A CHRISTIAN MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTION

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A Christian ministry of social and political action increasingly ranks low on the priorities of seminarians and parish pastors. With a few notable exceptions, most clergy view controversial social and political involvement either as ancillary to their calling or an anachronism of a previous era.

Many of us clergy are like the invalid Jesus described lying by the Sheep Gate pool (see John 5:2-9), waiting, watching, and hoping for just the right break to get us into the swim of life where dynamic ministry flows or into a church that is a catalyst for change in community and society.

Many are paralyzed by apathy or antipathy, crippled by past experiences or limitations of the present, lame because of inadequate preparation or cynical despair, or blind due to excuse-making and fear of the unknown. Richard A. Goodling, speaking of "the pervasive unease" within our professional life, argues that in part this is true because "of a felt sense of professional inadequacy and ineffectiveness, in short, the frustrating and demoralizing experience of being powerless or impotent."[1]

The man beside the Sheep Gate pool apparently had both the desire and the potential to act, but his performance had been inadequate and ineffective, resulting in some 38 years of frustration, defeat, and demoralization. James Dittes asks:

> How much of a day, how much of a career is spent watching from a distance, perhaps great, perhaps tormentingly small, while others seem to be fully immersed in significant ministry? How many of those years are spent waiting with the rueful sense of separation between oneself and the significant currents of events in God's world and man's?[2]

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[1]Richard A. Goodling, "The Clergy and the Problem of Professional Impotency," *The Duke Divinity School Review,* Fall, 1980, p. 31.

[2]James E. Dittes, *Minister on the Spot* (Philadelphia, Pilgrim Press, 1970), p. 2.

But the question of Jesus remains the same today as it did many yesterdays ago in Jerusalem: "Do we want to be healed?" Do we want a new ministry? Do we want to sense healing and wholeness in our lives? Do we want to experience new power and potence in our profession? Do we want to become strategically involved in the great issues and crises of our time and church? Do we want to face the ambiguities and the anxieties, the conflicts and the controversies, the anger and the anguish, and the risks and responsibilities of Christian leadership? Or do we want to continue to lay by the troubled water and cry that we are too over-burdened by our studies and family responsibilities, or complain that our denominational supervisor has not come by and carried us into the surging waters of dynamic ministry, or blame others for climbing into the pool's steps of success faster?

If our response is to be healed personally, to become empowered professionally, and to become committed change-agents for Christ, then the invitation of Jesus twenty centuries ago vibrates again in 1983: "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." The creative and healing forces of life are not always somewhere else. We are already in the midst of God's creative and redeeming power. The renewal of our ministry comes from within, in the place where we are, not the place we think we ought to be. The break-throughs for social justice, evangelism, church growth, and increased civility in human life will come not by all of us trading places, but by everyone of us, in each and every place, rising up, speaking out, and walking forward into the heartaches and headaches, the storms and stresses of life.

As transactional psychologists like Muriel James and Louis M. Savary remind us, the power for good and growth is a power within, an energy, vitality, creative drive, and strength which is the source of self-esteem and professional effectiveness.[3]

Lest I be misunderstood, seizing the opportunity for healing, empowerment, involvement, and effectiveness in ministry does not mean life will be easy or that one will be successful. There are no pills that we can pop and suddenly become charismatic, and no panaceas we can quickly adopt to change stubborn churches into serving communities of faith.

As church leaders we have more power potentially than we are usually ready to acknowledge or accept. This represents not only our personal gifts and graces, or just our professional knowledge or skills, but the symbolic and organizational power of the church we represent. To be identified as ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to function in the public realm with authority and responsibility that are more than just a sum of our personal and professional attributes.

Far from having to lay passively by the pool while contemporary crises erupt within and around the church, each of us, thanks to God's grace, can

[3]Muriel James and Louis M. Savary, *The Power at the Bottom of the Well: Transactional Analysis and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), p. 20.

become more effective spokespersons and servant leaders of church and society. Far from having to blame others for not getting us into the swim of health and history, we can claim our own destiny as persons and pastors committed to social justice and civility in a global community.

