

# A Reflection on the Guadalupe Center, Cuernavaca, Mexico

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*[Introductory note: This Reflection on the Guadalupe Center was written by Gerardo Thijssen at the beginning of May. A profoundly committed Christian, his humility and solidarity with the poorest radiated from him. He possessed an uncommon clarity about the demands of Gospel living in a world of gross injustice-and he accepted them as the guiding values of his own life. With sadness, we learned of Gerardo's death at the end of May, due to medical complications during surgery. On May 20, the front page of Jornada de Morelos, one of Cuernavaca's major newspapers, carried the headline, "Gerado Thijssen Dies, Untiring Defender of Human Rights."*



*Gerardo was born in the Netherlands on July 11, 1926, one of fifteen children from a poor rural family. He eventually entered the Congregation of the Sacred Heart, desiring to become a missionary priest. Following his theological studies and ordination, his first assignment led him in 1952 to a very poor rural parish in Chile, serving in the diocese of Talca, with Bishop Manuel Larraín. Very quickly, his traditional training was challenged by the material impoverishment of a people who, at the same time, possessed a profound spiritual richness. Wealthy landowners forced Gerardo to leave the area, due to his commitment to the poor. Moving to Chile's capital, Santiago, he was made the second pastor of a huge squatter settlement of 30,000 inhabitants. Together, Gerardo, his pastoral staff, and his large community developed a model of church as the pilgrim people of God. His work became known to many in Latin America. A young priest named Gustavo Gutiérrez (later author of A Theology of Liberation and numerous other books) would travel from Peru to live and reflect with Gerardo. On September 11, 1973 a bloody military coup, led by General Augusto Pinochet and supported by the United States, occurred. Gerardo was one of the persons most wanted by the soldiers. The auxiliary bishop of Santiago hid Gerardo in the trunk of his car, and brought him to the Dutch embassy. After a brief time in Holland, he returned to South America, this time to Peru, seeking in vain for a bishop willing to accept him. In Ecuador, he was imprisoned. Finally, he contacted Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo of Cuernavaca, Mexico, who invited Gerardo to work in his diocese. After so many years of ministry at the grassroots of poor communities, Gerardo found it difficult to adapt to the highly clericalized role of the priest in Mexico. He asked Bishop Sergio to be laicized, and as such continued to work as a lay missionary, with the moral and financial support of his religious congregation, until his death. His wife, Irene Ortiz, shared his thirst for justice through her feminist involvements, especially the struggle of domestic workers. Gerardo dedicated the last 28 years of his life to working with Base Christian Communities.*

*Gerardo was approaching his eightieth birthday when he died, yet the "youthfulness" to which we, the church, are called was evident in his every word and gesture. The sharing of his Reflection has become a testimony to the life of this very good and tender human being.]*

BY WAY OF PERSONAL INTRODUCTION, I came to Latin America as a Christian missionary from Holland over fifty years ago; and I have worked extensively with grassroots movements, especially with the Base Christian Communities. Over the years I have been very interested in the work of the different centers for intercultural exchange between Mexicans and North Americans located in Cuernavaca; and I have been involved in presentations and in organization with them all. My impression has been that they really do help to strengthen the relations between the peoples of

Mexico and the countries to the north, especially the United States. The North Americans participating in these programs learn to appreciate the communitarian culture of our Mexican people, and to experience first-hand the poverty to which the people are subjected resulting from an excluding and inequitable global economic system (a neo-liberal agenda). Yet even more, the participants come to realize how these very same poor are the bearers of a hope for a new kind of world, one that is more humane and less self-centered.

In the program at Guadalupe Center, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, coordinated by the Mexican Benedictine Sisters, there are several important aspects of the experience that other centers are not able to offer in the same way:

- The program offers time and space for reflection and interpersonal exchange in the context of the Sisters' prayer in a contemplative environment.
- It is rooted in the Benedictine tradition. Benedictine monastics, both men and women, were the main shapers of a Christian culture in Europe during the early middle-ages, simply by practicing their "*ora et labora*," i.e., prayer and work. The Sisters at the Guadalupe Center are grounded in this tradition; and they are able to renew the tradition through a contemporary witness to its values.
- The Sisters live and explain the message of Guadalupe, a religious expression that is very much in the line of the Gospel, and that lies at the heart of Mexican life and faith and culture.

