

**NO SALVATION  
OUTSIDE  
THE POOR**

Prophetic-Utopian Essays

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## The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty

*Ignacio Ellacuría's "Taking Hold of Reality"*

I want to begin with some brief clarifications. I am not a Zubiri scholar. What I know of him I mainly learned through Ellacuría, not so much through his writings on Zubiri but from what we might call the Zubirian flavor that permeated his thinking. What I knew of Ellacuría's thinking was more the theological than the philosophical side. I saw in him the influence of Rahner, his theology professor at Innsbruck; a good measure of Marx; and a large measure—what is generally least noticed—of the biblical-Jesuanic tradition, the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola and Archbishop Romero. Finally, I believe the Salvadoran social reality, and sometimes the ecclesial reality, had a decisive impact and influence on his thinking.

In this essay I want to analyze two aspects of his vision of reality: “the crucified people” and “the civilization of poverty.” Both themes are from his mature thinking, not passing youthful reflections, and Ellacuría considered them very important. Today, however, they are generally overlooked, except in some writings on his theology.<sup>1</sup> I don't know if this is true in the philosophical discussion, but it does happen when Ellacuría is spoken of in broader terms. This is the “forgotten Ellacuría,” an understandable oversight, but an impoverishing and irresponsible one, because this countercultural Ellacuría can always be a Socratic gadfly: uncomfortable but positive, and necessary, in today's world.

It may be said that things have changed, and that Ellacuría himself

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would be on guard against the mimetic repetition of concepts; he would prompt us to historicize them. But I think we need to return to these themes, to unmask the reality that is still largely made up of crucified peoples, and to set our sights on a more human civilization which can still be described as a civilization of poverty.

### Taking Hold of Reality

Ellacuría understood the formal structure of intelligence as “grasping and facing reality,”<sup>2</sup> which can be seen in three dimensions: “taking hold of reality” (the intellectual dimension), originally from Zubiri, to which he added “bearing the burden of reality” (the ethical dimension) and “taking responsibility for reality” (the praxic dimension). To these I have added—more from experience and intuition than from theoretical reflection—“letting ourselves be carried by reality” (the dimension of grace), to which we shall return later on.

What first impacted me in Ellacuría’s thought was his emphasis on taking responsibility for reality; it was early in the development of liberation theology, and the phrase came to define theology as the ideological moment in a praxis<sup>3</sup> aimed at “the greatest possible realization of the reign of God in history.”<sup>4</sup> I tried to pick up that insight by defining theology as *intellectus amoris (iustitiae, misericordiae)*,<sup>5</sup> thus going beyond Augustine’s *intellectus fidei*, and beyond *intellectus spei*, as Jürgen Moltmann reformulated it in 1978, in his *Theology of Hope*.

“Bearing the burden of reality” impacted me even more. Where I came from, it was totally new to hear—and perceive in the person of Ellacuría—that intelligence “has not been given to help people evade their real commitments, but to take on themselves the burden of things as they really are and with all that they really demand.”<sup>6</sup> This means we cannot fully grasp reality without bearing it at its worst, which I think we still fail to understand. Ellacuría’s death may well serve as a symbol of that burden-bearing. He thought about it and carried it to the very end. And it is not a coincidence that Salvadoran theology has led in the development of persecution and martyrdom as central themes, in theory as well as practice.

What was new to me was this understanding of the praxic and ethical dimensions of intelligence. But in the perichoresis of the diverse dimensions of intelligence, I also began to see the deepest implications of “taking hold of reality,” which is not as simple as it seems. Ellacuría himself warned us of this. Taking hold of reality implies “being inside the reality of things—not only standing before the idea of things or their mean-

ing—a 'real' being in that reality, actively, as opposed to a reified and inert way of being; it implies being among them through their active, material mediations."<sup>7</sup>

### **"The Crucified People"**

When Ellacuría "took hold of the reality" of the Third World, he grasped it in an important way as a "crucified people." In 1977 he wrote a monograph that we came to know very well: "The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology."<sup>8</sup> In 1981, on one of his exiles in Madrid, he re-emphasized that theme in a shorter article. Despite all the changes brought by subsequent years, those words are still lucid and even irreplaceable:

Among the signs that are always appearing, some striking and others barely perceptible, there is an outstanding one in every age, in whose light all the others must be discerned and interpreted. That sign is always the historically crucified people, which remains constant although the historical forms of crucifixion are different. That people is the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, whose humanity is still being disfigured by the sin of the world, whom the powers of this world are still stripping of everything, taking away everything including his life, especially his life.<sup>9</sup>

From a theoretical-theological perspective, the first text focuses more specifically on the relationship between crucified people and historical salvation, and the second on presenting it as reality, in which history is expressed with the greatest density, for which we must take responsibility and whose burden we must bear.

