

# THE FAITH OF THE POOR: A SOURCE OF HOPE

By JOAN TOOFIG

*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and thwart the cleverness of the clever. . . .  
For God's folly is wiser than men and his weakness more powerful than men.<sup>1</sup>*

**T**HAT GOD should use the foolish things of this world to enlighten the wise, and the powerless to confound the strong should come as no surprise. God's ways are not our ways. The gospel teaches us the paradox of life from death, good from evil. Indeed, the divine economy seems to be built upon the most unlikely resources — the meek, the marginated, the unprepared. In this article I will try to show how the very desperate situations of injustice, hunger, fear, exploitation, torture, persecution and death in Latin America are giving rise to christian hope for the world.

Years of missionary work in South America have made me conscious of the often futile struggle of many people for the bare necessities of life. Ignorance, illiteracy and the lack of required documents have contributed to unemployment. Poor diet and inadequate housing have taken their toll in illness and a short life-expectancy. With few exceptions, limited and inferior educational opportunities have been all that the poor could aspire to. Unfair labour practices have flourished because fear of being fired has silenced would-be protests. Unjust structures have been reinforced by repressive governments, in which national security is the order of the day and the justification for arrests, control of press, and the denial of every form of civil and human right. Torture, violence and terrorism have not been absent. This picture has been reproduced throughout Latin America and in other parts of the world.

In September 1977, the Bogota section of Priests for Latin America (SAL) expressed it this way:

. . . The thermometer of justice must measure the present human situation:  
the worker's starvation wage;

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1, 19. 25.

the steadily rising cost of living;  
 the homemaker's empty food shelves;  
 children's precarious health;  
 school deficiencies;  
 closed universities;  
 labour strikes caused by employers' greed;  
 the proliferation of usury;  
 repression through the complicity of political and religious hierarchies;  
 the silencing of every kind of protest with violence;  
 the dismissal and arrest of labour leaders . . .  
 the state of siege, etc.<sup>2</sup>

This was another way of saying what the latin american catholic bishops had described in 1968 in their Medellin documents as 'institutionalized violence', the poor as victims, hungry, homeless, unemployed, exploited, and without a voice in their own governments.

To live in freedom and dignity without fear, with enough to eat, a place to sleep, an opportunity to be educated and to develop as a person with other people, to earn a decent living in human working conditions, to experience trust and solidarity with others, to know God and his love: these are the real yearnings of the poor that groan to be satisfied.

Since that 1968 meeting at Medellin, both religious and secular groups have put in motion programmes of consciousness-raising, the development of a critical attitude and the concomitant responsibility of doing something to change a situation that is recognized as dehumanizing. In groups under Church auspices, men and women, workers, miners, maids, fishermen, students, farm workers, urban slum dwellers, rural peasants, priests and religious have been examining the situation in the light of the gospel, and sharing insights on how best they can respond to it in order to effect change. We know that the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian in every age, and continues to guide contemporary Christians as he did the early Church, forming them by the very circumstances (persecutions, oppression) in which they find themselves. In the ten years that have passed since Medellin, we have dramatic examples of how the Spirit is leading Christians as they read and respond to the signs of the times.

We are told of a worker whose home in a city slum was broken into by the police demanding to be shown where he was hiding arms. The man quietly pointed to a drawer in a nearby table. There the

<sup>2</sup> *Latin-american Press* (Lima, Peru, 10 November 1977), p 2.

police found the man's bible. This was no clever repartee on the part of the worker. He knew from where his strength had come — the word of God. He had answered with the wisdom and directness of one who possessed the truth.

Arbitrary arrests, harassment, violence, torture and the threat of reprisals on relatives have been used against the poor. In another instance a young woman, active in union affairs of the company where she worked, was warned to stop her union activities. She refused to be intimidated. She was killed in an unexplained traffic accident as she left her job. Some people have disappeared completely, and efforts to determine their whereabouts in jails, hospitals or the morgue have been in vain.

In a small community in the mountains of Central America, the police broke into a home demanding to be told who were the leaders in the community. The man calmly replied, 'Jesus and myself'; so conscious was he of Christ's presence in his struggle.

A sister living among the poor in Santiago, Chile, told of a group of housewives blocking a road by standing in it with their brooms. It was their only means to protest against government repression. Certainly they were weak, but in this simple but united effort they found new strength and an effective voice.

A priest in another latin american country who was being sought for by the police gave this simple remedy to overcome fear. He said that when he experienced fear, he thought of others who had been in similar straits and had shared their fears with him. That recollection gave him the courage to go on. Persecution promotes dependency upon God and the inner strength that comes from it. Commitment to a cause, to their fellow men and to God, has made people ready to accept the risk, to suffer torture or whatever else is required of them. The self-denial of such a life is obvious; but Christians living this repression hardly advert to it. They have all the anxieties of other men, their weaknesses, temptations and foibles; but their sense of values is sharpened. They find joy in each small victory, in news of a prisoner, in the ingenuity of a companion who outwitted the police, in an effective protest that embarrassed the oppressor, in the deep fellowship with others who share their vision and common purpose. Their energies are never dissipated on non-essentials. Their life is simpler, their joy deeper, and their faith stronger.

The persecution has not been haphazard. It has been directed principally at groups that have been 'conscienticized'. In some areas, the Church has identified closely in this struggle. The pastoral letter

of the Bishop of Chimbote, Peru, in January 1978, clearly attests to this. I will quote it at length because it well expresses the extent of the oppression and his pastoral concern. It was written during a steel strike that had affected thousands of families in the area.

For a long time, the people of Chimbote have lived in a hard and difficult situation, which has now become dramatic in terms of hunger, misery, unemployment, the increased cost of living and the resulting consequences.

