

Deus Caritas Est in Latin America

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Introduction

Concerning the encyclical *Deus Caritas est* of Pope Benedict XVI, I would like to pull together some considerations destined to deepen Vincentian spirituality in Latin America. This encyclical was published at Christmas 2005, as a way of offering a Christmas greeting to the faithful of the entire world, and its theme was doubtless linked to public opinion concerning the problems of the sexual conduct of the clergy.

Our purpose, therefore, is to nourish the Vincentian family, for it to be filled with that love that moved Saint Vincent toward the poor of his time, like a fire flaming and burning during his entire life. I will then divide my reflection into two parts. In the first, I will comment on the content of the encyclical; in the second, I will compare the pope's discourse with the option for the poor in Saint Vincent and in Latin America.

This first letter of Benedict XVI may be classified as a reflection of Christian ethics or a chapter of moral theology. The chosen theme develops out of the renewal of Catholic moral teaching begun by Father Bernard Häring,¹ when he wrote, even before the Council, the first version of his extensive work of moral theology, *The Law of Christ*. This was the first attempt to overcome the casuistic moral teaching centered on the conception of sin, with its profoundly pessimistic vision about earthly realities. In opposition to casuistry and scholastic moral theology, Häring proposed a morality centered on faith and in the love of Christ. He recovered foundations in the Bible and tradition for his reflection on a renewed Christian ethics, freeing it from the dichotomies of the Aristotelian-Thomistic method.

This moral theologian inspired Father Marciano Vidal² to draw up his moral theology of "attitudes" that contributed so greatly to the reflection of seminaries and religious institutions in Latin America. It was because of the influence of the Council and of Bernard Häring

¹ BERNARD HÄRING, *The Law of Christ*, 3 vols., Westminster, Md, 1961.

² MARCIANO VIDAL, *Moral de atitudes, ética da pessoa*, volume II, translated from the 5th Spanish ed., Aparecida, 1988.

that a group of Spanish moralists, Aspitarate, Elizari Basterra and Rincón Orduña,³ confronted moral theology as Christian praxis, coming out of an encounter with the faith that was developing in Latin America as an articulation between word and life, theory and practice, action and reflection.

But it was in Latin America itself that various moral theologians blossomed, such as Jaime Snoeck, Bernardino Leers, Antônio Moser, Márcio Fabri dos Anjos, Francisco Moreno Rejón, Roque Junges and an entire group of professors of moral theology, including our former superior general Robert Maloney, who also worked with moral theology in our seminaries in Panama.

God is Love

The Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) did not treat specifically of moral theology. Nevertheless, it did open some horizons to promote a renewal of all Christian moral teaching. Häring himself revised his work in the spirit and the mentality of the council, giving it a new title: *Free and Faithful in Christ*.⁴ In every perspective where a renewal of moral theology is found, we find a bright inspiration in Häring's thought. As a professional theologian, Benedict XVI, certainly knew as few others did the thought of Father Häring. What was the law of Christ? It was the law of love. To become a disciple of Jesus Christ is to follow the law of love, since Christ acted as a teacher of the gratuitous love of God. The love of God is a free gift; it is grace. This love is proclaimed by the divine teacher as the greatest of all virtues, the only one that remains to the end.

Pope Benedict XVI turned again to Saint John, the evangelist who speaks the best of love and who articulated the love of God with human love: "It may be said that only he knows God whom he loves, because God is love."⁵ With his theology Saint Paul also contributed by identifying love with the gratuity of the gift of God. We are liberated by him through grace; we live now under the rule of grace, which justified us and purified us before God. The law kills, the spirit gives life; the reign of the law is finished, and now we live under the rule of the new law, the law of love. It is love which is going to save

³ R. LOPEZ ASPITARTE - F.J. ELIZARI BASTERRA - R. RINCÓN ORDUÑA, *Práxis cristã*, II: *Opção pela vida e pelo amor*, 3rd edition, translated by Álvaro Cunha, São Paulo, 1983.

⁴ BERNARD HÄRING, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 3 vols., New York, 1978-1982.

