

POSIBILIDAD

ADVENT REFLECTION

BY JIM HARNEY

Advent as living in in via. It's a time of journey and the breaking into history of God's life.

At this point in the liturgical cycle, the not-yet excels; the time of waiting in a patience-impatience posture receives the prize.

We focus on the in via, that path where God breaks into our lives. Mystery overtakes us, and we listen attentively to a call of possibility in the horizon of our times.

This via happens in a context of place. And in a place we find a face: a human being we're in dialog with, who opens up and shares his or her background. The story gives added flesh to place.

I'm thinking of a document by the UN entitled "Dying of Sadness: Gender, Sexual Violence and the HIV Epidemic."

Here we're dealing with places where women face the most horrendous things done to them. It is a hard read; my body shook as I read it. In the context of the structural violence that has plagued the poor

how do we take a sense of "place" and allow human reason to be placed within it and let it be enriched by human compassion and God's compassionate love?

This is certainly something the prophets worked on. How do we come to the point where we are able to see things from the perspective of those who suffer? So much of what Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, a Jesuit priest murdered with five of his fellow Jesuits in El Salvador, always referred to as a "Bloody Christ," "the Crucified," "the Suffering

Servant." For him, coming in touch with these realities promised grace and liberation. And it happened before a face, a human being in need, one dying of sadness.

Before the face it is so important to bring the tension between life and death to experience the tension between a via negativa and

a via positiva. Outside of that tension hope becomes more difficult. And it was within that tension that Ellacuría pointed out that we would encounter life.

The prophets stayed in touch with historical reality. They met it head on and that's why we can learn from their spirituality. They acted as though "God reigns." They inserted themselves in the reality of the times. They spoke on behalf of the ones living.

In the Old Testament literature we had prophets reminding us of the best within the tradition that the poor of Israel clung to as a matter of life and death. The prophets prayed as though their lives depended on it.

Those who kept in touch with the reality of Exodus, the orphan, exploited and excluded spoke on behalf of Yahweh. They kept tradition and memory alive. When people rendered justice to the oppressed an extraordinary thing happened, says Isaiah: creation danced and celebrated. This salvific event pushed the breath of imagination to its limits bringing with it unheard of openings to be present to the oppressed. No wonder the Israelites believed first in a God who identified with the lowly and then later fashioned a belief in God as creator!

Back to the in via that brings us to places where we encounter “the other.” Places full of surprise and awe. We encounter this life of mystery and invitation in history, in time, in the NOW. It’s in that precious time where the eternal and the temporal shine: and hope happens. “Hope begins where hope begins.”

What is it that impinges upon us in the now in which we live and are called upon to be a people of hope?

Everything seems to be falling apart: the world is looked upon from the perspective of the dollar. The dollar rules. Everything has become an industry: the education industry; the healthcare industry and even the church has been looked upon as an industry. And they are unable to meet the great yearning of human beings to be whole, to have something in them that moves them beyond themselves. Perhaps it’s time to realize the failure in all of this and to learn to take risks that bring us to realize that justice and integrity are important in our

lives and to be open to it. Fr Sobrino notes “By love, human beings ‘decenter’ themselves. They find their fulfillment in devotion to an ‘other.’”

Let me just share an observation by a biblical scholar, Walter Brueggeman, who puts the place of the “other” in perspective for us. He states, “While we may each one give a different name to our comparable matrix of faith identity I suggest that the task of the beloved community now is vis a vis the “money economy” of Western postindustrialized technology that sweeps all before it and seemingly cannot be resisted.” He goes on to state that this reality “is unhesitant about brutality,” and “it poses acute questions and challenges for a distinctive community of faith.” “This imperial context,” he believes, “is the one for our time and place.”

So this context: what’s it all about?

- Alarming poverty in the world.
- A scandalous concentration of wealth in the hands of so few.
- Prodigious amounts of capital moving swiftly around the world in search of profits.

And within this context we’re taken:

To Seattle where demonstrators challenged assumptions of The World Trade Organization, one of the most powerful financial institutions on the face of the planet.

To South East Asia where once-vibrant economies prevailed and now, instead, millions starve.

To children throughout the world forgotten and abused.