Through the encounter with the Base Christian Communities, the participants in the program at the Guadalupe Center are welcomed into the lives of a people who are very deeply Christian, yet whose lives have been economically impoverished. Participants begin to discover the causes of this poverty, wrought by an excluding and inequitable economic system and through the negative effects of economic dependence upon Mexico's northern neighbors. They begin to realize how the responsibility for this

impoverishment must be borne by those who control the economic and political power-strings, and the blame for which cannot be attributed to all the American people. Poverty is overcome only by doing justice and by searching for viable economic alternatives that will benefit everyone.



Furthermore, the participants in this program discover the values of the indigenous and simple "*mestizo*" (mix-blooded) peoples of Latin America: their deep respect for the dignity of every human being; their communitarian spirit; and their joyful openness to sharing, and not hoarding, all that they have. In the experience among the indigenous people, the participants discover a new cosmic dimension of life in the relationship with Mother Earth, and are led to a deeper appreciation and care for the fundamental interrelationship of all that lives: persons, animals, plants, even what some might term "the inanimate," i.e., everything that exists; because the Spirit of God is present in all.

Jesus invited his disciples (cf. Luke 10:21 f.) to encounter the wisdom of the poor, who, from the underside of society, are able to truly see and hear what those from above (the "kings" and "prophets") do not always understand. Of course, the poor, like all of us, have their own shortcomings and brokenness; but they remain, nevertheless, special signs of God's presence, signs of love and hope, with a humbling capacity to share.

Those who give themselves to such an experience also begin to discover that, in the church of the poor and in the base communities, the first and foremost concern of the people is to announce and build the Reign of God with justice, engaging existing structures and human relationships among them here on earth. They seek new relationships based on God's vision for justice and peace, especially where the poor become the principal agents of their own future. For these people, working for the Reign of God is so much more important than merely pursuing their own individual or personal salvation.



Participants in these programs become aware that an analysis of reality is extremely important to uncover the ways that God is speaking to us through the events happening around us in the reality of life. In other words, the word of God, as it happens in our present reality, becomes illumined by God's written word in the Scriptures.

With all the due respect that I feel for the American people, who, just as all other peoples, are a people with dignity and values, I offer my humble opinion: the Christian Churches in the USA, including the Catholic Church, lack a prophetic dimension. These churches lack an understanding of their mission to love in the political contexts in which they live, putting aside privilege and power, and building a new society clearly manifesting signs of God's Reign. I have to critique the enormous and absolute trust the American people place in a small group - "a clan" - with great economic and political power in its hands, but who are not serving the well being of others in the world. They are simply serving the economic enhancement of big corporate structures.

I am convinced that many American Christians are enticed to be more concerned about their personal salvation than about announcing and building the Reign of God. Where are the prophetic voices denouncing war, the neo-liberal agenda, and the widening chasm between rich and poor? What alternatives for change are the Churches offering? Of course, there are exceptions, as we see in the support offered by some Churches during the recent protests for immigrants' rights and speaking out against unjust laws. Certainly, there are other examples of prophetic solidarity with the poor. Nevertheless, there is the impression that the vast majority of the Churches are more concerned about their own growth as institutions, than they are about the Reign of God with prophetic signs.



I believe that participation in the program of intercultural exchange at the Guadalupe Center can help form Christians and persons of conscience in better understanding their prophetic calling, as well as in realizing their mission to be in solidarity with the poor, both in the USA and throughout the world. Deepening such awareness would benefit the USA and Mexico. It would benefit the Church and a world that today is being so irresponsibly and immorally globalized, with no concern for its impact on the poor majority of the world's people!