⁵ I John, 2:3-5; 4:7-16.

us. We will be judged, according to Saint Matthew, by the principle and criterion of love.⁶

This positive horizon, opened by Häring, broadened the understanding of the Christian life as a fundamental option for love, and the following of Jesus Christ became the way of Christian praxis, like ethics and moral theology. Previously, Catholic moral teaching was more like scholastic philosophy and canon law than scripture and tradition. Now, it is better identified with the Word of God, the preaching of the Fathers and Christian spirituality. The pope clearly affirms that the love of God gives meaning to human love and transforms it in the fundamental option of the Christian. Deepening the reflection on love, he proposes a deepening of the meaning of Christian life. To elaborate a moral discourse based on love is to seek and construct the meaning of life.

Then in the first paragraphs, the pope defines the method that he will follow in the development of his letter. He sees it divided into two distinct parts. The first is a theoretical speculation on love in its three dimensions: eros, philia and agape.⁷ Here he makes a philosophical, anthropological and theological speculation on Christian love, making use of these categories of Greek philosophy as they were taken up into the revelation of the Gospel and the epistles of Saint John the Evangelist.

In the second part, he follows the road of moral teaching, that is, of Christian ethics as the practice of the faith. He identifies this practice with the concept of love-charity and reduces every expression of love to acts of charity and the assistance of the poor. He rejects any practice of love that might signify the search for transformation of structures. This has great relevance for us, since in Latin America the method of reflecting and the new concept of faith and love are determinative for an understanding of what happens in the Latin-American Church.

We could classify the first part as speculative theology about the concept of love and about love as a theological virtue. He discusses erotic love and refers to an accusation of Nietzsche against the Catholic Church, who believed it to be contaminated by a deadly poison, the concupiscence of eros. However, despite everything, eros has resisted and survived. Nietzsche accused the Church of "satanizing" one divine dimension of love, making into sin every

⁶ Rom 2:12-24; 5:1-21; 7:1-6.

⁷ Jaime Snoeck in his book *Ensaio de ética sexual* uses the same Greek categories and the Gospel of Saint John, but gives another understanding of human love: an evolution of matrimonial love, from the beginning of falling in love to the maturity of life together. It is a process of growth and maturation.

manifestation of happiness, desire and joy in sexual practice. The pope justifies himself and justifies the interpretation of the Church by arguing that sex reduced to hedonism dehumanizes the person through suffering. For this reason, a Christian has to remain vigilant and active to free love from this poison of erotic concupiscence. Father Jaime Snoeck, a moralist of the Redemptorist community, Dutch but rooted in Brazil, also elaborated his sexual ethics on the basis of these three categories of love. His perspective, however, is one of a process of integration and maturation of the love of eros, philia and agape, culminating in the integration and realization of conjugal love. Agape signifies the full communion of the love of eros and philia in the dialogue of friendship, happiness, joy, union and full communion.

In Latin America, we also agree that eros was contaminated by a poison which made sexuality banal and reduced it to hedonism. But for us, this poison is clearly identified: it deals with consumerism and the ideology of capitalism which associated sexuality with consumption and transformed it into a product of this same consumption. It reduced the human person to the order of means, and made of the person a way of making more money.⁸ "God tempts no one; we are tempted only by our own concupiscence,"⁹ the apostle affirms. There is truly a risk of separating ourselves from the plan of God and of seeking pleasure for its own sake, changing it into an end in itself.

The second part of the encyclical seeks to prove that the Church has always lived this law of love, identified with the practice of charity. To justify this affirmation, the encyclical refers to various institutions of charity and brings forth the examples of the saints who ennobled themselves through the exercise of Christian charity. Then he makes an excursus on the social teaching of the Church, emphasizing its contribution to the orientation of the State toward charity as social justice, to the reconciliation of conflicts and to relations between capital and labor, always in view of the building of peace. Charity always seeks to construct peace and harmony, contrary to the ideologies that manipulate the human person, exacerbate conflicts, preach violence and nurture hatred. At this point he directly analyzes the Marxist ideology, although Marxism no longer represents any threat to the world. Today's threat is

⁸ In his book, *O enigma da esfinge; uma análise da sexualidade humana* (Petrópolis, 2003), Brother ANTÔNIO MOSER, analyzes sexuality beginning with the denunciations in the press of pedophilia charges against the clergy of the Catholic Church.

