

## **Martin Luther King Jr. In Cuba**

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On April 4, 1968, I was spending several weeks working as a volunteer during the sugar cane harvest when I first heard the shocking news of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. Later I will explain why a young Baptist pastor found himself in that situation, in a voluntary work camp in which 95% of the workers were either members of the Communist Party or were members of the Communist Youth. We heard the sad news of the King assassination as we were eating our lunch rations, sitting on bundles of harvested cane and listening to a loud speaker providing music and occasional news. I lowered my head in consternation when I heard several comments being made around me, "Look at that. They have killed him even though he is one of them." In Cuban terms, the speaker was pointing out that King was just another American, someone who formed part of the Empire. I took the opportunity to explain to those around me that King was a martyr, a fighter for racial justice and for the rights of the most humble of people. I said that he certainly was an American, but that he was not an imperialist. He belonged to the poor, the pacifists. Moreover not all Americans are imperialists, I said. Quickly a circle of workers gathered around me, interested to learn of a type of Christianity which was new to them: Christianity committed to a better world.

Clearly, this essay has the appearance of being more autobiographical and testimonial than academic. The passion and purity which characterize a renewed faith can only be expressed this way.

It was only following his tragic death that the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. moved from being of interest to only a few in Cuba to the point where it had a serious impact on our country. During those years, the focus for Cubans was intense and was directed to our south. A year earlier, guerilla leader Ernesto Che Guevara had died in combat in Bolivia. The Cuban Revolution was exerting a strong influence on youth movements, leftist groups, and even Latin American Christians had begun a theological reflection which would give birth to liberation theology. It was a time of strong politization in which it was thought that building an alternative society to capitalism was not only possible, but was near at hand, almost just around the corner.

However the Cuban Revolution was absorbed in the struggle for survival. It found itself blockaded by the United States, infiltrated by armed groups

in the mountains, and invaded at the Bay of Pigs. From all of these struggles, the Revolution emerged victorious. Meanwhile, churches in Cuba found themselves challenged to minister in the new Cuba, full of patriotic fervor and the new ideology which called to idealistic youth with dreams of a Cuba without poverty, illiteracy, and all of the wrongs which had been a part of our society. Cuban churches were also affected by a conflict between religion and the State, which had reached a climax. This was due to the effects of the Cold War which had deeply influenced the minds of many people and had generated a fierce anti Communism in the majority of religious leaders. The conflict between the government and the Catholic Church was not long in coming to a head. The Church lost its educational institutions and the majority of the Spanish clergy had to leave the country. Confrontations with some other religious groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, created an atmosphere of general condemnation of religion, which was accused of being an ally of reactionary forces.

To complete the picture, it should be added that a dogmatic Marxist teaching was being put forward at that time. This was elaborated using manuals of belief, edited in the Soviet Union, which identified the confrontation between scientific materialism and idealism (which included religion per se) as the root of ideological contradictions. The patriotic song used at that time was the *Internationale*, which states in one of its verses "no more supreme saviors, no Caesar, no bourgeois, no God; we will make our own salvation". This fundamentalist and exclusivist Marxism was introduced with missionary zeal in special schools of "revolutionary instruction" and was taught as a part of the regular program of study from junior high school through graduate school.

This form of Marxist teaching did not conflict greatly with popular forms of religion, which consisted of a mixture of African cults and Catholic saints. These religious traditions were practiced within the family circle and were deeply rooted in the poorer sectors of the population. On the other hand, evangelical churches had a conservative tradition with a vision of the mission of the church focused on personal conversion and an eschatology of "the Great Tribulation" which in many cases identified Moscow as the beast of Revelation 13. These churches did not have the capacity to give an adequate answer to the new challenges. Many young people abandoned the churches because they were more attracted by the construction of a new society than by sitting in a church pew.

Thus it is not surprising that the church windows were closed to the outside world, which was seen as being dominated by hostile and dangerous forces.

A large number of pastors abandoned the country, concluding that the hour of the church had passed and that God was no longer among our people.

However, at the same moment in Cuban history, a few pastors and laypersons were touched by the free wind of the Holy Spirit and led to go into the changing and challenging society with the dream of establishing communication bridges, demonstrating in this way that God was not isolated in the Church, but also had a place in the world. We wanted to say that the Church was not necessarily reactionary, that Jesus was also a revolutionary in his day.

Timidly and with fear and trembling, we met to reread the Bible in a new way, seeking a word from God for the new situation. Fortunately we found support, first in the universal church. In an ecumenical environment we were visited by Christian men and women of great vision. They spoke to us of another way to be faithful disciples of Jesus as persons committed to their world and their history. They helped us to understand that the Marxist critique of religion is much like the protests of the prophets of Israel, who charged that religion had become only a cult divorced from justice and that the Law and the Temple had truly become idols. This disturbing theme helped us to become aware of the idolatry in the church. Later, we read the letter written by Martin Luther King, Jr. from a Birmingham jail in which he confessed his disillusionment upon contemplating the beautiful architecture of the evangelical churches in the South. He asked himself, "What kind of God is worshipped by these people?" With a leadership more interested in maintaining order than in the practice of justice, a God who is distant from the sufferings of the people cannot be anything other than an idol, good for quieting the conscience but not for liberating the oppressed. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us to take a critical look at our own ecclesiastical institutions.

We also were inspired by outstanding figures within the theological camp. One of these is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose uncompromising stand against Nazi power resulted in his execution. Bonhoeffer inspired us to come to understand a God who works "on Mondays", in the midst of a secular and, in some senses, a post-Christian society.

At that time we also received information from our southern neighbor Colombia where Camilo Torres, a priest who was very influential among university youth, was killed while fighting as a guerrilla. Torres said that we can only call ourselves followers of Jesus when we practice effective love for the poor. With him, many other Christian youth took up the fight

as guerrillas, creating a revolutionary mystique. It must be acknowledged that the peaceful method of fighting was not very popular at the time.

All of these winds stirred the flame of a call to live out one's faith in a fully committed way in which politics would play an important role.

However evangelicals, nurtured in a tradition of commitment to the church and a definite devotion to the Bible, felt an emptiness and were not completely at ease. We needed the confirmation of finding a spiritual source of inspiration within our own tradition. It is here where Martin Luther King, Jr. became an evangelical reference point which satisfied all expectations. King was a man of the church, a Baptist preacher with Bible in hand, defending the cause of the oppressed. Quickly, he became the hero of the new generations of Christians in Cuba. We did not have much information regarding the deep thinking of King, but the little which we did know inspired us to live a faith committed to oppressed people and, moreover, gave us an example of an active peaceful resistance in the face of unjust laws, more in keeping with the style of Jesus and Ghandi.

This satisfied the unsettling fact that our motivations were not purely political nor did they result from our desire to follow the flow of what was currently in style. We were concerned with the need to base our social commitment on Biblically sound theological principles. We felt the need to have the light of God's Word illuminate our way along these thorny paths.

In 1971, I was invited to give a talk at a meeting of Baptist youth in Havana with the theme, "The Validity of the Message of Christ for Our Action". This was a gathering of more than 200 youth and young adults concerned about Christian testimony in the Cuban society. I prepared myself to present the Biblical foundations for a responsible Christian presence in the world. I chose three key themes to shed light on this topic: the incarnation, as God's method for influencing the world; the Kingdom of God, as the stimulus for announcing a better world; and the struggle against the principalities and powers as the prophetic task in the face of evil. It was upon these three pillars that I sought to base the Christian commitment amidst the historic circumstances in which we were living. The influence of the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. was the main source for this Biblical and theological reflection.

