

Home Truths from Nicaragua

James Alison OP interviews in Nicaragua the Brazilian Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga

Recently the distinguished Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar accused the almost equally distinguished Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff of not believing in Jesus's divinity, and dismissed the liberation theology of Latin America as an export from Europe. What do Church leaders who know Boff well and have an intimate understanding of the pastoral situation in Latin America think of that?

Pedro Casaldáliga is not a familiar name even to those in the English speaking world who take an interest in the Latin American Church. Yet within Latin America he is one of the most highly regarded figures in the 'radical' wing of the Church. A spry, fifty-seven year old Spaniard, he is one of those figures that move the Latin American heart more than any other type of hero—a Catholic bishop committed to the poor. His diocese of Sao Felix in the Matto Grosso in Brazil has been the constant scene of struggles between the multinational corporations and estate-owning landlords on the one hand, and the indians and landless poor on the other. Bishop Pedro's stance in favour of the latter has caused him to be the target of many assassination attempts. He arrived in Managua, Nicaragua, in late July to show public support for the fast being carried out by the foreign minister, Father Miguel "Escoto, long a friend of his. As a European, though one who has lived in Brazil since 1967, he was particularly keen to draw more European attention to that struggle of which Nicaragua is the focal point.

ALISON: This is the first time that you have left Brazil for eighteen years. What prompted you to come here just now?

BISHOP What is going on in Nicaragua and all Central America affects profoundly the political future of Latin America, and the future of the Church. I think we're seeing here, in Central America, the touchstone of the future: the credibility of the Church is at stake here, and when I say the credibility of the Church I could say the credibility of the Gospel, and in the last resort the credibility of God himself. Besides, I feel myself a Latin American by adoption, with a

special affection for Central America since I have watched its struggles closely, its sufferings, its martyrdoms. For instance, I received the last letter which Monsignor Romero wrote in his life, with its significant last words, 'We believe in the Resurrection'. Fr Miguel D'Escoto's gesture seems to me an extreme Christian gesture. I know Miguel: he is a profoundly religious man, and one who is, in the best sense of the word, sufficiently worldly. He knows the world, has travelled it, a good diplomat. When he undertook this last gratuitous extremity, it was because he really felt that all other avenues to peace had been exhausted. Let me be sincere. As a bishop, and without wanting to give lessons, or to sweep out my neighbour's home, I felt a certain coresponsibility. I feel that the Nicaraguan hierarchy is somehow distant from this Hour of its people. I don't judge anybody—God will judge, but that's the feeling I have. I thought I could make a contribution of faith and prayer, that I could help within my limitations—thinking of the possible repercussions of this visit on my friends in Spain, so that Fr. Miguel's Evangelical Insurrection can spread, and acquire strength in other places as well. And then, I don't cease to be a bishop, and within these religious countries the words and attitudes of a bishop are always seen to have a definitive force.

ALISON: Clearly you have Nicaragua very much on your mind. What do you think are likely to be the repercussions in the rest of Latin America and beyond of the things that are happening in the Christian and political scene here?

BISHOP: I would say that today we are witnessing in Nicaragua and Central America the centre of the confrontation between two systems of life: international capitalizing colonialism on the one hand, and on the other a socialism which is trying to be native, original and Nicaraguan. This is evidently not in the interest of capitalism, and can't be in the interest of the moneyed class. Latin America has, for the last few centuries, been dominated from without by the successive empires: by us Spaniards, you English, the French and Dutch have had their go as well, and now the U.S.A. Our dear Europe has been a sad colonizer. Alongside the domination from without there have always been its lackeys within, the local oligarchy, the bourgeoisie: an internal domination at the service of outside interests. Today we see the confrontation between that power and the attempt by the people themselves to be considered with dignity, to have land and food, to be able to read, write and vote. I'm not

trying to canonize the revolutionary process, but no one with any sense of observation can deny that the confrontation exists. My reading and now my personal experience of the Nicaraguan process has led me to the conviction that, with all its faults, it is legitimate, and the Truth is with it. To talk of a civil war is a blindness, or a stupidity, or, worse, a perversion. What there is here is an aggression; worse still, effectively a camouflaged invasion. The reconstruction of the country is being hindered on all levels; even the literacy campaign has had to run down—Fernando Cardenal is worried about that. The expansion of agriculture is blocked: they're not even able to harvest the maize which they planted. Of the budget, 40% goes into direct defense—and, if you think what goes into indirect defense, maybe 80% of the budget of the nation is swallowed up in what is a desperate fight for survival. The dead are too many to be counted—they talk of 12,000 in the last four years.

ALISON: How can people outside Latin America be made more aware of the realities of the situation?

BISHOP: Let's look at this as simply as possible: Does the first world recognize that it dominates the third world? Does it recognize that it exploits the third world? Does it recognize that, apart from the external debt, it has already charged what it wanted from the third world in raw material and cheap labour? Does it realize that it is a first world at the expense of what is fatally a third world? If these things were recognised we'd be on the way to a solution. If it isn't recognised we're on the way to a conflict between the first and third world. I, as a European, and above all as a Christian, want to do what I can to help with a word, or gesture, an attitude, and if necessary with my life, *so that men and women of good will in the first world are aware.*

Secondly, people must know the realities of the third world. The mass media pervert them. I give the example of the BBC in London, which at one time gave a very friendly coverage to the problems and suffering of my own region of Matto Grosso, and then, one day, moved by the pressures of a high ranking Brazilian diplomat and economist in England, changed its line. In the U.S.A. almost three weeks of Miguel D'Escoto's fast have gone by without that gesture of a foreign minister and priest being 'news'. Let the first world know the truth, don't let yourselves get drunk so easily on Coca Cola and American information—be freer, more aware, more critical and self-critical.

