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The urgent need to return to being the church of the poor

by Jon Sobrino, SJ

[**Editor's Note:** This article was written in 2009 for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bishop Helder Camara, and it is published here with permission from the author. It was translated from the Spanish by Jesuit Fr. Joseph Owens]

Today, March 24, marks the 30th anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination while celebrating Mass in a hospital chapel in San Salvador. Read the full report by

Celebration

editor Pat Marrin here.

Envisioning the Church as "poor and powerless" has never prospered much among us. Not even Vatican II, as important and decisive as it was in other matters, made it a central concern. The Latin American bishops' conference at Medellín (1968) did indeed make it a key issue, and the Puebla conference (1979) also stressed it, even in the face of serious opposition. For the last three decades, however, the abandonment of the vision has been only too apparent. As Fr. José Comblin says: "After Puebla there began the Church of silence. The Church began to have nothing to say." Although the Aparecida conference (2007) slowed down the decline a bit, the Church has still not experienced that "turning around of history" that Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría said was needed in order to heal a society that is gravely ill. The conclusion is that we need to return to being a Church of the poor and to work hard for that. In El Salvador, since the death of Archbishop Romero, the erosion has been clear, as has been the need for ecclesiastical regeneration.

At the time of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII wanted the Council to recognize that the Church is "a Church

of the poor." Cardinal Lercaro gave a lucid, heartfelt discourse on that theme at the end of the first session in 1962, and Bishop Himmer expressed it in unmistakable terms: "The first place in the Church must be reserved for the poor." Even in October 1963, however, Bishop Gerlier was complaining of the little importance being accorded the poor in the schema on the Church. The more progressive Latin American bishops also soon realized that the great majority of bishops at the Council did not feel comfortable discussing the topic. Nevertheless, there was always a group of bishops who wished to be faithful to the inspiration of John XXIII, among them a good number of Latin Americans. They met regularly and quietly in Domus Mariae to discuss the topic of "the poor Church."

On November 16, 1965, a few days before the end of the Council, about 40 of the bishops celebrated the Eucharist together in the catacombs of Saint Domitila. They asked for the grace "to be faithful to the spirit of Jesus," and at the end of the celebration they signed what they called "the Pact of the Catacombs."

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The "Pact" was conceived as a challenge to the "brothers in the episcopacy" to lead a "life of poverty" and to be a "poor servant" Church, as was the desire of John XXIII. The first signers were mainly Brazilians and other Latin Americans, but others soon joined them. By signing, they made a commitment to live in poverty, to reject all symbols or privileges of power, and to place the poor at the center of their pastoral ministry. The text was to have a strong influence on the liberation theology that arose a few years later.

One of the supporters of the Pact was Dom Helder Câmara. This year we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of his birth, on February 7, 1909, in Fortaleza, Ceará, in northeastern Brazil. In homage to his person and as a reminder to us, we publish here the text of this historic document.

The Pact of the Catacombs: a poor servant Church

We, bishops assembled in the Second Vatican Council, are conscious of the deficiencies of our lifestyle in terms of evangelical poverty. Motivated by one another in an initiative in which each of us has tried avoid ambition and presumption, we unite with all our brothers in the episcopacy and rely above all on the grace and strength of Our Lord Jesus Christ and on the prayer of the faithful and the priests in our respective dioceses. Placing ourselves in thought and in prayer before the Trinity, the Church of Christ, and all the priests and faithful of our dioceses, with humility and awareness of our weakness, but also with all the determination and all the strength that God desires to grant us by his grace, we commit ourselves to the following:

- 1. We will try to live according to the ordinary manner of our people in all that concerns housing, food, means of transport, and related matters. See Matthew 5,3; 6,33ff; 8,20.*
- 1. We renounce forever the appearance and the substance of wealth, especially in clothing (rich vestments, loud colors) and symbols made of precious metals (these signs should certainly be evangelical). See Mark 6,9; Matthew 10,9-10; Acts 3.6 (Neither silver nor gold).*
- 1. We will not possess in our own names any properties or other goods, nor will we have bank accounts or the like. If it is necessary to possess something, we will place everything in the name of the diocese or of social or charitable works. See Matthew 6,19-21; Luke 12,33-34.*
- 1. As far as possible we will entrust the financial and material running of our diocese to a commission of competent lay persons who are aware of their apostolic role, so that we can be less administrators and more pastors and apostles. See Matthew 10,8; Acts 6,1-7.*

