

CHAPTER 5

HOMILY FOR A COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND LEARNING

Background essay

Tom Wilkens

The homily that follows was rooted in the Salvadoran portion of the previously described Central American sojourn in 1988. During our days there, the group had the opportunity to visit three universities: the National University of El Salvador, Central American University, and Dr. José Matias Delgado University. I gave brief descriptions and impressions of each university in the homily.

I want to focus here on my experience at Central American University. Our host was the Vice-Rector¹ of the University, a Jesuit priest named Ignacio Martín-Baró. Father Martín-Baró was a soft-spoken scholar with special interests in mental health and human rights. He was a courageous advocate for the poor and oppressed — speaking frequently in El Salvador and throughout the world and writing extensively. But most often he brought to bear pressure for positive change behind the scenes and sought to provide the skills and tools for making change largely through the University curriculum and classes.

Even his low-key approach was too much for the powerful oligarchy in El Salvador. The year after our visit a quasi-military death squad murdered Father Martín-Baró, his housekeeper and her daughter, and five other Jesuit priests on the faculty.² There were widespread international expressions of outrage. But there was very little change in US policy, a

policy that was supportive of the repressive regime there. In truth, the Salvadoran government likely could not have survived without our substantial financial assistance.

It appears that Father Martín-Baró may have had something of a premonition of his fate. He knew very well the difference in context between university life in El Salvador and in the US. He once commented:

“In your country,” Ignacio Martín-Baró remarked to a North American colleague, “it’s publish or perish. In ours, it’s publish *and* perish.”³

I have known, ever so briefly, a martyr. Though I wish that were not the case, that Father Martín-Baró might still be alive, nonetheless I am grateful that his life touched mine. Two different worlds: he and I lived in two different worlds. He knew mine much better than I knew his. He knew about the ivory towers and ivied halls that North American academics inhabit. Yet he was not bitter about my advantage juxtaposed to his disadvantage. Instead, he made a quiet case for my finding ways to be more supportive of the people he served, the people for whom he ultimately gave his life.

I have tried. I have tried to report the realities that I was seeing in Central America in articles written for publications; to advocate for peace and justice in my preaching; to raise the critical ethical and theological issues in my ethics and contemporary theology classes; and to share with my students something of the experience that I had had by taking them on field trips to the Texas-Mexico borderlands and eventually on a service-learning mission to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. To what avail? I could measure my students’ mastery of information and their critical ability to process it. But I could never measure the changes in their hearts, the transformations of their inner beings. I have no access to that; no teacher does. As a result, and as with so much that really counts in life, it is a matter of faith and hope, not a matter of certainty based on hard data.

Of course, my own life was not on the line — not even my academic life. I had a department chair who supported my ventures into the developing world and its theologies. I had a college administration that helped to secure grants for my language study and travel. And I had teaching colleagues who, while they may not have been fully clear about my evolution as a theologian and professor or may not have agreed with my “take” on

national and international developments, nonetheless ranged in their responses from quiet tolerance to outspoken endorsement. To whom much is given, namely me, much is — and should be — expected.

Nor was my family life on the line. My wife, Betty, deftly masked her anxieties about my safety. This allowed me to travel to places well off the tourist track. Eventually she was to join me on these journeys to the developing world and, especially after our retirements, to participate in service missions around the globe. Our two children had, I think, during the decade of the '80s only a vague awareness of and a nominal interest in their father's travel destinations and theological development. This would change in subsequent years. Our son has become an enthusiastic supporter of his parents' volunteer efforts in developing-world settings. And our daughter asked me to join her on her first international service mission in February of 2007 (see her response in the previous chapter). To whom much is given, namely me, much is — and should be — expected. Still, in the strange and surprising life of faith and logic of the gospel, these gifts and expectations have not been burdens. They have been, rather, sources of growth and joy.

The situation in Central America today has changed in some ways and yet has stayed the same in others. The poverty remains extensive and oppressive; it would be worse without the relief and development efforts of church groups and other international NGOs (non-governmental organizations). The violence continues to be widespread and intense, though more of it today stems from urban street gangs and less from civil strife and quasi-military groups. And contemporary US policy seems to result in benign neglect more than the malevolent involvement in the affairs of the Central American nations that was so prominent in the '80s and before — stretching all the way back to the mid-nineteenth century. However, our current indifference is not an adequate alternative to our previous interference. We must notice and then respond to their reality of suffering and want in creative, non-paternalistic, non-manipulative ways.

Homily for a community of faith and learning⁴

Tom Wilkens

The text

Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

— James 2:20-26

Introduction

We have heard a good deal about community during this first month of chapel talks. Those talks have been uniformly thoughtful, well articulated, and helpful. I am not one to look a gift horse in the mouth and so I will continue with what has been a winning theme. I will use a clause from this week’s epistle lesson as my point of departure: “faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26). The thesis that I should like you to ponder is this: a community of faith apart from works is dead.

