

Simone LANZA

Wind of Ecumenical Renewal:

Six Small Windows between Latin America and Europe

Europe was broken up at the end of World War II; it was not easy to start again for people who experienced their loved ones killed by the enemies. In those days, Tullio VINAY, a young Italian Waldensian minister, together with other young Protestants, had the idea to build a place of peace and love, where Christians could reconcile themselves in the name of Christ. One of the main aims of the ecumenical movement nowadays is to avoid wars; this is a concrete hope we must globalize.

THE IDEA OF AGAPE

Lacking money, electricity and even roads, people built Agape with enthusiasm and faith in Christ, with stones and wood from the site. It was not easy: in the Waldensian Church there was a controversy about Agape's construction on the pretext that, in the first two years, no pastoral vocation came out from it.

The founders had clear ideas regarding the role of Agape in the *renewal* of the Christian Church as a whole, not just the Waldensian one. Not only was Agape training people to preach the love of Jesus Christ in the world instead of just in the churches: Agape was an idea.

In Agape people who were partisans in the resistance and people who were soldiers of the fascist army could truly reconcile themselves: Agape is a place where different people can communicate their diversities among themselves.

Agape has always been critical towards the Church's model of relationships, as one of its founders -Enea BALNEAS stated: "Once again, Agape says no! No to these pseudo-communities; no to these churches full of satisfied bourgeois people; no to this plain preaching! Once again, no!"

People reckoned then that the Church was stuck in a *mud pool*, and even now, more than fifty years later, the Church is still more in a mud pool as fewer and fewer young people attend worship. Only love, which introduces a new dimension into human relationships, can save us:

"Accepting Agape means accepting a diagnosis — our Church is in a mud pool — and a clear duty: to understand that neither evangelism nor Church media nor money of other churches are able to take her out of it. Only love can make it, only love, which secretly works in individuals".

Agape is an ecumenical centre in the Cozie Alps at 1600 metres of altitude, and it is an ideal of working towards peace and reconciliation and towards the radical renewal of the Church as a whole.

Since its founding, hundreds of young people have come to offer their work, and today Agape can host about one hundred people who reflect on various themes: from theology to politics to gender, to give some examples.

THE POOR IN SPIRIT

In the XIIth century, a young merchant of Lyon called WALDO chose to give his riches to the poor and to convert to a more authentic Christian life. So as not to involve unwilling relatives with his personal choice, he left half his riches to his family members.

His story is similar to Saint Francis' and from a similar period as well, with an important difference: together with his associates, he would read and preach the Bible in common language. The Roman Church found this claim to preach, as lay people without authorisation, offensive; and she excommunicated WALDO for heresy.

His followers, both women and men, thought that preaching

towards true *conversion*, towards a real life shift, was crucial. Their main idea was that, in order to preach, it was not important to be a successor of the apostles of the Roman Church, but to daily convert to the Gospel through poverty, itinerant ministry and purity of conduct.

So, the poor man of Lyon was forced to *act clandestinely* as he preached all over Europe, from Spain to Scandinavia. Faithful to the poor, the Waldensians (together with the Hussites) are the only medieval movements to survive the persecutions and slaughters by the Roman Church in the name of Christ.

THE ROOTS OF PROTEST

At the beginning of the XVIth century, the Archbishopric of Mainz was on sale and Albert von HOHENZOLLERN, who already owned two, offered 14.000 ducats to Rome for it — but he did not have such a sum of money.

So he asked for a loan from the most powerful bankers of those times, the FUGGER family, who had made their fortune also out of the cannon construction business in the previous century. They gave him the money at a very high interest: Albert must return to them 30.000 ducats.

This system is very similar to the one that nowadays creates the national debts of Latin American, African and Asian countries. The analogy continues: the FUGGERS "proposed" that Albert should sell indulgences so that his subjects could gain their relatives' souls, the pope could have the money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and the FUGGERS would have their money back.

Nowadays, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) "propose" economic restructuring policies to poor countries so that they will be able to return their unfair debt.

Everything would have happened just as the FUGGERS had forecast if it were not for a young scholar called Martin LUTHER, who reacted on 31 October 1517 with his 95 theses that got Protestantism underway.

So we can see that LUTHER's religious struggle was, in fact, also a "protest" against this financial system, even if many Protestants do not grant this today and LUTHER himself turned to rich princes against the poor peasants.

Most Protestant churches in Latin America are directly funded by US fundamentalists, and it is certain that the CIA used these churches to divide grassroots Christian groups and liberation theologians.

THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS

It is widely held that on 12 October 1492 Christopher COLUMBUS discovered America. Today we know that America already existed and that COLUMBUS' discovery was actually a conquest.

Gold obsessed him; it is one of the most frequent words in his journal. And gold obsessed even more those criminals better known as *conquistadores*, who committed the greatest genocide in human history in order to take the gold.

According to some historians, in order to get rid of the Spaniards, the *Indios* were telling them that there was a place with more gold than they could imagine. But the conquerors went everywhere and left rivers of blood behind them.

A sensitive bishop, Bartolomè DE LAS CASAS, wrote about a "womb strike" performed by indigenous women, who did not wish to give life in such a deadly and violent context. In Nicaragua part of the population was slaughtered, and part was deported to Peru to be slave miners.

Indigenous slavery, though, was soon abol-

ished, as the Spanish monarchs needed “free” subjects who could pay taxes. So they started to import slaves from Africa: about sixty million people disappeared from Africa and the same amount from America.