To those who face HIV/AIDS, eighty percent of whom live in Africa.

To women toiling in sweatshops that pepper the planet.

To Latin America falling deeper into poverty.

To Colombia where bloodletting takes place in the name of oil.

To Central America where after a decade of brutal war people live worse off now than during the eighties when hundreds of thousands lost their lives.

To Mexico, our neighbor to the south, where most of its 90 million people can't make ends meet.

In all these places we find a common denominator: "the Crucified."

We find 41 nations eligible for debt relief.

Their average debt load is 125% of GDP. They owe more money to powerful transnational banks than all the money that flows through their countries daily. When a country's GDP drops 2% it faces a crisis.

In the thick of this, US foreign aid declined by 8% in the 90's.

And even there, most of the aid came with strings attached – the majority of the money came back to the United States and ended up in the hands of transnational corporations rather than finding its way to the poor. For them there is very little trickle down.

Our in via with all of this in mind, knowing not the hour or the moment of liberation, but walking and acting, being present to the ones who call us forward: the excluded and violated. And in our in via we hear the words of Isaiah, "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of the messenger...who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

The prophets stayed in touch with historical reality. They met it head on and that's why we can learn from their spirituality. They acted as though "God reigns." They inserted themselves in the reality of the times. They spoke on behalf of the ones living on the edge. They proclaimed justice, a word and reality close to their hearts. The prophets lived in such a way that that they blended word and deed in to one harmonious whole.

In El Salvador during hard times, when torturers, death squads and military brigades had license to bomb and kill, Bishop Romero heard God's word voiced from the mouths of the country's poor. He changed and learned from his people. He believed that the poor had power and as a result he preached, "If

they take our radio station (which had been bombed many times) suspend our newspaper, silence us, put to death all of us priests, then each of you will have to be God's microphone. Each of you will have to be a messenger, a prophet. The church will always exist as long as even one

baptized person is left alive."

In this season of Advent we strive to become HOLY. "What God wants is for all of you to be holy," says the scripture. Don't let the word holy turn you off. The reality of holiness may pose problems when it's looked upon as something that happens outside of history; confined to an individual outside of a communal context. When we live it out in the presence of the other, constantly calling us out of ourselves, and paradoxically bringing us in touch with ourselves, we experience the hope that accompanies holiness. Bishop Romero captured the power of what I'm trying to say:

We end up suffering by not connecting with the suffering of the world; and by being in touch with those who hurt we're able to avoid the one suffering that would come as a result of being absent from it.

“I believe the saints were the most ambitious persons. And this is why ambition for all of you and for yourself: that we may be great, ambitiously great, because we are images of God and we cannot be content with mediocre greatness.”

In God’s time, which is always the now, the “hic et nunc,” we experience mystery, a call to respond to transcendence, that which stands above all relationships and at the same time quickens them, refreshes them and denounces relationships of domination. Romero affirmed that by what he believed and how he lived.

He caught a bullet saying Mass for what he believed and what he hoped for.

In this exciting time we’re called to exercise imagination, hold on to prophetic links in our being, that come from exercising subversive memory. Romero was a subversive as far as those who controlled “the money economy” were concerned. And in connection with this memory we’re able to work on behalf of community, building it by challenging all that keeps us from a shared life with one another. We can’t hope without others, especially without the “crucified” in our lives, and a faith community.

In the thick of this tension between self-centered and other-centered ways of being in the world we’re called to live our lives grounded in God’s love and be open to the clamor of the poor.

With this tension, we begin to realize we are more than data points in market surveys or meant to simply respond to “curtsey calls” so that companies can acquire greater market share. We don’t have to render all significant aspects of our lives to market values. The “other” counts.

This concern for the other is why Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría called for a “civilization of poverty” that would reject a world based on capital and exclusion. Ellacuría took a “civilization of poverty” and with it challenged a “civilization of abundance.”

In this season of expectation and hope we’re called to ponder, as did the prophets, injustice in a world of alarming inequality. CEO’s enjoy unheard of benefits never experienced before in the human experiment. For example, while General Electric’s CEO, Jack Welch, in 1998 pocketed \$86.6 million. If we took at his wealth and equated it to the height of the Empire State building, the wealth of a GE worker would only represent seven inches of the the hight of that building.

