Sanctuary: A Movement of the Spirit (2/2)

Dr. Justo L. González

© Justo L. Gonzalez
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
info@aeth.org

Sanctuary: A Movement of the Spirit

(2 out of 2)

Yesterday I was seeking to place the sanctuary movement within the context of the totality of Christian faith and theology. Today, I would like to place it within the context of other events that have led to it, or to which it is related. Indeed, the sanctuary movement is part of a larger struggle for peace and justice, and unless we see those connections we risk losing the sense of the place of the movement within the divine economy and the present struggles.

A clear illustration of how this can take place is the case of Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, one of the few real heroes of the Spanish conquest of this hemisphere. He was a hero, not because he slaughtered Indians, conquered empires or became rich, none of which he did, but rather because he decided to follow the way of voluntary poverty by becoming a Dominican, and because, having done so, he devoted his entire life to the defense of the Indians. Because of that devotion, he had to undergo many trials and tribulations. He was hated by governors and heeded by kings. He proposed a form of evangelization that was entirely alien to his time, but not alien to the Gospel. And yet, as is so often the case, that very struggle on occasion blinded him to other issues of justice. The time came when, in the midst of his frustration at his inability to change the behavior of the whites against the Indians, and seeking relief for the Indians in their heavy toil and inhumane treatment, he suggested that slaves be brought from Africa. It was a suggestion he soon regretted. But it is a clear illustration of the point I am trying to make. The struggle for justice is always concrete. It must deal, not with generalities, but with the

AETH

concrete instances in which injustice must be challenged and confronted. But at the same time that struggle for justice must always keep in mind that at a deeper level of analysis there is a connection between the various expressions of injustice.

In Las Casas' time, the root of the injustice committed against the Indians was that the Spaniards wished to profit from their land and their labor. To suggest that, in order to spare the Indians, someone else be brought from Africa to do the hard labor, was simply agreeing that the Spaniards had the right to this land and to someone else's labor.

While Las Casas was heroically fighting in the trenches, confronting landowners and governors with their injustice, and forcing the government to enact new laws for the protection of the Indians, another Dominican, a professor at the University of Salamanca, saw that the deeper issue was the presumption that the pope was the universal ruler of the world, and could therefore grant rights of possession to whomever he chose. Against such an assumption, Francisco de Vitoria taught that the Indians were true rulers and owners of their lands, and that neither pope nor emperor had the right to dispossess them, even in order to Christianize them.

As Las Casas himself was drawn into the more theoretical debate, having to defend his views before the court lawyers, he began to make use of the writings of Vitoria. Eventually, in an episode seldom recorded by historians, and mostly under the influence of the combined forces of Las Casas and Vitoria, Charles V even considered giving up the entire enterprise of conquest

and colonization.

The struggle for justice in our time is no less than the struggle to have the mighty nations and powerful individuals of our day give up their own modern enterprise of conquest and colonization. The sanctuary movement is part of that struggle. It is our part in that struggle. It is one concrete point at which a number of us may have chosen to challenge the injustices that result from the policies of modern-day *conquistadors*. But, precisely because it is a very concrete struggle for justice, it is also a struggle against injustice in the larger sense. It is the larger injustice that has produced the refugees to whom we offer sanctuary. Unless we realize this, we run the risk of compromising the freedom of others, as did Las Casas when his involvement with the Indians led him to suggest black slavery.

If sanctuary is to be a movement for life, it must seek, not only safe haven for these refugees on whose behalf we are now working, but also safe haven all over the world for all God's children. We must work, and work hard, to see that the policies of the Immigration and Naturalization Service are changed. But we must not lose sight of the policies of the State Department that create the refugees in the first place. Nor must we lose sight of the economic practices that stand at the root of the policies of the State Department.

The Administration insists on declaring that the refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala are economic refugees. Obviously, what they mean by that is that they come to this country, not because their lives are threatened, but in search of higher living standards. Anyone who has

spoken with the refugees at a detention center, or with those in sanctuary in our churches, knows that this is not true. Many of them are fleeing because they have seen death too close. I am thinking in particular of the young Salvadoran, now awaiting extradition in a detention center in Texas, who survived because the bodies of all his dead relatives hid him from the death squad; or the young woman, a union organizer, who told me that her neighbors stopped her on her way home to tell her that her husband and children were dead, and that people were waiting for her at home in order to kill her too. To call such people “economic refugees,” as if they came to this country in search of higher wages, is at best a lack of understanding of the real situation, and most probably a cynical lie.

