

Subversive Compassion

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Subvert: "To turn from below; to overturn or undermine from the foundation"

As the Church of the Nazarene begins its second century, nothing less than a subversion of its administrative, educational, and ministry apparatus as well as the theology that nourishes and perpetuates that apparatus will be required if the church is to follow Jesus of Nazareth into the 21st century. As the definition above makes clear, subversion implies a radical change that is brought about from below. The kind of vital subversion I have in mind here is one that can only be made possible by the church's compassionate identification with those on the "underside of history" (Gutiérrez). Though the word *subversion* relies on a vertical spatial metaphor, this revolution from below may also be spoken of as a revolution from the margins – a displacement and de-centering of the church from its present male-dominated, North Atlantic, affluent, racist nucleus to the peripheries of both our church and world. What follows here are three theses that are intended to serve as a modest starting point for a dialogue about the subversive nature of Christian compassion with a challenge to the North American church to find ways of more centrally defining itself by this compassion.¹

Compassion, as is well known, means literally "to suffer with." Yet, how rarely is this solidarity that is the essence of compassion allowed to govern our understanding and mold our practice when it comes to compassionate ministry. In our world, compassion is regularly reduced to soft, pastel attitudes toward people in need – a remote pity that feels sorry for the "less fortunate" or "under-privileged." The compassion which we discover in Jesus of Nazareth, however, entails two simultaneous movements that go far beyond this cotton-candy distortion – the movement toward *community* with those who suffer and the movement toward the *liberation* of those who suffer. Authentically Christian compassion is never complete where there is only a remote effort to provide aid without identification and solidarity. So also, authentically Christian compassion is never complete where there is only proximity to suffering without the joyful and demanding work of relief, advocacy, empowerment, protest, and justice. Compassionate ministry must always take up this double movement of *liberation* and *community*, and it is precisely this double movement that gives Christian compassion its holistic character (compassion includes concerns for justice and liberation) and its subversive character (compassion starts "from below")

1. Christian compassion is subversive *theologically*.

¹ For a more systematic attempt at developing a public and practical theology of Compassionate Ministry, see *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

Of the many contributions that theologies from the third-world have been making over the last half century, three stand out as especially important when considering the development of a theology of compassionate ministry. The first of these is an insistence that *context* is not just the political, social, and religious reality in which the church lives, but the soil which nourishes the theology of the church and shapes the ministerial preferences and structures that flow from that theology. Context affects how we read and interpret scripture – what we see and, just as importantly, what we don't see. Context can mobilize or anesthetize the passion for justice and the pursuit of peace.

A second contribution of these theologies from the margin is closely related to the first. It is a call for the application of a thoroughgoing *suspicion* to theology – especially insofar as theology is done from within a context of privilege, comfort, and wealth. This suspicion proceeds on the assumption that because of the concrete life-commitments and social location out of which our beliefs arise, some important data will not always be taken into full account while other perhaps less important data will be given a primary role. In other words, all theology is biased. Furthermore, since wealth and poverty do not occur in a vacuum in our world but are instead most often related to one another as cause and effect, any theology that serves the interests of the wealthy and comfortable (however unconsciously it may do so) inevitably participates in the oppression of the poor and outcast. Theology is never neutral.

But perhaps theology, though biased, can be biased in the right direction. It is this third contribution of liberation theology that is its most controversial. Juan Luis Segundo, a Jesuit theologian from Uruguay, proposed the possibility of a liberating circle between context and theology. What is required, according to Segundo, is a context that is capable of yielding questions that are “rich enough, general enough and basic enough to force the theological community to change its customary conception of life, death, knowledge, society, politics, and the world in general” (8). Today I am convinced that the kind of context Segundo is talking about is the context in which many Nazarene compassionate ministries already find themselves in North America – situations of poverty and dehumanization which afford a view of the world from its underside and margins and from which a revolution in theology and ministry can take place.

