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Fr. Tissa Balasuriya: a loving and gentle rebel

by Ruki Fernando

Appreciation

Colombo, Sri Lanka — Oblate Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, a noted theologian, economist and human rights activist, died Jan. 17 in Sri Lanka. He was 89.

He founded the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo in 1971 with the aim of fostering interreligious and interracial action for justice and peace. He was also instrumental in founding the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in the mid-1970s.

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith began a doctrinal investigation of Balasuriya because of statements he made about Mary, original sin, Christ's redemptive role, revelation, and papal authority in his book *Mary and Human Liberation*, published in English in 1990. He was excommunicated in January 1997, accused of propagating ideas contrary to the Catholic faith.

A year later, Balasuriya signed a "Statement of Reconciliation" and the excommunication was lifted.

Balasuriya was a frequent contributor to *NCR*. His last article, a critique of Pope Benedict XVI's third encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), appeared in August 2009. He found it a "valuable document, but has some missing dimensions. It does not analyze the way the modern world has been set up as an association of Christians with governments and colonial powers, especially from 1492 to 1945. The pope seems to overlook the inadequacies of the church in the course of history."

Balasuriya has been called a radical and rebel within the Catholic church and society. He, like Jesus, never flinched from challenging the powerful -- in the government, multinational corporations or the church.

But what I remember most about Father Tissa is his love and his gentleness.

Though I had begun reading his works years before, I got to know Father Tissa personally in the 1990s. He took me to slums in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, and got me involved in conducting discussions on human rights in area schools. He invited me to a training course on organic farming in Kandy and made me part of theological discussions with leading Sri Lankan and other liberation theologians from across the world. He lived a simple life, with few personal belongings, and mostly traveled by bus and train.

In 2009, I was asked to present a paper on the Eucharist and armed conflict at a conference held in preparation for the plenary assembly of Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. My thesis, that "the Eucharist has to be related positively to human liberation if it is to be faithful to its origins," was drawn from Father Tissa's 1977 book *Eucharist and Human Liberation*.

Even when the Vatican, with active collaboration of local church leaders in Colombo, excommunicated him, he didn't speak angrily of those responsible. "I feel more in communion with the real church and those oppressed" was the sentiment I remember most in my conversations with him from that time.

As a teenager, I was a regular visitor to the Centre for Society and Religion. There I found critical material on church and society. From the center, we in the Young Christian Students Movement could borrow slides, videos, overhead projectors and other material and equipment. On one occasion, Father Tissa recommended a film on Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was killed because he condemned the military dictatorship in his country. I had never heard of Romero or the film, but took Father Tissa's advice and showed it. It remains one of the most challenging and inspiring films I have ever watched. I have used it many times since in presentations to various groups.

A woman activist has told me that Father Tissa was among the few churchmen in the 1980s and 1990s who welcomed her and her young child. Long before Father Tissa wrote the book *Mary and Human Liberation*, he had been an advocate for women's rights in society and especially within the church.

In recent years, when my work as a human rights activist in Sri Lanka put me in certain danger, Father Tissa reached out, concerned for my safety. He invited me to stay with him for protection, saying, "I have a very short time to live, but you have more years ahead of you, so be careful." He never failed to reply to an email or return a phone call.

Some people close to Father Tissa found it difficult to work with him, and indeed had disagreements with some of his thinking. He was, after all, only human. But I also think that his vision and commitment were so idealistic and challenging that some found it difficult to keep up with him.

Father Tissa was and will remain one of my gurus -- someone who helped me to connect my faith to realities of oppression and injustices around me -- in Sri Lanka and beyond. I am among the many fortunate people Father Tissa mentored and inspired through his writings, his conferences and workshops, and personal conversations, but most importantly, in the simple way he lived and the love he radiated.

[K.M. Rukshan (Ruki) Fernando has worked for a number of human rights and church-based organizations in Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines. This article is adapted from one that appeared on Groundviews, a citizen journalism website based in Colombo, Sri Lanka.]

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