

### CONCRETE PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

As we noted at the start, theology is a *logos* dealing with God's revelation in history. And since there is only one theology in the final analysis, this *logos* about God is also pastoral in nature from the very start. Everything I have said so far is also pastoral in one way or another, because speculative theology cannot really be separated from praxis. Theology must interpret God's revelation in day-to-day history. When it is separated from that history and turned into a distinct theoretical discipline, as happened in the past history of the Church, theology will inevitably become decadent.

Right now, however, I should like to deal with a few specific features that must be taken into account in our pastoral praxis. Pastoral activity cannot be guided by recipes. Instead it must approach the ever-changing face of reality with certain basic attitudes and realizations.

### CRITICAL QUESTIONING AND OPENNESS TO THE UNEXPECTED

Whether we advert to the fact or not, we usually approach life and reality with certain attitudes that are almost second nature to us. The traditional virtues and vices are really another way of describing certain attitudes towards

people, things, and life in general. The person who possesses the virtue of justice, for example, is someone who loves the Other *qua* Other; who does not use the Other as a tool of his own self-interest but rather gives the Other what is due to him.

It is important for us to have a proper and truly pastoral attitude. In today's world this means that we must be open to the novel aspects of reality and be prepared to work out novel solutions for new problems that arise unexpectedly. There is no ready-made solution which can be applied unthinkingly to any given problem. We cannot simply ape the past, because we are in a period of profound and thoroughgoing change. We must keep our eyes and ears open to catch the novel accents of present-day reality. We must be prepared to look at reality respectfully and attentively if we truly want to render creative, responsible service. In a real sense, we must be prepared to create new solutions out of nothing. I say "out of nothing" because real liberty refuses to be fettered to anything. It is prepared to create new things. There is a whole "anthropology of creation" that is yet to be explored.

First of all, we must realize that we are influenced and conditioned to some extent by the totality of the world in which we live. Many judgments and pre-judgments weigh down upon us. We are part of some group, we are not the whole of humanity. We are members of a certain class, part of the Church; there are others besides us. We see things from a certain specific perspective. If we do not realize and accept this fact, we will never accept and appreciate our own finiteness.

Accepting my own finiteness also entails accepting the fact that the "Other" sees something different from what I see; or sees the same thing in a different light. Hence I must be willing to listen to what the other person says to me. I must realize that I am not God, that I am conditioned by

certain things, whereas God is not. And these conditioning factors estrange and alienate me from other people to some extent.

Suppose I am talking to someone from the working class. My academic background and university training will weigh down upon me to some extent. I will use certain words and certain lines of thought that may not be familiar to that person, whereas his or her viewpoint may seem a bit odd to me. I may be inclined to look down on that person as an illiterate. But the simple fact is that our real-life experiences are different, hence we may not be able to get to the vital core of each other's thoughts and feelings. Anxious as we may be for dialogue with each other, we may end up talking to each other like two deaf mutes. To break the bondage of oppression and domination, we must learn to listen to each other. We must be open to the Other outside us.

## CULTURAL CONDITIONING

Our educational and cultural training may impede communication with other people. To truly realize this fact is to discover that we are not God. It is easier said than done. I live in this particular world, the Other lives in that particular world. Both are real, and we must bridge the gap between them if we wish to dialogue with each other. Otherwise he will not understand what I am saying, and I will not comprehend what he is saying.

Not only is it difficult to proclaim the truth. It is difficult even to point out the way to truth. I may say something which is rich in symbolic meaning to me, because of my education and experience. To another person it may be relatively meaningless. "Behold, the Lamb of God!" To me this may unfold rich layers of meaning. To another person it may be a pointless remark. The road to pastoral ineffec-

tiveness, like the road to hell, is paved with good intentions. It is not enough to say something. We must say something that is meaningful to other people.