⁹ James 1:12-15.

neo-liberalism and economic globalization, which represents the renewed phase of capitalist totalitarianism.

In this second part, there is a veiled reaffirmation of the critiques formulated against Liberation Theology when he was prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is not improper to identify in this part the veiled reference to the Liberation Theology of Latin America.¹⁰

In this perspective, the encyclical affirms the sacred value of the human person against the Marxist teachings that accuse the Church of mere assistance of the poor, and whose consequence is the retarding of revolutionary transformation.

Against this utilitarian and pragmatic vision, which transforms the human person into an instrument and means of hastening the revolution, he puts the gratuity of the love of God concretized in the practice of charity. The objective of the action of the Church should be to construct the Kingdom of God in the direction of eschatology and not to identify it with the transformation of the structures of this world. In this sense, the encyclical approaches the position of the two documents¹¹ sent to the episcopal conferences of Latin America in the decade of the eighties, correcting certain aspects of Liberation Theology, where there was an opposition between the urgency of sharing bread and the need of preaching the word.

In this second part, he recalls also that love harmonizes and integrates the living out of the theological and cardinal virtues, which put us in communion with God and allows us to be always working toward a conversion to God. It becomes a path for directing ourselves in our mind and heart toward God.¹²

In synthesis, the encyclical begins with fundamental moral theology by returning to various concepts to elaborate a theory of love. It speaks of Christian love as that which gives meaning to human love, integrating sexuality with the sacrament of marriage and in the building of the family. It presents, therefore, themes of the moral teaching of sexuality, marriage and family. He passes from moral speculation to Christian ethics as the practice of love,

¹⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Libertatis Conscientiae," Instruction on Christian freedom and liberation, 1987. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter on the Mission of the Church and the Theology of Liberation* (to the Episcopal Conference of Brazil), 1987. In this letter, the pope makes some remarks on the dangers of the Theology of Liberation but affirms that the Theology of Liberation is not only opportune but necessary.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² In this part he is using concepts of virtues that are integrated into religious moral teaching, but it is a chapter based on Greek philosophy and faith incorporated into Catholic moral teaching.

characterized by the concept of charity as he integrates in his discourse a reflection on the morality of the virtues. He recalls the teaching of his predecessors in the composition of the social teaching of the Church and refers as well to the compendium drawn up by the Commission Justice and Peace launched in Brazil in June 2005, by Edições Paulinas with the presence of Cardinal Rafeale Berton, president of that commission.

With Christ in the poor

The encyclical provokes a reflection on the Vincentian charism and spirituality, and we are going to identify, for Latin America, a common option. Just as in Saint Vincent, love is not a conceptual abstraction. Rather, it is a matter of concrete love, incarnate love with shape and form, love for the poor as the incarnation of the love of Jesus Christ as found in the Gospel.

In Saint Vincent, love for the poor is not a preferential option; it is, first and foremost, the founding decision of the Christian life. This perception became the horizon of the meaning of all his spirituality and inspired all his work. This love of God, incarnate in the love for the poor, became not only the subject of his conferences, colloquies, letters and theological discourses, but it also became concretized in works and associations moved by the fuel of charity, with a view to eliminate misery and poverty in the France of his time.

It was a spirituality centered on the Incarnate Word, but with an insistence that the Word became flesh by means of the poor and for the poor. To become a disciple, a follower, of Jesus Christ meant for Saint Vincent to take up the goal of the defense and care of the poor. It was not a contemplative love, much less a speculative love, but on the contrary was concrete, active, participative, efficient and efficacious.¹³

Some authors classify Saint Vincent as a contemplative in action, an active-contemplative. The poor, in his vocabulary, have a sacred character and are an absolute value, because the poor are the sacrament of the Absolute, of God. The poor then pertain to the order of ends and cannot be reduced to means or an instrument. The option of the poor in the thought of Saint Vincent is a condition of salvation. Not to love the poor, to ignore them and, even worse, to despise them is to run the risk of losing one's salvation. All congregations have some reference to the poor, but what is different for us is that we were founded only for the poor. The image that he gave us of the poor as the sign of Christ has become emblematic:

¹³ GETÚLIO MOTA GROSSI, *Um místico da missão, Vicente de Paulo*, Contagem, 2001.