## **The Incarnation**

Understanding the basic meaning of “incarnation” requires a major shift in our way of understanding the form in which God’s mission in the world is realized. In the text “*as the Father has sent me, I am sending you*”<sup>1</sup>, the word “as” indicates a specific model for accomplishing the mission of evangelization. This is none other than the incarnation, the presence in soul and body in the world, just as Jesus exemplified. We evangelical Christians have understood evangelization as a matter of speech or discourse from the base of our churches or in the media, as if the gospel were just another product to offer, a piece of merchandise for sale. This is not to depreciate the verbal proclamation, but only to affirm the principle that only life can transmit life. There are times when actions speak much louder than words.

I remember that to illustrate this sense of the incarnation I cited the example of the “empty pulpit”. King was invited to give a sermon in an ecumenical meeting in Geneva and it happened that the racial struggle was at a critical point. He decided to remain at the side of his people and sent a recording of the speech, which was listened to with much reverence even though the pulpit was empty. Since King was present in all of the important moments of the struggle, it was not possible for him to remain comfortably within the walls of the church.

So we understand that actions are more important than words. As when Jesus answered the disciples of John who were inquiring as to whether he was the awaited Messiah. The Lord answered, “*Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, ... the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*”<sup>2</sup>, Jesus’ response did not consist of giving a great speech, but rather in doing the redeeming works of God for the benefit of human beings.

To speak of incarnation in the Cuba of the 1960s and 70s meant to participate actively in many of the tasks which required a special effort to leave behind the prejudices which marginalized Christians from the intense flow of life. Even if those committed to Communism did not clearly understand the motivation behind our actions, it was time to demonstrate the true nature of the Church through deeds and not just with words.

This understanding of incarnation motivated us to join in the efforts of our people to accomplish a sugar cane harvest for the good of our country’s economy. It was arduous work which required us to spend the night in rustic shelters in the countryside, to get up very early and to spend the day

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<sup>1</sup> Johns 20.21b

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11.4.5

cutting sugar cane. It was while doing this that I heard the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I felt great sadness, but also pride. A great man, going beyond the ideological differences between our two countries, was able to bring ideals and actions together and to transform them into a profound reality.

But our presence in that setting caused suspicion among Communists. I remember the discomfort of my companions in the shelter as they viewed my strange presence among them. They asked me if I had a “Nixon grant”, which was what was said of those the government had sent to work in the country because they had put their names on a list of those who wished to leave Cuba. The churches also had a difficult time understanding this form of accomplishing the evangelical mission. I had to go before a congregational meeting to explain my reason for going to cut sugar cane. Happily, confidence in me prevailed and I received the support of the members of our church.

The path of incarnation is marked by the love of God (*“For God so loved the world ....”* John 3:16), and also by the spirit of humility, which is the *“same attitude as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in the very nature of God ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!”*<sup>3</sup>.

This path was not popular with those who thought that opening church doors and inviting people to come in was all that was necessary to fulfill the task that God has put in our hands. But Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us break away from a way of thinking deeply rooted in our churches and which understood the term “world” to mean something dangerous and even evil, something with which we should never become involved.

Even more, some of us felt that being present for a few days in agricultural work was not enough. We believed that it was easy to stand in the pulpit and preach to the laypersons present in the worship services about sacrifice without having any other everyday working obligations or commitments as pastors. This concern over the difference between pastors and laypersons led one day to my presenting my congregation with the proposal that I become a pastor-worker, living the discipline of any common worker and dedicating only my free time to the work of the church. Once again, the church had the maturity to go along with the pastor, giving him its confidence and support, aware that the proposal was coming from his authentic desire to live his convictions to the fullest. So it was that a few

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<sup>3</sup> Philipians 2.6,7

days later I was working in a business related to agriculture and for the next fifteen years I worked in jobs connected with the production and distribution of food. This kept me closely involved with average people and with workers of the most humble of economic conditions. I shared with them work which was exhausting, but gratifying, since it dealt with providing food to the people. This bi-vocational experience of living in two different settings was not easy and sometimes things became confused in my mind. There were days in which at the beginning of a church service I found myself almost saying “Dear fellow workers, let us pray to God”, or in a labor union meeting saying “Brothers and Sisters”.

But truthfully it must be said that the majority of Cuban pastors did not take the same path. There actually were more pastors who adopted the bi-vocational style -- as teachers, workers, and doctors -- prior to the revolution than during the revolution. In reality in Baptist ranks I was the only pastor who adopted this style of mission. My colleagues did not support me and, to the contrary, criticized me sharply, calling me a collaborator of the regime.

One might ask what results were obtained from those 15 years of bi-vocational work. The answer in terms of numbers would be that few results occurred. Only four of my work companions were baptized in the church. However many human relationships were established and many friends from work began to see the church with new eyes. I never was an anonymous worker. Comments were always made about the “priest” or pastor. In addition, the good memories of the companionship and friendship of those times, along with the wisdom of the common people, continue to enrich my life. It is clear that there was no great harvest in terms of numbers. However the Lord never sends us out to achieve results. Instead, we are called to give testimony of his presence and saving power. Only the Holy Spirit is charged with giving growth from the planted seed. We rest in that fact.

### **The Kingdom of God and Utopia**

A second theme I presented to the Baptist youth in 1971 was importance of rediscovering that the central message of Jesus was not the salvation of the soul, but the announcement of the Kingdom of God. And the idea of Kingdom points to a messianic hope, a new order which has burst upon the world and which Jesus made visible through miracles of healing and all of his redeeming work benefiting the oppressed, those who suffered from marginalization, the children, and the women, among others. The coming of the Kingdom means that the world has begun the dynamic of

transformation with new values, a new order, and a new law, which is the law of love. With great enthusiasm, we learned of New York City pastor Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the founders of the social gospel movement, which placed the theme of the Kingdom of God at the center of the Christian mission. This was very much in keeping with what we needed.

We linked this new perspective to the language of utopia, which “does not yet exist”, but provides a horizon and calls us to the struggle for a better world where the prophets’ dreams of justice and universal peace<sup>4</sup> are fulfilled. For us, utopia and the Kingdom of God came to have the same meaning, both expressing the hope of a better world, both provoking transforming actions.

We concluded that it was hypocritical to pray “Thy Kingdom come” while not being committed to the signs of the Kingdom -- life, justice, and peace. We were aware that neither socialism nor any other social system could be equated with the Kingdom. However, we did see in laws which favor the poorest among us a sign, an indication that events were moving in the direction of the Kingdom. The dream of a new world and the signs that this was coming in our midst motivated us to live with joy and hope, working so that the Kingdom would also be visible among us.

There is no doubt but what Martin Luther King, Jr. was this type of dreamer. He believed that another world of brotherhood, which he called the community of love, could be a reality in our world. Although he himself might not see it, he could view it from afar, like Moses viewing the Promised Land without being able to walk its ground. There can be no room for doubt that King was moved by the idea of a utopia. In his well-known speech given during the 1963 March on Washington, he said, “I have a dream that one day ....” This serves as an irrefutable proof of his perspective. This spirit of dissatisfaction with the present and of affirmation of the possibility of a better world sustained the group of dreamers in Cuba who believed firmly in a different reality.

From “Credo” by King, we take a few lines which reveal this passionate utopian spirit.

Today as the world lies in darkness and in the hope of the Good News, I boldly affirm my faith in the future of humanity.

I reject the belief that in the current situation human beings are not able to make a better world.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 65.20-25

I firmly believe that, even in the midst of exploding bombs and thundering cannon, there remains the hope of a shining tomorrow.

I dare to believe that one day all inhabitants of the world will be able to have three meals a day for the life of their bodies, education and culture for the health of their spirit, equality and freedom for the life of their hearts.