A tale of three Salvadoran communities

A public community: the National University of El Salvador

To begin, I want you to accompany me on a very brief tour of three communities in El Salvador. They are three universities: the state university, a Roman Catholic university, and a private university. Our first stop is at the oldest of the three institutions, the National University of El Salvador.

At one time the National University was one of the strongest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning in Central America. Now it is a physical mess and a fiscal basket case. What happened? What happened were student uprisings in the 1960s, faculty and staff protests in the 1970s, and the occupation and partial destruction of the campus by the army in the 1980s.

Today the graffiti-covered buildings deteriorate for lack of a maintenance budget, the faculty and staff wonder each payday whether and how much they will be paid, and the students struggle — for the most part unsuccessfully — to stay in school. Less than 5% of the students who matriculate graduate.

Why has all of this come about? Because a generation ago the university community — faculty, staff, and students — redefined their mission. They undertook a mission to correct the cruel inequities and injustices of Salvadoran society. As a political corollary of that mission, they began to protest publicly the structures of privilege and power in El Salvador. They refused to accept the *status quo*. Their strategy called for the intellectual community actively and overtly to support the oppressed and exploited majority in their country. And for this the university reaped the whirlwind of government wrath.

A Roman Catholic community: Central American University

Our next stop is the campus of Central American University, a Roman Catholic institution run by Jesuits. This university was founded in the 1960s. It was intended to be an alternative to the emerging chaos at the state university, to be a tranquil island of academic calm in the churning sea of social unrest. It worked. Central American University is beautiful: the buildings are well equipped; the lush landscape is well manicured. There's no graffiti here.

Is this Roman Catholic school really so different from the state university? In tactics, yes. In goals, no. Central American University has defined its primary mission as the critique of structures of privilege combined with the creation of functional alternatives. The political corollary of this mission is an institutional commitment to keep pressure — not always public — on the government for change. Their strategy is to encourage faculty to critique the Salvadoran situation as an essential part of their academic work and within their academic disciplines. A few of you may remember Jon Sobrino, the liberation theologian who spoke here four years ago. Sobrino is from this university. He speaks and writes, critically and constructively, out of his discipline. He also has had threats and attempts on his life.

The students at Central American University are discouraged from joining parades of protest. But they are encouraged to orient their studies toward the plight and problems of the poor. They are being prepared to cooperate with the poor in rebuilding the nation. That's a tall order. Revolution is a piece of cake compared with the task of rebuilding a polarized, war-torn nation.

A private community:

Dr. José Matias Delgado University

Our final stop on this quick tour is Dr. José Matias Delgado University. Founded in 1977, this private university was intended — in the words of its Vice-Rector — to be a university where the students would come to study, not to engage in political activities. Apparently they do study. Sixty percent of those who matriculate, graduate. And the graduates are in demand: they find employment in government and business.

The primary mission of this university is to provide technically skilled people to run the government and the private sector economy. There is also a political corollary: *de facto* support for the political, economic and social *status quo*. Their strategy is not only to stay off the streets but also to stay away from controversial issues. That cannot be easy in this cauldron called El Salvador. On the other hand, perhaps it is the easiest of the alternatives. It is surely the least threatening, both to the university and to the power people.

Implications for US academic communities

What have these three universities — with their differing missions, political agendas, and strategies — to do with higher education in the United States? More specifically, what has this to do with our community of faith and learning?

It seems to me that all three alternatives have been exercised by US institutions of higher learning — allowing, of course, for very real contextual differences. The option taken by the students and staff of the National University of El Salvador — namely, engaging in ideological reflection, embracing a political agenda, and hitting the streets — this option has been exercised by some students in the US, especially during the '60s. I'll not argue the merits or demerits of this alternative (I do think that there are both). I simply offer the observation that Texas Lutheran College is likely a century or two away from seriously considering it.

That is not the case with the option that the private Dr. José Matias Delgado University represents. In fact, it has been Texas Lutheran's primary option until now: that is, rigorous job-oriented training coupled with the denial of a political agenda. In truth, we even have a long and honorable theological tradition in which to ground our practice. It has to do with the idea of vocation and the notion that occupations performed well are the primary means of fulfilling obligations to our neighbors. We could do worse, much worse. But I also think that we can do better.

I think that we are beginning to do better. I see signs that we are seriously considering the option that the Roman Catholic Central American University embodies: rigorous life-oriented learning coupled with the recognition of political agendas. We are beginning to see — perhaps most clearly through our movement into international education — that our institutional mission and academic program need some redefinition and elaboration to take into account institutional responsibilities that transcend the parochial imagery of ivory tower and ivied halls. Hit the streets? No. Hit the issues that trouble and terrorize large sectors of the human community? Yes. Create graffiti? No. Create networks of mutual support with third- and fourth-world peoples, schools, and churches? Yes. Alienate our traditional constituency? No. Educate our constituency *and ourselves* with respect to new realities, responsibilities, and opportunities? Yes.