#### *The Crucified People as Negativity: "Sign of the Times"*

Ellacuría did not choose this language at random, or merely for its Christian resonance, because in his time it was not customary to apply to the "people" what we say of "Christ." He chose it intentionally to emphasize the negativity of reality; that was how he felt it and saw it, and that was central to all his thinking. In describing the role philosophy should play in de-ideologizing and unmasking the hidden reality, he challenged Heidegger: "Perhaps instead of asking why there is something rather than nothing, he should have asked why there is nothing—no being, no reality, no truth, etc.—where something should be."<sup>10</sup>

“The crucified people” does not express a random negativity, but a specific one. Economists and sociologists talked about a world of poverty and misery, of dependency, injustice, and oppression. But hardly anyone—except perhaps Archbishop Romero—described that reality as deeply as did the term “crucified people.” Let us take a look.

Ellacuría used those words to give a name to great majorities. Thus the language of “people” and “peoples” is laced with death, not natural but historical death, which takes the form of crucifixion, assassination, the active historical deprivation of life, whether slowly or quickly. That death, caused by injustice, is accompanied by cruelty, contempt, and also concealment. I usually add that the crucified people are also denied a chance to speak and even to be called by name, which means they are denied their own existence. The crucified people “are not,” and the affluent world prohibits or inhibits them from “becoming.” The affluent world can thus ignore what happens to them, without any pangs of conscience.<sup>11</sup>

This crucified people, with all its negativity, is a “sign.” Borrowing concepts from *Gaudium et Spes* 4 (1965), Ellacuría says that the crucified people are one of the main features of our time, not merely something factual that we may consider, but something central that must be considered, without which we do not have a full grasp on reality. But he went a step beyond the Council: he audaciously named the most important sign, around which the others revolve and make sense. This act of proclaiming the sign of the times had already begun, in a different way, at Medellín in 1968. There the bishops, foreshadowing Ellacuría’s words quoted above, began with the following words:

There are in existence many studies of the Latin American people. All of these studies describe the misery that marginalizes large masses of human beings in all of our countries. That misery, as a collective fact, is an injustice which cries to the heavens (*Justice* 1).<sup>12</sup>

### *The Crucified People as a Positive: “Bringers of Salvation”*

Ellacuría knew well the biblical-Jesuanic tradition, in which negativity can reflect the positive. That is certainly true of the crucified Christ, acknowledged as Son of God and Savior, especially in and through the cross as we see in Mark 15 and 18. Closer to our theme, Isaiah presents in the songs of the servant of Yahweh (Isa. 52:13–53:12) a mysterious figure—real or imaginary, individual or collective—destroyed by the sins of the world and bringing salvation.

This servant is first of all a man of suffering, acquainted with infir-

mity, taken to his death—by the actions of others—without defense and without justice, despised and rejected by all. In the second place, he is not thought of as a possible savior but quite the contrary; he is seen as a leper, condemned, stricken by God and humiliated, and moreover as a sinner. They made his grave with the wicked and counted him among the transgressors.

Yet Isaiah audaciously attributes salvation to that figure of the servant, and Ellacuría also finds in it the basic elements for a historical soteriology in today's world: his innocent suffering and death bring salvation. It is said that the servant's state is not due to his sins, but he suffered without having sinned: he was crushed for our iniquities, wounded for the sins of the people. Thus, it is said, he shall make many righteous. In the language of our day, it is said that he will bring salvation to all, including his victimizers, because he has borne their iniquities. Says Ellacuría: "Only a hard-won act of faith could enable the singer of the servant to describe in this way what looks like just the opposite in the eyes of history!"<sup>13</sup>

With this servant in mind, and in terms of the hermeneutic circle, Ellacuría took hold of the reality of the Third World peoples, and also analyzed their salvific dimension. He saw the hope of liberation in the positive capacities of the people; thus, for example, with Archbishop Romero he defended and encouraged popular organization. But he also saw them in their negativity, as a suffering, "crucified" people, and that is what we focus on here. So that that word would not be in vain, he made an intellectual effort to historicize the content of the salvation brought by the crucified ones. Later we shall say more about the salvation that comes from below. For now let us remember two important, surprising, and overlooked elements of that salvation.

