

Living out Hope from a Place of Exclusion: Service Rooted in Solidarity

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Introduction

The new century has begun with tasks for humanity to undertake: poverty and marginalization are growing by leaps and bounds, generating various expressions of violence. This situation confirms that the promises of the neoliberal economic model have not been fulfilled. It is urgent for us to develop a theology that allows the church to reflect on the challenges of, and the commitments to, these tasks. We must remember the words of Jürgen Moltmann: “The more accurately a church recognizes its social context, the more effectively it can become an instrument of God’s justice in [that] society.”¹

Seen from within Latin American reality, and in particular from Colombian reality, service implies working, being, living, and sometimes dying, for others. Service also means to listen, to weep, to be in solidarity with others, particularly excluded persons. Colombian society has been built on exclusion, and it is from there that an inclusive theology of service can throw light on the present moment. In this essay we will look at the implications of service from the perspective of the Biblical Jubilee. First we will look at the anti-jubilee social order that has reigned in our reality, and then the Biblical Jubilee as hope in the midst of despair. This process will lead us to the challenges of being “jubilarly” communities where the option for life and service are the present signs that justify the community task.

An Anti-Jubilarly Order

Colombia is experiencing one of the most critical and painful moments of its history. Although it has not always been a violent country, violence has indeed

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been present in its history. At an internal level the country has been in permanent endemic war – fourteen years of a war of independence against Spanish domination, eight general civil wars, fourteen local wars, two international wars, two coups d'état in the last and the present centuries, party confrontation, generalized uprisings, and the longest internal armed conflict on the continent.²

Violence in Colombia is a multicausal phenomenon with dynamics that coexist, overlap and feed one another, and that are supported by a “culture of violence” socialized in the family, educational institutions, the workplace, and the media.³ This social phenomenon makes itself evident in: (1) *political violence*, concretely an armed internal conflict in which insurgent groups and the State have confronted one another for forty years, and since the 1980s, a conflict to which the insurgency, the State and self-defense paramilitary groups have been parties; (2) *socioeconomic violence*, a product of economic imbalances which are reflected in conflicts that go beyond the political dimension and manifest themselves in a high level of crimes against life, personal safety, and property; (3) *sociocultural violence*, the result of the intolerance of those who regard people from marginalized sectors as the enemy, stigmatizing them because of their race, gender, or behavior, sectors that are executed by the misnamed “social cleansing” groups; (4) the *violence of drug trafficking* and the *violence for control of territories*, provoking the displacement of millions of people, the majority being women and children.

Economic Globalization

Enormous social inequalities are the predominant characteristic of the type of economic adjustment imposed in the last decade not only in Colombia but in all of Latin America. Contrary to the assurances of the defenders of economic globalization (that international competitiveness defines itself in the incorporation of new technologies) what has happened is the worsening of living conditions for the majority of the population and its exclusion from any possibility of life with dignity.

One example is that of privatization, presented as an indispensable complement of openness and globalization, but undertaken without State policies to defend the general interest and rights of citizens. Public services for social well-being have been gradually dismantled, using the argument that they were rife with inefficiency, inequality, and bureaucracy (in the case of the health

sector). These transformations are part of the elimination of social rights. Something similar is occurring with the privatization of higher education.

The Interests of the United States

The intervention of the government of the United States and of North American economic interests ranges from anti-communism to drugs. There is pressure for the strict fulfillment of commitments demanded by the International Monetary Fund, such as the privatization of state corporations, a hike in taxes, and the deterioration of workplace conditions. The U.S. has also reaffirmed its anti-drug strategy of eradicating illicit crops in our country, and wants to subordinate the peace process to this objective (under “Plan Colombia”). Plan Colombia is both controversial in the country and yet its scope and content are not fully known. It is fundamentally oriented to the fight against drug trafficking: \$1.3 billion U.S. have already been designated, of which 80 percent are for military support: radar, planes, helicopters, training, and financing of new battalions; 12 percent for “policies of human rights, judicial reform, and democratic systems,” and the remaining 8 percent to “alternative” development programs.⁴

