

1-1-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Beal, Tarcisio (2006) "LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AS THE ESSENCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND OF CHRISTIANITY," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol1/iss1/10>

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# LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AS THE ESSENCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND OF CHRISTIANITY

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“God is that very love with which we love one another.”

(St. Augustine)

“The Church is and wants to be a church of all, but mainly a church of the poor.”

(Pope John XXIII)

“The option for the poor is, for Jesus, a central and decisive criterion for salvation: the love of the poor cannot be separated from the love of God.”

(Segundo Galilea)

“The option for the poor is the root of the political dimension of the faith and its most fundamental characteristic.”

(Oscar Arnulfo Romero, martyred Archbishop of El Salvador)

## *Abstract*

*Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century runs the risk of becoming just another religion if it keeps distancing itself farther and farther from its Jesuan and apostolic origins which must always remain as the benchmarks for evaluating its authenticity. The temptation has always been, and continues to be, to accommodate itself to the ways of the world, to go for earthly success, numbers of converts, power, security etc. Already in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century this accommodation began to shape the Constantinian turnaround that made the Christian church an ally of the Roman state and of the rich and powerful in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. It encountered resistance, however, and the Good News of Jesus announced to the poor and the weak was preserved intact by many Christian communities; hence the many reform movements and saintly lives which, throughout the centuries, have constantly tried to return to the pristine example of the church of the first two centuries. The church's faithfulness to the Good News of the Reign announced to the poor, now usually referred to as the “preferential option for the poor,” will always remain as the one unique trait that translates Jesus' central command to “love thy neighbor as thyself (Mt 5: 42-48; 12: 19; 19: 22, 39-40; Jn 13: 34-35; 15: 12-17; Rm 13: 8-10; 1 Cor 13: 1-18). This faithfulness in fashioning God's Reign cannot be genuine unless Christianity upholds and exemplifies the example of Jesus in terms of insisting that the wealth of the earth must benefit all of God's children and that poverty is the result of injustice.*

## **Introduction**

If Jesus came back to earth to visit some Christian communities today, would He commend them for their magnificent liturgies, their Gospel revivals, their many hours spent in Sunday worship, and their gatherings in mega churches to listen to spell-binding preachers who make them feel good by speaking of a Son of Mary not found in the Scriptures? Or would He be hardly recognized and treated as a dangerous lunatic who speaks of a God quite different from the god these Christians worship?

In the history of Christianity, perhaps no other aspect of its substance has been more misrepresented and accommodated to the powers of this world than the teachings and the praxis of Jesus regarding material wealth and the works of mercy. It is an embarrassing realization, for they spell out the Christian concept of social justice and brotherhood which are the very cornerstone, the very essence, of Christianity. They intertwine time and eternity, spirituality and corporeality, the Reign of God as a reality here-and-now and a future of everlasting bliss. Immortality of the soul is not a Christian novelty, for it was found in some ancient religions and in Greek philosophy, and it entered Christianity with some difficulty. The Christian novelty is the belief in the resurrection of the body, a belief Catholics affirm every Sunday in mass while reciting the Creed of the Apostles. This has been the ultimate reason why the Christian church has always rejected abortion, the exposure of the newborn, gladiatorial combats and duels, adultery, and divorce, all viewed as sins against the dignity of a body destined for immortality (Hoornaert, 1986, p. 248).

My contention is that any form of spirituality which is not somehow tied to the needs of the human body, of the human person, is not truly Christian and is not faithful to the example of Jesus. Already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Marcion remarked that Jesus' sensibility toward the poor was the greatest proof of his divinity (Tertullian, 1879, fol. 3, 3.1). Christian piety has been a unique phenomenon in the history of religions because it relates the humblest service to the body of the wretched to the coming of God's Reign of justice and solidarity and to the service and worship of our Lord Jesus. "Love thy neighbor" is the only sacrament absolutely necessary for salvation. In our neighbor in need we find Jesus; therefore salvation hinges on this love, period (see the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25). Everything else is good and is commendable but loses its meaning and effectiveness without the "love of neighbor."

