
Essay 7

**Social change and the role of the Church:
the people's resources for understanding
and reducing vulnerability**

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Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, Geneva

Social change and the role of the Church: the people's resources for understanding and reducing vulnerability

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1. A pilgrimage

In this paper, you will not find great proposals: what you will find is passion. For what follows is the story of the pilgrimage of a human rights activist, walked in the context of HIV. This is because my overriding commitment, in the past quarter century, has been to journey together with people and groups who are vulnerable to HIV. It is within this framework that I have discovered a spirituality; and in doing so I have found that another way of looking at reality is possible. I simply want you to take this reflection as a way of opening heart and mind to share what, for me, has been an epiphany of the gospel in the context of the HIV pandemic.

Since its beginning, the HIV epidemic has produced very clear theological divisions within the churches. During these twenty-five years, the voices of leaders and of faith communities have reflected widely differing attitudes and reactions, articulating positions that speak of different theological approaches and, in consequence, of different actions in terms of advocacy, pastoral activity, prevention and care.

For example, there are many people within the faith communities who want to limit the HIV issue exclusively to the medical field. They want

to avoid conflictive issues, and they are not comfortable with alternative (perhaps more faith-related) responses. But for faith communities and their leadership, the HIV issue cannot be mainly a medical one. If it were, then they would not have problem with it. But it has in fact been repeatedly demonstrated that the centre of the debate is not the human immune deficiency virus. There are other viruses and other diseases with similar characteristics, some of which affect an even greater number of people, but the faith communities did not feel the need to do theological reflection (as we are doing) or to respond to them in other unique ways.

Since 1981, when people became aware of the HIV epidemic, it has been repeatedly shown that it is not HIV as a virus, or AIDS as a medically described syndrome, that is the central problem, or the cause of so many divisions and contradictory messages. What makes AIDS different, and brings us together here, is the stigma and discrimination that transform a medical diagnosis into a moral judgement. The task of faith communities and their leadership is to develop transforming responses to the issue of stigma and discrimination, and also recognize that many times we have promoted them.

Churches, therefore, have often found it simpler to work in the area of care than to develop messages on education-for-prevention. But addressing HIV-related stigma requires theological answers. Theology, therefore, has to help us to build a message which is faithful to a renewed hermeneutics of the Scriptures, and which also brings an alternative view of our confessional identities. For theology is a structure of thought related to our idea of God and God's action in the world. A hermeneutic based on this understanding means we can never have a neutral approach to any of the critical issues provoked by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

2. A theology of glory

I am going to try to classify and to name different ways of doing theology in relation to HIV (and, incidentally, in relation to many other issues).

On one side we have those who want to respond, and to speak about AIDS, but not to get involved with conflictive issues. They may be organizations and individuals who view hospitals supported by faith communities with pride on grounds that a high percentage of beds is occupied by people living with HIV or AIDS; but at the same time, these very organizations and individuals may not take responsibility for the innumerable graves for which they have been responsible in the cemeteries of the world.

It is an unfortunate fact that faith communities and their leadership have frequently been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Society in general has observed our narrow biblical, theological advocacy and service perspectives, and has concluded that we are more an obstacle than an ally in the achievement of global goals and targets. In recent years, our own documents have openly confessed that we have been very slow, as institutions, in breaking the silence, but very quick, as individuals, in condemning and judging.

In one way or another we are all theologians. We do theology because we have ideas and convictions about the nature of God and God's action in creation. But this does not mean that it is necessarily good theology. Our fears, cultural limitations, prejudices or political commitments are often stumbling blocks to the permanently open attitude that would free us for a genuine review of our theological and pastoral hermeneutics. Therefore we have to recognize that many times we have been poor theologians, that we have given way to the temptation to usurp God's glory and give the glory to ourselves for our efforts, and that we are prone to take refuge in a theology that shows us a God without paradoxes, a God who fulfils all our expectations of prestige and power.

Those who promote a 'theology of glory' believe that God's nature is modelled on their own patterns of hierarchy, and their own understandings of purity and human wisdom. They believe that the achievement of comfortable circumstances, success, and professional acclaim are signs of God's favour: that God is delighted with them, and therefore rewards their human efforts.

