



Peace reflect the fact that promoting justice is an integral part of evangelisation. The Report given here from a delegation of U.S.A. Churches following their visit to Brazil is an example of increasing Church involvement in the "option for the poor" described by Albert Nolan in a later article of this issue.

"The day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi will surely be the theme of many future discussions and meetings. What took place there on 27th October, 1986 was not only a declaration of a world-wide desire for peace. It also marked the emergence of a new paradigm in inter-religious dialogue. Because Fr. Marcello Zago was deeply involved in the preparation of this event his reflections have an added value. His use of the title Secretariat for interreligious dialogue" rather than the official "Secretariat for Non Christian" may be a small but significant indication of the changed paradigm. Certainly many questions still remain and one should avoid a naive euphoria. But such prophetic events mark a turning point. After Assisi, the situation of dialogue is completely changed. A new type of ecumenical and interreligious encounter has been officially inaugurated.

Not everyone can do what Bob McCahill does. His dialogue of life with muslims and Hindus is an inspiration to us. Why should a missionary who is happily involved and totally accepted move to a new situation? Bob's thoughts can be a help to many in comparable situations to-day.

The last two contributions clarify two areas of mission about which there is considerable confusion. Making on "Option for the poor" appears as a caricature in places where endemic poverty is simply an evil. Worse still it is frequently man made. "Making an option to overcome poverty" would appear to be the preferential choice. So also ascribing sickness, persecution and suffering as a punishment demanded by the Father, to "sanctify" us and stimulate our faith is a caricature of God's loving care. The death of Jesus is often compared to that of a hostage offering his life in exchange for the freedom of prisoners. We are grateful for the clarifications of Albert Nolan and Claude Ortemann.

COMING EVENTS: SEDOS SEMINAR: LAITY IN MISSION

Villa Cavalletti 24-28 March, 1986.

Resource Persons: Amin Fahim (Egypt);  
Deirdre and Dermot McLoughlin (Canada);  
Donald Nicholl (England);  
Anna Maria Tepedino (Brazil).

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: Third Conference in the Series by  
Fr. Michael Amaladoss, SJ. at SVD College on 9th  
April, 1987.

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THE CHURCH AND LAND REFORM IN BRAZIL  
REPORT FROM A DELEGATION OF THE USA CHURCHES

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*(La réforme agraire au Brésil est le problème politique et social le plus aigu qui se pose aujourd'hui au pays et à l'Eglise. Le débat très vif sur les projets de réforme agraire du gouvernement s'est doublé d'un accroissement dramatique de violences envers les ouvriers agricoles et leurs familles. Ces violences sont le fait des propriétaires ruraux, aidés par la police militaire ou d'autres forces armées, et même par des groupes paramilitaires. Tandis qu'en 1982, 58 ouvriers agricoles furent tués, il y en eut 222 en 1985. En août 1986, la Commission Pastorale de la Terre, un organisme de la Conférence Episcopale du Brésil, invita une délégation des Eglises de Etats-Unis à visiter le Brésil. Cette délégation fut chargée d'observer le ministère rural de l'Eglise, de faire part de ses observations aux Eglises des Etats-Unis dans l'espoir que celles-ci apportent leur appui aux efforts de l'Eglise du Brésil et exercent publiquement une pression sur le gouvernement brésilien en vue d'une réforme agraire authentique et courageuse. Voici un abrégé des observations de cette délégation.)*

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INTRODUCTION

In July 1986 an unofficial Delegation assembled by several U.S. religious organizations was sent to Brazil to report on the conflict surrounding agrarian reform. The Delegation originated from a request by the Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB). The request of this commission on rural ministry was heeded by a number of organizations in the U.S., including the American Friends Service Committee, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Franciscans (O.F.M.), the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I), the United Church of Christ, and the Washington Office on Latin America.

The task given to the Delegation has been to observe the rural ministry of the Church and to report its observations to the churches of the U.S. in the hope that these might in some way lend support to the Brazilian Church's efforts and publicly pressure the Brazilian government to initiate genuine and courageous agrarian reform.

During its ten-day visit to Brazil in late 1986, the Delegation which consisted of 6 persons visited cities and villages between the southern coastal city of Sao Paulo and the northwestern jungle city of Manaus. The

largest number of interviews were held in northern Brazil where land conflicts are most acute.

### THE PRESENT CONFLICT OVER LAND REFORM

Conflict over land has been part of Brazilian history since the colonial period when the country was divided into 15 giant feudal captaincies by its Portuguese colonizers. But the conflict has taken on new vigor since 1985 when the election of Tancredo Neves promised the land reform efforts delayed by 21 years of military rule. Mr. Neves never assumed the presidency and died before initiating the agrarian reforms he envisioned. But, under his successor President Jose Sarney, a Ministry of Reform and Agrarian development was created and entrusted with the task of developing an agrarian reform plan for the "New Republic".

The National Plan for Agrarian Reform: A moderate reform plan was drafted by the Ministry following a series of dialogues with representatives of the Catholic Church, workers' unions and other interested groups. The government's proposal, entitled the National Plan for Agrarian Reform emphasized the modernization of the country's agricultural production via rural enterprise and the disappropriation of all large farm holdings that were not in production.

Wealthy Farm Owners Object: As could be expected, wealthy farm owners and land speculators reacted aggressively against the National Plan for Agrarian Reform and labeled its intent as communistic. They formed a right wing association of large landowners and farmers that raises money to support candidates for the Constitutional Assembly who are against agrarian reform.

President Sarney, joined by Church and rural union representatives, has confirmed the existence of paramilitary forces at the service of large landowners in those areas of greatest conflict over land ownership.

A Considerably Weakened Land Reform Law: It is important to note that some of the key figures in Brazil's government, such as Minister of Justice Paulo Brossard, are owners of large rural lands. The President himself owned large holdings until he gave them to his family when he assumed the presidency. It is not difficult therefore to speculate why, after receiving strong opposition from wealthy land interests, the initial proposal of the National Plan for Agrarian Reform was submitted nine times for revision, yielding on October 10, 1985 a considerably weakened law.

Violent Consequences: The vigorous debate over the government agrarian reform proposal has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in conflict and violence over land tenure. Whereas 58 rural workers were killed in 1982, 222 were killed in 1985. These figures only represent assassinations which are thoroughly documented. Many more have been reported or have occurred under circumstances which do not permit adequate documentation.

Selective and Pernicious Violence: Officials of Church organisations reported to the Delegation that the violence in the rural areas is not only increasing, but also better organized, selective and pernicious. Better organization is attributed to the land owners' organisation which often works in collaboration with the Military Police and other armed forces as well as with paramilitary groups. The assassinations are characteristically selective in that the victims are strategically chosen from among those giving greatest support to the agrarian reform movement. Those assassinated in 1985 and 1986 for instance include union leaders, sisters, priests and lawyers.

Church Workers Murdered: The Delegation conducted on-site research of the murder of one such person, Father Josino Tavares, A Brazilian Catholic pastor in the conflict-ridden Bico do Papagaio area. Within twelve days of Fr. Tavares's death, a Baptist minister also working with the landless, Jose Inacio da Silva Filho, was shot and killed as he left his home in Timon, Maranhao on the way to church. The final characteristic of the assassinations is perniciousness. The deaths are calculated to terrorize the population. To this end they are accompanied by rape, torture, the splitting of skulls, dismemberment, and so on.