Biblical Jubilee: Hope through Service

As a process against the anti-jubiliary (dis)order, a movement of hope, struggle, and popular utopia is being raised up today from the deepest part of the Christian tradition: the “Biblical Jubilee.” The Biblical Jubilee was born in Israel as a community effort to contain and correct social inequality and the tendencies toward discrimination and lack of solidarity. There are four redemptive efforts in the Biblical Jubilee that produce social equality and community reconstruction:

1. Redemption from debt and growing poverty (Deut. 15; Lev. 25; Matt. 6:12; Matt. 18:23-25)
2. Redemption of family ownership of the land (Lev. 25; Ruth)
3. Redemption of the sabbath rest of the whole creation (Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 23:10-13; Lev. 25:4,8,10)

4. Redemption from all slavery and all oppression (Deut. 15:12-15; Lev.25:39-42)

The redeeming action of the Jubilee functioned as a religious and social pressure from the familial and tribal networks that demanded its periodic application (every seven years for the sabbatical year and every fifty years for the jubilee).

Jesus of Nazareth adopts this popular tradition and proclaims a jubilee on a shabat (day of rest) as an action characteristic of his entire mission:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus rereads the prophetic memory of Isaiah as an emancipating announcement of life and hope for a today plagued with pains, debts, hunger, chains, and oppression. The reign of God is proclaimed and established as a jubilee: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:22). New networks of solidarity and equality weave together the jubiliary communities born under the fire of Pentecost: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Today, in this crucial hour for Colombia, the horns, drums, speakers, and megaphones call to a new Jubilee as a process in the face of the anti-jubiliary social order. We call everyone – believing women, and men who share this clamor and this hope to favor and strengthen a church movement from the south that announces good news to the poor, to the oppressed and the excluded of our country; that proclaims, in a way that privileges them, a time of grace and liberation. A Biblical Jubilee that promotes a sensibility and a practice of solidarity in the churches on behalf of those who are hungry, imprisoned, persecuted, discriminated against, unemployed, indebted, victims of disasters, and displaced. A Biblical Jubilee as the beginning of a theological,

spiritual, pastoral, and structural renewal based on solidarity, compassion, mercy, and social action. A militant Biblical Jubilee environmentally committed on behalf of and in defense of the entire creation. A Biblical Jubilee in favor of a moratorium on the external debt, and the renegotiation of property and agrarian debts, in favor of a “law of jubilee” that lightens the sentences of prisoners and proposes a penitentiary system in tune with ancestral cultural traditions. A Biblical Jubilee in favor of peace (shalom) as a new accord for social, cultural, and political coexistence built on the base of social justice, the redistribution of resources, agrarian reform, respect for human rights, demilitarization, military and political nonintervention on the part of the powerful countries, and the recognition of cultural, religious, generational, and sexual diversity.

Being Jubilary Communities

Faced with this panorama, the alternative is to be jubilary communities. In Colombia, being a jubilary community implies the following characteristics.

A community in solidarity

In some countries it is dangerous to be on the side of those who suffer, on the side of the victims and those discriminated against. In many places, demonstrating sensitivity to the excluded does not enjoy the approval of the majority of denominations that are concerned about ecclesial models which compete for loyalties. As it confronts the causes of injustice leading to different expressions of violence, the church must be ready to pay the price entailed in confronting privilege and established powers. The presence of a community that exercises solidarity with all those who suffer oppression then becomes necessary.

This community is one in which the pain of the other becomes the pain of all, and the space for fraternal accompaniment to those who suffer is real; one in which persons who suffer, affected existentially by the rupture of the social fabric and exclusion, find the necessary strength to continue life, and one in which weeping with those who weep becomes a distinctive practice.

A community that enlivens hope

Enlivening the hope of persons who suffer is a humble and modest task for a community of faith. It implies that with the means available at the present moment, one must continue life, believing and hoping for a better tomorrow. Hope is enlivened through mercy and compassion, being a Samaritan church; an affective and effective option for the victims; visible gestures for justice and human rights; the recovery of worship and of the power of celebration; and the recovery of the power of the word. From the Christian point of view, hope is a collective enterprise and a community task.