Theologians like Segundo claim that theology done from within a context of wealth and comfort will naturally tend to function conservatively as a mirror of the status quo and in such a way as to justify the way things are rather than in such a way as to hear how Christ calls things to be. Theology, in this case, is unable to ask the right questions, much less provide the right answers. When enslaved to wealth, theology is impoverished. Almost forty years ago, Gibson Winter wrote a book entitled *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*.² This title, I think, continues to be an apt description of our church – not only geographically (though that is undeniably true), but theologically as well. Our church and its theology have, for some time now, been held captive by the interests and distractions of those who have little or no interest or stake in the liberation of the oppressed, the inclusion of the marginalized, or the restoration of dignity and humanity to the poor. All too often, the working religion of our denomination has been little more than a synthesis of American civil religion and a few moral pilferings from the table of the religious right. By extension,

² New York: Macmillan, 1962.

our popular theology is but a pale reflection of the prevailing cultural patterns of individualism, consumerism, and a sharp dualism between private and public life (unless, of course, a Democratic President of the United States is caught in a sex scandal in which case our private indignation suddenly knows no bounds).

Like so many other Protestant denominations in North America, we are the religious bastards of an economic system that favors the accumulation of wealth and unrestricted consumption of world resources over long-term sustainability, social justice, and the global good. Our heroes have long ago ceased to be John Wesley or Phineas F. Bresee but have instead become James Dobson and Rush Limbaugh. And perhaps nowhere is our suburban captivity as apparent as in our denominational magazine, the *Herald of Holiness*, which, of course, most Nazarenes buy for the same reason most men buy *Playboy* (and it's not for the articles!) The function of the *Herald* is interesting precisely in its non-literary and iconic value. It serves to perpetuate a conservative, white, affluent model of Christian living within which most of the denomination can feel comfortable and secure despite the diversity, poverty, secularity, and downright difference that surrounds us. Over the last ten years (and probably longer), the *Herald of Holiness* has not once featured a non-white family with parents and children on its cover. Yet dozens and dozens and dozens of healthy, wholesome, and attractive white families appear on its cover skipping around, swinging on swing-sets, going to church, and reading the Bible together. And one of the few times the *Herald* actually ever did picture a non-anglo person on its cover, was when it featured a black woman who was a practitioner of Santeria with a snake draped around her neck. The Church of the Nazarene does not side with the poor, and in a world where poverty overwhelmingly runs along lines of color our church is still lily white. The exceptions we might identify only serve to prove the point *as exceptions*.

Theology done "from below," on the other hand, has little or no interest in things staying the way they are. It is instead open to the transforming and revolutionary message of Christ's gospel. Without the rich questions Segundo talks about, there can be no liberation of theology and no overturning from the foundation (*subversion*) of what it means to be the church or of what it means to minister as Christians. For that reason, as we move into the next century, compassionate ministry cannot be treated as the one-legged stepchild kept in the denomination's basement or an interesting sideshow maintained as a place to relieve our collective conscience as a church. If theologians from the third-world have taught us anything, it is that solidarity with the poor is required for the church to be the church. Compassion, then, must come to define the church at its center. Our theological starting point must become an indispensable identification with victims, with the sufferer, with the outcast, with the marginalized, and with the dying. When compassion really is "suffering with" rather than a condescending charity dropped onto situations of need from positions of privilege and comfort above, it can become the rich soil from which a liberating Christian theology and subversive Christian praxis can blossom and grow.

All this is not to say that there is something glamorous or somehow meritorious about poverty, injustice, suffering, and marginalization. Nor is it to say that all theology done from the perspective of the poor has a guaranteed validity. It is to say, however, that the poor and powerless are able to see the coming of God's reign as "good news" much more clearly than the wealthy and powerful. The coming of God's reign spells an end to

exploitation, injustice, oppression, and suffering. No one who experiences those things has to be converted to the notion that their demise is a piece of good news. It is automatically good news (*gospel*). This is what is meant when liberation theologians claim that the poor are the natural addressees of the gospel or when Jesus claims that the poor are the inheritors of the world he has come to inaugurate. The rich and powerful, however, do not experience the coming of God's reign as a cause for joy – at least, not in the first place. They must instead be converted to that fact (since when, after all, is losing one's advantage over others immediately experienced as good news?). Of course, the wealthy and advantaged are not the only ones who must undergo conversion. The poor and disinherited must also be converted. As Segundo notes, however, the conversion is not the same for both groups. While Jesus calls the rich and powerful to be converted to the gospel as good news, he calls the disinherited to be converted to an understanding of themselves as inheritors of God's reign.³ This is a subversive evangelism indeed.