The crucified people offer light (Isa. 42:6 and 49:6 call the servant "light of the nations," although that song does not yet speak of the *suffering* servant). In our time, said Ellacuría, the Third World offers light to enable the First World to see itself as it truly is, which is an important element of salvation. He made the point with two graphic metaphors. He compared the crucified people to an inverted mirror in which a disfigured image shows the truth that the First World seeks to hide or dissemble. And in the metaphor of coproanalysis, an examination of feces, he showed that the existence of the crucified peoples reveals the true state of health of the First World.

A second element of salvation is hope. Ellacuría spoke of this twice in 1989. Out of its own suffering the Third World nourishes hope and offers it to a hopeless First World. Here is the full text of the first, transparently utopian comment:

All the martyrial blood spilled in El Salvador and throughout Latin America, far from leading to discouragement and hopelessness, infuses a new spirit of struggle and new hope in our people. In this sense although we are not a “new world” or a “new continent,” we are clearly and verifiably—though not exactly by outsiders—a continent of hope, which is a very telling sign of the newness yet to come to other continents, which do not have hope but only fear.<sup>14</sup>

The second comment is from his last speech, on November 6, 1989:

There is a lot still to be done. Only utopianism and hope can enable us to believe and dare to try, with all the poor and oppressed people of the world, to turn back history, subvert it, and send it in a different direction.<sup>15</sup>

If we want to think about them, “truth” and “hope” are important salvific contributions of the crucified people. But they also contribute guiding energy to turn salvation in the right direction and work for it; they challenge our understanding of social, environmental, and religious salvation in a world that does not belong to poor people but creates them; and they help to unmask the dogma that a poor people can only receive but not give—which is vitally important to keep the affluent societies from falling into arrogance and dehumanization.

Ellacuría knows that the need to accept salvation—also—from below is not commonly recognized, not by philosophies, nor by ideologies, nor by theologies, although he mentions Marx’s idea that there is a possibility of emancipation in the oppressed, “in the formation of a class of civil society that is not a class of civil society; of a class that dissolves all classes; of a sphere that possesses a universal character because of its universal sufferings and that demands no *special right* for itself, because it has not suffered any *special harm* but rather *harm, pure and simple*.”<sup>16</sup> This is an effort to think out the role of the weak (a social class, the proletariat, although the most disinherited are excluded) in historical salvation. The song of the servant is more radical, which is why Ellacuría uses it to formulate his understanding of reality.

### *The “Always” of the Crucified People*

All this is astounding. But the “always” may be even more so: “that sign is always the historically crucified people, who not only remain but are *always* crucified in a different historical way.” Is it responsible to say that? Today we can see a significant reduction of poverty and even

dream of eliminating it, for example in China and India. But we must not forget the important, continuing setbacks in the struggle against poverty and the fact that relative poverty (the rich man and Lazarus), the terrible comparative harm between rich and poor, is not diminishing but increasing scandalously. In any case, Leonardo Boff is right: "When future generations judge our time they will call us barbarian, inhuman, and shameless, for our great insensitivity to the suffering of our own brothers and sisters."<sup>17</sup>

Personally I think that even from an analytical viewpoint, Ellacuría's "always" makes sense,<sup>18</sup> especially if the crucifixion of peoples is analyzed not only in terms of their unmet basic needs but also of the ignorance and indignity to which they are condemned, the depredation of their cultures, and the aberration of relative poverty in comparison with the affluent peoples. Things change, paradigms change. But we may wonder if there is not something trans-paradigmatic, if there are not principles of evil and sinfulness that run throughout history, with a dynamic of crucifixion that takes different forms but still produces death. That is what "always" means. And apparently it does exist.

### *Its Importance in the Present*

People may say that, after all, "the crucified people" is only a way of speaking, but we must remember that we are engaged in a "language battle" in which enormous resources are invested. It is not the same to speak of "underdevelopment," let alone "developing countries," as to speak of "crucifixion." The first two are easily coopted. The third cannot be, so it is censored. Perhaps the language of "crucified peoples" will help to win the language battle, and thus the struggle for truth.

At a deeper level the affluent world, no matter how democratic, pluralistic, and global, needs to be shaken out of what Kant called "dogmatic sleep." The West is still largely sunk in "the sleep of cruel inhumanity," ignoring, suppressing, covering over terrible realities for which it is mainly responsible. The language of "crucified people" may help to shake it into wakefulness and action. That is what a Dominican friar, Antonio Montesinos, did in 1511 in La Española. On the third Sunday of Advent he confronted the landowners with the horrors they were committing and ended by asking them: "How can you stay in such lethargic sleep?"