The violence is not limited to assassination. The Delegation reviewed evidence of homes being burned, fields and crops destroyed, death threats, torture, intimidation, defamation of character, and falsification of land titles and other documents. Within this context, the Catholic Church of Brazil is clearly the most powerful and consistent representative of the plight of the landless rural workers.

#### THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN AGRARIAN REFORM

The Church of Brazil is a Church of the poor. It was present in the conflict areas visited by the Delegation. No member of the Delegation can as an experienced Church worker imagine ministering spiritually to the rural communities rife with unemployment, alcoholism, disease and malnutrition, and family and marital breakdown without attending to the land tenure crisis which is the principal cause of these problems. Often, in the midst of these problems, the only hope

that people have is that which comes from their faith. The Delegation was deeply moved by the depth of faith evident in the people and in their pastoral agents.

Lay Leaders' Involved in Agrarian Reform: Consensus about the necessity of ministering to rural workers involved in conflict extends beyond the Bishops' Conference. The Delegation observed a remarkable consensus between the perspective of the Bishops and that of the lay leaders attending the Sixth Inter-Church Meeting of the Comunidades de Base (Intereclesial das CEBS) in Goiania, Go. The theme of the ecumenically-attended meeting was agrarian reform, understood in the context of the strong Biblical image of the search for the promised land. Lay leaders were in full control of the agenda and of participation in the discussion, yet the importance and urgency of the Church's pastoral involvement in agrarian reform remained uncontested by both Brazilian laity and Bishops. Disagreement existed, as it does among the Bishops, only around the "how".

The Church's Pastoral Strategy: In 1980, the Catholic Bishops of Brazil issued a statement entitled LIBERATE THE LAND. The statement was approved almost unanimously, 300 to 4. The Bishops situate their concern for and ministry with rural workers within the context of the overall objective of their pastoral strategy:

"To evangelize the Brazilian people in the process of socio-economic and cultural transformation, starting from the truth about Jesus Christ, the church, and human beings, in the light of the preferential option for the poor, for the total liberation of human beings and increasing participation and communion, with the ultimate aim of the construction of a more just and fraternal society, thus announcing the definitive kingdom." (page 12)

The Highest Value of the Kingdom:

In the document Liberate the Land the Bishops justify their pastoral concern for the land by affirming that the highest value of the kingdom is the life of human beings and that one of the principal concerns of Jesus's own pastoral action was to correct the distortions in relations between human beings. The Bishops are fully cognizant of the risk involved in opting for victims of injustice:

"Jesus was clearly rejected by those who held political, economic and religious power. Before Pilate, they accused him: 'He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place' (Lk. 23.2,5; cf Mt. 27.1-2). And for this he was condemned to death." (page 14)

The Implementation of the Pastoral Ministry to Rural Workers: In order to implement the pastoral ministry of the Church to the rural workers the Bishops have constituted the Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) with offices throughout Brazil. The Delegation wishes to affirm the dedication, the work and the goals of the CPT, the major goals being the following:

- (1) To provide legal aid to rural workers, including the documentation of oppression and the use of juridical instruments to prevent the displacement of rural workers from their land.
- (2) To support the organization of workers' unions. The CPT has assisted the organizers of 18 unions in the last 5 years.
- (3) To encourage comunidades de base to reflect and act on the problem of agrarian reform. One means of raising consciousness is the staging of people's tribunals to highlight the fact that civil courts usually fail to judge alleged crimes against rural workers.
- (4) To seek indemnity for the families of the victims of violence.

#### DELEGATION CONCLUSIONS

Agrarian reform is indeed a complex and enormous problem. The Delegation sympathizes with persons and organizations which are attempting to find just and peaceable solutions. But, given the shallowness of present government reform efforts, the Delegation wishes

- (1) to denounce the Sarney government's abysmal lack of results;
- (2) to support the campaign by churches, unions and concerned politicians for a serious redistribution of the land;
- (3) to urge legislation which would impede the monopolizing of land by corporations, speculators and large landowners;
- (4) and finally to oppose the international financing of efforts to merely "modernize" agricultural production without providing for land re-distribution.

#### Recommendation to the Churches of the U.S.:

- A) Efforts to raise the consciousness of the U.S. public about the seriousness of the land conflicts of Brazil.
- B) A letter writing campaign to the government of Brazil urging genuine land reform efforts and inquiry into the deaths caused by the conflict.

- (c) Research and action on (1) the efforts toward "agrarian reform" or "modernization" sponsored by the World Bank and other international lending organizations; and (2) the nature of the involvement of U.S. multinationals in the land tenure crisis as well as in food production, processing and marketing in Brazil.

Ref. The Church and Land Conflict in Brazil: A Delegation Report C/o.  
Bishop Rene Valero, P.O.Box C, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11202 USA

See Also:

Liberate the Land: A Statement by the Bishops of Brazil CIIR  
Third World Theology Series. 22 Coleman Fields,  
London N1 7AF, England.

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DAY OF PRAYER FOR PEACE  
ASSISI, 27 OCTOBER, 1986

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Marcello Zago, O.M.I.

( La journée de prières d'Assise fut une occasion symbolique unique dont les effets se repercuteront dans la vie de l'Eglise et dans le dialogue interreligieux. La religion était, et paraissait vraiment l'être, un facteur d'unité en rassemblant des gens de religions et de races différentes, d'une manière toute nouvelle. Le Père Marcello Zago était alors secrétaire du Secrétaire pour les Non-Chrétiens et fut donc largement responsable de l'organisation de cette journée. Depuis il fut élu supérieur général des Oblats de Marie. Nous les remercions de nous avoir permis de publier ses réflexions, destinées d'abord aux membres de sa Congrégation. Nous nous sommes permis d'abrégier légèrement son texte. NDLR).

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1. REACTIONS TO THIS EVENT

All who seek to understand the nature and progress of interreligious dialogue in the Church and in the world will see the gathering for prayer that took place at Assisi last October 27 as a pattern-setting step and, even more, the significant symbol of the same.

The press and various communications media noted its importance. Accredited journalists outnumbered those at Vatican II: 800 as compared to 500. Regardless of the ideological slant of each publication medium, their reactions and comments were all quite positive. They underlined the novelty of the event and the level on which it took place: Christians and non-Christian believers together to pray for peace; a unique contribution to peace by believers; the social role of prayer; peace as a value that is religious, not only social.

The importance of this event, however, was noted even more by the participants themselves. I heard the comments made after the evening meal when the religious leaders met the Holy Father, and again the next morning when these same leaders met together for some three hours; and I heard what was said that afternoon when the representatives of international dialogue organizations held their meeting.

Deep and unanimous was the gratitude expressed to the Holy Father, either in his presence or in his absence. "Thank you for having brought us together to pray!" Some added, "Thank you for having brought us Christians and non-Christians together!" And someone added further, "Thank you for having brought us together here at Assisi!" "I never imagined I would ever be present when Buddhists, Hindus, and Moslems were praying," an Orthodox Patriarch said. A member of the Reformed Church said, "Thanks to the Pope of Rome, so many interreligious barriers have been removed." "A miracle!" - "I now see other believers with new eyes, a gift I have received here at Assisi."