### **The Praxis of Early Christianity**

Contemporary biblical scholarship leaves little doubt as to who were the early Christians. They organized themselves in small communities and met in their homes to worship and to share their faith and their goods. They were migrants, slaves, women, people without Roman citizenship, without support, without influence, the mudsill of society. Their nuclei were called parishes, a term coined from *paroikos*, i. e., a foreigner without citizenship (Peter 1: 1; Eph 2: 19). Rejected by society, they began constructing a new kind of community based on brotherhood and sharing, stirred by the memory of *Exodus*, of the Prophets, of Jesus, and of the eschatological hope of God's Reign (2 Peter 3: 13; Phil. 3: 20; Col 3: 1-2; Heb 13: 14). Their Jesus is a marginal person, born in *Nowheresville*, whose first friends are despised people (shepherds and magi). He is recognized and worshipped by two marginals in the Temple (Simon and Anna, both living between life and death). Because He does not marry, He finds himself outside the mainstream of Jewish society. He does not belong to any theological school; He lives with fishermen and peasants, meets publicly first with a Jewish marginal (John the Baptist), and devotes his life to the rejected of society. He does not like the rich because their abundance in the midst of wretched poverty and social injustice cries out to heaven

for justice. He is tempted by power, which he rejects as the tool of the lords of this world and calls blessed those who live on the margin. He inverts most of what is seen as normal and accepted by society, and He is a Galilean who confronts the power center of the Temple and is ultimately sentenced to crucifixion as an enemy of the state (Hoornaert, 1986, pp. 43-47). Does anyone wish to know the real Jesus? Let him/her go to Galilee, not to Jerusalem, not to Rome! (Mk 16: 7).

It has been an error of many historians to say that, until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity appealed mostly to the educated elite of the Roman empire (Chodorow et al., 1994, p. 119). First-century Roman historians (Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius) state quite the opposite: as a whole, Christians were a marginal group, a group often used as scapegoats by unscrupulous emperors and proconsuls. Celsus (*True Discourse*, written in 170 C. E.) describes Jesus as a “vagabond, a marginal who crossed the country with ten or eleven followers from the mud of society, socializing with fishermen and publicans, making a precarious living; an opponent of the rich, he died an infamous death after an infamous life” (in Hoornaert, 1986, pp. 46-47). Celsus also insistently points to the marginality of the Christians who -- he says -- do everything upside down: find wisdom in madness, prefer ignorance to learning, and slavery to social status; they refuse to serve the state, and recruit their membership from the poor, women, and children (Hoornaert, 1986, p. 48).

### **A Theology of Marginality**

There is no surprise, then, in the fact that the early followers of the Nazarene elaborated a theology of God’s election of the marginalized that was grounded on the praxis of Jesus and the God of the Poor of the great Hebrew prophets. In fact, the more the church expanded its membership and drew near the centers of power, the more apparent became the contrast between the communities that kept intact the memory of Jesus as described above and clearly outlined in the Gospel of Mark on one side, and the communities and leaders who worked out a compromise with the world on the other. The Apostle Paul, St. Justin Martyr (d. 165 C. E.), and the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Church Fathers Irinaeus of Lyon and Tertullian of Carthage were among the strongest voices of this theology of marginality. They defended the faith of the poor and simple in face of the assault of the powerful and the learned. Yes, Justin was an intellectual, but he refused to do what his contemporary Clement of Alexandria did, namely, to justify Christianity before the Roman-Hellenistic philosophy and before the state; instead, he preached, like Paul, the wisdom of the Cross, which was scandal and foolishness to the world. The martyrs and saints of the first four centuries were laborers, poor hermits, soldiers turned peacemakers, women living in the periphery of Roman society; rich people converted to a life of prayers and works of mercy; charitable married men elected as leaders of the Christian community: all people who lived on the margins. The Christian community was one where everyone was an apostle (i.e., a missionary) and everyone took care to preserve the memory of Jesus, a task specifically coordinated by the presbyters (elders). Thus, all kinds of people entered Christianity, but all went through a *metanoia* (a conversion), spiritually and in lifestyle, as did Paul, Justin, Irinaeus, and Tertullian. They became the “organic intellectuals” of a truly popular movement (Hoornaert, 1986, p. 90).