This is also important from a theological viewpoint. The "signs" are mentioned again in *Gaudium et Spes* 11, this time not as characteristic of a time but as true "signs of God's presence or purpose"—signs in their historical-theological meaning. For faith, the crucified people are in the place of God, in the same way that Paul and Mark, Bonhoeffer,

Moltmann, and others speak of a “crucified God.” In any case, whether or not we accept this *theologoumenon*, reality is made present with radical ultimacy in the negativity of the crucified people, which at least protects the reality against trivialization.

Finally, “taking hold” of reality—specifically in its form as “crucified people”—points to the specific forms that should be used by the other dimensions of intelligence. Ellacuría thus intentionally formulated “taking responsibility for reality” as the praxis of “bringing the crucified people down from the cross.” At the root of this idea is Ignatius Loyola’s challenge to penitent sinners, to ask themselves in the presence of the crucified Christ: “what have I done, what am I doing, and what shall I do for Christ?” This means not only giving thanks for the forgiveness obtained, but doing, and then asking what to do. In the presence of the crucified people, Ellacuría historicized the answer to this question: “Bring them down from the cross.”<sup>19</sup> He defined “bearing the burden of reality” as risk taking, persistence, and faithfulness to the end, and a willingness to die on the same cross with the crucified people.

“Letting ourselves be carried by reality,” by the reality of the crucified people, points to a central paradox of Christian faith, although it may go beyond it. In theological language, it means that there is “grace” in the crucified people; that is, the crucified people bear us as their burden.<sup>20</sup> They do so in several ways: by giving us new eyes to see, new hands to work, broad backs to hold us up. And they give us hope. The only thing to say in support of this last point is that it happens. Obviously Archbishop Romero had to bear the burden of his people, but he also said that “with this people it’s not hard to be a good shepherd [pastor]; they *move* one to service.” Ellacuría rephrased Monseñor’s words: “To complete what he said, we should add that ‘with this pastor it is so easy to be the people of God.’”<sup>21</sup> The reality of the people bore up Monseñor, and the reality of Monseñor bore up the people.

To conclude this point, we can ask how Ellacuría came to this idea of “taking hold of reality,” and to its formulation as “the crucified people.” I don’t have a self-evident answer, but I think it came from several sources. I believe Ellacuría allowed himself to be affected by the reality, out of his instinctive honesty toward reality, letting it be what it is—the secular Barthian version of the theologal “letting God be God”; and out of his real, not only conceptual, rootedness in a biblical-Jesuanic tradition that nourished him in the mystery of free will. This led to an uncommon “miracle.” Clearly reality appeared to him as the crucified people. This is the *opthe* through which the appearances of the risen Lord are retold. There was gift and grace. Ellacuría responded and corresponded.

## The Civilization of Poverty<sup>22</sup>

### *Unmasking the "Civilization of Wealth"*

In his last years, Ellacuría was convinced of the need for "another" world—as we might say today—to keep us from falling into inhumanity, but not just any other world. We needed "to turn back history, subvert it, and send it in a different direction."<sup>23</sup> He called this the "civilization of poverty," and wrote about it three times,<sup>24</sup> to go beyond the prevailing civilization of wealth. He insisted on this to the end of his life; if the language is startling we might use the terms "solidary poverty" or "shared austerity," although Ellacuría preferred the word "poverty."

The civilization of wealth, says Ellacuría, offers development and happiness, and the means to attain them. The first of these "in the last analysis, proposes the private accumulation of the maximum possible capital by individuals, groups, multinational corporations, states, or groups of states as the fundamental basis of development."<sup>25</sup> The second proposes "the possessive accumulation, by individuals or families, of the maximum possible wealth as the fundamental basis of one's own security and the possibility of an ever-increasing consumerism as the basis of one's own happiness."<sup>26</sup> His judgment on that civilization is highly critical, but not simplistic:

We do not deny that this kind of civilization, which prevails in both the East and the West and should be called a capitalist civilization—whether it is State or private capitalism—has brought some goods to humanity, or that these goods should be conserved and promoted (through scientific and technical methods, new forms of collective consciousness, etc.), but it has also brought greater evils and its processes of self-correction have not been enough to reverse its destructive course.<sup>27</sup>

The "greater evils" are that this civilization does not meet the basic needs of everyone, and as Ellacuría insisted with increasing force, that it does not build spirit or values that can humanize people and societies.

