THE CHURCH IN HAITI - LAND OF RESISTANCE

by

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For decades Haiti has been perceived of as a country of misery, dictatorship, political unrest and 'boat people'. The question posed is ~ Does the picture characterize the real Haiti? Are our perceptions correct?" Let us examine the perception and the reality.

Most Haitians are of African descent. Bought in Africa, transported to the Americas, under inhuman conditions to be sold as slaves to 'european colonists who wanted to rapidly increase their personal fortunes. From early on, the Africans expressed their non-acceptance of this new status by demonstrating various types of resistance: they swallowed poison; threw themselves into the ocean on their way to the colonies, or committed suicide on their arrival in Santo Domingo. By so doing, they manifested their resistance to domination, misery and slavery. From the beginning they struggled for their freedom.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE

In Haiti, the Africans maintained their religious beliefs and practices as a part of their culture. In fact:

"Les cultures autochones referment en leur sein de quoidonner vie a des societes differentes du modele standardise et devitalise qui s'est repandu sur le monde."¹ (Autochthonous cultures have within them the potential to generate societies different from the standardised and exhausted model spread throughout the world.)

Their religious practices, too, were an expression of resistance. Although uprooted from Africa, the slaves always believed in the protective spirits that gave them, in this new land, the strength to cling to anthropological roots. In religious celebrations, the African slave was oriented to Africa, invoking the protective spirits called 'loa". Quite correctly, Maximillian wrote:

"Les idees et les croyances son les grandesforces de l'humanite; maconnair =tre donc la puissance des croyances vodouecques sur le monde haitien est une absurdi. La seule attitude logique, dans ce cas, est celle vouloir les canaliser."² (Ideas and beliefs are the
driving force of mankind: it is absurd therefore, to underestimate the power of voodoo beliefs on Haitian society).

Haitian celebrations reflected an African world. The Africans did not lose their roots, even though unprotected and exiled, they were not destroyed. Voudoo, which represents these deep feelings of resistance, provided a means of coping, a way of applying religious belief to social reality. "Le vaudou remplit une fonction sociale utile dans l'état actuel de la société haitienne."3 (Voudoo plays a social role in the present state of Haitian society.)

Voodoo was not practiced in isolation from Christianity. Slaves rebelling against the colonialists were baptised several times, sometimes as much as ten times, in order to exorcise the "choul sauva" (the devil) from their souls. The colonists attacked voudoo, because they viewed it as the practise of resistance.

HAITIAN RESISTANCE

1492 does not signify the discovery of a wild world. It is instead the unpleasant encounter of some wild colonialists with civilized slaves, sons and daughters of liberty, who had to pay for their freedom with their blood. The Haitian people continue to fight against the legacy of colonialism. How can we talk about 1492 as a great event without seeing the same colonial hands oppressing the Haitian people?

Throughout Haitian history, resistance to domination has been characterised by different types of action: sometimes by heroes in rebellion (Toussaint, Dessalines); sometimes by armed troops (Charlesmang Peralte, Brataville); sometimes by slaves deserting their masters (Boukman).

There developed in Haiti, a political wisdom that was not submissive, though sometimes political silence could be regarded as eloquent. In the face of an army of occupation in this century, there was a strategy of tacitly bending backwards, waiting for the timely moment to act promptly. People who did not understand this were surprised when the popular wrath rose up to win unexpected victories, for example, on January 1, 1804, and in our time, on February 7, 1986, and March 1990.

In the economy also, alternative practices developed. The poor have their own method of saving, which runs parallel to the banking system - the 'sol' in which a number of persons get together and agree to each contribute a certain amount of money at fixed periods over an established period of time. At each period, one member receives the total deposit. As a way of investing they used the "cochon creole" - the creole pig. In spite of the high rate of illiteracy (85%), it is to their credit that the poor have found ways to survive for centuries, in spite of incomes insufficient to buy food, or provide for their most basic needs.
THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

From the beginning of Haitian history, the Catholic stood side by side with the colonists, who were in confrontation with the slaves. The church was involved in mainly in administering the sacraments; - establishing social and health facilities;- engaging in education, building and operating schools, and training teachers.