“When you look with anxiety on a poor man who is dirty and ugly, you should turn the medal around and there you will find Christ, your brother.”

In the conference during which he made this affirmation, he insisted on it and repeated: the poor alone! the poor alone! the poor alone! To justify this decision, in another passage, he presents Jesus Christ in the Gospel questioning his hearers: Why did the divine master come into the world? To help the poor. Emphasizing his discourse, he formulated other questions about the mission of Jesus in the world, and the answer was always the same: to help the poor, to help the poor, to help the poor.

In Saint Vincent, the love for the poor has an inclusive precedence above the worship of the celebration of the Eucharist. “If a confrere goes to celebrate a Mass and a poor person knocks at the door to ask for some help, he should leave the altar and go to assist the poor person. This is to leave God for God.”¹⁴ Theologically, this is a daring and revolutionary affirmation.

Father Vincent probably had in mind the parable of the Good Samaritan. A priest passed by and a Levite, two persons chosen intentionally by Jesus, since, as their function, they had a mission to help the poor man who had been beaten and wounded. Nevertheless, perhaps because they were in a hurry or were perhaps late for the worship in the temple or in some synagogue, for the sake of the worship of God they did not give any aid to the poor wounded man, and they passed him by. They did not remember the warning of the prophet: “It is mercy that I desire, not sacrifices.”¹⁵ They were acting, however as if the warning were inverted: “It is sacrifices that I desire, not mercy.” Jesus was censuring religion, worship and interpretation of the scriptures by the scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law. The neighbor is not just somebody at our side but is above all the handicapped, the ruined, the beaten and wounded; he or she is the one who lacks help.

Vincentian spirituality is so comprehensive that various congregations and lay associations were born with at least some aspect of his discourse and the practice in his work, particularly his love for the poor. By way of illustration, I will simply recall two examples. When Antoine Frédéric Ozanam was questioned by professional colleagues, professors and students of history, about why Catholics were doing nothing to transform the reality of France in the nineteenth century, he sought in Saint Vincent the way to transform the conferences of history into an instrument of action.

¹⁴ *Idem*. Conference of Saint Vincent on the care and attention that the confreres should give to the poor.

¹⁵ Mt 9:13; 12:7.

Catholics had kept discussing the social, political and economic situation principally in Paris, but were doing nothing about it.¹⁶

The French revolution had already had a violent reaction against the Church and the monarchy. Historians affirm that the revolution took place against throne and altar, since the poor and those living in misery had been abandoned by the State and by the Church. "Watch out for these poor folk," the Catholic hierarchy warned.

Blessed Ozanam was impressed by the direction that Saint Vincent had given to the Confraternities of Charity, a lay organization established to help the poor. He immersed himself, then, in this work and in this perception of the charitable activity of Saint Vincent, and he changed the name of the conferences of history into the Vincentian conferences, with the social goal of having their members go out to encounter the poor and to contribute to the social transformation of France. All we have to do is to read the newspaper articles, the letters and the conferences of Blessed Ozanam to conclude that the Vincentian conferences were of an eminently social character.¹⁷

With this, the conferences became strong leaven in the dough and transcended both time and space to move beyond borders, principally into Latin America. In recent times, they have needed a refoundation to recover the original spirit of their founder.

In this case, Ozanam was impressed by the organization destined to the practice of charity: lay persons going out to encounter the poor, to help them believe that God loves them, that God is love. Love for God was not a conceptual abstract, but was and continues to be enfolded in the sign and testimony of the members of the confraternities, Vincentian brothers and sisters, when they visit the poor in their shanties, houses, asylums, shelters, prisons and nurseries.¹⁸

A second example explores another side of the love for the poor lived and preached by Saint Vincent: a Dutch bishop, Johannes Zwisem, founder of the Brothers of Mercy. This prelate was impressed by the preaching of Vincent de Paul about charity as mercy and compassion. In this sense, much in the preaching of Saint Vincent spoke to him about the virtue of meekness. Goodness, kindness, patience, compassion, recommended to the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, were the incarnation of the mercy and

