

WHERE IS GOD?

Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope

Jon Sobrino

Translated by Margaret Wilde

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FIRST REFLECTIONS

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

I would like to begin by recalling my first thoughts, when I was still under the impact of the earthquake;¹ it seems important to me, as a way of getting into the reality. Obviously one doesn't need to be in an earthquake to be able to reflect on it. But unless we somehow become enfleshed in the reality and in what it produces—death and damage, destruction and desolation, responsibility for things done and not done, the demand for solidarity and the abomination of corruption, and incidentally also the good that has come out of the earthquake—if we close our eyes and soothe our conscience, and life goes on as before, then the earthquake simply will not have existed for us, it will never have been “real.” We would be living in what may well be the greatest danger of our time: living in *Docetism*, in appearance, in a fantastic, self-imposed *apartheid* that we never want to leave. In a word, we would be accepting the trivialization of existence that is imposed on us.

And since this is to be a *Christian* reflection, I also want to say that unless we somehow live the reality of the earthquake, we are turning away from the cross of the crucified peoples—whether the cross takes the shape of earthquakes and other natural disasters, or of wars, repression, injustice, and barbarity. And we are turning away from the paradoxical light that can come from these things, and even from the hope and solidarity that can grow out of suffering.

What I have just said should be obvious, but I am afraid it is not always so.² Therefore this first chapter aims to help the reader “be in

¹There was one earthquake on January 13, 2001, and another on February 13, along with many other tremors. Together they were the strongest earthquakes to hit Central America in the past twenty years. For El Salvador, the January 13 earthquake was one of the most powerful in the country's history.

²It is surprising, and sometimes scandalous, how people and institutions can talk about poverty when they have never in any way known the reality of poverty, and

the reality” of the earthquake, and from there to “think through,” to wonder about the reality of our own world and about our own reality, to wonder about grace and sin, and above all, about the victims.

The following is an almost word-for-word copy of what I wrote three days after the first earthquake.³ What I said then forms the seed of what I shall develop in greater detail in this small book.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE POOR

To live in El Salvador is always a heavy burden to bear. Officially, half the population lives in serious or extreme poverty. Most of the other half live with serious problems and difficulties, which are aggravated by catastrophes: two other earthquakes devastated the country in 1965 and 1986, hurricane Fifi struck in 1974, and hurricane Mitch two years ago. And let us not forget the fifteen years of repression, war, destruction, massive emigration and migration, on top of the everyday poverty and injustice that have always been here.

Now a powerful earthquake has caused deaths that are counted in the hundreds, but will soon reach the thousands. Many more than that are injured, and many, many more have suffered damages. The ruined houses have left hundreds of thousands of people homeless, at the mercy of the weather, suffering the nighttime cold, with many small children among them. The earthquake also leaves behind the anguish of an uncertain future: how and where will people live during the coming weeks, months, and years, where and how will they get the credit they need to rebuild their houses and their lost livelihood, and always the additional fear—sometimes panic—that the earth might start trembling again. Many areas have been evacuated and are now desolate, while refugees crowd into other areas. The scenes are terrifying: unconsolable grieving and weeping for the dead, whole families missing: “My neighbor lost five children,” “The whole family was buried in the house.” And as the days pass and news arrives from the interior of the country, there is a growing conviction that the catastrophe was worse than people thought.

So, to live in El Salvador is a heavy burden, but it is not borne equally by everyone. As always, it weighs more heavily on the poor majorities.

have no experience of it—not even of austerity; who are not the least bit interested in eradicating poverty or in sharing their wealth with others; who never make the effort to lower themselves or to suffer any conflict, risk, or persecution for having confronted the monopolists and oppressors who create poverty. That is, they talk about poverty without ever, in any way—not even by remotely analogous experience—having lived “in the reality” of poverty.

³“Primeras reflexiones,” *Carta a las Iglesias* 466 (January 16-31, 2001), pp. 10-14.

The earthquake has destroyed houses, especially the ones built of mud and sticks or of adobe, which is where the poor live because they can't afford cement and iron. The floods and mudslides have buried people and homes—simple middle class homes among them—but always the poor, because the steep and barren hillsides are often the only place they can plant their crops, never on a fertile plain. It is the same as in military conflict: the immense majority of those who suffered repression, most of it from the state, and the majority of those who died in the war on both sides, were poor. And so it is in every type of tragedy. The earthquake is not just a tragedy, it is an X-ray of the country. It is mostly the poor who get killed, the poor who are buried, the poor who have to run out with the four things they have left, the poor who sleep outdoors, the poor who live in anguish over the future, the poor who face enormous obstacles trying to rebuild their lives, the poor who cannot get financial credit. Certainly other people suffer losses in the earthquake; sometimes they suffer the painful and irreparable loss of family members. But in general, once the scare is past, they rebuild what has been damaged, they get credit, and go back to normal. Some of them are able to go on living in luxury, as if nothing had happened.