When the refugees are called “economic refugees,” the image that is conveyed is that of people who come to this country because they believe that life here will be easier. But again, anyone who has met these refugees and heard of their saga in coming to this country would have a hard time believing that they are looking for an easy life. I am thinking of the Salvadoran couple who told me last New Year’s Eve that they had spent the last New Year's Eve wading through swamps in the Guatemalan border; that they then hid in a train wagon which was locked after they got in, and that for three days and nights they had no food or water; that they walked practically the whole length of Mexico and a good portion of the Arizona desert. Such people are not looking for an easy life. Nor was the Guatemalan woman who was raped on fourteen different occasions (sometimes by government officials) as she spent two years making her way through Mexico.

To call these people “economic refugees,” as the Administration insists in doing, is, as we say in Spanish, to try to cover the sun with a finger.

But there is another sense, a much deeper sense, in which these people are indeed economic refugees. They are economic refugees, not because their land is too poor. Rather, they are economic refugees because their land is too rich. Let me explain. In a popular stereotype in this country, Central America is seen as a series of “banana republics.” The image that this conveys is of countries that are too backward to do anything but grow bananas, and where revolution is some kind of a national pastime. That stereotype is patently false.

What is true, however, is that a great deal of the Gross National Product of these countries comes from such export crops as bananas, coffee, and beef. Why is it so? Is it because these countries are by nature poor? Or is it rather because they are by nature rich, endowed with a climate that allows crops to grow year round, and cattle to be grazed all the seasons of the year? Why did someone, such as the United Fruit Company, decided to move into Honduras or Nicaragua? Was it because those countries were by nature poor, or because they were endowed with some of the richest land and best agricultural climate of the world?
The stereotype that most of us have of what is going on in Central America, even when we are sympathetic to change, is that the struggle there is against the remains of a quasi-medieval system, a sort of feudalism in which a few families own all the land.

This is in part true. It is traditional folk-wisdom, taught in most of our schools, that in a country such as El Salvador a few wealthy families own most of the land.

But the fact of the matter is that in recent decades, with the advent of refrigeration and of faster means of transportation, the situation in El Salvador and in all of Central America has worsened. Land that at an earlier time was only good for raising corn and beans has now become valuable. At first it was bananas that made the land valuable – hence the stereotype of the "banana republics" – and later it was other fruit and beef. With the advent of the fast food chains in the U.5. in particular, range-fed beef, requiring little labor and raised on lands that could be easily cleared of forests and peasants, became a very profitable investment. In this enterprise, the native aristocracy joined forces with foreign investors, mostly North-American, but also European and Japanese. This eventually gave land a higher market value than it had before, and the various countries became richer in the sense that they now were able to obtain hard foreign currency for their exports.

The land that used to grow corn and beans for the peasants and for the population of the cities now produces beef for our markets and our fast food chains. People in Central America can eat corn and beans; but they cannot eat the beef that is sold to a hamburger chain. A peasant family could live on a relatively small plot growing its own crops and raising some pigs and chickens. The same family cannot live on the land where cattle have now displaced people. A

few may find employment with the landowner. But most must move on, either to the cities or to poorer lands. In the cities, a few may find employment with the meat-packing companies, or with the trade that grows out of the export of food and the import of consumer goods for the few who can afford them. But most will remain unemployed, living in overcrowded conditions, lacking such basic necessities as plumbing and sewers. In the mountains, some will find a plot of the land where they can resettle. But if they are successful, and the land proves to be fertile, it will not be theirs for long.

Eventually, these conditions provoke such unrest that the rich landowners and others, both nationals and foreigners, who profit from the existing order have to resort to repressive measures. More and more of the wealth resulting from imports has to be invested in weapons and in the maintenance of an army. The main function of such an army is clearly the repression of discontent. Repression breeds more discontent. Discontent then becomes so general that the repression blindly strikes at all who are in the least suspect. In the process, all the poor, the Indians, students, union organizers and teachers become suspect and subject to repression unless they very clearly prove that they support the government. Such proof often involves taking part in the repression themselves. Thus, the entire country is polarized. In the end, not only those who actively oppose the government, but even those who would simply wish to be left alone, will find their lives threatened.