¹⁶ JOSÉ TOBIAS ZICO, *Antônio Frederico Ozanam e a missão do leigo na igreja*, Belo Horizonte, 1971; complete works of Frederic Ozanam, 11 volumes; BONNARD, *Frédéric Ozanam d'après sa correspondance*, Paris, 1912; *Ozanam, o livro do centenário*, Rio de Janeiro, 1913.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

compassion of Jesus. With Saint Vincent he learned the meaning of: "It is mercy I desire, not sacrifices."¹⁹

The Vincentian spirit inspired Bishop Zwislen to found a lay congregation with the charism of the mercy and compassion of God toward the poor. For this reason, he called them the Brothers of Mercy and today its members are part of the large Vincentian family.

It is not enough simply to care for the poor; what is needed is to treat them with mercy and compassion. In Brazil, Brother Henrique Cristiano published an exhaustive study on the movement of mercy, including a chapter on mercy and compassion in Vincentian spirituality based on a detailed study of the work of Pierre Coste.²⁰

Those whom Christ prefers in Latin America

The Second Vatican Council created the possibility of a social pastoral service rooted in the continental and regional realities of Latin America. The conferences held by CELAM in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1978, opened the horizons of the Church to the need for a pastoral ministry that preaches and contributes to the transformation of the reality of poverty and misery in this colonized and suffering continent.

In that moment there was growing in all the nations of this continent a great anxiety for freedom from the social, political and economic structures which they feared would keep us dependent on the United States and Europe. Our countries had freed themselves from slavery and the domination of the motherlands of Spain and Portugal, but they were falling under the dominion of capitalist imperialism. This domination was becoming worse at that time with the plan of the United States to place all these nations under the control of the military trained in the School of the Americas in Panama, under the ideological pretext of saving us from Communism. Among the various denunciations of this project was a book by the American linguist Noam Chomsky, that critiqued North American foreign policy.²¹

¹⁹ Mt 9:13; 12:7.

²⁰ CELAM, Medellín, Colombia, 1968; CELAM, Puebla, México, 1978. The main points of these conferences: the option for the poor becomes the base for the Theology of Liberation; a pastoral ministry of liberation, base ecclesial communities, understanding of the faith as praxis, which launched the Church directly into the problems of the people. A true conversion took place toward the cause of the poor.

²¹ NOAM CHOMSKY, *Counter-revolutionary violence: bloodbaths in fact and propaganda [Banhos de sangue]*, Andover, Mass., 1973, ARCHDIOCESE OF SÃO PAULO, *Brasil nunca mais: um relato para a história*, 20th edition, Petrópolis, 1987.

Medellín imparted a new energy to theology, both moral and pastoral, when it began the reflection that had already been maturing in the ISPAC of Rio de Janeiro, led by our former confrere, Prof. Hugo de Vasconcellos Paiva, aided by Prof. Hugo Assman and other collaborators in the process of the updating of the clergy of Brazil.

The analysis of Latin American reality done by the theologian and sociologist Father Joseph Comblin was fundamental in ecclesiological thinking. He held that the people of Latin America were not ignorant in matters of religion. The poor know enough for salvation and are marked by their religiosity and popular Catholicism. The difference between Europe and Latin America was in that, while they were debating about militant atheism, dialectical materialism, secularism and heresies, our problems were poverty, misery, famine and economic domination.

Although in Europe the problem was orthodoxy, faithfulness to doctrine, in Latin America the great problem was orthopraxy, the lack of agreement between faith and life, a dichotomy between action and reflection, a separation between the sacred and the profane. The faith was not accomplishing any transformation as leaven in the dough, nor as light to illuminate the reality and contribute to its transformation. As Brother Bernardino Leers said, the hierarchy was working as if the word in Exodus was: "I have not heard the outcry of my people."