I also believe that one day all of humanity will acknowledge God as the source of their love. I believe that saving and peaceful goodness will one day become law. The wolf and the lamb will be able to lie down together, each person will be able to sit under his fig tree, in his vineyard, and no one will have reason to be fearful.

I firmly believe that we will triumph.

We saw signs of that Kingdom of God in everyday events. The decades of the 60s and 70s were time of important changes in Latin America. The Catholic Church was stirred by the new winds of Vatican Council II and awoke to the problems of today's world. In 1968, Latin American bishops meeting in Medellín, Colombia, proclaimed the necessity of the socio-economic liberation of the continent. Thousands of organized local groups in Brazil and other countries searched the Scriptures for messages to address the oppression their people were experiencing. They found themselves rereading old texts with new eyes. Protestant and Catholic theologians created a new language, apart from academic abstractions and digressions. The phrase "a faith in search of effectiveness" began to be used (Miguez Bonino). Poor people became favored participants in theological dialogue, as they searched for sense in a world without sense. European theological dialogue about secularism had little to contribute. On the political front, socialist doctor Salvador Allende won democratic elections in Chile with a program of radical changes.

We young Cuban pastors worked intensely to raise awareness in our churches because we believed that the Christian Church has a place and a message to offer in times of change. We translated progressive position papers, distributed texts by Martin Luther King, Jr., and organized retreats focusing on the social responsibility of the Christian. All this was designed to forge a new generation of Christians with social awareness. We were able to bring together a considerable number of workers, students, and young people in general.

But we were mistaken in our optimism and especially in our underestimating the power of the establishment. Firmly based social structures showed their ugly faces. The Reagan era began and a meeting called by his advisors in Santa Fe produced a document which warned of

the danger posed by liberation theology to the interests of the United States. Repressive regimes focused on “national security” began to appear. Military dictatorships savagely suppressed their people. Thirty thousand died or “disappeared” in Argentina alone. The sunset of hope had begun. The Kingdom of God was not as close as we had thought. Other contradictions awaited us in the near future and pushed back even further the horizon of the utopia of which we dreamed. We still had much to learn.

In our Cuban homeland, the churches were moving at an agonizing slow pace toward social awareness. Rumors circulated that our group of young pastors was made up of Communist fellow travelers and that we were ecumenical heretics who opposed everyone who did not have a social commitment. We were excluded from programs at conventions and internecine fighting within Cuban Baptist organizations became more and more bitter. There was no dialogue, only the disqualification of anyone who thought differently.

At this point it was becoming clear that the concept of the Kingdom of God carried with it some elements which distinguished it from human utopias. One distinguishing element is highlighted by the cross and the resurrection. These mark a path of suffering, self denial, and momentary defeat, but which in truth is no more than the darkness which precedes the splendor of the resurrection dawn. The Kingdom of God does not guarantee a steady, upward movement. There are failures and steps backward, and there is a cross of infinite pain which must be taken up. As Martin Luther King taught, to end violence one must walk a rough path. King’s followers walked this path with great difficulty, practicing a reflection and spiritual meditation which gave them the capacity to suffer violence without practicing it. For Christians, the resurrection is the guarantee that the Kingdom is not totally annihilated. Life surges up with more power than death. As a Latin American poet has written, “All the flowers can be cut off, but no one can stop the coming spring.”

A second distinguishing element in the Good News of the Kingdom of God is that Christian hope provides a unique perspective in a time of apparent stagnation. This hope does not offer a refuge for those who have failed. Rather it is an ointment which opens the eyes to other realities, to small things which seem insignificant, but which contain the promise of life. Jesus spoke of a mustard seed, of the hidden treasure, of the children, of the leaven hidden in the bread dough. The Kingdom breaks out among us in small, simple things. It is not necessary that there be a seizure of political power; there is another power that rises up from below, from the simplest links of society, in the family and in the community. That is where ethical

values are created; the values which fertilize the soil for the building of a better world.

These are lessons which were missed by the revolutionaries who saw their dreams of a more just society become frustrated.

### **The principalities and powers**

These struggles made us ask ourselves, in reality against whom are we fighting? What is preventing the world from being transformed and our own churches from being renewed? Why are social structures so resistant to a change which would benefit the majority? It seemed as if we were swimming against a current which was much stronger than we were and which was pulling us further and further from the Kingdom.

Orthodox Marxism attempts to give an answer, teaching that society is conditioned by its economic bases. Marxism argues that political power is built on these economic bases and that these bases give rise to ideologies and produce a culture. So when the control of the economic bases changes hands, all the superstructure changes, almost automatically. A socialist society which takes ownership of the means of production creates the conditions for satisfying the material needs of its members. This results in a new culture and a new ideology.

However things are not quite so simple. The human being consists of more than just material needs. In addition, the so-called superstructure enjoys a certain amount of independence. Classical Marxism did not take into account what Italian thinker Gramsci later called the existence of a hegemonic power which enjoys relative independence from political and economic power. This power expresses itself through the institutions of the civil society, such as the customs and traditions of the people. This perspective takes into account the influence of traditional culture, religion, and customs. This hegemonic power serves as a counterweight to political power and in the long run can totally debilitate it. This thinking allows us to understand that part of the success of the civil rights movement led by King is due, not only to the justice of its demands, but also to the fact that it was rooted in the traditions of the Black church.

Another factor contradicting classical Marxist theory is the undeniable fact that human desires sometimes count for more than needs. Thus, it is not surprising to see those living in a barely habitable dwelling in a very poor country using the latest model of television and a cellular phone. For them there seems to be no relationship between wants and needs. It would be

interesting to research the degree of influence the power of consumerism had in the crumbling of the socialist camp.

All of this brings us to the Biblical categories of “principalities and powers”, which help us to understand the powers which dominate society and even our own churches. These powers can be of great blessing, as was the case in the traditions of Black churches. On the other hand, they may include negative influences, for example political and religious fanaticism and xenophobia. All of these realities can be addressed using the Biblical categories of principalities and powers.

Those of us in Cuba were faced with the challenge of how to find a Biblical basis for the existence of the oppressive realities which go beyond exclusively individual limitations and which are difficult to pinpoint. We saw how Martin Luther King, Jr., understood and faced the racism which was part of the laws and traditions in the South and which was reflected in the thinking of many sincere Christians and even in the passivity present in some of his own people.

Fortunately, the book These Rebellious Powers, written by Albert van den Heuvel, provided us with an answer. In this book we discovered that the words “principalities and powers”, which are mentioned so much in the New Testament, form a conceptual foundation on which we can base our understanding of mental structures, traditions, prejudices and unjust laws. In other words, principalities and powers can be used to refer to everything which conditions the lives of people and which acts as a net in which people become trapped. Thus, the terms “principalities and powers” came to play a key role in our thinking.

Huevel writes, *“When powers isolate, bind, sow enmity, create loneliness, demand idolatry, and produce selfishness, conservatism and traditionalism, it is time to remember the invitation of the Messiah to join with Him in throwing these powers from their thrones.”* Huevel argues that in his letter to the Colossians, Paul connects this idea of powers to the Jewish religious traditions which restrict freedom. Thus it is appropriate to apply the categories of principalities and powers to all structures, ideologies, traditions, and any other parts of society which become oppressive. Later, theologian Walter Wink explored this theme in depth in his well-known “The Powers Trilogy”.