The Jesuit believed that the church had to confront this official civilization. He pointed out that prevalent civilization hasn’t come to terms with glaring poverty in the world, in fact, it has

exacerbated it. UNPD data reveals that the poor of the world spend one cent out of every dollar on consumerism; in the United States and other power economies 86 cents of every dollar goes to consumerism.

In a civilization of poverty the “other” becomes a place where God manifests love and grace, a definite point central to the Gospels that constantly calls us to attentiveness to hurt thrust upon others in this world.

In the Gospels the Victim constantly becomes

present to us: not marginalized or pushed to the edge. The victim becomes central to the gospels in the Person of Jesus and the violated that surround him. John the Baptist catches on to this and hangs out with those on the bottom; it's central to his life and he pays the price.

So this gospel truth that prioritizes the victim declares the violated one innocent. How does that reality move in our bodies? How does it allow us to plot our lives, live in such a way that their definition comes from being in touch with God's call to learn from the least and find our identities unraveling in connection with that rather than plugged into the domination of the market? How do we look at data? Read the news? Relate to a world in chaos?

What about the life of John the Baptist who lost his head because of a posture of being present to the violated and saying that indeed one greater than he would come? How does that tension work itself out in our own lives? So in the course a day we stumble on some data from the conservative and widely read magazine "The Economist" out of England. The magazine reveals "The slide of tens of millions of Europeans into third world poverty – may end up costing the European Union, in the long run, far more than war."

Would we be able to say the same thing about our own country as more and more children slip into illiteracy, forgotten, as funds to the caring sector shrink? Educator and social critic, Jonathan Kozol, points out that "Children ought to have at least a few entitlements that aren't entangled with utilitarian conditions. One of them should be the right to a degree of unconditional

satisfaction in the sheer delight and goodness of existence. Another ought to be the confidence of knowing that your presence on this earth is taken as an unconditional blessing that is not defined by the economic uses that a nation does or does not have for you."

What does it mean to live in the "not yet" and realize that five hundred human beings could fill this church and possess more wealth than three billion human beings on the planet? In the last year their wealth grew by \$200 billion. So together they have \$1.2 trillion dollars of the world's wealth. No wonder in the thick of this culture those who go to the Ivy League schools study to make money, and lots of it. And it would come as no surprise that many who teach fail to come to grips with structural

leads that would allow us to get a handle on this injustice and in so doing hold our heads high and as a people deal with the hurt of the world. Would it by any chance have something to do with the scripture:

"And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand." Luke 21: 27-28.

All this affects our bodies when we remain distant from dealing with issues of social hurt. We end up suffering by not connecting with the suffering of the world; and by being in touch with those who hurt we're able to avoid the one suffering that would come as a result of being absent from it.

Distant from the hurt of the world we're outside the fray. Outside of a world that has

We come out of a tradition that prioritizes the weak, the lowly and when we turn our gaze toward them we find life. Something incredible happens when we do it. We learn to tell a story of hope. We're all storytellers.

made Coca-Cola and Nike symbols much more powerful and recognizable around the world than a Peace symbol. And at the same time Nike has 25,000 workers producing 70 million pairs of shoes annually. And these workers spend long hours in unjust situations receiving salaries that have helped produce a world that has lead Liberation Theologian, Jon Sobrino to say that we have moved from an “unjust world to an inhuman world.”

We can't remain distant from the concerns of Disney and Citibank that touch our lives so directly. Disney impacts what we'll see on TV. Citibank decides who will have access to capital. Just as it has made a decision to take interest in only 800 million people on the planet and forget about the rest because they don't have the wherewithal to end up as being “bankable” – they are the unbankable ones and because of that they don't count.

In this season of expectation and hope we're called to ponder, as did the prophets, injustice in a world of alarming inequality. CEO's enjoy unheard of benefits never experienced before in the human experiment. For example, while General Electric's CEO, Jack Welch, in 1998 pocketed \$86.6 million. If we took at his wealth and equated it to the height of the Empire State building, the wealth of a GE worker would only represent seven inches of the height of that building.