Clergy Involvement In Christian Social Action

To do so, obviously, involves many elements, but let me just focus on two major dimensions. First, let me suggest how we can be sensitively and strategically involved in Christian social action in our church and community. And, then, secondarily emphasize six imperative ministries of faithfulness and effectiveness for our time.

As the pastor becomes involved in the critical issues and problems of society, it is imperative to remember one's task is that of enabling the whole Body of Christ in every place to struggle for social justice and reconciliation. While the focus is primarily on the strategic role of the pastor, let us not forget the theology of the ministry of the laity and the practical reality that lay persons normally have an even greater stake in the health and welfare of church and community than does the itinerant minister. In addition, laity often can witness more effectively for social justice and civility because they know the channels for penetrating power structures, cultural sub-groups, parochial prejudices and provincial traditions.

All are involved in strategic social action at one level or another. Christian social action is the response of a Christian to an unmet human need in the light of one's theological and ethical convictions. It is planned, purposeful involvement in decision-making processes which influence policies and institutions. Unfortunately, many have come to think of social action as being simply synonymous with demonstrations and confrontations—events like trying to stop the "nuclear train" as it moved through Colorado. But in reality, a complete typology of social action would have to include such diverse activities as praying for a city council meeting, leading a church to study the nuclear predicament, writing letters to legislators, or being personally involved in politics. Every person will not stand in a picket line or march in a demonstration. Expecting everyone to do so is to lose a valuable resource because of a narrow perspective. Just as Paul speaks about "the varieties of gifts" in the church, so we must recognize a variety of social action gifts.

If we want to become more sensitively and strategically involved in our local church and community, we can do well to learn from four theoretical insights, succinctly stated by Robert H. Bonthius: exposure, intervention, collaboration, and organization.[4] Let me elaborate briefly on each.

[4]Robert H. Bonthius, "Getting Into Social Action—And Staying With It," *Theological Education* (Winter, 1970), Vol. VI, No. 2, p. 102. See also Donald E. Messer, "Social Action Blueprint for Parish Pastors," *Christian Advocate,* Nov. 12, 1970, p. 7-8.

Exposure. One's perceptions and actions are shaped by life experiences and exposures. Until a problem is identified, there is little chance of attempts to solve it. A basic theoretical foundation in the social sciences is the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[5] This can hardly be over-stressed because it is so critical regarding the crises the church and country are facing today. Let me give three examples of how this social science theorem is operative today.

(1) The attack launched on the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches was not accidental. It was a deliberate effort to undermine grassroots support for the ecumenical church working for social justice. Substantial public evidence exists that government leaders, upset by the WCC's prophetic attacks, have funded overtly and covertly efforts and publications aimed at the World Council. Likewise, the *Reader's Digest* and "60 Minutes" programs were fruits of a campaign orchestrated by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and heavily funded by six foundations previously noted for giving to very conservative political organizations rather than to religious organizations.[6]

The temptation is to expound at length on these groups and facts, but let it suffice for now simply to point out how these folk understand the importance of shaping perspectives. If they can get people questioning how their church offering is being spent, they may be able to stifle the prophetic voices. If they can create suspicion in people's minds about these ecumenical organizations, then perhaps they can change or destroy them. Failure to counter the false charges levied against these two ecumenical organizations could have serious long-term consequences both in terms of finance and world-wide service.

(2) President Ronald Reagan has taken to the television networks to portray as vividly as he can the world-wide dangers posed by the Soviet Union and the need to escalate the Pentagon budget. He is attempting to define the situation militarily to justify the consequences of a $1.9 trillion defense build-up. He already has asked ministers to spread his anti-nuclear freeze message from their pulpits.[7] The President knows that "if persons define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." That is why Vice President George Bush journeyed to Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia to thank Reverend Jerry Falwell "for what he stands for" because Falwell is one of the "responsible American leaders" opposing the nuclear arms freeze.