Certainly the vision of Ephesians 6:12 nurtured King’s spirit as he clarified the structural dimensions of the sins of racism and segregation: *“For we*

*wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world ...”*

While I am not certain if Martin Luther King, Jr., used these same Biblical arguments in referring to his struggle, I am convinced that he handled the racial conflict from this perspective and with the belief that one must fight against sin while loving the sinner. Viewing things from this perspective, a racist is the victim of powers that have blinded him and therefore the racist deserves the compassion which is capable of helping him to redeem himself from his sin. In the methodology of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., also found the way to educate the masses in the awareness that it is love, rather than hate, which motivates all of their sacrifices.

We in Latin America are familiar with ethnic and racial prejudices, which attribute the crushing poverty of indigenous peoples and blacks to supposed flaws in their character and lack of discipline. We are convinced, however, that this poverty was brought about by the oppression of the powerful, who have created institutional mechanisms which perpetuate injustice. Poverty is not a divine punishment, nor is it due to a lack of will on the part of the poor. Instead, it is due to those structures which are the modern “principalities and powers”. The most painful aspect of this is that a feeling of inferiority has been internalized into the consciousness of the poor. As a result, the poor are not able to free themselves from the fatalism and dependency on their supposed protectors who, while not giving them a decent life, at least guarantee them a certain amount of security.

## **Two Tools**

In the face of these realities, two tools have come to the aid of the oppressed people of Latin America. We mention them because in some way they will have an impact on the Cuban situation. One is *popular education*, created by Brazilian Paulo Freire. This consists of nothing more than empowering the poor to enable them to uncover the true reasons for their poverty. The poor then become the main players, active subjects who have something to say and who have developed a critical awareness of reality. Popular education creates spaces for horizontal dialogue, participative and inclusive. It raises self esteem and produces a commitment to make necessary changes. It is a very valuable tool against fatalism, authoritarianism, and against the “principalities and powers”.

The second tool is so-called *liberation theology* which introduces a new method for developing theology. It does not begin with what was said in the past by theologians and learned scholars. Rather, it consists of a

dialogue with the subjects of history -- people. Throughout time, theology has developed through a conversation among those in the community of faith and the surrounding culture, and the dominant thought and philosophy. This has been an exchange of ideas, involving both give and take. Theological development has been marked by evolving concepts with a philosophical emphasis and has become primarily an academic exercise involving a small number of specialists. In the process, it has lost its evangelical and prophetic edge.

Latin American theology does not ignore the heritage achieved through years of reflection and theoretical development, but it has forged a new focus, based on real life and the oppressive circumstances being lived by a majority of poor people. In Latin American theology, faith concepts are not questioned by illustrious thinkers, but by the poor, who pose the great questions of justice and the love of God. Latin American theology begins with the practice of liberation. Therefore by its very nature it critiques all theological reflection which contributes to the perpetuation of a situation of suffering and oppression.

The first liberation theologians on our continent were the Dominican friars, headed by Pedro de Córdoba and Antonio de Montesinos, who used the pulpit of the Mayor Parish on the island of Hispaniola to denounce the crimes and abuses which the Spanish *conquistadores* were committing in indigenous communities. From that point, there began a current of prophetic voices, headed by Fray Bartolomé de las Cases, which gave life to a form of speaking of God which was different from the traditional because it represented the voice of the oppressed.

So in this sense other liberation theologies have arisen in the world. In one way or another, they all position themselves alongside those who have suffered discrimination or who have been marginalized. All have an element of the prophetic denunciation of all ideologies which justify and contribute to the persistence of oppression. Thus, it is possible to speak of a feminist theology, which unmask the machismo hidden in language, customs, and religion. Nor can we fail to mention Black theology, which has made a major contribution to the unraveling of the enormous load of racism in Western culture and has put forth a theology which dignifies and values the contributions of Black culture and traditions.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was not an academic theologian. His life was not connected to a university classroom. However, to read his writings is to plunge into the depths of liberating thought. King's way of thinking moves awareness in the direction of transforming human beings focused on themselves into instruments of peace and into the builders of a new world.

So from here in Cuba we see King as being in the best tradition of authentic liberation theology. And, like Antonio de Valdivieso, Monseñor Romero, and so many other Latin Americans who defended the oppressed from a theological perspective, Martin Luther King, Jr., sealed his commitment to the poor with his own blood.

## **Transformations in Cuba Today**

Now we will address the most current aspects of the influence of Martin Luther King in Cuba today.

In order to speak of Cuba today, it is necessary to acknowledge that the events which occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989 still have a profound impact on our society today. Despite the fact that our country had the capacity to sustain itself and survive against all the dire predictions of the experts, the magnitude of that economic disaster was so great that it is comparable to an earthquake which destroyed 80% of the productive capacity of the country. As an example, prior to 1989 sugar was produced by a well-developed agricultural system with advanced equipment used on state farms and cooperatives and was sold at guaranteed, protected prices. After 1989, production fell from 7.5 million tons to only 1.5 million tons.

The country was left bankrupt, with the United States embargo tightening to the point where the American administration even went after Cuban reserves in US dollars held by foreign banks. In fact, Swiss banks were fined for holding Cuban funds in US dollars.

It isn't necessary to invest time here in detailing information which can be easily obtained elsewhere. We only want to affirm that for Cubans the horizon which had been utopian was reduced to the space of the struggle for personal and family survival. Up to that time, Cuban socialism had guaranteed a modest standard of living. In 1989, rationing of basic items allowed some easing of the crisis, but in the 1990s the problem of food, transportation and medicine became the top daily priority. The situation was captured in the popular saying "Things aren't easy!" This phrase was repeated thousands of times and became the trademark of the new situation. However the words of Saint Paul also became true in that difficult time: *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."*<sup>5</sup> .

A new spirituality of resistance challenged pastors and theologians to persevere in standing at the side of the suffering, desperate Cuban people.

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<sup>5</sup> II Corinthians 4.7-9

We were challenged to resist against all hope, without knowing where we were headed; to resist the frustration of those who saw no way out, except to leave the island; and to resist those who feared an outbreak of social chaos and saw no way out except the strengthening of repressive measures.

### **Pastors for Peace**

There was very little international support for us. However Lucius Walker, a prophet and follower of Martin Luther King, Jr., stepped up from the very country which was blockading Cuba. Walker, of the organization IFCO, NY, organized the first Pastors for Peace Caravan at the beginning of the decade of the 90s. His goal was to bring Cuba humanitarian supplies donated by the North American people. Donations were gathered in 120 cities, first in the United States and later in Canada. This help was directed to Cuban schools, hospitals and churches. The Pastors for Peace defied the laws establishing the blockade, crossing the US-Mexican border with busses loaded with goods for Cuba. On one occasion, a bus carrying donations for the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center in Havana was detained. Members of the caravan went on a hunger strike for many days during extremely high summer temperatures. They were supported by Havana pastors, who began another hunger strike in front of the U.S. Interests Section on the island. Finally, the bus was released and Havana residents welcomed the caravan members with great celebration.

The Pastors for Peace were doubtless inspired in their peaceful disobedience of unjust laws by the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. These caravans have been repeated every year. By 2010, a total of 21 caravans have reached Cuba. They have made a difference in the image our people have of what it means to be a pastor. I have experienced this change in the way I am treated in Cuban institutions. All I need to say is that I am a pastor and I am received and listened to with a great deal of respect.

The men and women of the Pastors for Peace Caravans have run the risk of jail and of thousands of dollars in fines for violating the embargo laws. It distresses us that the great press establishment of the United States has not given coverage to these heroes, who have offered such a powerful testimony of loving solidarity and of bravery in confronting unjust laws. Martin Luther King, Jr., would feel proud in the company of the men and women who continue walking the path which he began.

### **The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center**

The counterpart in Cuba to the Pastors for Peace has been the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center, which was founded by the Ebenezer Baptist Church, located in the Marianao Municipality of the City of Havana.

