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Gutierrez at Vatican: Church must be Samaritan, reaching out to others

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 28, 2014 NCR Today
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The core mission of the Catholic church is to go outside of itself, to make neighbors, and to always be at the service of the poor, the founder of the sometimes controversial liberation theology movement said in an historic talk at the Vatican Tuesday.

Speaking during the launch of a new book by Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez reflected on the parable of the Good Samaritan, saying the story reflected the need of the church in our time.

Gutierrez, a native Peruvian, published *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, touching off a continuing subset of theology that focuses on Jesus Christ's role in redeeming humanity not only from sin but also from unjust political, social, or economic conditions.

For decades during the pontificate of John Paul II, authors or liberation theology were under the focus of the Vatican's doctrinal office, mostly for allegations that their work was too closely tied to Marxist critiques of the capitalist system.

On Tuesday, Gutierrez offered mainly a direct reflection of the Good Samaritan parable, tying it to the notion of a "preferential option for the poor;" Pope Francis' recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The joy of the Gospel"); and meetings of the Latin American bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007; and Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.

Following are Gutierrez's full remarks at the book launch. The remarks, made originally in a mixture of Spanish and Italian, have been translated as literally as possible.

Thank you for the invitation to participate in your book. It has been an honor for us ? we are great friends. I would like also to give thanks for the presentation of [Honduran] Cardinal [Óscar Andrés Rodríguez] Maradiaga and your presence here, all of you.

I believe that the main topic of the book has already been said by Cardinal Maradiaga. It regards the mission of the church. That is the core topic. Which means announcing the Gospel.

The conference in Aparecida drafted a text that states: "Over 2,000 years since when Christ came to this earth the continuing suffering and injustices lead us to live as a Samaritan church." This sentence has been the highlight of Aparecida and I believe it has a great, deep meaning. It is a beautiful sentence to define the church as a Samaritan church.

It gives the idea of being at the service. During the Council, the word service, to be at service, was very much used. This is why I would like briefly to say a few words with my poor Italian tonight on the topic of this reality and about poverty.

On this issue, on this topic, I believe that in order to understand the meaning of this word coming from Aparecida ? and also considering the meaning that accompanies this expression ? we need to go back to the parable of the Good Samaritan, or Samaritan if you prefer.

The Samaritan is not a Christian, is part of the Gospel as an example of someone who is not Christian. This is the starting of the story: Who is my neighbor, the neighbor that I have to love? And the answer that Jesus gave is not a theoretical definition about who our neighbor is. What he gives as an answer is a story, is a narration.

And at the end of this parable, Jesus makes a question: Who of the three seems to you to have been the one who really was the neighbor, who took care of the person who has been attacked? Who is my neighbor, who is the other I have to love? Because normally we think the person who is the neighbor is the wounded person.

However, reading the parable ? to understand this story is not really easy. It's a bit more complicated than we think. And Jesus asks who of these three persons is the neighbor?

We need to try and find the meaning of this. Normally we think the neighbor is the wounded person. But what is the meaning here? And to understand the meaning is really important because it helps us understand the expression that the church is a Good Samaritan church.

This means that my neighbor, however, is that person to whom we get close to, that we approach. In fact, we have no neighbors. We have no neighbors. They are not there. They become neighbors because we approach them. The moment we approach them they become our neighbor from our initiatives, gestures ? these are the things that create proximity to those that are far away.

Our neighbor is a person who is not close to us. It is not the person next to us. The neighbor is not the person that we find on our way, but that person that we approach to the extent we leave our own way, our own path, managing to approach others.

If we leave our path at the moment, then we go towards a person. And the Good Samaritan leaves his own path in order to help the wounded person.

And then the question: Who of these three was the neighbor for the wounded? This tries to makes the person who is far away, to make him become close.

Sometimes we think that primacy is given to those that are close to us. That's not the point. The wounded person is an anonymous person. The wounded person is a meaningless person. And the Good Samaritan doesn't know who this person is that is wounded.

