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A THEOLOGY OF PROTEST IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD



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I begin by reading from chapter 36 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel "From all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you... then you shall live in the land I gave to your ancestors. You shall be my people and I will be your God".

For 25 years this great annual ecclesial gathering has been a very precious and privileged space for renewal and celebration for those who hunger and thirst for justice. We come together as church. The church is all of us. As the local church we are a discipleship of equals, gathered together around our bishop. But more than that, we are a universal church. The church then is a global people, united in sacrament and solidarity, struggling to follow the Lord, and so we are all companions on the journey following the Lord. "Companions". If we take the word and split it open, it is "com" and "panis" — people with whom we break bread and share bread — companions on the journey. And Jesus, the man we follow, was a bread breaker and bread sharer — that was his trademark — in stories and parables and miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand. On the road to Emmaus after the Resurrection he was recognized in the breaking and sharing of bread, and of course at the Last Supper which we repeat and re-enact in his memory he gave Himself to us in the breaking and sharing of bread. We are followers of a bread breaker and a bread sharer. You could say we are a bread-breaking, justice seeking people, striving to follow the Lord in a globalized and globalizing world — in a divided and broken world. And we seek to witness to this, however imperfectly, in our prayer, and in our work, in our campaigning, in our protests, in our advocacy, in our lifestyles and indeed in our whole lives.

The term globalization is complex and ambiguous. I am going to talk about globalization because we in the north are the majority shareholders and the major beneficiaries of globalization; because it is our companies and our governments that shape globalization; because it is us, northern citizens, northern bread-breakers and sharers, who can act together to change globalization. And before I go on, I want to acknowledge that globalization is not the cause of all problems, all injustices, all deprivation. Talk to any shanty-town dweller, small farmer or market trader in a developing country and they will be far more

likely to mention their government, venal local politicians, the police, middlemen of all sorts, money lenders, unscrupulous land grabbers as the source of their problems than globalization or its agents. I need only say here that we do not ignore the responsibility of the rich and powerful in the south for many of the problems that beset the peoples of their countries — and they bear a heavy responsibility. But that is not our theme today.

In what follows I have drawn from dozens of analysts and theologians. On the one hand globalization is about global interconnectedness with all the resonances of community and closeness and family. On the other it is about global economic liberalization, with the harsher resonances of markets and profit. The truth is globalization means all things to all people and we must make our minds up what we mean by it. It can refer to the instantaneous communications across the planet — by cell phone and satellite phone, by e-mail, radio or the omnipresent CNN Television channel — so powerful it is considered the sixteenth member of the Security Council. It can refer to the world wide web of internet information and the bank of knowledge it provides to anyone who can log on.

It can refer to the means of transport — the globe has become accessible. And we can travel from any point A to any point B, usually in less than 24 hours. But then again it can refer to economic integration and the universal spread of the market, liberalizing trade and internationalized investment, trillions of dollars of capital and currency flowing across frontiers everyday. And it can refer to the worldwide presence and activities of transnational corporations. Today, of the 200 largest economic players in our world, 56 are national governments and 144 are companies like Microsoft, Philips, Sony and so on. Or yet again it can refer to the homogenization of cultural and consumption patterns, blue jeans, McDonalds, Viagra, Disney. And the emergence, not of homo sapiens, but of homo consumptor. "I consume therefore I am" — the new global individualism. Finally it could refer to the networking of movements — Justice and Peace, peoples' organizations, faith communities and development agencies — the emergence of a global civil society, a global citizenry responding to global threats, fostering a global ethic and protecting our common home, Planet Earth.

These are all related processes and they are not ends in themselves. Global trade, the worldwide web, international currency transactions, technological advance and economic growth are means, not ends. And these globalization processes cannot simply be halted. We are globalized whether we like it or not. In the end, it seems to me, anti-globalization resistance is useless. Aggressive

anti-globalization activists have been described as contemporary Luddites — I think they are rather more the widows of Marx. Chris Patten's favorite banner at the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, which caused great amusement to everyone, read: "The worldwide coalition against globalization".

Yet, if globalization cannot be stopped, it can be controlled. It's not a given like the weather. It can be shaped and directed. It can be and must be regulated, but regulated towards what? Towards, I put to you, the global common good and the unity of the whole human family. Pope John Paul II would say towards the civilization of love. Our secular world would say, towards human development for the whole planet — a world where human dignity is assured and economic and social rights are respected for every single one of us.