This “theology of marginality” was dominant in the early Syrian, North African, and Ethiopian churches. The Syrian church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, centered in Antioch (where the term “Christian” was first coined) was a church of the poor. It emphasized self-denial, frugal living, poverty, solidarity, and humility. It was first in producing the iconography of the cross, which was repugnant to the Hellenized, elitist, and imperial iconography of Constantinople.

Also markedly popular was the North African church outside of the Hellenistic influence of Alexandria. Led by Carthage, it used the popular languages of the region, translated the Bible before St. Jerome prepared the *Vulgate*, and introduced terms such as *sacrament*, *Trinity*, *incarnation*, *confession*, *Holy Scripture*, *pagan* (someone living outside the city, in a *pago* or village), *gentile*, *papa* (“daddy,” for a presbyter or a bishop/overseer). The African church of the poor was violently shaken by the religious and civil wars of Donatism and Pelagianism (410-412), then hit again by the Vandals (430) and finally erased by the Muslim conquerors in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Chadwick, 1954, p. 275).

Also fascinating is the history of the Ethiopian church which was formed in late 4<sup>th</sup> century: widely popular, it resurrected the language of the common people (*ge'ez*) and included among its Scriptures the *Book of Enoch*, one of the sharpest critics of the powerful, the rich, and the exploiters of the poor. It possessed an incipient “theology of liberation” based on the principle that “where injustice disappears, there God reigns.” Popular dances and other features of Ethiopian/Abyssinian culture were incorporated into cultic worship (Hoornaert, 1986, p.122).

### **The Imperial Theology of the Alexandrian Church**

So why did the Christian church become the privileged religion of the Roman empire by 380 C. E.? Clearly the early 4<sup>th</sup> century turnaround regarding the social position of Christianity began with Constantine’s Edict of Toleration, which placed Christianity on par with the other religions of the empire and made the Christian bishops judges in the civil courts, wearing the *regalia* of Roman officials. In 380, Emperor Theodosius proclaimed Christianity the only legal religion of the empire.

The great Russian historian Rostovtzeff notes that a major shift in ancient Western society actually began to take place with the surge of Hellenism after the death of Alexander the Great (323 B. C. E.). The Hellenization of the of the socio-economic and political structures of Egypt, where the central metropolis of Alexandria radiated its influence eastward and westward, imposed the language and the thinking of Hellenism and began marginalizing popular languages and cultures. It was Christianity that ended up preserving the languages of the common people. The Greek elite gained control, whereas the Egyptian masses were treated as dogs and slaves. This Hellenized Egyptian model was later adapted by the Roman empire in the days of Diocletian (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century C. E.) and Constantine. The goal of the state went from taking responsibility for the wellbeing of the population to the strengthening of its own power. Thus, in late 3<sup>rd</sup>

century C. E., a social revolution from the top destroyed the economic, social, and intellectual foundations of the ancient world and replaced them with a state based on ignorance, coercion and violence, slavery and servility, corruption and venality. Henceforth the dominant elites would be aristocratic and exclusive, anchoring themselves on the state in order to keep a stranglehold on society (Rostovtzeff, 1933, II, pp. 327, 331, 365-366; 1957, I, pp. 53 ff). Then, with the advent of capitalism after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the middle classes were gradually co-opted into doing the same.

The fascination with Greek philosophy, the impact of the Zoroastrian beliefs of Manichaeism and Gnosticism, and the proximity to an all-powerful state led some Christian intellectuals to reinterpret the Good News of Jesus long before the church's alliance with the Roman state. The most prominent of these Christian intellectuals was Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215).

