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Speaking and Listening to God



Becoming a neighbor to another is the result of an action, a commitment, of approaching another and going out of one's way. Gutiérrez encourages us to learn that the neighbor is not someone whom we find in our road, but rather our neighbor is someone in whose road we place ourselves. The poor are not usually nearby; they are usually distant. They become neighbor when we enter into relationship with them. Experience teaches us that it is possible to give from almost nothing, which, as Gustavo reminds us, is something everyone can do, even the poor. We can always offer companionship, support, and friendship, regardless of what we have. When our spirituality is formed out of these experiences we can begin to speak theologically. Without spirituality, theology answers questions that few people are asking and speaks before it really has anything to say.

A TIME TO BE SILENT, A TIME TO SPEAK

Theology is a language. It attempts to speak a word about the mysterious reality that believers call God. It is a *logos* about *theos*.

When I speak of “mysterious reality” I am using the word “mystery” in its biblical sense. The French philosopher Gabriel

Marcel helped us to understand the matter by drawing a distinction between “problem,” “enigma,” and “mystery.” God is not a problem before which we stand impersonally and which we treat as an object. Nor is God an enigma, something utterly unknown and incomprehensible. In the Bible God is a mystery to the extent that God is an all-enveloping love. In Marcel’s terminology, God is the mystery of the Thou that we can only acknowledge and invoke. From a biblical standpoint mystery is not ineffable in the literal meaning of the word; it must be spoken and communicated. To conceal it, to keep it withdrawn to a private sphere, or to limit it to a few initiates is to ignore its very essence. The mystery of God’s love must be proclaimed. Doing so presupposes a language, a means of communication, a way of speaking located more in the disturbing certainty of hope than in the serenity brought about by an innocuous knowledge.

Believing is an experience that is both interior and shared in community. Faith is a relationship between persons; it is a gift. The mystery of God must be accepted in prayer and in human solidarity; it is the moment of silence and of practice. Within that moment — and only from within it — will there arise the language and the categories necessary for transmitting it to others and for entering into communication with them.

The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that throughout human life everything has its moment and season: “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (3:7). One depends on the other, and they nourish one another. Without silence there is no true speaking. In listening and meditation, what is to be spoken begins to be sketched faintly and hesitatingly. Likewise, expressing our inner world will lead us to gain new and fruitful areas of personal silence and encounter. That is what happens in theology.

There is a connection between theological language and the human condition. In Latin America and beyond it, a way of speaking of God is stammeringly coming to birth, a way of speaking marked by the cultural diversity of humankind and the conditions created by poverty and marginalization. The questions that arise from the historical use of that theological

language, its simultaneous particularity and universality, and finally the narrative dimension of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, will help us to approach this connection.

It is not enough to say that the word about God is born of the need to formulate and communicate an experience of belief. Belief comes in the context of living human experience, with all its challenging complexity. A whole social and cultural world is involved in the development of theological language. The questions that arise from situations of human extremity cut deep; the appeal cuts through anecdotal and passing experience to the essence. These questions leave us naked before the basic inquiry of all human beings. If we do not go down or rather up into the world of everyday suffering, of consuming anguish, of ever-burning hope, the theological task has no substance. Two writers (Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala and José María Arguedas Altamirano) will help give flesh — wounded flesh — to this challenge as we see it today.

— *The Density of the Present*, 186–88

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Walking with the Poor



Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (ca. 1535–1616) was an indigenous Peruvian who protested, as a Christian, the Spanish treatment of the native peoples of the Andes after the conquest of 1533. The son of a noble family from the southern province of Lucanas, near modern-day Ayacucho, he is best known as a Christian and for his illustrated chronicle, Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno.

ABANDONMENT AND HOPE

Felipe Guamán Poma lives in his own mental universe; this sometimes makes it difficult for unwary readers, especially if they are excessively marked by a Western perspective and logic. He writes his long report to the king of Spain as an Indian, a member of a people whose tribulations he seeks to denounce and whose rights he seeks to defend. He also writes as a new Christian, making the life of Jesus with his preferential love for the poor the fundamental criterion by which to discern justice and injustice in the Peruvian Andes.

Having walked nameless for thirty years in the midst of the abused and neglected Indians, he can speak firsthand about the abuses they suffer. His denunciation is anchored in painful experiences. The old cliché with which he ends his agonizing