

We Share a World

**'Now is the time for a new "creativity" in charity,
not only by ensuring that help is effective,
but also by "getting close" to those who suffer,
so that the hand that helps is seen
not as a humiliating handout,
but as a sharing between brothers and sisters. ¹
POPE JOHN PAUL II, 1920-2005**

Everywhere one looks, it seems, one sees manifestations of rapid change sweeping over the face of the globe. How often do we, exasperatingly, exclaim that the changes are occurring at a faster pace than we can absorb? If it is so in the world's wealthy countries, how much more worrisome is the pace of change in the rest of the world's nations—mostly impoverished—whose cultures, economies, ecologies, and cosmopolitanism are assailed relentlessly by the ideology of the "free market." The dignity of the human person; the wisdom of ancient traditions; the value of human labor—not as a commodity to be exploited, but as the expression of a person's creativity; the self-determination of peoples; and a shared commitment to the common good, especially to the care of the weakest: all of these values are under assault by the uncontrolled phenomenon called "globalization." Human beings are no longer revered as *imago Dei*, the image of God, but have been redefined as *consumers*. The goal of human life now is to *have*, not to *love*; to *search for gratification*, not to *be in communion*.

The myth of unlimited progress, proclaimed so self-assuredly in the modern era by the world's dominant powers, has given way to a "shaking of the foundations". Globalization has been emptied of its promise to deepen the unity of the human family. Instead, it has ushered in a process of exploitation and destabilization, giving rise to scandalous poverty, war, a sense of uprootedness, and profound anxiety and despair. Peoples (particularly of the Southern hemisphere), condemned by the major economies of the world to eek out a miserable existence on the periphery, are now being pushed over the edge as expendable. The gaping chasm between the (few) rich nations and the (majority) impoverished nations marks a disparity of unimaginable proportions: a disparity which is not inevitable, but which is caused by the sinful structures driving the engines of the world's wealthiest economies. This war against the poor takes many interlocking forms, only one of which is military.

Early in the church's history, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, *Gloria Dei vivens homo*, "the glory of God is the human person fully alive." Today, theologians from the impoverished two-thirds of our world have refined Irenaeus' phrase to state, *Gloria Dei vivens pauper*, "God's

glory is the poor person fully alive." The inescapable situation of personal and social sin, manifest in the structures of such "savage capitalism" ², is a form of *practical unbelief*, a denial of faith in the living God, Whose glory is that every person, and all creation, should flourish.

WE WISH TO SEE

The late, prophetic Brazilian archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Helder Camara, knew that when women, men, and children are without bread, it was *he* who was faced with a spiritual crisis. What would it mean to profess faith in the Christ who is the Bread of Life, when the lives of the poor are robbed of bread? Would his faith challenge him to *never* look away from the plight of his sisters and brothers?

Making his own the request of the Greeks in the Gospel of John, "We wish to see Jesus" (Jn. 12: 21), Dom Helder was converted by the compassion of Jesus of Nazareth, and the scales fell from his eyes. Though he could not "see" the presence of the Holy Spirit in the misery surrounding him, that same Spirit became the "eye" through which he came to perceive anew. As if responding to the request in John's Gospel, the early church affirmed that *we become what we see*. Dom Helder encountered the Christ who entered into the utter depths of human dereliction, and who there revealed the Living God of self-emptying love and solidarity, Whose presence is the most profound protest against all that crushes human beings. In the depths, he discovered God's love as the invincibly firm ground upholding especially those who suffer.