Then the conference at Medellín determined to make a decided option for the poor, to gather its forces in the struggle to transform reality and, in this way, the study and analysis of reality would become a starting point for all theological reflections. The episcopate consecrated the method proposed by Canon (later Cardinal) Cardijn for Catholic Action, which had already produced many young people dedicated to the cause of the people, in the famous classification of youth ministry in A-E-I-O-U (youth that was agrarian, student-led, independent, working, and enrolled in a Catholic university [from its Portuguese initials: *agraria, estudantil, independente, operária, universitária católica*].)

Out of this reflection and method was born Liberation Theology, a pastoral theology of liberation, the Ecclesial Base Communities, biblical clubs, reflection groups, movements of Christian faith and social involvement, bringing together the participation of Christian in the process of transformation of social, political and economic reality.²² In Latin America, the faith assumed the dimension of the practice of charity. Fr. Francisco Taborda, a theologian, summarized the new understanding of the faith in an emblematic sentence: "Praxis is the shape of the faith in this epoch in Latin America." In

²² Medellín and Puebla, *idem*.

this way, Christians overcame that accusation of Cardinal Sebastião Leme of Rio de Janeiro, who affirmed in his struggles against the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas in the decades of the twenties and thirties: "Brazilian Catholics are a majority, but an inefficacious majority."

Cardinal Leme was affirming that Catholics were an inefficacious majority, but the Brazilian hierarchy could not identify the cause of this inefficacy. The root of the question lay at a dichotomy between faith and life, not in the religious ignorance of the people as he interpreted it. Social, political and economic problems were situated in the area of the profane but the Church could not become involved with profane matters, since it dealt with the sacred, and so it was there that the cause for the inefficacy of the majority of Brazilian Catholics was found.

Out of Greek philosophical dichotomies were born theological and doctrinal dichotomies between the profane and the sacred, the spiritual and the material, body and soul, and in this way the life of faith was rationalized by reducing it to doctrine and commandments, that is, to dogmatic and moral theology. Just knowing the doctrine meant having the faith. Both young children and engaged couples were asked about faith with the questions of the same little catechism of Christian doctrine. If they were able to answer those questions, they could make their first communion or celebrate their wedding. On the contrary, they might have been better prepared, that is, if they had memorized the catechism. Faith became confused with its doctrinal formulation, since for scholasticism essence precedes existence.

To these dichotomies were associated a certain pessimism and negativity in regard to the world, to matter and to the body, the result of the influence of the Manichaeism of Saint Augustine and the Jansenism of the school of Saint Victor,²³ of which even Saint Vincent was a victim. Within this concept, politics and social questions were profane realities and had to be exorcised by the pastoral ministry of the Church, inasmuch as the Church was supposed to be occupied exclusively with the salvation of souls, since

²³ ROBERT P. MALONEY (in his *The Way of Vincent de Paul*) writes that Jansenism was in the air that Saint Vincent breathed; MAURÍLIO JOSÉ CAMELLO DE OLIVEIRA, *Caraça: centro mineiro de educação e missão*, Belo Horizonte, 1969: holds that the preaching of the Vincentians was influenced by Jansenist ideas. The reform of the Brazilian clergy, sponsored by Dom Viçoso with the French Vincentians, brought about a large group of holy and well-educated clergy, but profoundly marked by Jansenism, according to the historian Riolando Azzi, and the volumes of the history of the Church in Latin America by CEHILA. The slogan of Dom Viçoso was: Holy and well-instructed priests for the discipline of the clergy.

the spirit was considered to be the principle of good, while the body and matter were principles of evil. Consequently, the Church advocated punishing the body, matter, to free the spirit, to save the soul. The Church's proper area had to be the sacristy, and priests and bishops should have been men of the sacred, occupied only with spiritual questions, with the mission of saving souls. The pastoral activity of the Church should have been only the practice of charitable assistance. The struggle for social justice, the transformation of reality and human rights sounded like Marxist and communist teaching, even though they had been themes already broached in the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI.

