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**The People of El Salvador:
the Communal Sufferings of Job**
(A theological reflection based on documentary
evidence)

To Silvia Maribel Arriola,
a nun murdered in the parish of Zacamil in January 1981
We shall never forget what you did last year
When in San Roque we heard you speak
Vowing your life's service loud and clear
To the needs of the poor and the weak.
You shed your fresh and sparkling blood
For the hungry and downtrodden,
And now a thousand roses bloom
On your tender broken body.

E. D. Popular verses in memory of Silvia (Managua, 1983)

TO TRY to apply the message of the Book of Job, whether analogously or allegorically, to a whole people, can well appear a risky, if not an impossible undertaking. But remember the biblical figure or hermeneutical concept of the 'incorporating personality', used of the person of Israel, for example: a historical individual whose name is applied by analogy to the Hebrew people, to the 'remnant' of Israel, to Jesus, to the early Christian community (the 'new Israel'), to the Church itself as a whole. In this sense, Job can equally be a person or a people. There can be a collective Job, a Job-community. A suffering, persecuted, crucified Job-people.

I should make clear at the outset that I am writing of El Salvador in March 1983 and it is quite possible that in the near future the 'suffering people' will become the 'victorious people' and no longer be a suffering Job but a Moses setting out on the way through the desert, happy and full of hope, but no less responsible for its destiny; tempted, hungry, sometimes afflicted (like 'Nicaragua-in-the-desert' now-March 1983). Each people becomes different figures over the course of a few months or a few years when history

makes certain nations the agents of great social changes, as is happening today in Central America. Theology must learn to listen to events close to ...or it will come too late. ..or too early. ...

Next, I should say that I am using an interpretation of the Book of Job slightly different from the usual one.¹ It is agreed that it falls into three parts: Introduction-chs. 1-2; disputes with the comforters'-chs. 3-42:6; Epilogue-42:7-17. But I think I dissent from tradition by taking the second part (including the words of the 'cosmological' God: 38:1-41) as part of an act in which the God of Israel, the God of the poor, *absents himself*, ceases to show his face (*pnei* in Hebrew: Job 1:12 and 2:7), in order to allow Satan (*shatan* in Hebrew) to dominate the situation, the system, the overall drift of events. The comforters (Eliphaz, Bildad, Sophar and finally Elihu) would then be the *theologians of domination* who try to convince the suffering Job that he is guilty, that he is suffering because he has sinned, *thereby hiding the 'evil' that the system produces in the poor*. The system of domination, Satan and his associates, would have dominated, the poor, feel guilty of their sufferings: all their arguments conspire to form a *theology of resignation*. Neither Job nor the people of El Salvador admit their arguments.²

1. LIKE JOB, THE PEOPLE OF EL SALVADOR KNOW THEIR SUFFERING³

Satan smote Job' (2:7), that is El Salvador, in recent times, first in 1932, when the army--already supported by North American businesses--murdered more than 30,000 peasants, including Sandina's comrade Farabundo Martí and the martyrs--among thousands--José Feliciano Ama and Chico Sánchez. This is only the affliction of recent times, because in fact the people of El Salvador has, since the particularly bloody Spanish conquest of the early sixteenth century, been continually oppressed, violated in all its rights.

But when Satan smote Job-El Salvador' for the second time in recent years, the violence was far more gruesome, and has till now accounted for the lives of 50,000 of the poor. Let us take two of them as examples:

Ana Coralia Martínez, 21. María Ercilia Martínez, 28. The district of Salinas. These two young women were dragged out their house at 2 a.m. by eight armed men (including Atilio Matute and J. Pacheco, both members of ORDEN, the others being members of the National Guard, all dressed in civilian clothes). They were next seen dead, with marks of cruel torture, raped, with bullet wounds. They were found on the banks of the El Angel canal, from where the National Guard of Apopa collected the bodies and took them to the morgue of the General Cemetery in the same town. These two girls were auxiliary Red Cross workers in Aguilares, and Ana Coralia was also Coordinator of Rutilio Grande's parish committee.⁴

Such documents are proof of the situation of the people in El Salvador, of their suffering, their martyrdom. All this has been going on for two decades, but the pace is now accelerating. The political organisation of the vanguard (the Popular Forces of Liberation-FPL, and the People's Revolutionary Army-ERP) began in the 1960s, and many Christians joined these forces from their beginnings. In fact, and this must always be borne in mind, these revolutionary forces would never have been popular, rooted in the history of the people, without the conscious and organic presence of the Christian participants. In 1980 the Coordinator of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) told me in Mexico that 'since the killings of '32, without the presence and organisation of Christians, with their peasant Base Communities, their Delegates of the

Word, the uprising would have been impossible. They were the first to organise the people'.