A native of Athens, Clement proposed the thesis of the Christian *gnosis*. Justin, Tertullian, and Irianeus had defended the wisdom/knowledge of the poor in matters of faith. Clement deemed them second-class Christians, wanting in superior knowledge, without an understanding of the faith that was seen as out of the reach of the simple and uneducated. Clement ignored the Coptics, the peasants, the shopkeepers, and the artisans, that is, the majority of the Christians. He worked out of the *museion* (the world's greatest library in Alexandria) and did not mingle with the people of God. He presented the *gnostic* as God's favorite and placed him above the angels. For Clement, only the few who had received the oral tradition/teaching of the Apostles qualified as God's intimate friends. The *gnostic* knows everything and is part of the church's hierarchy (Stromateis, 1879, IV, fol. 97-114; VI, fol. 15, 1). Clement believed that even in heaven the ignorant Christian is separated from God by an abyss, while the *gnostic* dwells next to God's throne because he was the worthiest of all believers:

It is our business then to prove that the Gnostic alone is holy and pious, worshipping the true God as befits him...[The true Gnostic] leaving behind all hindrances and scorning all the distractions of matter, cleaves the heaven by his wisdom, and having passed through the spiritual entities and every rule of authority, lays hold of the throne on high, which alone he knows. (*Stromateis*, 1879, VII, fol. 2, 82).

Clement suffered the influence of Philo's Neoplatonism and saw Greek philosophy, which is eminently elitist, as part of divine Revelation. He speaks of two conversions: one from gentility to the Christian faith, the other from faith to *gnosis*, God's special disclosure which is accorded only to the privileged minds (*Stromateis*, 1879, I, fol. 99, 1). More than any other early Church Father, he set the stage for the justification of the Constantinian church of worldly power. Oddly enough, he wanted Christians to stay out of politics (Paidagogos, 1879, III, fol. 54). Theologian Eduardo Hoornaert contends that Clement set the stage for a bourgeois Christianity that would be palatable to the political power brokers because of its depoliticized reading of the Scriptures (Hoornaert, 1986, pp. 131-133).

## The Righteousness of God's Reign

Clement of Alexandria's theology of the *gnosis* and of intellectualism clearly veered away from the example of Jesus and the praxis of the early church. The Gospel of Mark makes it quite clear that the Good News of Jesus was proclaimed first and foremost to the poor and the needy:

The disciples of John gave him all this news [about Jesus' ministry] and John, summoning two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or must we await for someone else?" When the men reached Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, to ask, "Are you the one who is to come or have we to wait for someone else?" It was just then that He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and of evil spirits, and gave the gift of sight to many who were blind. Then He gave the messengers their answer: "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, **the Good News is proclaimed to the poor** and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me" (Mk 7: 8-23).

Whenever Jesus spoke of the Reign, and He did so frequently, He was not referring to a refuge, a haven, a place of rest, not even solely of rewards in the afterlife. Rather, He was pointing to a collective practice of service, a reality brought about by human hands through the power of God. Jesus articulates the mystery of the Reign in utterly mundane terms, in the language of the poor and the simple: "This is what the Reign of God is like... (Mt 4: 26). Mark's story of Jesus constantly places him in the concrete social surroundings of first-century Palestine: land and table, house and village, orchards and vineyards, deserts and wells, lake and mountainside, synagogue and Temple. It signals Jesus' strategy of applying the reality of God's Reign to the whole of public life (Myers, 1991, pp. 173-184).

The Reign is a prophecy, the foretelling of a future event that is beginning to happen. It is especially spelled out in the *Beatitudes* (Lk 6: 2-21), which should not be interpreted as referring solely to rewards in heaven but rather to a new heaven and a new earth down here for human beings. Matthew -- notes South African theologian Albert Nolan -- turns the prophecy into an exhortation, signaling that the promises and blessings of the Reign are extended to all who are poor in spirit, i.e., humble and open to God's Reign of righteousness, who work for justice, who imitate the lowliness and the meekness of the poor; to the sad, the depressed, and the persecuted because of their following of Jesus; to all, in short, who are virtuous (Nolan, 1988, pp. 45-46) because they have welcomed the Good News in their lives (Mt 5: 1-12). "The signs of the Reign, then, are the earthly vision of a new order of things in which all may 'eat and be satisfied'" (Myers, 1991, pp. 402-403).

