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Liberating Faith – Examples of the Church 'Born from Below'

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The twin development of liberation theology and basic Christian communities is rightly associated with Latin America. It is good that a continent whose thinking and life have been long neglected now takes its place in the sun. But it is sometimes assumed that Latin America was the source of the worldwide evolution of new ways of doing theology and of being church, whereas this happened by spontaneous combustion of the Spirit in different lands, in the main about midway through this century.

There were antecedents. Decolonisation allowed peoples to reclaim indigenous histories which had previously been tidied into colonialist histories. When people recover awareness of identity, through a sense of history which no longer disparages their past, they have a basis for developing theologies which are no longer subservient to dominant theologies and for living the faith in ways which are authentically their own. The inauguration of the World Council of Churches and the early establishing of a Department on the Laity played its part; as did the definition of the church as the 'People of God' in Vatican II (mitigating the stress on hierarchy in Vatican I). As early as the 1930s the Iona Community was pioneering a route to renewed faith expressed through renewed community. All this provided tinder which the spark of the Spirit could ignite. A fruit of it was the church 'born from below'. Members who gave due regard to secular and ecclesiastical authorities when they were speaking for a Higher Authority knew when they were called to live a mature, adult faith, being 'no longer children' (as in Ephesians 4) and holding responsibility for 'being and living church in the world'. Their ways of doing so sometimes cheered, sometimes grated on traditional authorities. A kindred fruit was the development of theologies stemming from indigenous roots of devalued people and devalued cultures. This produced not only Latin American liberation theology but Asian Action, Minjung, feminist, black, African, reappropriation and a clutch of other theologies – making rich a territory which had previously had a monochrome western stamp on it.

Among many features of these developments, I propose to choose and illustrate a central characteristic. It distinguishes communities not only in Eastern and Western Europe but wherever they are found in the world. It is that awareness of the calling to 'become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' which has already been referred to. The road to maturity is often uneven. Some start on it very tentatively and gain confidence only as they risk further steps. Some fall down and fail. But a proportion pick themselves up and soldier on, learning from that experience. Some are severely constricted by their situation and have to protect 'a little life in dried tubers' against an uncertain future springtime. This fresh venturing marks both the shaping of new forms of Christian community and the hammering out of new forms of theology. In our time the priestly people are recovering their birthright both

to be the church and to share in shaping the faith-basis from which they live. The best professionals are those who accompany the people in that quest.

Hungarian groups, which met clandestinely during 'the occupation', were severely constricted by their circumstances. The most that was open to them was to form devotional, prayer, Bible study groups. These activities were thought to be innocuous. Had they taken on board social and political concerns the secret police would have got on to them. That was how I found things in 1987 when, after two previous unsuccessful attempts, I got in touch with 6000 of them, through Miklós Tomka who played a coordinating role. At the end of January 1990 I was on the spot when representatives of these 6000 groups, which had now come into the open, met at a day conference in Budapest to consider Christian political responsibilities.

For one thing, they were clear that God is Lord of the nation, of all the nations and of the whole creation. Response to such a God must affect the total fabric of life: institutions, structures, governments, their policies and priorities. Previously they had been prevented from expressing this aspect. Now they had the opportunity to add a dimension of obedience previously denied them, and thus 'grow into the fulness'.

They looked at the possibility of forming a political party. 'We could call on 100,000 people. No party would have as strong a base as we could muster.' They looked, only to dismiss! Christians, they judged, should not form parties. They should invest in whatever parties seemed most likely to have priorities not too distant from those of the Kingdom of God.

So, was there one party which they should all get behind? The president of the Christian Democrats was present. He blotted his copybook taking about three times the period allocated to him. His thesis was that his party was the only one based on Christian principles, which walked hand and hand with the church. (My interpreter stepped aside from her task sufficiently to whisper to me 'You can imagine with how big a pinch of salt we take that.')

'No', they concluded. With integrity Christians have made different political options. They must be free to continue to do so.

