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Pope John Paul's Jubilee Call for a More Robust Social Engagement

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For the year 2000, Pope John Paul drew heavily from the Jewish theme of the Jubilee year, particularly since it was central to the mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 4). Not only did John Paul use this as the key motif for the church's reflections on the Jubilee itself; he has made it central to church planning for the new millennium. In effect, the Pope is calling on Catholics, in collaboration with others of good will, for a renewed social engagement with the great issues of our time, to advance the freedom, human rights, solidarity and wellbeing of all people.

To assess how well the Pope's interpretation of the Jubilee theme meets major challenges facing the church, especially in its social concerns, I propose to relate it to some of the ideas articulated by JB Metz in his 1998 work, *A Passion for God*. A disciple of Karl Rahner, Metz has of course been an advocate of political theology for many years. This recent collection of essays in *A Passion for God* summarises key challenges he sees. Undoubtedly Pope John Paul II is quite familiar with Metz's views.

Metz was concerned to relate theology more closely to the contemporary historical context, especially by first confronting more forthrightly the Enlightenment critique of religion; secondly, by seriously dealing with the implications of Auschwitz; and thirdly, by attending more resolutely to the challenge of suffering in the third world with its multiculturalism and plurality of religious traditions. He does not see the disputes over liberation theology as 'a conflict between a base church and a hierarchical church but rather . . . between a bourgeois religion that cannot get beyond just taking care of its members, and a messianic religion of discipleship'.¹

1. JB Metz, *A Passion for God* (Mahway NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 45.

For Metz, 'biblical-Christian mysticism is not really a mysticism of closed eyes, but an open-eyed mysticism that obligates us to perceive more acutely the suffering of others'.² But what he fears in our political culture is 'a profound apoliticality [sic], a privatistic parochial thinking always ready to adapt itself, a rather voyeuristic way of dealing with social and political crises'.³ In the church, he sees spreading from Rome a 'defensive mentality, demanding certainty and an emphatically defensive way of preserving traditions'. Instead he demands 'the courage of concrete imagination, of concrete engagement' with problems and difficulties,⁴ rather than a sectarian piety demanding uncritical and excessive loyalty to the church and closing itself off from the great problems of the day with their dilemmas of conscience. He quotes Rahner calling for a 'church of morality without moralizing', which fosters a 'culture of freedom of conscience in the church' so that it escapes 'its everpresent temptation "to want to triumph by detouring around the consciences of men and women"'.⁵

In his 1977 work, *Faith in History and Society*, Metz had warned against an 'absence of critical freedom' in the church, leading to a silent crisis in the profound alienation of great numbers of Catholics, reacting against what they perceived as a closed and dangerous 'sectarian attitude'.⁶

Metz has thus set a very demanding standard for the sociopolitical engagement of Christianity. How, then, does the Pope measure up, especially in his Jubilee program?

The Pope considers the Jubilee of great importance in restoring a sense of focus and scale of priorities for the church, recognising social commitment as close to the heart of God and the gospel. In his visits all over the world, as well as in his many speeches and social encyclicals, John Paul has demonstrated grave concern about the plight of the poor in the third world and the direction of globalisation.

He has long held the ambition to articulate a liberation theology for the world. As he said in Rome in 1979 after his visit to Puebla, liberation was 'one of the fundamental biblical themes, and must be taken up again in the teaching of the church, in theology and in the

2. *Ibid.*, 69.

3. *Ibid.*, 77.

4. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

5. *Ibid.*, 96-97.

6. JB Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), 96-97.

apostolate'. He continued that 'it must be admitted that one of the great contemporary theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar, is right when he demands a theology of liberation on a universal scale . . . 'Christ! It is necessary to speak of our liberation in Christ; it is necessary to proclaim this liberation. It must be integrated in the whole contemporary reality of human life.'⁷

The choice of the word 'liberation' is fortuitous not just because it encapsulates modern political and social aspirations, but more so because it more accurately translates the Hebrew word for 'redeemer', as first God redeeming the Hebrews from Egypt, and then Jesus offering his redemption. 'Liberation' preserves the social aspects at the heart of the metaphor but which has in large part been lost by historical spiritualising of the word 'Redeemer'.