(3) Imagine for a moment that an epidemic was sweeping this country and that in the last three to four years more than 1800 cases of the disease had been identified. Seven hundred deaths have been recorded. Half of the victims are

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[5]W. I. Thomas quoted in Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), p. 421.

[6]Leon Howell, "Who Funds IRD?" *Christianity and Crisis,* March 21, 1983, p. 91.

[7]"Reagan Rejects N-Freeze As 'Fraud,' " *The Denver Post,* March 9, 1983, p. 1.

under 35 years of age. No cause or cure currently exists. How the disease is transmitted is uncertain. Who will be victimized next is problematic. Five to ten percent of the total population are prime candidates.

In light of previous national concerns for unraveling the mysteries of the Legionaires' Disease, the toxic-shock syndrome, and the swine flu epidemic—all of which killed far fewer persons—one should expect that the nation's churches and politicians would be clamoring for substantially increased funding to mount a crash medical program of research and assistance. That historically has been both the Christian and the American way.

But this time things are different. The killer disease I just described is not imaginary but real—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a new disease that destroys the body's immune defenses and leaves its victims vulnerable to cancer, pneumonia, and a host of other deadly infections. In general, the church has been silent and the politicians have moved very slowly about getting any major funding for research.

Why? Because sexual and racial prejudice blinds our perceptions, and limited exposure to the primary victims paralyzes our consciences and our actions. So far this dreaded deadly disease of AIDS has basically been confined primarily to the new "lepers" of our society—homosexual men, drug users, and Haitian immigrants. Increasingly, however, it has also appeared in hemophiliacs and children in these groups. No one knows whether or not it will soon spread to heterosexuals and lesbians. To repeat—if we do not perceive a problem, then we will do nothing to solve it.

If we are exposed to human conditions crying out for justice, and become sensitized to human problems, we are more likely to become change-agents for Christ. Ministers who are wounded healers reach out to the broken people Jesus came to save. A primary reason most of us lack understanding and compassion for people who are of a different race or nationality or religion or sexual orientation is that we simply have never had much opportunity to associate in meaningful and positive ways with those who are different than ourselves.

Experience is essential in the process of exposure, but it is imperative that data be derived from a variety of sources. Besides meeting and talking with the victims, change-agents, powers, and experts involved in a particular problem, it is necessary to crosscheck this oral data with written accounts published in newspapers, books, and surveys. It is critical to know, for example, that during the period of the Vietnam War, 58,000 American soldiers died in combat overseas while 17,000 American women died at home in acts of domestic violence. Or to know that 50,000 official reports of sexual abuse to children are made each year in the United States with only an estimated 10% of the cases reported.

Then comes our reflection upon this information in light of our knowledge and feelings about the situation, theoretical inputs regarding the possibilities and limitations of social change, and consideration of the constraints and convictions of the Christian faith.

Intervention. A second step in this process of involvement is intervention. Fact-finding is but the prolegomena to direct action. Research into any problems will provide a plethora of perceptions, problems, and possibilities. Out of the multitude of concerns, specific plans must be outlined and proposals must be reduced to operational dimensions. Goals must be realistic. Attainment of ends sought must be a real possibility. Nuclear freeze resolutions have a chance for success; unilateral disarmament proposals are utopian impossibilities.

Personal theological understandings influence one's social and political ministry. A theology excessively dominated by a pessimistic view of one's ability to change the world will not produce persons willing to contribute abundant energy, time, and talent in social action causes. Christian realism which stresses human sinfulness and the penultimate nature of nation, class, and ideology, but is imbued with a real vision of the future, is a theology of hope, and, therefore, provides a framework for political and social involvement.

Once we know our goals, as religious professionals we need to select methods which cohere with our chosen ends. If freedom is a goal, for example, then one ought not use methods which rob others of their right of decision. If respect for persons is a basic ethical principle, then in conflict situations one must seek to back an opponent into a corner with an open door; in other words, help those with whom we disagree to save face and change position without losing their dignity.

