

Human Rights and Reconciliation
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The recent General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which we consider to be a gift from God for our churches, has incorporated the two topics of this presentation with renewed interest.¹

“Certainly, the restoration of justice, reconciliation and forgiveness are the conditions for building true peace. The recognition of this fact leads to a determination to transform unjust structures and to restore respect for the dignity of all men and women, created in God's image and likeness. ..As I have had occasion to say, it is not the proper task of the Church to be involved in the political work of bringing about the most just society possible; nonetheless the Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the struggle for justice.” (SCa 89) (DA 546)

1.- A path of solidarity

The commitment and work for the defense and promotion of human rights is a path of solidarity and justice, and opens us to the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Since 1994, it has been common place for the social action of Latin America and the Caribbean to speak about the “Pastoral of Human Rights” as the unifying factor for all social action of the Church. It has not been an easy path, because human rights haven’t been and still are not well understood, but undoubtedly it is a significant contribution from the Church to the long journey towards human rights and peace on Earth.

John XXIII opened the doors of the Church not only to intra-ecclesial aggiornamento, but also, when he published the Encyclical *Pacem in terris* in June of 1963, he gave us, as a Church, a positive and renewed understanding of the meaning of human rights, and of the need of the Church to put itself on the path of service to human beings, especially when they are poor and their rights are not respected.

This year of celebration and commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must help us to renew our convictions and strengthen the perspective of rights as the necessary minimum for a more human and reconciled world, a reality that is still distant for millions of human beings.

The countries that came out of the tragic experience of World War II made a clear and firm decision that they would never again become victims of the

¹ 24 direct references to reconciliation and 71 to human rights and human dignity

cruelty of war. Unfortunately, throughout these 60 years we have witnessed many wars and conflicts; we have seen many atrocities, which tell us that as human beings, we still have a long way to go. We can therefore be assured that all of us working on these issues must continue without rest to make the words and the spirit of the Universal Declaration, a reality for every human being.

All of the efforts to make the human rights approach believable, just as they have been developed in the many declarations, pacts and protocols of the United Nations, are aimed at making the first article of the Declaration a reality: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood."

I believe that this first article already contains the profound meaning of reconciliation; by calling our attention to the need of achieving a more human behavior among people, only those who recognize each other as brothers and sisters can make a new pact of reconciliation for a renew world.

Putting the spirit and the words of the Declaration into practice, in order to strengthen the foundation of a more human, and therefore more reconciled world, is an inalienable commitment of all those who share the conviction of human dignity, created in the image and likeness of God. Dignity that is never lost, not for any sin, nor for any crime, nor for poverty. John Paul II remembered this as a central and unifying task of the church

"The inviolable dignity of every human person makes up an essential task; ... the central and unifying task of the service which the Church and the lay faithful in it are called to render to the human family." (ChL 37 y SRS 47)

In 1998 in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, John Paul II told us:

"Still today one can note the gap that exists between the "letter," as acknowledged in many international documents, and the "spirit", which is currently very far from being respected. For our century is still marked by *serious violations of fundamental rights*. There are still countless people in the world, women, men and children, whose rights are cruelly derided. How many persons are unjustly deprived of their freedom, of the possibility of expressing themselves freely or of freely professing their faith in God? How many are victims of torture, violence and exploitation? How many persons, because of war, unjust discrimination, unemployment or other disastrous economic situations cannot attain *full enjoyment of the dignity God has given them and of the gifts they have received from him?*"²

I wanted to call to your minds this declaration, because I believe that it is not very well known and it contains a profound conviction. As a church we should

² Address of The Holy Father John Paul II to the participants in The World Congress on the pastoral Promotion of Human Rights, July 4 1998

strengthen the efforts that we make for that “other world” that is rising out of the ashes of the unjust pain and death of so many conflicts that continue to mistreat us as human beings, and that convert our planet into an inhospitable world.

2.- From the world of the insignificant

The statistics of Latin America and the Caribbean show that we are not the poorest continent, but the continent with the greatest inequality in the distribution of income.³ The poor, men and women of varying ages, live in a daily reality without rights. In other words, poverty, as it exists in our part of the world, is the mass violation of human rights. The great Peruvian liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, whose theology begins with the poor, reminds us that the world of the poor is the world of the “insignificant”⁴ in our societies. They are such a small thing that holds no weight in the social environment; they are invisible to those who hold the political, economic and social power of our countries in their hands.

The Peruvian experience of political violence in the last twenty years of the 20th century, confirms this reality. Those of us who fought to defend the rights of the populations of rural and urban poor, indigenous peoples, Quechua and other native language speakers of our highlands and jungle, thought that around 30 thousand of our compatriots had been killed, whether by the actions of terrorist groups or as a result of the State’s security forces.

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission tells us that actually 70 thousand people were assassinated. How is it possible that such a high number of deceased, for one reason or other, could go unnoticed? The only answer we find is that the victims of this insane violence carry the “markings of poverty, of the despised, of secular oversight.”⁵

³.The predictions for 2007 foresee that there will be 4.5% growth, which would mean the fifth consecutive year of growth for the region. However, despite this hopeful outlook, Latin America is still held back by two factors that impede the wellbeing of a large part of the population: poverty and inequality. According to data from ECLAC, during 2005, 40.6% of the population lived in a situation of poverty and 18% in conditions of extreme poverty. In numbers of people, these figures mean that today, some 213 million Latin Americans live in poverty, and 88 in situations of indigence

MACHINEA, Jose Luis (2006). “La Coyuntura Económica de América Latina: hay lugar para el optimismo? (The Economic Situation in Latin America: is there a place for optimism)”. Document presented at the *Economic Policies for a New Social Pact in Latin America* seminar organized by the CIDOB Foundation in Barcelona, October 6 and 7, 2006.

