



DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

“Go to the peripheries!” Before he was elected Pope Francis, Jorge Cardinal Bergoglio gave this talk to the Cardinals gathered in conclave in March 2013: “There is a tension between the center and the periphery.... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed. When this happens, the Church itself becomes sick... Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.”

Since its foundation, St. Vincent School of Theology tries its best to follow the same spirit in the arrangement of its curriculum, pastoral engagements and the orientation of its professors. True to the gospels and the example of Vincent de Paul, our vision-mission statement already intends to pursue “a way of doing theology that builds on the religious experience and praxis of the socially excluded, and gears towards the evangelization of the poor.”

To understand this vision, we refer you to a foundation communal and institutional experience of the SVST community as it encounters the peripheries in their most marginal moments. For, as we very well, in theology, this is the only place to start – human experience at the rough grounds where people struggle to live. There is no other.

INTRODUCTION: OF AK47S, CRANES AND HOLY WATER

Let me start with my personal experience. On the Christmas of 2004, when the SVST community was trying to evaluate and re-orient its directions after almost two decades of existence, a tragedy happened in General Nakar, Infanta and Real, Quezon. A heavy flood and landslide covered these towns, and killed hundreds of people. SVST decided to cancel its traditional Christmas party. Instead the students decided to raise funds and goods for the victims of the recent typhoons in Quezon province.

Our objective was simple: to go to one small community that has not been reached by big relief operation groups both from the government and media. The place was a small sitio called 'Batangan' in the town of General Nakar. To reach this place, we had to walk for an hour with our sacks of goods on our backs (of course, with the help of the people from there otherwise we could not have carried them all!) and cross a small river by *banca* and trek again a good 20 minutes to get to the school where most people were relocated. It is a small community of 300 families, located right below the towering Sierra Madre. What meets you is a sight of total devastation. The only bridge that connects them to town is washed away. The elementary school is covered with soil and mud to the roof. Several houses were totally knocked down by the flood, soil and logs all together. It is good that one stronger house blocked the big logs. If it has given way, around 200 people could have perished that night as they were sheltered in an elevated area next to it. Around 10 people died in this small place, several bodies of whom were never actually recovered till now. We feel that there is a strong Basic Ecclesial Community in this place. The leader, who is an ex-Franciscan seminarian and who got married there, seems to have a good command and rapport with the people. Since the chapel was also destroyed, they made one classroom their chapel and since it was already Simbang Gabi, they hold a para-liturgical service each dawn to celebrate it. Remember, this is just a week or so after the tragedy! We talked with the mothers and fathers. Some played with the children. We ate with them, also with the rice and sardines that we brought. Then, we bade goodbye to this very hospitable and resilient people who can still smile and laugh with us despite what happened to them!

Yet there was one curious thing which we all noticed (and which we only recounted to one another when we were out of there): inside some of those small houses were AK47s!

On our way home, we passed through another barrio called 'Tignoan' (Real, Quezon), the sight of the much talked about Rapador building – the only reliable concrete structure in that place under which the people sought refuge during the raging storm. A landslide from the mountain above caused it to collapse, burying under it a hundred or more. They requested us to celebrate the Mass with them. The survivors and their families were all there. Those whose bodies were not recovered were beneath our feet. It was almost Christmas. The readings that day talks about the 'Emmanuel', the 'God-with-us'. But in front of a grieving people who were crying from the start of the Mass to its end, where can God possibly be found? One could sense the question: Is God really with us? When lights were blinking in all malls and streets of Manila to signal Christmas, it was so dark in that place as electric lines were not restored yet. What could Christmas mean in this place, if it means anything at all?

Out of both desperation and hope, one mother asked a student if she knew President Arroyo. The student asked her why. In all sincerity she replied: "*Kasi gusto ko sanang humingi ng regalo. Huwag na lang bigas, de lata at lumang damit. Sana magpadala siya ng malalaking truck o crane dito. Nasa ilalim pa kasi ang asawa ko. 'Yan lang ang tanging hustisya na maibigay sa kanya. Sana!*" (I would like to ask for a gift. We don't anymore need rice, canned goods and used clothing. What we need are big trucks and cranes. My husband is down the rubbles. To get his dead body of there is the only justice I can give him. How I wish!) After the Mass, they led us to where the common graves where, in the beach, under the banana or mango trees, in their own backyards. We sprinkled holy water on the graves and recited the prayer for the dead. I heard one lady exclaimed afterwards: "*Maraming salamat po. Ngayon, talagang makapagpahinga na sila ng lubusan.*" (Thank you so much. Now, they can really rest in peace.) I asked myself: Was God there or not?