In the following hundred and fifty years, wars, diseases and enslavement drastically reduced the population. Then integration destroyed indigenous culture. Thousands of cultures, languages and traditions that lived in the Latin American continent disappeared or are bound to disappear.

The fault of the natives was that they lived in rich lands, just as they do now, when still some 500 million indigenous people struggle in order to remain on their lands. Thus the genocide continues.

ECONOMIC TORTURES, FROM THE AMERICAS TO IRAQ

Just as in typical Latin American dictatorships, the ex-secret service director, George BUSH Sr. became the president of the United States. The mid-seventies, the time he was leading the CIA, was also the time of the Condor Plan, which was a military strategy to impose neoliberal economics and to physically eliminate socialist governments in Latin America.

Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay: in a recent documentary presented at the Cannes Film Festival, some Latin American generals are proud to have anticipated today's US anti-terrorist techniques.

There is in fact an interesting link between Latin American history and today's Iraq. The economic strategies are the same, and Iraqis seem condemned to misery because they live on rich lands.

According to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Iraq is today's *Eldorado*. “A Capitalistic Dream,” headlined one issue of *The Economist*: in fact, foreign enterprises need neither authorisation nor local partners nor investment in the local community.

The neoliberal system imposed by the occupying countries is against the *Hague and Geneva Conventions*, since they cannot unilaterally modify the economic status of the country. There is also a political link.

The US ambassador in Iraq is John NEGROPONTE, who acted in Latin America in the eighties. NEGROPONTE started to work in the US embassy in Vietnam during the war, but his most important task was the direction, in 1981, of the so-called Iran-Contra Affair in Honduras, supporting *Contras* in Nicaragua and the war against the resistance in El Salvador.

According to Noam CHOMSKY, the United States was afraid that “Nicaragua may have become a second Cuba. In Honduras, proconsul NEGROPONTE's task was to superintend the bases where an army of mercenary terrorists, the *Contras*, was trained, armed and sent against the Sandinistas.”

In 1984 Nicaragua, as a state of law, brought the United States to the International Justice Court in The Hague, where the U.S. was ordered to stop the “illegal use of force” (international terrorism) against Nicaragua and to pay a high fine.

Amnesty International censured NEGROPONTE and the U.S. Senate prosecuted him, while Bush Sr. appointed him to be responsible for National Security and BUSH Jr. appointed him to be ambassador in Iraq, certainly the right place for him.

According to Pino CACUCCI, one of John NEGROPONTE's specialities was to push the enemies to believe that their best companions were spies, so that they would be executed for this. Such a thing happened to the greatest Salvadorian poet, Roque DALTON, because of “a CIA agent, working for the *Shit Department*, so-called because its task was to dirt the target's reputation.

Roque DALTON has been killed because his stupid companions believed some false evidence, which stated that he was suspected to be a CIA informer. In this way (as Paco TAIBO II stated) ‘the Salvadorian guerrilla divided and lost his cleverest militant’.

Since NEGROPONTE arrived in Iraq, guerrillas have become tougher and independent reporters and NGOs workers have begun to disappear,

while the civilians' situation has also worsened, and they lack water, electricity and health care.

Regarding this escalation, Patrick BOYLAN, a US scholar, states: “Many elements make us think that these are not the so-called ‘Islamic fanatics,’ but instead ‘death squads,’ trained (according to *The Guardian*) by CIA.”

This situation reminds us of the Latin American situation in the seventies and eighties, when curious pacifists, independent journalists and free NGOs were under attack, as they could be dangerous witnesses of the regimes' behaviour. In this way, just like in Latin America, the *Eldorado*, the neoliberal economic dreamland, becomes a terrifying place where death squads can freely act.

GLOBALISING HOPE

Nevertheless, much hope comes nowadays from Latin America — similar to the hope that brought hundreds of young people to build Agape, similar to the hope that the poor in spirit held while wandering and preaching through Europe, similar to hope of those who claimed to reform the Christian Church.

The World Social Forum (WSF) is held in Porto Alegre and its slogan has a theological content, mostly ignored in Europe: “Another world is possible.” The proposal that arose here came from the indigenous people in Chiapas and in Ecuador: we should not gain power in order to make a revolution in the world; we should instead challenge the concept of power in itself.

Today it is not important to make globalisation better, but to build a world “*donde quepan muchos mundos*” (where many worlds live together). A philosophical, theological and political thinking centred on the poor and oppressed, on women and indigenous people, arises from Latin America.

Many ecumenical Christian communities make this thinking concrete in poor areas. Day by day Roman Catholics, Protestants and Atheists work together, knowing that fundamentalism is a great danger for the ecumenical movement.

Many of the Latin American indigenous movements are telling us that Jesus Christ was with them even before the *conquistadores* arrived there, and that He was surely not on the invaders' side.

Christianity was born as a heterogeneous movement, with a lot of diversities in it: it was not a Church as an institution; it was a *movement*, with a communitarian vocation. Its characteristics were strong local links, a spirit of friendship, liberating solidarity, communal property, lay leadership and an equal place for women.

These are also the characteristics of the liberation theologies coming from Latin America. Liberation theologies and actions overcame the Marxist period and are more mature now, by being more inclusive. There is a God of Love and Liberation, Who gives us hope. Thus one of the slogans of the 2004 World Social Forum is “Globalising Hope.”

Suggested Reading

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This essay was translated by Peter CIACCIO.