Regarding the life of the majorities, Ellacuría said there are not sufficient resources to extend to everyone the solution offered by the civilization of wealth—which in economic terms is called "the civilization of capital"—and that for this reason this civilization is also not ethical, in

Kantian terms. I do not know what Ellacuría would say today, in this time of economic globalization, when there are hints of a possibility of reducing poverty and making daily sustenance universal. But what is not becoming universal is the North American, European, or Japanese standard of living. They consume such a large part of the world's resources, raw materials, and energy that it will never be sufficient for the world population.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding spirit and values, this civilization is fundamentally oriented—and offers a spirit that clearly leads—to dehumanization. It is the civilization of the individual, of success, of the selfish good life. And the spirit is suffocated even more when the West that produced it understands itself not only as an achievement of talent and noble effort—which are very real in part, accompanied by a secular, gigantic historical depredation—but as the fruit of a kind of predestination similar to the age-old religious self-understanding of chosen peoples.

Let us focus on the United States, which behaves with all the naturalness and arrogance of those who follow a “manifest destiny.” This nation is justified as an empire, considers itself sent into the world as missionaries of the wealth-god, and expects to be appreciated as a generous benefactor. People may say that there are also reactions against that self-understanding, but they are few and far between. And I do not know how willing such people are to give up the benefits of the civilization of wealth. This is true, in varying degrees, everywhere in the First World. This arrogant spirit is dehumanizing. By nature it tends to provoke contempt in some, and servility or irrational violence in others.

This conviction led Ellacuría to say that the United States “has a bad solution,”<sup>29</sup> which is worse than no solution, which is what the Third World has. In general, he said that the affluent countries “have no hope”—which the Third World does have—“but only fear.”<sup>30</sup> Whatever improvements are made in reducing poverty, I personally do not see what meaning they can have in a world where equality and brotherhood are not among the guiding values of development. They can have no meaning if they constantly reenact the parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Lazarus—without narrowing, only widening, the separation between them, as the UN Development Program (UNDP) reports every year. Ellacuría's conclusion is clear: such a civilization is suffering a “humanistic and moral failure.”<sup>31</sup>

### *Suspicious*

Ellacuría not only unmasked the “great evils” of the civilization of wealth, against which it has not produced the necessary self-correcting

mechanisms; he also unmasked what in the West is understood, in practice, without debate, as "goods." That led him to suspect that the West was ideologizing those goods in order to make them untouchable, beyond criticism. Two examples: his suspicion of democracy and even of human rights, which he wrote about in 1989.

For Ellacuría, democracy was obviously important, especially living under national security regimes. But in casual conversation he would say, for example, that "the United States values democracy and behaves democratically within its borders, but cares nothing about democracy outside those borders." This point is important, because the United States is not a *flatus vocis* but a very solid reality that has supposedly incarnated the very essence of democracy. Merely by sanctioning an absolutely antidemocratic inequality through its behavior, the inequality of "inside" and "outside," the United States engages not only in hypocrisy but in a conceptual contradiction. What El Salvador needed, Ellacuría said, was "not democracy [as offered in the propaganda], but human rights." In other words, the honest or hypocritical offer of democratic political superstructures did not guarantee the fundamental need: a just life.

But he also expressed this suspicion in theoretical terms: "The purpose of the ideologized manipulation of the democratic model is not the people's self-determined choice of a political and economic model, but to cover up the capitalist imposition."<sup>32</sup> Democracy has grave limitations: it expresses the political version of the civilization of wealth, and it can be manipulated, which is not surprising because it is created, as the theologians say. But if that manipulation is massive, if it leads to enormous cruelty, if it necessitates the institutional lie in the media and international forums, if it is practiced by the United States—the greatest and best expression of democracy—and above all if it keeps on happening, then the manipulation of democracy cannot be considered a mere accident; it seems to belong to the historical essence of democracy as it is practiced in the West, and more specifically, in relation to the poor majorities on the planet. We may well say that it also brought good things to the old colonies, or that it is the "lesser evil," but we should not ignore its great historical potential for dehumanization. Ellacuría's analysis was not based on the concept of democracy but on how it functions *in actu*, in and for the Third World, not in and for the limited area of the affluent countries. Therein lay Ellacuría's suspicions.

Let me mention one of Ellacuría's theological reflections in this context. When Vatican II spoke of the fundamental equality of all the members of the people of God, it was not only thinking of the early Church tradition; it was also inspired by central values of democracy and incor-

porating them into its doctrine. But Medellín went on to formulate a different theoretical concept of the Church: the Church of the poor. This went beyond the council's "democracy" and emphasized inequality within the Church, not in favor of the hierarchy but of the poor. Ellacuría deepened this new concept and affirmed that the poor belong at the center of the Church as a matter of structural, organizational, and missiological principle.<sup>33</sup> This approach did not go against the people of God, nor against the democracy it implies, but indirectly reveals a theoretical weakness with great practical consequences: in a world made up mainly of poor people, not even equality (if they had it!) would ensure that they would be taken seriously. They must be placed at the center in order not to be "expelled" from social and ecclesial citizenship. Ellacuría insisted on this for an evangelical reason: the poor can shape the church evangelically. From a social viewpoint, it follows that any society that claims to be truly "democratic" or egalitarian must be conceived and organized on the basis of the rights of the disadvantaged.