I recalled these experiences of pain and suffering here since by now they are almost forgotten as they are being covered by other more 'media-worthy' events, e.g., the burial of *Da King* (Fernando Poe, Jr.),

the death of KC (the daughter of the Speaker of the House), the Christmas holidays or the tsunami victims. These experiences will now be forever marginalized by the 'scoop-hungry' society. Yet it is from these margins that real questions of God, of life, of salvation can be asked. The same questions theology has imposed on itself to examine. What I want to say is this: the 'margin' itself is the privileged place of God's revelation.

MARGINS: LIMITS OR FRONTIERS?

What is a 'margin'? How do we describe such a location?

When we first started to write, we were trained to write with proper margins: one inch to the right, one inch to the left; more practically measured by the index finger and later folded to make sure the handwritten texts are justified. In a way, the texts which occupy the center of the paper were more important. They get the teachers' utmost attention as to form or content. The margins, however, are an empty space. They do not signify anything at all except to be that – an empty space to highlight the text at the center.

But the presence of margins is also a necessary presupposition. When you write on a card from one end to the other, from top to bottom, without leaving some empty space as margin, it does not quite look good. How many times have we been reprimanded by our teachers to write book reports or formal themes with 'proper margins'? The more spacious the margins, the more pleasant the text appears. Thus, margins are not entirely useless. They are also fertile grounds for imagination to thrive. When we read books more closely, we want those with wider margins as this is where we write our own thoughts – some sort of running commentary or annotation, as it were. Writings on the margins in fact lead us to a reader's interpretation of the author's work in another context. In the medieval times, for instance, where monks were mere 'copyists' of sacred books as they could not change the texts, they can in fact 'play' with it on the margins. That is why medieval books are filled with lovely, curious or outrageous designs called 'illuminations' that can lead us to the copyist's mind, these being the key to his own interpretation of the central text or of his boredom as he does his lonely job. Margin thus is a space of play to

deal with the contingencies which could not be contained in the strict logic of life or text which is an inherent quality of the center space. Or, in business, for example, the notion of margin (as in 'margin of profit') refers to some sort of reserve (in the form of time or money) or allowance for the contingencies and changes in order to cushion one from losses or to brace one for gains and progress.

Margins thus have two faces. First, they point to some sort of *limits, verge, brink, edge* or the *border* of something. It is an empty, non-productive space, most often neglected and deserted. It is a passive reality which merely exists to highlight 'the center'. It is the center's task therefore to 'master' its margins and borders and make them serve its purpose. Recalcitrant margins thus have to be managed and controlled. States, for instance, have to always control its borders. That is why the separatist trend in Muslim Mindanao always proves to be a threat to the hegemonic Manila. The same happens in the Church as we heard of the silencing of Tissa Balasuriya, Anthony de Mello or Jacques Dupuis, to mention more recent cases.

But beyond this passive meaning is a dynamic reality. Beyond the notion of *limits, margin* also refers to 'frontiers' (as in 'new frontiers of knowledge', 'on the verge of discovery' or 'cutting edge'). It signifies a dynamic and creative space which has a life beyond what those at the center can ever imagine. In fact, its presence calls into question the center's existence. Like the margins of medieval copyists, it is a space of play but also of resistance for some real voices make themselves heard – voices which are neglected or suppressed by the logic of the center. It is here where 'life' happens with its contingencies and uncertainties but also with its unexpected disclosures and surprises.

I have been talking quite metaphorically. But when applied to theology, the above excursus is a plea to seriously consider a privileged locus for theological discourse – the margins of life, the margins of the church, the margins of society. In these margins, life is revealed in its utter limits. But it is also precisely here, in some special manner, that God chooses to reveal Himself or Herself.