Besides their gratitude, they also expressed their awareness, not only for having been part of an extraordinary historical event, but also for having lived a deep experience, an overwhelming one for many, one that was unique.

I consider indicative the attitude of Mr. Togbui Assenou, the Togo representative of the traditional African religions and one of the more simple persons there. Because of his advanced age, his light garments and the climate of his native country, he keenly suffered from the cold. He was numb and shivering and was several times invited to leave the square and to seek shelter. He insisted on participating right to the very end of the ceremony. Afterwards, however, he was laid-up in the infirmary, completely exhausted; It seemed as though he could no longer react to anything. Two hours later, though, when he heard that the Pope was about to leave, he jumped off his cot, took his cane, went out into the corridor and leaned against the wall. He simply had to thank the Pope and to touch the Man of Prayer and Peace before he went away. Then he returned content to the infirmary where he stayed in bed the whole next day.

## 2. THE EVENT ITSELF

The Day of Prayer at Assisi was at the same time a simple and a complex event. The sequence of its three main moments - the welcoming, the prayer in distinct places and the gathering together in common - was simple; complex was its preparation and its concrete organization.

The Welcoming: Pope John Paul II received and greeted each of the seventy or so delegations, of whom more than half were non-Christians, at the entrance to the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels. The delegation then entered the church where the personal guests of the Pope took their place on the podium set up in front of the Porziuncola. Those who accompanied them were seated in the nave.

The representatives of the world religions occupied the right semicircle and the Christians the left. Last to enter was the Holy Father who took his place in the center; to his right was the represent-

ative of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and to his left was the Buddhist Dalai Lama of Tibet. The Pope then gave an address in which he welcomed everyone and also indicated the meaning and program of the day, a day to be marked by prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and silence. The assembly dissolved in the same order. While the various religious leaders left in separate vehicles, the Christian authorities, including the Pope, rode together in a public bus.

The Prayer in Distinct Places: At Assisi itself, the different delegations went to their assigned separate places: the Christians to the cathedral of St. Rufinus; the Buddhists, Shinto and Tenrikyo to various locations within the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro; the Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians to locales centered around the Bishopric; the believers of the traditional African religions to the Municipal Hall of Reconciliation; those of the Traditional Amerindian religions to the church of San Gregorio; the Moslems in the hall of the Minerva; the Bahai, finally, in a room of the Confraternity of San Paolo.

This period, during which each group prayed separately, lasted from 10.30 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. Two facts, it seems to me, deserve special mention in its regard. The example of the Christians who, despite the great variety of Churches and Communion, had decided to pray together in the same cathedral, induced others to do the same. The Buddhists, whose preference had been to pray in separate places according to their different traditions, came together instead in the church of San Pietro. The religions of India also, after a separate prayer had been offered by the Hindus, Zoroastrians and the Sikh, came together in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. During these hours, prayer was offered not only in the assigned twelve places but also in all the many other churches and chapels, indeed, in the entire city. I had to travel the streets of Assisi a good three times during that period and I saw a city transformed into a temple of prayer.

The pilgrimage began at 2.00 p.m. Setting out from their different prayer places, the various groups moved toward the City Hall square like streams flowing into the same river or as pilgrims joining a single procession headed toward the same objective. This procession consisted of the different delegations that were placed in an alphabetical sequence. It advanced amid the acclamation of the people. Such a festive welcome deeply moved the Christian and non-Christian guests. As I was leading the procession, the thought of the Council of Ephesus unexpectedly came to me. On that occasion the jubilant people welcomed the Council Fathers who had proclaimed Mary as the Mother of God, and thus ratified their dogmatic declaration. It seemed to me that the people here in Assisi, Catholic most of them and gathered together from so many parts of the world, were not only applauding those who had come to pray but were also approving the dialogue and ecumenism that the Church has been

promoting since Vatican Council II.

The gathering Together: The third major feature took place at the square in front of the lower basilica of St. Francis. Its layout and ritual were filled with meaning. I led each delegation in turn to the prayer podium set apart from the large platform on which the Pope's invited guests sat in a semicircle. This logistic separation was deliberately chosen so that every hint of syncretism was excluded. We were together to pray, each according to their own tradition. Beyond these necessary distinctions, however, a profound sense of respect and communion reigned among all who were present. The square was not a theater where one watched a performance but rather a shrine in which one was present as a participant. The highlights were the prayer of the Christians which was more concretely formulated and that of the Amerindians which included the offering of the sacred peace pipe.

After these separate prayers, a number of common gestures added to the symbolism: a pledge in favour of peace proposed by young people from the different religions; the distribution of olive shoots to be taken back home and planted in one's respective religious establishment; the exchange of a sign of peace according to the different cultural and religious usages; the freeing of a quantity of doves.

The day ended with a common meal which the Pope also shared, although he came in a bit later for it: he had first wanted to express his thanks to the Assisi authorities and organizers. Just before his departure, John Paul II again met each person individually; to each he gave an autographed souvenir, a lithographed sketch of Assisi that Italian artist R. Tommasi Ferroni had specially designed for this purpose.

### 3. THE BACKGROUND AND PREPARATION FOR ASSISI

The proximate preparation was complex and quite discernible from the moment of its official announcement made in St. Paul's Basilica outside the Walls on January 25, 1986, the anniversary of the day when Vatican Council II was first announced. Everything had to be well thought-out first, all the more so because leaders of non-Christian religions would be present. The Secretariat for interreligious dialogue decided to involve the local Churches in selecting those to be invited. The latter were to represent only the historical religions of those countries in which these had developed. The details of the day's program, its phases, prayer modalities and symbols were gradually determined in many meetings in which the Secretariates for Christian unity and for interreligious dialogue as well as the diocese of Assisi regularly took part, under the chairmanship of Cardinal

Etchegaray of the Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*. The Holy Father closely followed the development of every aspect in this process. In the immediate preparation, the members of the Work of Mary (Focolarini) and the Community of St. Egidio of Rome lent a priceless assistance in the logistics domain, in terms of transportation and of personally accompanying each invited person. The city and diocese of Assisi provided room and board gratis, and so did a number of religious houses in Rome. This preparation and the help of so many persons not only made the day of Assisi possible, but also gave it a special quality, so that it became a privileged occasion of dialogue and the beginning of a new relationship with believers who hailed from all over the world.

All members of the organizing committee had a refined sensitivity concerning interreligious relationships and a direct experience of dialogue.

The Remote Preparation: The day of Assisi, however, would have remained impossible without the remote preparation provided by Vatican Council II which had sown the premises that gave direction to the Churches in Asia. In fact, it is in Asia that the pioneers of dialogue opened the way even before the Council. Next came a collective awareness on the part of the Asian episcopacy, particularly from 1974 onwards, after the first plenary meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Gradually the forms and participants of dialogue increased in number, especially in certain more significant areas such as Japan, India, and Indochina.