It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that those who are coming from Central America are

economic refugees. Those who say that we should not be receiving these people, because we have enough unemployment within our borders, ought to consider this: Shouldn't a Salvadoran peasant have at least the right to work in a hamburger stand selling the beef raised on the land that used to be his?

Even in the case of those who cross the border coming from political situations that are more tolerable than those in El Salvador or Guatemala, such as the Mexicans who cross the border every day, we must understand that they are coming to this country, not because this is a naturally rich country and theirs is a naturally poor one. More than half the beef raised in Mexico is consumed in the United States. And in recent years more and more land in Mexico is being devoted to raising tomatoes and other vegetables for the American market. Thus, while a Mexican family is crossing the river under the bridge, in a sense they are simply following their sustenance that is crossing over the bridge. Even though the crossing of the trucks may be declared legal, and the crossing of the family illegal, the link between the two is such that to tackle them separately may be politically convenient, but it is economically futile and morally unjustifiable.

What all this means is that we have to abandon our understanding of the present economic problems of the Third World as one of underdevelopment. The problem is rather one of misdevelopment. It is not a matter of catching up with the developed world. It is rather a matter of changing the terms of the race. Until we understand this, we shall be pushed into

such insane policies as the ones we are currently pursuing in Central America and in Southern Africa.

If the problems of Central America are to be solved, they will not be solved with more development of the sort that has been taking place in the last half century. Indeed, the present problems are to a large degree the result of such development, and more of the same will simply create greater disparity, more repression, and larger numbers of refugees.

What all this means is that there is a connection between the present Administration's commitment to a trickle-down theory of economic development and its policies in Central America. Such policies are based on the premise that all that is needed is a sufficient length of time to allow for economic development, then all will be well. What is not seen in this formulation of the matter is that in most Central American countries there is a history of decades of that sort of development, and that this history, rather than leading towards greater stability and freedom, has led to war and repression. Thus, in order to promote its ill-conceived policy of economic development, the Administration finds itself forced to escalate its military commitment to the region. If such a policy fails, as is very likely and as has already happened in Nicaragua, we shall see the very same people who are now calling for more military hardware calling for moderation from the new governments. And if it succeeds, all that we shall have to show for it will be a so-called "friendly" government, tottering atop a mountain of unrest and repression – such as we are now supporting, not only in several Central American countries, but

also in South Africa, the Philippines, and in Korea. And, because we are supporting such "friendly" governments, we lose a great deal of our moral authority to criticize and condemn those unfriendly governments in Poland, in the Soviet Union and in Afghanistan, that certainly should be criticized and condemned.

Ultimately, therefore, even though some of its proponents may sincerely believe that this is the best policy for Central America, it is a policy of repression in the name of progress, and of tyranny in the name of democracy. It is a policy of oppression, fear and death. And the same must be said about similar policies wherever they are pursued.

In contrast to such policies, the Sanctuary Movement movement for life. It is first of all a movement for the life of those who are coming to our borders for fear of death. It is a movement for life for those whom the Immigration and Naturalization Service would simply deport with little regard for the dangers that may await them. But it is also a movement for life for the thousands whose lives will be spared if the present folly in Central America is stopped. It is a movement for life for the villages that are now being bombed with American-made bombs dropped from American-made planes guided by American- provided intelligence – although why they call that intelligence is one of the greatest absurdities of the English language!

It is a movement for life, because every bomb, even those that miss their target, is an instrument of death. Working as I do with issues of hunger and development, I am aware that

with what it costs to produce and deliver one such bomb an entire family in Central America could be made self-sufficient. Thus, every bomb that we can prevent from being made, delivered and dropped may save lives, not only because it will never explode in some peasant village, but also because it will allow us resources for true humanitarian purposes.