But towards what and away from what? ... away from the global common bad, which we don't talk about quite so often. The global common bad is the misery and suffering of the poor, the half of humanity — three billion people living on less than two dollars a day, and living on that alongside the whimsical and grotesque excesses of the wealthy. The income of the richest one per cent in our world is equal to the combined income of the poorest 57 percent, and the gap is getting wider and wider — that is the global common bad — the growth of that inequity.

The 1990s was the first decade of this new globalization. But the 1990s was also the decade of UN conferences: ushered in by the conference on children in New York in 1989, there were conferences in Beijing on women, in Cairo on population, in Rio on the environment, in Istanbul on habitat. But it was the decade of broken promises because the resolutions passed there were largely ignored by all the major governments.

And yet the decade culminated, in the jubilee year, with a global charter, the Millennium Development Goals, themselves a distillation of the resolutions of the conferences of the previous decade. It is a jubilee manifesto, approved by the whole international community, unanimously at the special session of the United Nations in September 2000. Its eight major goals and 18 targets — solemn promises that the whole world made together with a fixed timeline of 2015 — relate to child mortality, maternal mortality, education, gender equality, HIV/AIDS, the care of the environment, the provision of water. But the key goal was that by 2015 we would halve the percentage of people on our planet living in absolute poverty, on less than a dollar a day. It is the most contemporary statement we have in the secular world of the global common good. The world leaders who gathered for the Millennium Summit acknowledged that "the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people". Nevertheless, tragically and crucially, the commitments of that manifesto were completely absent from all the globalization processes and systems of the last decade.

And so at the end of this first decade of the new globalization, what did we have? We had the prospect of online education, interactive university teaching, medical training via the Internet, with the best professors in the world to students in isolated corners of the world. This opens up the prospect of a giant global open university. We had instant communication which, inter alia,

protects and promotes universal human rights and gender equality across great political and cultural divides. Authoritarian rulers find it much more difficult to jam the electronic systems of the Internet in the way that they used to jam the World Service of the BBC.

And yet, 72 per cent of Internet users live in the rich countries where there is only 14 per cent of the world's population. And yet a computer — which you need — costs a Zambian teacher his or her complete salary for four years, whereas it costs a British or American teacher less than a month's salary. Not long ago four out of five web sites on the Internet were in English, but only 10 percent of the world understands English. We are bothered about computer literacy but today 850 million in our world cannot read or write their own name. It means we have a problem.

During these 1990s, the good news was that the percentage of people living in extreme poverty in East Asia and the Pacific was halved — a fantastic achievement. For Africa, at the present rate of progress, to halve the number of people living on less than a dollar a day will take to the year 2147. The factors in both Asian progress and African stagnation are globalization and economic liberalization. For Africa, no change in the percentage of people living on less than a dollar a day in the 1990s actually meant in absolute terms that 58 million people more were living on less than a dollar a day by the year 2000 than there were in 1990.

What does it mean, living on a dollar a day? I was in Zambia earlier this year, going round the country, visiting communities where people were living with HIV/AIDS, seeing the poverty there at a time of drought and food shortage, meeting families that had no income, no livelihood and no support and surviving on less than a dollar a day. What did that mean? It meant that the children took it in turns to eat, with a child often eating only four or five times a week — some on Monday, some on Tuesday, some on Wednesday and so on. It meant that when they wanted food and none was available through begging or borrowing or stealing, they would send the young girls out to find or forage for food and, as anybody knows, they were going to wait beside one of the main roads for a truck driver to come by, to sell the only commodity they had left — their sex.

If you go to the shanty towns of Nairobi in Kenya or Bujumbura in Burundi or Port-au-Prince in Haiti, you see what living on less than a dollar a day really means — it means surviving in the midst of squalor and breathing in an incredible stench that would make you vomit. It is very, very hard to be there amidst the mud and mess, with people who have only black plastic bags to cover the sides of their houses and protect them from the elements. Many live in precarious situations. In Bujumbura they are on a hill, which is a plateau on the side of a mountain — the water comes down the mountain and straight through the shanty town. They are conditions you would not allow your pet dog to live in. Yet these are conditions where human beings have to subsist in some form or other. That's what living on less than a dollar a day means — your dignity is taken away from you.