What has come to be known as a “preferential option for the poor,” therefore, is not only or even primarily a *ministerial* preference, but rather a *theological* and *epistemological* preference as well. In other words, it is not simply that the church ought to make compassionate ministry *to* the poor a priority because, after all, poor people really need the church's help. Rather, compassionate ministry *with* the poor opens the church up to the experience and perspective of the poor in a way that helps us be the church! It is the poor who become the church's theological guides. While compassionate ministries in the Church of the Nazarene have been rather intentional in taking up this *ministerial* preference,⁴ they have not always taken up the second aspect of this preferential option in a way that is so desperately needed in the church today – namely, a *theological* preference. In fact, the success of Nazarene compassionate ministries in providing food, clothing, or emergency relief compared to its utter failure in challenging systemic evil and deeply rooted injustices in our society is, I believe, very much related to the fact that compassionate ministry has not been grounded theologically in the experience of the poor. Instead the practice of compassion in our church has typically been allied to a theology that, far from nourishing authentic Christian compassion, instead domesticates it and, at times, even works against it.

Compassion cannot be constructively linked to the pursuit of justice when it is wedded to a theology that has no interest in justice. It cannot effectively minister to the whole person when it is wedded to an anthropology that neatly divides the soul from the

³ Long before there was such a thing as “liberation theology,” Howard Thurman was saying much the same thing. In his *Jesus and the Disinherited* (originally published in 1949) he makes the case quite eloquently that Jesus' call to the disinherited is a call to reorient themselves as God's children. It is this conviction, says Thurman, that “automatically tends to shift the basis of [one's] relationship with all [one's] fellows” (51). To understand oneself as an inheritor of God's reign is to eliminate fear, deception, and hate. It is the basis of love and the restoration of integrity and dignity.

⁴ Phineas F. Bresee, the founder of the Church of the Nazarene, is as scandalous as any of the liberation theologians when he proclaims, “we can get along without rich people, but we cannot get along without preaching the gospel to the poor.”

body. It cannot effectively challenge "the domination system"⁵ when it is wedded to a truncated, narrow, and individualistic doctrine of sin. And it certainly cannot mobilize a broad-ranging holiness ethic that arises from a life of confession, repentance, and sacrifice when sanctification is reduced to something that happens on Thursday night at campmeeting.

For some time now there has been a mainstreaming of compassionate ministry that has increasingly bred agitation, consciousness-raising, organizing, and protest out of compassion. Instead, we have all too often been exposed to models of condescending charity that stir us to bend down to help out the "less fortunate" (a phrase that is often used for the poor and oppressed because of its neutrality to issues of injustice). Today, however, the church must engage in subversive compassion, and certainly for the sake of the poor, but it must also do so for its own well-being, for its own renewal – indeed, for its own survival.

2. Christian compassion is subversive ecclesiastically.

Our church has not, in recent years, proved itself to be a friend to poor people. Concerned more often with the size of our churches at home and the export of suburban holiness abroad, the church has rarely allowed those without a voice, without power, and without position to make significant claims on its life and ministry. Even when the church has "stretched" itself toward including the marginalized, it has rarely rethought its nature and mission in view of their predicament. While desiring to play a part in the life of the poor, the church has not always invited poor people to play an integral part in *its* life.

Over time and as a result of this neglect, the prevailing structure and organizational patterns of the church have become gigantic obstacles to the full and creative participation of poor people in its life, theology, and ministry. Nonetheless, it is possible to transform the church into the community of liberation that God intended it to be. Such a transformation requires a thorough rethinking and restructuring of the church in the light of the massive experience of poverty and oppression on our planet. Indeed, there can be no authentic participation of the poor in the life and ministry of the church where a materially comfortable church of the elite simply invites poor people to join them. A complete reversal of the church's relationship to the poor must take place. In a world that is predominantly poor, the church must first become a "church of the poor," or as Gustavo Gutiérrez advocates, "a poor church" (117).