### Table Fellowship and Communion of Goods

One of the most questionable interpretations of the Gospels is to say that Jesus preached a Reign of God for the afterlife, of the salvation of the soul, of spiritual bliss, that "his Reign is not of this world." Anyone who comes to know the real Jesus of

history will think otherwise. Jesus wanted and proposed a new order of society, a blueprint that ultimately cost him his life. His strategy was to address the broad picture of society by proposing a reversal of dominant values that constantly pitted the oppressors against the oppressed. The dawning of the Reign of God was to bring an end to those values which were wrecking people's lives (Lk 8: 7-21). His approach was the intimate relationship of table fellowship. By consorting, eating, and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, many of them women, Jesus challenged the contemporary patriarchal values based on Temple purity. As a consequence, He was labeled a winebibber, a glutton, and a friend of undesirables (Lk 7: 33; Mt 11: 18) (Freyne, 1997, pp. 98-201).

The Gospels narrate many episodes about Jesus sitting at the table with all sorts of people: Pharisees, sinners (publicans/tax collectors, prostitutes, peasants, those sick of body and soul), and his disciples. A meal together, in full equality, in dialogue with everyone, weaving parables of the Reign that sewed together the reality of his listeners with the mercy and solidarity of God toward all who were considered sinners by a society of castes -- that was the style of Jesus' table fellowship. He turned the meal and the table into a sacred moment and God's locale *par excellence*. Unfortunately, the ritualization of the Eucharist has often deprived the sacrament of its true meaning as the bond of solidarity, community-sharing, and community building that was the hallmark of the early Christian church. The sharing of goods was an established practice of the early Christian communities. Hermas (2<sup>nd</sup> century) says that those who did not abandon their riches could not participate in the celebration of the mysteries, in the worship of the community (3<sup>rd</sup> vision, 6, 5-7). Here is what we read in the *Acts of the Apostles*:

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own anything he had, as everything they owned was held in common... **None of their members was ever in want**, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need (Acts 4: 32, 34-35).

Theologian Richard Horsley notes that what Jesus proposed was not an abstract model, but rather a model of kinship based on the concrete socioeconomic reality of a local community where there is one "father" and all are siblings:

In circumstances of widespread disintegration of traditional patriarchal institutions, particularly the patriarchal family and its ruling mechanisms of Temple and *Torah* - enforced through the "Scribes and Pharisees" - Jesus and his movement offered the alternative of familial communities, not of physical kinship of blood ties, but "whoever does the will of my Father is my brother, and sister, and mother..." Mk 3: 35 (Horsley, 1987, p. 87).

The story of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes shows Jesus teaching us how to share. In fact, the story of the "multiplication" of the loaves and fishes, which Jesus performed twice, is recounted by all four evangelists and it has puzzled many biblical scholars who have suggested an interpretation different from the traditional one. What Jesus did - according to this new reading - was still startling and miraculous because it



contradicted Jewish customs and cultural taboos, especially those connected with the rites of cleanliness.

We all know the story (Mk 6: 35-44; 8: 1-10; Lk 9: 10-17; Mt 14: 13-21; 32-39; Jn 6: 1-14): Jesus found himself out in the wilderness surrounded by a hungry multitude in the midst of whom were many who had brought no food for the journey. Jesus took pity on them, for they had not eaten for many hours and were far away from any food market. He knew that something had to be done. Now, Jewish customs and social regulations about cleanliness and health deemed the sharing of food inappropriate and dangerous. Jesus, however, was thinking only of the needs of the people and so, unexpectedly and to the amazement of the disciples, He invited those who brought food to gather it into one common pool, then ordered the disciples to distribute it to the crowd. Everyone ate enough and there were plenty of leftovers (Mk 6: 44; 8: 9, 9-10; Lk 9: 17; Mt 14: 21; 15: 38; Jn 6: 12-13).

