

## The Franciscan Affinity to Liberation Theology

Dom Helder Camara calls St Francis the great symbol of a liberating church of the poor. And Cardinal Arns writes in an article : “The 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the Latin American Bishops in Medellin states in its document on the poverty of the Church on our continent: ‘a hollow outcry of millions of people is rising, people who beg from the bishops a liberation which is not granted to them from any other side.’<sup>1</sup>

In response to it the Episcopal delegates suggested three attitudes to a church that wants to be poor; attitudes that are also of an existential importance to the Franciscan Order, here as well as in other parts of the world:

- ‘The Church deplores the unjust lack of the goods of this world and the sin that causes this lack.’
- The Church proclaims and lives the spiritual poverty as an attitude of the spiritual sonship and the openness towards God
- The Church pledges herself to material poverty. The poverty of the Church is an indispensable quality in the history of salvation.’

In order to justify its option for the poor the liberation theology follows the most beautiful of traditions by referring to the humanity of Christ, that is the living Gospel. The document of Medellin uses expressions that are very similar to those of our Father Francis. One example may suffice: “Christ, our redeemer, not only loves the poor, but he who was rich, made himself poor, lived a life of poverty, focussed his mission on proclaiming liberation to the poor and founded his Church as a sign of this poverty among the people.

Just as St Francis wanted to live as a poor man in a small community, so did the bishops in Medellin open the doors wide for the new basic Christian communities. “We want to encourage all those who feel called to form small communities who have taken root in really poor areas. They are a sign to the whole people of God, a constant call to evangelical poverty.

Not only communities but also individual persons, especially priests, heard something in the decisions of Medellin that is also found in the rule of St Francis: “We encourage all who feel called to share the destiny of the poor to live among them by the work of their hands”<sup>2</sup>

Puebla, the Third General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopacy in 1979 went even much further concerning poverty and evangelization. Although Puebla branded the misery and the inhuman living conditions in the eight features of the countenance of the suffering Christ, it sees the poor as the first evangelizers of the world. This is the dream of Francis of Assisi come true.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Medellin Document 8, 1-2

<sup>2</sup> Medellin, III, 9a

<sup>3</sup> Kardinal Arns, in: Franziskaner Mission 1 – 1990, 20 Jahre MZF, Werl

Cardinal Lorscheider goes even further and applies this in general to the religious life in Latin America. He says: "One cannot understand religious life in Latin America today, if one does not see it together with liberation theology and its originality. This theology starts at the social reality of the utmost misery in which the majority of the population find themselves and aims at the liberation of these oppressed people. This is the reason why liberation theology asks: what is the relation that must exist between the redemption through Jesus Christ and the process of socio-historical liberation?"<sup>4</sup>

From all this it becomes clear that here we touch the very core of Franciscan spirituality. Francis of Assisi is called the father of the poor, the man who as the rich son of a merchant left his position and changed over to the side of the poor. It was a long way to this decision, with a carefree youth, with times of crisis and a long search, until he was able to see through the economic mechanisms of wanting to have and to possess, which exclude a big part of humanity from a life in human dignity. After this insight he left that system in order to live an alternative kind of life which excluded nobody: a life among the poor and with the poor.

It was the encounter with human suffering that had led him to this turning point of his life. Lepers had been a horror to him, just as they were to all the other people of his time. But the Lord himself had led him among them, as he writes in his testament. From that time on, they, the sufferers, would remain for him and his brothers the touchstone of their vocation. He leaves no doubt that the place of the Franciscan life is at the side of the poor and the suffering. "And they must rejoice when they live among people who are considered to be of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers and the beggars by the wayside."<sup>5</sup>

Surely we find the poor and the excluded, the nameless people also in our society and this in an increasing measure. But we meet millions of them especially in the countries of the two-thirds-world.

These are the ordinary and despised people, the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers of today, among those St Francis wanted to live in his time and where he would show his brothers and sisters their place today. And this not only that they may hear the cry of the poor for more justice, but that they may identify with them and live among them and together with them struggle for more humaneness, participation and justice.

Today Francis would find thousands of possibilities for solidarity, not only in words, but in deeds. "In the whole world there would be nobody poorer than Francis, nobody who would be less of a person than he himself. The one whom the adulteress, tax-collectors, prostitutes, sinners, children, the blind, the lame, the deaf could experience in the Gos-

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<sup>4</sup> MZF, Berichte, Dokumente, Kommentare, Nr. 34, Die Armen haben mich bekehrt, Ein Porträt von Kardinal Lorscheider, Bonn 1987

<sup>5</sup> Earlier Rule 9

pel, would become a new reality; God, through whom and before whom a human being is and becomes a whole person.<sup>6</sup>

One who chose Francis as the leading figure in his life, Bishop Pedro Casaldaglia, who lives in the Matto Grosso among poor peasants and Indios, puts it into these words; "If Francis lived today in Latin America, he would live as a Franciscan, that is clear, but he would also live as a Latin American, but in differentiated ways, depending on where he lived; in any case Francis would live as an Indio, or as a 'Favelado' or as any other oppressed person of our people. He would be poor, but truly poor. He would not limit himself to "making a preferential option for the poor", because the one who takes a decision to side with the poor is not yet poor himself."<sup>7</sup>