To find out what is meaningful for another person I first of all must realize that my own world is not the whole world, that the other person has a world too. I must be willing to enter into that other world and to listen to that person from there. I must get over the notion that the other person has nothing to say. He has much to say, but his words and his world are different from mine. If I truly listen to his words and live in his world, then I may be able to say something meaningful to him.

## ECONOMIC CONDITIONING

Economic factors also condition us. I may think nothing of eating meat today, whereas a slice of meat might be a real feast for someone else. Some people still do not realize that there is real hunger in Argentina, that people are suffering from malnutrition and an inadequate diet. Our economic situation is part of our social status, and it makes us part of a class. The notion of class was not new with Marx. It goes back to Aristotle and it is evident in the Bible also. People on different social levels live differently, work differently, and possess different cultures to a greater or lesser extent.

Saving money, for example, is a virtue for the middle class. People of this class want to "be in the money." In the eyes of someone like Francis of Assisi, however, saving money would not be virtuous at all. He wanted to be holy, and grace, not saving money, was the means to that end. One man's virtue is another man's vice.

This whole matter of membership in a certain class is a very serious one. I cannot help but think of the plight of many priests and religious in Latin America at the present time. They came from a working-class background, and it,

was there that their Christian vocation developed. Then they went through a period of training and formation in the seminary or the religious order, finding themselves ushered into a new social and economic milieu in the process. Some of them also went to Europe for further studies. When they returned to work among the laboring class, they found that they no longer spoke the same language or lived in the same mental framework. Today they are unable to relate to their own original background and milieu. How much better it might have been if they had not been torn away from their native milieu in the process of "forming" them.

## POLITICAL CONDITIONING

We must also consider the conditioning influence of political factors, for it is an important one. To be part of a social class is to enjoy the fruits of its culture and the benefits of its power. Let me give a little example of that fact. When a clergyman has to go down to a municipal office for some reason, he is often invited to leave the long line of people waiting for service and to come right to the front. He readily avails himself of the offer, pretending that it is a mark of respect for the Church or God's minister. In reality he is enjoying the privileges of a class that has social power. Such power, insofar as it exerts domination over others, is sin. Clergymen make full use of the political power shared by their class when they jump ahead in line or use their muscle in administrative dealings.

We often fail to realize that we are engaging in politics. We pretend we are not, and criticize those who do so openly. But only those who profess their politicking have truly realized the influence of political conditioning on the lives of all of us. If we do not consciously advert to our political conditioning, our actions will be determined by it

in a less than human way. We will be the unwitting spokesmen of the politics of the *status quo*, whereas the professedly political activity of others may actually be evangelical.

#### RELIGIOUS CONDITIONING: FOLK CATHOLICISM

We are also subject to religious conditioning, and here the whole matter of folk religiosity is very pertinent. For example, we may have grown up in an atmosphere of folk religiosity, then moved away from it, and now find it impossible to make any valid judgment about it.

The whole matter of folk Catholicism, the Catholicism of the people at large, is an important issue for pastoral praxis. We have gone through several stages of thinking on the whole matter, and they are worth reviewing here. Up to the 1940s and 1950s, the prevailing pastoral outlook in Latin America was one of proud optimism. Notice was taken of the fact that more than ninety percent of our people were baptized in the Church. The people of Latin America were Catholics, our countries were Catholic countries. Such was the boast.

The situation changed when some of our theologians read what Europeans were saying about the missionary status of their own countries. France is a mission territory, said Henri Godin, in his startling book, *France, Pays de Mission*. Then Alberto Hurtado, S.J., questioned how Catholic Chile really was (*¿Es Chile un país católico?*, Santiago, 1941). Theologians began to wonder whether there was any real Christian faith in Latin America. Our people, it seemed, were imbued with superstitious beliefs and practices; magic and miracle seemed to be their major interest. A new hypothesis was fashioned: only a small group of Latin Americans were conscious Catholics nurturing real faith. The rest of the people evinced a vague re-

ligiosity compounded of superstition and fragmentary ideas.