Theology should stimulate, inform, and correct our social action. Persons engaged in training clergy for action discover, however, that "*people more frequently act their way into a new way of thinking than think their way into a new way of acting.*"[8] In other words, theology develops in response to an empirical situation. In response to unmet human needs we discover new Scriptural insights and resources. In trying to influence the policies of human institutions, we are likely to understand Paul's references concerning the evils of "principalities." In meeting conflict and defeat, our pride and self confidence are likely to be shaken, causing humility and even holiness to emerge.

Strategizing must not only include theological and ethical reflection, but also an assessment of costs and resources, plus deploying necessary energies for achieving goals. In designing plans it is necessary that a pastor or a group select the issues carefully, weighing their relatedness and evaluating the group's realistic power. Throughout the state of intervention, strategy must be heuristic since effective social action takes into account the revising of goals, the changing of personal and social situations, the shifting of alternatives, etc.

No religious professional operates prophetically exclusive of other concerns. If one is providing pastoral leadership to a local church, then one has many other responsibilities. One, therefore, must balance social action con-

[8]Quoted from a group called TRUST, by Robert H. Bonthius in "Action Training: What Is It?", p. 92.

tributions with other pastoral duties. The pastor who alienates one's church because one neglects basic pastoral tasks also usually fails to be effective in social action. The basic dilemma facing every pastor in social action is how to be a moral leader without alienating those whom one is trying to influence. Lay opposition to pastoral social action is often based on rational grounds; other times the "flak" is irrational. Loving, caring pastoral concern has a therapeutic effect in such situations and often reduces the anger, if not the disagreements.

The preacher who enters the pulpit to preach on controversial issues needs to have a grieving heart, full of what Abraham Heschel would have called the "pathos" of God.[9] We stand not above, but with our people, not in detached judgment, but involved with them for justice's sake. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "whom you would change you must first love."[10] None of us will ever be change-agents for social justice, reconciliation, and civility in human life if we don't truly embrace with love and care the people in our churches whom we are called to serve and change. As George A. Buttrick said in his 1940 Lyman Beecher lecture:

> The wise preacher of the social gospel is always ahead of his people, but always tied to them in loyalty and understanding love. If their minister has been with them in stress of joy and sorrow, in overcoming and failure, they will not question too strongly his right to speak the whole truth as he sees it in Christ.[11]

The pastor involved in controversial social action, of course, has no surefire formulas for success and can make as many mistakes as any other. The person of faith, however, recognizes God's love means mercy and forgiveness. Intervention involves choices. To remain neutral and not to act really means to take a side and to choose. Life is always a choice of values, sometimes of choosing between lesser evils. Therefore, we can appreciate anew Martin Luther's unusual advice: "Sin bravely." Or put another way, do one's best and pray for forgiveness!

Collaboration. Collaboration is a third step for clergy in a social action. Religious professionals or church groups cannot initiate or sustain social action by themselves. Pastors and groups are therefore urged to collaborate with a variety of people and groups. Tentative alliances with groups of diverse purposes and functions must be formed for effective social action on a particular issue. Once a problem is pinpointed, it is essential to note how much communi-

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[9]Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 224.

[10]Quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom For Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), p. 13.

[11]Quoted in Lovett Hayes Weems, Jr., "Pastoral Care and Social Controversy," *The Christian Ministry*, March, 1983, p. 20.

ty support already exists for solution of the problem. Pastors in social action should develop working relationships with (1) church hierarchies, (2) a network of consultants, (3) community change-agents, (4) a circle of supportive persons, and (5) the local congregation. Let me briefly indicate why each is important.

Everyone has what is called a "reference group" in sociology. These reference groups have normative or comparative influence on us. Theological professors often look to graduate school mentors or professional organizations like AAR/SBL. Students may be influenced by professors. The professional clergy reference group is usually clergy colleagues who set formal or informal standards of behavior and provide a frame of comparison by which we can evaluate ourselves. If they expect or approve of our social action, then it is easier for us to endure the conflict and controversy that inevitably arises around significant projects.

