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Immigration reform is about 'God's option for the poor'

by Pat Marrin

NCR Today

If Vatican II was to have been a revolution, it is hard to fathom what Pope John XXIII may have actually had in mind when, in a talk given in 1959 before the start of the council, he spoke of his dream of recovering the "church of the poor." What if the church looked like the original circle of disciples around Jesus, without power or possessions, traveling light, preaching God's justice and love, made up of outcasts, the weak, the exploited and crucified of history? It was an old man's prayer, spoken from the throne of a 2,000 year-old institution held captive by its own temporal aggrandizement and claim of absolute authority, one of the last monarchies on earth.

The phrase, "church of the poor," was a dangerous memory, and it faded quickly from the council's agenda, but was taken up by a group of Latin American bishops who knew the dream was already stirring in their part of the Third World, where a violent stand-off between the rich elites and the vast poor majority was about to explode. The church needed to support human development, economic reform and social justice in order to be faithful to the Gospel and to be on the right side of history.

The bishops' 1968 meeting with Pope Paul VI in Medellin, Colombia, to apply the spirit of Vatican II to Latin America put its blessing on a radical shift in church alignment from rich to poor with the equally potent phrase "God's option for the poor." It gave official expression to an emerging theology of liberation that saw God in the world, the church as the body of Christ, anointed to "bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives, a year of favor to all" (cf. Luke 4).

Controversial and costly, such a church might have remained an abstraction if it wasn't lived in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and throughout Latin America. The murder in 1980 of Archbishop Oscar Romero for walking with the poor in El Salvador highlighted decades of brutal repression that was forcing the institutional church to review its loyalties, refine its theologies and practices to meet the

challenge of global liberation versus evolving forms of military economic repression.



U.S. Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley volunteered to replace Jesuit colleagues murdered by the army

at the University of Central America in San Salvador in 1989 toward the end of the long civil war there. In the past two decades, Brackley has witnessed on behalf of God's option for the poor by building the case for comprehensive solutions of regional poverty that challenge U.S. foreign policy and multinational interests. He has argued cogently that the social reality for the poor in much of the world will not change unless the social reality changes in the developed world and especially in the United States.

As we planned the Jan 12-14 Celebration conference on the church's role in immigration reform (<http://celebrationpublications.org/conference>), it became clear that immigration is not a domestic crisis but an international one. Reform is not just in the interests of the U.S. church, but a critical challenge about the role of the global church in its commitment to the poor. The time has come for Medellin to come north, for the seed sown by Pope John XIII and nurtured by every pope since then, to find fertile ground in the United States.

The need for comprehensive immigration reform will open doors to larger questions about who we are as church and why our response is so important for the future of the church. Please join us Jan. 12-14, 2011, in San Antonio. The issue is critical and the timing could not be better.

In my next blog I will tell you why I think liturgy is the key to the church's influence in the debate over immigration reform, and why I am so happy Fr. Jake Empereur will be part of the Celebration conference.

?By Pat Marrin, *Celebration* editor

Related blogs by Pat Marrin:

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