Let's look again at the 1990s and some more figures. In South Asia — and this includes India — the growth in per capita income throughout the 1990s worked out at over 3 per cent a year. That is impressive growth — bigger than in Britain. In Bangalore, India

— which Bill Gates has christened silicon plateau — there is a two billion dollar computer software industry. Yet, 19 countries in Africa had negative growth rates for the whole decade, which means they shrank. Overall, in sub-Saharan Africa, human development went backwards during the 1990s due to globalization — or, some would say, because globalization marginalized Africa from the gains to be had from trade and economic growth. So we see there are winners and losers of globalization. There are winners and losers within every country — in Britain and in Russia, as much as in Kenya and in India. There are winners and losers between countries. India and China are winners. But the poorest countries, and the poorest people in the poorest countries, are inevitably losers. Sub-Saharan Africa is a loser.

The World Bank — not known for ringing overstatements — has said that “the distribution of the gains of globalization has been extraordinarily unequal” — for which read that they have been a downright human disgrace and catastrophe. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has said the past decade, the period of the most intensive globalization, has shown increasing concentration of income, resources and wealth amongst peoples, corporations and countries.

The Latin American theologians say that our current language, talking about the Third World, the South, the developing countries and their economic reversals is anodyne and inadequate language. It attempts to say something is wrong, but not how wrong. Jon Sobrino says 1.2 billion people in the year 2003 living in our world on less than a dollar a day is a “macro-blasphemy”.

The Latin American theologians speak of crucified peoples. The cross means death. Death caused by poverty, generated by injustice, or death caused by conflict to control minerals and natural resources is what African peoples are widely subjected to today, in north, south, east and West Africa. To be crucified is not simply to die but to be put to death. There are victims and there are executioners, and there is very grave sin. The list of the structures of injustice that put them there is a long one — the arms trade, corruption, international debt, unfair trade and many, many more. But some of them are part and parcel of the current globalization processes. A globe is beautiful, it’s round, it’s equal, it’s special, but globalization today, as it manifests itself to the poor, is ugly.

The greatest harm that the word globalization does is to cover up, to delude us with a make believe pseudo unity and universality of humankind, which is epitomized in the “global village” phrase. Africans say no. They had globalization with the slave trade; they had it again with colonialism; now they are on stage three. It’s not “global village” they say, rather it’s “global pillage”. So, globalization tantalizingly promises unity, but it lacks justice. So it’s counterfeit unity. The universality that the present globalization offers is the unity of the ‘haves’, in the north and the south, those who have e-mails and telephones and some significant purchasing power. This universality and unity has as its unspoken and single-minded end the pursuit of economic opportunities, the maximization of a surplus or profit and the accumulation of wealth. This is a model of unity which is centripetal, center-seeking, moving inexorably from the periphery to the center. In this model the poor are redundant. Trickle-down

does not work. They are not wanted. Their social safety nets are cut. They are the victims.

Authentic unity and universality of the human family comes with a centrifugal movement, from the center to the periphery, all encompassing so that it is inclusive. That is the challenge, it seems to me, not whether globalization is good or bad but how do we make it inclusive? How do we humanize it? How do we civilize it? How do we redeem it? How do we transform structures of sin into structures of grace? I believe, to redeem it, we have to put the cause of the crucified peoples at the center. We reject and take out the heart of stone, which is the religion of the market, the maximization of efficient trade and economic activity, no matter the human consequences, the minimization of taxes to be paid to governments, the maximization of surpluses, of profits, irrespective of their distribution.

What we counter propose is to put in a heart of flesh — an ethical core, in the form of a statement of the global common good. A commitment to that global common good should be the cornerstone of globalization. And maybe the Millennium Development Goals are ready made, for the purpose. But there are other human rights conventions which could equally be put at the center of global policy. Many have, for too long been declarations without substance.

An ethical core requires global governance. Our global rules and economic governance need to be repaired, need to be updated and need to be re-legitimized with an ethical core. Many terrible things are imposed as economic measures in the name of globalization. They are not intrinsic to it, they must end. We have to begin by finding a way to do trade and finance as if human beings mattered and regulate them to ensure that it happens. A strategy and a theology of protest means that we have to begin with those crucified peoples, grounded in our experience of the poor and our option for the poor. If we don’t try to change globalization, then we collude in its wicked consequences. We collude in the division and fragmentation of the global family. But that means we have to work with globalization, against globalization and towards globalization. With globalization — in the sense of using all those objective forces that can benefit humanity — particularly the Internet and the web — since information has become a basic human need.

Schools, universities in the south, peoples’ information centers, civil society organizations need to be wired up to be part of this global network. But working against globalization — by doing a critical analysis, to expose its anti-developmental and de-humanizing consequences, to challenge the orthodoxies of the economic globalization bandwagon, to struggle to confront the actors with as many allies as we can get together. That is the act of denouncing. But the prophet denounces and also announces. We have to work towards globalization by announcing our alternatives, our reforms. I put to you that our option should be the option for constructive engagement — to be the voice of the voiceless poor. The people we want to represent in policy debates — whose interests we want addressed — cannot afford the luxury of shouting from the sidelines with no prospect of change coming. Equally, we are wary of engagement and dialogue leading to co-option and a legitimization of the status quo, a hierarchy of

interests that excludes and impoverishes those communities we want to help.

