
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA

Presented by Fr. Alan McCoy, O.F. M.

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I come not as an economist, a demographer or a politician, but as one who would be a Christian; one who shares the Judeo-Christian tradition in my ministry to people. In the past years I have been privileged to experience something of the plight of the poor and dispossessed in many parts of the world- in Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as here in our own Los Angeles area. And it has been very helpful to be able to follow the development of Liberation Theology in response to these realities.

Surely, Latin America deserves special attention because of its serious problems and also because of the efforts made there in recent years to deal with the basic problem: land tenure. Liberation Theology, based as it is on the fundamentals of Latin American reality and Latin American theological reflection upon that reality, has had a major role in these efforts.

In August 1986 I was asked to join an ecumenical group to visit Brazil at the invitation of the Brazilian Bishop's Conference Committee on land reform. Our delegation of six persons was assembled for two major purposes, first, to raise the consciousness of our delegation members about the issues of agrarian reform in Brazil and about the role of the churches of Brazil in the reform...and second, to explore and recommend appropriate responses by the churches and citizens of the United States.

Our delegation visited cities and villages between the coastal city of Sao Paulo and the northwest jungle city of Manaus. Prepared for the task by readings and a briefing by the Washington Office on Latin America, the delegation members attended three national meetings and interviewed on site (in select conflict areas) over fifty pastoral agents and rural workers actually involved in the land conflicts. The largest number of interviews were held in the Bico do Papagaio (Parrot's Beak) area in Northern Brazil where the land conflicts are most acute. The government, in 1985 created a plan for the modernization and disappropriation of all large farm holdings that were not in production. Even a weakened law that was eventually adopted was met with violence; some 22 rural workers were killed in 1985 alone. The violence is not limited to assassination. The delegation reviewed evidence of homes being burned, fields and crops being destroyed, death threats, torture, intimidation and

...Continued on Page 3

Fr. McCoy Speech

...Continued from page 2

defamation of character, and falsification of land titles and other documents.

The conflicts over land tenure arise from a history of massive inequality of opportunity. Within Brazil's total population of about 134 million (as of 1986), ten percent of the 5.2 million landowners owned 80% of the farmland. In other words, among the 5.2 million landowners, 5 million own only 20% of the land. All the while 60 million Brazilians (nearly half the population!) live in extreme poverty. In recent years more than 15 million landless people migrated to the large urban centers. And in the last 25 years more than 24 million people have migrated looking for land employment, stability and housing.

Invasion of land in recent years, was only of land kept by large landowners and corporations ; and who for reason of land speculation, have unjustly expelled rural workers from lands that these workers brought to fruition. The inter-church meeting in Goania was on agrarian reform, and understood in the context of the strong biblical image of the search for the Promised Land.

The bishops had prepared a document entitled: *Liberate The Land*. Our conclusions were:

A) Support the campaign by churches, unions and concerned politicians for a serious redistribution of land. B) Urge legislation which would impede the monopolization of land by corporations, speculators and large landowners. C) Oppose the international financing of efforts to merely "modernize" agricultural production without providing for land redistribution. We reflected on the words of Pope John Paul II on Recife (1980)... "It is not legitimate, because it is not in accord with God's plan, to manage this gift (land) in such a way that its profits benefit only a few people, while others, the vast majority finds itself condemned inevitably to a situation of want, poverty and marginalization". After our return from Brazi, Amnesty International has kept in touch with us regarding the ongoing conflict.

Last September, I was called to some ministry in Haiti, and was able to get some pictures of what those people have been and are going through because of land monopoly and foreign support of the dictators of the past. In these last years I have been

sent to Latin America many times on missions in support of causes for justice; and although the statistics show that some Latin American countries have advanced in the last years and that a certain development has come along, I can assure you that this has not happened to the great majority of the people. As in our own United States, the condition of the poor has deteriorated to an alarming degree.

I want to congratulate you for your continuing interest in such a cause as the betterment of our society. Your concentration on Land Reform is surely an approach that is basic to any lasting betterment of the condition of so many people. A question to be asked is: "Will it be possible to bring about the many ideals of the Georgists without a change in our way of living? Before the fall of communism in Eastern Europe it was said that the Third World countries were economically oppressed, deprived of civil liberties; and the capitalist countries of the West were culturally oppressed. The consumerist orientation of the economy made them all powerless and thus unable to overcome unemployment and create an economy that serves the whole of society.

