

INTERVIEW FOR RUTH'S BOOK

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1. In Cry of the the People Penny Lernoux gave your story. Would you add or correct any of what she said ?

I would simply add that the Interamerican Human rights Commission investigated the entire case and found the Argentine authorities guilty of torture. The official Argentine response to this decision was that I had resisted arrest so that the injuries I suffered had come from that supposed incident. There were many other gross distortions of the truth in that reply which reveals the cruscading fascist mentality which is so dangerously prevalent in the Argentine military. They really believe they are the bulwark of Western Occidental civilization so everything they do must be right. Their recent very prominent role in the July coup in Bolivia shows that they feel missioned to intervene openly in other Latin American countries if necessary. It is also evident that they have come to dominate in influence among practically all the American Armed Forces as evidenced by the key role their commander-in-chief General Viola played in the 1979 Bogota meeting of the conference of American Commanders. They present for me the same threat to the Americas as Nazism did in Europe during the thirties. Torture, disappearances of prisoners, elimination of 'enemies' are all perfectly justifiable. And seemingly the Pentagon goes along with them.

2. What do you think your experiences with the poor and the resulting personal persecution and imprisonment have to tell us here in the US ?

I think Penny Lernoux has done a more than adequate job in her book responding to that question which of course arises not only from my case but from all who suffer in Latin America.

I did not know much about the dynamics of relations between the US and Argentina when I was imprisoned four years ago. In the

I know a good deal more. . For the Last 20 years ^{or more} beginning ^{perhaps} with the Cuban revolution and the Alliance for Progress the ^{Nacional de} US ^{Memoria} Government has been pursuing an openly interventionist policy in all Latin American countries including Argentina to support ^{the} very specific economic interests of US multinational corporations. They may talk of development, of democracy, of national security but the bottom line is economic. Each US Embassy has now been equipped for years to carry out that role which goes much further than simple diplomacy. There are friends - the so-called private enterprise sector - ie the business or capital owning community and there are enemies - or at least those who cannot be trusted - the vast majority of the people who are so brutally exploited by the private sector. The business of the Armed forces is to guarantee law and order so that the latter's interests can be protected in very tense and volatile situations. It is no secret that the US military have equipped the local military for that role making them masters of Repression. All dissidents are branded communists or subversives and so have no rights - except to be eliminated.

Most Americans I have spoken with are appalled with the role of the US in Latin America but when they try to change the situation they come to realize how little responsive the US government is to the average American Citizen. They may influence Congress or even the White House but what about the Pentagon, the CIA even the State Department, even the media. We can see that very concretely now in the situation in El Salvador. There is a wholesale manipulation of the media, the US is actively engaging in the repression of the people which has now claimed more than 7,000 dead this year alone under the umbrella of defending a so called 'moderate junta'. In 1976 the US press labeled Videla in Argentina as a 'moderate'. Now he has become a fascist because he has abducted more than 20,000 Argentines as if the US Government was innocently unaware of that when they ~~initially~~ defended him as a moderate.

3. What are the main factors doing Liberation Theology that can be applied in the US ?

Rather than speak about 'doing Liberation theology' I prefer to speak about living a Christian life or following the Gospel. Otherwise there can be certain ambiguity that it is possible to live as a Christian in a way in which the theme of liberation can be ignored. To me that is impossible. Liberation is central to the Christian message and to the Gospels. It is not an optional extra or a fad hobby for Third world activists. Rather it opens us up to the Gospel itself. In that sense I see various factors or levels ~~which we need~~ of the struggle for liberation which we need to live in order to be true to the Gospel but which are applied differently in different situations.

The first dimension is that as Christians we are called to share in the life ~~of a~~ and history of a people struggling towards liberation. Jesús pinpoints that process or struggle as the coming of the kingdom of God which is present in world history. As Christians we are called essentially to tune into and to serve that reality. It is the historic march of the people of God from slavery to liberation. We are called to faith in it, to be converted to it and to serve it. The Good news is precisely that there is a liberation process in the World and we Christians are servants and not owners of it. God guides His people along the way in mysterious ways. Christianity then is of the very essence of history and cannot be reduced to simply an ecclesiastical, or personal dimension. The secular religious division exists for the Christian on quite a superficial level. This aspect of a people in movement is of course very strong in Latin America where so many are struggling to overcome exploitation. In the US one has to do much more searching to uncover that reality.

The next dimension is ~~that~~ more immediate if you wish - it is that of the community. Generally we discover and respond to the Christian message through the mediation of the community. A true Christian community is of its essence liberating - opening us to the demands of the Gospels

both at the level of a struggling people and at our own personal level. The community then supports us in our response of change and commitment. The community both celebrates the road already travelled and the promise we gather from the events of the Gospel of the certain victory of liberation over oppression. In other times the parish community may have intended to carry out that role, or a local religious community but now it is best fulfilled by participation in a basic Christian community. Basic because the community is of the base of the social pyramid where true history is being made, community because there is a common shared life and search among all the members, and Christian because it uses the tools of Christian revelation to discern the road ahead. In the US perhaps basic Christian Communities are more important even than in Latin America given that there is an overwhelming presence of evil in US society - the fruits of injustice, the madness of nuclear destruction etc. The community resists that evil. Resistance is the other side of the coin to Liberation in the life of a community. There is so little popular support in the struggle that unless one ~~participates~~ participates actively in some community the individual becomes very vulnerable in the US.