Then, let Miguel's gesture be multiplied in the solidarity—groups in Europe. There are such groups. They should work together in actions which affect governments and companies at home. We live with the problems of the big landowners and the drama of the multinational corporations which have in Brazil, in my own region of Matto Grosso, huge estates with a régime of slavery—Volkswagen, for example, near my region. Speaking as a christian, I would ask the First Church, living in the first world, to be much more conscious of the need for solidarity—not merely alms-giving at Lent or Christmas, or in an emergency like an earthquake, but a much more permanent solidarity, linking communities with communities, to know concrete realities. The First world church should despoil itself and be poor so as to be free to be a true prophet at home, denouncing injustice and announcing the sort of brotherhood and freedom which can affect the third world as well.

ALISON: Bishop, liberation theology is news in Europe—a new way of thought that is breaking into our theological schemes. Yet it is definitely dependent on its place of origin. We, for instance, have organisations—socialist parties, for instance— which can participate in the struggle for power in a way that similar organisations at present cannot do in Latin America, and yet this theological element is something difficult for us to grasp.

BISHOP: The first things is to recover the human and christian dimensions to freedom and liberation. These are fundamental themes which it would do no harm to any theology to re-examine. Secondly, whenever we speak of theology, we speak of something relative, temporal and contextual, rooted in this case in Latin America. If theology, is in the last resort, thinking through our faith, it obviously becomes thinking through our faith from where we are, in the context in which we think it, conditioned and made possible by the culture, the history, the life-situation in which we are living. It seemed to me a sad eulogy when not long ago Hans Urs von Balthasar, whom I highly respect for many reasons, was praised thus: he is indeed a great theologian, for *his* theology is outside time and space. Well, a theology that's outside time and space is not a lot of use. Not even Faith is outside time—we only have it until time is over. Then, you will remember that all theology is contextual. As liberation theologians repeat insistently, their theology was born in a continent that is both majoritatively

christian, and simultaneously dependent and oppressed. The central theme, the basic point of reference from which we think, live, speak, and practise the Faith, and do pastoral work can only be liberation. This is the central axis which illumines all the other themes. Jesus Christ is the supreme liberator, the Grace of God can only be the gift which lifts me up, sin is a slavery which has not only invaded my person, but entraps the whole human ambience in which I live—it is simultaneously personal and social. It seems to me that if certain people in some of the more easily scared, centralist sectors of the Vatican had seen liberation theology thus, they would have found no reason to rend their garments, or chase anyone away.

ALISON: Why didn't they?

BISHOP: It seems important to say the following. There continues to be a theological ethnocentrism in those Vatican circles: 'Only that which comes from Europe can be serious, no one is capable of profound thought in the third world.' I wonder whether there is no captivity or slavery in Europe! what good it would do us all if, starting with the Bishops and the Vatican itself, all christians might discover what binds us, ties us, enslaves us in Europe; it might be fear of an atomic catastrophe, or maybe consumerism or individualism, obsession with money-making, incapacity to show solidarity, culturally superior behaviour, ethnocentric attitudes, sexism, drugs ... Aren't those things a kind of slavery? If only the theologians and pastors of Europe were to throw for themselves the light of the great biblical theme of liberation on those typically European forms of slavery! These problems might seem to be less political, but at root most of them are political as well. In this world everything is political, even though the political isn't everything—that's the truth.

ALISON: Does this mean you disagree wholesale with what Rome has had to say about liberation theology?

BISHOP: I'm in disagreement with Cardinal Ratzinger's Instruction *Libertatis nuntius*, and it is as well to remember that the Pope himself was in disagreement with the initial instruction, which was extremely negative, and he demanded that it be filled out with the first five chapters, which are highly positive. I disagree fundamentally with Cardinal Ratzinger's Instruction because, as I see it, it turns out to be a sort of anonymous collective calumny against theologians of liberation. It says 'theology' or 'theologies', passing from singular to plural. It never specifies the names

of the supposed theologians, but it claims that they deny the divinity of Christ, reduce the Church to a political mission, that they forget eschatology, and make of the Eucharist a protest celebration. I know more or less all the theologians of liberation; many of them I know personally. As a human being and as a bishop I say that these affirmations are, at the very least, anonymous collective calumnies. Some of those theologians have written whole books on eschatology, on the Eucharist, on Christology, and none of them comes within a mile of denying the divinity of Christ. So either the Sacred Congregation was ignorant of liberation theology, and judged it *a priori*, which would be highly frivolous, or they read it in a blind and stubborn way. Or, because of their lack of confidence in the churches of the third world, they didn't want a new theology born in the third world to grow to maturity. There are themes in theology that have already been exhaustively treated, as the theologians of liberation point out. They only want to highlight what are the most urgent themes for them. I insist on this: before liberation theology was born, there existed the pastoral work of liberation, and the spiritual living out of liberation; that began with the pedagogy of liberation, the work of the great Brazilian Paulo Freire. Liberation theology is only the systematization in the light of Faith of all that process, of all that eruption of liberation which is being lived in the third world, and especially in Latin America. It is significant that this happens in a continent which is both third-world and majoritatively Christian—might there not be some biblical or evangelical root to all this?...