To respond to the genuine needs of society, Liberation Theology must accept the fact that the market economy is the most efficient instrument for utilizing the natural resources and to bring about

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true prosperity; but the market must be governed by principles of justice, directed to meeting human needs, and oriented to the common good. Liberation theologians can no longer just fight the market system, but they can demand that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by

... Continued on Page 5

Fr. McCoy Speech *Continued...from page 3*

the state, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole society are satisfied.

This is a challenge also to those who propose the theory of Henry George. Can you help with authentic liberation? Are you willing to adopt a lifestyle that allows others to survive and change models of production and consumption as well as change structures of power which govern societies today? Among specific concerns is that of the international debts of the third world countries... debts that must be deferred or even canceled to support the fundamental right of people to subsistence and progress.

We have seen that the terrible disproportion between so-called *developed* countries and the *developing* countries is comparable to a great extent to the affluent and the poor in our own country. In these last years we have seen a terrible tragedy in our midst: 40,000 children born in the United States each year do not live to see their first birthday. 67 new born babies die each day in our land. Our infant mortality rate puts us last among 20 Western Industrialized Nations. We have the highest child poverty rate and the highest abortion rate in the Western World. The rate of teen-age suicide has tripled in the last thirty years. More teen-age boys die of gunshot wounds than from all natural causes combined.

Moreover, our foreign policy is increasingly children's policy. Global poverty, armed conflict and systematic injustice threaten the lives of children and their families. Children will pay a terrible price for indifference toward international economic policy and neglect of human rights.

The challenge faces us. Are we up to it? Can we present a coherent strategy, a thorough going land reform, a reordering of the country's economic priorities and democratization that empowers vast sectors of the population? This will confront fierce opposition, fiercely determined enemies abroad and at home. And yet there have gone before us some wonderful people who have given their lives in a peaceful, non-violent protest against the very evils we mention. Some days ago, I was reflecting how many people that I have known that have given their lives in a non-violent peaceful standing for the justice and peace we are speaking of. I recall some thirteen. Most famous would be Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. I was in San Salvador the

day he was killed and was about some tasks that he had asked for. When he was killed I was actually meeting with some five members of his social action committee. Some time later, I received word that four of those five had been captured, tortured and their bodies thrown on the side of the road. The day after the killing of the archbishop, as we planned for his funeral, I met a number of the people working for the church in San Salvador. Among them were three American women, two Religious Sisters and one Lay woman. Later they, together with a fourth religious, were captured by the military, tortured and killed. Two of our Franciscans were also killed for their work with the poor and needy in Central America. A Jesuit friend of mine, the rector of the University of Central America in San Salvador, was also killed by the military along with his Jesuit confreres, the housekeeper and her daughter.

*"If one such country could adopt
the Henry George plan..."*

When in Nicaragua on a fact-finding visit, I along with other members of the delegation were guests of a couple, Felipe and Mary Barreda - leaders in the basic Christian communities in Nicaragua, and genuine friends of the poor, though both were relatively wealthy. They had arranged for us a fine dinner and meeting with some of the leaders of the small communities. It was a genuine pleasure to visit with them and their children and friends. Shortly after they were captured by our U.S. backed Contras, held captive and tortured for four months and finally executed. I saw the diocesan paper with the picture of the youngsters receiving the coffins of their mother and father into the church for the funeral. In this instance as in the other, it comes home to us that the price of true justice and lasting peace is courage and hope. We ask ourselves, what of our involvement in all this?

You have been informed of the progress made in the meeting in Santa Domingo. If one such country could adopt the Henry George plan with the

...Continued on Page 6

...Continued from page 5

other necessary steps to insure justice , we might have a truly outstanding example to show the rest of the world. Much has to be done to convince the American public and through them our political leaders, that it is to the best interests that such an experiment be made. If our government does not allow such an experiment, the steps in Santo Domingo are doomed from the start.

You as convinced proponents of Henry George's principles have your work cut out for you. The challenge is to prudence, yes, but also to courage- to continue in the face of serious opposition. If this is an answer, it can make tremendous difference in the world situation. We reflect seriously on the words: "The Land is mine, says the Lord". ♦

Fr. Alan McCoy is a Franciscan priest, with a Doctorate in Canon Law from Catholic University- 1944. He has taught Canon Law & Moral Theology at Santa Barbara Theologate 1944-49. In addition to administrative & pastoral work Fr. McCoy has been President of the Canon Law Society of America 1966-67, President Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the U.S. 1976-82, Executive Director of Franciscan Conference 1982-89. For the past 15 years Fr. Alan McCoy has been on the road quite a bit with his work taking him to Africa, Asia, & especially Latin America. His work is specifically related to social justice & relief of those suffering from armed conflict.