In the 1960s came the formation of Catholic Action and the organisation of a 'Christian democrat framework' with its 'Courses of social capacitation' (such as FUNPROCCOP, started by Mgr Chávez). This process was renewed with the coming of the Vatican Council. In 1967 CESPROP (the Centre for Social Studies and Popular Advancement) was founded, and in 1968 the bishops took part in the Medellín Conference. The experimentation with Base Communities went on growing, leading to the First National Pastoral Week, which was criticised by the bishops. This led the organiser of the Week, Fr Rutilio Grande (born in 1928, martyred in 1977) to declare: 'By criticizing the theology of liberation, the basis of the Pastoral Week, the Episcopal Conference has forgotten what Medellín said about it.'⁵ A bulletin entitled *Justice and Peace: Study Notes* began to circulate among the country people, and did much to raise consciousness. In 1971 Fr Nicolas Rodríguez became the movement's first martyr.⁶ This led the bishops to declare: 'In the face of the wave of violence and crime we appeal to the conscience of the Armed Forces and the Security Forces, and insist that they restrict their activities to the service which is their purpose and to no other.'⁷ As the people grew in consciousness and organisation, so the repression grew, leading to the time of the second 'coming' of Satan, who has 'smitten' the people for the past seven years in the most appalling fashion: ,

Since 1974 such names as San Francisco Chinamequita, La Cayetana, Tres Calles, Santa Barbara, San Salvador Plaza Libertad, have acquired a tragic renown in the country .In all these places, in the name of prevention or repression, the lives of many of the people of El Salvador have been cut down by the State Security forces.⁸

The repression went on growing, culminating in the killing of 30 July 1975, when the security forces opened fire on a crowd of peaceful demonstrators. When Fr Mario Bernal was expelled, Rutilio Grande declared in a famous homily: 'I very much fear, my beloved brothers and sisters, that very soon the Bible, the Gospel, will no longer be able to cross our frontiers ...because every page in it will be considered subversive.'⁹

On 22 February 1977 Mgr Oscar Arnulfo Romero was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador. On 27 February, Fr Alfonso Navarro celebrated a mass to deplore the electoral fraud, at which he said: 'If anything happens to me for telling the truth, you know who will be guilty.'¹⁰ Three months later he was murdered. On 12 March Rutilio Grande was killed. His parish of Aguilares had been a training centre for hundreds of Community leaders-who were to be killed in their turn, one by one, over the coming years:

Aguilares is singing the precious song of liberation. We are the witnesses to this sorrow, to this separation. I feel it very close to my heart because as a Pastor I feel the sorrowing confidence of those who through the Church seek to meet those whom repression has scattered.

Mgr Romero, Homily at the Funeral Mass for Rutilio Grande.¹¹
And the scale of killing went on increasing: till now 50,000 poor, country people are dead: a real historical and community Job. On 29 September 1978 Mgr Romero declared: 'The Catholic Church of El Salvador is being forced back to the time of the catacombs.' On 26 November Fr Ernesto Barrera was murdered. Then came Puebla, from which Mgr Romero sought support in a letter, trying at least to postpone his death-which he clearly saw would come at any moment. On 24 March 1980 he was martyred.

I should like to pay special tribute to Sr Silvia Maribel Arriola, who as a nun joined the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). She was working with the army medical team on the Western 'Feliciano Ama' Front, in the Zacamil district of the Department of Santa Ana in January 1981 when their camp was bombed by the army. She is a heroine of Latin American liberation, a nun, a woman, a consecrated person, a guerrilla fighter, part of the sufferings of the historical Job of Latin America:

We are victims of the most cruel tortures, beaten and maltreated in every imaginable way: we have electric shocks applied to the tenderest parts of our bodies-genitals, soles of our feet, head, tongue, eyes, ears. ...We are suffocated by the 'hood'. ...We have acids applied to our tissues, which eat away our flesh and cause terrible pain. We are hung in the air in various ways for long periods of time while being hit and beaten on different parts of the body. And we women, besides undergoing these tortures, are sexually humiliated in every possible way, having to put up with the worst violations by our captors who prey on our defenceless bodies like possessed beasts.¹²

Written by one of the 'disappeared' in a prison run by the Army supported by the United States.

And the same document goes on: 'Jesus Christ was cowardly tortured and put to death for the sole crime of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God to the poor'; and: 'Only faith and a deep conviction that the oppressed will triumph enable us to stand up to the trials with which we are faced.' Community Job, suffering Job, Job in history!