Since its beginning as a modest institution in the shadow of the church, it has grown and expanded its radius of influence. Because it rose up to meet the difficult times through which the country was passing, it presently enjoys national prestige and recognition, with its influence extending beyond normal church boundaries.

But we will let the Center speak for itself:

*“The Martin Luther King Memorial Center is a macro-ecumenical organization of Christian inspiration. Based among the Cuban people and their churches, it contributes in a prophetic manner to the solidarity of the people and to their aware, organized, and critical participation, devoted to the defense of a fulfilled life for everyone and the respect for natural rights. This contribution is made from the perspective of popular education and a theology which is of the people, critical, liberating, and contextualized”.*<sup>6</sup>

The Center has a clear focus on training, which is oriented not just toward churches, but also toward the society generally. This training is designed to develop new attitudes toward conscious participation in the political community with the broad goal of the defense of life and of nature. The Center’s macro-ecumenical character points to an opening to the religious rainbow of Cuban society, which includes religions of African origins, which are active not only among the Black population, but also extend into many other sectors of Cuban society. This inclusive perspective is faithful to the inspiration of Martin Luther King, Jr., who welcomed those who joined the struggle, be they Jews or Muslims.

One of the basic contributions made by the Center is popular education. It is important to clarify that, although the King Center is not the only institution which promotes popular education, in our judgment it is training the largest number of people from all sectors of the Cuban society, without excluding anyone. The courses which train popular educators have reached out to hundreds of activists throughout the entire country. This has created a network of persons who remain in permanent contact and have organized themselves and hold national meetings in which feedback is provided by participants coming from a diversity of

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<sup>6</sup>1. Programa General 2009-1012 Formación y Comunicación para la Participación y Solidaridad.

local experiences. It is also important to emphasize that popular education is the philosophy of life of the Center, which keeps alive a spirit of self criticism, of a horizontal relationship among its members, and of a model of democratic participation by all of its workers.

This contribution is very significant for the reality found in Cuba today, since one of the fundamental problems of our society is the excessive state centralization of social organization. This is something we have inherited from the “real socialism” of Eastern Europe. This phenomenon confuses socialism with state control and gives rise to the bureaucratic and authoritarian methods which attempt to direct all social activities. It also has created a citizenry which is obedient, passive, lacks creativity, and which faithfully follows the directions which come down from “above”. This results in a participation in decision making which is very mechanical and readily achieves artificial unanimity.

To this must be added the fear of the destabilization of our society, promoted from the United States, which provokes an extremely defensive reaction from Cuban authorities when confronted with any opinions which differ from the official position.

This contribution of popular education by the Center certainly constitutes a movement from the ground up, attempting to create a culture of authentically democratic participation by all sectors of the society. It does not receive any official governmental support or recognition. However more and more leaders from various levels of government are becoming aware of the importance of popular education. In our opinion, this is one of the more interesting developments in current Cuban society. Within it lies a powerful germ of transformation.

The King Center’s other contribution of transcendental importance relates to “a popular theology, which is critical, liberating, and contextualized.” This reflects the influence of Latin America’s liberation theology. The provision of theological education is made together with the Latin American Biblical University of Costa Rica. Numerous theologians make periodic presentations at the King Center, featuring abbreviated, but intense, classes, followed by home study by each participant.

Since this second contribution of the King Center is linked directly to Cuban churches, it is important to point out that in the last 20 years Cuban churches have experienced a staggering growth, with their memberships multiplying three or four times. This rapid increase has led to the disadvantage of not having enough time to achieve a balanced maturity in

the theological training of the leadership. Many pastors find themselves in front of congregations only 3 years after their own conversion. This is especially true among the Pentecostal churches. In addition, the economic crisis has allowed the young leaders to be easily influenced by dependency upon agencies and persons who donate money from abroad, primarily from the United States, and who propound a type of religious education which is foreign to the historic tradition of the Cuban people. In the majority of those cases, these foreign influences have produced sectarian divisions, an indifference to social participation, and disrespectful proselytizing.

The impact of the King Center's programs of popular theology on the Christianity on the island is still modest. However it cannot be denied that it is one of the educational projects with the greatest promise in the training of pastors and laypersons in our country. And its program is of the highest quality and is constantly updated and revised. One limitation which can be pointed out is with regard to the goal of being a theology which is "contextualized". This is a challenge, since the immense majority of the leading thinkers and texts in the field are not from Cuba. Although many originate in Latin America and share much in common with our roots, they are not completely responsive to the particular characteristics of today's Cuban reality.

Another contribution of the King Center is in the area communications. With a broad program of publications, especially through its prestigious magazine *Caminos*, the Center does justice to Cuban authors from the fields of sociology as well as to theologians and Biblicists. In addition, the publishing house *Caminos* has published a considerable number of works by Cuban authors.

An additional important role played by the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center is its active involvement with social, pacifist, and ecological movements. In particular, the Center's leadership role in the World Social Forum should be pointed out.

### **The Twenty-First Century**

Thus far in our Cuban pilgrimage, the inspiration of Martin Luther King, Jr., has accompanied us, has nurtured our dreams of a better world, and has given us strength to confront difficult situations and to grow in the midst of contradictions. Today, we want to move ahead with the same confidence as we seek to conquer the future. However the horizon is

overspread with shadows. More than ever we look to the memory of Dr. King to help us to discern new signs for these times.

The present certainly confronts us with disquieting questions. Many things have changed in Cuba today from the romantic and heroic era of the 60s and 70s, when we proudly proclaimed that we were “Cuba: the First Free Territory of the Americas”.

To begin, we have to be honest with ourselves. We have to acknowledge the crude reality produced by the crumbling of the socialist camp, which has transformed the lives of Cubans. On the other hand, time has passed and a new generation has arisen. Earlier generations have given way, slowly but surely, to the coming of later generations, each with its own anxieties and new vision. Despite the fact that the power structures are the same and the heroic and defensive rhetoric is unchanged, the underlying pattern of beliefs which Gramsci called an “hegemony” is showing other hues. Today political slogans are not the dominant parlance of the man and women in the street. Moreover when people very obviously engage in that type of talk, listeners suspect that they are being opportunistic or that they are government functionaries or are persons of privilege whose life experience does not include the difficult times and shortages of the common people.

It would not be wise, however, to make a simplistic characterization which might lead to the mistaken conclusion that Cubans today are only a disenchanting and sad people. The love of Cuba throbs in our very beings. In the event that we would have to face aggression from abroad, thousands upon thousands of arms would be raised to defend our homeland. In addition, melancholy and sadness are not a part of the Cuban character. Our African roots give us precisely the energy and ability to find humor and entertainment in midst of the worst of situations.

But what we want to affirm is that the utopian horizon, the dream of a new society, has been reduced until it occupies only a small space in daily life. The struggle for survival has eroded the vision of the future. One works for the immediate present, for the house one has to build with great effort, for the children one has to sacrifice to feed, and for the achievement of a minimal amount of wellbeing.

In this situation, inequalities in standards of living have arisen, something we were not accustomed to in earlier decades. The necessary opening to international tourism, the arrival of foreign corporations, and the receipt of money from family members living abroad have produced a shocking

differentiation in levels of consumption. There are beautiful stores where goods can only be purchased with a type of currency which is not the same in which salaries are paid. We know heroes and veterans of wars of liberation who live in precarious conditions, while their neighbors may make a show of their wealth.