3. A theology of the Cross

In reality, being a good Christian theologian in the context of the HIV epidemic has nothing to do with a theology of glory. Christian theology is, rather, a theology that takes the Cross of Christ (and not our own success) as its fundamental hermeneutic and pastoral tool. It is that cross which allows us to understand the dimension and prophetic depth of living in the context of the HIV epidemic. A theology of the Cross is the antidote to a theology of glory or a theology of prosperity.

The most fundamental text on the theology of the Cross comes in the first letter to the Corinthians. Here the apostle Paul affirms:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart'. [...] God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. [...] God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'. (1 Cor.1:18-31)

In this fundamental text we have a blueprint for content and methodology for pastoral action. It is a road map for those who want to establish a dialogue and accompany people and groups vulnerable to the HIV epidemic. This text allows us to understand that those women and men who act out a theology of the Cross do so in the belief that the format and ways in which God is manifested and revealed are always paradoxical and hidden to the human understanding.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines **paradox** as 'contrary to expectation, a tenet contrary to received opinion, a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is per-

haps true'. Thus, our understanding of the action of the community of faith and its leadership has to be guided by this paradoxical manifestation of a God who is hidden (and therefore to be revealed) in something that is opposite to what one might rationally expect. The HIV epidemic is manifested in those vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. This is our new hermeneutical key, which allows us to put ourselves, and also our actions in the context of the HIV epidemic, into a different perspective, which goes beyond the mere provision of social welfare.

God, therefore, is always hidden in what we consider vulnerable, weak and impure. But from the perspective of a theology of glory we continue to expect God to be revealed amidst thunder and lightning, in the powerful, the magnificent, the miraculous and all that we consider politically correct. So we see that God's manifestation is always a paradox, in the sense that it is something totally contrary to our expectations, contrary and opposed to common sense.

Theologians of glory might express a view that runs something like this: 'God cannot be manifested in that which we consider vulnerable to HIV or to AIDS, because God is mighty, and in God we do not find weakness nor foolishness'. But as we have seen in the passage from Corinthians, to know God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth is to know God *in all stigmas and all discriminations*. In trying to discern God's will, theologians of the Cross will not speculate on the life of their community of faith or on the circumstances of their own lives. Their attention, rather, will center on the suffering of Jesus Christ for the cause of justice, on his life of passion, and on the communions and friendships that drove him to the cross.

It is not abstinence or monogamy that pleases God. Neither is it the fulfilment of any law. It is faith in the one who died on the cross and who (even when resurrected) shows us that he carries, in his hands and his side, the signs of all stigmas. That is the faith that sanctifies all laws and brings them to fulfilment, leading us to conform our own lives to the life and passion of Jesus of Nazareth. In the context of the HIV epidemic, the core of any message that comes from the faith communities should be that unconditional love which we receive only by grace.

In all honesty, though, we must admit that we are not immune to the theology of glory. We have a tendency, in all our messages about prevention and education, to put our successes and merits in the center. We create messages based on human and individual glory, and on our achievements, because we are afraid of God's paradoxes as revealed by Jesus of Nazareth.

In Jesus, incarnate, crucified and resurrected, God manifests himself as a passion for justice, equity, and promotion of the rights and dignity of all people. God's concern is especially for those stigmatized and excluded by social and cultural considerations. Indeed the cross is a direct consequence of Jesus' friendships, and the people with whom he shared his table. For Jesus' choice of friends was a subversive one. The cross, after all, was a tool of punishment for all those who were considered dangerous or likely to subvert the prevailing political and religious power systems. It was not two thieves who were crucified together with Jesus of Nazareth: it was two men who had been judged to be dangerous to the oppressive social, cultural and religious systems, and to the imperial powers.

When we speak about measures to prevent HIV transmission, we have to remember that God is pleased *only* by that which is in Jesus of Nazareth. *Solo Christo, sola fide, sola gratia* (Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone) must be central in our proposals for prevention, education, advocacy and care in the context of HIV and AIDS. Many of our responses to critical issues presented by the HIV epidemic have clashed with the prevention strategies proposed by society and people living with HIV or AIDS because we have forgotten this centrality of the Cross of Jesus of Nazareth and we have turned non-central and circumstantial elements into dogma.