#### 4. THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF ASSISI

The ecumenical and interreligious day of prayer held at Assisi on October 27 is an event of such importance that it should be considered and deepened from a theological perspective. An experience of this nature and import has a theological value that should be explored and that could shed light on the whole theology of dialogue.

a) A confirmation of dialogue: The day of Assisi was first of all a confirmation of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. What the Council stated in its documents was expressed here in a solemn manner that all could understand and was highlighted by the communications media. For dialogue, in fact, is above all respect and recognition of persons and their most authentic values; it is promotion of these values; it is collaboration with people of good will in the achieving of a common good. At Assisi, the welcome given to the religious representatives and the help provided at the prayer offered by the various religions were in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role

but are also effective before God. Christian fundamentalists perceived this de facto recognition and that is why they protested; those at the head of the new religions and sects were even more aware of this consequence and that is why they tried in every possible way, without success, to be officially present.

b) An act of dialogue: Assisi was an instance of dialogue at the highest degree. Dialogue, in fact, has many goals: its aims are knowledge of each other, collaboration, and mutual enrichment. Its manifestations vary: it can be doctrinal, experiential, interior; it can be cooperation, being present to each other, a sharing of life. It is more authentic in the measure that it touches deep-seated attitudes and becomes experience; it is more effective in the measure that its participants are more qualified and representative.

In all kinds of ways Assisi was a dialogue which impressed precisely because it was so experiential. To prayer, which was its climate and soul, were added other manifestations of contact, respect, mutual knowledge - elements which involved many other people besides the invited guests and official participants. This is most likely the beginning of new relationships on the universal and local levels. It became clear that the various forms of dialogue are complementary to each other and that dialogue is a service to people and to mankind.

c) An image of the Church in the world: Assisi is also the symbol, the stage setting of what the Church is by her very vocation in regard to humanity and to other movements. As Vatican Council II had already put it (SC 2, 8; GS 40, 45; AG9) the Church was seen there as a people on pilgrimage to the eschatological goal, walking together with the whole of mankind which is called and oriented toward the same ultimate end (cf. NA 1). The Church not only takes part in this journey but also directs it to its goal which by grace has been revealed to her and of which she holds the first beginnings as a gift. "Hence this messianic people, although it does not actually include all people, and at times may appear as a small flock, is however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race" (LG 9)".

d) An image of the Church as the promoter of unity: Assisi symbolizes the mission given to the Church to promote unity among all peoples for their benefit. This unity is an eminent Gospel value and the objective of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. This was very well expressed by the Pope who extended the invitation, received and welcomed those who came, walked together with them, and sat in the center of the semicircle.

The Council gave two reasons for proposing dialogue: one is of a social nature and the other theological (cf. NA 1).

We are in a new historical situation. The world is becoming one. The communications and information media have undermined barriers that are centuries old. In this world which has now become a village, there are tensions and conflicts that can become explosive and fatal for the whole of mankind. Various believers and doctrines, different religious traditions and structures are present everywhere, even within cultures that are traditionally homogeneous. This can give rise to tensions, ostracisms and relativism as well as to enrichment, deepening and collaboration. Faced with such a situation, Vatican Council II asks Catholics to look for what is held in common and to favour what facilitates a constructive living together and, in doing so, to base themselves precisely on elements that are religious.

This commonality is seen theologically - all have God as their common origin and ultimate end; and phenomenologically - all seek in the different religions the answer to the arcane enigmas of the human condition. The reason for this change of direction is linked to what is most basic in the Church herself: "Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she reflects at the outset on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them" (NA 1). What we have here is not merely an invitation to a courteous, human ethic behaviour in regard to others; relationships with the religions are seen rather in the light of the life and mission of the Christian community.

By her very nature the Church is called to live and transmit the love of the Trinity and of Christ. The main structure of the two documents on the Church (cf. LG 1-10) and on the missions (cf. AG 1-5) reveals this. "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (AG 2). "The Church, which has been sent by Christ to reveal, communicate the love of God to all men and to all peoples, is aware that for her a tremendous missionary work still remains to be done" (AG 10). "The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (LG 1; cf. GS 45). This is why it is her duty to promote unity (cf. GS 42) and dialogue (cf. NA 1).

e) The specifically religious nature of dialogue: By their very nature religions respond to a person's interior needs, even though from a certain perspective and dynamic fulcrum they tend to transform the whole person and to influence the whole of society. Assisi expresses primarily the religious character of the Church and of dialogue; and when this

element is used as the fulcrum, service rendered to humankind becomes more specific and effective: "The people of God and the human race which is its setting, render service to each other, and the mission of the Church will show itself to be supremely human by the very fact of being religious" (GS 11).

Prayer for peace is the expression of a specific contribution to humankind in search of peace: "The Church, then, God's only flock, like a standard lifted on high for the nations to see it, ministers the Gospel of peace to all humankind, as it makes its pilgrim way in hope toward its goal". (UR 2). In this way we have come to understand that there is a religious dimension to peace that is irreplaceable and essential, that is born in the heart of religions, that is a gift of God as the monotheistic religions remind us. Anything that is most profoundly religious, like prayer, is very human and has an impact on society itself.

f) Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue: Assisi has underlined both the convergences and the essential differences between Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. The Christians prayed together first in the cathedral and then during the common part of the program in the presence of all the religious representatives. The kind of unity that already exists between Christians and what they are still seeking is substantially different from that of the other believers. A conscious relationship to Christ affects prayer addressed to God, to whom all believers address themselves, and affects all mutual relationships. Christians are joined to each other whereas other believers are ordained to the People of God.

In my view, the following distinction made in two texts of *Lumen gentium* needs to be pondered in depth: (1) "The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honoured by the name of Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity of communion under the successor of Peter" (LG 15). (2) "Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways" (LG 16).

g) The challenge from syncretism: The greatest difficulty and most notable opposition stem from the fear of syncretism, that is, mixing Christianity with other confessions, truth with error. Very great care against this was taken at Assisi, even in the external forms, and especially during the third part of the program, and these measures met with general satisfaction. We need to acknowledge what is specifically Christian and preserve it; but we also need to acknowledge valid elements that we hold in common and share with others.

h) Relationship between dialogue and witness: At Assisi, Christians came into contact with other believers and vice versa, and this in an attitude of profound respect. Each witnessed to the other in a witness of life and a witness that was expressed (prayer and speeches). Witness like this greatly affects everyone concerned. From the Christian viewpoint, such witness is seen in relation to the active work of the Spirit and to the personal choice made by each individual. The missionary mandate thereby touches land on other shores and does so in a Gospel manner.

i) Extension of the mission: Assisi clearly shows that the boundaries of the ecclesial mission have been extended. They are not limited to evangelization and the establishment of Christian communities but extend to being a leaven of Gospel values, to the promotion of - God's Reign which is already initially present in the Church but exists also beyond her visible boundaries and will be fully achieved in eschatology. The Church is a sign and sacrament of this Reign and at its service; she has a role to play in regard to every person, for all are candidates of this Reign.

#### CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit is urging the Church to open new avenues of approach to the modern world (cf. PO 22), to live out her vocation and mission in an ever better way. At the very heart of Christianity there is a person, namely, Christ, and there is a basic attitude, namely, charity. These realities are at the heart of God's Reign, already now in its temporal phase and will be there until it has become everything in everyone in its final phase. Even though not all recognize Christ in the present phase, there is, a greater acknowledgement of unity. Unity is therefore the instrument of God's presence. Interreligious dialogue must be seen in this perspective. Of interreligious dialogue, the event of Assisi is a symbol, a peak, and a reference point that is rich in meaning.