2. LIKE JOB, THE PEOPLE OF EL SALVADOR KNOW THEY ARE INNOCENT¹³

The suffering people know they are innocent; at least they know they are not suffering because of any sin they may have committed, consciously or unconsciously. who prey on our defenceless bodies like possessed beasts. So do the oppressors discharge their fury, so do they pretend that we should *pay for crimes that we have never committed*.¹⁴ One has to realise that the crimes of which they are accused, the sin of Job's 'comforters', is simply not conforming to the system that oppresses them. The mere fact of saying 'I am hungry!' is sufficient reason to be accused of sin, of subversion, of being guerrillas, communists or whatever. When Ronald Reagan justifies the sending of 110 million dollars to help the army in El Salvador before the US Congress, he explains to a journalist who asks him: 'How bad is the military situation?': 'It is not good, but Salvadoran soldiers have proved that when they are well trained, led and supplied, they can protect the people from guerrilla attacks.'¹⁵ And referring to the military of Central America, the President of the most powerful nation in the world today said: 'We worshipped the same God. ...'¹⁶

One can now understand what Michael Novak, Catholic theologian at the 'Institute for Democracy and Religion' (IDR) and the 'American Enterprise Institute' meant when he said about El Salvador: 'Events in Iran and Nicaragua have begun to show public policy analysts that they omit religion-specifically, the ideas of theologians-from their calculations at their peril.'¹⁷ That is, the present-day capitalist system of the 'centre' justifies its actions in the name of God (Reagan and the Central American military 'worship the same God'). The question of religion then becomes essential, as Novak says, because it is the level on which the acts of violence perpetrated by the military in order to save capitalism in El Salvador are ultimately justified. The 'aid' in arms used to kill the people, to 'smite' Job-are justified on the grounds that the military are defending the people from the guerrillas (when the facts are the opposite, that the people with the help of the guerrillas are defending themselves from the attacks of the military supported by the United States). So the 'comforters', the *theologians of*

domination (formerly theologians of resignation who convinced the people of their sin and exhorted them to patience and hope of a happy life *after death*, whereas now they justify theologically the very use of repressive violence: an explicit theology of domination) have the task of 'convincing', of creating a 'consensus' in favour of the violent means to be adopted in order to paralyse the people through terror. This terror-which does not stop at the most horrible tortures but even beheads the bodies of those it has murdered or 'explodes' them with bombs placed in their guts so as to frighten off the others, leaving the bodies in lanes, on city and town streets, or even in their own houses-which has adopted political forms, seeks to 'immobilise' the people-Job. But the people do not accept any supposed blame. They know who the guilty ones are: Satan:

Formerly the Church used to put about the idea that the world was evil because we were evil: brutal, womanisers, idiots, and the solution was always in confession and repentance. Now we here are beginning to understand that God's plan was for us to be masters of the world and of our history and, as the prophet Hosea said, for that which is not-yet-a-people to become a people and the people of God. If this is to happen, the Christian community has to be the witness and leaven of the new people. Gone is the time for letting ourselves be deceived by Parties that have nothing to do with US.¹⁸

Thus one document. And another:

Here in El Salvador there are hundreds of political prisoners who are being held for having done no more than be faithful to the example of Jesus Christ. We are deprived of our liberty because we follow the teachings of our Martyr Archbishop Mgr Romero, who once said: 'If we Christians feel ourselves to be followers of Jesus we will understand that solidarity with the people to the end is a matter of being true to our faith.'¹⁹

There is never a hint of a consciousness of any sin of the people behind the persecution, torture and suffering. Never. The sinners are the military, the ruling classes, the United States; they are the active subject of sin. The suffering of the people is an objective effect of sin. The innocent suffer the consequences of the practice of domination. Faith alone 'keeps alive the flame of hope', another document says, 'and feeds it so that our spirit can stand this martyrdom'²⁰. The suffering people, Job, is convinced of the essence of revelation: 'God never does wrong (*yarshyah*), do not doubt that!' (Job 34:12). 'Wrong' is the product of domination, and the dominated who suffer its effects know they are innocent; they know that the dominators make them suffer (and it is in this 'making suffer' that sin consists), and that the dominator is Satan. The people of El Salvador know this final truth; Job did not, though the author of the Book of Job did, and this is the only reason why he wrote the book.