4. Law and gospel

For faith communities, the issue of HIV prevention has proved a sensitive one. Prevention is one of the conflictive areas involving 'breaking the silence' about certain issues that many people prefer not to talk about. In this, Lutheran theology is helpful. With its bi-

focal view of reality, the distinction between law and gospel could help us address the issue of prevention, allowing us to take different and diverse positions without creating divisions. What this 'bifocal' approach does is to make a basic distinction between law and gospel: as in the distinction between the written law and spirit, between the kingdom or regime of God and the secular kingdom or regime, between faith and deeds, the idea that we are justified but also sinners; and so on. The main thrust of Christian proclamation itself is directed towards preventing the gospel from being transformed into law.

For the law neither redeems nor saves. Rather, the aim of the law, theologically, is to bring all human beings to the humble awareness of their situation of slavery to oppressive systems and to their liberating need of the mediation of Christ. The law is the mirror in which we see ourselves; and under its gaze we always find ourselves in want, knowing that (before God) we have never done enough. That is exactly the aim of the law: to bring the believer to a state of humility, which leads to the arms of that totally undeserved grace which is offered by Jesus, the Christ.

It is interesting to see how the churches' main documents on HIV and AIDS, notably those of the World Council of Churches and of the Lutheran World Federation,¹ start with a confession, by the community of faith, of its own sins. As we contemplate what the law demands, we know that the aim of the law is to help us to see that we cannot be the ones to throw the first stone. That is why the law should never be made a moral code or a paradigm of behaviour: for in the very moment that this happens the redeeming work of Christ loses its centrality and becomes a simple help to what we can do by ourselves.

I would like to rescue a basic text of Luther that can help us in the construction of an educative proposal for the prevention of HIV and AIDS:

¹ WCC, *AIDS and the Churches as a Healing Community*, Geneva WCC 1986; LWF Documentation. *Pastoral Work in Relation to AIDS*, edited by Publication Office, LWF Department of Communication. N°25 September 1988, Geneva.

Be sure [...] that you do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws. [...] You must grasp Christ at a much higher level. Even though this higher level has for a long time been the very best, the preaching of it has been something rare. The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. [...] See, this is what it means to have a proper grasp of the gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God, which neither prophet, nor apostle, nor angel was ever able fully to express, and which no heart could adequately fathom or marvel at. This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content. This is what preaching the Christian faith means.²

By understanding the true meaning of the law, the community of faith has the possibility of opening itself to its own conversion. This understanding is the common ground on which to establish human relationships of solidarity. It is also important to distinguish between the theological use of the law (which belongs to God's kingdom) and the civil use of the law (which rules in the secular world). Changes, diversity of opinions and of behaviour are accepted in the secular regime. Many misunderstandings and faulty messages on prevention transmitted by our faith communities have resulted from confusing the law and the gospel and confusing the kingdom of God with the secular kingdom.

In Lutheran theology, the core of Christian action is the announcement and the experience of the gospel; and this consists in opening oneself to receive God's forgiveness and God's reconciliation. In putting ourselves under God's sight, we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ: a justification that is not earned through any action of ours, but by accepting an unconditional gift, offered to everybody, and completely free.

To confuse law and gospel is to take away from the law its 'accusing' function in order to transform it into a moral system that is unrelated

² Luther's Works. *Word and Sacrament* Vol.35 p.117: "A Brief Instruction on what to look for and expect in the gospels" (1521) Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1957.

to the work of Jesus Christ. It is to transform the law into a guide for sinners who try (basically by their own efforts) to adjust themselves to its demands, and receive supplementary help from God in doing so. In this way, we lose the centrality of the promise of salvation, and of justification by the God who liberates us from the accusations of the law, and does so exclusively in Jesus Christ. The radical, saving promise of the gospel is thus transformed into a tool for covering up our deficiencies, and for imagining that we are able to please God through ways which have basically nothing to do with Jesus Christ.

5. Theology of the Cross in the churches' documents on HIV

It is significant that some of the churches' earliest written responses to the HIV epidemic located the issue firmly within the perspective of the theology of the Cross. The first document published by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1986 was a fundamental one. It was entitled *AIDS and the Churches as a Healing Community*.³ If it is genuinely to be a healing space, it said, then the Church needs to be truly open to the challenges provoked by the epidemic. Apologetic and conservative positions cannot help us to 'break our own hearts, and repent of inactivity and rigid moralism'. The theology of the Cross paradoxically recognizes that 'the healing community itself needs to be healed by the forgiveness of Christ'.