Finally there is the personal factor. Liberation must reach down into our own personal lives otherwise there is a shallowness and an evident lack of consistency in our response. There is a personal process of conversion from evil to the truth, from hate to love, from death to life which is no one else's responsibility but our own. There is a truly personal encounter with the Love of God which liberates us and confirms us. This is the confirmative part of our faith which I think is very important. It is I think very difficult to forego richness, power, to move with the poor, oppressed and marginalized without feeling personally sustained by a loving and liberating God. Sorry Ruth if I extended myself a bit in this response - I tend to let the typewriter run away, but I think those three factors the political, the community and the personal are important and the last one is very important everywhere - the US and Latin America. Perhaps in Latin America there needs to be more work put

into the letter as many people in the struggle lack somewhat a sense of personal vocation or identity.

4. Who are the poor in Latin America ? Why?

Firstly those who are economically exploited in their work -- be they miners in Bolivia or textile workers in Haiti. There is no relationship between the wages they receive and the value of what they produce. They are literally robbed every day with exorbitant profits going to international capital and/or local elites. Then there are all of those poor who are marginalised from society and exploited where possible. The native Indian peoples, the african peoples, peasants, women and even children. Poverty, exploitation and marginalisation are the characteristics of the poor in Latin America and tragically compose the vast majority of the population.

5. Who are the poor in the US ? Why?

The poor in the US are those who are marginalised from the spoils which US companies reap at home and abroad. Workers in the US are also exploited but I think there are very strong barriers in US society between those who receive sums of money out of all proportion to their activity and those who are excluded. The signs of exclusion tend to emphasise race, sex and neighbourhood. The poor then to me in the US tend to be the inner city, racial or ethnic minorities women, immigrants, prisoners, old people etc.

6. How can you best identify with them in Latin America ?

The only true authentic identification with the poor is to accompany them in their struggle for a new society. It is to proclaim 'Blessed are you poor' That may mean literal identification with their situation, working and living through the same exploitation and marginalisation. In Latin America this is seen as very important even essential for committed christians. But it will

always mean living a simple lifestyle, entering into friendship with the poor and oppressed and serving their struggle, each according to their capabilities and the needs of the moment. It always means conversion of ourselves from the rich, the selfish, the pride within us. Even though the struggle of the poor in Latin America puts a great emphasis on economic, political and cultural emancipation the struggle for liberation goes much further than that to the new man, the new woman which the New testament speaks of - to a reality which also transcends history as we can conceive it.

7. In the US? In the US I think the general direction is much the same - to communicate the message of the beatitudes to the poor - that they are blessed, that they will inherit the land, that they are the preferred ones of God even though society excludes them and that their struggle is vital to the liberation of all. The impression I have is that there is much more despair, hopelessness, and self-destruction among the poor in the US than in Latin America. People there probably resort more to drugs, alcohol, sexims to escape from their reality. It is much easier for an oppressed person to see an end to his/her state in Latin America ~~than~~ because the majority here are victims whereas in the US the majority believe themselves to be the beneficiaries of all.

8. Can you reflect Biblically on some of the above?

One very important point which the Bible emphasizes again and again and which we Christians insist on dividing is the unity of life and faith. Many are afraid that taking seriously the theme of liberation, faith, religion, spirituality is debunked. God is forgotten about and men and women are seen exclusively or principally in terms of their most primary needs. In practice many fear humanism has come to replace Christianity, under the guise of liberation. Politics replaces religion. So people withdrew to the purely spiritual, ecclesial or

religious sphere of activity. In most cases this type of argument is simply an excuse for inactivity and an insidious invitation to religious alienation. In others it might be simply a certain crisis of faith. There are obviously dangers of seeing things too much on an activist level and the spiritual is as much part of us as the political and one needs to grow in all.

In that sense the New Testament is very clear. The Divine is present and living among in a man called Jesus of Nazareth who 'humbles himself even to death, death on a cross'. There is therefore a continuous tension, in our lives between what the catechism uses to call the natural and the supernatural. The theme of liberation permits a profound unity and synthesis to grow in our lives between those two poles of attraction. - the human and the Divine avoiding the pitfall of alienation.

9. What else would you like to add?

To some people 'liberation people' seem too dogmatic, too serious, as if they are carrying the weight of the world's suffering on their backs. I think we all need to discover more the creativity and plurality of responses which are possible taking liberation as the vital Christian value it is. Sectarianism, exclusivity, domination really indicate how little we understand of the liberation process. It may be necessary on a personal level to concentrate on certain issues and concerns but these should really open us to affirm others in their search. Hope, a deep joy, and enjoyment of life should really pervade our struggle. Otherwise something serious is amiss.

