

A Theology of Liberation – In the Spirit

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The life and work of Mahatma Gandhi has recently been brought back into the public consciousness through Richard Attenborough's film. Karl Jaspers once said of Gandhi:

This man wanted the impossible: politics through non-violence. He enjoyed the greatest success. Has the impossible therefore become possible? [. . .] What is unique, however, is the fundamental fact that a man, deliberately and convincingly, embarked on a political struggle in a way which transcended politics [. . .]

This means, in effect, in the way of the Gospel, for it was there that Gandhi found the ultimate source of his inspiration. Since then others have attempted to follow this way, such as Martin Luther King and Lech Wałęsa. On the basis of their experience and the freedom movements which they inspired, we can speak of a "theology of liberation". This has nothing to do with a theology of liberation in the terms of the well-known developments in Latin America, where the attempt is made to justify the use of violence in the struggle for social and political freedom by appealing to the Gospel. It is rather the theology of liberation of which Pope John Paul II spoke during the general audience on 21 February 1979 after his return from Mexico:

One must agree with the great contemporary theologian [Hans Urs von Balthasar] who justifiably demands a theology of liberation with a universal dimension. The particular circumstances may be different, but the reality of freedom itself is universal. The task of theology is to find the true meaning of freedom in the various, historically-based conditions that exist today.

In this sense there is also a Polish theology of liberation which has developed through the experience of struggling for freedom in the past four decades and especially in the last few years. This article is an attempt

to present the essence, main elements and implications of this theology.

The Polish theology of liberation can be understood fully only against the background of the spiritual state of the world, or rather the attitude of believers in the world. One may identify three typical concepts existing at present. The first two are in fact misconceptions which constantly reappear in history as attempts to create communities of faith. The third corresponds to a concept of faith based on the Bible, especially the New Testament.

In the first concept, faith is understood as an escape into the hereafter. The faithful withdraw "into inwardness of spiritual bliss" and leave the things of this world to float. The inner personal relationship with Jesus, the Redeemer, is considered the essential element of Christianity, which fills one with joy so great that the problems of this world are forgotten; as if in Jesus one had already discovered heaven on earth. This is a sentimental attitude to faith which alienates people from the realities of this world, which are dismissed as politics, or as the "preoccupations of the children of this world".

This is characteristic, for example, of the Jesus movement, which developed out of the hippy phenomenon. It is also true of some groups within the charismatic movement (especially those in the initial stages of their development), as well as various movements within the free churches. All these phenomena could be described as "Jesus movements". This kind of separation between faith and participation in the events of this world can also occur if the faith is superficial and weak and not built upon a personal relationship with Christ in the Holy Spirit, but rather upon habit or religious upbringing.

It results in a certain schizophrenia between an isolated religious sphere of conscience and the rest of life, which develops according to its own standards and has nothing to do with faith. Unfortunately, this is the way that a great many practising Catholics understand their faith. In the long term such an attitude usually leads to unbelief.

The second concept views faith as an external, supplementary motivation for social or political activity which represents one's primary goal. According to this concept, Christianity and even the Church are supposed to be merely useful supporters for a social revolution in the struggle for liberation. This applies above all to those movements in South America which may be grouped under the banner of the "theology of liberation", although there are also less radical movements whose social, economic and political activities are carried out in the name of "Christianity". The representatives of such movements should ask themselves to what extent their Christian involvement is based on a spiritual foundation and is open to the working of God's Spirit. If the first concept of faith may be described as "Jesus movements", the second could be called "Christ movements". It is not the person of Jesus and a personal relationship with

him through faith which are paramount here, but rather his messianic deeds, which are expressed by his name "Christ" — the Anointed One.

In reality, Jesus is the Christ and thus He must be present in our concept of faith. Jesus, the Son of the Living God, calls us and enables us through the gift of His Spirit to encounter Him personally and later to be united with Him. At the same time, He invites us to share in His mission. As Christians, we are anointed together with Him, the Anointed One, and thereby called to participate in the redemption of the world in our given time and situation. Therefore we cannot consider our faith to be an escape into a blissful me-you relationship with Jesus, but rather as a demand to participate with Christ, God's servant, in service for our brothers, so that through our responsible love and willingness to sacrifice they might be led to redemption and liberation in the power of Christ's cross. A personal relationship with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit is naturally the everlasting source of power, courage and enthusiasm for this service of liberation.