Ref. OMI Documentation No. 147/87: Via Aurelia 290; 00165 Rome.

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DIALOGUE OF LIFE  
A LETTER FROM KISHORGANJ, BANGLADESH

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Bob McCahill, MM.

*(Many missionaries are faced with the problem of whether they should "let go", "move on" from a place where they have worked for many years and sent down roots.*

Bob McCahill has written to us occasionally over the years and kept us aware of his dialogue of life in Tangail a town which is 90% Muslim and 10% Hindu. We have published his letters from time to time in SEDOS Bulletin. Last year, Bob at age 48, considered moving from Tangail leaving his friends whom he loved dearly. This is his first letter from Kishorganj - his new home. We share with you also his reflections on why he felt he should move from Tangail and his assessment of his nine years living there. They may help men and women missionaries faced with the question of "moving on").

*(Il arrive à beaucoup de missionnaires de se poser un jour la question: ne vaudrait-il pas mieux partir et quitter une région où ils ont travaillé pendant des années et où ils ont pris racine? - Bob McCahill durant ces dernières années nous a écrit souvent sur son dialogue de vie à Tangail, une ville musulmane à 90% et hindoue à 10%. Nous avons publié ses lettres de temps en temps dans le Bulletin de SEDOS. L'an passé, Bob, âgé de 48 ans, a décidé de quitter Tangail, y laissant des amis très chers. Voici sa première lettre de Kishorganj, sa nouvelle résidence. Nous vous faisons part de ses réflexions indiquant pourquoi il a estimé devoir quitter Tangail ainsi que son évaluation des neuf ans qu'il y a passés. Elles peuvent aider des missionnaires qui sont affrontés avec ce problème de changement de poste.)*

Kishorganj: October, 1986.

Dear Friends,

This year I did something that perhaps a few of you did also. I moved. After nine fine years in Tangail of helping the poor in ways they want to be helped I judged that the signs of love for the poor and respect for their faith had been made for a sufficient duration of time by this missionary. It was time to move on to another place in order to make the same signs to new persons.

"Do come to Kishorganj. We welcome a brother who will live among us in poverty and chastity." Those words of welcome from one respected citizen provided the invitation I needed in order to transfer to Kishorganj (pronounced: key-shore-ganj), a district town 100 miles east of my former abode, populated by 100,000 people, approximately 90% Muslims and 10% Hindus.

In the new place I rented a room for \$6 per month, furnished it with a single-burner kerosene stove, a candle holder, a clay water jar, a washpan, plate and glass, a sleeping mat, and a wardrobe as elaborate as my surroundings. Doug kindly supplied me a slightly leaky pressure cooker; he knows I have not the patience to deal with any other sort of cooking. Then I set out to get to know the Kishorganjis.....

"Who are you? What do you do?" the people want to know. I explain: "I am Brother Bob, a Catholic Christian missionary. I am here to serve the sick-poor. Service to the needy and love for all persons is my religion. Christians believe that Allah makes happy those who serve the needy." Implied in my reply is a message for any who wish to understand it: This Christian missionary is your brother. I wish you well. I appreciate your Faith and your culture. There is nothing about you that I seek to change except that which you also wish changed. I will gladly try to help you free yourselves from whatever debilitates you, that is, free you for living useful and happy lives.

There are no other foreigners in Kishorganj. Not now. But, between 1916 and 1930 the Nazarene Christian Mission of Kansas City, Missouri, maintained a girls' high school in this unlikely place. Only Allah knows what were and are the effects of that mission effort. One thing is clear, however. There is fellow-feeling in Kishorganj. Did the Nazarene Mission contribute to that attitude? Or is it solely due to the strivings of Muslims and Hindus to live harmoniously together? Or is it for reasons I have yet to discover? The place fascinates me.

So do the people. I wish you could meet many of them. Like Chaytali. Her age is fourteen years and she is the last of 14 children, three of whom survive. Both parents are gone. Chaytali stands five feet tall, weighs 64 pounds, has fine features, a light complexion and a winning smile. Six months ago someone humiliated her so severely that she wanted to die, for which purpose she drank some nitric acid from a jeweler's shop. The attempt failed, but as a result of it she can no longer swallow food and lives on milk whenever she can get some. "I want to eat rice again!" she declares. First, though, she'll have to have some work done on her esophagus. I volunteered to be her

brother; she prefers to call me "Dadu" (Grandpa). She assures me that she never went to school and is "dumb". However, she is anything but that. I marvel at the intelligence and resourcefulness of this sweet scrawny Bengali lass. Now she wants to live and not to die. She can use a little help from her friends.

May God give you, too, the joy of helping friends-in-need in your mission place.

Your brother,

Bob.

SOME THOUGHTS ON LEAVING TANGAIL, 1986

I feel that the Lord is urging me to leave Tangail and settle in a new place. That inspiration is the reason for my plan to transfer. But, on the practical level, why should this missionary start again elsewhere? Are the opportunities for doing good works and giving Christian witness in Tangail less now than they were in the past? Quite the contrary. In fact, the more involved I become with more people, the greater are the opportunities to assist and to save. There will always be sick-poor persons who need a brother's help.

However, I believe the sign of Christian love has been made here for a sufficient duration of time. That sign has been seen by two groups: namely, the poor and the non-poor. On the one hand, many poor persons have experienced disinterested love from a source they never expected, that is, from a foreigner, an "Englishman", whose image in this culture is normally of someone who is greedy for liquor and sex. The poor, in turn, have reciprocated with kind words and deeds towards me. They call me 'mama', 'dadu', 'bhai'. They often invite me to eat with them. (Are there any more elaborate ways for persons to express gratitude and affection than those?).

On the other hand are the non-poor; that is, the middle and upper classes, who also observe what I am doing. They approve of my work with and for the poor. In the beginning they were largely suspicious of my intentions. I am told that in conversations among themselves they acknowledge that Brother is "doing" religion. Some apply to me the Islamic belief that "The key to heaven is love for the poor". By most indications, the people of Tangail understand it is love that motivates this missionary, and not the desire to convert Muslims.

I do not know what the Lord is holding in store for me in Kishor-ganj. Nor did I know what the future would hold when I boarded a bus

bound for Tangail nine years ago. As I rode the bus towards Tangail I asked the Lord to insert me into that unknown place before day's end. I had not the faintest idea about where I would spend that first night. The Lord inspired a fellow passenger (Nurul Islam, a complete stranger) to invite me to meet a friend, who introduced me to another friend, who took me into his house for the next six weeks. I was suprised, grateful, and conscious that God was working everything for me.

Ministry among women: Many of the Tangail poor are so much a part of my life that I will be happier for continued contact with them. Among those friends are many women. In 1975, before we came to Bangladesh, we were told that we would not be able to work with women; their menfolk would not allow it.

After serving the poor for several years, I realized that already I was dealing with women as much as, or more than, I was dealing with men. Besides the fact that I am able to work effectively and lovingly with persons whom society tends to ignore (i.e., sick-poor women), the trust their menfolk place in me is a joy to experience. Henceforth, the same process will begin in Kishorganj; that is, working first with sick-poor men, for as long as it takes to build trust, after which they will permit me to help also "their" women. As women in Bangladesh are less free and more neglected than men, I believe that to help women in any substantial way is to work for justice and peace.

