

THE EVANGELIZATION OF LATIN AMERICA Ross and Gloria Kinsler

Throughout Latin America momentum is building toward major celebrations and counter-celebrations in 1992; as we all try to understand and evaluate 500 years of "Christian" presence in this region. The terms usually applied to Columbus and his successors are all inadequate, inappropriate, and unacceptable: discovery, conquest, civilization, evangelization. Conscientized Latin Americans, especially those whose genes include the great indigenous civilizations of the hemisphere and/or the slave trade, can only feel insulted by such insensitive and ignorant references to these events and their continuing effects. Those of us who work with and for and through the church in Latin America must use the coming months to review our churches' complicity in these five centuries of human tragedy, to confess and repent of our personal and collective sins, to try and interpret to North Americans what we have learned, and to prepare the way for more faithful evangelization in the years to come.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

Giulio Girardi in his little book, *La Conquista de América: ¿con qué derecho?* (San José: DEI, 1988), points out that the conquest of the Americas set in motion processes of colonialization that overtook not only the New World but also Africa and Asia, that these processes have unified human history under North Atlantic hegemony, and that Europeans have since then expropriated not only the wealth but also the culture, identity, and history of the Third World peoples. It thus behooves all of us, especially North Americans, to examine carefully these past events and present arrangements and to ask ourselves, especially if we call ourselves Christians, what is God's "Good News" for us and for them today.

In 1454 Pope Nicolas V turned over to the King of Portugal all the kingdoms of Africa with the right to "invade, conquer, and submit all the inhabitants of the continent to perpetual slavery." In 1493 Pope Alexander VI gave all islands and lands known and yet to be discovered west and south of the Azores to Spain with full and total power, authority, and jurisdiction. During the next 150 years it is estimated that the 80 million people of the Americas were reduced to 10 million. In Mexico alone 25 million were reduced to 1 million. No 20th Century massacre comes anywhere near his monstrous crime against humanity, even in absolute terms, far less in terms relative to the total world population at that time. (Girardi, p. 31)

Such numbers, horrible as they are, fail to express the depths of dehumanization and suffering experienced by the Native American Peoples, the African slaves that were forced to replace them, and their descendants. Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1973) attempts to do so. In Mexico, he reports, Indian mothers killed

their children to save them from the torture of the mines. In Haiti they killed their children and committed mass suicide. The silver mines of Potosi in Bolivia "consumed eight million lives, under "terrible work conditions." The sugar plantations were hardly better. (Galeano, p. 25, 42, 51) So tens of millions died, crushed by the "Christian" Europeans' rapacious lust for wealth.

The sad irony of this history is that the astronomical riches drawn out of the Latin American colonies went through Spain and Portugal to England to finance the industrial revolution and the British Empire and later to the U.S. to strengthen the economic base for U.S. hegemony throughout the hemisphere. So the logic of empire continues to rule, and the human tragedy continues even now. "The more a product is desired by the world market, the greater the misery it brings to the Latin American peoples whose sacrifice creates it." (Galeano, p. 73) In the remote interior of Brazil it has been reported in recent years "that the Indians have been machine-gunned from helicopters and light airplanes and inoculated with smallpox virus, that dynamite has been tossed into their villages, and that they have been given gifts of sugar mixed with strychnine and salt mixed with arsenic." (Galeano, p. 61)

The imbalance of economic, political, and ultimately military power continues to be enormously advantageous to some at the expense of the vast majority under the guise of the "free" market and "benevolent" international capitalism. In 1967, for example, Brazil received \$76 million through capital investments; four times that amount left Brazil in profits, dividends, payments for technical aid, patents, royalties, and the use of brand names; "clandestine remittances" took out another \$120 million. (Galeano, p. 246) By 1976 the ILO/UN reported that in Latin America 110 million people lived in "serious poverty." Families with incomes unable to provide a minimal diet were 42% of the population of Brazil, 43% of Colombia, 49% of Honduras, 31% of Mexico, 45% of Peru, 29% of Chile, and 35% of Ecuador. (Galeano p. 305) Today the situation is far worse.

