

Hoping Against Hope: obstacles to the option

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In his inspiring and moving reflections on the church in Latin America Jon Sobrino can speak of that church as an identifiable and representative community; identifiable in the struggle against poverty and injustice, representative of many different sections of society:

In the Church of the poor the age-old barriers between hierarchy and faithful, priests and workers, peasants and intellectuals, have broken down... In this solidarity there is a sharing of the word ... There is a sharing of the yearning for liberation and of the various struggles that lead to liberation ... There is a sharing of hopes and successes. Above all, there is a sharing of what formerly had been the tragic destiny of the poor alone: martyrdom and persecution.¹

In England there are obviously Catholics who are living an option for the poor, without necessarily appealing to the example of Latin America. During the last few years I have witnessed the commitment to the homeless at Mary and Joseph House in Central Manchester; kept in touch with efforts to improve race relations in Leicester; seen the diversification of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society's work for the poor at the east end of Newcastle; and been drawn into what seems to be an unceasing quest on behalf of the third world by Justice and Peace groups in Nantwich and Surrey. But, despite such options for the poor in different parts of the country, I do not believe that the Roman Catholic Church as 'an identifiable and representative community' will take an option for England's poor.

I would, then, accept what must seem very harsh conclusions by Michael Hornsby-Smith:

There is no evidence that English Catholics are likely to mount a sustained attack on the weaknesses and injustices of our form of mixed economy and representative democracy ... The powerful in Britain can sleep safely, confident that there will be no prophetic uprising of five and a half million Catholics determined to bring the Good News to the poor.²

In this article I am outlining what I think to be the obstacles that are stopping England's Catholics as a community from taking the option. I

am, note, talking about 'England' rather than Britain' only because most of the data and experience on which what I say is based comes from England.

Resistance to community

In *Theology after Wittgenstein* Fergus Kerr eloquently and persuasively argues for the priority of the community dimension over against 'the post-Cartesian preoccupation with the individual subject of mental states and events': 'The point of (Wittgenstein's) exploring the private and private language is to retrieve the natural expressiveness of the human body, and to reaffirm the indispensability of belonging to a community.'³ In Western philosophy and theology there is a 'myth of the isolated wordless "I"', a myth which has 'continuing power'; even in the work of well-known contemporary theologians 'the starting point is naturally assumed to be the individual'.⁴

Much of Kerr's book echoes recent writings and practices by Catholics in Latin America who have made an option for the poor.⁵ But it also highlights different starting points, different presuppositions, which make an option for the poor or the creation of a church of the poor so much more difficult in England. In my experience the 'natural expressiveness of the human body' and the 'indispensability of belonging to a community' do not have to be retrieved in the daily lives and celebrations of people in Peru. They are there—inescapably, inevitably—in many varied expressions: in the food kitchens springing up across Lima to combat hunger, in cooperatives, in provincial customs and folk-lore which take root even in the desert of the shanty towns, in religious festivals.

The following incident highlights how the starting point in Latin America can be very different from that 'of the individual':

Western therapy, with its emphasis on the individual, was also seen to be inappropriate to the fundamentally collective sense of the Guatemalan woman's identity. Barbara explained how she asked one refugee to tell her about herself: 'She told me about her land and her culture and her village and her family and the church and the school and all those things, and I said, "Thank you, now could you tell me a little just about yourself?" She looked at me, very surprised, and said, "But, I just did."'⁶

Latin American belief, optimism, in the importance and power of community—and of the poor in that community—may strike us as naive or exaggerated. For example, Gutierrez does not write about prayer groups scattered throughout a district or country, valuable though they are. He is concerned with 'the spirituality of an ecclesial community that is trying to make effective its solidarity with the poorest of the world':

Surprise may come from the idea that the subject of the experience that is giving rise to a spirituality is an entire people, and not an individual who stands apart and is to some extent isolated, at least initially ... The following of Jesus is not along a private route but is part of a collective enterprise.⁷

And Sobrino can claim that besides matrimonial love, familial love, and the love of friendship, there is also another love which is 'an essential part of the gospel message': the form of love called justice. This is 'called for both by the historical reality of the human race and by the social dimension of the human person'; it is directed to the poor and oppressed *majorities* of the human race; it was practised by Jesus and led to his death. Among other consequences, it leads to evangelization *by* the poor and to persecution by those opposed to their liberation.⁸

The belief and the optimism of those Latin American Catholics who have made an option for the poor and created the church *of* the poor have been maintained in the midst of the most terrifying violence and in the face of opposition from within and outside the church.⁹ It has borne fruit in new forms of life, new ways of being the church, and in the unmasking of and challenge to forms of oppression.