As people of God who live under the cross of Christ and want to embrace and support individuals and groups vulnerable to HIV, we have to do it 'without barriers, exclusion, hostility or rejection' of any kind. As part of the process of our own healing we need to review our biblical hermeneutics, our confessional identity and our pastoral practices.

Only as we enter into the reality of a theology of the cross, and consequently find God in this paradoxical, hidden way, will we be able to confess, as this WCC document puts it, 'that churches as institutions have been slow to speak and act [but....] that many Christians have

³ World Council of Churches, 1986

been quick to judge and condemn'; or to affirm that because God deals with us in love and mercy, then we are to also and that we are to outlaw simplistic moralizing about those who are living with HIV or AIDS.

In the same way, in its 1988 document entitled *Pastoral Work in Relation to AIDS*,⁴ the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) adopts a perspective from the theology of the Cross. In this publication, LWF declared that 'the Church should [...] open its doors to all, unconditionally [...] irrespective of who they were or what they had done [because] by excluding somebody from the sources of life, the Church becomes guilty of the gravest form of discrimination that exists'.⁵ It says, further, that 'the church should question seriously its own role in developments facilitating the spread of the disease and challenge its own members and the society to take steps to remove discriminatory attitudes and actions prevailing in society'.⁶ These tasks, these aims and this commitment are still pending even twenty years after the adoption of this document by the Lutheran World Federation.

We have to recognize the co-factors that promote the HIV epidemic and become a prophetic voice in denouncing them. One of the roles of faith communities is to advocate for the development of public policies, which brings us into dialogue with governments. We have therefore participated in the follow up to the UNGASS meetings in 2001 and 2006, and the ongoing monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is because we recognize that socio-economic structures promote the poverty of certain communities and groups, making them more vulnerable to the epidemic. In consequence, working to eradicate AIDS also involves questioning the structures that produce poverty, illiteracy, prostitution and drug abuse and all forms of inequality. Among those we should include the structures that produce and sustain gender inequity: one of the major factors that favours the spread of the epidemic. This means that empowerment of women

⁴ LWF Documentation. *Pastoral Work in Relation to AIDS*. Edited by Publication Office. LWF Department of Communication. N°25 September 1988. Geneva

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 5

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 5

must have a central place in any prevention proposal. This political commitment should be part of our theology of the Cross and of all crosses that produce injustice.

The LWF document also assumes that 'the body of Christ as a reconciling community must respond affirmatively to the manifold human brokenness'. AIDS, it says, 'challenges us to free ourselves from the bondage of prejudice and self centeredness,' and as the church, to 'become a caring community that sets people free and gives them hope through faith'. More recently, but also from the perspective of the theology of the Cross, the African leaders of the Lutheran communion affirmed:

We commit ourselves to:

- Breaking the silence;
- Confessing and acknowledging that we have too often contributed to stigmatization and discrimination
- Speaking openly and truthfully about human sexuality and HIV/AIDS;
- Remembering that the silence of persons living with HIV/AIDS can be broken when they know they will not be judged, excluded and discriminated;
- Stopping all forms of condemnation and rejection;
- Turning stigma and discrimination into care and counselling;
- Not standing in the way of the use of any effective methods of prevention.⁷

In conclusion, the distinction between law and gospel supports the use of a theology of the Cross as a hermeneutical key which allows us to build an alternative voice in the dialogue about HIV and AIDS, together with the people who are themselves living with HIV and AIDS. Thus the epidemic has become our space to do theology, our mandate

⁷ LWF, *Breaking the Silence: Commitments of the Pan African Lutheran Church Leadership Consultation in Response to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic*, Nairobi 2-6 May 2002.

being the promise of inclusion in the body of Christ to individuals and groups vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. Doing theology is no more an aseptic task. We confess a God who is not beyond the epidemic, not beyond the people living with HIV, and not beyond the stigmatized and excluded. We confess a God who is – paradoxically - right there in the midst of them.