The war in Central America is killing people. It is killing people in the battlefields who are fighting for one side or the other. It is killing people in air raids that we are encouraging and supporting – often killing people who did not ever know they were involved until death fell from the sky. It is killing people who die in river crossings trying to leave their countries in search of safe heaven. It is killing people who fall in the hands of bandits and coyotes on their way up north. It is killing people who cannot grow crops because their land is no longer safe. If as Christians and as people of goodwill we are committed to life, we must be committed to stopping the war in Central America. And the sanctuary movement is one way to express that commitment.

But Sanctuary must also be a movement for life in that it must train us to see the connections of injustice and oppression as they exist in various parts of the world. We must allow our concern for the refugees whom we are seeking to help to lead us to take every conceivable risk. But there is one danger of which we must always beware. That is the danger of allowing our concern for this particular issue to cloud our discernment with regard to the larger issues of which the flight of refugees from Central America is but one instance. We must beware of the

trap into which Las Casas fell.

To me, one of the greatest assets of the Sanctuary Movement as I have known it is precisely its openness to perceiving the connections between various sorts of injustice. Shortly after his indictment, I was talking with the Rev. John Fife, trying to devise a strategy for his defense and that of others who had been indicted with him. There are many reasons to be angry and dismayed at the procedures employed in the investigation of their case, especially since the leaders of the movement have always been completely open about what they were doing and why. Certainly, those who have been indicted have a great deal to lose, including their own personal freedom. But even in such circumstances, and faced by such dangers, what immediately struck all of us in that meeting was John Fife's concern that we develop a strategy that would not allow his own trial to becloud the larger issue of the repatriation of Salvadoran and Guatemaları naturals, and the ever larger issue of the war in Central America and its causes. To me that is a sign of great hope. An agency in Chicago that has developed a network to alert people to violations of human rights in El Salvador that require immediate and concerted action is now considering a request to perform a similar service in regard to the Philippines. To me that is also a sign of great hope. Among those who have been arrested in protest against apartheid and the American policy of so-called “constructive engagement” are many who are also supporting the Sanctuary movement. That is also a sign of hope.

That many of those involved in the sanctuary movement are able to see the connections that I have been seeking to lay bare, is the reason why many opponents of the movement insist on

trying to define it in the narrowest possible terms. The movement challenges more than the policies of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. It challenges the entire ideological construct on which so much modern empire building is grounded. In response, those who fear it will do everything possible, if they cannot undo it, at least to keep it within the narrowest confines possible. This is why the judge in Tucson insists that the trial be kept within the narrow question of smuggling and transporting illegal aliens. This is why most of the letters I receive in criticism of the movement do not go beyond the point of affirming that Christians ought to obey the law. This is why I note a strange connection between those who protest our involvement in the sanctuary movement and those who would rather not have us talk of the root causes of hunger. This is also why it is so easy to raise funds in this country for emergency food relief, and so difficult to get people to think about the reasons why there is hunger in various parts of the world. To see the connections is painful, for it questions many of our assumptions, and it particularly questions many of the notions that would make it possible for us to continue living as smugly as if we had nothing to do with the pain of the rest of the world.

There is a connection between the greed that has ruled our actions in Central America for decades, and the arms buildup in which we are involved there; there is a connection between the manner in which the superpowers have dealt with smaller nations, and the terrible situation in which they find themselves in the midst of the arms race; there is a connection between a government's inability to understand the pain of its poorest citizens, and its inability to understand the dreams of blacks in South Africa; there is a connection between war and

hunger, between greed and oppression, between fear and repression.

But this is not the last word. We belong to a tradition that also knows that the God of life is the God of peace; that the God of peace is the God of justice; that the God of life, peace and justice is the only God; that to serve God is to work for life, for peace, and for justice; and that, no matter how strong death, war and injustice may seem, in the end the victory is ours.

I know of no better way to say this that in the words of the prophet Micah:

> They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> And their spears into pruning hooks;
> Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> Neither shall they learn war any more;
> But they shall sit each under their vine and under their fig tree,
> And none shall make them afraid.

This is the vision by which we live. This is the vision by which we support the sanctuary movement. This is the vision by which we oppose the arms race. This is the vision by which we struggle for justice among nations and among individuals. This is the vision by which we protest when someone gathers the grapes and another reaps the benefits. This is the vision on which we call every day as we pray: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done earth as it is in heaven.”