Community Life: Several years ago Archbishop Michael asked the Maryknollers in Tangail to evaluate their apostolate among Muslims and Hindus in Tangail. One of his questions was: "Why do you live together?" I answered that it would have been difficult to begin working among Muslims, and even more difficult to sustain that early work, without the presence and support of like-minded fellows. It seems to me that now it is time to experiment with living outside a community of priests. I think I have learned during the past eight enjoyable years in the Tangail Maryknoll Fraternity that the people of Tangail are neither impressed nor edified by our community life in their midst. On the contrary, some people seem to suspect that life in a male community denotes oddness. Frequently I have been asked by friendly, curious persons: Whom do you live with? When I reply that I live with my religious brothers, there is silence. The questioners drop the topic that they imagine can only embarrass me. It appears to me that the suspicion of homosexuality easily comes into some people's minds when they see unmarried mature men living together. In order to present an understandable living arrangement to my new neighbours in Kishorganj, it might be fitting for me to consider living with a

Bengali or two, to whom the local people could put their private questions about the missionary's life.

Another reason for wishing to start again in a new place has to do with my age (48 years) and the psychology of the modern age. Nowadays men and women are advised to change works before ten years pass, in order to rekindle enthusiasm. Fresh starts are occasions for grace.

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## I. THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Albert Nolan, O.P.

*(Il existe pas mal de confusions et de malentendus au sujet de "l'Option pour les Pauvres". On rencontre même un certain nombre de déformations délibérées de sa signification. Des gens qui souffrent d'une pauvreté endémique y voient souvent une caricature et voudraient remplacer l'expression par celle d'"Option pour surmonter la pauvreté".*

*Il s'agit-là d'une malentendu semblable à ceux qui concernent le sens de la souffrance dans la vie de Jésus et dans celle de ses disciples. Sa mort a souvent été comparée à celle d'un otage offrant sa vie en échange de la liberté de nombreux prisonniers. Là aussi il y a une caricature faisant du Père un injuste oppresseur, avec un code moral qu'aucun ne peut accepter. Les deux articles suivants: "Option pour les pauvres en Afrique du Sud" et "Comment Jésus a-t-il réagi devant la souffrance?", ont été très abrégés. Mais nous les offrons à nos lecteurs, pensant qu'ils peuvent s'appliquer spécialement à de nombreuses situations du monde d'aujourd'hui. NDLR.)*

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The challenge to the church, to almost all our churches, represented by this term "option for the poor" goes far beyond anything envisaged by the Reformers. It challenges both Catholic and Protestant, and it challenges us in a very fundamental way. Here, I should like to open up the specific approach implied in this new theological term for further research, reflection, debate and practice. In the first place, it will be necessary to state quite clearly what we are talking about and even more importantly what we are not talking about. Then we shall have to give some account of how this new theological theme is grounded in the Bible. And finally we must venture some suggestions about what it may

mean in the struggle for liberation in South Africa today.

### OPTION FOR THE POOR: ITS MEANING

One of the most common misunderstandings is that an option for the poor means a choice or preference for preaching and ministering to the poor rather than to the rich. The more recent phrase "preferential option for the poor," made popular by the Puebla Conference of Latin American bishops, has tended to reinforce the idea that all we are talking about is a pastoral preference in the distribution of the church's services, resources and preaching.

The option for the poor is not a choice about the recipients of the gospel message, to whom we must preach the gospel; it is a matter of what gospel; we preach to anyone at all. It is concerned with the content of the gospel message itself. The gospel may be good news for the poor and bad news for the rich but it is a message for both the poor and the rich.

The opinion that the preferential option for the poor is simply a way of emphasizing the all-importance of almsgiving, charity and relief work need not delay us here. The poor are not people who are deprived because of bad luck or misfortune. The option for the poor is concerned with the sin of oppression and what christians should be doing about it.

The option for the poor is not a preference for some people over other people. It is a matter of taking up the cause of the poor as opposed to the cause of the rich. The moral judgement involved here is not a judgement about individuals who are rich or poor, but a judgement about the morality or rightness of two conflicting causes. The option for the poor is a judgement about the rightness of the cause of the poor and a condemnation of the cause of the rich, whatever the measure of personal guilt of those involved may or may not be.

It has also sometimes been thought that the option for the poor is a matter of lifestyle: an option for poverty. We do not necessarily help the poor and oppressed by imitating their deprivation.

The option for the poor is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict. It is the assertion that Christian faith entails, for everyone and as part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed. Nothing could be more threatening to the cherished beliefs of so many of today's Christians. Nothing could be more controversial and challenging for our theology and our practice

as Christians.

Those who feel threatened will say that this is not the gospel, it is politics. The gospel, they will argue, is about peace and reconciliation and not about taking sides in a conflict. Yes, but surely the gospel does not require us to reconcile good and evil, injustice and peace? Does it not rather demand that we take sides against all sin and especially against the all-pervasive sin of oppression?.

#### THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN THE BIBLE

The option for the poor is not a biblical phrase but it does sum up very neatly and succinctly one of the most central themes of the Bible. We know that the concept of the poor is central to the whole biblical revelation, but it is so easy to "spiritualize" all that is said about the poor in the Bible by quoting texts that refer to "spiritual poverty" as the attitude of total reliance upon God and having a humble and contrite spirit. Any generalization that ignores the different historical context is sure to be arbitrary and biased.

The Option for the Poor in the Exodus Story: The outline of the Exodus story is clear enough. We are introduced to a group of people in Egypt doing forced labour as slaves, building cities and prestigious buildings for the Pharaoh (Ex 1:11). Their cruel oppression and broken spirit (Ex 6:9) is described at some length. The scene was as common in the ancient world as it is today.

The new thing, the new revelation, was the appearance of a God called Yahweh who actually took notice of them, who saw their oppression, heard their cries and helped them to escape from their oppressors. Here was a God who actually sided with them rather than, like all other gods, siding with the kings and Pharaohs who oppressed them. Later they recognized Yahweh to be the only God, the creator God, the God of their Fathers.

What does this tell us about the option for the poor?

Here we have the original poor people of the Bible, the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Their poverty is obviously material and economic but what is far more striking is that their poverty is the direct result of the structural oppression of Egyptian society. The poor here

are the oppressed and what is described at length is precisely their oppression.

In the Exodus story the option for these oppressed Hebrews is taken in the first place by Yahweh himself. God takes sides with the oppressed and against the oppressor in no uncertain terms. The other interesting thing about the Exodus story is that it is the poor and oppressed themselves who must take an option for their own cause. The work of Moses was precisely to persuade the Hebrew slaves to take up their own cause, and that is what faith and trust in Yahweh meant for them in practice.

The Option for the Poor in Canaan: Exodus was only the beginning of the liberation story in the Bible. When the descendants of the Hebrew slaves reached Canaan they joined forces with oppressed peasants and other rebels most of whom had a common ancestry. Together they began to build the new nation of Israel. With their background of oppression and with the new hope based upon Yahweh, the liberator of the oppressed, it is not surprising to discover that they built a nation in which there were no rich and no poor, no kings, princes or even chiefs, and no slaves. It was a federation of twelve tribes and the land was divided equally amongst the families or clans (Num 33:54;34,18).