I have given so much attention to 'resistance to community' not only because it seems to be a continuing factor in Western philosophy and theology, but also because in various ways it underlines the unwillingness or the inability of the English Catholic church to 'mount a sustained attack on the weaknesses and injustices' in our society. It is there, I believe, in the isolation of power (or, more exactly, the isolation *by* power), in the lack of challenge to the rich-poor divide, in the understandable hesitation to follow Austin Smith's path of existing and suffering with the powerless, of seeing and assimilating the agonies of this world.¹⁰

Marginalisation

Can the Catholic church in England make a genuine option for the poor when so many people within it are marginalized by the church itself?

Judging from reports it seems that in the diocese of East Anglia, at least, there are real attempts to bring the whole church together. But, to take only one of many possible examples, Boff's account of the interchurch meetings of the Basic Communities in Brazil reminds us how little participation there has been by the laity in England since Vatican II. Boff traces a journey—starting in 1975—which took six years and which 'spread across the nation'. He speaks of the grass-roots church coming to full expression; of the people witnessing to their 'economic, political and cultural despoiling'; of 'ecclesiogenesis', the birth of a new church.¹¹ We have not got even the beginnings of anything like this.

It is true that clerical domination has dwindled in England, but in

the church women are still 'silenced, excluded, trivialised and marginalised'.¹² For me, however, the most disturbing feature of the composition of England's Catholic church—one which very much affects the role of the laity and severely limits an option for the poor—is that it is overwhelmingly white. Unemployment and housing, to take only two instances, can affect coloured people much more seriously. A report by an officer of the Child Poverty Action Group states: 'Bangladeshi women, for instance, are four times more likely to be unemployed than white women; Asian families are ten times more likely to be in overcrowded housing than white families.'¹³ If such people are not adequately represented in the church how can we hear and respond to their suffering?

Isolation by power

We have started to touch on the question of power in the church. In a thought-provoking and fascinating article W.S.F. Pickering challenged theologians to follow sociologists and put power and its consequences at the centre of their agenda.¹⁴ And now 'Power in the Church' is to be the topic for the 1988 National Conference of Priests. Austin Smith has already written on the issue of power in the English church context. He says that it was the 'power to choose' which separated him from the people with whom he went to live¹⁵, and he goes on to suggest that power can determine the kind of community we have in the church:

Communion means a struggle mutually to share power over destiny. ... If the Gospel calls us to anything, I believe it calls us to a new translation of the reality and experience of power. ... This shared power over life I see as the central point in a philosophy and theology of community. ... If (the parish) is really to respond to the definition of community then there must be a sense of shared power over destiny.¹⁶

Cynthia Bunten has worked for almost twenty years in youth work and race relations in the Highfields area of Leicester. She admits her own isolation from the lives of people in the area because she does not live there. But she believes that for some the gap is altogether unbridgeable:

Those who speak on behalf of the church often seem to me to be similar to the local Police Committee: a group of middle-class, well-meaning but totally alien people taking vital decisions for the Inner City Community who live in a very different world—where every time children walk out of their front door they witness instances of violence, drug abuse, poverty, prostitution, despair. The two life experiences are impossible to relate.

The divide set up by power—in terms of wealth, and the backing of an organisation and its resources—may lead to the kind of gap described

by Cynthia Bunten. But power in terms of sacraments, authority and decision-making can also affect the way we see and realise the church. We can come to equate *this* power with value or importance, and so, even unthinkingly, write off or underestimate the majority of the community.