Galeano goes on to ask how those who profit from these intollerable conditions can continue to stop rebellion among "the great condemned majorities." The answer is all too clear: REPRESSION. During the last 25 years we have witnessed terrible repression in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay, most of Central America, Haiti, and to lesser degrees almost all the rest of Latin America. The U.S. government has consistently sided with the oppressors ... in the name of freedom, democracy, and anti-communism. The horrors of the early conquest have been repeated in our lifetime under the rhetoric of national security, sometimes with sophisticated surveillance technology, often with blatant brutality, always with media manipulation. In Galeano's Uruguay "torture [was] applied as a routine system of interrogation: anyone [might] be its victim, not only those suspected or guilty of acts of opposition. In this way panic fear of torture [was] spread through the whole population, like a paralyzing gas that invades every home and implants itself in every citizen's soul."

(Galeano, p. 306) In Chile 30,000 were tortured and killed. In Argentina thousands were disappeared. "There are no corpses and no one is responsible. In this way the bloodbath has more impunity for not being 'official', and thus collective anxiety is more potently spread around.... State terrorism aims to paralyze the population with fear." (Galeano, p. 306) So, under heavy U.S. funding, the presence of U.S. advisors, and the threat of U.S. invasion, El Salvador's military dictatorship has killed 70,000 and disappeared 8,000. Guatemala's statistics are 100,000 dead and 40,000 disappeared. And the recent invasion of Panama is now estimated to have killed 4,000 to 7,000 men, women, and children.

THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE OF JUBILEE

Exploitation, oppression, and death under unconscionable elites and foreign empires are not unknown in the Bible. In recent decades Third World Christians have awakened biblical scholars and theologians to the startling but now obvious fact that virtually the whole Bible was written by and for oppressed people. Chilean Pablo Richard calls it "the subversive memory of the poor." It is inevitable therefore that we should try to see how the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments dealt with imperialism and repression, how the history of salvation relates to the history of human suffering, indeed how the Gospel, Good News to the poor, should be proclaimed in Latin America today.

The Old Testament really begins with and centers upon the Exodus, the paradigm of God's mighty acts in human history. God appears to Moses at Mount Horeb and says, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3: 7-8) God hears; God intervenes; God delivers; God gives land and abundant life ... against Egypt, against corrupt Israelite kings, against Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Syria, and Rome. This is God's Good News to oppressed peoples, and it must not be spiritualized into mere religiosity, moralism, or pietism.

Even more striking in its historical relevance is the Jubilee, another central Old Testament teaching that underlies the New. It presents the Good News not simply as a promise of God's intervention but also as a concrete program for human liberation through radical social legislation. In ancient agrarian societies -- as in modern industrial economies -- poor people were constantly in danger of losing their livelihood through natural disasters (plagues, drought, storms) and injustice (excess taxes, expropriation, trade manipulation). When tragedy struck, they had to turn to the money-lenders, who charged exorbitant interest. Unpayable debts led to loss of land, share-cropping, slavery, prostitution, and finally hunger, disease, and death. So God ordained that Israel should celebrate a Jubilee every 50th year, at which time debts would be cancelled, slaves freed, and every family returned to its land. Beginning on the Day of Atonement they would "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." (Leviticus 25:10) This was indeed Good News! And

this is what Jesus clearly intended for his ministry, when at the outset he read from Isaiah 61:1-2 at the Nazareth Synagogue: "to proclaim the acceptable [Jubilee] year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18)

Tom Hanks notes that in his reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 Jesus omits the following phrase, "the day of vengeance of our God," and that he inserts a phrase from Isaiah 58:6, "to let the oppressed go free." Hanks reasons that Jesus thus intends to link these two chapters of Isaiah and relate them clearly to Leviticus 25 and the Year of Jubilee. "The originality and boldness exemplified in relating the two texts is best accounted for as reflecting Jesus' own exegetical insight and passion for liberation." (God So Loved the Third World, Orbis, 1983, p. 99) Taken as a whole Isaiah 58:6 clearly rejects religiosity and pietism and asserts four times God's mandate for social and economic liberation:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke.

This was God's Good News to the people of Israel and through her to the nations. This was the substance of Jesus' message when he proclaimed the coming of God's Rule. This is or should have been the church's message down through history to our own time. Read once again the Nazareth passage (Luke 4:18-19) and alongside it another key text in which Jesus tells John the Baptist's followers what his ministry is about (Luke 7:22-23).