But what does it mean to be "a poor church"? Does it mean that there is no place in the church for those who have wealth? Certainly not. It does mean, however, that the church and its ministry must be shaped by the suffering and poverty of the world. When this happens, the church can truly become a "compassionate" church. The church that allows not only its sense of mission and experience of worship but also its institutional life and internal organization to be shaped by the needs of those who suffer will be revolutionized from outside itself. And this is the irony of the matter. The church is called to change the world. But the world must first be allowed to change the church. As

⁵ See Walter Wink's trilogy: *Naming the Powers* (1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (1986), and *Engaging the Powers* (1992) – all published by Fortress Press – and especially his single-volume version, *The Powers That Be* (Doubleday, 1998).

Gutiérrez puts it, "the Church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world" (261).

In our world, however, whether we like it or not, the world that stands ready to inhabit the church is overwhelmingly poor. A church that fails to be shaped by that poverty and need, as Jon Sobrino says, is neither "human" nor "Christian." In the first place, a wealthy church is *inhuman* because

in a world predominantly poor, wealth intrinsically causes the church to distance itself from the real world, to disembody itself from it, and to feign not to understand it. A rich church is, first of all, a church that has failed to become flesh in a world predominantly poor and is, therefore, a "fairy tale" church; in that sense, it is unreal (84).

In the second place, a wealthy church is not a *Christian* church "since it does not follow the poor and humble Jesus" (84).

The church that is wealthy, therefore, is actually worthless both to God and to human beings. It does not serve the former and it has no relevance to the latter. Instead, the wealthy church is a church that deceives itself and others as to the obscene violation of the image of God that poverty and suffering are in our world today. The point is not that wealth is intrinsically evil nor that poverty is intrinsically holy, of course. The point is that in our world it is improper and even deceitful to consider wealth or poverty in the abstract, apart from the motivations and practices that lead to each and apart from the consequences and paths to which each leads. And nowhere is this more true than in the church.

A poor church, as Sobrino argues, is able to be "rich in compassion" not because it has great quantities of material goods to bestow on the poor, but because it has something even more valuable to offer – solidarity and vulnerability. These are the essential ingredients of compassion rather than an alien or neutral charity trickling down in the form of "pity." A poor church, therefore, can be not only *human*, but *Christian*. A poor church follows the example of Jesus in taking sides with the marginalized and outcast of society, and when it is following Jesus in the practice of compassion, the church thereby reflects the character of God and serves God. The poor church is "evangelical" in the sense that its inner life and mission are rooted in the gospel – a gospel that brings liberation and community to those who are oppressed and excluded. The poor church has nothing to conceal. It is free to be a sacrament of *life* and *truth* to the world. It is free to be "compassionate."

Compassion, then, is both the mark of the true human being as well as the defining characteristic of the true church of Jesus Christ.

Compassion, as a response [to the suffering of others], is the fundamental action of the complete human person. So conceived, it is not one thing among many other human realities but that which clearly defines the human person. On the one hand, it is not enough to characterize human beings so, because a human is also a being who knows, hopes, and celebrates. On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary, for in the eyes of Jesus, to be a human person is to respond with compassion. If one does not do so, that person has, at root, perverted the very

essence of what it means to be human, as happened in the case of the priest and the Levite who went around the man lying in the road (Sobrino: 89).

Compassionate ministry is humanizing ministry – it is an expression of and a recovery of the image of God. To be compassionate is not only to be human but to restore the humanity of others. Compassion is more than one ministry among others and it is not simply a "spiritual gift" or "particular calling" that only a few Christians have. If we can talk about the essential character of Christ in terms of "compassion," then it must certainly also be a constitutive element in the life and mission of Christ's church.