Such concentration of wealth in so few hands means that others die before their time. And alarming changes have accompanied this wealth accumulation for a few and they are often looked upon as an act of God, or as economists take pride in saying it's the “invisible hand of the market” working itself out.

And the “invisible hand” tends to favor

powerful corporations. In Bangor, where I live, our community has come together to prevent a “Big Box” Wal-Mart, four football fields in size, from going up. Here's a company with economic power greater than 160 countries; it's the largest company in the world, larger than General Motors that held the position for decades.

So we're told that our children will have more than five jobs in their lifetime before they are dropped into the earth. We're told that we work much longer and harder than Europeans and with fewer rewards. We're also told that we have more people in prison than any other country in the world: something that our Bishops have noted. We're told that we live in a bubble-like economy with more jobs than ever – yet this work creation means degrading jobs that have brought with them more working poor than ever before. At the same time more of our children live in poverty. One out of every five children in our country stands a better chance of making it in the European Union.

It comes as no surprise that tension abounds in our bodies: NOT THE TENSION THAT THIS SACRED TIME PROCLAIMS. It's a tension built on the premise of a life lived without hope. For the market can only survive when it casts hope into a Dumpster. Hope limps when people see democracy not as vibrancy on the part of citizens in the public sphere challenging unjust situations, but as access to thousands of choices of goods to buy in super markets.

The prophets address their message to a community in jeopardy. Here's the tension – it's around the jeopardy. Can we not say that hope abounds when we come to a point, like the prophets, where we create language capable of naming the jeopardy, and coming

to terms with it; looking for the systemic roots of it, the “structures of sin” and challenging it. The prophets took it on. John the Baptist did. Bishop Oscar Anulfo Romero did. Father Ignacio Ellacuría did.

When we set our sights on the structural component of evil we have a gush of prophetic imagination running through our bodies that brings mind and heart together into an act with promise behind it. We end up before the violated who have no voice and speak on their behalf. Such an act also brings us before those with too much voice and who have so much power to define how we live and die. When we face the oppressed the glory of God manifests itself in our lives.

So when we encounter social relations that exclude, we don't see them as an act of God or an act of nature, something that is just part of life, but we view them as the work of human hands and they can be changed by human hands.

Social relations that allow one percent of a population to control most stocks no matter where we go makes dirt of all of us. Something is wrong, the prophets would surmise. These social relationships created by those who control some \$17 trillion in the United States alone espouse power for a few to the degradation of many.

We see it in Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand, El Salvador, in most of the “majority world” where the impoverished live and die. There is something here that violates the tradition that allows us to remember, ponder our place in the world not as victims, but as people on the move, waiting, expecting, hoping and challenging all those who defy creation and all living things.

We come out of a tradition that prioritizes

the weak, the lowly and when we turn our gaze toward them we find life. Something incredible happens when we do it. We learn to tell a story of hope. We're all storytellers. The early Christians knew that as they told a story of a living God by the way they lived and the hope they brought to others that quickened a movement of the poor that stood as sign to those who didn't count.

Let us continue to tell our stories with hope in this season of expectation. It's a season that gives reason to believe that as we stick together as a beloved community we can continue tell a story of hope and not have any institution rob us of it.

But as we develop our storytelling capacities keep in mind that there is also a campaign to crack our hope: take it away from us. A hopeless world is a prerequisite of a “New World Order” that has no place for the best within the human spirit.

The cutting edge of solidarity lies in our ability to reflect and act critically, as did the prophets, so as to be attentive to the ones on the bottom. This takes lots of patience, action and theory so as to create room to broaden the space of resistance and rebellion. Solidarity is an act of hope in our ability to discern the tension of domination-liberation tendencies in the way we act. It is the capacity to detect those determinants that keep us stuck in reified ways of doing things. The likelihood of victory seems distant, but it is our hope and it is a hope that crosses boundaries and links us together with others in struggle.

Let us proclaim a living God seen most clearly in the face of the oppressed and violated of this world. And from this posture we're in a much better position “to deflect the invasive power of capital” in our lives and the society

in which we live. And we'll be in a much better place to heed the advice of Bishop Romero when he warned his people never to touch the idol of capital, it's like a high tension wire, they would be burnt and burnt badly.

Yes, indeed, Advent is living in in via.