This is the way that faith is understood in the Bible: as a call to an I-You relationship with God but also as an anointing for service in fulfilling God's plan of redemption in the here and now of history. Faith, in other words, must be understood as participation in the self-consciousness of Jesus Christ, which he revealed in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his messianic activity with the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4: 18-19).

Such an understanding of the Christian faith is the foundation upon which some movements within Christianity today are based. They could be called Jesus-Christ movements. To this group of movements belong *Comunione e Liberazione*, the *Focolari* movement, the *Cursillo*,* the charismatic renewal in its more mature forms and in Poland the *Light-Life* movement.

The testimony of Oasis

The *Light-Life* movement, or *Oasis* movement, is an independent Catholic movement, which operates openly, is directed from a centre and is spread throughout the whole country among youth and adults — a unique phenomenon in the Eastern bloc.†

In 1981 some 45,000 people took part in 15-day *Oasis* summer camps. Approximately eighty per cent of them were youngsters between 15 and

*Renewal movements within the Catholic Church, the first two of which originated in Italy, the third in Spain — *Ed.*

†For a description of this movement, see *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 49-66 — *Ed.*

18. In 1982 even more participated despite the fact that martial law was then in force.

By "Oasis" I mean a particular method of spiritual exercises and teachings worked out over many years of experience and based on a personal encounter with God through Christ in the Spirit. During the 15 days of the retreat the participants learn to relate personally to God through the Bible, prayer and worship. They also experience fraternal Christian fellowship with others in small groups. This takes place in a spirit of mutual service, an attempt to live out *Agape*, the selfless love modelled on the example of Christ. During an Oasis camp practically every participant is led to discover Christianity as a new life. The consequences of this are deep joy, transformation of one's life, and an eagerness to share the experience with others. After the Oasis retreats, small groups are formed which attempt to cultivate this new style of life at parish level. Close to three hundred thousand people have participated in Oasis retreats in the past 12 years. There are post-Oasis groups in two thousand parishes. There are also family oases, from which the branch movement "The Living Church" has developed, comprising about five hundred family circles, each with 5-7 families. Some forty per cent of all vocations to the priesthood in Poland today come from the ranks of the Oasis movement.

We are asked over and over again by visitors from abroad how it is possible that such a movement could develop and thrive in a communist, totalitarian state. The secret lies in the principle which we have followed consistently and which is the movement's essential charisma. It can be expressed in two words: Light-Life (in Greek *Phos-Zoe*). These two New Testament concepts are represented in the form of a cross. This is an allusion to the indivisible unity between light and life. Light, and by that I mean the light of understanding, of conscience, of the Word of God and finally in the personification of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, must be lived, must be adopted as the obligatory norm for our life. So I am not talking of light *and* life, but rather of a light which can never be separated from life, which becomes the light of life. In the movement and through the movement there is a persistent effort to lead people to such an attitude. To achieve that, however, one needs courage above all. One must be able to overcome fear in order to bear testimony to and live by the light. Therefore the cross, in which we find the strength to overcome fear, is part of the Light-Life experience. The essence of human freedom is expressed and the true way of liberation shown by living the light through overcoming fear and taking up one's cross. A person is free when he has the courage to bear witness to the truth and to live by the truth regardless of any suffering and sacrifice. The Light-Life movement arose from the endeavour to live according to this principle.

Everything that makes up the movement was from the very beginning

forbidden and illegal in Poland. In a communist system it is only the Party which can programme and lead the forces which form society. This is especially true in relation to youth work. This axiom is safeguarded by a whole series of laws and regulations. The Christian Light-Life movement was formed and grew in spite of this. We simply followed the principle of never asking what we were allowed to do, but rather doing what we must do as Christians who want to live according to the Gospel in the freedom of God's children. We never let fear keep us from doing what we felt we must do as disciples of Christ.