A WHOLLY GRATUITOUS ENCOUNTER

Attached to the simple church, which was the cathedral of Recife, is a small sacristy, which served as Dom Helder's "archiepiscopal palace". A table, a wardrobe, a small cooking stove, and a hammock for sleeping shared space with the customary items found in the sacristy of a humble church. Looking out the sacristy window one day, Dom Helder penned this meditation, the fruit of his prayerful, daily communion with the poor:

*When I see them,
the children of my people,
the world without voice:
emaciated,
bloated belly,
oversized head
and, very often,
empty, left behind,
as if it were missing-
it is Christ whom I meet.³*

Here is the Risen One, who encountered Dom Helder in the shacks of the *favelas*. Here is the church of the poor, ⁴ a *poor church* animated by the Holy Spirit, whose common life explodes categories of 'public' and 'private,' 'religious' and 'political.' Their eucharistic practice as the Body of Christ-in offering and sharing their humble lives and their meager bread-becomes a direct threat to the economic order. ⁵ Among these seemingly forgotten people, Dom Helder discovered the Church in all its vibrancy and richness, a living school of communion, a centuries-old tree of faith blossoming anew from the soil of the poor.

LOVE IS A DEED

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, OP, asks what he calls a "lacerating" question, which continues to haunt him: "How do you tell a poor person that God loves them?"⁶ The *telling* would be truthful only in the *doing*. This same question is posed to us as well, to us who benefit from the world's inequalities. It has become difficult for us, in our culture, to imagine our faith traditions as *necessarily subversive* of all that would keep human communities, and all creation, from thriving according to God's design. Yet this is the greatest spiritual question facing us: shall we refuse to live in practical unbelief? Do our faith traditions challenge *us* to *never* look away from the plight of our sisters and brothers?

Archbishop Rowan Williams has written, "A situation where religious and ethnic rivalry obscure this common commitment to address poverty, material and spiritual, represents a luxury in the world that is coming to be. But we do share a world, one which is scarred by all the varieties of poverty sketched above, and more; and which is threatened by environmental disaster of an unprecedented kind. ... We *know* where the roots of poverty lie."⁷ The telling of God's love will be truthful only in our doing the works of justice. *For we do share a world.*

1. From the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (section 50), January 6, 2001.
2. See Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); and William Greider, *The Soul of Capitalism: Opening Paths to a Moral Economy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).
3. Quoted in Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 279.
4. Contrary to a common assumption, the phrase "Church of the Poor" was used during the Second Vatican Council by a group of bishops, mostly from impoverished countries, who understood the effort to bring justice to the poor as the Church's obedience to the Gospel. They directed their collective energies to the advancement of Pope John XXIII's explicit call for a "*preferential option for the poor.*" Cf. David Power, OMI, *Love Without Calculation: A Reflection on Divine Kenosis* (New York: Crossroad, 2005). Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, archbishop of Bologna at the time of Vatican II, wrote: "If the Church is truly the theme of this Council, we can affirm in full conformity with the

eternal truth of the Gospel and with the present age: certainly the theme of the Council is the Church, in its existence as the church of the poor." Cited in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 25.

For an overview of the New Testament witness to Jesus and his ministry, and the subsequent history of the church, cf. Bernard J. Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21-27.

5. Bell, *op. cit.*, 73. In an interview, the late theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar stated that, starting with the Hebrew Bible, "the poor are not only theologically but also politically the true prophets, for they stake their all ... on the absolute future of God." Cf. *Test Everything, Hold Fast to What Is Good* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 42.

Also see Henri de Lubac, SJ, *Catholicism* (London: Burns and Oates, 1950): e.g., The Church "is essentially social. It is social in the deepest sense of the word: not merely in its applications in the field of natural institutions, but first and foremost in itself, in the heart of its mystery. ... It is social in a way that should have made the expression 'social Catholicism' redundant" (from the Introduction). De Lubac was one of a number of theologians calling for a renewal of the church through a "return to the fountain of its living sources" (*ressourcement*), paving the way for the Second Vatican Council. Our founder and brother, Abbot Leo, shared this vision of the "return to the sources" for the renewal of Benedictine monastic life.

6. Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, 139

7. Rowan Williams, "Christianity, Islam, and the Challenge of Poverty", Lecture given at the Bosniak Institute, Sarajevo, May 19, 2005.
(www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/050519a.htm)

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