Then we moved to a third stage of thinking about the whole matter. Our theologians suddenly realized that we did not have any solid criteria for judging how real or how solid was the faith of simple people. How were we to find out? In the previous stage, sociological surveys had been in vogue. People went around with their questionnaires and asked questions: Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the Trinity? Do you believe in the soul? Are you an atheist? In many instances the respondents may not have understood the questions or even heard such language before. The fact is that the questionnaires were framed in the context of a culture that itself was alienated from the people of Latin America. Thus their responses were misleading to a large extent, because they answered from within the context of their own *different* world. Fortunately, we have lost some of our passion for questionnaires.

If I want to know what average people think, I must de-culturate myself insofar as I am able. I must try to get into their world, so that I can dialogue with them in meaningful terms. I must enter a new novitiate, as it were, so that I can operate with hermeneutic and interpretative criteria that are more real and anthropological. We are just now beginning to do that. We are coming to realize that faith is not necessarily a matter of educated self-awareness. Consider the faith of the martyrs and the great saints, for example. It may not always have been articulate and learned in its expression, but it was deeply and truly lived in practice.

So now we are beginning to give more respectful consideration to the faith of our people. We have dropped the air of triumphalism, to be sure, but we also feel that an undercurrent of real religiosity may underlie seemingly questionable practices. We are beginning to detect in people's lives a

real openness to the Infinite and a real sense of individual finiteness. If educated Catholics really want to understand the feelings of the people, they must be willing to admit that their training may have alienated them from their own people to some extent.

In another work of mine, I explored the songs and popular music of the Argentinian people as indications of folk Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> We often tend to think that people are mute, that they do not know how to express what they are. The fact is that they do express their beliefs, but in many different channels which we are not accustomed to taking seriously. We send out our alienated questionnaires, note the lack of response, and come to the conclusion that the respondents have no real religious beliefs. But they express a great deal of their view of life in popular songs, the tango, folk music, and folk wisdom. We must break out of the cultural mold in which we are enclosed by education and training. We must learn to listen so that we can truly dialogue with people in their world.

#### LIBERATION AND "TRANQUILLITY OF ORDER"

We have been taught that peace is the "tranquillity of order." It is a classic definition, and it has geared us towards a respect for order. But, as Dom Helder Camara notes, "tranquillity of order" in a pond is complete stagnation. The waters must be stirred up and fed afresh with clear rainwater in order to be of any real use.

We must realize that it is not enough to feel at home in our world. Everything may seem fine to us, but in fact our cultural world may be peaceful because it is quite dead. There may be nothing left to do but bury the corpses. The only thing we can really do as Christians is open up to the Other; a fresh way of Christian living will appear to us in the very process of liberation. This opening to the Other is an essential outlook and attitude. We must take our place with



the Other, pay heed to what is happening day by day, and thus participate in the process of liberation.

The process of liberation itself is the only means whereby we can discover in the concrete what factors are alienating us on different levels. Hence we must involve ourselves in that process. But it is easier said than done. Father J.Y. Jolif, a French Dominican, is a great philosopher. He noted once that the death of the philosopher is indifference, and that only when he is truly dead, as Socrates was, is he a great philosopher. Well, Christians are dead when they no longer disturb anyone, when their prophetic voice is stilled. Christians are truly Christian when their prophetic voice is heard; and it can be heard only when they maintain the risky attitude of criticizing any established totality.

We must opt for liberation in the concrete, shouldering the risks entailed. Each individual can discern for himself where his own option lies, if he remains open to the process itself. To avoid the option is to betray our Christian commitment.