Thus, the real miracle was the sharing, never done before, which actually multiplied the availability of the loaves and the fishes. The evangelists -- notes Albert Nolan -- never explicitly say that it was a "miracle of multiplication." Their narrative does not carry the usual New Testament comments about popular reaction to the miracles of Jesus, namely, that the people were "amazed, astonished, dumbfounded." (Nolan, 1988, pp. 51-52). In fact, Mark simply states that "his disciples did not understand" (Mk 6: 52; 8: 17-18, 21). I believe Jesus was setting the example that became the standard for the early Christian community, that which is reported in the *Acts of the Apostles* (4: 32-35).

### **Wealth and the Reign of God**

It is within this context of solidarity and sharing as the cornerstones of the Reign of God that one must understand the episode of the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man. Jesus took to heart the command from *Deuteronomy*: "There shall be no poor in your midst" (Deut 15: 4). He viewed the worship of money ("Mammon" or "Baal" are the biblical terms) as idolatry and as frontally opposed to the designs of the Reign (Mt 6: 24; Mk 4: 19; Lk 6: 13). Here is where Christian churches, hierarchs, preachers, and biblical commentators have seriously betrayed the Good News of Jesus and, consequently, have failed and continue to fail to stand consistently and unequivocally on the side of the poor and the needy, the migrant, and the immigrant, the sick and the oppressed.

The Bible's concept of justice is quite different from the capitalist concept of justice. The prophet Amos compares the justice of God to a rushing mountain river which clears everything out of its way (Amos 5: 2), everything that perpetuates oppression, discrimination, and poverty. The more the prevailing form of capitalism fails to deliver in its promises of an earthly, material Utopia, the more it is praised and defended as "the world's only supremely moral system" (Salsman, 2006 : Wolf, 2003, pp. 47-50). Christians have for centuries failed to shape society according to the designs of God's Reign partly because they failed to grasp the dialectical interplay which exists between individual/personal actions/intentions and institutional dynamics. Personal conversion

and renewal were constantly emphasized while revamping of structures was overlooked. The concept of social/structural injustice and sin escaped the apostle Paul as it escaped Church leaders until Vatican II. For centuries the Catholic Church helped build and support social and governmental institutions of veiled violence and injustice which grind out the poor and the weak while resorting to moral preaching and piecemeal assistentialism. Thus, justice was replaced by charity or a handout while structural violence was solidified. The traditional understanding was that sin and evil stemmed from individual and personal failings only, so the Church endeavored to educate individual consciences.

The new awareness of social sin and institutional violence was forcefully stated by Pope John Paul II in his December 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*:

“Sin” and “structures of sin” are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the evils that afflict us... This general analysis, which is religious in nature, can be supplemented by a number of particular considerations to demonstrate that among the actions and attitudes opposed to the will of God, the good of the neighbor and “the structures” created by them, two are typical: on the one hand, the all-encompassing desire for profit, and on the other, the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one’s will upon others (Nos. 36 & 37).

One of the first contemporary theologians to analyze the contemporary structures of violence was the Salvadoran Jesuit Ignazio Ellacuría, who was martyred by the Security Forces of El Salvador in 1989 for the crime of speaking in defense of the poor and of the victims of violence and war. For a Christian -- he said -- the proper way to address injustice and violence is through the “violence of the Cross,” which is animated by love, not hatred. We must -- he continued -- avoid two errors: (1) that all we need is to destroy the present structures and create a new world, while overlooking the need for the concomitant conversion of individuals and (2) that there is no need to effect fundamental changes because the problem is merely one of good intentions (Ellacuría, 1976, p. 208).