For Ellacuría, human rights are good; it was obviously necessary and urgent to put them in practice, and he worked toward that end. But in theorizing about human rights, he also expressed important suspicions: human rights are presented as essentially universal, but in fact they are not, not only because they are not yet real for everyone, but because in the real world, the fact that they are real for some people often means that they are denied and even violated by others:

The problem of human rights is not only complex but ambiguous, because it not only brings together the universal dimension of humanity with the real situation in which people live their lives; it also allows those rights to be used ideologically, not only on behalf of human beings and their rights, but in the interests of one group or another.<sup>34</sup>

We cannot speak of the universal and nonideological validity of human rights without considering "whence" and "for whom" they are proclaimed:

When a right is turned into a privilege, its universality is negated and it ceases to be a human right, becoming instead a class or group privilege.<sup>35</sup>

Two things are needed in order to de-ideologize human rights. One is dialectical historicization. Human beings are divided between those who enjoy rights and those who suffer them. "The dialectical reality between

the strong and the weak, between the lord and the slave, between the oppressor and the oppressed, is more relevant to our problem."<sup>36</sup> The best way to identify an effective and dynamic right is thus "to powerfully deny that condition of weakness, slavery, and oppression."<sup>37</sup> And the dialectic must be upheld if the rights are to prevail. "The radical problem of human rights is the struggle of life against death, the search for what gives life in the face of what takes away life or produces death."<sup>38</sup>

The second thing needed is to historicize and prioritize the contents of those rights. Ellacuría insists on approaching them from the viewpoint of the fundamental meaning of life. The right to life above all, especially the life of the majorities and the peoples, must be seen historically in terms of the meaning of life.<sup>39</sup> Merely biological life "may be taken as self-evident in the wealthiest countries, where that right is guaranteed . . . but that is not true in most countries, either because of extreme poverty or because of repression and violence."<sup>40</sup> Thus, to proclaim the essential universality of human rights may be fallacious, irresponsible, and ideological, since "most of humanity . . . does not enjoy the real conditions for biological survival, because of hunger and unemployment."<sup>41</sup>

I would like to add, briefly, two other suspicions that, as I recall, Ellacuría expressed more implicitly. One is about freedom of expression, which is presented in essence as a right—a good thing, especially in our countries—but which does not always go together with the will to truth. Historically, it often doesn't. Indeed, freedom of expression may cover up the absence of a will to truth; thus, "the good" is placed historically at the service of "evil."

The other suspicion has to do with prosperity, which today means an eager, truly compulsive desire for a better life, for "unlimited" well-being, without considering that it may also be dehumanizing both for those who enjoy it and for those who pay the costs. This neurosis is also expressed in ostentation and Pharaonic behavior, in social and sometimes religious contexts: Singapore, world soccer championships, weddings, and so forth. This prosperity and ostentation are not motivated by a desire for humanization. They divert people's attention from the reality of the majorities who do not benefit directly from the deification of prosperity, toward the minorities who are presented as economic benefactors, the ones who make entertainment (that is, happiness) possible. In the face of the divinization of progress that they offer, it would be good to remember the reflections of Jürgen Moltmann on the future of the new millennium: "progress and precipice."<sup>42</sup>

Ellacuría was a prophet who denounced evils, but he was also suspicious and taught suspicion of that which may be good but is presented

as indisputably good, since it can also be placed at the service of evil. He did so because he “took hold” not of just any reality, but also of the permanent reality of the crucified peoples—in spite of the progress and democracy around them, and in spite of the universal declaration that theoretically defends human rights.