#### BASIC FEATURES OF A CHRISTIAN OPTION

First of all, in my opinion, these concrete options must be made within *the framework of a grass-roots community* which is sincerely and authentically alive. Some sort of basic community, it seems to me, is an absolute necessity. Lay people probably ought to create communities of married couples on the grass-roots level, not to form little cliques for themselves but to serve each other and people around them. Priests and religious probably should form grass-roots communities of their own, suited to their particular nature but grass-roots communities nevertheless. An authentic life style will suggest many revisions in existing rules and regulations, for these rules and regulations often are imprisoning rather than ordering principles.

It is concrete life within such a grass-roots community

that will truly engraft us into the life of the Church. I would say that we cannot really be part of the living Church nowadays without being a member of such a community. If we are not, we are merely impersonal individuals living in a neutral, mechanical community and attending impersonal Church functions.

We will have to learn how to live and act in the context of such basic communities. A period of initiation and apprenticeship will certainly be necessary because our heads are filled with all sorts of ready-made formulas. We must learn how to divest ourselves of such formulas so that we can approach real everyday life with simplicity and openness.

Second, these basic communities and their members must discover *the critical function of faith*. The task of faith in real-life history is to fight against pantheism; to fight against projects which seek to be absolutized and against people who seek to turn themselves into gods: to fight against sin-man's oppression of his fellowman. This criticism is performed chiefly with deeds, not with words. Jesus went out and mingled with publicans and sinners, and he thereby drew criticism from those who believed in their own righteousness. The critical function of faith is exercised in deeds and action even more than in words, and it calls the established order into question at every turn.

If a person commits himself to this critical function, he will soon discover the meaning and import of the Gospel message. Jesus did not die on the cross because he was a masochist or because he was seeking ascetic purification. He died on the cross because the logic of sinful structures, of the totality, required his death. Jesus criticized the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and others, and so he represented a danger to the leaders of Israel and to the Roman empire. Latin America desperately needs this critical function today. If the Church does not exercise this function, it is dead.

Third, we must commit ourselves to *concrete action on*

*behalf of liberation.* There are things to be done. We may have to write an article, or give a speech, or participate in some demonstration. The police may be waiting for us. That is the concrete risk we face, but we must be willing to dirty our hands in the struggle to liberate the oppressed.

Fourth, we must be *cognimnt of the inescapably political function of our faith.* Let me cite Socrates as an example here. Socrates was a philosopher, pure and simple. One day he realized that the Assembly was wrongly condemning six admirals who had indeed lost a battle but who had also conducted themselves honorably. So Socrates spoke out against this injustice because he saw the Other as such. Socrates exercised a critical function within Athenian society and found himself at odds with those who ruled the city. They were forced to condemn him to death, and he accepted the legal penalty because he respected the laws of Athens. He took the cup of hemlock. Socrates was killed for much the same reason that Jesus was killed. Socrates could not see the real sense of his death, Jesus could. For faith casts a critical light on the whole human realm. Christian faith is seen as an enemy by the economic tyrant, the political tyrant, the religious tyrant, and the cultural tyrant.

Power used for domination is the very power of Satan and sin. It is the institutionalization of original sin. The prophet must speak out against such power when he proclaims the Gospel message. The Christian faith has a political function even though the Christian may not seem to engage in politics directly.

NO RECIPES  
OR PREFABRICATED FORMULAS

Pastoral activity in Latin America cannot rely on recipes or prefabricated formulas. We must work out feasible solutions as we go along. This means that we must learn how to interpret real everyday life. Theology, then, has an important role to play. Once upon a time our priests went to

Europe to get doctorates in Canon Law; it was the sure road to the episcopacy. More recently the emphasis has been on the social sciences: sociology, economics, political science. Today we are rediscovering the importance of theology for critical consciousness-raising. Faced with ever new situations, we must learn how to discern and apply the interpretative criteria imbedded in our faith.

The process of evolution has moved gropingly towards higher forms of life over millenia. Even those groping attempts which ended in failure had their role to play in the overall process. The same applies to our situation today. We must try all sorts of things, respecting plurality as we go along. Unity is important of course, but we must not equate unity with stultifying uniformity. Tradition is a living, innovative, creative process. Each person must be allowed to use his background and talents in our quest for solutions.