For Ellacuría, for Dorothy Day, the great apostle of working-class America, and for all Christians committed to God’s Reign on earth, the present structures of injustice and oppression cannot be overcome without the redemptive power of the Cross, which represents a certain form of necessary violence. This is so because there must be a confrontation with the structures of sin, as was done by Martin Luther King and the African-American Church of the United States in their head-on confrontation with the violence and the evil of racism in American society.

Furthermore, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dorothy Day, a staunch Catholic and daughter of the Church, reminded us that spirituality and social justice must be found together in order to draw the fruits of the Spirit:

We are working for a new heaven and “a new earth, wherein justice dwelleth.”  
We are trying to say with action, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!”  
We are working for a Christian social order (Cornell et al., 1995, p. 31).

Dorothy Day prized the grand Catholic Tradition of incarnation and sacramental spirituality; of angels and saints. of the gifts and action of the Spirit: of sound doctrine and fidelity to the Mother Church: of a relational spirituality that combines the social and the personal at all times; of a commitment to nonviolent resistance against unjust economic and military systems, and even of bearing witness against Church officials who betray the Gospel of Jesus. When in 1964 she and her friends within the Catholic Worker Movement stood up against racism in Los Angeles and sought to bring all ethnic groups together and the Cardinal, Auxiliary Bishop, and clergy of the Archdiocese refused to go along and even prohibited the continuation of Dorothy's efforts, she scolded them in this manner:

Maybe they are terrified, these Princes of the Church... [yet], where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ. one flesh with Christ? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother!" (Cornell et al., 1995. p. 164).

### **Conclusion**

We live in a society which seems to believe that it is economically good to have a certain percentage of unemployment and a few million families living in poverty, hunger, and wretchedness. The number of America's hungry is around 28 million today (23.3 million in 2005), an increase of more than 18 per cent over 1997 and 8 per cent over 2001 (*National Catholic Reporter*, March 10, 2006). Our beloved city of San Antonio, Texas, will not erase the shame of having 20,000-plus homeless in the midst of enormous abundance and waste if it does not work to restore their dignity by welcoming and integrating them into our society as brothers and sisters in whom we meet Jesus himself. At this very moment, the San Antonio Housing Authority is caving in to those who refuse to welcome the poor into their up-scale neighborhoods for fear that the poor will downgrade their life style and decrease the value of their property (Wilson, *Express-News*, November 15, 2006). We continue to place property and our comfort above our Christian commitment, yet we dare to call ourselves Christians. Is this what Jesus asked us to do? Where are our religious leaders when we need them to speak up? If they are not counter-cultural as Jesus was. what do we need them for?

The story of the rich young man who passed up his opportunity to enter the Reign because he could not give up his comfortable lifestyle has some startling implications. Mark, Matthew, and Luke twice (Mk 10: 17-30; Mt 19: 16-22; Lk 12: 13-15; 18: 18-23) would not have included this episode in their Gospels had it not taken place. Jesus clearly says that the Reign is of the poor and it excludes the rich as long as they remain rich while their neighbors are wanting (Mk 10: 25; Mk 24: 26, 26-27; Lk 6: 20-26); and if the rich parted with their wealth -- says Jesus -- that would be a miracle.

The accommodation or softening of the stance taken by Jesus regarding the rich by church authorities, theologians, and preachers of the Gospels has been going on for too many centuries. In fact, it began as soon as intellectuals started understanding and interpreting Christianity from the perspective of the Hellenistic, elitist worldview, and it became quite common after Emperor Constantine made the church an ally of the state.

Again, Clement of Alexandria was the first to write specifically and at length about the implications of Jesus' advice to the rich young man in his *The Rich Man's Salvation*. It was he who interpreted the *Beatitudes*' "poor in spirit" as detachment from earthly riches and as "spiritual poverty" (Clement of Alexandria, 1919, pp. 303, 305). He even argues in favor of the rich remaining rich by saying that "if nobody had anything, what sharing would be left among men?" (Clement of Alexandria, 1919, p. 295). It sounds like saying that poverty is necessary to give the rich an opportunity to enter heaven. Actually, Clement did that which has become the usual approach to hunger and poverty, namely, the replacement of fundamental justice for almsgiving.