3. Christian compassion is subversive *institutionally*.

Over the last thirty years, three types of institutional structures have served as our church's dominant models for the practice of compassionate ministry in North America: (1) direct denominational assistance in the form of grants, worldwide disaster relief, and other forms of direct aid, (2) compassionate ministry "programs" set up within local churches, and (3) church-based non-profit corporations. A tremendous amount of good has come out of these models and one can only hope that this good can continue in years to come. As we evaluate these vehicles for compassion, however, the question arises as to whether the net result of such models is actually the distancing of compassion from the center of the church by the creation of what, in effect, have become institutional appendages for carrying out compassionate ministry. Do these models really move us in the direction of becoming the compassionate church that Sobrino talks about or do they instead engender a church that practices compassion at a distance?

This critique may seem especially appropriate in the case of the first two models mentioned above (denominational and local church compassionate ministry programs). It shouldn't take much convincing for us to realize that simply because a church or a denomination feeds hungry people or clothes naked people, it has not necessarily made a commitment to stand with the hungry or the naked nor has it necessarily made a commitment to work to end the structural conditions that cause hunger and nakedness in the first place. The fact is that it is quite possible to engage in charitable work for the poor as a denomination or as a local church without actually entering into liberating community with the poor. This, of course, does not mean that such programs should be eliminated, but it does mean that they do not provide for us a model of a subversively compassionate church.

The third model, however (the church-based non-profit corporation), is a bit more complicated. In recent years, this institutional form has been one of the primary shaping influences in how we structure compassionate ministry in our church. Since many of these non-profit corporations were begun as an outgrowth of churches who understood compassion (even subversive compassion!) as their defining center, they may hold more promise for us as we seek to find appropriate practical models for imagining and implementing subversive compassion. And then, again, they may not.

The non-profit corporation has served compassionate churches primarily through its ability to solicit funds from a variety of sources, administer complex social programs, and provide a solid means of accountability to a wider public. As a distinct entity from the church with a separate board of directors and a different relationship to the Internal

Revenue Service, the non-profit corporation has also been able to provide the compassionate church legal protection in what has become a very litigious social work environment. The church receives this protection, of course, by being effectively removed or “veiled” from any oversight or authority over what is going on in the corporation – and perhaps this is just the problem. While the non-profit corporation has served as an effective tool through which a compassionate church might deliver its ministries to the community, too often it has also introduced a number of dynamics that have served to distance the church from its compassionate center.

One of those dynamics is a “corporate” mindset that all too easily distances the church from the poor and from the servant model of leadership we discover in Jesus. It is difficult to overemphasize the impact that the corporate model has made on the 20th century church as a whole and on Christian ministry in particular. We are now directed by executives rather than led by ministers; we are now managed instead of disciplined. Those we serve are now clients; and instead of evangelism we now do marketing. In North American culture, the corporate mentality is roughly equivalent to the air we breathe. And the church, eager to look presentable before Caesar (or rather IBM, Citibank, and the City Council) has filled its lungs to capacity with this air. We kid ourselves if we think that the corporate model can be simply borrowed from the world, tweaked a little here and there, and then made to serve the subversive compassion of Christ. At least one of the reasons why compassionate ministries today fail to engage *the powers that be* is because they have so pervasively adopted the way *the powers* do business. As a result, centers for compassionate ministry do not have the high ground (perhaps “low ground” would be better) from which to be subversive. The church of Jesus Christ is not a non-profit corporation; and while I do not advocate that we should do away with or cease creating non-profit corporations as one way of carrying out compassionate ministry, I believe they hold little promise as institutional vehicles of subversive compassion.

Another dynamic in our compassionate ministry models that has served to distance the church from its compassionate center is an enslavement to fundraising. Modern compassionate ministries are literally consumed by this activity and, at the same time, perhaps no single phenomenon has served to weaken the prophetic dimension of compassion than its dependence upon the charity of the wealthy. Let’s face it, compassion abstracted from concerns for justice and liberation can be funded by the powers that be. But a subversive compassion that goes beyond mere charity to include ministries of justice, protest, and advocacy is much more difficult to fund. As Dom Helder Câmara, archbishop of Recife, Brazil, once said, “When I give people food, they call me a saint. When I ask why there is no food, they call me a communist” (Brown: 86). Naturally, if this is the case, compassionate ministries tend to create and recreate themselves almost solely on the basis of what is fundable. And that is damnable.