The rest of the day conference – apart from a contribution they requested from myself on the way in which they fitted into the overall European pattern of basic community development – was taken up with the search to find a positive way forward. They came out with a clear, common decision:

- 1 Members should be encouraged to do homework on the different political parties, and get behind the one which seemed to have a programme nearest to the concerns of the Kingdom. They should also invest time and energy in pressure groups which had creative policies.
- 2 They should encourage those among their number who were so minded to stand as candidates for regional and national government, whatever party these supported.
- 3 All should submit their choices and their reasons for these to their own small groups, hear and attend to critical and supportive assessments of their actions, and decide in the light of these whether to change course or continue as before.

At the end, my interpreter apologised: 'For decades we have had no opportunity to exercise political responsibilities. You must allow for our inadequacies.' I only wish that so-called democratic countries had got as far as these Hungarian Christians.

In the early 1970s I attended one of the day conferences of basic Christian communities in Rome which were held twice a year. The company was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Most of the day was taken up with Bible study led by a Baptist pastor and

some of his people. The following year was to be a Holy Year, a year of Jubilee. The theme chosen for the day was the biblical understanding of Jubilee. Contrast was made between the power-boost for Rome which contemporary Holy Years were designed to produce, and the justice/restoration basis of the biblical Year of Jubilee with its rehabilitation of life’s losers. At the end of that day I got hold of the pastor. I asked him how this partnership of Baptists and Roman Catholics had come about.

‘We Baptists’, he said, ‘really believed that everything that mattered was in the Bible. So we got round and dug into it and dug into it. After a time it became clear to us that we were making no effective witness to people in our area. At that point we looked across and saw Roman Catholics who certainly were making impact. We just had enough courage, in spite of the history of dismissiveness and persecution which we had suffered at their hands, to go across and say “We think you have found something in the Christian faith which we lack.” Cheerfully they invited us to join them. We did. In no time they were saying “This isn’t one-way traffic. It’s two-way. We are ignoramuses about the Bible and you are clued up. We need one another.” Since then we have worked in partnership in basic Christian communities.’

‘What has been the result?’ I queried.

‘The opening of our eyes to the world God loves’, he replied. ‘You know, there were homeless people around our doors. We had not even noticed them! We began to see what we could do for this one and that one. It then dawned on us that there was a *problem* of homelessness – that society could be structured in a way which produced homelessness. We had to go on to examine social structures and their effects. That led us to question the priorities of the City Council – we Baptists had to get into city politics if we were to be faithful to the gospel! That led us further into an assessment of national and international policies and priorities.’

‘How has it worked out?’ I asked.

‘Man’, he said, ‘the Bible is alive as never before.’

In September 1991 I was privileged to be asked to share in a gathering of East European Christians who had met over two decades – as travel and other restrictions allowed – to consider their calling under communist regimes. We met in Brno, Czechoslovakia. There was quiet testimony to the way in which under communism church premises represented small areas of freedom where alternative values and life-styles could be thought about; to young people stubbornly holding to the faith and thus denied the chance of higher education; and to older people disprivileged in other ways (Christians who have shown such integrity have been in quite disproportionate numbers pressed to stand for public office); in general to a church severely restricted, yet which was true to the Hebrew/Christian tradition of weaving in a seamless robe biblical insight, prayer and action. What follows is a development which is very similar to the one in Rome and recognisable elsewhere. People start with the immediate and local, probe into the factors which produce a problem, and end up with global concerns. On the way they learn ‘the evangelical necessity of research’. (Senator Salonga spoke to me in the Philippines of ‘the evangelical necessity of research into transnational corporations, lest the world get into a powerful grip which is other than God’s’). Here is one story I heard at that gathering.

In an area of opencast coal mining in East Germany electricity generating had developed alongside, to take advantage of the raw material, and then various industries, to take advantage of cheap electricity. The air was filled with dust and fumes. More and more land was taken over for expansion. ‘The ground you are on now is where my church stood’, said the local pastor to a visitor. People were made refugees,

their houses demolished in the advance. The very ground of graveyards was threatened. The local church got together to see what faith demanded in the situation.