The liberation terminology also cuts through many of the historic accretions on Christianity which obscure the most fundamental revelation of God, as not just interested in saving human souls, but who stands exposed in history as the one who pledges to rescue (redeem) people from suffering and oppression.⁸ In Jesus God is so passionately concerned for human wellbeing that he lays down his life for us.⁹

Because he believes that God is revealed in terms of this liberation, the Pope has been urgent in declaring that men and women of faith cannot be indifferent to the great social dramas of our time; our response is not an optional extra, a 'charity', but an essential aspect of living in fidelity to Christ. He wants Catholics especially to make a more robust and intelligent contribution to public debate, in the context of a rejuvenated ecumenism and a deeper collaboration with the other great religious traditions. So far, Metz would agree with what Pope is saying.

7. 'Liberation theology involves "that truth which made us free"', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 February 1979: 1, 12.

8. For a striking treatment of God's solidarity with those who suffer, see Fretheim, Terence, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984/87).

9. Jesus does not save us from an authoritarian and vengeful God, but reveals in startling clarity who the God of the Old Testament really is, what is deepest in God's heart. See *ibid.*, 2-3.

In taking up this Jubilee theme, John Paul addresses another of Metz's key concerns and has provided a new basis on which Christians of all denominations, and indeed also Jews and Moslems, can invoke a common religious tradition of a vision of God profoundly concerned about human suffering and wellbeing. Not only does such an emphasis overcome the dichotomy between contemplation and action, between faith and works,¹⁰ between charity and justice, but it also provides firm scriptural foundations for social collaboration across religious boundaries in the urgent tasks of peacemaking and social justice. Indeed, such a vision of God not only provides grounds for a fruitful collaboration among the great religious traditions, but also with those of no religious belief, since the God of Jubilee so startlingly embodies contemporary secular ideals of freedom, justice and social equity. Metz would also heartily endorse this aspect of the Jubilee.

However, this Jubilee message is not being heard very clearly in the church, much less more widely. It is no secret that even some of the cardinals have not been happy with all that the Pope has been saying about the Jubilee, especially the apologies for past errors by the church.¹¹ Others have not understood why the Pope is placing so much emphasis on the social implications of faith. Hence in many places, the message of the Jubilee was reduced to a traditional exercise of piety or devotion and its social implications largely ignored. This is a serious situation, as it means that one of the most important correctives of the Second Vatican Council has still not been received or understood everywhere, even by some of the bishops.

1. Social engagement

The Roman Church has celebrated Jubilee years off and on since AD 1300, but never before has so much emphasis been placed on the practice of the Jewish Jubilee as recounted in Leviticus 25, and highlighted by Jesus in his mission statement in Luke 4. Pope John Paul has repeatedly emphasised the social context of these passages.

10. In Metz's view, sanctity 'proves itself in an alliance of mysticism and militant love, that takes the suffering of others itself'. See Metz in 'Messianism or "Bourgeois Religion?"', in JB Metz, and J Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity and Modernity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995), 25.

11. Metz has been keenly aware of the 'collective memory of disappointments caused by the Church', and compromises with political and social alliances. See *Faith in History and Society*, 93.

He is not arguing, of course, for a reduction of religious practice to social work, in the sense that only a secular social engagement is of worth. On the contrary, he is demonstrating the essential link between faith and social obligations, since God at the Exodus and throughout the history of Israel is revealed as passionately concerned with human wellbeing. John Paul's ideal is to demonstrate the intrinsic link between contemplation and action, as he has modelled in his own life. As he said in his January 2001 letter, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 'Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history' (#33). Indeed 'we must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity . . .' (#52) Metz must have been truly delighted to hear these words coming so strongly from the Pope.

Moreover, John Paul has invited the whole church to draw up fresh pastoral plans for this new millennium, taking as the key criterion our response to the Last Judgment scene in Matthew's gospel, that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison. He urges the whole church to 'go in charity to the poorest', to take new risks for the disadvantaged and distressed, as he invokes the refrain, 'launch out into the deep', away from our safe places. Matthew's gospel text is 'not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ' (#49). Is the Pope making a concession here to liberation theology's 'orthopraxis'? Whatever the technical meaning of the words, the Pope insists that the mission of the church hinges on solidarity with the afflicted.

'Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty', including the new forms of drug addiction, fear of abandonment in sickness and old age, and discrimination. He asks all to make sure that 'in every Christian community the poor feel at home' (#50). By now Metz must be wildly applauding the Pope.