10. What about living in community? Ruth - how many pages do you want? There is really so much to say on this level. Essentially I think we search for community because we need one another's support and friendship in the struggle. On the other hand we are constantly challenged to move forward. There is a mutual support relationship

at work . However once things are sorted out on that level there is the real danger that a community close in on itself so it is very important to have a clear relationship to other communities and to the struggle in general in order to be constantly challenged by it. Openness, hospitality, participation in other groups etc. are just as important as the internal dynamics. I think also it is very difficult to live a strong community life with a totally informal structure. There is a need for regular meetings , liturgies etc. In Latin America it is more common for a community rather than actually living together under the one roof to give a lot of importance to meetings etc. as it is through this that community is built up.

11. Please reflect a bit on the situation of women in Church and Society in Latin America ?

Being a man there is a good deal of difficulty in appreciating the situation of women. The male experience of life is very different all over than that of women. The type of society we have means women get excluded and assigned very specific tasks ~~maxxhax~~ very early on so any process towards liberation in which does not play a key role will not ring very authentic. I think however there are two levels of concern which I notice in women's movement. One is the concern about society in general and the struggle for liberation and the other level is directly related to issues concerning the specific exploitation of women taking place. In Latin America the women's movements that have arisen in the last few years, such as the movement against the cost of living in Brazil, the hunger strike for political amnesty in Bolivia of 1978 and particularly the different movements of mothers of political prisoners are really mobilising about issues of general concern but which women have been able to give a specific input in the crisis situation Latin America is living. A good example is the Argentine movement of the 'Mothers of Plaza de Mayo'. Traditionally one of the most maligned groups in Argentina by the left were the so-called 'fat ladies of high society'.

With the Videla dictatorship many of their children who were supporting the popular struggle were kidnapped so many of them began to join with other mothers in a weekly protest in Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires demanding of the regime the whereabouts of their children or grand-children. There is no doubt that in awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Adolfo Perez Esquivel the Norwegian authorities were also giving international recognition to the Mothers. There are really a most remarkable movement, Their founding member of 60 years of age Azucena Di Vicentini was herself kidnapped now 3 years ago never to be heard of again and ~~thaxiant~~ was the first of many, the last been a mother Norma di Gianotti who was kidnapped by the Argentine military in Peru and her body was discovered in an apartment in Madrid. They suffer continual insults and persecution and yet I firmly believe that there is hope for the victory of truth and justice in Argentina because of the mothers. They really are one of the most forceful moral movements I know of today. One of those unique movements that everybody feels uncomfortable with - the Church, the political parties, even the Nobel Peace authorities because they say the truth directly and to the point.

However perhaps women's movements in Latin America need to concern themselves also of the specific problems and forms of oppression which women suffer.

And in the US?

In the US women's movements seem to be very strong on feminist issues but they seem to have real difficulties in attacking the general problems of society. I think in the US women have still to make their voice heard on issues such as war particularly the arms race and peace. This growth in awareness and struggle of women in the US is really one of the most hopeful things happening. It is a real 'sign of the times'.

Describe the Little Brothers of Jesus !
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~~Describe~~ The Little Brothers of Jesus began when a small group of French clerics decided in the mid 30's to follow the teachings and example of Charles de Foucauld by setting up a type of primitive monastery in El Abiodh in Algeria. Charles de Foucauld was a French soldier and explorer of the Sahara who later on in his life became a Christian, a monk, even a hermit for a while. He then returned to the area of Tamanarasset in the center of the Sahara where he lived as a kind of missionary-monk until he was killed by raiding bandits in 1916. One of the most unique features of his life was his vision of Jesus as one who lived as the poorest, the most humble of all. Charles felt called to live next to Jesus sharing the life of the most abandoned and exploited of peoples. He saw the 30 years of quiet living at Nazaret as the model for his own life: - working simply, living as just another neighbour, "crying out the gospel through his life" and not words. He lived his life out in a strong Moslem environment and rejected proselitism seeing the role of the community he wished to found - the little Brothers as primarily a ferment in society. His own life was lived in great solitude among a Church which was evidently expanding in the traditional missionary and found it difficult to understand what he was about.

The Little Brothers from the beginning have emphasised their vocation as essentially contemplative and not active, where a simple style living from manual work, and shared in community make possible strong links of friendship with the people.

The community to which I belong - the little brothers of the Gospel try to live that and more in the sense we assume a more active presence in the community. Poverty is seen as a very important aspect of our vocation particularly sharing the life and struggle of the poor.

Sorry Ruth if I had to rush a bit the last two questions. I am trying to finish tonight so as to send you this with Alfredo. Things are going well here and I hope to write a letter soon to all - Love to