

## *The possibility to reflect social issues in theological aspect*

The study of Theology and Society are not two totally different disciplines with no common ground for dialogue. The concerns of both disciplines are not at all unrelated. After consulting the opinions of my teachers and friends, I would like to take this opportunity to share some views on this topic.

### **Not an Ivory Tower**

First of all, what is church? Church is not, or should not be, an ivory tower. At least, the Christian Church is not. Perhaps, our faith life consists of attending Mass on Sundays. Or, if we are more devout, we may join some pious associations. For those interested in faith communities, faith life involves joining basic Christian communities. For those with a more rational drive, it is to study theology. Or, according to one's own gifts, faith life is to contribute with one's gifts... Doing any or all of these is already a very good thing.

However, Christianity has an inborn quality, namely, its social character. Since Old Testament times, no prophet ignored social questions. The prophets were not only the spokespeople for God; they also took on the responsibility of championing social justice. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians undertook the mission of bringing the Gospel to the world. In contrast to the intense social divisions in the society of those times, the proclamation of the Gospel to the world implanted the need to break social boundaries, promote equality and an equal right to salvation for all.

The theme, "God loves people" includes a love for all social classes. If we say that the Church has inherited Christ's mission of redemption, then to neglect the weak, such as the victims of discrimination, the poor or those who are being unjustly treated, does not make sense. God loves men and women and cares for all. Since the inherited mission of redemption is for all without exception and since the work of redemption also includes working for justice, the Church can never be excused from the promotion of social justice.

### **Theology Itself Possesses Social Factors**

The next question is, What is theology? In this article we give no absolute definition. However, liberation theology, feminist theology, Asian theology, contextual theology and political theology all arose in response to specific social conditions or social issues. Basically, Christian theologies arose from questions raised by certain people at a certain period of time. Who raises what questions at what time depends on the actual context, the concerns of the public, the role of the Church in society, etc. These also involve, to a certain degree, social, cultural and historic factors. For example, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ is a belief firmly held by the Church. It is the core and the unchangeable heart of Christian faith. Later on, questions about creation, Christology, salvation, etc., formed the bases of a systematic theology. Catholic social teachings grew out of the disadvantaged position of labor during the later period of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, the later tension between capitalism and socialism and the challenge of the Second World War. Upon a foundation of eternal truths, we integrate certain social, cultural and historic factors and develop a theology as a relevant guide to living.

### **Holistic Faith**

Faith is exemplified in three types (1). The first is to treat faith as an ultimate or transcendent, rational exploration. It focuses on the intellect for understanding and comprehending the truth. It inclines towards proving, analyzing and understanding truth. If the rational framework is over-emphasized, faith will easily become too rationalistic, become a type of rational knowledge, even a type of rational framework that is cold and divided from personal experience.

The second type is to treat faith as a sentimental feeling of trust, which solely concerns the relationship between an individual and God and about the moment when one is touched by God. Without a rational foundation, such a faith will lose direction and end in confusion. Overstressing sentimental experiences will suffocate autonomy, critical thinking and an ability to make objective judgements, will individualize faith and result in a loss of social responsibility.

The third type is to treat faith as behavior, focusing on participation and experience. Faith should include participation in history, the proclamation of one's own belief, the praxis of one's own proclamation. This means that praxis is an indispensable part of faith life. Only by participating in human history, does faith exemplify its concrete meaning in human society.

After all, an effective understanding of the Bible and the Church can only flow out of its relation to history and actual participation in life.

In view of this, faith demands praxis. Heaven on earth is not just a theory, nor an accumulation of knowledge. On the contrary, it demands participation and praxis. We need actively to participate in the life of our society and integrate faith with praxis.

## **Principles of the Church**

If theology and social issues share a common ground, then what will the content of this common ground be? In the eyes of the Church, it is the human being.

Human beings are the foundation, the center and the focus for all communities, societies, nations, economic and political systems. Take development for example. It does not only mean economic development, such as, the richer the material resources in a society, the more advanced the scientific research, the more cumulative the society's wealth, the more the towns grow into large urban complexes... Although these are the content for development, the overall development of human beings cannot only be confined to these. We also need development in the area of morals. Human behavior needs ethical guidance. Human rights should be seriously valued and respected. Society is formed for the good of human beings so that any society, which fails in its respect for human beings, will not be able to foster the development of human dignity. Environmental protection is also important since natural resources are not for us to abuse and human beings are the most affected by pollution (2).

Another issue is the distribution of resources. The resources on earth originally belong to all and no one has the right to claim exclusive ownership at the expense of others. However, in today the world's resources are very unevenly distributed. The rich northern countries, which consist of a quarter of the world's population, consume eighty percent of global resources. The poor southern

countries, on the other hand, make up three quarters of the world population but consume only twenty percent of global resources. Imbalance in trade makes this situation even worse. Transnational corporations buy raw materials cheaply from the places of production but sell the labor-added products expensively back to these same places to make a large profit. Eventually, these areas of primary production become poorer. These are injustices in the distribution of resources and in international trade (3).

Moreover, workers are more important than the work they do. Human beings are the subjects of work. The function of work cannot be confined to money-making but must also provide opportunities for self-development. Salary needs to be enough to make a living for oneself and one's family in dignity. There should, then, be a policy for income maintenance. One should have the freedom to join a labor union for the pursuit of one's rights using reasonable means. The government should provide unemployment protection, plan for the visionary development of society and balance out the unequal relationship between workers and employers (4).

There needs to be a preferential option for the poor. We need to stand on their side. This is a way of practicing Christian love. The poverty of the Third World has originated from the loss of fertile farmland to producing food for western countries, compounded with wars, corrupt governments as well as the control of markets and the pressure for profits by giant transnational corporations. These are issues of social justice. To stand on the side of the poor is to be familiar with the problem of poverty. It involves more than an individual's desire for work and one's mode of consumption but also awareness and concern for the structural injustices in society and systems. To alleviate, or even to be aware of, injustices needs a firm commitment to social reform.

Above are merely some examples to demonstrate how the Church establishes a common ground for dialogue in social matters and provides some guidelines for the integration of Christian faith with modern society. The use of Christian theology to discuss social affairs is not only possible but also essential. Of course, it is not an easy thing to do since it involves knowledge of many disciplines. At least, the faithful need to understand and become aware of this as something integral to Christianity and as an indispensable part of our faith life.

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(1)Regarding the three types of faith exemplification, cf. Avery Dulles, S. J., *The Meaning of Faith: Considered in Relationship to Justice*.

(2)Concerning the meaning of development, cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.

(3)See the "Poverty and Famine" educational package published by Oxfam (in Chinese).

(4)Concerning the appeals of labour rights, cf. *Laborem Exercens*.