In this country, the number of the poor and hungry keeps on growing in the midst of scandalous luxury and waste while we continue to sing the glories of a system which is bankrupt and inherently ungodly. Now the U. S. Department of Agriculture tries to hide the tragedy of hunger by omitting it from its reports. The 28 million people who do not have enough to eat from one day to the other are ingeniously described as "experiencing very low food security" (*San Antonio Express News*, November 23, 2006). In 1989, concerned citizens sued the State of Texas for refusing to comply with a federal mandate that ordered all states to provide health care for the poorest children. Texas state officials refused to comply despite legal injunctions from the federal courts and a unanimous Supreme Court order in 1993. Today Texas still has 2.8 million children (one third of the children in the State) without basic health care (Carlos Guerra, 2007, pp. 1B, 3B). Texas gets an A (among the top five States) for economic vitality, yet it is rated an F (bottom five among the fifty States of the Union) in sharing its wealth with the people at large (*San Antonio Express News*, January 19, 2007, pp. 1C, 6C). New York's Manhattan store of *Karl Kemp & Associates* just sued four homeless men for \$1 million dollars because they are sleeping on the sidewalk of Madison Avenue, in front of their business (*San Antonio Express News*, January 19, 2007). Cartoonist Henry Bliss paints a sad picture of our society by portraying a well-to-do American walking by a homeless beggar and excusing himself from helping him by saying: "Sorry, I spent all my money on Christmas decorations!" (Bliss, *San Antonio Express News*, December 30, 2006).

As long as we continue to place the ethics of acquisition and of individualism before the ethics of sharing and the common wellbeing, we have no right to call ourselves Christian or even human. Jesus gave us the blueprint for building a better world. It is high time we put aside the rhetoric and get on with the praxis of the Reign of God as exemplified by Jesus. A good way to start is to turn the Eucharist, the very center of our worship, into the transforming power of the community. Rather than focus on the species of bread and wine, we should focus on the sacramental, mystical, yet real presence of the One who makes us all into one body. For the early church, the miracle of the Eucharist was not the transformation of the species of bread and wine into the Body of Christ but rather the transformation of the community into the Body of Christ. It effected the mystery of the Incarnation in the disciples of the Nazarene.

Secondly, we should pray more often to the Holy Spirit, whose very name means action. Too many of our prayers are moot because they ask God to take care of the poor, instead of asking the Holy Spirit to empower us to do it. God has chosen to build his

Reign with the insufficiency and the weakness of human beings helping human beings. He/She does his/her will through us. Thus, we should not ask God to feed the poor and stop injustice. We should, instead, ask him/her to give us the courage and the fortitude to band together to do, within our specific circumstances, what Jesus would do if He were in our place.

Whenever we have any doubts about what to do, how to go about facing any problem in human relations, we ought to ask the ultimate question. “What would Jesus do?” By doing so we will build a society of love and happiness. Pe. Zezinho, SCJ, who has worked for decades with the poor in the periphery of the city of São Paulo, Brazil, thus answers the question, “What is needed for happiness?,” in one of his popular songs (Pe. Zezinho, CD. n. d. ):

**Amar como Jesus Amou**

Amar como Jesus amou;  
 Sonhar como Jesus sonhou;  
 Pensar como Jesus pensou;  
 Viver como Jesus viveu;  
 Sentir como Jesus sentiu;  
 Sorrir como Jesus sorria,  
 E ao chegar o fim do dia  
 Eu sei que eu dormiria muito mais feliz!

**To Love as Jesus Loved**

To love as Jesus loved;  
 To dream as Jesus dreamt;  
 To think as Jesus thought;  
 To live as Jesus lived;  
 To feel as Jesus felt;  
 To smile as Jesus smiled,  
 And by the end of the day  
 I know I would sleep so much happier!

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