Pastors need to keep their church leaders informed of their activities. Churches with a strong hierarchical structure can be especially helpful to a pastor who is involved in social action. Other churches have similar organizational mechanisms. Church groups and leaders provide sources of legitimization for a minister as well as being possible resources for money, persons, and facilities.

Collaboration must also continue with a network of consultants. The victims of social injustice and those persons who are intimately acquainted with the problems must be continually contacted for purposes of information, exposure, and evaluation.

Community change-agents—those persons in the city who have power to enact change at various levels—are valuable persons for pastors engaged in social action. They can provide leadership, expertise, and resources for information and assistance.

Pastors in social action especially need the collaboration of a circle of supportive persons, including wives, husbands, lovers, like-minded professional colleagues, and kindred community spirits. These persons provide services of commiseration, and cross-criticism.[12] These persons are an important reference system for pastors in social action. Pastors whose spouses disapprove of their social action will find it difficult to continue their involvement.

A final reference group with major impact on religious professionals in social action is the local congregation. Pastors are deeply influenced by what their people expect from them. While denominational officials tell clerics to be prophets in word and deed, what they often mean is to engage in social action without unnecessarily upsetting the church program, budget, or people. Campbell and Pettigrew in their classic study of Little Rock ministers during the racial crisis over schools discovered that the local congregation was the

[12]Robert H. Bonthius, "Getting Into Social Action—And Staying With It," p. 105.

most important reference group prohibiting meaningful social action.[13] Fear of alienating one's congregation and thus losing friends and possibly position is a major force operating to keep pastors from effective social action.

This fear is correlated closely with a pastor's tolerance for ambiguity, compromise, and conflict. As Seward Hiltner once noted, "A minister who cannot tolerate ambiguity cannot tolerate a local church."[14] Consensus-oriented persons take fewer risks than clergy who can live comfortably with more conflict. But as the great black leader Frederick Douglas asserted:

> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning... This struggle may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but there must be a struggle.

In a study of clergy, Francine Carol Juhasz discovered that "a person's ability to manage social conflict is a predictor of his effectiveness in bringing about social change." The portrait of a successful pastor in social action that emerged from this study indicates that such persons:

—have a positive attitude toward social conflict;
—view conflict as a means, not an obstacle;
—work cooperatively with others;
—refuse to be threatened by conflict;
—see conflict as a challenge, not a defeat;
—are able to maintain a sense of humor; and
—do not blame themselves for the occurrence of conflict.[15]

Effective pastoral involvement in social issues is inhibited if controversy and conflict are avoided. If, as someone has said, "fear is the darkroom where negatives are developed," it is imperative for clergy to overcome this personality hangup if one expects to be a servant leader for social justice.

Organization. Change seldom comes rapidly or without persistence—organization is imperative. A church that has not been regularly educating and sensitizing its people to critical issues facing the church and society will always be at a disadvantage to organized forces that seek to undermine the church and discredit its leadership.

Sub-rosa power structures in boards of directors or organizations can stymie individual efforts for change. Early in my ministry I met defeat in an effort to reform a private child care agency because I discovered too late the hid-

[13]Ernest Q. Campbell & Thomas F. Pettigrew, *Christians In Racial Crisis: A Study of Little Rock's Ministry* (Washington, D.C. Public Affairs press, 1959), p. 87.

[14]Seward Hiltner, *Ferment in the Ministry* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 22.

[15]Francine Carol Juhasz, "Management of Social Conflict as a Predicator of Effectiveness in Social Action," Ph.D dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1969, pp. 10-11.

den interlocking relationships of board members who were also members of a fraternal order and directors of a particular bank which held that agency's funds and investments. I spoke with a prophetic voice. But I got booted off the board! All because I did not properly study the total system and organize support before I went into battle. Since then I have sought to carefully select issues, tried to determine the depth of opposition, weighed carefully the possibilities of victory, and tried to go forward into the controversy with a more realistic understanding of what "powers" and "principalities" I was facing.