For people in the Hebrew Scriptures or for Jesus, of course, there was no bifurcation between social realities and spirituality. The point of the Jewish Jubilee—however imperfectly it was followed in practice—was to restore social conditions to what God had intended—freedom from bondage, with every family ensured material sufficiency by owning their own land, and remittance of all debts. The

modern difficulty of the disjunction between the realms of faith and social life would have been inconceivable to Jesus.

2. The papal apologies

Most intriguing were the Pope's formal apologies in Lent 2000 for past errors by Catholics and their church, particularly in relation to the Jewish people, Protestants during the Reformation and since, and wars of religion. The Pope also adverted to violence used in the name of the faith, and the systematic violation of conscience through forced conversions or the Inquisitions. He repeated apologies to the Orthodox in his visits to Greece and the Ukraine in June 2001. Metz must also have strongly approved these apologies, long overdue as they are, but finally confronting the church with a profound truth about its own historical witness, the obfuscation about which has been such a source of scandal.

Some cardinals and bishops did not agree with the Pope making these apologies, thinking they would revive memories of past hurts and damage the reputation and authority of the church. But the Pope was insistent that fearful and tragic historical truths had to be faced and acknowledged if there was to be a genuine reconciliation with groups harmed or alienated by past events. The church had to abandon any hint of triumphalism and walk humbly with its God, asking for forgiveness. There could be no pretence or ecclesiastical humbug here.¹²

Curiously, there has been little academic writing so far on the significance of the apologies, especially for ecclesiology.¹³ For it is clear that the apologies extend not just to Catholics acting against church teaching, as in the case of slavery in the New World for instance, but also for those acting at the command of the magisterium or church authorities over centuries, as in the Inquisitions or the Crusades, with the violation of consciences and abuse of what we would now consider the most fundamental rights to life and non-

12. See Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa's [sic] of John Paul II* (New York: Alba House, 1998).

13. See however the important article by Bradford E Hinze, 'Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue', *Theological Studies* 61, 2000: 207-38. Also see Avery Dulles, 'Should the Church Repent?' *First Things* 88, December 1988:36-41; and Kevin Lenehan, 'The Great Jubilee and the Purification of Memory', *Louvain Studies* 25, 2000: 291-311.

combatant immunity. One need hardly add that these are the very antithesis of what the modern church declares as the basic principles of its social teaching and integral aspects of evangelisation.

John Paul has not received total support from the curia for all his actions. Cardinal Ratzinger, for instance, publicly disagreed with the Pope hosting a meeting of the world's religious leaders at Assisi in 1986. Yet such symbolic gestures have a way of gripping the imagination in a way words cannot, and perhaps they are also a way for him to move the debate forward without having to justify matters theologically to everyone. One thinks also of astonishing symbolic gestures in his visit to Jerusalem and the Wailing Wall, and his later visit to a mosque. Perhaps it is also providential that he goes in his frailty of illness and old age, reverent but somehow penitent. These images have a power beyond words, evoking compassion and a feeling of solidarity in grief and anguish over the great sufferings and injustices of the past, so often committed in the name of religion.

Indeed, as Metz would insist, gospel liberation is not always about securing victory, but about joining a crucified Christ in his solidarity with suffering. Without taking away anything of the bone-crunching horror of so much suffering, Metz talks of a 'suffering unto God'.¹⁴ In *Faith in History and Society*, Metz wrote:

The memory of suffering in the Christian sense . . . creates a social and political conscience in the interest of others' suffering. It prevents the privatization and internalization of suffering, and the reduction of its social and political dimension. In this memory of suffering, the history of suffering and the history of social oppression are not identical, but they are also not separable.¹⁵

The papal apologies also have something important to say about the authority of the church and its claims to articulate religious truth. The apologies strongly reinforce the right of conscience even against the magisterium. If the magisterium can be wrong on such major questions as Pope Leo XIII's teaching on church and state or statements

14. Metz, *A Passion for God*, 69.

15. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 115.

made by the Biblical Commission during the anti-Modernist campaigns early last century, why cannot it be wrong on other matters?¹⁶ And how is one to make such a judgment, except through the cultivation of conscience, especially by an attentive listening to the voices of those who are suffering, marginalised and oppressed, as recent church social teaching so insists? Despite instances of heroic resistance by some church personnel to the unjust wars and dispossession of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, was not the overall picture one of massive collusion and complicity by the church and great numbers of Catholics in what can rightly be compared to the Jewish Shoah, but perhaps on an even greater scale? How are we morally to evaluate the colonisation of Asia and Africa?