So in this contradictory life today, one might ask: Has utopia disappeared completely from the hearts of the Cubans? It would not be accurate or just to fail to highlight an aspect of the Cuban society that is truly a positive indication that the values of the new world we dreamed of are not totally lost. In 2006, I traveled from Caracas to Havana on a flight I will never forget. Around me sat traveling companions who impressed me as people who had never flown before. The majority were elderly, of very humble origins, with skin tanned by the sun. Some had indigenous features. The plane and its human cargo were bound for Cuba as part of a program called Operation Miracle, designed to operate on the eyes of thousands of people from the most humble levels of society. In Cuba, operating rooms were prepared and hotels were waiting. Medical personnel would work around the clock so that in a matter of months hundreds of thousands of poor people would regain their sight. As I sat on the plane, I pondered on how much matters were different. Today, change is not coming through guerillas seizing power. Today, the provision of health is the great task -- the sending abroad of life for the poor.

This is something which does not capture the attention of the world media: the contributions of an army of 30 thousand Cuban doctors and nurses giving service in places where others do not go -- in jungle and mountain hamlets. It is not surprising that when the recent earthquake devastated Haiti, 150 Cuban doctors were already there serving that impoverished country. As I write, a search for persons with physical and mental challenges is being conducted throughout the countryside and towns of various countries in Latin America. Once located, these people will be offered medical and technical assistance to improve their quality of life. These brigades of Cuban personnel work in the most remote places. It truly is impressive.

I have known these doctors, who work in ways similar to medical missionaries in the most inhospitable places, risking their lives to bring health. They do receive a modest economic benefit, but the sacrifices they are making cannot be compensated with money. In our own country of Cuba there is much human wealth in the thousands of professionals who serve with true selflessness, without receiving sufficient compensation for

their efforts. They are true signs of the Kingdom, the light of utopia that does not go out.

Of course, this brief brush stroke does not cover the full spectrum of the Cuban reality, with all its lights and shadows. So it is understandable how we who live on the island find ourselves frequently caught in the tension between uncertainty and faith, seeking a new language that will help us to not lose our direction and to follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **Toward a Theological Inquiry**

I have spoken of how, in the early days of the revolution, theology derived from Biblical teachings regarding the Kingdom of God, the incarnation, and the principalities and powers served to orient our mission as the church in a new context. In the same way, the inspiration of the example of Martin Luther King gave us the strength for our social commitment. Despite the pressure of urgent of pastoral and social duties which did not leave much time for theoretical reflection, those first two decades were fertile ones for theological creativity. Profound articles and essays appeared in modest ecumenical publications, often mimeographed. Even with all the limitations, it was the first time that authentic Cuban theological reflections had come to light. One of the best writers is theologian and pastor Sergio Arce Martínez. We remember gratefully his essay “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society”, which shed great light on our social practice. And, we have already said that Latin American liberation theology became a confirmation of the validity of our progressive Christian walk.

However the same things cannot be said about the present day. I feel as if we are walking through an arid desert, without refreshing thinking which is relevant to our situation. In the traditional ecumenical left one hears a discourse which is repetitive, apologetic, and evidences superiority when it deals with the Cuban reality. It seems to bend to the international situation, focusing on the same themes as those of progressive social movements throughout the world. This latter characteristic isn't bad, of course, except that we are living in today's Cuban reality. By turning a blind eye to the immediate situation in Cuba, we have nothing meaningful to say to our people. We have ceased being prophets because we are not grounded in our own reality.

If we consider theology to be a faith dialogue with people in the historical context in which we have been called to live, it behooves those who claim

to be developing theology in Cuba to seek a more intimate encounter with existential reality, free from all propaganda and apologetics. We must listen to the simple people, to the humble people. We must be disposed to dialogue with our hearts and minds fully open.

One group which can offer many suggestions for theological reflection in Cuba today is comprised of the artists, poets, dramatists and cinematographers who address reality with their own codes and their enviable creative freedom. They survey reality, put their ears to the ground, listen to silent shouts, and so their work becomes a reflection of an era. Any visitor coming from another country and getting close to our current literature will find that it is a far cry from that of earlier times. No longer does it preach firmly held convictions or absolute ideologies. Instead what prevails is a search for the meaning of existence.

This is particularly impressive in cinematography, which by reaching a larger public has unique possibilities for touching the public conscience. The new films reflect the contradictions, frustrations, and lack of hope, as well as the quiet heroism, joys and dreams of a people who have been called upon to live through a singular historic experience. In some cases, these films have become a true catharsis by which the public sees itself portrayed. In other cases these films have served as a probe, making people uncomfortable and causing them to think. In particular, the film *Suite Havana* (2008), directed by Fernando Pérez, moved people deeply as it represented the daily lives of various average individuals as they accomplished their daily tasks with one thing in common: the protagonists were motivated by their own specific, but different, dreams. These dreams were no longer those of a great, new utopian society, but were nonetheless beautiful and legitimate.

What we are proposing is that the primary job of Cuban theology today is to remain silent and to listen to everything which this complex time in our history wishes to say to us. It doesn't help to just copy the answers which might have applied in other contexts and other times, nor does it help to seek nourishment from the great gurus of theological thought. We must drink from our own fountain, as Gustavo Gutiérrez says so well. This implies a large dose of evangelical humility and reverent silence.

### **Some Guideposts to Follow**

Popular reading of the Bible, an offspring of popular education, is a very valuable tool for encouraging the free expression of people's feelings. In this process, there is no specific interpretation of the Bible imposed in an

authoritarian way by the pastor or teacher. Instead, the reading is done from the perspectives of the real lives of the participants. Even when aided by the most serious of exegetical tools, the text is read from personal experience, from the moving of God in our present experience. In this way, the deep meaning of a Scripture passage emerges at the time of the reading. The result is not necessarily predictable. The Spirit liberates the illuminating and relevant message.

The Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Center is developing a program of the popular reading of the Bible and this is being put into practice in numerous communities, with very encouraging results. It must be clarified that this model of Bible study is not done at the mercy of capricious, individual interpretations of Scripture. A specific method is used which is faithful to the best tradition in hermeneutics. Popular Bible reading is a communal activity in which the Bible reading interprets reality and reality reinterprets the meaning of the Scripture.

The limitation of this method is that it is difficult to systematize the results and thus reach a theological statement. However there is no doubt but what the ideas produced by this reading of primary material of Scripture produces valuable ingredients for later theoretical formulation. There is much worth harvesting from this fertile ground. Perhaps the most important theological contribution is the connection it establishes between the utopia of the Kingdom and the individual life experience of each member of that Kingdom. I would like to express this idea with the image of a great net which is knotted at thousands of tiny points where its threads cross. These knots represent the realizations of many individual dreams. There is no need to divorce personal and familial aspirations of happiness from the Kingdom. In Jesus we find that there is a link between the small and the great, between the insignificant seed and the powerful tree.

A second guidepost I wish to propose is based on the light of the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose civil disobedience movement began in a meeting in a church in Montgomery, Alabama. This guidepost is that of the affirming of the Christian community as a source of social transformation. Recognizing the distance which separates Cubans from the experiences of the Black church in the American South, and without any messianic pretensions, I dare to affirm that the churches of Cuba have an important contribution to make to society. Local Christian communities, small prayer and Bible study groups, are privileged spaces where the basic humanity of each participant can be affirmed. J.H. Oldham expressed this clearly:

*“The first indispensable task is to restore substance to the human person ... There is no way to restore substance and depth to the life of man except by living ... Human living is living in relations with other persons and can acquire meaning and depth only in those relations. Since the number of persons with whom an individual can have direct and close relations is limited, the art of social living has to be learned and practiced in small groups, of which the family is the chief .... There is nothing greater that the church can do for society than to be a center in which small groups of people are together entering into the experience of renewal and giving each other mutual support in Christian living in secular spheres.”<sup>7</sup>*

Our country’s entrance into the worst of the economic crisis coincided with the arrival at our churches of waves of people seeking help and a message of hope. Churches became centers of help, offering not only a word of encouragement, but also, to the extent of their means, medicine and food. Many people were victims of depression and became disoriented and perplexed in the face of a situation which was totally beyond their power to control. For the generations which had grown up without any contact with the world of religion it was a great discovery to find in the communities of faith an atmosphere of warm brotherhood which affirmed life and where there was concern for the wellbeing of each person. Families divided as a result of some members emigrating from Cuba found a new family and were given love and care.

