dignidad de la persona humana” (Medellín, “Justicia”, 10).