

The Church, Dialogue, and Fraternity

Doing Theology from the Place of the Poor

Rafael Velasco, S.J.
Catholic University of Cordoba

The author begins with discussing the difficult relation between the Catholic Church and modernity and the changes that came with Vatican II. He then uses Paul announcing his faith at the Areopagus in Athens as an image of the church's position today. Then looking at the situation in Latin America, he argues that theology needs to be written from the place of the poor. Fraternity needs to be understood as a means of expanding people's sense of brotherhood/sisterhood to include dialogue with persons of other religions and cultures, and together change society to care for the poor and needy.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 2, No. 2 (October 2013)
77–81 © 2013

Introduction

The complex marriage between faith and culture—called “Christendom”—worked during the whole Middle Ages. Modernity produced a crisis in this model that the church resisted. By condemning “modernism,” excommunications, and enclosures, the church became isolated and stopped its development. The church felt threatened in its prerogatives and in its monopoly of the discourse regarding the truth. This situation explains the reaction of the church against advances in science (the Galileo case, among others). It is true that there were popes who financed scientists. In the year 1600, what later became the Pontifical Vatican Academy of Sciences was created. However, the relationship with cultural, scientific, social, and political modernity was not in the least peaceful. It is in this context that we should understand the Vatican I Council’s definition of papal infallibility. This dogma is to be seen in the context of a church that felt itself politically (in fact the Council was called off due to political problems) and culturally trapped. The sciences put the institution’s teaching in question. So, the church reserved for itself the infallibility to determine the truth against a world that questioned the traditional truths proclaimed by the church.

It has been difficult for the institutional church to overcome this trauma caused by its problems with modernity. Late, for example in Vatican II, the church recognized the value of democracy as a system of government and life. While it is not practiced inside the church, at least after a long time it is recognized as a value. Late, the church has been trying to reconcile with secularization, with the separation between church and state, and with the autonomy of the different fields of knowledge. As Karl Rahner said:

The history of the Church teaches that it [the Church] has often defended positions that it tried to keep at all costs even against its ultimate and unavoidable mission. It fought against the power that wanted to expel it from those positions and only when it was expelled by force, did it realize its mistake and did it admit that it did not need to defend them and that often that very anachronistic defense had damaged itself and its authentic mission.¹

Only during Vatican II does the church try to reconcile itself with modernity. The church now sees itself as “sacrament in history” in dialogue with the world (LG). It is a new paradigm marked by dialogue. The church recognizes again the world as an Areopagus.

The Image of the Areopagus Provides a Good Paradigm of What the Church Means in the World

Paul’s speech at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17: 16–34) was the first attempt in scripture of a highly educated presentation of the Christian Good News. In the place of ideas where debates were held among intellectuals, to which the common people attended, Paul makes this speech in which he takes Greek philosophers and poets and uses them in his argumentation to announce the “unknown God” in the midst of a pantheon of gods. The speech is quite rich, but I offer just a couple of reflections that I consider important.

The world of universities can be compared to the Areopagus. It is the world of knowledge, the search for it, where discussions are

held, where different methods and disciplines live together. In the university, there is a plurality of types of knowledge and of ideas. There is also a plurality of “gods.” I mean here a plurality of beliefs and unbeliefs: of different religions, of those who do not put to themselves the idea of God at all, of people who do not feel called to believe, of people who, honestly, do not understand or cannot accept the idea of a personal loving God, of those who have decided that God does not exist, and of those who have declared the death of God but do not know what to do with the corpse so they are all the time attacking God trying to make it clear that God is dead. There are beliefs and unbeliefs of very different types.

Paul suggests that deep in the human heart there is a search for something else—that we call “God.” That search, that thirst, inhabits all human hearts. We all feel it. It is what makes us love, to want to change in some way, to do great things, to perform acts of generosity or nobility. This inner thirst is transformed into a religious representation; sometimes it remains there, in silence, but real.

There is a God still unknown for our contemporary culture, because even those who believe in God have often disfigured God’s face. Many people today do not believe in the deformed image that religions have shown during the centuries. The institutional realizations of that God are poor, contradictory, and distortive, which shows the limits of the institutions, not of God. In this context—in the university Areopagus—we try to announce the unknown God. Beyond plurality and unconditional respect for all people and their religious beliefs, we cannot deny our Christian identity. Moreover, we must affirm it if we want to be really pluralistic. We must state our faith in Jesus of Nazareth, man and God, who announced the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice

1. Karl Rahner, *Cambio estructural de la iglesia* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1974), 59.

and fraternity; and who, for that announcement, gave his life and was rescued from death by the Father as a testimony that Love defeats death. He is whom we announce.

We do it explicitly and implicitly. We do it tacitly by being faithful to our conscience, searching for truth, acknowledging that we are not its possessors, but its servers. We do it when we work so the knowledge of truth may free those who possess it, and so they too can work to free many brothers and sisters who suffer discrimination, marginalization, and disrespect of their basic human rights. We are also invited to announce Jesus explicitly in the university. We do it as an offering, not as an imposition, as propaganda; we do it with respect because we know that God inhabits the hearts of all and that as Paul said at the Areopagus quoting a Greek philosopher “for in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The result of Paul’s dialogue was modest. Acts says that everything went well until he began to talk about the resurrection of the dead: “some began to scoff, but others said, ‘We should like to hear you on this some other time’” (Acts 17: 32). However, “some did join him, and became believers” (Acts 17: 34). Regarding this reaction of the people at the Areopagus, Miguel de Unamuno says, referring to the faith in the resurrection of the dead, “this is the limit of the intellectual’s patience.”² The message we try to transmit suffers the same process. There are not many who understand and believe. But there are some who really understand, wish, and commit themselves.

2. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954): Section III.

The Challenge Today is to Announce the Faith in Jesus Christ, Working for Justice in Dialogue with Different Cultures and Religions

Chiara Lubich says:

In these decades of dialogue a conviction has been reinforced: what people from other religions expect from us, Christians, is a concrete testimony of love rooted in the Gospel, that everybody wishes and receives, as if it was the response to the natural vocation to love of all human beings. It is not just by chance that the “golden rule” is common to all religions: “Treat the others as you would like others to treat you.” In the atmosphere of reciprocal love that the “golden rule” produces, it is possible to establish a kind of dialogue in which one can try to “be nothing” and “make oneself one” with the others so as to, in some way, “enter” in them. This is the secret of that kind of dialogue that can generate fraternity. Sometimes it can be a difficult task but it is always vital and fruitful. It has a double effect: it helps inculcate by learning about the other’s religion and languages and predisposes the others to listen to us.³

We have seen that the other is touched and asks for explanations. So, we can pass to the “respectful announcement” in which, loyal to God, to ourselves and our neighbour, we state what our faith says about the topic we are talking about, without imposing anything, without traces of

3. ZENIT Interview with Chiara Lubich, Rome, April 8, 2004.

proselytism but with love. At that moment, for us Christians, dialogue becomes announcement of the Gospel.⁴

This new spirit of dialogue implies for not few groups in the church giving up the dream (illusion) of reestablishing Christendom, and to the church to give up the pretension of being some kind of international agency of morality. On the other hand, the unity and fraternity that we announce must have meaning in our historic way of being church so as to really be signs of the Kingdom in history. This will imply deep institutional changes. For this reason it important to state, like Karl Gabriel, that if global cultural transformation depends more than before on institutions because there is no more cultural homogeneity, it is indispensable for the success of this process to be sensitive towards the aspirations of individual autonomy and reflectivity.

We have often repeated with Vatican II that the church should read the signs of the times to announce the gospel to its time in history. Nothing can be truer. But it is not less true that the church should learn to listen to what God says *from* the world. We can no longer continue with a mental and theological scheme that makes us unilateral speakers. While the church speaks to the world, it is essential for the church to be able to listen to the world, to listen to and to obey God's voice who also speaks from outside of the limits of the institutional church. Perhaps one of the problems of the institutional church today is its growing deafness. It may need Jesus, always a foreigner, always coming from the outskirts, to say with strength and love: "Be opened!"

4. Ibid.

The Testimony that will Finally Convince—Beyond the Reasonable Announcement of the Good News—is Fraternity in Solidarity Represented by our Closeness to the Poor.

It was this way at the beginning, as many saints, theologians, and martyrs have reminded us. One of the consequences of our faith in the Incarnation is the place from which theology is made. If God incarnated, nothing human is alien to him. And if God incarnated among the poor, living in the margins, the action of the church and its theology cannot be neutral. We cannot be neutral before injustice. If God was made flesh in the margins of history, we must read history from that place. God does not see history from above, but from the margins, from those who suffer exclusion, those who are often absent in the official liturgy, those who feel they are sinners and needy, those who have no access to central power. From that place the gospel is read differently.

The theological question: "Who is God?" is inseparable from the ethical question: "What to do?" ("What have you done with your brother?") If the first question takes us to the God announced by Jesus of Nazareth, Father of all, the God of Life who establishes in Jesus a Kingdom of Justice in which the poor come first, the answer to "What to do?" also has consequences.

A theology that tries to assume as central the category of fraternity must have at its center the poorer and more vulnerable brothers and sisters. From our faith in the Incarnation it is impossible to think theology decontextualized; we must think and do it historically rooted in reality. And reality in Latin America is still strongly marked by exclusion and poverty. To make theology from this reality implies adopting a perspective from the poor: from the poor

person's life while committed and in dialogue with other types of knowledge.

In Latin America—our context—life is menaced by exclusion, violence, and poverty. This means lack of access to health services, decent housing, justice, drinkable water, and human rights. Theology in Latin America would then imply to think life from the reality that the poor suffer. It will mean to make theology from the reverse of history written by victors, but from the defeated ones, from those who cannot get quality education, those who see their green spaces transformed into a dump. Why is this so? Because they are poor and they only count at election times. We must reflect from those who are not the main characters and so are not present in headlines. It will also mean to make theology from the outskirts of society: where the victims live, those whose faces show the “suffering features of Christ, the Lord” as the Puebla Document states.⁵

It then means to make theology from the suffering majority since most of the population in Latin America is poor and suffers. The love of God here and now should be called liberation, commitment to the transformation of reality. The Kingdom of God, which is grace, historically begins when we share our bread. This theology of sharing, of incarnated fraternity, should have a prophetic character. It needs to call it somehow, because it should disturb, ask uncomfortable questions, and look for the necessary answers and commit to them. A theology that goes beyond dogmatic and notional elaborations, that goes beyond the question of “How can we be good in society?” to wonder about “How can we be good at making this society good?”

A theology that helps us live more humanly in this world, that encourages us to make the world more human, that aspires to something more than good behavior, must in some way be spiritual wisdom rationally articulated. Wisdom that helps us live with taste and sense. Wisdom related to our own daily life. Such a theology emerges from the New Commandment the Lord left us. It is about that commandment lived in fraternity that Chiara beautifully says: “[W]hen it is radically lived, it generates unity and brings with itself an extraordinary consequence: Jesus, the Resurrected one, is present among us.”⁶

Fr. Rafael Velasco, S.J., is a theologian and rector of the Catholic University of Cordoba in Argentina. He was a pupil of his fellow Jesuit Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis.

5. *Puebla Document*, August 6, 1979, no. 31.

6. ZENIT Interview with Chiara Lubich.