One of the traditional moments in the Christian liturgy is the greeting of peace. In Cuban churches this is not a simple ritual act during the service, but rather is a special moment to express love. Everyone exchanges warm embraces, resulting in a little bit of chaos in the middle of the service. But this moment is much appreciated because the love of family is being expressed spontaneously. Another very significant time in a service is the sharing of thanksgiving and prayer requests, since it is an opportunity to share with the community our joys and sadness and our triumphs and failures. This is a time which consolidates the bonds that unite the community and puts into practice what Paul taught: *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”*<sup>8</sup>

Another contribution of the churches deals with ethics. The Cuban economic crisis resulted in a crisis in values. People sought subsistence in every way possible. When they were not successful using legal means,

<sup>7</sup> J.H.Oldham, “A Responsible Society”, in *The Church and the Disorder of Society*, Vol II in the Amsterdam Assembly Series *Mans Disorder and God Design* ( New York Harper 1948)

<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:15

they resorted to illicit strategies, including pilfering items from places of employment, prostitution, the black market, etc. To this must be added an increase in the consumption of alcohol, a rise in the numbers of divorces and other social problems. In this atmosphere the churches assumed a greater relevance as agents affirming positive values. It should be pointed out that the Cuban government has recognized this contribution. However it must also be acknowledged that there is a negative side to some tendencies which appeared in churches which focused on an individualistic life style with an emphasis on consumerism as an indication of heavenly blessing. This is particularly emphasized in what has been called prosperity theology.

So, with more positives than negatives, the churches have affirmed their renewed value as places for human growth. Their ministry gives meaning to lives, creates bonds of brotherhood, and practices effective and practical solidarity.

### **From Mysticism to Spirituality**

Despite all this, Martin Luther King, Jr., certainly would not be completely satisfied with churches which limit themselves to offering support to those who come to them and which, in the end, are focused on themselves in competition with other churches. It can be affirmed without doubt that in these times the spirit of interdenominational unity has cooled notably. The ecumenical movement suffers from anemia. Despite their presence in considerable numbers, this lack of unity has resulted in evangelical churches lacking a voice with a prophetic message to the entire society. We form part of the world's disunity. We lack the capacity for dialogue and the maturity to accept diversity.

From this it can be seen that we are not proclaiming the Kingdom of God as we should, nor are we defying the principalities and powers. In a society like that of Cuba, which is in a time of change and of elaborating a more participative and human socialism, the church as part of the civil society should be able to offer a significant contribution. Sadly, however, this vision does not exist in the current generation which thinks, for the most part, that its job is to grow in numbers.

What then is the illness which is paralyzing evangelical Cuban churches? Where are we falling short? It may be surprising to hear from the mouth of one who has lived his life as an activist and promoter of the social conscience of the churches the affirmation that the problem arises from a poverty of authentic spirituality. Each day convinces me more that the

lack of spirituality is what invalidates the church for completing its mission. And this mission is not just to the church community, but to the entire society. Let me explain.

I beg the pardon of the mystics of other ages, but with the goal of clarifying my proposition, I would like to explain this point by making an artificial distinction between mysticism and spirituality.

In 1980, my wife and I were collaborating with the Baptist Seminary in Nicaragua, living in the euphoric times following the recent Sandinista Revolution which had defeated the cruel Somoza dictatorship. We noted the admiration with which the people of Nicaragua regarded the heroes who had made that victory possible. The commanders of the revolution, for the most part youthful, enjoyed great prestige. They were brave men who had risked their lives fighting in the mountains against a powerful army. Some had been tortured, while others had given up comfortable positions in the society to follow their ideal. They were an example of the purest revolutionary mysticism. They sacrificed their all on the altar of a better world. This mysticism placed the heroes above the common people, as if they were higher beings.

But ten years in power were enough to change many of their minds, with a few honorable exceptions. They lost power when they lost the elections of 1990 and an unheard of thing happened -- what Nicaraguans called the "piñata phenomenon". The erstwhile heroes, acting like children throwing themselves on the candy falling out of a piñata at a birthday party, appropriated for themselves everything they could before giving up power. Some time later while visiting Nicaragua, I was told that some of those former guerilla commanders were among the most powerful millionaires in the country. What had happened? Why did this transformation occur, this loss of values? Where was the revolutionary mystique?

Of course, heroes are not really superior to the rest of humanity. They are also vulnerable to temptations, and nothing seduces more than power and wealth. I believe that from this perspective we can read the account of the temptations of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry. It was not enough for Him to receive the anointing for the messianic task. It was necessary to go through interior purification, rejecting idols, crucifying self, and despising the power and grandeur of this world.

I dare say that when Martin Luther King stated that he would like to be remembered as the "bass drum" in the march for freedom, he was saying

with a good sense of humor that he was not the central figure, although he was making noise. He felt that he was just one of the musicians. Humility is the doorway to authentic spirituality. Near his death at barely 42 years of age, Cuba's national hero, José Martí, said, "I am ready to disappear". He was indicating that he did not believe himself to be irreplaceable and that his position as the main leader in that revolution did not tempt him. Martí is revered in Cuba for incarnating a life of exceptional spirituality, reflected clearly in his personal relations and his capacity for loving even his own enemies.

Nelson Mandela is a person today who has given a powerful message to the world. Twenty-seven years in prison served for him as a purifying fire, producing a special spirituality like the purest refined gold. He is a man who was capable of leading his country through the depths of hatred caused by the wounds left by apartheid and on to national reconciliation. Without doubt, Mandela is a man possessing exceptional spirituality, which is reflected in addition by his refusal to run for reelection, entering private life without other ambitions. Not all politicians act in that way.

The following statement by the teacher of spirituality Thomas Merton casts light on our thinking: *He who intends to act and do things for others or for the world without deeply studying who he is, and what is liberty, integrity, and the ability to love, will not have anything to communicate to others, except the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his egocentric ambitions, and his doctrinaire prejudices*"<sup>9</sup>.

To parody the well-known hymn to love, we could say that "mysticism has us share goods to provide food for the poor and give our bodies to be burned, but spirituality says that without love, everything is worthless".<sup>10</sup> Spirituality is deep water, subterranean; it feeds the springs and rivers which run on the surface. Many torrents are produced when it rains, but they dry up and only leave an empty and dry riverbed. But deep waters do not dry up. So is authentic spirituality.

We are living in a time when it is necessary to dig many new wells in Cuba in order to feed a spirituality which will renew our society and our churches. And I would say more: not only in Cuba, but in all of so-called Western Christianity we are subject to new principalities and powers. Who doesn't feel numbed by the power of technological consumerism, which penetrates to the bones of even the poorest, creating visions of a type of paradise accessible thanks to money? Who is not distressed at the

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1971)

<sup>10</sup> 1ra. Corintios 13.3

era of violence which even invades family space, exalting strength, cunning, and revenge?

