

The Faith of the Poor: An Invitation to Hope

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“For this reason the human righteousness required by God and established in obedience—the righteousness which according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream—has necessarily the character of a vindication of right in favour of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of His people, God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone; against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it. What does all this mean? It is not really to be explained by talking *in abstracto* of the political tendency and especially the forensic character of the Old Testament and the biblical message generally. It does in fact have this character and we cannot hear it and believe it without feeling a sense of responsibility in the direction indicated.”

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/I, p. 386.
Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957

INTRODUCTION

I was recently asked to deliver an address which was not quite within my competence. My assignment was to summarize for a large Christian gathering the salient trends in the world economic system. In spite of many hours of research and a carefully gentle presentation, the outcome was far from felicitous. I did end on a note of hope, but most of the audience was not prepared to go along with my analysis. In essence, I held that with the leadership of the industrialized nations, the earth in the 1960's was organized as a global factory by the economic lords, and in the 1970's as a global arsenal by the military lords. And since the human agenda was not primary to either group, the human prospect had never been in greater jeopardy. The hope I held was that of my own and other denominations: the promotion of the New International Economic Order which the United Nations since 1975 has favored as a sort of global Marshall plan.

Allowing for my incompetence in technical economics and my failure as a speaker to empathize with an audience already frightened by ominous economic setbacks, I was still struck by the contrast between the fear of the future among us, the Christian non-poor of the United States, and the hope for a

different future among the struggling Christian poor in Latin America. The contrast is fairly easy to explain. For those who have much to protect, losing ground induces fear and self-protection. Conversely, for others who never had much to protect, there is little to lose, but much to hope for in a change of circumstances. In Latin America, the vast majority belong to the second group. But what may be of utmost importance is that both as individuals and as a class, *millions today are to be found among the struggling poor who are the primary actors in a Christian movement no less far-reaching than the 16th century Protestant Reformation.*

MEDELLIN: THE CLAIM OF THE CHRISTIAN POOR ON THE CHURCH

This movement is rightly identified with Latin American liberation theology. But, to be precise, one should say that first came the movement and then the theology. The sequence is basic to the integrity of the *new church* which God's Spirit has been raising in Latin America since the late 1960's. That it was born as a massive movement in that part of the world is no coincidence. Nine out of ten Latin Americans are baptized Roman Catholics, and either of those are poor. More important still than such statistics is that an authentic ecclesial miracle took place in 1968. In Medellín, Columbia, the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM II) committed themselves to give their top pastoral priority to the poor.

In a real sense the bishops were converted by the tenacity of the hope of the poor. Although these poor Christians had much reason to give up on the church, they claimed their birth-right within in. In fact, they claimed to *be* the church, not just to belong to it. At Medellín the Catholic Church was supposed to engage in a Latin American follow-up to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Instead, to its own surprise, it began to rediscover its identity as the companion of Jesus among the poor. This experience of conversion has come to be known as "the preferential option for the poor." The 1979 Puebla Conference of CELAM III ratified the same stance, and in so doing, it confirmed that following Jesus is inseparable from communion with the poor.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS IN THE NEW ACCOUNT OF FAITH

Liberation theology is the account of faith resulting from this new (and ancient) way of being the Church. This is to say the understanding of the Bible, the Creed and the *magisterium* (the living tradition of the Church) comes from the "underside of history," where the Good News of Christ is preached to the poor and where their emancipation breaks in as the preeminent sign of the arrival of God's Kingdom.

It takes no clairvoyance to realize that such an account of faith is an immediate threat to all the tyrannies that rob men and women of the abundant life preached and ushered in by the Lord of the Church and the world. Indicted are economic and political systems which keep the poor "in their place."

Unmasked is the violence perpetrated in the name of order, stability, national security or anti-communism. Rejected is the fiction that the church or theology takes no sides (such neutrality become transparent in its support for things as they are). Denounced are the rich—persons and nations—who came by their wealth by exploiting the labor and goods of the poor. Condemned is the militarism whose only purpose is to protect privilege at the expense of the unarmed.

Good news for the poor inevitably carries with it this sort of reverse bad news for those who oppose the hope of the poor. The most dramatic evidence comes from the ranks of the Latin American Catholic Church itself. In spite of Medellín and Puebla, and in spite of the vibrant new life of the believing, struggling poor, most rich Catholics and not a few of their chaplains among bishops and priests, denounce the new church as subversive, political, worldly—in sum, an aberration to be fought against.

SHARING THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD

The new church became “illegal” the moment it took the side of the poor in imitation of its Lord, and like him, it began the way of persecution and martyrdom. *Of course, a church which knows itself to be worthy of sharing the sufferings of Christ in the world becomes invincible.* That is, unfortunately, something the legalized killers in the service of national security cannot possibly understand. Their concept of order is the preservation of the status quo, often in the name of Western “Christian” civilization. It is appalling to realize that in Latin America today the martyrs of the new church are being killed by fellow-Christians trained and financed by other Christians. That explains the (unheeded) appeal made to Salvadoran soldiers by Archbishop Romero in his last homily (March 23, 1980):

Brothers, each of you is one of us. We are the same people. The peasants you kill are your brothers and sisters. When you hear the words of a man telling you to kill, remember instead the words of God, “Thou shall not kill.” God’s law must prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. . . . In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people who have suffered so much and whose laments cry out to heaven, I beseech you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God, stop the repression!

A previous, related appeal was also made by Archbishop Romero to President Carter (February 17, 1980). Addressing him as a fellow-Christian, the Archbishop begged that no U.S. military assistance be given to the Salvadoran government because “it will almost surely intensify the injustice and repression of the common people who are organized to struggle for respect of their most basic human rights.”

“THE AMERICANS ARE KILLING US”

Because both appeals failed, Archbishop Romero became one more of the

thousands of martyrs of the church of the poor. And the carnage goes on, unabated, and the primary target continues to be the believing, struggling poor and their defenders. Amidst the horror one often hears "the Americans are killing us." Between 1950 and 1975 the United States trained 71,651 Latin American military officers, including eight of the region's dictators, and in addition supplied \$2.5 billion worth of armaments. More recent figures could easily parallel or enlarge the amounts of personnel and armaments recorded for those years. The cost of national security against the Christian poor and other subversives seems to escalate in direct proportion to the increase of their hope.

The new church, so biblical in its teaching and preaching, so centered on Jesus as its companion and liberator and so expressive in its base-level communities of the priesthood of all believers, has evoked a growing Protestant partnership. It is still a minority partnership, but one full of ecumenical promise. That may open up more conduits of understanding among Christians in a still predominantly Protestant United States.

SHARED FAITH: SHARED HOPE

The faith of the poor in Latin America is indeed an invitation to hope among us fairly comfortable U.S. Christians. Surely their perseverance and faithfulness are a loving rebuke to our cruel innocence when it comes to the misuse of American power against them. Surely we have something to learn from them whose hope against hope keeps the future open for more concrete realizations of the Kingdom of God against the horror of nuclear extinction posed by the super-powers. Surely the believing, struggling poor remind us that both poverty and luxury have no place in God's *shalom*.

Perhaps the greatest invitation to hope lies in the willingness of the new church literally to lose its life so that it may regain it in the power of Christ's resurrection. Life used to be cheap and death senseless for the Christian poor and their defenders. That is no longer so. The rediscovered God of Jesus of Nazareth is supremely the God of life. Life is therefore sacred, to be treasured and nurtured in its infinite dignity. But if for the sake of my friends and their future, I must risk it, like Jesus did for me and all humanity, then I have learned indeed to live beyond fear: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay life down for one's friends." That generosity toward life and death is indeed an invitation to hope.