The proper attitude for today is well exemplified by Mendez Arceo, the Bishop of Cuernavaca (Mexico). His field of study is history, and he wrote his dissertation on the bishops of Latin America. He has told me personally that he has found history to be of much use to him. It has taught him to open his eyes to various possibilities, and to allow for their tentative implementation. If someone proposes a certain project to him, he allows him to go ahead with it even though it may seem to be very much at odds with past practice. For example, he has allowed priests to get their degree in psychoanalysis when it seemed that this would be useful to the community in which they live and work.

We must not forget the case of Galileo Galilei. In 1616 he was informed of this condemnation by the Holy Office: "That the earth moves is philosophically absurd and theologically heretical." This condemnation was obeyed in Rome for more than a century and a half, and it was taught that the earth did not move. The pages of history tell us that such sinfulness has been possible for the Church more than once.

In seventeenth-century Paris, a priest of the Oratory

named Richard Simon wrote a critique of the Old Testament in which he made many scholarly observations.<sup>2</sup> He said that God could not have spoken Hebrew because Hebrew was subsequent to Abraham; that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because it narrated his death; that certain books of the Bible were not historical, and that there were many different literary genre in the Bible. Bossuet saw to it that all Simon's works were burned in the public square, and the Holy Office put his works on the Index of forbidden books. Bossuet continued to believe that God had created the world 400 I years earlier, even though Simon pointed out that this would make the Egyptian pyramids older than creation.

My point here is that we must take cognizance of our past history. We must be willing to suffer persecution within the Church itself insofar as unity is confused with uniformity and a failure to make the proper distinctions. Bellarmine and Bossuet equated Christianity with Christendom, and thus they were led to condemn men like Galileo and Simon. We cannot rely on ready-made formulas, and so we must ask God for more faith. Our faith must have a real prophetic element in it if we are to lead ordinary Christian lives, for ordinary Christians are obliged to engage in liberative criticism.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude this discussion, I should like to allude to a Gospel text: "When these things begin to happen, stand erect and hold your heads high, your deliverance is near at hand" (Luke 21 :28). The words "stand erect" here are associated with the Hebrew words *talita kumi*, which Jesus used when raising the daughter of Jairus to life again. Thus to "stand erect" is to come back to life again, and that is what we must do today. Weighed down by suffering, oppression, and pessimism, we must come back to life as Christians. Jesus tells us that our deliverance is at hand. It is, in two

senses. Our life is short, and our deliverance from suffering is not far away, especially if we are truly committed to liberation. But it is near at hand in another sense also. The person who commits himself to work for the coming stage of history here and now is also working for the kingdom of God which has already begun here. We cannot fashion the kingdom of God out of thin air. We must fashion it through concrete historical projects. No specific project in history will completely flesh out the kingdom, but that does not mean we can sit back and do nothing. Some people turn a specific project into an absolute, idolizing their own scheme. The communists do that with communism, for example. But others avoid all commitment and wait for the arrival of an ethereal divine kingdom. That, too, is a mistake. We must commit our lives to concrete work in history. We must feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. We must work with dedication and enthusiasm, even though we realize that every specific project is relative, for that is the only way to make the kingdom of God manifest.

The mission of the Christian is not performed solely by building churches. It is carried out by participating in real-life history in its many different aspects. The kingdom of God is fashioned through these projects. If they are not carried out, the kingdom will never come. We must get rid of many of the false antinomies that still weigh down upon us.

When Jesus cured the paralyzed and the sick, he told them that their faith had saved them. We, too, must have faith if we are to be saved. We must "stand erect" and "hold our heads high" because our deliverance is at hand.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>.See *El catolicismo popular en Argentina*, no.5, Historia (Buenos Aires: Bonum, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>.See my article on this topic in *Concilium*, no.47 (1969).