### *Civilization of Poverty*

The civilization of wealth does not “civilize.” Ellacuría contrasted it with the civilization of poverty, to which he devoted a lot of theoretical analysis in his last years, even in the midst of all kinds of urgent needs. He considered this the way to historicize “the civilization of love” described by the popes. And he continued doing so right to the end, mostly alone, with one exception that I remember—Pedro Casaldáliga, who said: “To the ‘civilization of love’ we should add what the Jesuit, Spanish, Basque, Salvadoran theologian Ellacuría has felicitously described as ‘the civilization of poverty.’”<sup>43</sup>

Let us begin with a clarification. Ellacuría obviously was not aiming for universal pauperization. He described the civilization of poverty in order to contrast it with the civilization of wealth. In a world sinfully shaped by the dynamic of capital and wealth, we need to develop an opposing dynamic that can salvifically overcome it. The thesis of a civilization of poverty thus “rejects the accumulation of capital as the engine of history, and the possession-enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization; rather it makes the universal satisfaction of basic needs the principle of development, and the growth of shared solidarity the basis of humanization.”<sup>44</sup>

His positive programmatic affirmation, put simply, is this: the civilization of poverty is “a universal state of affairs which guarantees the satisfaction of basic needs, the freedom of personal choices, and an environment of personal and community creativity that permits the emergence of new forms of life and culture, new relationships with nature, with others, with oneself, and with God.”<sup>45</sup>

Ellacuría said that this civilization of poverty is “based on a materialistic humanism, transformed by Christian light and inspiration,”<sup>46</sup> and I would like to add a word about that. The backdrop of the civilization of poverty and its humanizing potential is the biblical-Jesuanic tradition. We have already said that in Isaiah the crucified people can bring salvation, but more generally, all the Old and New Testament tradition focuses on the salvation that comes from the poor and the small: a childless old woman, the small people of Israel, a marginal Jew. . . . José

Comblin also sees a positive, joyful spirit in poverty that he contrasts with the spirit of wealth:

In El Salvador I have seen shacks overlooking the ocean, where thousands of people live in precarious conditions—including the risk of falling into the water. But the people there live joyfully, with an awareness, openness, and patience that are the opposite of the world of the wealthy.<sup>47</sup>

We need to work to make that civilization of poverty a reality, or to make its elements a moving force toward a new reality. It is not enough to preach it as a prophecy against the civilization of wealth, or even merely to proclaim it as good news for the poor of this world. The solution "cannot be to withdraw from this world and confront it with a sign of prophetic protest, but to become engaged in it in order to renew and transform it into the utopia of the new earth."<sup>48</sup>

In this context, Ellacuría proposed two fundamental ways to undertake the transformation of the present civilization. The more understandable and acceptable of these, at least for some, is "to create economic, political and cultural models that can enable a civilization of labor to replace a civilization of capital."<sup>49</sup> The other is positively to strengthen "shared solidarity, a fundamental characteristic of the civilization of poverty, in contrast to the closed and competitive individualism of the civilization of wealth."<sup>50</sup> This solidarity is not only an important element for a priori thinking about the new civilization we seek, but a posteriori it brings in something fundamental from the Christian tradition and the best Latin American traditions, which can overcome tendencies of dissociative individualism.

To speak of solidarity takes us beyond instrumental effectiveness into a different plane of reality. It is to speak of "spirit," of spiritual effectiveness. This for me is the most striking part of Ellacuría's thinking about global social reality: his focus on the spirit that informs a new civilization, which can be generated by the poor above all:

It is poverty that really leaves room for the spirit, which will no longer be stifled by the need to have more than the next person, by the greedy desire for superfluous things, when most of humanity lacks the basic necessities. Then the spirit can flourish, the enormous spiritual and human richness of the poor and the people of the Third World, which today is stifled by misery and by imposed cultural models that are more advanced in some aspects, but not more fully human.<sup>51</sup>

These are unforgettable words: “the enormous spiritual and human richness of the poor and the people of the Third World.” He does not mean refusing to see the evils caused by poverty, a refusal uncharacteristic of Ellacuría. Describing in words what that spirit is is also hard; I am convinced that only those who have experienced it can talk, helplessly, about it. Put as simply as possible, many people find in the Third World “something” that they do not see in the world of wealth, and that “something” is of a higher quality.

Archbishop Romero attributed a special force to the people, to the popular majorities. “They *impel* one to serve them,” he said in his Homily of November 18, 1979. Ellacuría was moved by Monseñor’s vision of the people’s “ability to find ways out of the gravest problems.”<sup>52</sup> Having seen the Rwandan refugees from a distance, and many Salvadoran communities up close in times of war, earthquake, and everyday life, I have talked about their “primordial saintliness,” their decisiveness in living and sharing life.<sup>53</sup> The term “quality of life” does not come from the world of the poor, because it presupposes life, which the poor cannot take for granted. But “life impulses” do come from that world, where life is not reified and contemplated within and for the sake of the consumerism of the civilization of wealth. From the poor come humanity, embrace, community, art, culture, theology.