Recent scholarship has shown beyond doubt that the Israelite society of the twelve tribes was indeed an egalitarian society and that this structure was based upon belief in Yahweh, the liberator of slaves. In this respect, Israel was unique among the nations of the ancient world.

The Option for the Poor in the Prophets: For reasons that would take too long to explain here, the egalitarian society of the twelve tribes did not last. Gradually inequality set in, despite the attempts of the Jubilee legislation (Lev 25:8-55) to stem the tide, until eventually the people began to ask for a king in order to be like other nations. The prophet Samuel resisted and warned them that the king and his officials would become slaves again. But the people insisted and, as the Bible understands it, God allowed them to have a king (1 Sam 8:1-22).

This was the beginning of oppressive structures within Israel itself. Saul did not become rich but he proved to be a jealous tyrant. David was a pious and benevolent dictator who began slowly to take on the trappings of an oriental monarch. But it was Solomon and his successors who fulfilled Samuel's worst fears. The majority of the people were reduced to much the same poverty and oppression as that

from which Yahweh had once liberated them in Egypt and Canaan.

Hence the rise of the great prophets. Although most of the prophets probably did not come from the oppressed classes of Israel, they took up the cause of justice for the poor as Yahweh's cause. The result for almost all the pre-exilic prophets - so the New Testament claims - was persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom (Matt 23:29, 33; Luke 6:22, 23, 26).

The Option for the Poor during and after the Exile: During the centuries after the fall of Jerusalem and the monarchy, in exile in Babylon and after the return to Jerusalem, the remnant of Israel remained a small colony oppressed by a succession of empires: Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman. There was suffering but on the whole, even in exile, it was not remotely as bad as the oppression experienced originally in Egypt. There was a measure of persecution but now it was mostly a religious persecution. With the exception of the Maccabees and later the Zealots, there was no attempt to struggle for liberation. Israel became submissive and opted for a kind of religious independence.

It was during this period that the people of Israel developed that very special form of Jewish piety that we call spiritual poverty. The scrolls of the law and of the prophets had been taken into exile by the elite. These they read, interpreted and rewrote in terms of their present experience.

The poor and oppressed were central to the written tradition they had inherited. The poor were God's favorites. Thus they read the texts about the poor as applying to themselves, the oppressed remnant of Israel (Zeph 3:11-13; Isa 49:13). To be God's chosen people the religious remnant of Israel must imitate the "virtues of the poor," which are understood to be the virtues of being humble, meek, contrite, patient and totally reliant upon God. To be truly poor becomes a matter of the heart and of the spirit: a humble heart and a contrite spirit.

How does this relate to the option for the poor?

The Jews who developed this spirituality of poverty were indeed oppressed, but they regarded themselves alone as the "poor of Yahweh." This was the beginning of the detachment of spiritual poverty from its roots in material poverty and in the social category of all the oppressed classes. Instead of taking an option for the poor one can then take an option for the "virtues of the poor" in a way that enables the status quo of oppression to continue unchallenged.

It was Jesus and his movement that brought the piety of the poor down to earth again and rooted it firmly in an option for the materially poor and politically oppressed.

The Option for the Poor in the Gospels: In the time of Jesus and his disciples, the remnant of Israel was very conscious of being oppressed by the Romans. But, like the prophets in previous times, what Jesus draws attention to is the internal structures of oppression. Oppressor and oppressed, rich and poor, could also be found within Jewish society and religion. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests and the elders (that is, the nobility and rich landowners) were in various ways oppressors; while the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, widows and orphans, the "sinners," the tax collectors and prostitutes were all in their own way oppressed people.

In this situation Jesus took sides quite clearly and unequivocally. His option for the poor included a determined effort to get the poor to take an option for their own cause. He insisted again and again that it was their faith that would heal them and save them. He used his position to restore their dignity and confidence in themselves by telling them that they were "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." In short, he told them not to bow down or lie down but to stand up and walk (Luke 17:19; Mark 2:11-12). His preaching of the kingdom gave them hope for the future.

Jesus' option led him to identify himself totally with the poor: "whatever you do to the least of these you do to me" (Matt 25:40, 45). It was for his stand in favour of the poor and against the oppressor that he was, like the prophets, persecuted and eventually killed.

There is no way that one could argue that the category of people Jesus was opting for were the morally and spiritually poor. They included sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors. They included people who were hungry and thirsty and begging on the streets.

The central challenge in the gospels is the challenge that Jesus presented to the rich and the powerful and to all who had sided with them. He faced them with a simple and uncompromising option - the choice between God and money (Matt 6:24 par.; compare Mark 4:19 par). Those who choose God would have to sell their surplus possessions (Matt 6:19-21; Luke 12:33-34; 14:33) and join with the poor in a sharing community in which no one would be in need (Acts 2:44-46; 4:32, 34-35), that is to say, where there would be no rich and no poor, no master and no slave.

In Matthew's words, they would "hunger and thirst for justice" (5:6; compare Luke 6:21); they would not be destitute but they would be "poor in spirit" (5:3; compare Luke 6:20).

Here then is the new spirituality. There is no glorification of poverty but a determination to overcome it. There is no denial that we have enemies but a determination to love them too (Luke 6:27-35). There is no refusal to recognize the reality of sin in the world but a determination to be forgiving (Matt 18:21-22). There must be a struggle against all forms of oppression but there must be no revenge (Matt 5:38-39).

#### THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

In our situation of a cruel and relentless oppression that is perpetrated in the name of God and the Bible, it becomes imperative to preach about God as the one who has taken sides, here in South Africa, with all who are oppressed - and to preach this to everyone. It will then be necessary to spell out, work out and live out the consequences of this for the various groups amongst the oppressed and the oppressing or exploiting classes.

The oppressed must take a clear option for their own cause, for the cause of all the poor and oppressed. An option to become upwardly mobile by oneself or with a small group that abandons the rest of the oppressed is not an option for the poor but an option to join the oppressing and exploiting classes. People in South Africa are oppressed in many different ways and to different degrees. Workers are oppressed, some much more than others; blacks are oppressed, but some suffer considerably more than others; women are oppressed, but not all to anything like the same extent. It becomes possible therefore to be oppressed on one account while being part of the oppression on another account. An option for the poor is an option against every form of oppression and exploitation.

Many of the churches in South Africa, are beginning to take a prophetic stance. But in view of what we have seen of the option for the poor in the Bible, we may well ask whether the stance of these churches has gone nearly far enough. There is a growing denunciation of injustice but there is no clear announcement of hope for a future liberated society. There are challenges to the government and to whites in general but there is no clear statement that the oppressed should take up their own cause as God's cause.

One of the more serious emotional obstacles to siding with the poor is based upon the fact that we do not experience the same daily sufferings and insecurities as the poor. When you are not humiliated

at every turn and regularly beaten up by the police, you do not experience the same emotions of fear, frustration, anger and indignation. You may side with the oppressed but you will not easily feel the same way about the oppressor. And that makes it more difficult to share God's anger at what is happening daily in our country. However, as we get involved in a practical way and as we begin to risk our own security and comfort, our reputation and even our lives, a certain sharing of the experience of oppression and of God's anger becomes possible.