A few years ago in the province of Nowy Sącz, where two thirds of all Oasis retreats take place, an attempt was made to break up the camps on the pretext that they were illegal. The local authorities handed some seventy written orders to close down the camps within 24 hours to the camp leaders. Not a single camp was disbanded. Those in charge of the camps, mostly priests, gave the local authorities the following explanation: "The Oases are based on divine law, on international human rights conventions and even on liberties guaranteed in the Polish constitution. Thus the Oases are legal, but the orders to disband them are illegal. Therefore we cannot obey them. Furthermore, we will continue to carry out our programme, and if you come with force to drive us away, as Christians we will not fight against you with force, but we will pray for you and rejoice that we can suffer for the sake of righteousness." Not once did the authorities come and try to force us away.

In this way the movement grew and eventually became so strong that it was no longer possible for the authorities to inhibit it by administrative means. We discovered a way to human and social freedom without the use of force, through bearing witness to our faith and living according to that faith.

The testimony of the Polish Church

After the Second World War, when Poland was placed within the Soviet sphere as a result of the Yalta agreement, the Church found itself in constant confrontation with the communist system imposed upon the country. It is a totalitarian, godless system, directed by the so-called *nomenklatura** against the background of the Party and the state administration, which comprises the ruling group. This group has one goal: to gain and maintain absolute power, power over all people and all spheres of life. To achieve this power, it is necessary to destroy all structures and forces which oppose it. People must therefore be transformed into slaves who do not pursue any goals of their own, nor search for any values which are not subjected to the goals and value system of the ruling Party — the

*The system according to which appointments to specified posts in the government or economic administration are made by organs of the ruling Party — *Ed.*

nomenklatura. All socially significant positions are occupied by members of the *nomenklatura* to ensure total control over all spheres of life. The *nomenklatura's* monopoly over the communication and educational systems cut people off from the values of truth, history and tradition, and from the roots of culture, above all Christian culture. Through lies and one-sided propaganda the *nomenklatura* attempts to impose views and behaviour which transform the people into the rulers' mindless tools. Through a monopoly over the economy, people are forced into dependence upon the State for all the necessities of life, so that they can be more easily manipulated. Above all, a reign of terror is established by an extensive security system. In this way a perfect system of enslavement results, the two main pillars of which are lies and fear.

In these circumstances the problem of freedom, of human rights and human dignity became the primary problem for the individual and the nation. The Church has played an essential role in the struggle for freedom and human dignity against the system of soviet, totalitarian claim to power. It has always set itself against the absolute claims to power made by the communist State and has appealed instead to the higher laws and values of morality and religion. It has always unmasked falsehood and condemned injustice. In its essential pastoral functions it was not subjected to the *nomenklatura*. It broke the information monopoly through its own "mass media" of the pulpit, broke the educational monopoly through a network of religious and catechetical instruction. The Church became the only place of refuge for the nation, a support in the spiritual struggle for freedom, a defender of human rights and dignity. The State did not succeed in limiting the Church in its worship functions, nor in diminishing the faith into a purely private matter for the individual. Over the years a Polish attitude to faith was formed, which made it an immediate support and basis for daily living and for solving the most important problems of life.

Volumes of history could be written about the daily struggles of the Church over the past 35 years. There were innumerable examples of the struggle for religious instruction in schools, for the right to place a crucifix on the wall of a classroom, for permission to build new churches and catechetical centres, for freedom to hold religious processions and pilgrimages, for a Catholic press and literature, for the right to work with students and various lay groups and even for public Christian cultural events. The Church and faith became the starting point for many social and charitable activities such as campaigns against alcoholism, abortion, etc.

From many examples, I would like to select that of the building of churches in the diocese of Przemyśl by Bishop Ignacy Tokarczuk. In the last ten years, 150 new churches have been built in this diocese without permission. When the bishop was summoned to explain these illegal

buildings he said “according to our pastoral principles, people should not be more than a half hour’s walk from a church. This means that I shall have to build twenty more churches in my diocese. In the next three years I will fulfil this plan and then I will leave you in peace.”*

Since the communist takeover in Poland the Church has fulfilled a great task of educating people in an active faith which is relevant to everyday life. Faith as an escape from reality does not exist in Poland. Groups within the renewal movement have not succumbed to this temptation. Neither does the temptation to engage in social or political activities not based on a deeper spiritual life present any fundamental problem for the Church in Poland. Attempts by the State to form a “Catholic” movement which is loyal to it have been discredited by the Pax movement. There can be no doubt that the Church, with its struggle for spiritual liberation and human rights, had a deep influence on the Solidarity movement.