<p>The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.</p>	<p>Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.</p>
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To say that Jesus' ministry and message were social and economic is not to deny their spiritual nature. On the contrary it is to recover the fundamental biblical understanding that God is sovereign over all of life, over all creation, over every dimension of our lives. The social and economic dimensions of our lives are fundamental, and they must be integrally related to faith and discipleship. The Bible holds all these dimensions together through its concept of peace (shalom), which means health, wholeness, fullness of life, justice, reconciliation, and salvation. When Jesus healed the sick, exorcized the possessed, forgave the sinful, confronted the self-righteous, and challenged the oppressors, he called them to faith and faithfulness.

EVANGELIZATION TODAY

Along the highways of Guatemala one sees today large, concrete crosses with this message, presumably placed there by the Catholic Church: "1492 to 1992 -- 500 Years of Evangelization." One can also see nowadays in Central America car window stickers such as these: "I believe in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church"; "With Jesus and Mary all is merry"; "Jesus Christ is my leader; he keeps his promises." The latter are, at least in part, reactions or responses to the Protestant sects that have invaded the region in recent years. Some say there are 600 in Guatemala alone, all of them strongly "evangelistic" in orientation. They proclaim their heaven-oriented message of individual salvation through house to house visitation, tracts, blaring loudspeakers, nightly services, endless campaigns, and repetitive radio and TV broadcasts. They grow through proselytism and division, crude and highly honed techniques, multiplying preaching points and myriad chapels. But is their message relevant to life in this world? Is it faithful to the Bible? Is it really Good News? What Gospel do the people of Latin America need to hear?

The Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones (San José, Costa Rica) has just released a small book by Jaime Valverde on *Las Sectas en Costa Rica: Pentecostalismo y Conflicto Social*. A sociological study co-sponsored by the Centro de Coordinación de Evangelización y Realidad and the Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano, it concludes with these words (our translation), which could apply to the rest of Central and perhaps Latin America:

The sectarian Pentecostal movement is developing in the midst of a great paradox. It constitutes a symbolic protest before the deterioration of the conditions of life for vast sectors of the population, and it offers its members the possibility of establishing warm and fraternal primary relations. On the other hand the social and political effects of its activity totally suit the interests of the ruling class. Thus from a starting-point that rejects the mandates of the world and society, these "Christians" fulfill a legitimating function for the social order and for those classes that benefit from it. In this sense, in contrast with the traditional Catholic Church, the sectarian Pentecostal Churches do not actively but rather passively legitimate the status quo. (p. 85)

Not all Pentecostals are sectarian, but 70% of all Protestants in Latin America are probably Pentecostals, and the tendency cited by Valverde spreads far beyond the Pentecostals.

The links between repression in Latin America and Sunday worship in U.S. churches may not always be self-evident. But it takes little social analysis or prophetic imagination to trace the lines of self-interest between U.S. wealth, business and banking, foreign policy, military power, low-intensity conflict strategy, media, and churches on the one hand and Central America's steep

social pyramid, severe economic depression, high unemployment, extreme poverty, military repression, massive malnutrition, excessive infant mortality, and religious escapism.

It would perhaps be useless to dream what Latin America's history might have been like, if the Good News of God's Reign had been proclaimed and applied during these 500 years, if instead of greed and concentration of wealth the land and other resources had been systematically redistributed among all the people, if shalom (peace with justice) ruled instead of military and police power, if foreign nations could have looked beyond immediate profit and expanding dominion to basic human values. It is certainly valid to turn to the heroic resistance of the Latin American peoples, to known and unknown religious and political martyrs who have been the voices of the voiceless, to innumerable base ecclesial communities, human promotion projects, publications, study programs, and popular movements that witness to a vision and a movement for Jubilee, for shalom, for life.

The task of evangelization is relatively clear and terribly urgent in Latin America today. The possibilities in North America and Western Europe are not so clear. In Latin America life and hope spring up abundantly though tragically amidst the killing fields and waste lands. In North America and Europe the corrosion of imperial power and wealth seem to have sated human sensitivities, saturated the lust for pleasure and power, clouded the meaning of life, and almost eliminated hope. So, in another expression of irony, some from the North come to the South asking for help in their search for faith, for hope, and for love, in their search for a new theology, a new spirituality, a new humanity. Thus we are joined together, North and South, in the task of evangelization today.