

Homily For The Commissioning Of Franciscan Lay Missioners
Sunday, November 8, 2009
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Introduction

Today's readings from 1st Kings and from Mark's Gospel exemplify what Liberation Theology calls "the privileged place of the poor in Salvation History". In both texts an obscure person - both quite dependent widows - become the centerpiece of the story.

Another way of describing what the liberationists claim is to say that God takes the side of the poor; God has a preferential attitude toward the poor.

We see this borne out, for example, in Mary's prayer, the Magnificent. Upon discovering that she will be the mother of the Messiah, Mary praises God as the one who "scatters the proud, casts down the mighty, raises the lowly, fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46-55)

Jesus goes a step further, identifying with the poor, when he describes the ultimate judgment on our lives to be based on what we did or did not do FOR HIM in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, stranger and imprisoned.

I

It is clear that the poor do not, however, hold this privileged place because they are morally superior to others, but because they are always poor, always oppressed, always marginalized.

I once heard a description of impoverished people as "those who are always told to come back tomorrow". There is no time for them today.

II

Jesus' example and teaching tell us other things about the poor as well. Only in one of his parables is a person given a name: Lazarus. Jesus told many parables but except for Lazarus, no one else is named: "a man went out to sow seed"; "a woman lost a coin"; "a king gave a great banquet". No names. Even in the parable of Lazarus, the rich man goes nameless.

Surely, Jesus point was that the poor do indeed have names, they are persons, they have families, a history, dreams and hopes - just like everyone else.

Another teaching Jesus gives us about the Lazaruses of the world comes from the Gospel we just heard. "Jesus sat down opposite the treasury". He put himself in a place where he could see the widow, the Lazarus. One has to situate oneself where the poor can be seen.

In Spanish this is called "salir al encuentro", get out and make the encounter [with Lazarus].

III

This is exactly what our seven new lay missionaries will be commissioned to do in a few minutes here today: take their places where they can encounter the Lazaruses on the world - in their cases, the Lazaruses of South Africa and Bolivia where they will serve.

For three or more years these women and men will know by name, up close and personal, on a daily basis the poor of the earth.

They will come to an understanding of the immensity of impoverishment in our world and an understanding of the economic, social, political and, yes, religious, realities which keep these Lazaruses in their impoverishment.

IV

They will return to carry on a much-needed mission in our society: giving witness in a country that often denies, or hides, or ignores its poor people; that has its poor people fight our wars for us; that even blames the poor for their poverty; and denies health care to the most vulnerable.

They will carry on a mission to the church in this society which by and large is deadly silent about the structural causes of poverty.

V

On this day of their commissioning we are enormously grateful for their generosity; grateful, too, to their family and friends, many here present, for your support of these lay missionaries; grateful for all whose financial and moral contributions make this effort possible.

Conclusion

In a moment Franciscan Mission Service will officially commission these latest of our missionaries. We will ask the entire assembly to bless them.

However, at this moment let me invoke a blessing on all of us who have heard God's word regarding Lazarus today;

May God bless us with anger... at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people.

May God bless us so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears... to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war.

May God bless us so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, in our neighborhood, so that we will courageously try what we do not think we can do, but in Jesus Christ we will have all the strength necessary.

May God bless us to fearlessly speak out about injustice, unjust law, corrupt politicians, unjust and cruel treatment of prisoners, torture, and senseless wars, genocides, starvations, and the poverty that is so pervasive.

And may God give each of us the blessing to know personally and intimately a Lazarus - a poor woman or man, so that all of these blessings may become particularized and individualized.

Amen.