Modern philosophies helped us to surpass this dichotomy, and the Second Vatican Council helped us to overcome pessimism and negativity relative to the world, to matter, and to the body with its theology of earthly realities. Good and evil are conjoined in all earthly realities and, in all of them, the seeds of the Word have been planted, and they come to be through the mystery of redemption. But the Second Vatican Council showed us that the true faith is that which brings the institutional Church to make a preferential option for the poor and the excluded, and leads to individual and communitarian conversion and to the transformation of unjust structures. In a word, it leads to conversion. It was in this way that Jesus preached and left an example in the Gospel. He was killed because he preached and fought against unjust structures. In the same way, Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* sounded the alert for the need of the Church to defend the multitude of workers massacred by the cruelty of liberal bosses.²⁴

The book of Vincentian spirituality published by Fr. Robert Maloney,²⁵ *The Way of Saint Vincent* pinpointed the changes that favored the new understanding of the Vincentian virtues. The first one is precisely a change of methodology. *The Way of Saint Vincent* (p. 48) identified the changes that led to a new understanding of the Vincentian virtues. The one mentioned is precisely a change of methodology. "A change in philosophical and theological methodology. The emphasis here has shifted from a classical to a more historical way of thinking. The classicist mentality is deductive. It emphasizes universal principles and necessary conclusions.... The method tends to be abstract and *a priori*.... The method has been applied systematically to dogmatic, moral, and spiritual questions. The historical mode of thinking emphasizes changing circumstances

²⁴ LEO XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891; PIUS XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, 1931, forty years after *Rerum Novarum*. Both encyclicals defended the rights of workers against the greed of the bosses.

²⁵ ROBERT P. MALONEY, *idem*, pp. 48-52.

and contingent conclusions. It begins with concrete data, employs an empirical method, stresses hermeneutics, and draws its conclusions inductively from its sources.... A significant consequence of this shift in emphasis in philosophical and theological methodology is that change has come to find a greater place in our expectations. People today are willing to accept fewer absolutes. They question absolute prohibitions which were formerly accepted.” This change of perspective convinced us that no case is the same as another, and it gave rise to an increasing cultural, religious, philosophical and theological pluralism. This change of outlook on the study of theology, philosophy, pastoral ministry and scripture was fundamental in the transformation of the pastoral activity of the Church in Latin America. It was here, then, that the preferential option for the poor in America was joined to the founding charism of the works inspired by Vincentian spirituality, the love for the poor.

A new concept of faith

The concept that best translated the integration of these dichotomies is the concept of praxis. Faith is praxis. And what is that? Praxis is the articulation between a theory, a concept, or a discourse and an activity or a practice, with hopes of transformation. Praxis is free and conscious, and it has a finality, an intentionality. Theology has to be a discourse that reflects on Christian practice, and our practice has to be illuminated by a theory.

This was the fundamental change that transformed the conception and the living out of faith in Latin America. From this were born and became popular the expressions: faith and life, word of God and reality; Christian faith and social engagement; Christian faith and political commitment. Out of this, the pastoral activity of the bishops became a commitment, whose preaching and specific pastoral activity were destined to transform the social, political and economic reality. This preaching sensitized a great part of the clergy and corresponded to the worries of the poor. It brought about hope and nourished the readiness to struggle. In this way were born various instruments of struggle: pastoral ministries, social movements, demands, the participation of Christians in social and political questions, the “Brotherhood Campaigns,” the “Cry of the Excluded.” The meetings of the bishops began systematically with a presentation of an analysis of a social, political and economic reality. The Bishops’ Conference of Brazil makes use every two months on its internet site of an analysis of an issue done by persons who reflect on the theology, philosophy and pastoral outreach of the Church in Brazil.

All praxis generates conflict. Conflict is inherent in praxis. Conflict is not done just for the pleasure of creating conflict. Society,

certainly, is formed from different social segments and is divided into competing classes. Those who benefit from this unjust structure grab, tooth and nail, their privileges, advantages and interests to guarantee their state of wellbeing or their own social status. For this reason, they intransigently defend their condition and their position in the dominant society. They impede the creation of mechanisms for the distribution of returns and this is the great cause of social problems. As far as this goes, those who are victims of injustice struggle to transform the unjust structures and acquire some rights and a certain liberty that represent a different future with hope for better days, in which everyone might take part.