An earthquake, like a cemetery, reveals the iniquitous inequality of a society, and thus also its deepest truth.⁴ Some tombs are huge, sumptuous pantheons of luxurious marble, in prestigious locations. Others, almost without names and without crosses, are piled up in hidden places and consigned to anonymity. They are the majority.

So earthquakes remind me of cemeteries, but they also, tragically, re-enact the parable of Jesus (Lk 16:19-31): there was a very rich man who feasted sumptuously every day. And at the foot of his table lay a poor man, Lazarus, waiting for crumbs to fall from the table. Only the dogs would come and lick his sores.

THE INJUSTICE THAT SHAPES OUR WORLD

Tragedies like an earthquake have natural causes, of course, but their unequal impact is not due only to nature; it stems from the things people do with each other, to each other, against each other. The tragedy is largely the work of our own hands. We shape the planet with massive, cruel, and lasting injustice. We think of the planet as belonging to 25 or 30 percent of the human family; the rest—the poor, victim-

⁴Something similar can be said of the unequal consequences of catastrophes that occur in rich countries and in poor countries. It has been estimated that in Switzerland, an earthquake of the same seismic dimensions as those in El Salvador would have produced only five or six deaths.

ized majorities—have to wait for the leftovers, the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. This iniquitous inequality is evident even in normal times, and even more in an earthquake.

There is no point in establishing safety standards for housing construction, when the poor cannot possibly afford to comply with them. It is an insult that we are not even close to achieving livable housing conditions for the majority, while skyscrapers abound and freeways, hotels, airports are constantly being improved. Even in El Salvador. And people take pride in them as a sign that things are going well.

According to the experts, in this new and celebrated millennium of globalization, two billion human beings have no place to live with a minimum of dignity and safety. When Gustavo Gutiérrez wants to shake up the complacency of our world, he asks this simple question: Where will the poor sleep in the twenty-first century? These data and this question are even more painful and disheartening when an earthquake strikes. "Capitalism was born without a heart," says Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. It has been building slums and shacks for over a century, and thus makes a mockery of the poor who, by turns, lose their houses every twenty years.

But the experts are also mocked, as we have recently seen in a cruel example. Earlier, Salvadoran and foreign technicians and ecologists had warned of the dangers caused by the deforestation of the Bálamo Mountains. They were ignored and hundreds of houses were built, and what happened was inevitable: about 270 houses and several hundred people were buried four meters deep in the ensuing mudslides. Clearly the deforestation alone did not cause the tragedy of the earthquake, but it helped. The next day President Flores went to the site of the tragedy, on one of those official visits that are sometimes sincere and sometimes just to save face. People came up to him, surrounded him, booed and insulted him—a most unusual occurrence—until finally an official had to stand in front of a television camera so the scene could not be filmed. The people's indignation and sorrow can be deduced from their response that day. And a cruel sign of barbarity was found in the rubble of the mudslide. Months before the houses were built, there were demonstrations with posters and banners of protest. By a macabre coincidence, a little girl's body was dug out of the ruins with one of those banners in her hands.

One last reflection on the injustice that stalks our world, fearless and cruel. Earthquakes generally occur every fifteen or twenty years in Central America, but the politicians, government officials, soldiers, oligarchs, even the international community of opulence never seem to learn from the ensuing tragedy. Nothing effective is done to avoid or minimize, as far as possible, the next tragedy. After the 1986 earth-

quake there was no search for an effective solution to the general situation of the poor in the country—who will automatically become even poorer if some other catastrophe occurs; nor have effective steps been taken to prevent and alleviate the consequences of inevitable catastrophes. In the fifteen years between the last two earthquakes, the country has cleverly devised ways to privatize nearly everything, in order—they say—to provide better service. It has invested abundant resources in improved weaponry for the armed forces, in technology for the banking system, telecommunications, and the Internet. But after an earthquake we still dig through the ruins with a pick and shovel, especially in small towns and remote villages.⁵

The tragedy has been great for the poor. Today people still talk about it, but soon it will be upstaged by other, everyday interests. Already there is talk about whether or not the earthquake will stimulate the economy, which is like discussing the distribution of a dead person's possessions before the body has been taken away. It's not exactly the same, but it reflects a great deficit of compassion and objective concern for the victims, and even less for justice.⁶ The owners of the country seek to alleviate the damage, but they are not much concerned with guaranteeing a future for the poor, their survival, their homes, their belongings. What is more shocking is that it seems natural for things to be this way, as if such matters belonged to the natural rather than the historical order. And if it is a matter of history, no wonder people are crowing triumphantly over "the end of history."