He's just a good person, or maybe we don't know. We don't know if he?s a good person or bad person. The Samaritan doesn't know who that person is. He only knows that person has been abandoned and mistreated and that is the reason he approaches him.

What motivates the Samaritan to feel closeness with this person is how he feels when he sees this person who is wounded. He sees this is a person in need.

And this person is in need of help. So the Samaritan becomes the neighbor for the wounded person. And the wounded becomes the neighbor of the Samaritan. So at the moment we can say the wounded is the neighbor, but because he became the neighbor. He became that once he was approached by the Samaritan.

The possibility implies reciprocity. And the Samaritan approaches the wounded person and in that moment the two become aware of each other. This is the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan ? something that expects a lot of us. Because it is easy to help those who are physically close: my family, my town, my country. The issue here is to go, to approach those who are farther away.

And what it means to say that church has to be a Samaritan church? What is the meaning of that?

If we are inspired by the story of the Samaritan then we will have to read a text that we have here that comes from *Evangelii Gaudium*, that states the church is a church in movement, that is going toward the periphery, moving outside of itself ? that it's a commitment to Jesus Christ to be at the service of the poor.

And this church, if following this definition, would be a Samaritan church: Moving towards the other, to look for neighbors, to make new neighbors.

A few minutes ago, I said we don't really have neighbors. We need to create them by our commitment, by our love, so that we can make the neighbors become neighbors.

The text here I'm mentioning comes from a speech of Pope Paul VI, his speech to the Council, which is a memorable speech. With this speech, the pope said the following: On the face of every person, every human being, especially from its tears and its pains we need to recognize in his tears and his pain the face of Christ.

And obviously this is an allusion to those of Matthew 25 and Luke 10, inviting us to do this. We need to understand the importance of going towards the outside, of reaching out. As Pope Francis has said, many don't want a self-referential church. We need to go to the peripheries; this is what we have to do.

There's a big temptation to remain in one place. But this is not the need, what the Gospel expects from us. What I have said very briefly is the foundation of the concept of the preferential option for the poor. This is the main thing. And then we have to ask ourselves why are we preferential?

Because we can?t forget that God's love is universal. But at the same time there's a privilege for those who are suffering, the needy. The poor are the first ones because they are the last ones. And for this reason they are the first ones.

We say that we want to be close to the poor and that by doing so we think that we are better. Certainly, we need to remember that God's love is universal. And obviously the poor have to be loved. And it seems to me this is the meaning ? this is what the parable of the Good Samaritan represents.

A Samaritan church is an open church, a church attentive to human needs. As I said before, Pope Francis has been stressing going out, going towards the outside. The speech of the pope in Aparecida says that the church doesn?t need disciples or missionaries ? it needs missionary disciples.

Above all: This idea of leaving our path and to think that if we don't want to do this, we need to. There is a great quotation from the conference in Medellin: There is a text the cardinal mentioned before that is also quoted quite frequently: A Samaritan church is a poor church, a missionary church and a paschal church.

And this is the idea. It seems to me that we, 50 years after the council, we are inspired by the council still now.

The pope was quoted and he announced this new perspective: It seems that our time is a time that is quite demanding and at the same time is one of the greatest moments of joy. This is something Francis has repeated often.

At the same time we need to be assured that this joy, this happiness, won't be something easy. It is not an easy happiness, easy to reach. It is a joy that has to go through the paschal mystery, through the suffering and/or solidarity with those who suffer. But the joy that we're looking for is there.

Evangelii Gaudium has been written at the right moment in time. Theology, which is part of my life ? it has been said already ? theology springs from life, from the life of the church. Not from books or theologians, but from life.

And this is the context of theological concepts. This is something that is mirrored. Those who do theology know that theology is very close to the daily life of Christians.

This is the reason why we can thank Cardinal Muller for this presentation, for expressing this need. Thank you.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org [1]. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac [2].]

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