The testimony of Solidarity

It is generally acknowledged that the Polish labour and freedom movement Solidarity can be understood only in the context of the role of the Church and religion in the history and life of the Polish nation. The nature of this “link”, however, is often not reflected upon in depth and needs clarification. It is inadequate simply to maintain that national and Catholic elements have always been strong in Polish history and piety and that this link has remained very strong up to the present.

I believe that the obvious identity between the methods used in Solidarity’s struggle and Christian attitudes and values can be explained by the fact that this struggle is for the basic rights of man and therefore is a vital part of the Church’s struggle. Throughout its struggle since the end of the war the Church has drawn attention to and has made the people sensitive to the values of human dignity and freedom. It has also shown how to fight courageously for these values — to struggle in the Spirit of the Gospel without hatred or violence but with dignity, strength and love. The key to understanding the revolution of Polish workers, which in a short time brought over ten million people into the Solidarity Trade Union, cannot be found exclusively in social or political concepts. The Solidarity movement is in its essence a spiritual revolution, initiated above all in response to the violation of human dignity and rights, and in this sense it is a completely new phenomenon in modern social history.

At the very centre of this enormous protest movement is the spiritual value of truth. The Solidarity revolution is a protest against falsehood, against the total untruthfulness of the communist system. “The Poles

*See review of Fr Adam Boniecki’s book *Building Churches in the Przemyśl Diocese* in *RCL* Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 109-11 — *Ed.*

need the truth as much as they need coal”, Lech Wałęsa said in reply to a western journalist who had asked why the Polish miners did not work harder in order to increase coal production. Deeply rooted, if not always clearly formulated, in the consciousness of the striking and struggling masses is the intuitive conviction that a person is free when he witnesses to the truth which he knows and acknowledges. The Soviet system of enslavement, which is based above all on lies, awakens in them a deep yearning for liberation through the truth. This yearning has become so strong in the past few years in Poland that the example of the Gdańsk workers’ struggle for freedom quickly inspired the entire nation to break down the barriers of fear. Fear is the second support of the Soviet system, fear which does not allow people to witness to the truth and demand their rights. The Polish workers, and practically the entire Polish nation, recognised and experienced the way to liberation, the way to true human freedom, through courageously witnessing to the truth and through overcoming fear.

At the centre of the Polish revolution is also another value which is expressed symbolically by the cross. When the striking workers erected a memorial in front of the Gdańsk shipyard to their colleagues who were murdered in 1979, it took the shape of three huge crosses crowned with three anchors, the sign of hope. The cross in Victory Square in Warsaw, under which Pope John Paul II preached, and under which the deceased Cardinal Wyszyński lay in state in his coffin to receive the homage of the entire nation as a spiritual leader; the cross of flowers in the same place; and the cross before the entrance to the “Wujek” mine in Katowice, where seven miners were killed in December 1981 — these are all symbols of the deep conviction which is essential to the Polish concept of struggle for freedom. It is a conviction which is motivated by faith, a conviction that there is meaning in suffering for truth and even sacrificing one’s life for it: that the victory of the resurrection can be achieved only through the cross. Therefore wherever people have shed their blood and given their lives for the truth and freedom, crosses have been erected and there are always candles burning and fresh flowers there as a sign of hope in the resurrection.

The cross also expresses another essential concept: the idea of struggle for liberation without hatred and use of violence and with readiness to forgive. In August 1980 the Polish workers’ revolution discovered a path to liberation without the use of violence, and thus identified itself with the movement of non-violence. This attitude had already proved its worth many times. In many dramatic situations the Polish workers did not allow themselves to be provoked into bloody confrontations. Many times the leaders of Solidarity have warned against terrorism and the use of violence, and openly stated their readiness to forgive and their willingness, should the dictators show signs of good will, to change course and

start a dialogue. One can see therefore that the Polish revolution is based upon spiritual and Christian values and attitudes.