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez “Desenterrar la Memoria”

⁵ ibid

As pointed out by Salomon Lerner, the President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in his report to the State: “The report we hand in expresses a double outrage: that of massive murder, disappearance and torture; and that of indolence, incompetence and indifference of those who could have stopped this humanitarian catastrophe but didn’t.”

Knowing from first hand experience what happened, I think that the figures could be even greater, since the TRC could not go to each one of the small towns that were devastated by the criminal insanity of terrorism and by the brutality with which the State’s security forces acted.

Another first hand example of what we are talking about is the recent earthquake of last year that affected a good part of southern Peru and caused close to a 1000 deaths, thousands of wounded, and the destruction of 80% of the housing and infrastructure. The affected area collapsed. While it is true that we felt great solidarity within Peru as well as from many other countries and foreign agencies, seven months have passed and in many of the affected zones, you get the impression that the quake only happened yesterday.

This solidarity of the people contrasts with the indolence and incompetence of the State to respond to the tragedy with promptness, efficiency and solidarity. That is when we discover the poor, the principal and majority of the victims of these types of tragedies, live in the “cellars”⁶ of our nations; from there they are invisible to the eyes of those who determine their destinies. For many people, these are only unfortunate statistics and percentages, but we don’t lose any sleep over it, because they don’t have a face, or a voice; they don’t make us sick to our stomachs.

The Uruguayan Jesuit Luis Perez Aguirre, of happy memory, a great apostle of human rights, spoke of the “tender option,” that is, the poor share with us their pain, and from deep inside of ourselves we respond to their needs and search for the cause of the pain in order to be able to transform it. “Compassion is limitless solidarity with the causes and the struggles of the oppressed, of the weak, of those stripped of their dignity and rights.”⁷

The world of the poor is, in the experience of the majority of them, a world without rights; from this we can see the importance of the task of awareness, organization and empowerment of the poor so that they themselves can know and make people respect their rights.

Poverty and extreme poverty, such as that which is experienced in the southern countries and which is growing in the developed north, is the daily and massive violation of fundamental human rights. This reality is what produces more “premature and unjust deaths”⁸ in all of our countries.

⁶ ibid

⁷ Luis Pérez Aguirre, SJ “La Opción Entrañable”

⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, Ibid

One third of the world's population lives in poverty and extreme poverty. There are more than 2 billion people in these conditions; men and women of varying ages who "possess the most difficult poverty to endure, that of insatiable hunger; intense cold in the winter and oppressive heat in the summer; social isolation; chronic, but curable illnesses, for those who have the money; floods that leave them out in the open; impossible dreams; those with no land; and perpetual silence."⁹

In the dawn of the new millennium, the reality of poverty that we experience and that coexists with limitless capital growth is a scandal that scars the conscience of humanity. In the final decade of the twentieth century there was still a certain hope: the cold war had ended, and it was believed that the world could set aside its vast resources for the development and prosperity of these small towns and villages. But what was lacking was humanity: that is, putting oneself in the place of the other, of the victim, the one who suffers and is hungry, and also lacks political power. The great leaders of the world were not ready to pay the price for another model of development, one which would be focused on the human person and their dignity and rights.

The clamor for a reconciled reality

Creating a more human world, that is, a more reconciled world, where recognizing the "other," whoever he may be, as a brother or sister that demands solidarity, because of his poverty, or the violence that affects him or her, is an enormous challenge. The bishops at Aparecida, reminded us of Jesus' mission to make a more human world in a very beautiful way:

"Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wants to give us his life and put himself at the service of life. We see that when he approaches the blind man in the road (cf. Mark 10, 46-52), when he dignifies the Samaritan (cf. John 4, 7-26), when he cures the ill (cf. Matthew 11, 2-6), when he feeds the hungry (cf. Mark 6, 30-44), when he liberates the possessed (cf. Mark 5, 1-20). In his Kingdom of life, Jesus includes everyone: he eats and drinks with sinners (cf. Mark 2, 16), and he does not mind being considered a glutton and a drunk, (cf. Matthew 11, 19). He touches lepers (cf. Luke 5, 13), allows a prostitute to anoint his feet (cf. Luke 7, 36-50), and at night he receives Nicodemus to invite him to be born again (cf. John 3, 1-15). In the same way, he invites his disciples to reconciliation (cf. Matthew 5, 24), to love one's enemies (cf. Matthew 5, 44), to choose the poorest people (cf. Luke 14, 15-24). (DA 353).

Jesus demands of us the logic of merciful love, which is the only thing that will make possible the creation of a new reality reconciled with itself, with the "others", and with all of creation that awaits the dawn of a new day.

Thank you

⁹ Elio Parisi, "Derechos Humanos y Pobreza" (Human Rights and Poverty) University of San Luis, Argentina

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