THE SAINTLINESS OF LIVING

It is easier to write about tragedy and evil than about life and kindness. But let us say at least briefly that in the midst of tragedy life still forcefully pulsates, attracts, and moves. There is no more fundamen-

⁵Mozambique periodically suffers flooding, with no possible escape in some regions except by helicopter. Shortly after the Salvadoran earthquakes, chilling scenes were shown on television of men and women desperately reaching up to the helicopters, but there wasn't room for everyone. NATO helicopters, of which there were so many in action during the Balkan war, were waiting in "peace time" hangars despite the pleas of human rights institutions for NATO to make them available in "catastrophe time."

⁶In our world, so cruel and detached from the victims, we have polite ways of handling these situations. It is no longer done, as it was in the movie *Zorba the Greek*, that everyone waits for the precise moment of death in order to claim as booty some of his poor belongings. But in September 1997 the secretaries of commerce of the Group of Seven met in Denver, without ethical hesitation, to divide up trade with Africa. The U.S. secretary of commerce complained that his country came away with only 17 percent of that trade.

tal expression of life than a procession of people, on foot or in shabby vehicles, women with sacks on their heads and children clinging to their hands, as we saw so dramatically in the African Great Lakes region. That life flows from the best that we are and have. These are poor people, often very poor and with very little knowledge, but all they are and all they have is placed at the service of life, often because they have little else to give. At crucial moments they do not seek help from the government, nor do they expect it to be effective. And they do not expect much from the democratic principle that we call accountability: a willingness by officials to give an accounting, because the people are entitled to ask for it, and to solve the problems they are responsible for solving.

In the Third World, secular experience has taught the poor to distrust governments, authorities, and officials, even though there are responsible people among them. It's not that they don't know, at least vaguely, that they have human rights. In times of catastrophe they know they have a right to be assisted and helped. If help comes they appreciate it, of course, and when it doesn't come, they protest its absence as best they can. But they don't expect much, so their basic response is to use their own creativity, their strengths, and their intelligence in the service of life. The force of life imposes itself in the midst of tragedy, and the magic of the human comes alive in spite of everything. In Armenia, a village of Sonsonate that was totally destroyed, the power of life is preserved forever in a photograph. An old man is sitting amid the ruins, and beside him is a sign held up by a stick: "Armenia lives."

Along with the impulse of life itself, there is the power that comes from solidarity among people. Emergency assistance from many places has begun to arrive, and it will keep coming; there are rescue technicians, doctors, engineers. They provide a great service, offer encouragement, and deserve our sincere gratitude. But I'm speaking now of a more fundamental solidarity; to describe it let us go back to what happened in the Bálamo Mountains.

Not many power shovels were available to dig up the bodies, and in any case they would have increased the risk of tearing the bodies apart. So long lines of men, passing buckets back and forth, tackled the job of removing thousands of cubic meters of earth. For days they hoped for the miracle of discovering someone still alive. That is the primal power of solidarity: it seeks the living in order to rescue them, or the dead in order to bury them in dignity.

In this primal solidarity, women stand always and everywhere as the focal point of life: caring for the children among the ruins, making and sharing whatever food there is in the refugee camps, always en-

couraging by their presence, never giving up, never tiring. They are the ultimate, irreplaceable, ever-present focal point of unfailing life. They are not “the pastor of life” (if I may quote Heidegger at this point), but they are the ones who “take responsibility for life.”

I like to think that in that fundamental decision to live and give life we see a kind of primordial saintliness, regardless of whether it is a virtue or an obligation, whether it is freedom or necessity, whether it is grace or merit. It is not the saintliness that we acknowledge in canonizations, but anyone with a clean heart can appreciate it. It is not the saintliness of the heroic virtues, but rather of a truly heroic life. We do not know whether or not these poor who cry out to live are intercessor saints, but the heart is moved when we see them. They may be “sinner saints,” so to speak, but they splendidly fulfill the primordial purpose of creation: God’s call to live and give life to others, even in the midst of catastrophe. This is the saintliness of suffering, which has its own logic, more fundamental than the saintliness of virtue.

Finally—although this may sound exaggerated to believers, and crazy to nonbelievers—these poor may inspire us to repeat what the centurion said at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus die, bloody and asphyxiated: truly, these are the sons and daughters of God.