But there have been some very interesting developments over the past few weeks. George Monbiot, the Guardian columnist and anti-globalizer, said “I was wrong”. He admitted that the World Trade Organization (WTO) is important, even with its awful rules. This rules-based system, he said, is better than no rules at all. We have to make it work. That was an amazing change of heart on his part. In the same week Patricia Hewitt, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, proclaimed that — and we have to hold her to it — that she would not agree to anything in the forthcoming trade round that was going to do damage to developing countries. Well, we shall see.

This is a big advance, but unfortunately it is not reflected in the current positions that our government and the European Union plan to take with them to Cancun in September. At least we have to work together to engage the peoples of the developing world and place them at the heart of negotiations.

Now to the theological side of protest. If we are a bread-breaking and justice-seeking people then we are also a people of hope. Protest has to be driven by hope and not by negativity, by positive belief in human potential. Protest cannot be cynical or negative, nor even simply oppositional. Even if we are saying ‘This is wrong’, we have to be saying it because of our profound conviction that human persons can be different, that justice is possible. In other words it is hope as passion for the possible — that is the grounds of protest. There is much to reflect upon and critique in recent models of protest. The anti-globalization mass demonstrations or maybe the East Timor resistance that brought about change, or maybe even the hunting lobby in this country. We need to think carefully about what makes protest legitimate and what makes it effective? They are not the same thing. Protest simply motivated by luxury or self-interest — such as nimbyism, not in my backyard — versus protest in which people actually risk their lives — such as in Burma, with Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters, or in East Timor. There is a big, big difference.

Maybe I can share with you seven characteristics which we have found over the years are characteristics of legitimate and effective protest. The first is that protest is informed by the voices of those who suffer, wary and aware of our own privilege; Second, protest is underpinned by analysis that provides an accurate diagnosis and effective solutions or alternatives; Third, that protest is participatory; Fourth, protest is non-violent and non-damaging, protest that absorbs rather than continues violence. Protest that harms lives is not legitimate; Fifth, consistency and coherence; protest that addresses our personal lifestyle and responsibilities as well as the larger issues. It stays

with issues and not just with quick shots — been there, done that, got the tee-shirt; Sixth that protest is truthful — that it unmasks the sinful structures, the hegemonies of materialism, of macro-economic orthodoxies and it recognizes the worst inequalities; And lastly, that protest leaves and includes space for the spiritual and religious.

Id like to conclude by saying that I have just returned from eight days in Rome. I was at an international Caritas congress with the overarching theme — “Globalizing Solidarity”. There were between 400 and 500 people representing 198 countries. It was a beautiful and inspiring meeting — a microcosm of the church today — bread-breaking, justice-seeking church. We were encouraged by Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez of Honduras — a great man — and accompanied by Teresa Okure, a Holy Child sister and theologian from Nigeria who gave us an African grounding in our reflections; and we were visited for a day by Archbishop Martino, the new head of the Justice and Peace Commission in Rome. We prayed and worshipped together. We discussed and debated poverty, globalization and solidarity. We evaluated, we reviewed, we planned and voted. The program we voted on includes food security and trade, debt and international finance, effective coordination of disaster relief and emergencies, HIV/AIDS and a better response from us as the church network, on human trafficking and migration, and reconciliation, conflict resolution and peace building. There were some vigorous exchanges, but it was full of hope.

Our experience of protest was discussed — Jubilee 2000, both in North and South, and the ups and downs of that process. We changed the world through Jubilee 2000. We looked at the protests in Mexico which have led the government to try to renegotiate free trade arrangements, and Cochabamba in Bolivia, where protests ended attempts by the government to bring in water privatization to the detriment of the people. Protest is there, protest is working.

As a group we were not intimidated or overwhelmed by globalization. For me, it’s simply that we have a cosmic God who cannot be absorbed by globalization, and we belong to a universal church. We try to globalize compassion and to globalize solidarity. I love the African proverb: “I am because we are and we are because I am”. We can put a new heart into globalization — globalization without marginalization: in campaigning, advocacy and protest we can change our world; another world is possible. That other world will be a world where the crucified peoples are taken down from the cross and nobody put up in their place.

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