A community of faith apart from works is dead. But we are not lacking in works. And we are not dead. Those aren't the issues. The issue is the quality of the works, the center of their gravity, the vision they are meant to realize. We are, I suggest, at a time of unique opportunity, great promise, and scary options. Let us be of good courage and good cheer.

Response: Where is your Antioch?

Kim Wilkens

Some of the followers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and started telling Gentiles the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's power was with them, and many people turned to the Lord and put their faith in him. News of what was happening reached the church

in Jerusalem. Then they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When Barnabas got there and saw what God had been kind enough to do for them, he was very glad. So he begged them to remain faithful to the Lord with all their hearts. Barnabas was a good man of great faith, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Many more people turned to the Lord.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. He found Saul and brought him to Antioch, where they met with the church for a whole year and taught many of its people. There in Antioch the Lord's followers were first called Christians.

During this time some prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch. One of them was Agabus. Then with the help of the Spirit, he told that there would be a terrible famine everywhere in the world. And it happened when Claudius was Emperor. The followers in Antioch decided to send whatever help they could to the followers in Judea. So they had Barnabas and Saul take their gifts to the church leaders in Jerusalem.

— Acts 11:20-30; CEV

Where is your Antioch, your community of faith and learning? Is it dead or dying? Is it alive and growing? Before you can figure out *where* your Antioch is, you need to know *what* an Antioch is. From the description in the book of Acts it sounds like:

- Antioch is a community of faith (Barnabas, a man of great faith, went to Antioch and he recognized God at work in the community and he begged them to remain faithful).
- Antioch is a community committed to hear God's calling (the Lord's power was with them and many people turned to the Lord).
- Antioch is a community with an outward focus (they told outsiders, the Gentiles, the good news and sent whatever help they could to Judea).

Glenn McDonald, the author of *The Disciple-Making Church*, says that each of us needs an Antioch — one or more settings in which we can be ourselves in the company of a few other faithful people. He goes on to say that “we will be greatly blessed if we have found at least one place where it is safe to ‘try on’ and ‘try out’ the various visions to which God may be calling us — where we can hear the truth about ourselves without fear; where trusted friends can help calibrate our inner tuners to hear the voice of God; and where those same colleagues are willing and able to bless us on our way”.⁵

Why is having an Antioch important? I have discovered that I have

several Antiochs and that they are critical to my spiritual growth. The most obvious is my family, especially my husband, my son, my parents, my brother, and my mother-in-law. They provide unconditional support and love.

I've also experienced Antioch community with the Honduras mission team. I understand that achieving true community is rare. According to M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled* and *Beyond*, most groups of people only achieve pseudo-community, where the assumption is that everyone is the same, with the same goals in mind, and that everybody will play nice. True community requires experiencing the chaos of our differences and the breaking down of barriers to communication such as “expectations, preconceptions, and prejudices and emptying ourselves of the need to heal, convert, fix or solve.”⁶

We had a diverse team, the most obvious difference being the age range: from seventeen-year-old Kalie to my 69-year-old dad. We also discovered that we had various backgrounds, skills, and gifts and in the short span of a week we became a community “in which spiritual accountability, truth-telling, and listening to God were priority activities.”⁷

Finally, I am blessed to find Antioch in the people at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. At Peace, my home congregation, I have found a community that is committed to an outward focus, to serving others, and to going in Christ. Because of their support, their prayers and their commitment to hear God's call, I have been given so many opportunities to grow in Christ.

Where is your Antioch? Is it part of a community that listens to your doubts and fears? Are they trying to hear God's call? Are they going out into the world? Do they challenge you to leave your comfort zone?

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1. Vice-Rectors are the true leaders of Latin American universities; the office of Rector is honorary.
 2. Jon Sobrino, mentioned in the homily that follows and throughout this book, was also on that faculty and likely would have been murdered if he had not been attending a conference outside the country. Two of Sobrino's recent works on Christology were put on "notification" by the Vatican in an action made public on March 14, 2007, continuing the conservative hierarchy's harsh attitude toward liberation theologians since the earliest years of John Paul II's papacy. Soon thereafter Sobrino's colleagues in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians expressed their solidarity with him in a collection of essays entitled *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (2007), available as a free download at <http://servicioskoinonia.org/LibrosDigitales/LDK/EATWOTGettingThePoorDown.pdf>. The book also serves as a good survey of current Latin American liberation theology by some forty theologians.
 3. Ignacio Martín-Baró, Adriann Aron (ed.), Shawn Corne (ed.), *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.
 4. A homily presented at Texas Lutheran College, on September 23, 1988.
 5. Glenn McDonald, *The Disciple-Making Church* (FaithWalk Publishing, 2004), 93.
 6. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (Simon and Schuster, 1978), 272.
 7. Glenn McDonald, *op. cit.*, 95.