Metz is right to draw the implications of Auschwitz to the attention of the church, especially to reinforce the determination of the church 'to form its identity in the face of and together with the Jews'.¹⁷ The Jewish people are not just another people who have endured genocide and long-standing persecution. For Christians they have a special place because Christ was nurtured and died as a faithful Jew, and the Jews retain a special significance in God's eyes. Furthermore, Jews have suffered exceedingly at the hands of Christians or before the eyes of Christians, who hence share in the responsibility for their fate.

The question of the authority of the church and the role of conscience is contentious but very critical in the light of history and the responsibility of the church and its personnel. The apologies demand that the church must discover, acknowledge and own the truth of its own history, so that this 'purification of memory' may purge the church of any cultural and historical baggage which obscures its fidelity and witness today. It is no exaggeration to speak of the need for a momentous change of heart among many Catholics on these matters, though such a process cannot occur overnight.

Indeed, the logic of the apologies invites a more sophisticated understanding of conscience than seems to be held by some in the Holy See. Clearly there are deep disagreements within the Vatican about how the church should proceed to clarify the relationship between conscience and authority. Some recent statements of the curia indicate a dogged determination to emphasise the authority side of the

16. See Bruce Duncan, 'The Significance of the Pope's Proposed Apologies for Errors by the Church', *Australasian Catholic Record*, October 1999: 462-79.

17. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 42.

equation, despite the Pope's initiatives with the apologies. Nevertheless, John Paul's appointment as a cardinal of Walter Kasper, who has publicly challenged Cardinal Ratzinger's views about the role of the bishops in relation to the Holy See, perhaps signals the beginning of a retreat from the extreme centralisation of church authority in the Vatican.¹⁸ In his document on the new millennium, John Paul may have made a few people in the Vatican nervous with his declaration that 'there is certainly much more to be done' to reform the Roman Curia and help the episcopal conferences and synods to operate (#44).

But let us return to Metz's concern about how the church is to respond to the acute social distress and injustice suffered in the third world, where most Catholics live, in contrast to the affluence and unprecedented prosperity of much of the western world.

I do not intend to explore the complexity and nuances of the Pope's views on church-inspired sociopolitical action. But certainly very early in his career he was strongly influenced by the thinking of de Lubac and Jacques Maritain among others, to strengthen the social engagement of the church. It should not be forgotten that after his doctoral studies, he went to France at the request of the Polish bishops to report on the Worker Priest Movement. He is thus closely acquainted with the so-called 'New Theology', with its strong reaction against the accommodationist policies of the authoritarian Catholics around Action Française and the Vichy regime. Not only were their politics discredited, but their theology as well. It is thus no accident that John Paul so strongly echoes the 'integral humanism' and concern for social justice and human rights of Maritain and his disciple, Pope Paul VI. Wojtyła's life under a communist regime dictated a careful balance between church social criticism and survival within sharp constraints. These dictates also inhibited a fuller structural critique of capitalism.

John Paul strongly agrees with Maritain and the Second Vatican Council that the church must respect the autonomy of sociopolitical affairs, and hence keep a discreet distance from partisan politics, which should be the preserve of the Catholic laity acting on their own initiative, independently of the church. The role of the church is to develop and propagate her social teaching, and encourage and train the laity to undertake their social responsibilities in building a just

18. Walter Kasper, 2001, 'On the Church', *Tablet*, 23 June 2001: 927-30.

society and world community. Thus John Paul has abjured the older Latin pattern of direct clerical involvement in politics.

But the Pope has been prepared to depart from these general principles when he thought necessary, as in Poland where he played a prominent role supporting the political opposition to the communist regime. Undoubtedly he saw his interventions here more in terms of the defence of human rights and religious liberty, but this is a good instance showing that the application of these general principles is not always self-evident or uncontroversial.

Perhaps the debate over liberation theology has been the most difficult in which to apply these principles, especially when many church personnel and agencies felt compelled to defend human rights against murderous regimes and the systematic oppression by elite groups protected by death squads and by military forces supported by the United States. Historians will debate whether the Pope read too much of his experience under communism in Poland into the turbulent events around the development of liberation theology, and if he were accurately informed about events in Latin America.

Indeed, the Pope's views on liberation theology have been at times perplexing. At Puebla in 1979 and on many other occasions, he has spoken most forcefully on the church's duty to defend the poor and marginalised. Yet he was concerned about versions of liberation theology that might uncritically accept elements of Marxist ideology and lead to further conflict, especially within the church itself. The 1984 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was a clumsy document and aroused much debate within the church about its accuracy. Many claims have been made about the politics of its drafting and release, but I know of no definitive clarification as yet, and we may have to wait years before scholars have access to the records.

