

## Renowned theologian, advocate of poor, dies in Brazil

Phillip Berryman | Apr. 2, 2011



### *APPRECIATION*

Renowned theologian and advocate of the poor, Joseph Comblin, died March 27 in Salvador, Brazil of natural causes. He was 88.

Comblin, a leading exponent of liberation theology, was once a follower and an adviser to the Brazilian bishop, Dom Hélder Câmara, a defender of human rights and the church's option for the poor. Hélder Câmara came to be known as the "Red bishop" during the Brazilian dictatorship.

Born in Brussels, Belgium, in 1923, Comblin was ordained in 1947 and moved to Brazil in 1958. He later worked in Chile, teaching at or leading seminaries in both countries.

The Belgian-born theologian leaves a legacy of a vast body of work in several genres, along with a distinctive model of how to live the theological priestly vocation.

I got to know him during a short course on "Theology of Development" in 1968 at the Latin American Pastoral Institute in Quito. While there he was informed that the Brazilian military dictatorship was not going to allow him to re-enter the country.

A background paper he had written for Hélder Câmara in preparation for the upcoming meeting of CELAM (Latin American Bishops Conference) at Medellín had been leaked to the press and he was being denounced as a foreign subversive advocating "revolution".

Actually the paper was not a manifesto but a sober discussion of what "revolution," then widely discussed throughout the continent, might entail for the church. The matter was resolved in a few weeks through discussion between bishops and the military and he returned. Meanwhile, I often heard him clacking away on a manual typewriter in his room.

To see Comblin up close -- slow of speech, mild-mannered, even shy, steeped in scripture, history, and theology -- made it all the more surprising that he should be considered dangerous. The incident however captures some key aspects of his way of working: by 1968 he was not teaching in classrooms but working

Hélder Câmara and others in pastoral work, and his primary concerns were not doctrinal formulations but how the church should act in the world.

Comblin was born in Brussels in 1923, entered the seminary after high school, and studied theology at Louvain in the 1940s. He received a doctorate (with a dissertation on Christ in the book of Revelation) and served in a parish for a number of years. Chafing at the conventional routines of Belgian Catholicism and society, in 1958 he volunteered to work in Brazil (to a "church with a future" he said later). He taught for in the state of Sao Paulo until 1962, and then in the seminary in Santiago Chile, returning to Brazil in 1965 to work with Hélder Câmara .

### **"Theology of the Hoe"**

In 1969 at the Theological Institute of Recife, Comblin spearheaded a new way of training for priesthood. Rather than living in a seminary and taking the usual courses, the young men, themselves from rural families, lived in a community, farming in the morning, studying in the afternoon, and doing pastoral activity in the evening.

Their first year of study was built around a series of "everyday realities" explored in dialogue with the people. The first topic was casa ("house"): they observed how houses were built, who lived there, people's activities, and what the house meant to the people. At a second stage, they would consider various meanings of house or dwelling in scripture, and at a third stage confront scripture with people's traditional ideas, e.g., to what extent God dwells in the church building (as a sacred space) and to what extent in human beings, families, or communities.

Other topics considered in the initial year included land, labor, male-female relations. The other three year-long course took up Jesus Christ, the church, and morality, always starting from the people's own perceptions.

Underlying this project was a conviction that the issue in Latin America was not so much clerical celibacy or a priest shortage, but the model of ministry. Priests were often foreign, and even when they were natives, years of seminary education and clerical culture had alienated them from the ordinary people. This "theology of the hoe" was aimed at developing a new model of priests who remained close to their own popular culture.

The candidates were trained to delve into their culture and to apply scripture to it; they did not study the usual seminary courses in systematic theology, which are largely the result of controversies from centuries past. Some priests were ordained from the program, and a similar program was started in Chile, but the entire approach was closed down under pressure from the Vatican.

As of the 1980s Comblin's major activity was training "lay missionaries" from poor rural communities throughout northeast Brazil. Several hundred attended his eightieth birthday celebration in 2003.

In 1972 Comblin was finally prevented from reentering Brazil. At that point he moved to Talca in Chile, then under the Allende socialist government. He kept a low profile and did not have to flee after the September 1973 coup. At some point he began to study the practice and ideology of the military regimes then in power in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and elsewhere, and published articles analyzing these regimes and raising the question of the church's response.

A version in English, *The Church and the National Security State* (1972), was based on his lectures at Harvard Divinity School. His argument was not simply a protest against the practices of these regimes, (torture and "disappearance") but was a theological critique of the ideology they used as justification. It was perhaps these writings that prompted the Pinochet regime to likewise deny him reentry in 1980. He was then able to return to Brazil, where he worked for another three decades.