THE PRIMORDIAL DEMAND: TO BE AFFECTED BY TRAGEDY

There is a lot to do when an earthquake strikes, but the first thing—without which nothing else we do is enough—is to let ourselves be affected by the tragedy, not to turn away or soften it. This is not a way of promoting masochism, or demanding what is psychologically impossible. It simply requires an initial moment of honesty toward reality. To turn away from tragedy, subtly or blatantly, is a way of escaping the reality of our world. But we must be aware of the consequences: unless we become fully present in the reality we cannot help the people in need around us, nor can we meet our own internal needs. To let ourselves be affected, to feel pain over lives cut short or endangered, to feel indignation over the injustice behind the tragedy, to feel shame over the way we have ruined this planet, that we have not undone the damage and are not planning to do so, all this is important. It motivates compassion and immediate emergency assistance, but more importantly it sheds light on the most effective way to help in the tragedy.

There is also a salvific aspect to truly letting ourselves be affected by tragedy. It roots us firmly in the truth and forces us to overcome the unreality in which we live. So institutions like churches and uni-

versities would do well to analyze and proclaim the truth of these tragedies; one might wish that governments, multinational corporations, armed forces, and international banks would also do so, but there is little hope of that.

In this context it is especially important that the communications media make a “preferential option for the truth,” beginning at a superficial but very important level with true information about the events, and going more deeply into its causes. The view offered by the media is often notoriously inadequate.

By way of a small excursus, a football player’s million-dollar salary becomes news—scandalous news—when it is publicized in the media; without them it would not be news. But we should be aware that this is not a matter of real reality, but of a factual, scandalous, stupefying anecdote in a world that is dying of hunger. The “news” becomes “reality” when we compare the salary figures for athletes, singers, or movie stars, with what a human being has to live on in Africa, or Bangladesh, or in the impoverished community of Guadalupe, which was destroyed in the earthquake. Then we will at last learn about comparative disadvantage, about injustice and inhumanity, about reality. To make this comparison challenges the imagination and can produce dizziness, but it needs to be done. It becomes an insistent demand: “Is a world like this human?”

Let us return to the earthquake. Tragedy has an immense educational potential. If we analyze and do not conceal its truth, it leads us into our own truth and that of our world. This is not easy to do. In the aftermath of the Salvadoran earthquake, it was easier to see what was happening in the cities than in the remote towns and villages. But we have to make the effort. As Ellacuría said, if the First World wants to see itself, it should look at the Third World. Today we might say: if we want to know the truth of the capital city, we should look at the villages and towns.

Finally, letting ourselves be affected by tragedy generates solidarity, at least sometimes. Sometimes a family misfortune will unite the family—*felix culpa!* people used to say—and it may be the only thing that unites them. Or to put it differently, if even suffering does not bring unity, there is no solution. Human beings always have hidden reserves of kindness, often dormant, but they can be activated by other people’s suffering. We are not always, entirely, selfish. An earthquake in El Salvador, a famine in Calcutta, AIDS in Africa may well help to build awareness of the human family.

There is something in the suffering, crucified peoples that appeals to us, that draws us out of ourselves; that is the beginning of solidarity. Along with ethical feelings of obligation, along with the struggle

against feelings of guilt, something deeper and more decisive may appear: a feeling of closeness to other human beings. Material solidarity comes later and is badly needed: food, clothing, tents, medicines, money, technical assistance of all kinds, debt forgiveness . . .

But all this, the quality, the consistency, the “foreverness” of solidarity, comes from the discovery of something good and humanizing in being close to the victims of this world. Perhaps that is when the human miracle happens: the miracle of holding each other up, of giving and receiving the best that we have. And the even greater miracle of loving one another as members of one family. Christians say it more simply and radically: to love one another as sons and daughters of God. That is when the miracle of the shared table happens, the joy of belonging to the human family.

WHERE IS GOD IN THE EARTHQUAKE?

There are many different types of religiosity in El Salvador, but overall it is a religious country, especially in these days of earthquake. In contrast to what might happen in other countries, here the question about God is inevitable. But it comes up in different ways.

Some people, the fanatics, have said that the earthquake was a punishment from God—as happened in the Guatemalan earthquake of 1976, when the cardinal archbishop at the time said that the sins of the priests had caused it. Others, a majority, prayed to God in gratitude (thank God we are alive); in hope (with God’s help we shall go forward); and in submission, to find some meaning in the catastrophe (may God’s will be done). These expressions are close to what Salvadorans typically say: “With God’s help,” meaning “Only God can help; we don’t expect much of men.” Or in less religious terms, suggesting the cumulative skepticism with which the poor understand the meaning of life: “Who knows?” That is, there is not much logic in reality by which they can predict the future, certainly not a future favorable to them.