### **Rivers of Living Water**

Continuing with the simile of deep water, which reminds us of the words of Jesus, “streams of living water will flow from within him”<sup>11</sup>, I turn now to the traits which should characterize the spirituality which the evangelical churches of Cuba should seek in order to satisfy the thirst of our people at this time. Even with the limitations which have already been pointed out, the churches are a reserve of hope, with great potential for healing and life. Using love and the correct pedagogy, this well is still able to cleanse itself and to penetrate deeper. And, I believe that it is capable of producing living water. Now we shall see the traits which should characterize this renewed spirituality.

### **The Path of Spirituality**

It should be acknowledged that since the time of the Protestant Reformation, spirituality has suffered from a distortion and lack of appreciation which continues today. Medieval piety, including various spiritual traditions, was rejected as consisting of superstitious practices foreign to the Roman church. Protestantism was closely tied to new modern thinking which placed confidence in human reason in understanding and explaining everything. So Protestant theology was based on a discourse directed at human intelligence. The proclamation of the Word from the pulpit came to be the symbol of the emerging Protestantism, evidencing a certain arrogance at seemingly being able to explain everything and leaving the mystery of faith without a place.

Today in the so-called post-modern times, there is a new positive attitude toward mystical experiences, a search for spirituality. As a result, many in the West have turned to Eastern religious traditions. Others have found a new orientation for their faith in the charismatic movement. Especially in Latin America, the neo-Pentecostal movement, in a variety of manifestations, represents the largest non-Roman Catholic religious force.

I believe that one message can be taken from all this -- a message which Hans Küng has expressed in other words: If spirituality does not characterize Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Christianity will not survive.

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<sup>11</sup> Juan 7. 38

The error consists of thinking that spirituality can be divorced from social commitment. This is inaccurate, since authentic spirituality springs from an unconditional love for the world for which Jesus died. Of course, this does not mean that all forms of spirituality are the same and produce the same results. In effect, there are distortions of spirituality which become ways to escape reality. However, it is not so easy to draw a line between what we could call good and bad spirituality. It is necessary to take into account which people are practicing one type of spirituality or the other and in what context each type of spirituality is being practiced.

I only wish to affirm that spirituality which has Jesus as its source is a matter of ascending the Mount of Transfiguration, where sublime experiences occur. One's eyes are opened to a new way of seeing the world, one's consciousness is awakened, and love is stirred, producing the desire to do things which ease pain and make life more beautiful and dignified. At the same time, this spirituality supports an ethic strong enough to reject the seduction of power and to affirm hope when things do not turn out as one had dreamed.

I think that Martin Luther King, Jr., was not just a skilled promoter of civil rights, but was also a man sustained by a profound spirituality, which gave him the energy to struggle and enabled him to see the possibilities for transformation which are latent in all human beings. His sermons reveal a depth of thinking which penetrates to the deepest levels of consciousness. His concept of redemptive love, of forgiveness and reconciliation can only spring from a very rich interior which reflects Jesus' words that "streams of living water will flow from within him."<sup>12</sup>

### **Churches and Spirituality**

With all of the limitations which have already been pointed out, churches are a reserve of hope, with a potential for healing and life. This well can still cleanse and deepen itself and, with love and appropriate pedagogy, I believe that living water can be drawn from it. However, we have to be careful not to think that spirituality is a goal we can reach all by ourselves. Deepening our spirituality involves a new conversion, a breaking with old religious habits, ways of thinking, and deep-rooted customs. Only the Spirit of God can cause this type of growth in believers.

I would like to end this work with a prayer which contains all of our heartfelt feelings.

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<sup>12</sup> Juan 7. 38

## **Prayer**

Grant us, O Lord, a spirit of humility, for we have been arrogant. We have believed that we are those who construct your Kingdom.

Like modern crusaders, we throw ourselves into conquering new land, forgetting that we are not gods, but only your instruments. And like those earlier crusaders, we have brought violence, brutality, discrimination, and humiliation.

Who is able to forget the time during which we sent outspoken believers, homosexuals, and wandering young people to do forced labor?

Who can erase from their minds the images of the physical and moral aggression committed against those who chose to leave Cuba back in 1980?

And all this was done in the name of a great utopia.

Grant us, O Lord, a humble spirit to face the responsibility for these offenses against people and to acknowledge the arrogance with which we mistreated nature, attempting to overpower its laws.

Forgive us! We have trusted in our own strength to gain our social redemption. Now that the horizon of a new day seems farther and farther away, we are burdened and tired and put our heads in the sand, seeking only our personal wellbeing.

We proclaim a credo which we do not practice, we have adopted a double standard, and we have become easy prey to corruption.

Cynically we pass by, not paying attention to the suffering of those less fortunate.

The principalities and powers of conformity, fear, and apathy have taken control of us. O God, grant us boldness to be humble of heart and to seek your pardon.

And what should we say to you, Lord, of those of us who say that we are your disciples? What of your church?

We would like to be able to present you with a people united in your love, with a spirit of service, serving as a testimony to our nation. But, sadly pride, competition, and divisions predominate among us. The churches

which have grown the most, those which have improved and expanded their buildings, are proud of their accomplishments. Their leaders cling to their positions, manipulate their congregations, prove themselves to be authoritarian and prideful, and judge and condemn denominations which differ from theirs. They do not know your passion for a church rich in diversity, which acknowledges the dignity of each member. Their overly moralistic approach blinds them to the ethical demands of living a life of love and service to one's neighbor. And the desire to please authorities makes us hesitate to speak a prophetic word regarding the reality of our people.

For all this, O Lord, what we need most is for you to grant us a full measure of your Spirit. But you, O Lord, are rich in mercy and you remember that we are but dust. So we will bless your name, because you are the one who heals all our diseases, who redeems our lives from the pit and crowns us with love and compassion, who satisfies our desires with good things so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:3-5)

Because of you, O Lord, and all that you are, a song of faith and hope springs from our hearts. We sing because, despite our pettiness and misery, we can take joy in your works, contemplate the glory of God in all of creation, and take pleasure in the good in each day. We sing because, in spite of problems, it is possible to celebrate the gift of life, to open our eyes to the beauty of our beloved island, and enjoy its everyday people -- happy, joking, hard working, and skilled at problem solving.

Lord, we celebrate Cuba's rich traditions and the legendary heroism of its patriots. We admire the beauty created by the talent you have given to the daughters and sons of this country -- a land rich in musicians, poets, scientists, athletes, craftsmen, artists, writers, and many others who display the gifts you have given.

Thank you, Lord, for the sense of humor of the Cuban people, which has allowed us to forget our difficulties and sadness.

Give us, Lord, a spirit of celebration, because Cubans still have a great reserve of solidarity and a purity of intention. For all this we affirm before you that there are many more reasons for celebration than there are for sadness, many more reasons for hope than for frustration and we sing to you.

We need wisdom to overcome our seemingly unending weakness of going to extremes.

We need to build the future of our country out of its multicolored social fabric, without exclusion or intolerance. We need to learn to hear the wisdom of the humble people with the discernment possessed by your servant, the prophet Martin Luther King, Jr., who learned how to unite his people in a march toward a new world of peace and love.

Grant us, then, the wisdom to leave behind failed paradigms and to have sufficient imagination to create a model of a society not built on profit, where the desire for money is not the main motivator. Grant us a truly just society, like that in the dreams of our heroes and martyrs.

Great Teacher, we live in this time of shadows between the darkness of night and the dawn of a new day and we find you here with us. In prophetic faith we acknowledge you and proclaim you to all. And we say to you: Little by little we will get back into step, lift our faces and march forward hand in hand to the beat of the Great Drummer, confident in the One who said, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." He will never abandon us. Amen.

(Translated by Kane Houghton)