## A ?Catholic Jacques Ellul?

Comblin's first book, on the resurrection, appeared in 1960, and he published approximately sixty-five books and well over three hundred articles, spanning several genres, primarily in Portuguese, Spanish, and French. Most distinctive may be a series of large studies of what may be called ?theologies of earthly realities,? as called for by his Louvain professor Gustave Thils: theologies of peace, the city, nation and nationalism, the city, and revolution.

*Théologie de la Ville* (1968), for example, is a sprawling work combining biblical theology, scholarship on urban history and city planning, considerations of the church's relationship to the city, and the pastoral challenges of the contemporary city.

His scripture studies include commentaries on several New Testament epistles and on the book of Acts, as well as many topical studies. He wrote a number of accessibly written biblical meditations on faith, the Gospel, and Christian freedom.

Many of his articles and books address pastoral matters directly: popular religion, education, models of ministry, secularization. Some works addressed theological issues, for example, the theology of mission or of Christian universality. What he did not write were treatises typical of systematic theology: Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, sacraments.

Comblin's writing is often contrarian. In 1961, when Latin America was believed to have an extreme priest shortage, he wrote that Brazil had a vocation to send missionaries to other lands. In 1990 when theologians were writing glowingly about base communities, he raised a number of serious questions about what was happening in pastoral practice, e.g., the dependency of lay people on priests or sisters, even though he had been an early advocate of them.

Reflecting his Louvain training, Comblin often ranged widely over church history, examining how the church had responded to the challenges of different eras. A persistent theme is that of freedom, the freedom brought by Jesus and Paul, and yet its frequent stifling, even within the church.

Although his articles appeared in *Concilium* and other theological journals, Comblin is not particularly known in the theological guild. He tends to be classified among the Latin American liberation theologians, and he was certainly involved in their collective work from early meetings with Gustavo Gutierrez and others starting around 1964.

However, I suspect that the main reason that he is not more widely known and studied is that many of his writings do not fit neatly into the usual categories of theological work.

He can perhaps be compared to Jacques Ellul, the French theologian, philosopher, and social critic, whose writings range from scripture commentaries to books on the ?technological society? and propaganda. Ellul tends to have a radical ?No,? coming out of his reformation and Barthian stance, while Comblin may have a more ?Catholic? temperament.

What they have in common is that they were grounded in scripture, and did not confine themselves to narrow disciplinary specializations. Both wrote driven by particular questions as they arose, with little concern for systematization. In that sense, he has been like Harvey Cox and Rosemary Ruether, who have engaged theologically with their culture and are not concerned with where they fit in the theological canon.

For close to a half century Comblin lived in rural towns traveling by bus (he did not drive), far from research

libraries and so was dependent on books he gathered over the years.

There is something paradoxical about Comblin's life: writing dozens of books and hundreds of articles, while working with poor people in rural areas, who may be literate but are not his reading public. A key to the paradox is he believed that a major service that theology can provide to the church's mission is to help strip away the accretions of history to reveal gospel in its simplicity, especially for the poor.

### **Discouragement about the church, hope in the Gospel.**

In recent years Comblin's view of the possibilities of the Catholic Church turned increasingly bleak. He saw that the generation of bishops with whom he had worked, men with strong personalities able to take initiatives, were replaced by Vatican loyalists when they retired or died.

In a talk at the Jesuit University in San Salvador last October he made a distinction between the Gospel and religion.

"Jesus did not found a religion, he didn't establish rites, teach doctrines," he said. Religion comes from human need and is a human creation. "When did religion enter Christianity? . . . When Jesus became an object of worship?"

With Constantine the clergy became a class set apart and there was great insistence on the difference between the sacred and the profane. Christian history itself is the story of the contradiction between those who are devoted to the Gospel and those who are devoted to religion. Religion seeks secular power; the gospel refuses power.

"Jesus did not found any church," he said, noting how the episcopacy emerged in the second century, and eventually the papacy took on an imperial role.

These are certainly not original ideas, but Comblin was stating them with a simplicity and radical thrust.

He advised people in the audience to realize that church history is subject to periods of institutional retrenchment, pointing to the 1950s when he was young and Pius XII had just condemned various schools of theology -- which then became the basis for Vatican II.

Comblin was buried near the grave of Padre Ibiapina, a nineteenth-century priest who did missionary work in northeast Brazil spreading the faith but also helping peasants improve their agriculture. Tributes poured in from his fellow theologians, bishops, priests, and religious and lay people in Brazil, Chile, and elsewhere.

I believe he has left a body of work that deserves to be more widely known, and an example of how to live a theological life.

[Phillip Berryman was a pastoral worker in a barrio in Panama during 1965-73. From 1976 to 1980, he served as a representative for the American Friends Service Committee in Central America. In 1980, he returned from Guatemala to the United States and now lives in Philadelphia.]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 05/26/2017 - 04:16):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/renowned-theologian-advocate-poor-dies-brazil>