MARGINS: THE LOCATION OF THEOLOGY

From 'Preferential Option for the Poor' to the 'Church of the Poor'

It is liberation theology which started in Latin America in the 1960s that alerts us to this direction. Unless the Church, its programs and its theology turn away from its effort at self-preservation and lose itself in the margins, it will lose its own reason to exist. Unless the salvation wrought by Jesus speaks to the actual political, economic and social sufferings and oppression, it is not worth the name 'salvation' at all. Liberation theology, because it challenged the 'center', became a threat to the ecclesiastical establishment. In a later stage, however, the institutional Church picked it up and began to talk about the 'preferential option for the poor' in Papal speeches and ecclesiastical documents. Now Jesus ceases to be seen as the 'victorious King of Kings' but as a poor man sent to liberate the poor person. "As he lived so he died – poor, buried in a grave that was not even his own," to use the words of PCP II. (PCP II, 48). The Church like Jesus should also come down from its throne, leave its feudal and monarchical trappings, and soil itself among the marginalized and the 'wretched of the earth'. The Eucharist instead of being a mere ritual commemoration of Calvary comes to be seen as a challenge to share one's resources in the manner of the breaking of the bread in the Last Supper. The whole theology and scriptures can now be seen from the perspective of the margins, the silenced, the forgotten, the oppressed.

But the term – 'preferential option for the poor' – in fact reveals the specific social location of its speaker. When the Church says it prefers the 'poor', it also means that it is not poor. Being an outsider, the Church looks at the poor and tries to help them in some patronizing and condescending manner. It is not poor; but it 'prefers' them. In fact, the choice of the term shows where one is located. For the real poor themselves do not use the term 'poor' to describe themselves. They call themselves by their first names. 'Poor' is used to describe themselves in front of others who are non-poor. 'Poor' is also the term used by the non-poor to describe social conditions lower than what they experience. Thus, the 'preferential option for the poor' implies a view of

the margins as passive recipients of my benevolent interventions – thanks to my different social location.

I have been looking for a direction in PCP II which points to what I am hinting at. The term 'Church of the Poor' is the closest that I can get. Among its many statements, it states: "The Church of the Poor will also mean that the Church will not only evangelize the poor but that the poor in the Church will themselves become evangelizers. Pastors and leaders will learn to be with, work with and learn from the poor." (PCP II, 132). This statement links us to our previous assertion: that the margins are themselves productive and creative spaces whose seeming emptiness is generative of God's epiphany.

Vincent de Paul and the Church of the Poor

If there is any guide who can lead us towards the Church of the Poor, it is Vincent de Paul, SVST's patron saint. In the context of 17th century France, Vincent was challenged how to make the Church of his times credible to people when bishops, priests and religious were wallowing in pomp and luxury in the cities while millions were dying in the countryside without the benefit of pastoral care. The Catholic Church has lost credibility as people turned to other faiths and denominations for meaning. In one of the missions which Vincent conducted in Montmirail, he encountered this objection from a Huguenot (a Protestant heretic):

"Sir, you have taught me that the Church of Rome is guided by the Holy Spirit. Now this is an assertion contradicted by facts. Look at the countryside. The pastors are ignorant, vicious and utterly wanting in zeal. The faithful, as an inevitable consequence, are left without instruction... Now cast your eyes on the cities. They are full of lazy monks and priests. Paris alone has ten thousand of them. And while so many priests are idling their time away, the poor country folk are lost on account of the ignorance in which they are left. No, don't tell that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit. I will not believe you." (Coste I, 102-104)

Vincent gave several reasons: that there are also good priests in the rural areas; that the priests in the city also have their own duties to do;

that the lifestyle of some priests should not be equated with the life of the whole Church, etc. But we could only imagine what Vincent could have felt then. He must have not been satisfied with his own reply. The situation is not very different from ours. Maybe we have been confronted by the same questions ourselves – questions which could not be answered by mere theological argument no matter how coherent and rational. Unless the Church takes the side of the poor, it will never be credible!

The following year (1621), Vincent and his missionaries gave missions in the same place. At the sight of their zeal and labor among the most neglected, the heretic converted. But the story did not end there. During the Mass which solemnizes his re-entry into the Church one Sunday morning, Vincent called him up to the front. At the sight of the statue of Mary, he changed his mind:

“I could not believe there is virtue in that stone,” he says.

To answer him, Vincent called a child in the congregation and asked: “What are we to believe about images?”

The child replied: “It is good to have them and to pay them the honor that is their due, not on account of the matter with which they have been made but because they represent persons who, having triumphed over the world, exhort us by their dumb representations to follow them in their faith and good works.”