The death of martyrs-such as Rutilio Grande or Oscar Romero-shows up (like the practice of the Cross of Christ) the evil of the system: it reveals the sin of the system. But the only way for this sin to be seen *as sin* is for the just who suffer to declare themselves innocent of their own sufferings. The theology that shows the suffering of the just as the effective object of the sin of injustice committed by the sinner because he dominates, is a theology of liberation. The theology that justifies the use of violence-even in the name of 'God' (in reality the Fetish, the Idol) or of Western Christian civilisation (or in the name of its 'enduring' values) or tries to convince the suffering people that they have sinned, is a theology of domination. This is why the theology of liberation is proving so unpopular *politically* (even though it is intrinsically *religious*) in El Salvador. It de-legitimises oppression and the sufferings of Job and deprives *Satan's collaborators* of their 'good conscience'.

3. BEYOND JOB: FUTURE MEMORIES

But the people of El Salvador, going beyond Job, have before their eyes (remembering these events they immerse themselves in the future of the whole country liberated in a short while when victory is won) the reality of the project that is *now being brought about*. It is as though in the midst of his sufferings Job could at one and the same time enjoy the happiness of having his riches and his family restored to him, and his health. Let a nun, Sister Rosa, be the last witness:

'Since the sixties, the Church in El Salvador has discovered a deep dynamism. ... There has been a rich experience of conversion of religious communities under the inspiration of Mgr Chávez. They have gone out into the desert to learn from the people, away from their Catholic schools. ... Several have been expelled, three North American sisters have been murdered, after being raped. Sr Silvia Arriola was murdered; I think she must be the first warrior nun of the Latin American martyrology, like Joan of Arc. ...'

'Sister' asked a journalist, 'what responsibilities do you have here, in a liberated zone of the Front?'

'Well, I teach, and I try to organise seven centres plus the same number of camps which belong to the zone in which we are operating.'

'Do you call yourself a fighting nun?'

'In the sense that all of us are at war and have a place in the fighting forces, yes. Any struggle against injustice is war. The very act of teaching people who are denied this right to knowledge is a struggle against unjust illiteracy.'

'Why did you abandon your habit to join the guerillas?'

'First let me say that I have in no way abandoned my habit. I consider myself fully acting as a nun, more so than ever before in my life.'

'Did you tell your superior what you proposed to do? What did she say?'

'She knew that I had been working for a long time to help the poor, particularly the country poor. She knows that there are Christian people in these hills and understands my need in conscience to be with them. She went through all this with me and has no objection to my continuing here now that the people have even more need of me. I have not fled from anything; I am just going on with my people.'

'But education here also means political education.'

'Or rather political education has implications on other levels. The children now know what the United States are and what they mean for us. They know they are an imperialist power and we are part of their strategic plan. They know what an oligarchy is, who the military Junta are. ...'

'Could this struggle to free the people be called a Christian conflict?'

'The Church has played its part in awakening social consciousness, helping the masses to discover their rights, which led to struggles to claim their rights starting in their own communities, until they discovered that there were organisations of peasants, of workers, of farmers, and realised that love for one's neighbour meant being organised and so came to swell the ranks of the revolution. Mgr Romero once said: 'sometimes, not being organised can be a sin.' And when this is happening the only thing we can do is be with the people, giving them the pastoral care of sharing our lives with them. You must know that there are parts where 99 per cent of the population are organised Christians, thirsting for justice, peace and unity. ²¹

This is more than Job could see!