One seldom hears the question that led to classical theodicy: “God either cannot or will not prevent catastrophes, and God doesn’t look good in either case.” But the question remains: “Where is God?” Jesus asked the same thing, and Paul had the audacity to reply, “On the cross.” These days someone has said, “God is in El Cafetalón,” a refugee center for impoverished survivors.

There is no logical, rationally convincing answer to the question about where God is in suffering.⁷ Without discussing it further now,

⁷We shall return to this at the end of this book. We mention it now only to complete the spectrum of reactions about God in the Salvadoran earthquake.

let us simply say that God is also crucified. In Europe, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann have made that point very well. Some of us have also thought about the problem.⁸ But it is clear that the answer to the question about God can only be found in life: if ultimate mystery, even in a time of catastrophe, can give rise to hope. That is to say, if hope does not die.

IS HOPE DYING IN EL SALVADOR?

Let us close with this anecdote. Several churches were destroyed in the earthquake, among them the church of El Carmen, in Santa Tecla where I live. Sorrowfully the people told their parish priest, "Father, we have been left without a church." And the priest, Salvador Carranza, who came to El Salvador from Burgos, Spain, more than forty years ago, replied, "We have been left without a temple, but not without a Church. We are the Church, and the Church depends on us to keep it alive."

Years ago, in a time when the Church was being repressed and persecuted, Monsignor Romero used to say: "If some day the forces of evil should leave us without this marvel [the radio], which is so abundantly available to them, and if they shut the Church out completely, we can be sure that they have not hurt us. On the contrary, we will be 'living microphones' for the Lord, and we will proclaim his words everywhere."⁹

These words are rhetorical, but they are true and lucid. They help to encourage the Church in a troubled time, and to encourage a people in circumstances like these. They point to something fundamental, as few words do. The greatest tragedy—in an earthquake or any other situation—is not the material damages it causes, but the destruction of what is human. The greatest solidarity is to help rebuild that humanity. The greatest hope is to keep walking, doing justice, and loving with kindness.

Has this died in El Salvador? I don't believe so, but we still need to make it grow. In this sense, I hope the solidarity will help to rebuild

⁸See my writing in *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 233-253, and *Christ the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 256-274.

⁹Homily, January 27, 1980. Monsignor Romero spoke these hopeful words because in his three years of ministry, the archbishop's radio station was interfered with and dynamited several times. Something he said earlier inspired his listeners with an even more vigorous hope: "If some day they take away our radio station, suspend our newspaper, forbid us to speak, kill all the priests and the bishop too, and if you were left as a people without priests, every one of you would have to become a microphone for God, every one of you would have to become a messenger, a prophet. The Church will exist as long as there is one baptized Christian!" (Homily of July 8, 1979).

houses, but above all it must help to rebuild persons, to rebuild the people, or even better, to build a new people. I hope it will help to repair roads, but above all it must help people find pathways for walking through life. I hope it will help to build churches, but above all it must help to build up the people of God.

Most certainly, I hope the solidarity will give hope to this people. Once they have hope, they will find ways to fend for themselves. And these people will repay what they have received with interest, in the form of light and spirit.

These are the things that came to my mind in the days immediately following the earthquake, which I wrote down on January 16. Now we shall begin to conceptualize more precisely some of what in those days was all impact and intuition.

But other, global, crucial questions also occurred to me in the presence of the earthquake: the kind of questions that inspire reflection as one reads them through the years, but which suddenly take on new and special power, not only as academic but as uncontainable, existential questions. "What really inspires us to think?" Obviously it was the earthquake, but beyond that answer there were other, more theoretical ones. It might be "the admiration that leads to knowledge" (Aristotle), or "the suffering that comes before thought" (Feuerbach). And the earthquake led us back especially to the question we had so often asked in El Salvador. Heidegger had asked, "Why is there being, and not nothingness?" and Ellacuría replied: "Why is there nothing—not-being, unreality, untruth, etc.—instead of being [entity]?"¹⁰

And in the midst of all these clamoring questions and our silent, stuttering replies, in the presence of the earthquake something came on me, more as a feeling than as an idea: a sense of *indignation* that "the same thing" always happens and "the same people" always suffer; a *yearning* for things to be different some day; and a kind of *veneration* for the life of the poor, for what I have called their primordial saintliness before, during, and after each catastrophe.

¹⁰"Función liberadora de la filosofía," *ECA* 435-436 (1985), p. 50.