In other words: What matters is to put oneself on the side of the poor, to opt for a life on the margin of the Church and of society. This is a positive option, not a negative one that would exclude others from salvation, e.g. the rich. Nor is it only a change of one's social standpoint but a change of one's perspective. Francis learnt to understand the Bible in a new way: from the point of view of the poor; he saw and understood that it was the poor Christ himself who met him in the poor. He understood at last that his vision, his dream to rebuild the Church of Christ, consisted first and foremost in making again a home for the poor in the midst of the Church. For this is the true Church of Christ; the place in which the poor can meet Christ, the brother of the poor, and where they can experience God's love. From that time on he wanted nothing but to live the message of the Gospel and to act it out in his fraternities as a living example, in the footsteps of this Christ who suffered, because he had chosen, completely and without reservation, to be with the weak, the oppressed, and the poor.

This way of life can be understood as an intensive search for a revitalisation of Christian life, as it was alive in the apostolic Church in the early Christian communities. The core of this spirituality, - to express it in view of our topic, would come very close to the options of Medellin and Puebla and the intentions of liberation theology. For us Franciscans it was and still is therefore self-understood that we, too, stand on the side of those who have taken the decision for such a liberating Church of the Poor. We would betray our charism and would leave the poor in the lurch if it were otherwise.

Andreas Müller OFM

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<sup>6</sup> A. Rotzetter. Franz von Assisi. Realisator und K nder des Evangeliums in unserer Zeit, in Geist und Leben 51 (1978) S. 143

<sup>7</sup> Dom Pedro Casaldaglia, in FM, 1-1990, S, 5, Werl.

## **United Nations**

### **Six Million Children Dying of Hunger Annually**

**The UN-Organisation FAO challenges richer countries to get more involved in the struggle against malnutrition. Most of the people suffering from starvation live in South Asia and on the African Continent. By Angela Koeckritz.**

Every year almost six million children die of hunger and malnutrition- This is shown in the latest world-hunger-report that has been presented by the UN Organisation for Food and Agriculture (FAO) in Rome.

According to FAO's estimate about 852 million people on earth were underfed between 2000 and 2002—the organization will present the actual figures next year. The majority of starving people live in South Asia and in black Africa. In countries like Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Angola more than 35% of the population are undernourished.

FAO urges to speed up the process of fighting starvation, as it is much too slow "The international community is far from reaching their goals," FAO say in their report. In 2000 the nations of the world had set themselves the goal that by 2015 the number of starving people should have decreased by half. While Latin America and the Caribbean had made progress, the situation in countries like North Korea and the Democratic Republic of Congo had deteriorated, says the report.

The FAO report mentions a number of measures that will help to reach the goal. First and foremost a promotion of the growth of the economy in the poor countries, secondly a stable government that is concerned about the common good of the people. FAO also challenges the rich nations to do their share in taking on more responsibility for combating starvation. They should make a contribution to the fight against hunger: through aid, fair trade and a release of debts. FAO also places great emphasis on education, because, "with every year in school the individual income increases by 10%."

Worldwide 121 million children do not go to school, most of them being girls, Hunger and a lack of education contribute to a rapid spreading of AIDS. On the other hand, according to Fao, AIDS is a reason for poverty and hunger. In many countries of black Africa the economic growth decreases annually by 0,2 to 1,2%. FAO also supports the preservation of the environment, for many people are hungry because resources that are of a vital importance for them have been destroyed.

### **Prayer to St Francis, the Stigmatized**

O St Francis,  
You, the Stigmatized of La Verna,  
the world is homesick for you,  
the icon of Christ Crucified.  
The world is longing for your heart,  
which is open for the people and for God,  
it is longing for your feet,

bare and wounded,  
for your hands,  
pierced and praying.  
The world is longing  
for your weak voice  
that is yet strong  
in the power of the Gospel...

John Paul II

### **Korrekte Fassung des Gedichtes von Hermann Hesse:**

Jede Blüte will zur Frucht,  
Jeder Morgen Abend werden,  
Ewiges ist nicht auf Erden  
Als der Wandel, als die Flucht.

Auch der schönste Sommer will  
Einmal Herbst und Welke spüren.  
Halte, Blatt, geduldig still,  
Wenn der Wind dich wird entführen.

Spiel dein Spiel und wehr dich nicht,  
Lass es still geschehen.  
Lass vom Winde, der dich bricht,  
Dich nach Hause wehen.

### ***In English***

Each blossom longs to come to fruit  
Each morning towards evening strives  
Forever nothing lasts on earth  
Except the change, except the flight.

Even the fairest summer will  
Want its autumn and will wither.  
Leaf, be patient, leaf, be still  
if the wind wants to release you.

Play the game and don't resist him  
Let it happen quietly.  
Let the wind that breaks you free  
Blow you home for ever.