1. *We do not want to be addressed verbally or in writing with names and titles that express prominence and power (such as Eminence, Excellency, Lordship). We prefer to be called by the evangelical name of "Father." See Matthew 20,25-28; 23,6-11; John 13,12-15).*
1. *In our communications and social relations we will avoid everything that may appear as a concession of privilege, prominence, or even preference to the wealthy and the powerful (for example, in religious services or by way of banquet invitations offered or accepted). See Luke 13,12-14; 1 Corinthians 9,14-19.*
1. *Likewise we will avoid favoring or fostering the vanity of anyone at the moment of seeking or acknowledging aid or for any other reason. We will invite our faithful to consider their donations as a normal way of participating in worship, in the apostolate, and in social action. See Matthew 6,2-4; Luke 15,9-13; 2 Corinthians 12,4.*
1. *We will give whatever is needed in terms of our time, our reflection, our heart, our means, etc., to the apostolic and pastoral service of workers and labor groups and to those who are economically weak and disadvantaged, without allowing that to detract from the welfare of other persons or groups of the diocese. We will support lay people, religious, deacons, and priests whom the Lord calls to evangelize the poor and the workers by sharing their lives and their labors. See Luke 4,18-19; Mark 6,4; Matthew 11,4-5; Acts 18,3-4; 20,33-35; 1 Corinthians 4,12; 9,1-27.*
1. *Conscious of the requirements of justice and charity and of their mutual relatedness, we will seek to transform our works of welfare into social works based on charity and justice, so that they take all persons into account, as a humble service to the responsible public agencies. See Matthew 25,31-46; Luke 13,12-14; 13,33-34.*
1. *We will do everything possible so that those responsible for our governments and our public services establish and enforce the laws, social structures, and institutions that are necessary for justice, equality, and the integral, harmonious development of the whole person and of all persons, and thus for the advent of a new social order, worthy of the children of God. See Acts 2,44-45; 4,32-35; 5,4; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; 1 Timothy 5,16.*
1. *Since the collegiality of the bishops finds its supreme evangelical realization in jointly serving the two-thirds of humanity who live in physical, cultural, and moral misery, we commit ourselves: a) to support as far as possible the most urgent projects of the episcopacies of the poor nations; and b) to request jointly, at the level of international organisms, the adoption of economic and cultural structures which, instead of producing poor nations in an ever richer world, make it possible for the poor majorities to free themselves from their wretchedness. We will do all this even as we bear witness to the gospel, after the example of Pope Paul VI at the United Nations.*
1. *We commit ourselves to sharing our lives in pastoral charity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, priests, religious, and laity, so that our ministry constitutes a true service. Accordingly, we will make an effort to "review our lives" with them; we will seek collaborators in ministry so that we can be animators according to the Spirit rather than dominators according to the world; we will try to be as humanly present and welcoming as possible; and we will show ourselves to be open to all, no matter what their beliefs. See Mark 8,34-35; Acts 6,1-7; 1 Timothy 3,8-10.*
1. *When we return to our dioceses, we will make these resolutions known to our diocesan priests and ask them to assist us with their comprehension, their collaboration, and their prayers.*

May God help us to be faithful.

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The Church of Archbishop Romero

As we read the Pact today, we are struck by the fact that it treats basically just one theme: poverty. But because the pivot on which everything else turned was that ? and not, for example, the administration of the sacraments ? the Pact of the Catacombs produced important fruits in Medellín and little by little elsewhere as well. Historically, it has led to the struggle for justice and liberation. Ecclesially, it has led to the option for the poor. Theologically, it has led to the God of the poor. All of this reached El Salvador, and Archbishop Romero blessed it and made it bear fruit, in the midst of the new Salvadoran reality of martyrdom.

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At Puebla Archbishop Romero got to know those same bishops who had signed the Pact in Medellín, and he returned to San Salvador quite happy, as he relates: "I remember one of the first nights during the Puebla meeting, when I met Bishop Helder Câmara and Bishop Proaño and Cardinal Arnns of Brazil. When they learned that I was the archbishop of San Salvador, they would tell me, 'You have a lot to tell us. Be aware that we already know that that people of yours is admirable. May they remain faithful to the Gospel, as they have been until now.'" The admiration they felt for Archbishop Romero was obvious, as was that he felt for them. Dom Helder Câmara was one of the principal animators of that prophetic group.

Nowadays, in our convulsed situation, we profess the continuing urgency of those social, political, and ecclesial dreams, which we can in no way renounce. We continue to reject neo-liberal capitalism, the neo-imperialism of money and arms, and the free-market economy of consumerism, which sinks the great majority of humankind into poverty and hunger. And we continue to reject all discrimination for reasons of gender, culture, or race. We demand a substantive transformation of the international organisms (UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, etc.). We commit ourselves to living a "profound and integral ecology," promoting agrarian policies that are a true alternative to the predatory policies of large estates, monoculture, and toxic chemicals. We gladly participate in the social, political, and economic transformations that have as their goal a "high intensity" democracy.

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As Church, we want to partake, in the light of the Gospel, of that consuming passion of Jesus, the Kingdom. We want to be a Church that opts for the poor, a community that is ecumenical and also macro-ecumenical. The God in whom we believe, the Abba of Jesus, can in no way be the cause of fundamentalism, harsh exclusion, possessive inclusion, or proud proselytizing. It is enough that we make of our God the only true God. "Does my God let me see God?" With all the respect due the opinion of Pope Benedict XVI, interreligious dialogue is not only possible, it is necessary. We will make of ecclesial co-responsibility the legitimate expression of adult faith.

Correcting long centuries of discrimination, we will demand full equality for women in the life and the ministries of the Church. We will encourage the liberty of our theologians and recognize their service. We will make the Church a network of praying, prophetic communities of service which bear witness to the Good News of life, liberty, and joyful communion. We will preach a Good News of compassion, welcome, pardon, and tenderness; we will be Samaritans on all the roadsides of humankind.

We will continue to insist that Jesus' warning be lived out in ecclesial practice: "It shall not be so among you" (Matthew 21,26). Let authority be service. The Vatican will cease to be a state, and the Pope will no

longer be head of a state. The Curia will be thoroughly reformed, and the local churches will promote inculturation of the Gospel and sharing of ministry. The Church will be committed, without fear or evasiveness, in the great causes of justice and peace, in the struggles for human rights and the recognition of the equality of all peoples. There will be a prophecy of proclamation, of denunciation, and of consolation.

[Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino is a theologian and author of several books. In 1989 six members of his community at the University of Central America were murdered by the Salvadoran government.]

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