Much more can be said, of course, about organization, but suffice for now simply to note that impoverished social issue campaigns characteristically suffer from the neglect of the details of morale-building, finances, equipment, and public relations. The art of administration is critical; without it one can expect unnecessary failures in Christian social action.

Obviously, these four theoretical axioms—exposure, intervention, collaboration, and organization—provide but a rough sketch of what it means to "rise, take up your pallet, and walk," away from the pools of professional narcissism and personal piety and into the mainstream of life's controversies. But perhaps they provide at least some clues as to what is necessary both personally and professionally if we are to engage in effective and faithful ministries of the Gospel in Jesus Christ.

Ministries of Faithfulness and Effectiveness

This leads to outlining what a ministry of faithfulness and effectiveness would be in our time. *First, it would be a ministry of reminding.*[16] Clearly one of our responsibilities as clergy is to remind our church and society of higher values than are the "common coin of the realm." The Church must be the conscience of the nation. In an age of alarming militarism, pressing economic needs, world hunger, and oppressed human rights, the exigencies of global life make imperative a renewed role of reminding for the Christian church and its ministers.

Some years ago Michael Harrington reminded us that the poor in this country are invisible. Tragically, hunger is again on the rise in this country. One out of seven Americans—mostly women and their children, the elderly, and the unemployed—lack the resources to properly feed themselves and their families. The percentage of children in poverty has jumped from 16% to 21% in only the last few years. For most of our people global poverty in the Third and Fourth World is even more invisible. We who are committed to a faith that has a clear bias toward the poor, therefore, must remember that ours is

[16]The first five of these ministries are adopted from the listing found in "Identifying a Food Policy Agenda for the 1980's: A Working Paper," Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, 1980, pp. 8-9.

always a ministry of reminding—of calling persons' attention to forgotten people, to hurting victims of life's tragedies and systems, and to transcendant norms that summon us to repentance and renewal.

Second, ours should be a ministry of interpretation. Much of our ministry is done in the interruptions of life. Until the *Reader's Digest* and "60 Minutes" launched attacks, few clergy had planned to spend time interpreting the ecumenical organizations to their people. Certainly ten years ago few pastors ever dreamed we would be interpreting questions of homosexuality and ordination. Yet now we find ourselves in that role, and we know that in the future other agendas will press in upon us, and we will be called to be faithful interpreters of the Word in relation to the needs of the World. It has been noted that "The ancient prophets discerned and interpreted the signs of the times. Our task is no less. We are called to discern the moral meaning of the present situation and so interpret it that eyes are opened, hearts moved, and political will redirected."[17]

Third, ours must be a ministry of protest. There are simply times when we must say "no." As clergy, we have to draw ethical lines and raise probing moral questions. It has been said that the three greatest social movements of our time have involved saying "no": (1) "no" to segregation; (2) "no" to the war in Vietnam; and (3) "no" to male chauvinism. By declaring ourselves in protest to policies, procedures, and programs that dehumanize persons, we begin to be catalysts for Christ in our churches and communities.

The conscientious Christian has to define, at least to oneself, what are the moral limits—the "here I stand, I can do no other" points—the violation of which would undermine all the good one seeks. Learning what these limits are may be the beginning point of our public ministry. "Negative starting points" are easier to identify sometimes than positive programs. But as Peter Berger has suggested, we must begin by saying:

> *No* to children living in garbage, *no* to exploitation and hunger, *no* to terror and totalitarianism, *no* to anomie and the mindless destruction of human beings...From these concrete instances of saying *no* one may then move ahead to the painstaking task of finding alternatives which will not only be morally acceptable, but which will work.[18]

Illustrative are Christians who are beginning to say "no" to deeper American military involvement in Central America. In the last two years, 8,069 El Salvadoran citizens have been murdered for political reasons. Unless there are quick and major human rights, economic and political reforms,

[17]Quoted from *Ibid,* p. 9.

[18]Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 227-228.

many persons in churches and in politics will be saying "no" to a war that has already caused more than 30,000 casualties.

