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Occupy Advent and the Vatican: A revolution of hope

Alex Mikulich | Dec. 6, 2011

Demonstrators from the Occupy Wall Street campaign hold signs as a protest march enters the courtyard near the New York Police Department headquarters Sept. 30. (CNS photo/Lucas Jackson, Reuters)

Commentary

We live in a moment of economic, social, moral and spiritual impasse. Wondrous technological achievements fail to assuage our possessive individualism, fail to end extreme poverty, fail to cultivate life-giving connections between the rich and poor peoples of the earth, and

fail to nurture our universal rootedness in the earth's ecosystems.

Scandals in almost every major societal institution erode public trust and any sense of our shared responsibility for each other. Technological prowess advanced through wars and multiple capitalist practices fail to care for the most vulnerable among us as they wreak ecological devastation and threaten the very existence of our planet.

Left to our own idolatry, the result is more of the same -- insatiable consumer desire, increasing cynicism, politics and economics driven by the self-interest of the powerful against the common good, and the "presumptive" resort to violence as the solution to conflict.

In this time of global and national decline, economically, socially and morally, how do we take up the spiritual task of waiting this Advent? For what or whom do we hope in this season of longing?

As I prepare for Advent in this time of impasse, I suggest reflection upon the unlikely congruence of two divergent resources: the Occupy movement and the Vatican's recent statement on global financial reform, "Toward Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority." [2]

In the words of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the authoritative office within the Vatican with the highest responsibility for Catholic social teaching, "the gap between ethical training and technical preparation needs to be filled by highlighting in a particular way the perpetual synergy between the two levels of practical doing (*praxis*) and of boundless human striving (*poiesis*)."

That is a theologically sophisticated way of emphasizing the need both to integrate spirituality and ethics, individually and collectively, and restore the primacy of spirituality and ethics over capitalism and finance.

How do we begin this work in Advent?

The Occupy movement practices a way of waiting and listening I find instructive for this Advent in this moment of societal breakdown. Each word and phrase spoken by every speaker is repeated, chorus-like, by the group. It is a way Occupiers slow down the pace of conversation to attend and listen to each other's voices. It is also a way that Occupiers give priority to voices of those previously unheard or marginalized. As they listen to each other, Occupiers seek to hear the voices of those who have not spoken or have not been heard.

I am struck by the wisdom of this Occupy practice for Advent in the way that it calls us to wait and listen, wait and attend, wait and be with one another in the midst of societal breakdown. It is a way of attending to what the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace calls the depths of "human striving" for enduring goods of love, peace and justice.

In the Occupy movement, if we listen and attend to the voices of the people, we hear diverse voices crying out for a different way of living, a different way of being in the world that values every voice, liberates every voice and joins every voice in the common work of mutual uplift, healing and new life.

Both the Occupy movement through this practice and the Vatican through its recent statement on global financial reform compel us to reflect on the need for a contemplative orientation that listens and embodies the cries of the oppressed, and their cries for freedom, for work, for liberation and for new life in God.

Advent calls us to the spiritual labor of waiting and listening to each other, to those who are in any way oppressed and to our deepest longings for love, connection, new life and God.

Yet such waiting as reorientation to the truly good is no easy task, for it demands "anguish and suffering," as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace puts it, as we struggle for love and justice in the midst of societal sinfulness and decline.

This spiritual labor of waiting and listening, I suggest, invites people of faith to open ourselves to our shared vulnerability with all people and to our loss of meaning and empty imagination in the midst of societal moral and spiritual decline.

Precisely at this seeming "deadendness," abandonment and emptiness, I wonder if God might be calling us to experience transformed desire, personally and collectively, for new vision, love, courage and hope that renews life across the face of the earth. Might there be a miracle of transformation in the midst of emptiness and poverty?

As the contemplative Constance FitzGerald suggests, the miracle is that contemplative cries from people and the earth are "no longer silent and invisible, but rather prophetic and revolutionary."

This is where the Occupy movement and the Vatican most closely converge. Both call us to wait and listen. If we attend and listen to the groans within ourselves, from peoples everywhere and from the earth, we may yet hear the cry of new life and a new creation. When will we groan with all peoples and the earth for God? In waiting and listening to these groans, may we find the Spirit yearning within us for the manger where the revolution of hope and love is born.

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co-author of *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (Forthcoming from Palgrave MacMillan in 2012).]

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