A healing community

In this context it is not enough to simply be a community where birth and confirmation of identity are affirmed; healing is also at issue – physical, moral, spiritual, and psychological. It is in the Christian community that sees the human person integrally where a person's possibilities for good will increase. For people affected by any expression of violence, "the reconstruction of the social order is an urgent process to undertake and this must begin with the verbalization of what has been silenced, of what is traumatic and terrifying. Only through the verbalization of the conflict does one achieve awareness of it" and in this way find new spaces and groups of belonging. The function of the healing community, therefore, is to facilitate the conscientization of persons who suffer violence through the social expression of fear, anguish, rage, and meaninglessness.

Since the faith community does not always have all the professional human resources available, it is necessary to nurture and strengthen support networks with other groups or faith communities, so that every community with its own particular emphasis or specificity may "serve one another like good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4: 10).

A community of "Sanctuaries of Peace"

In Colombia this characteristic implies being a people full of the Holy Spirit that welcomes human beings affected by the material and spiritual war waged around them. It receives and affirms them with the peace-making spirit of Jesus Christ. It is a step forward in the exercise of reconciliation with God,

oneself, and the neighbor.⁵ It is also a nonviolent proposal for the treatment of conflicts, where training in nonviolent conflict resolution, conflict prevention, and transformation is offered. Alternatives to obligatory military service are also offered there, as well as formation for a peaceful life and for reconciliation at many levels – daily, family, neighborhood, church, workplace, etc.

The community is a physical space or a territory of peace that is made known publicly and that demands respect and protection from all violation by force. It is a spiritual “house” – one’s own, hospitable, fraternal, and in solidarity with those it receives. It offers refuge and comfort to displaced persons, persecuted for their convictions or affected directly by violence or injustice. It is a house where violent and excluding practices are ended, one that includes women, men, boys, girls, peasant men, peasant women, and indigenous persons without regard to skin color or religious creed; a place of protection in the shelter of the faith community.

In Colombia, the Mennonite church understands service through the small efforts that emerge from the jubiliary communities. Recall institutions like the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, which offers a peace-oriented Biblical-theological education as a proposal in a culture of violence. *Justapaz* is a labor on behalf of reconciliation and justice, and *Mencoldes* is an effort focused on development, in addition to two rural schools whose education is rooted in peace, the La Paz Christian Home for seniors, the La Luz bookstore, and the El Recreo rural centre for gatherings and retreats.

Empires come and go, but jubiliary communities appear in all ages and societies. It is through them that the presence of the Spirit of God begins its movement. This movement is also carried out through the efforts of groups and entities uniting to change and transform the anti-jubiliary order. We recognize the effort of other groups, NGOs, churches, and spaces in which the Mennonite church also participates: the Ecumenical Network of Women for Peace, the Human Rights and Peace Commission of CEDECOL, the National Council for Peace, and the Civil Society of Paz.

Conclusion

The questions that motivated this participation were focused on the understanding of service that we from the south hold, and how we live it, as well as on how to help us to mutually understand and advance towards a more

inclusive theology of service. Our theology of service is carried out from a place of exclusion and it is from there, and through an anti-jubiliary social order, that we discover the key to being a jubiliary community that redeems faith and life in the midst of wrong and meaninglessness. We believe that in Latin America, and particularly in Colombia, God is calling us to serve in different ways, not through paternalism or social assistance but through the key of the Jubilee: forgiving and being forgiven of debts, recovery of land, rest for the whole creation, redemption of the home, liberty for the prisoners, comfort for all those who mourn, healing for the broken-hearted, shelter for the indigent, liberty for the oppressed, having daily bread, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, and announcing good news to the poor.

We hope that from here you will accompany us in the building of an inclusive theology of service, that your involvement and participation in accompanying and relating in different ways with the churches of the south may be a constant challenge. Wherever the church accepts this challenge, a Jubilee draws near and the Reign of God approaches. Serving the Lord is serving the poor of the third world: “. . . as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

Notes

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *La justicia crea futuro*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1989, 18.

² Sánchez G. Gonzalo, “Los estudios sobre la violencia. Balance y perspectivas.” *Pasado y presente de la violencia en Colombia*. Bogotá: Fondo Editorial Cerec, 1995, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 17, 22-26.

⁴ Luis A. Matta Aldana, “El Plan Colombia: Desafío neoliberal contra América Latina.” Foro Alternativo contra la globalización y el neoliberalismo, 2001.

⁵ “Santuarios de paz: una visión de mensaje y acción para el pueblo de Dios.” Bogotá: *Justapaz*, 1999.