And then there are cultural obstacles. These are not merely African and Western. There are also cultural differences between the working class and the middle class of any race, between youth culture and adult culture, and between people of various backgrounds. There is no value in pretending that they do not even exist.

#### CONCLUSION

Taking an option for the poor is like setting out on a new spiritual journey. It is so easy to get stuck along the way, at the liberal stage of paternalism or at the romantic stage of glorifying the poor. It is so easy to think that one has all the answers because of one's superior education or analysis. A thoroughgoing option for the poor includes the willingness to question one's assumptions and to learn from those who are oppressed. It is only after one has learnt to have confidence in the ability of the oppressed to promote their own cause to bring about their own liberation that one can begin to share that struggle with them and to make a contribution in real solidarity with all those who have taken an option against oppression.

The term "option for the poor" itself does not matter. We might choose to call it something else. What matters is the uncompromising commitment to the cause of the oppressed as the cause of God.

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 II. HOW DID JESUS REACT TO SUFFERING?
 

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Claude Ortemann

Jesus met many of the suffering sick; he also suffered in his own body. How did he speak of God in these situations?

HIS BEHAVIOUR TO THOSE WHO SUFFER

Jesus came in frequent contact with the sick and the disabled. It is therefore easy to describe his reactions as depicted in the Gospel.

The first thing we note is that he is never indifferent. The gospel texts tell us that he is moved and upset; they describe his compassion and even his tears (Mt 9, 36; 14, 14; 15, 32; Jn 11, 31-32, 36; Lk 7, 13). He derives no pleasure from anyone's suffering and, needless to say, there is no hint of sadism in his reactions.

Jesus never asks that suffering be offered up to God, for the benefit of the invalid himself or indeed of anyone else. It is impossible to attribute such a suggestion to him. And the God of Jesus never demands that a person's suffering be offered up to him. Jesus attached no value to suffering *per se* as so many spiritualities were to do later, and with a great lack of moderation. Nowhere does Jesus declare that suffering "contributes to one's salvation", or to one's personal sanctification, or to expiation, as some people insistently affirm, disregarding the fact that God's salvation is effected against suffering, which is an evil to be banished from the Kingdom.

Then, as we know, Jesus heals many sick people. He does not give his healing grudgingly, weighing up the invalid's sinful past. Neither does he present it as a reward for a blameless life, or demand virtuous conduct in return. His healing is wholly gratuitous. His God is the God of absolute gratuitousness, not of barter.

And last but not least, Jesus never interprets illness as a divine punishment. In short, the God whom Jesus conveys to us through his attitude to suffering men can never be considered sadistic. He "sends" no suffering whatsoever and he derives no pleasure from human suffering. The masochism of resignation and of "suffering offered up" is something that he never encourages.

JESUS IN HIS OWN SUFFERING

Jesus did not experience the suffering of illness. But he encountered, in reaction to his preaching, a growing hostility of such violence that it ended up by eliminating him physically. This gratuitous violence shown to him was provoked by the religious authorities and the Roman occupying forces; Jesus did not hold the one he called "Father" responsible for it.

And in his public life, Jesus did not ascribe the persecution of prophets to the will of God. Rather he denounced their murder as such, without presenting their suffering as a kind of sacrifice - whether of substitution or of expiation - desired by the Father (Mt 23, 29-37; Lk 11,47-51).

On being arrested, he did not consider the brutal treatment he received to be a trial willed on him by the Father (Mk 14,48-49; Jn 18,20-21). In fact, Jesus' suffering and death occurred in historical circumstances that no one can disregard without losing sight of their significance.

Those circumstances were determined by his contemporaries' rejection of his utterances about God and of his conduct, which he associated with God himself. The religious authorities considered Jesus' message and behaviour sufficiently deviant and dangerous to warrant the decision to put him to death.

For, as many authors have clearly shown in recent years, Jesus claimed to have an immediate knowledge of God's will, with no intermediary, no recourse to tradition, and placed himself above Moses. With complete composure, he transgressed the law and the religious prescriptions, he foretold the destruction of the Temple, he kept company with social outcasts, and public sinners, with tax-collectors and prostitutes. To crown it all, he referred his conduct to God himself. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14, 10-11).

The face of God that Jesus shows us is startlingly original. He is a God who devotes all his activity to our welfare; who has little desire to enforce laws that do not help us to live more abundantly, and who has nothing to do with legalism. A God who condemns no one, who does not reject sinners, but is close to each one of them. He is the God of a love that is always given quite gratuitously and never taken back. Such a God shocked the priestly hierarchy, guardian of the traditional doctrine, and motivated its decision to get rid of Jesus.

Can the Father who wishes no one to suffer act differently towards his Son? Is he not the same Father who asks all men not to inflict suffering on anyone, to forgive even those who do them harm, and in whose name Jesus says: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6,27; cf. Mt 5, 44)?

In the circumstances, it is impossible to attribute Jesus' death to a decision of the Father. Besides, such a decision would be odious and revolting: the Father demanding the death of a human being who is also his own Son! That God, who is akin to Mithra and the cruel gods of the Aztecs, can inspire nothing but horror, and inevitably strengthens the contempt or indifference of unbelievers towards harmful and outdated religions.

The death of Jesus has often been compared to that of a hostage offering his life in exchange for the freedom of many prisoners. But if this were so, the Father would be an iniquitous oppressor, adopting a procedure that no moral code, however lax, would accept. Furthermore, in these circumstances Jesus' death would not even have the effectiveness of a hostage's execution since, in spite of everything, mankind continues to suffer and to die.

If Jesus consented to suffer and die, he did so because he understood that there was no longer any other way of continuing to express the love that God gives and never withdraws. This is precisely what Jesus made clear at Gethsemane when he said: "Father, not my will, but yours . . ." Here, as in the Passion, the Father's will was the very same will that had guided the whole of Jesus' life: that God's love be affirmed until the end, that no limit be placed on it, not even the suffering and the death that were imposed on Jesus.

Hence it is very important that Jesus' suffering and death should not be presented in our liturgical texts as a demand imposed by the Father, since they are nothing of the kind. The words of the eucharistic consecration, for example, need to be elucidated by means of an introduction which states clearly that Jesus' death was inflicted on him by us and that through it he testified to a love which is never withdrawn and which his whole life illustrates.

Similarly, Jesus' suffering and death should not be presented as a condition made by the Father, a condition which must be satisfied before he consents to forgive us - as if the Father had waited until his Son was put to death before showing us mercy and giving himself to us.

Suffering is not meant to "Sanctify" us, to stimulate our faith, or to contribute to our salvation. Salvation, that is, God's gratuitous gift, is already realized by Jesus, and by him alone, since God

alone has that capacity for self-giving. No one can demand that gift of him. And it would be quite useless to try, since it is always offered. In suffering, as in all other human situations, it is possible to welcome his gift, it is possible to live the Gospel. But suffering is not a privileged situation in relation to other human situations. Jesus never singled out any particular circumstance whether religious, national or political, sexual, social or moral - as being the most favourable to faith. The only thing that matters is poverty of heart, that is to say the welcoming of God's gift.

Just as importantly, we should be careful not to liken every suffering to that of Jesus crucified without showing what makes it so very special: Jesus' suffering, inflicted on him by humankind is that of the witness to the Father's love.

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