The conception of faith as practice was likewise no different. It provoked many conflicts with the military dictatorships representing international capitalism and the dominant elite in these countries. Against their opponents, they always used the cliché of being Communists, and at the time it was sufficient to round them up, arrest them, torture them, exile them and even kill them. Conflict also took place within the hierarchy between those bishops and priests working for social and political transformation, and those other bishops and priests who defended dichotomized doctrine and a Church alien to social questions. Because of this, the Church in Latin America recovered a dimension of prophecy and perceived itself, as a result of its incarnational preaching, as touched with martyrdom. There also arose prophets both true and false, martyrs and murderers, but with this originality: Christians were torturing, defaming and executing other Christians during the era of the military regimes in various Latin American countries.

Conclusion

The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* provoked this reflection of ours and forced us to deepen our thought on the Vincentian charism and on the preferential option for the poor in Latin America. Here we recall the parables of Jesus about the relation between the word of God and action for justice and right, the preaching of the word of God and the construction of the kingdom. “Whoever hears the word of God and does not put it into practice is like the crazy man who built his house on sand. Wind and storm came and destroyed the house.” The house fell since it was without foundation. “The prudent man, by contrast, is the one who hears the word of God and puts it into practice. Wind and storm may come, but the house will not fall since it is built on rock.”²⁶ The rock is the link between hearing the word and putting it into practice.

²⁶ Mt 7:24-27.

It is worthwhile here to recall a sentence often repeated by a layman, the leader of the Brazilian laity, Alceu de Amoroso Lima: "The kingdom of God starts here or it never starts...." This is his translation in proverb of a theological idea: the kingdom of God has already arrived, it is already among us. But it is still not definitive and it has not yet been finished. It exists, in fact, only in the eschaton, in eternal life. The action and preaching of Saint Vincent were the word of God becoming *dabar* [word] in the midst of the people, the event of God, divine action, the dynamic of the kingdom becoming leaven in the dough. In the same way, the preferential option of the Church in Latin America for the poor is also coming into being, as the Bible is changing into a word of God for the people: action, presence, dynamism, transformation of human history into the history of salvation. This is why in the Gospel Jesus told his opponents: "If you do not believe in me, at least believe in my works, since they testify to me."²⁷

This preaching and pastoral activity of the Church and the confronting of conflicts help the prophetic dimension in the Church to advance and cause the dimension of martyrdom to rise again among Christians. We keep learning of the innumerable prophets of social causes and of the struggle for justice and right. In the dark times of dictatorship, we recall the courageous actions of Bishop Oscar Romero, Leonidas Proaño, Cardinal Silva Henriques, Bishops Ivo and Aloísio Lorscheider, Paulo Evaristo Arns, Hélder Câmara, José Maria Pires, Waldir Calheiros, Pedro Casaldáliga, Luciano Mendes de Almeida and many others.

Some of these prophets paid with their own life, falling as martyrs, shedding their own blood, the victims of political persecution. In this list too are the various religious assassinated in El Salvador, particularly Bishop Oscar Romero, Elacuria, Rutilo Grande and many others. In Brazil we have Santo Dias, Margarida, Father João Bosco Penido Burneir, Father Henrique, Brother Tito, Alexandre Vanucci, Eugênio Lyra, Father Josimo de Moraes Tavares and others. In Nicaragua many Christians, both lay and religious, were engaged in the Sandinista revolution because of their faith in Jesus Christ and in the Gospel.

Among the most noteworthy pastoral works in this struggle for the implantation of social justice in these countries, we can point to CPT (Comissão Pastoral da Terra), the CIMI (Centro Indigenista Missionário), the base Christian communities, and the Movimentos de Fé e Política, the Commissions of Justice and Peace, and groups of Caritas. We are, however, still far from social justice, but there is no lack of disposition for the struggle.

²⁷ Jn 5:31-38.

Now, a statement from the president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, reveals the efficacy of Catholics in political transformation. He said after his election: "The base Christian communities had a more important role to play in my election than even the trade unions did...." This faith and love incarnate in practice are becoming the salt of the earth and the leaven in the dough. "Fear not: Courage! I have overcome the world,"²⁸ Jesus said in the Gospel.

[For a complete listing of bibliographical references, not otherwise available in English, the reader may turn to the Spanish edition of *Vincentiana* or may request them from the editor.]

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²⁸ Jn 16:33.