There are two questions arising from the ordination/power connection and its bearing on people's lives and struggles in the 1980s. Firstly, how do the ordained enter situations of marginalisation and deprivation? Can it still be—as it was in the past—as bearers of power? Secondly: Can the ordained enter situations of conflict or national debate? Or is the holiness they seek for themselves and others something to be found only in traditionally sacred places or settings? The second of these questions is prompted by the departure of Bruce Kent: was it only about the vital issue of nuclear weapons, or did it also say something about the difficulty or reluctance of one section of the English Catholic church to engage in the search for meaning and sanctification in areas where argument or vulnerability—rather than power—are required?

My experience in Newcastle and Leicester has led me to think that poverty has taken a different form in the 1970s and 1980s, and therefore needs a different response. One difference might be to locate the response in the strengths and gifts of the community, so that its members might not only be receivers of power, holiness, insight, but also givers.

The need for one voice

If there are groups and communities working with the homeless, mentally handicapped, house-bound; if there are individual clergy and laity prepared to criticise overcrowded prisons and the dehuman conditions inside them—if such options for the poor are being made across the country, often quietly and without publicity, is it necessary to talk of a national or community response to such issues? And since Latin America is so different from England, why spend time—as in this article—listening to their interpretations and their responses to a very different, e.g. far more brutal, world? Does the English Catholic church not have to 'go it alone', find its own answers? That last point is undeniable, but perhaps there can be some sort of interchange between Catholics.

For example, in England we use terms such as 'poverty trap'. Perhaps Boff's language of 'destiny' can make us even more aware of the devastation being wrought on large groups of our population and why it is not enough to respond 'charitably' or piecemeal. In his reflections on *The Lord's Prayer* Boff writes:

Sins (do) not die with the persons who committed them but have been perpetuated by actions that survive their perpetrators in the forms of institutions, prejudices, moral

and legal standards and social customs. A large number of them represent a perpetuation of vices, racial and moral discrimination, injustice, against *groups* of persons and *social classes*; just because someone was born black or poor they subjected him or her to a social stigma. This historically created situation becomes a matter of *destiny* for those born into it: they become *victims of the processes* by which traditional norms are socialized and internalized—those norms that are so often the bearers of wrongdoing and sin. The person in question has already been *categorized*, quite apart from his or her own will in the matter of his or her own decision.¹⁷

In the English context ‘destiny’ might be translated or interpreted as ‘what comes to be taken for granted’, ‘seems unchanging’, ‘cannot be reversed’.

Although English Catholicism must work out its own response to its own poverty, there is some consensus with the church in Latin America on the need for a community voice rather than an individual or leadership-only voice, and on the way community might be achieved and the values it would reveal. Both Sobrino and Austin Smith speak of ‘sharing’—sharing the word, or power. The creation of an English Catholic church capable of responding more forcefully to ‘destinies’ of homelessness or the need for the nuclear threat would demand the kind of exchange between its members that Stanley Cavell speaks about:

The extent to which we understand one another or ourselves is the same as the extent to which we share or understand forms of life; share and know, for example, what it is to take turns, or to take chances ... share the sense of what is fun and what loss feels like, and take comfort from the same things and take confidence or offence in similar ways.¹⁸

Clearly we have a long way to go. Impossibly far?

1 *The True Church and the Poor*. SCM Press, p. 103.

2 *The Tablet*, 11 July 1987, p. 740.

3 Basil Blackwell 1986, pp. 89f.

4 *ibid.* pp. 7–23.

5 e.g. Boff, Sobrino, Gutierrez.

6 Summer 1987, Issue 34, p. 9.

7 *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, SCM Press, p. 29.

8 *The True Church and the Poor*, pp. 39–63.

9 For physical violence, see Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People*, Penguin 1982; for

theological violence, Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church*, Geoffrey Chapman.

10 *Passion for the Inner City*. Sheed & Ward, pp. 50–57.

11 *Ecclesiology*. Collins 1986, pp. 34ff.

12 *Concilium*, December 1985 (‘Women: Invisible in Church and Theology’) p. xi.

13 Quoted in *The Catholic Herald*.

14 ‘Power—Tool of Social Analysis and Theological Concept: A case of Confrontation?’, *New Blackfriars*, June 1984, pp. 269–279.

15 *Passion for the Inner City*, p. 61.

16 *ibid.* pp. 78, 105, 106, 114.

17 Orbis Books 1983, pp. 111f. (my italics).

18 *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 75.