Fourth, ours must be a ministry of advocacy. Few persons and professionals in American society have the freedom and the opportunity to speak as advocates without being accused of self-interest. Yet the clergy can be advocates of what Jesus called "the least of these" in our society. The church, said Walter Rauschenbusch, must fight for the "underdog" since "the strong have ample means of defending their interests and usually enough power left to guard their unjust interests also."[19]

Taking a clue from Jesus' relationships with the discouraged and downtrodden of his society, along with the thundering prophetic voices of the Old Testament against injustice and insensitivity to the needs of the poor, Christian theology and ethics has a decided leaning toward what the Latin Americans call a "preferential option for the poor." God does not love the victims of society more than others, but because Yahweh is a righteous God divine concern reaches out especially for persons, races, classes, and nations in need. Theologian Karl Barth said:

> The Church is witness of the fact that the Son of God came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that—casting all false impartiality aside—the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of its primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state's special responsibility for those weaker members of society.[20]

Truly, our vocation calling is a ministry of advocacy!

Fifth, ours must be a ministry of envisioning. Without a vision, the people perish—that is a cornerstone of prophetic understanding. Visions have a way of defining reality, and like the Thomas theorem suggests, visions have consequences. Because Martin Luther King, Jr., had a "dream," America is different today than when he proclaimed it in Washington twenty years ago. Because Pope John XXIII had a dream of a renewed church, not only is Catholicism different today, but so is all Christendom.

Dreamers run risks. Visionaries are often persecuted. Not all dreams become reality. But to use the words of John F. Kennedy we must become "idealists without illusions." For just as voices from mainstream Protestantism in the 1970s finally helped bring an end to the Vietnam War, so it may be that in the 1980s the bishops of the Catholic Church may provide the needed

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[19]Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis,* edited by Robert D. Cross (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; first published in 1907), p. 361.

[20]Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," *Against the Stream* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1934), p. 37.

impetus, for America at least, to reconsider the consequences of the nuclear arms race.

Dreaming impossible dreams—seeing beyond the usual—envisioning a new way or a new world—flows from the very essence of the Christian faith. Because the church's commitments transcend parochial and national self-interest, and because the values affirmed inspire greater compassion, justice and equality for all persons, Christians should dare to be involved in social action and partisan politics in order to transform dreams into reality. Our dreams can become our destiny.

To think of the Church as the conscience of the nation may seem like a romantic dream—"tilting at windmills"—yet it represents America's, if not the world's, greatest and best hope. *Time* correspondent L. Bruce van Voorst, writing in *Foreign Affairs,* argues that "because of their enormous memberships, organization, and dedication, the role of the churches will become critical in determining the political impact and outcome of the 'nuclear movement' in the United States."[21] Far from being impotent, the church can be a powerful force. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us, "Hope alone is to be called 'realistic,' because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught."[22]

And, finally, our ministry must be a ministry of reconcilation. Love must be the norm and style of our life as clergy and laity. Our calling demands nothing less. Our Christ demonstrated nothing more.

In the struggles of controversy, it is easy to forget the commands to love neighbor—and enemy. Let us insist that there be room in our debates on homosexuality, war and peace, ecumenism, or whatever, for the conscientious objector—for the person or persons who take(s) stands diametrically opposed to our own. Let us humanize our polarizations, remembering that none of us is certain we have God-given answers to social questions and issues.

We stand in the need of God's grace and forgiveness. Let each of us stand boldly and strongly for what we believe, but let us love intensely those with whom we disagree and who work in opposite directions. If God can see the good in us and love us as we are, then surely we can see the good in those with whom we disagree. What Robert Kennedy spontaneously spoke in a black neighborhood in Indianapolis the night Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated needs to be heard again:

> My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

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[21]L. Bruce van Voorst, "The Churches and Nuclear Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs,* Spring, 1983.

[22]Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 103.

> What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and the feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black....
>
> Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: "to tame the savageness of man, make gentle the life of this world."

In light of the contemporary crises facing our church and world, let us rise, take up our ministries, and *run!*