But what type of education? There was no doubt of its quality on the technical side. Nevertheless, it was an education that generated an elite, accommodating to the interests of the governing class. It was imperative that the status quo be maintained!

For most of our history, there was a collaboration between the political power and religious authority. They embraced in grandiose official celebrations of the te Deum. Despite certaintemporary distancing, this collaboration has not changed significantly over our history. Chuch and state could be perceived as two institutional powers serving one governing class, in the words of Leonardo Boff,

"La sclrose institutionnelle e donne de l'Église l'image d'un bastion du conservatsma anti-evangelique et a introduit dans la pratique eccliaie une profonde coupure entre l'Église, peuple de Dieu et "l'Eglise Heirarchie." (- Institutional sclerosis gave the Church the image of being a bastion of anti-evangelical conservatism, and introduced into religious practice a profound rupture between the Church, the people of God, and the hierarchy of the Church.)

1979 - THE TURNING POINT

In 1986 some members of the Catholic clergy who were apposed in this relationship of church and state, including the Spiritians and the Jesuits, were forced into exile. It was tewstimony of the strength of the governing class.

Following the Second Vatican Council, and more particularly with the conferences of Catholic Bishops at Medellin, Columbia in 1968, and Puebla, Mexico in 1979, the Catholic Church in Latin America articulated its role in a different way. It was an ecclesiology coming from those at the bottom, rising from the world of the poor. It was the theology of liberation for the poor. The poor were no more considered the object of charity, but rather , the subject of history. In the voices of the poor, theologians learned to discover the voice of God. In the struggle against misery, hunger, exploitation and slavery, they found Jesus Christ.

In contrast to a traditional theology, which was more inclined to talk about God in Heaven, the theology of liberation started from the day-to-day life of the people, seeking to discover the real face of God in their midst, revealed through Jesus Christ present among them. In the words of Juan Luis Segundo, "When the poor start to talk, when they become the voice of their own voice,we begin to see a theology of liberation."
HOPE - DISAPPOINTMENT

Jean-Claude Duvalier left Haiti on February 7, 1986. The people rejoiced. It was a day of liberation.

After Duvalier’s departure, the bishops asked for national reconciliation, without insisting on justice. The people called for justice. Disappointed with the position of the bishops, the Youth Congress in Les Cayes in August 1986, recast the slogan of the bishops, “Legliz se nou” (the Church is us) to “Legliz se nou tout; nou tout se Legliz” (the Church is all of us, all of us are the Church). In other words, the Church was more than the bishops. The people wanted justice, and one aspect of the justice they wanted was participation in the decision-making process of the official church.

Similarly the people protested Rome’s decision to deport Salesian priest, Fr. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the refusal by the bishops to condemn the massacre at Jean-Rabel. This made the bishops furious and they took several drastic and repressive measures - they closed Mission Alpha, the national Catholic literacy programme; restructured Radio Soleil, the voice of the Catholic Church in the country; pursued the deportation of the popular Salesian priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, despite several mass demonstrations in his support.

During the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, the bishops had enjoyed the privilege of political protection, in preaching “Legliz se nou” (the Church is we), they had come to believe that the Church was the bishops, and that the bishops were the Church.

TLK (TI COMINOTE LEGLIZ) - BASIC ECCLESIASTICAL COMMUNITIES

Even as the base communities (TLK’s) became an integral part of the Church, they came in for harsh criticism from the hierarchy. But the bishops stopped short of rejecting them completely. The TLK’s had one preoccupation - translating the Scriptures into action. They were the place where everyday life was shared, including its economic and political problems. If one person was persecuted, the entire community assumed the responsibility of facing the repressive power and responded to the needs of that person's family. This solidarity touched the whole Church and the country as a whole.