Vincent postponed the solemn re-entry to give the convert time to strengthen his faith. But it has been said that he remained a holy man to the end of his life from the time of his conversion. For me, the crucial part of the narrative is the fact that it was a child who answered the heretic’s doubt. It was a child – the weakest, the most inarticulate, the poorest, the least in the church’s assembly – that solved the crucial question. When those in the margins have the strength to speak up, when they have the courage to stand up for their rights, when they begin to challenge us and the way we live, when they can articulate the question of God’s presence in their lives and ours, then we can say the real ‘Church of the poor’ is beginning to take shape. If you want a jargon, this is what they call ‘empowerment’. To help the poor in their needs is laudable. But to empower them with the strength that is theirs in the first place is what is meant by salvation. I know St. Vincent will agree with PCP II when it proclaims: “The Church of the poor will also

mean that the Church will not only evangelize the poor but that the poor in the Church will become evangelizers themselves.” (PCP II, 132)

DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS: THE VISION OF SVST

It is this double direction that constitutes the renewed vision of SVST. Let me explain the central phrase of its vision-mission statement.

“St. Vincent School of Theology is an institute for theological, pastoral and missiological formation of persons for effective service to church and society. It fosters a way of doing theology that builds on the religious experience and praxis of the socially excluded, and gears towards the evangelization of the poor.”

First, it is a theology *from* the margins. It starts theological reflection and its courses from the experiences of peoples in the margins in the belief that their questions have something to tell us about God, about life and the salvation that Jesus proclaims. In fact, we don’t evangelize the poor. It is the poor who first evangelizes us and calls us to conversion. If there is any theology, it should start with them, with their questions, with their concerns, with their sighs, with their hopes. This is the privileged locus of God’s revelation.

That is why we have also opened SVST to lay people who are interested to study theology. For we believe that it is the lay people who can best help us articulate the questions of the margins. In the past, theological formation appears to be a lone privilege of the clergy. Today, we proclaim that it is both a right and responsibility of the whole people of God. In the past, we have lay people as recipients of our formation – be it in our pastoral areas, catechism classes or recollections. Even as seminarians, we are always considered ‘higher’, ‘better’ or ‘more knowledgeable’. At present, in SVST, seminarians, lay people and religious – together in one classroom and on an equal footing – grapple together with the questions of life, of death, of suffering, of God.

Second, SVST aims to foster a theology *for* the margins. From them, for them! Our theology, our pastoral ministry, our lives are not for

ourselves. They are geared towards their liberation. We have dreamed that the students and graduates of this school become agents of empowerment of peoples in the margins.

When people say 'SVST', they would know where our loyalties lie, where our options are. For the students and graduates of SVST, those who have less in life should have more of our selves. *Sana, ito ang magiging 'tatak SVST'! Sana!* (I hope this will serve as the mark of SVST. I hope.)

CONCLUSION: LEARNINGS FROM THE MARGINS

Let me end with a personal note. In my experience as a priest and theologian, it is always the people in the margins who have taught me more intensely what God or what life is all about. I may understand the concepts in books or classroom but it is them who make it come alive in my life. Let me go back to that personal experience I recounted in the beginning.

Hundreds of books have already been written about 'integral evangelization' or 'integral liberation'. It took me that moment to deeply know what it was all about.

The people whom we have met in Batangan were deeply religious people. Since the place is not accessible to priests, they have organized liturgical services by themselves with their lay leader. A week after the flood, with all their homes washed away, the *Simbang Gabi* was in full swing! But the religious response is just one side of the story. "*Nasa Diyos ang awa; nasa tao ang gawa!*" (In God we hope for mercy, in the human person we expect real work). With the utmost poverty they experience, many of them might have felt that social transformation could mean total upturning of society. Could that explain the AK47s? We went there to bring goods to people thinking that they badly needed it. Some really did like in Batangan. But the lady in Tignoan alerted me to one reality. Justice (or charity for that matter) is to be able to see her husband's body and properly lay it to rest. Beyond goods or clothes that we might give, what is necessary is a prayer and a drop of holy water so that, like the other lady, she can also say, "*Salamat. Makapagpahinga na siya ng lubusan!*"

When we studied theology, we were bombarded with ideas like 'grace', 'ecclesiology' or 'eschatology' – many of which escaped our minds as we dozed off, lulled as we were by the rhythmic voice of what we call 'heavyweight' professors (by their mere voice, they can knock you down and out).

It takes these people from Batangan and Tignoan for me to deeply understand what 'eschatology' is all about. Their resilience tells me that despite the dying, death is not the last word. So, one should not 'throw in the towel'!

I saw them standing there, mourning for the death of their loved ones but standing for life that is to come, all throughout the Mass. It is a stance with which they face the whole of the uncertain life ahead. They all point to "Ian" – that 11-year old boy who survived under the rubbles for ten days without food. He led me to their backyard where they buried his mother who did not make it. But he was very much alive. In the end, I told myself: "It was difficult to find God. But He or She must be here.

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