Notes

1. See N. H. Tur-Sinai *The Book of Job. A new Commentary* (Jerusalem 1957) (a fine work by a believing Jew); Job: a new Translation by M. H. Pope (New York 1982) with bibliography; H. H. Rowley *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids 1980) with bibliography; F. Andersen *Job: an Introduction and Commentary* (London 1976); Driver-Gray *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job* (Greenwood 1977); *The Book of Job* ed. C. Habel (Cambridge 1975), to give a brief bibliography of what is available in English. On the interpretation of Satan, see Kittel TWNT, VII, 151-165 II, 69ff. and I, 194ff.
2. For this interpretation, bear in mind that, at first, Job was happy (1:1-6). Then Satan appears (1:6) and sets out to tempt Job ('And Satan left the Lord's presence'-1:12). But as Job does not fall, he tests him a second time, with the same expression being used in 2:7. And from this moment till Yahweh's final intervention (2:7b-42:7, since the intervention of the 'cosmological God' in 38:1-41:26 is ambiguous) *Job is in Satan's hands*, that is in the hands of the system of oppression, the system based on the Fetish, on the Idol, even on a 'cosmological God' who is *not historical* and does not speak of the poor and the oppressed (an ambiguous God can also be a justification for a system of oppression). Once Yahweh leaves the scene, Satan enters the action: 'and he smote Job ...' (2:7b). Now it is Satan who is responsible for his suffering, not any pretended sin on Job's part, nor any act on Yahweh's part, since he did not smite him nor order it to be done, but merely permitted it: 'Al! that he has is in your hands' (1:12) and 'He is in your hands ...' (2:6). The God of the poor has nothing to do with what happens next, which is the responsibility of the Devil. *Job knows this*, and this is what the writer of the book is showing: God does not cause the sufferings of the poor; Satan does-the 'system', the dominator, 'Sin', Evil.
3. Thanks to many friends in El Salvador, I have many *direct accounts*, such as letters written from prison, proving what is happening to this martyred people.
4. This is one example among thousands. This is one witness from seventy-seven in the three pages dealing with the region of Aguilares alone, where Fr Rutilio Grande, SJ, was parish priest and martyr. In January and February 1980 alone there were seventy-seven murders in the holy Jesuit's parish. I have sent Concilium a photocopy of these three pages, along with other unpublished documents from which I quote, as evidence of the accuracy of what I am telling.
5. Anon. *Rutilio Grande* (Salvador 1978). For this history see R. Cardenal 'Historia de la Iglesia en El Salvador' in *Hist. gen. de la Iglesia en América Latina*, VI (Salamanca 1983); also E. Dussel *De Medellín a Puebla* (Mexico 1979) pp. 231ff.; R. Sol *Para entender El Salvador* (San José 1980); *El Salvador: un pueblo perseguido, testimonio de cristianos* (Lima 1981); P. Richard and G. Meléndez *La Iglesia de los pobres en América Latina* (San José 1980).
6. ICI 400 (1972) p. 19.
7. *Praxis de los Padres de América Latina* (Bogota 1979) p. 323.
8. *Persecución de la Iglesia en El Salvador* (El Salvador 1977) p. 12. See also 'Muerte y persecución de campesinos' in *SPES* (Lima) 31/2 (1977) pp. 34-40; 'Padecerán persecución por mi causa' in *MIEC-JFCI* 16-18 (Lima 1978) pp. 174ff. For all his seventy-three years, Archbishop Luis Chávez y González is still growing: 'In this country, coffee-in the hands of the oligarchy and the North Americans-is eating men. As Salvadoreans and Christians, as priests and bishops we are dismayed. ...by the material and spiritual violence our country is suffering' (ICI 472,1975, p. 30).
9. *Sgnos de lucha y esperanza* (Lima 1979) pp. 256-261. He goes on: 'I very much fear that if Jesus Christ were to come again as he did then, down from Chalatenago to Salvador, he would not get further than Apopa with his preaching and accusations. They would seize him in the hills of Guazapa, and take him before a whole lot of Supreme Courts as unconstitutional and subversive. Without a doubt, my brothers, they would crucify him again. ...They are without reason and with their lack of reason want to break the mould of truth, which cannot be broken with a finger or with brute force.' This brute force was soon to cause his martyrdom.
10. 'Padecerán. ...' the article cited in note 8, at p. 182. See *Excelsior* (Mexico) 27 March 1977,p.3.

11. *ECA* (San Salvador) 344 (1977) p. 433.

12. Document in my possession from COPPES (Committee for Political Prisoners in El Salvador) June 1982. This is how the four North American nuns, two of them from Maryknoll, were martyred.

13. The speeches of the .comforters' always include an accusation that Job has sinned and is suffering on account of this: 4:7; 8:6; 11:11; 15:35; 18:5; 20:29; 22:5; 25:4; (27:1?); 34:32. Job always replies with an assertion of his innocence, in speech after speech: 7:20; 9:20; 13:23; 16:17; 19:5; 21:7ff.; 23:10; 27:5; 31:16-40. The .cosmological God'-who can equally be an Ido!-puts the main question: .Dare you ...put me in the wrong that you may be right?' (40:8). In effect, if the sufferer *is not* a sinner then the one who makes him suffer is not God *but Satan*. Not accepting guilt is prophetic criticism of the evil of the system: 'The truth is, God does no wrong' (34: 12), so the one who does wrong is Satan, and *his angels, sinners*.

14. Document quoted in note 12 above.

15. The New York Times 10 March 1983, p. 6, col. 2.

16. *Ibid.* col. 6.

17. *Toward a Theology of the Corporation* (Washington 1981), Preface. This sets out to examine the following thesis: .Some theologians today write as if corporations were evil (sic) forces and, indeed, as if democratic capitalism as a whole were incompatible with Christianity' (p. 5). Novak goes so far as to quote Isaiah 53:2-3 (the Suffering Servant), commenting: 'I would like to apply these words to the modern business corporation, a much despised incarnation of God's presence in this world' (p. 33).

18. Document in my possession (copy with *Concilium*).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*