The TLK’s embodied the preferential option for the poor articulated in the Scriptures. “The whole community of believers were one in heart and mind. But no-one claimed any of their possessions as their own; bat rather they shared all things in common.” (Acts 4:32). The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to give new sight to the blind; to free the oppressed.” (Luke 4:18)

THE HIERARCHY

In contrast to the base communities, whose principal concerns were poverty and
injustice, the main concern of the heirarchy was to protect the institution of the Church and maintain its traditions. Paradoxically, the bishops feared the poor, the very ones who were ready to give their lives in the name of the Gospel and the building of the Kingdom of God. This lead to uncertainty, anxiety and distress, which characterised the pathological behaviour of the heirarchy each time the church of the poor called for justice and compensation. This is not to make a value judgement, nor to describe or analyze the psychological disposition of the members of the hierarchy, but rather to assert that the institution manifested a neurosis which affected its members. It is not that members are neurotic; but that the institution suffers from the neurosis.

FAITH AND POLITICS

Politics and political theory are the search for the common good. Faith is not a depository of beliefs, nor an assembly of creeds, but a dynamic strength. Faith includes the search for the common good. It transcends the visible, allowing the believer to be entirely devoted to the cause of building the Kingdom. Justice, freedom and love motivate a personal proclamation of faith. Faith and politics become part of the same action.

A PROPHETIC CHURCH

Prophets are people possessed by a spirit of justice, freedom and love, “Give Justice every morning” (Jeremiah,21:12); “Let Justice prevail” (Amos 5:15); “Love her just as Yahweh loves his people who turn to other gods” (Hosea 3:1); “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah,31:3) The light of prophetic revelation in the Bible allows us to see the world as it is and to denounce everything that runs counter to love, justice and freedom. The prophet describes reality with objectivity and speaks with strength. The prophet talks in the name of God.

The prophetic church walks in the footsteps of Amos, Jeremaih, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Jesus. Her prophetic mission obliges her to support the cause of the oppressed, without being tied to a specific social class. She is in alliance with all those labouring to build the Kingdom of love, justice and freedom.

This church should not put herself in a position of compromise with oppressive political power, nor enjoy its privileges. This could prejudice her mandate to bring about the common good. Should the church choose or accept this debased position, she would contradict the mandate of her faith. At the same time, political power does not automatically imply oppression: ideally it should instead be part of the process of searching for the common good.

A LIBERATING CHURCH

The type of liberation that does not promote the growth of every aspect of the human person is only a partial liberation. That is why our vision for the church in Haiti leads us to the struggle to attack misery, to denounce spiritual acridity, and to condemn
the social sin embedded in the structures of public life. Jesus is the guide. Faced with a crowd of starving people, He did not give them spiritual precepts only, but bread to stay their hunger (Matthew 14:31). With the sick, He cured illnesses (Mark 1:29-31; Luke 5:12:16; John 4:46-54) and forgave the sinners' trespasses (Luke 7:47; John 1:29: John 20:23). In other words, He countered pain both physical and spiritual. The struggle against the dictatorships that we have experienced in Haiti is precisely to act in accordance with the conviction generated by this faith - faith in Jesus, the guide of our church, the shepherd of sheep attacked by wolves.

AN EVANGELISED CHURCH PREACHING THE GOSPEL

The process of evangelisation should start from the bottom of one's heart to reach somebody else's heart - from the heart of the one preaching the Gospel (the church) to the heart of the other one (listening to the Gospel) (the social structure). Otherwise, one may risk ending up trying to change the Christian heart, crushed by oppressive social structures, while remaining silent and blind, accommodating and permissive in the face of these oppressive structures.

An evangelised church, preaching the Gospel, implies a process of contagious change. This church embraces an anthropology whereby no-one is isolated or marginalized, where all are members of the community, members of the body whose head is Jesus. The pain or problems of one are felt by all. It is a community of love. Jesus is the love. If we do not accept that love and allow it to shape our lives, we cannot pretend to be faithful or loyal to Jesus through one another. All of us have this invitation and this mission.

When we act in accordance with this mission of justice and love, if some say it is political, we do not object, because we are partisans of Jesus' politics, of this politics of the Gospel. This is the only kind of politics that can bring real change - a communion of all, with everyone working for justice, love and freedom.

NOTES AND REFERENCES