Ellacuría was not simplistic or unjust. He knew and appreciated the advances of science and technology, which can be placed at the service of the human, and he also knew the cultural models and expressions of spirit in the West. Today we value tolerance and dialogue—although they too entail grave dangers when viewed unilaterally; there have also been advances in solidarity, although sometimes vaguely and even selfishly expressed, viewed unilaterally as aid to those who suffer rather than as a mutual giving and receiving from those who suffer.

But that is not enough. We need a new axis, around which the diverse elements that shape a society can revolve in human ways. The civilization of poverty, which comes fundamentally from the spirit of the poor—and the spirit of Jesus—generates values that, together with the most genuine civilizing traditions of the past and present, can create such a new axis. This would require us to reverse the dogma that the world only revolves around wealth.

It is hard to say what that axis, filled with a new spirit, might be, but perhaps the following may be elements of that spirit:

- a. Being in reality, overcoming the docetism of living in unreality, in islands of affluence, alienated, detached from the poor and oppressed majorities.

- b. Honesty toward reality, overcoming the lie and the cover-up with the will to truth, giving names to the millions of victims and martyrs, honoring their memory which nourishes us.
- c. Compassion for the suffering of the great majorities, prophetically denouncing the injustice that produces it.
- d. The demand for freedom by and for everyone, and understanding one's own freedom in a way that does not enslave, that does not prevent the doing of good.
- e. Bearing the burden of history, every day until the end.
- f. The joy of recognition that we are all brothers and sisters, which may lead to suffering but cannot be overwhelmed by sadness, and the celebration of that joy.
- g. Caring for nature and all creation, within which we become a greater unity.
- h. The utopian hope for a new heaven and a new earth.
- i. Openness to an ultimate mystery in reality—and for some, coming out of ourselves, as in the prayer of Francis of Assisi, and giving a name (Father, Mother) to that mystery, without making God any less ineffable and mysterious.

At the end of the first section I described Ellacuría's words about the crucified people as astounding. The same, or more, is true of his words about the civilization of poverty. Let us end with some brief reflections, not to lessen the impact but perhaps to understand it.

In the first place, Ellacuría knew the great evils that occur in the world of poverty—the evils committed by the poor, their human condition, the evil inclinations caused by unmet needs, the dehumanization that comes from the civilization of wealth—lead them in large part by force or deception to commit evil. He was not naïve. But he saw no other way, besides the spirit that rises out of the civilization of the poor, to overcome the greater dehumanization of the civilization of wealth. And he was positively captivated by their creativity, their generosity, their persistence, their solidarity, their austerity, their hope, their openness to transcendence.

Second, Ellacuría knew that history does not move without power. In his time, in the midst of the people's struggle to build a new society, he recognized the need for and the legitimacy of the political front that sought power, but he gave priority to the organization of the base (grass roots), which did not seek to come to power. "The social is more basic than the political," he said.<sup>54</sup> I think he would emphasize this in building the civilization of poverty. In this sense, Ellacuría did not slip into "messianism," as is sometimes alleged of the liberation theologians, al-

though he valued the messianic aspect of the biblical-Jesuanic faith: that is, upholding the hope of the poor, but through patient work. Perhaps he was influenced by the fact that in El Salvador the revolution had not triumphed as in Nicaragua; rather, the building of a new society always went against the established powers. The theologians, priests, and pastoral agents of a new society never held power, nor were they favored by those in power, as was the case, more or less, in Brazil and Nicaragua.

Finally, let us ask where he came upon the idea of upholding utopia and expressing it as “the civilization of poverty.” Ellacuría was always obsessed by *justeza*, that is, adjusting to reality and its real possibilities. He was also realistic in doing everything possible so that reality would give more of itself. That did not make him an opportunist, or even a mere “possible-ist.” He also believed in the need for prophecy and utopia in order to move history forward. So where did this utopia come from? It undoubtedly had personal roots, but we must emphasize an objective and historical element that he himself identified: “Some places are more propitious than others for the emergence of prophetic utopians and utopian prophets.”<sup>55</sup> Specifically, the place where it is possible to think of the “civilization of poverty” is not the world of affluence, where the individual, success, and the good life are exalted. Even less is it the world of arrogant power: “We are the reality.” It is in the Third World, where prophecy and utopia seem necessarily to come together, where injustice and death reach intolerable levels, and where hope seems to be the quintessence of life. This is the world in which Ellacuría was consciously engaged.

I don’t know what Ellacuría would say today, in times of globalization and postmodernity. For myself, I would like to close by expressing a conviction and a desire. The conviction is that “they killed Ellacuría for confronting the civilization of wealth,” and the desire is that “we not let him die for defending the civilization of poverty.”

—Translated by Margaret Wilde