One of the dangers hidden in compassionate ministry is that, as Paulo Freire notes, bestowers of charity actually *require* unjust social arrangements in order to perpetuate their charity. Charity can become addictive and actually serve as a tool of control over hurting people – a means of keeping them dependent on the good will of the “righteous” in society. Authentic Christian compassion, on the contrary, is suspicious about the social, political, and economic arrangements between the givers and the receivers of charity – a suspicion

that simply because the givers of charity have chosen to be generous, they have not thereby ceased to serve the powers that oppress and enslave. As Freire puts it,

True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and working, transform the world (29).

There is, I suspect, a tendency among compassionate ministries in our church to avoid matters of social injustice because they require a prophetic voice that tends to alienate those who benefit from that injustice and who, by no strange coincidence, happen to be people who can benefit compassionate ministry through financial donations. The net result is that our society's patterns of acquisition and consumption, domination and subordination are, in general, not being challenged by compassionate ministries but rather mimicked. It is virtually impossible to be prophetic when one's existence is dependent on money given by the persons or institutions to whom one is prophesying. Apart from a certain "prophetic distance," we eventually end up saying things we don't mean and not saying things we do mean.

There are no easy answers here. Nonetheless, we can surely experiment more creatively than we have in creating institutional models that are more appropriate to subversive compassion. One serious possibility – a somewhat shocking possibility to those who have spent a long time in compassionate ministry circles – is the possibility of no longer soliciting money. Period. Money obliges us to the one from whom it is given. Especially if we want more! It is well known that Mother Teresa would accept contributions from anyone but would allow no one to solicit contributions for the work of her and her sisters. She had this stubborn belief that God would provide. Who knows what that might mean if practiced in our own context? It might mean that compassionate ministry ends up reduced to little more than a network of faith communities who have nothing more to offer the poor than their solidarity, their voice, and their good looks. So be it.

In his article, "Why 'Servanthood' is Bad," John McKnight makes the case that in our society we have replaced hospitality with social services and allowed large institutions to take over the community's responsibility for one another.

The hospice took hospitality out of the community. "Hospice" became "hospital." The hospital became Humana, a for-profit corporation buying up church hospitals. Communities and churches have forgotten about hospitality. Now systems and corporations claim they can produce it and sell it and that you can consume it (40).

I suspect that something like this is also the case with compassion. What would it take for the liberating compassion of Christ to become the defining center of the church as a community of faith instead of the specialized practice of a handful of compassionate

ministry centers? These institutions undoubtedly serve as a creative and effective vehicle through which the church as a redeemed community can come together to reach a hurting world, but they can also function as a cop-out for a church that has no interest in following the path of radical discipleship and so finds it easier to funnel the poor elsewhere. The recent trend toward designating some of our churches as “Good Samaritan Churches” may be a step in the right direction insofar as it attempts to put the local faith community back in the business of compassionate ministry, but it is not clear what this designation means on a practical level – especially with regard to the integration of compassion with concerns for justice and liberation.

One of the greatest challenges before our church with regard to compassionate ministry today is the creation of compassionate faith communities – basic ecclesial fellowships that reflect the compassionate and humanizing mission of the church in the world and that define themselves around the kind of subversive Christian compassion that merges charity with justice, worship with activism, protest with pastoral care, preaching with advocacy, and empowerment with evangelism. Open to the subversive compassion of Christ, these communities will have to find creative new ways to re-imagine and re-invent their inner life structure not on the basis of what is fundable nor culturally appropriate. Rather, like the Nazarene from the Galilean ghettos, these communities will find their starting point in liberating community with “the poor and the outcast for whom some care so little but for whom our Redeemer lived and died.”⁶

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⁶Phineas F. Bresee from a 1899 editorial in *The Nazarene Messenger*.