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Human Rights: Latin American Perspectives

Reinerio Arce-Valentin

The issue of human rights is something that is talked about a lot in different sectors of our societies. The media, objectively or not, often condemn human rights and offer information about the places where their validity is limited and where societies or certain groups fail to comply with them. Politicians include the topic in their debates and speeches. In short, human rights are something that are referred to frequently but are also used for political and hegemonic benefits and political interests of certain groups in various parts of the world. At the same time, human rights language has become a slogan which is used as a political instrument for certain hegemonic interests against others with certain intentions of controlling others by force.

For us, the challenge is how to address the issue from our Christian faith, which implies not only speaking up and working for these rights, but also denouncing the absence of their implementation and acting consistently in favour of defending human rights in any society. For me, from the biblical theological point of view, human rights should be based on the greatest demand we can have from biblical tradition, which is to work for and to enhance life. The God of scripture in whom we believe is the God of life, the giver of life. Biblically speaking, the central message of Jesus our Lord, the Son of God, is that he came to bring us "life and life in abundance" (John 10:10). Full life, life in abundance, was the purpose of God's revelation with his creation, which will only be fulfilled fully in his reign but for which he has asked us to work as his co-creators and co-makers in the present time.

The commitment to life becomes a concrete reality through the strength of love for justice. There are three distinct, though closely linked, biblical concepts of justice. The first is more linked to legality, in the sense of compliance with the law and punishment for those who transgress it. This dimension we call retributive justice: God is the judge of the living and the dead.

A second concept that is fundamental to understanding biblical justice is expressed in what we could call distributive justice. When the Bible speaks

of justice, it also refers to the distribution of the goods of God's creation for all human beings. It is about the distribution of resources and goods that God has created for all of humanity. God makes his creation as his house, his abode (*shekinah*). And God, Father and Mother of all, distributes with justice the goods of his house, which means God distributes according to the needs of each one. That is why, over and over again, in the Old Testament we are told to remember the widow and the orphan, for they were the most destitute in the societies of that time. That is what divine intentionality consists of, as clearly expressed by the writers of the creation myth in the first chapters of the book of Genesis. This plan of distribute justice for all is not only for human beings but for all of God's creation. Perhaps by violating this divine distributive intention we are committing the greatest violation against human rights.

The third way of understanding biblical justice is restorative justice. Hence, this refers to the meaning of the biblical Jubilee that was part of the Sabbath tradition, where the land, the animals, and all other things in private hands, which originally formed the heritage of the community, were to be returned to their original state. In the same way, slaves were to be freed. But in addition to restorative justice, biblically speaking, this Jubilee tradition refers to the restorative action related to the consequences of unjust practices. In other words, today this means that a restoring is needed in some way with regard to the consequences of our sinful actions that have harmed others or nature, since both are part of God's creation and deserve our loving care. This is about restoring justice and life in the light of not only the consequences of individual sin but also of structural sin through systems that promote injustice and inequalities, the exploitation of human beings and nature. All of these dimensions then lead us to work and to contribute to the establishment of just social economic systems through our social and political actions that bring us closer every day to the reign of God, which can be described as justice and peace through the practice of love.

"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go, be reconciled first with your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:25-26).

When referring to us by starting from this biblical conception of the God of life that leads us through love to be agents of justice in biblical terms, we have to be clear that the first human right that must be saved is that of the poor and marginalized, to restore their right for life and fullness of life. The

first violation of any human right that must be eliminated is poverty and the economic and social marginalization in which many human beings exist.

Thus, the foundation of the Christian commitment to human rights relates to the basic biblical concept of God as the giver of life and life in abundance. This is manifested through a commitment to justice that will bring peace, which is not only the absence of war but also implies the well-being of all.

There has been a manipulation of the issue of human rights from politicians and actors in international relations. If we want to contribute to the challenges of human rights from the perspective of Christian faith, we have to start with this foundation. We must be alert about the meaning of the concepts of human rights, as they can be and have been used like a double-edged sword: in the name of such rights, positions have been justified which are directed against the poor in their struggle for emancipation and in their efforts for building a new society where peace is a reality as a result of justice. Therefore, the understanding of human rights has to be reflected and expressed critically and contextually to make sure that they remain consistent with the biblical intention to eliminate all violations of rights and to provide life in its fullness for millions of people in the world.

Mishpat, as many contemporary biblical exegetes have shown, means salvation for the poor. This implies rights for the exploited, justice for the oppressed, essentially consisting of freeing them from their inhuman condition of death and dehumanization.

The unfortunate thing is that often two aspects are ignored. The first has to do with what was stated above about divine justice: this aspect is the basis for peace, which has often been ignored. It is not that freedom of expression and other human rights are not considered as human rights, but rather that before and above all other concerns, we have ignored *the fundamental nature of the right to live*. The second has to do with the fact that we manifest ourselves in different ways when there are political problems that result in human rights violations, but the rest of the time, we remain silent in the face of the death of millions of people every day due to extreme poverty and now the COVID-19 pandemic. There are still places where millions of people have not even been able to be vaccinated against COVID-19. In the same way, governments sanction countries for human rights violations, but these sanctions are often highly selective so that other countries and governments that are allies are not pointed out. In addition, many economic sanctions cause pain and death among the inhabitants of these sanctioned countries.

One last thing I would like to mention here is that we have left aside violations of the rights of God's creation, as if this were not also a great violation against life. This aggression against nature not only compromises her but at the same time violates millions of people around the world. It compromises the future of all because it compromises life.

Thus, I believe that as Christians we must understand the defence of and commitment to the rights of all human beings and creation as holistic, taking into account the human being as a whole and not just one aspect of the human being. We need to always remember that the foundation of any action for the defence and development of human rights is the protection and defence of life as such, which God has given us and which translates into the implementation of biblical justice through love. In this way and only in this way can we contribute meaningfully to the defence of a holistic understanding of human dignity and human rights.

Only in this way can we reach a true and lasting peace.