Theology of Liberation and Evangelisation

In the above testimony of the Oasis movement, the Polish Church as a whole, and the Polish Solidarity movement, one can see the inspiration of faith and the Gospel. The attitude to life which develops from them represents a political reality in a totalitarian, atheistic State, simply because they expand the sphere of personal freedom of all who refuse to bow before the absolute claim to power of the ruling political forces. When people in these circumstances courageously declare that "we must obey God rather than man" (Acts 4: 19), then this unjust abuse of power is weakened, or even broken. What I mean is "engaging in a political struggle in a way that transcends politics". But we are dealing with a reality and with an experience which cannot be simply called politics, since there is no political motivation and no political goals are directly pursued. We must rather seek to understand these phenomena through the concept of a theology of liberation.

Because this theology is directly associated with the historical experiences of the Polish people and the Church, we may speak of a Polish theology of liberation within the framework of the universal theology of liberation called for by the people. On the other hand, the Polish experiences may serve as a framework for developing such a theology of liberation.

The experiences described above are by no means a part of the past. The situation in Poland has not basically altered since the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981. The spiritual struggle for liberation continues, through the Light-Life movement as well as through the Church and underground Solidarity. More repressive measures have brought a deeper motivation for the struggle for freedom and a clearer identification with the cross. In recent years the Polish Church and the people have been enriched by an abundance of examples of courageous witness to the truth.

Above all there is a perception in the Light-Life movement that there is an intimate and essential connection between evangelisation and liberation. The Gospel is essentially the good news about the liberation of man, proclaimed as an event which has already happened. Any attempt at evangelisation which cannot respond to the problem of liberation in a given existential situation is a mistake. Such evangelisation will remain unsuccessful since it has no power in itself to touch, attract and inspire people. Evangelisation then becomes purely verbal instruction, propaganda, the propagation of one ideology among many others which are offered. The key to successful evangelisation lies in the ability to connect

the Gospel with the problem of liberation for people here and now.

This understanding of evangelisation led in Poland to its close identification with the concepts of truth and the cross and with the problem of overcoming fear. The Polish theology of liberation sees its central core in the Lord's promise: "The truth shall set you free" (John 8: 32). Truth is an essential element of human freedom. Each person is a being dependent on truth, and he is free if he knows and acknowledges the truth. Therefore Christ says: "If you abide in my word, then you are truly my disciples. Then you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8: 31-32).

To abide and to persist in the truth means to bear witness to the truth in one's life and to live according to the truth. To do so one must overcome fear, which keeps us from speaking and living the truth. Therefore the cross, as a sign of readiness for sacrifice, is one of the key elements of the theology of liberation. A person finds the courage to bear witness to the truth when he is willing to make the sacrifice for truth, even to the point of sacrificing one's life as Christ did.

The question arises: How does one come by the readiness to suffer, to take up the cross? This leads to the still missing element of the theology of liberation. This element is trust in God, faith in the love of the God who received and rewards our readiness to sacrifice, springing from the love and trust of a child and through a new life in the resurrection. This trust in God in the hour of our death is also the attitude of Christ on the cross. Everyone must adopt this attitude in order to achieve inner freedom; in other words, they participate in Christ's son-Father relationship.

Similarly, the New Testament expresses the problem of human freedom through the idea of being children of God: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba, Father" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . . (Romans 8: 14-15). Likewise we read in Galatians: "So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirit of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our heart, crying 'Abba, Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal 4: 3-7). One can see in these texts that the scriptures do not know the alternative: slave-Lord, but rather the alternative: Son-Father.

It is not the person who rules over others as his slaves who is free. Rather it is the person who, as a son, freely places himself in the service of the Father out of love. A free person expresses this love by serving others, his brethren, as Christ did. This is the freedom of God's children, and it is for this freedom that Christ set us free. These realisations, which make up

the basic principles and guidelines of a Polish theology of liberation, are the result of the experiences of people who have attempted to take upon themselves, in faith and through faith, a reassessment of the situation in a communist country. For this reason they are also in a position to serve as lights of hope for many people and even nations by pointing the way forward in the continuing struggle for liberation.