First they undertook 'Samaritan' work, comforting and counselling the suddenly unemployed farmers who lost their fields; those compelled to move to new areas; the old who thought that they might not be allowed to rest peacefully in their graves. They went on to ask, 'Is the disturbance to our community justified?' – and started to challenge government officials on economic priorities and energy policies. Seeing the need to be more constructive, they examined alternatives to existing policies. Electricity was so cheap that it was used wastefully. They argued for energy-saving policies which could make expansion unnecessary and contraction possible.

During all this they reread their Bibles, discovering insights into the kind of economic priorities which expressed God's way for human life; into the nature of the trusteeship of the planet which God had bestowed on human beings; into the concern for the wellbeing of our children's children which God required. Their action conscientised a whole area, made industrial chiefs revise their plans, proclaimed God's will that his beloved people had a right to share in decisions which shaped their destinies. It was still no straightforward matter. If jobs were lost through the expansion of a group of industries, jobs were also lost by their contraction. The pastor in the open coal development became so expert in energy matters that he was treated as a specialist consultant by government officials.

In 1973 I was with the PECCO team – the ecumenical team of Christians who worked and lived in the Tondo community of shanty dwellers on the foreshore of Manila, the Philippines. Under Marcos, basic Christian communities were hated and harassed. For it was in these that poor people discovered the very different worth they had in the eyes of God from that conferred by secular powers, and heard the calling to share in shaping the world God's way.

My contact person was Sister Victricia of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit. She told me of their aim – to help the people to value and bring into play their own resources, thus empowering them to fight for basic rights (they were not even allowed to buy the land on which their poor shacks were erected).

'In spite of what you say', I replied 'you are bound to be manipulating them. The members of the PECCO team have education, know-how, the protection of Christian orders and institutions which the shanty-dwellers don't have. Whatever your good intentions, you are bound to be manipulating them.'

She drew herself up to her full height, which brought her to the height of my chest, looked me in the eye, and said firmly, 'You're wrong!' She went on to illustrate. 'We open their eyes to their situation of oppression and the causes of their exploitation until they see it themselves and denounce it in their own words and their own way. Then we shut up. Again, we don't ask why there should not have been clean water laid on when hotels are mushrooming for tourists who can get ten baths per day. We ask them why a water pipe which stops at such a point should not be extended to another five dwellings. They get together and make out their own case. A date is fixed. They find themselves in a room with a rug on the floor and a man behind a desk! Nervously they blurt out some points. They become aware that they have a case. They begin to state it cogently. It dawns on them that the official figure behind the desk might be a bit afraid of them! They win their point.'

'The great thing is to encourage them to tackle something which they can deal with successfully, and to make their own case. That gives them confidence. Then you step out of their way and let them get on with it. What I have told you is an actual instance.'

The people involved went on to larger, effective challenges relating to deprivations they suffered. Two years later the West German government put forward a plan for foreshore development which would have meant demolishing a swathe of shanties. The people confronted them, argued a case against the proposal – and got the Germans to back down. But that would never have happened had they not started with the case for a water pipe going to five more dwellings.’

One further example illustrates the effective work of the PECCO team. Cramped for space, Tondo people had invaded unused land belonging to a factory. They put up flimsy shelters as a sign that the territory had been taken over by them. The PECCO team remonstrated. ‘Get going and build more solidly’, they advised. ‘It doesn’t even take a bulldozer to clear off what you’ve built.’ The people involved consulted, hesitated, let days pass without action. The authorities sent in men to clear the ground and restore it to the factory. ‘Told you so’, said the PECCO team, in effect. ‘Look’, said the land-invaders, ‘we would rather make a bad decision that is ours than a good decision that is yours!’ It was a sign of growing maturity.

Liberation theology is often associated with famous names. They played an honourable part. But the great new sign of hope in our time is ordinary people, including those at the bottom of the heap, doing theology in community: finding it to be the faith basis for making real and substantive in our time the exodus from every form of slavery which Christ accomplished in Jerusalem.