The 1986 *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* was a more considered document, but again strongly supported church efforts for social justice. After its release, John Paul wrote to the bishops of Brazil, commending their zeal in promoting social reform, and affirming that as long as their church continued in accord with church social teaching, including the two Instructions, then 'we are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely but useful and necessary', especially to break the fatal attraction of both

'unbridled capitalism and of collectivism',¹⁹ meaning Marxism-Leninism.

The Pope undoubtedly sees his role as preserving unity in his church, but at the same time he wants it to confront social injustice and oppression. The Catholic Church in Latin America thus presented a particular difficulty, for many of the social conservatives strongly opposed to liberation theology came from the upper class and saw the church's role as being more in a charitable model of helping the poor but without fundamentally challenging the structures of society or radically redistributing wealth. Others, like Cardinal Ratzinger and the leading opponent of liberation theology, Cardinal Trujillo, also appeared strongly opposed to the injustices of capitalism, but were primarily concerned to preserve the church's episcopal authority and to control the so-called 'popular church'. The more 'progressive' elements of the church, in part influenced by elements of Marxism or class analysis (not necessarily the same), had abandoned a strictly charity model of social action, believing that only with deep structural change could the lot of the poor and dispossessed show rapid improvement.

One does not have to be a Marxist to believe in class struggle, not in the metaphysical sense as the motor of history, but in the empirical sense, long accepted in the English-speaking world and in papal documents too, that there is a bitter struggle between rich and poor in many countries. Only the perversely blind could not see it in Latin America.

The outcome of the debates in Latin America has been puzzling for many overseas observers like myself. On the one hand, the church has recommitted itself to the struggle for social improvement, trying to hold a middle-ground position on social change to prevent further polarisation within the church. Indeed, some substantial progress has been made in Latin America, particularly in removing many of the military dictatorships and restoring some semblance of democracy and protection of human rights.

Yet on the other hand, many economies teeter on the verge of outright collapse under the burden of foreign debt, land reform

19. John Paul II, 1986, 'Make Appropriate Responses to Challenges of the World', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 April 1986: 6-7.

appears largely stalled, and the ruling elites remain in control of many economies and their politics. Moreover, the Christian popular movements seem to have lost much of their energy, and many conservative bishops have replaced some of the champions of social justice, like Archbishop Helder Camara. How is this in accord with the Pope's support for social reform? Or does it indicate that other more conservative factions in Rome have control of episcopal appointments?

What holds for Latin America also applies on the global scale. The promise to rapidly lift living standards in third world countries has been dashed by decades of stumbling efforts at development. The promise of globalisation has not been realised for everyone, but is exacerbating the gap between rich and poor countries. Given the extremely grave consequences for the impoverished people in the third world, the Pope and Vatican agencies have been seeking a clearer analysis of world problems, particularly through the Pontifical Commissions for Justice and Peace, and for Social Science, and Vatican UN delegations and representatives. As Michael Budde argued in *The Two Churches: Catholicism and Capitalism in the World System*, the shift in the Catholic Church to becoming primarily a third world church has meant an increasing concern with questions of global justice and inequality.²⁰

Here I suspect Metz would feel less happy with what John Paul has achieved. While he undoubtedly endorses John Paul's efforts to focus world energies on the plight of the poor, he is also keenly aware that much of this message is in practice undercut by curial attempts to tighten control, even over the bishops, and to demand excessive loyalty in violation of the principle of subsidiarity and against the Vatican Council's views on episcopal collegiality. There seems to be a fundamental contradiction between the Vatican's doctrinal conservatism and the Pope's social progressivism.

The Holy See is undoubtedly, and rightly, concerned to maintain the doctrinal and organisational integrity of the church against relativist philosophies and centrifugal social and cultural forces. This will be an increasing problem, as cultural pluralism increases within the church, and episcopal authority becomes more dispersed, particularly through the emerging third world. The question of conscience for the moment is caught in this wider conundrum. My hunch, and my

hope, is that the present Pope is pressing the Jubilee theme to prepare the church under his successor to find a more satisfactory answer to the problems, with an intelligent and vigorous social engagement more widely lived as an integral part of the gospel.

20. Michael L Budde, *The Two Churches: Catholicism and Capitalism in the World System* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).