This distressing situation is the fruit of systematic violence on the part of the holders of power and privilege. Any protest whatsoever by the people or their leaders is being interpreted as subversion or political agitation. And frequently workers have been threatened, fired or put in jail. . . .

Our Pastoral Agents witnessed many violent events in Chimbote on 13 January: as, for example, the indiscriminate shooting at the people by policemen . . . leaving a toll of eight persons wounded, two of them seriously (Mamerto Silva Vargas, forty-seven years old, and Victor Alva Díaz, seventeen) and one person shot to death — Genaro Rojas Bardales, a twenty-year-old student. In addition to all this, many tear-gas canisters were thrown into the large crowd of strike demonstrators. We emphatically protest and condemn the tear-gassing and the indiscriminate shooting. The striking steelworkers and the people who accompanied them were peacefully demonstrating in an attitude of civic maturity.

As their bishop I supported the request of the relatives of Genaro Rojas Bardales to recover his body . . . but without success.

All of this leads us to express our christian reflection on the events, and to extend the solidarity of the Church to those who suffer as victims of the established power of the present system.<sup>3</sup>

The bishop goes on to demand 'in the service of truth' that officials clarify the facts, and that the company give a truthful report of the real reasons for the strike. Like other prelates and religious leaders who have spoken out fearlessly in the name of truth and justice and out of love for their people, this bishop joins the increasing number of prophetic voices in Latin America.

More frequent than the testimony of bishops, however, has been the insertion of religious, women and men, among the poor. This presence has helped the religious to rediscover some gospel values:

<sup>3</sup> *Latin-american Press* (Lima, Peru, 16 February 1978), pp 5-6. James Burke O.P., Bishop of Chimbote (Peru).

fidelity, solidarity, courage, humility, simplicity, selflessness, and utter dependence upon God. Religious have participated in and have helped to form basic christian communities and have been formed themselves by this experience. They have learned that authentic christian spirituality is not the luxury of those specially consecrated to God; it is his gift to every person who dares to take the gospel seriously. This experience has taught both religious and laity alike what community means: a sharing not only of material goods but spiritual ones as well; a reflection about the actual situation, how they have experienced God in it, the successes and failures of the members, their hopes and plans, and what the word of God suggests to them in their search for a better world. In truth, religious are being evangelized by the poor. Father Arrupe puts it this way:

In this simple experience, they feel themselves very small and yet open to value in a new way: how God speaks to them through those with whom they stand in solidarity. They see that those people, the marginated, even though not often believers, have something divine to tell them through their suffering, their oppression, their abandonment.

Here one understands true poverty; one rediscovers awareness of one's own incapacity and ignorance; one opens one's soul to receive very profound instruction in the lives of the poor, taught by God himself, by means of these rough faces, these half-ruined lives. It is a new face of Christ discovered in 'the little ones'.<sup>4</sup>

In Brazil, Argentina, Panama, Mexico and El Salvador, priests and religious have met death because of their position in defence of the poor, and their struggle for social justice. Elsewhere, bishops and religious have been arrested, deported, and, in some instances, tortured, because they were seen as a threat to the privileged classes and the *status quo*. This presence among the poor has given a certain credibility to the Church, especially in countries where it has been traditionally identified with the power structures. But the suffering of official church personnel, inspiring as it is, is as nothing compared to the courage and sacrifice of thousands of lay people, whose families have been separated, homes searched, and lives threatened. Few would suspect the inner strength, tenderness of feeling, and greatness of soul in a shoe-shine boy, a woman who sells fruit in an open market,

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<sup>4</sup> Arrupe, Rev. Pedro, S.J.: 'The Service that Religious Communities can Give', in a talk to the Third Inter-American Congress of Religious, in Montreal, 20-27 November 1977.

or a man who repairs shoes at a corner-stall: yet all these risk their lives for others. They are the weak, the foolish, the powerless of this world. They are 'under-developed' by academic standards, they experience fear like anyone else; yet they face the consequences of their convictions as they struggle for a life with dignity and freedom, and a better future for their children. They have taken a critical look at their situation and, strengthened by their faith in God who is just and who is on their side, they have assumed responsibility for changing it despite the risk involved. Is there any higher form of human activity than this?

As I considered all that has happened in Latin America since Medellin (1968), the words of St Paul quoted above came to mind. So much has been accomplished. A sound foundation of trust in God has been laid, a love of neighbour, a willingness to sacrifice: and all nourished by the word of God. There is reason for hope that when the latin american bishops hold their Third Conference (Celam III) in Puebla, Mexico, in October of this year, they will reaffirm the documents of Medellin and go even further to break with every type of oppression and exploitation. Gary MacEoin notes that most of the basic christian communities, 'the most dynamic element in the Church in Latin America today, are communities of the poor'. Furthermore, 'the poor are many while the rich are few'. Finally, 'the exile, torture and killings of priests and nuns, in ever greater numbers as the forces of reaction grow desperate', may force 'the institutional Church to identify in blood with the oppressed, and share rather than control their struggle'.<sup>5</sup>

It has long been held that 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church'. If that is the case, these past ten years have marked a glorious chapter in church history in Latin America. No longer can a Christian remain a silent spectator of the sufferings around him. Not all bishops share this view. Through fear, ignorance, a lack of contact with the people, or a misunderstanding of their role, some refuse to acknowledge the oppression of their people and their need of liberation. One ignores or remains silent about the plight of the poor at the risk of being accused of cowardice, irrelevance, or complicity in the injustice. Fidelity to the gospel has its price, but solidarity is its own reward. May the Holy Spirit continue to strengthen the faith of the poor in God who is on their side.

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<sup>5</sup> MacEoin, Gary: 'Will the Latin American People be heard at Celam III?', in *Latin-american Press* (9 March 1978), pp 6-7.