

## **In Defense of Life**

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### **1. Introduction**

There are times when we look around us and we can't believe what we see. Is it really we ourselves who are doing this? But then, we remain in a daze. . . Because of this, these pages are dedicated to reflecting about life from the angle that gives us our Christian faith. This task is more urgent today than ever, since we are increasingly conscious of the deterioration of life in all its forms. This consciousness acquires unimaginable dimensions when we begin to combine information from the field of human rights, the exploitation of the environment, the expulsion of people from the economic system, domestic violence, racial hatred and discrimination, child prostitution. . .

When all of this is put on the same table, it gives the sensation that we're living a moment when almost every aspect of reality is rift with conflict, and when each conflict expresses a distinct form of individual or collective violence. If we had to identify a common denominator in all of this, we could call it *disdain for the life of the other*. The other—our neighbour, as referred to in the Scriptures—is sociologically ignored, or economically excluded, or biologically discriminated, or sexually subjugated. The other is discounted from chronologies, or, to put it plainly, the other simply doesn't exist for the record. Ignacio Ellacuría was a Spanish priest who was brutally assassinated by the Army in El Salvador, for having dedicated his life to the Gospel and to the poor people of his adopted country. On one occasion, he remarked that, "Here in El Salvador, life is worth nothing." That life, however, so disregarded by those who had unlawfully usurped power, was highly valued by Father Ignacio himself, and by others who shared his commitment, his battles, and his hopes. His strong words were not intended to express his own point of view, but rather to denounce the social system that was creating a daily deterioration of living conditions and condemning thousands of people in that country to a life without meaning. With just a glance, it's easy to see who suffered and who profited, morally or economically, in that situation. At the same time, it's difficult to avoid the sensation that those who are pulling the strings of the world are driving humanity in the shackles of the most brutal, internationally organised, exploitation. The final destination seems to be none other than the disintegration of the already-weak social fabric and the decline, to depths never before seen, in the living conditions of immense unnamed masses. The situations of poverty and dehumanisation that frightened us thirty years ago have today worsened greatly and continue to fall into a bottomless abyss.

If globalization has led us to recognize that we are all aboard the same ship—the planet, singular and unrepeatable—it also shows us that this ship has a first-class deck and a third or fourth class deck, and that the responsibility for what is happening in the world is not the same on each level. There are sectors with the power to create or modify the living conditions of the majority, a small group which determines the general direction of the world economy, thereby setting the conditions for national economies, especially in dependent countries. These are the people who plan aggression toward immigrants, or mutilate the information given to the general public so as to accommodate their particular interests. Such people cannot be situated on an equal plane with the great masses who are the victims of the decisions of these groups. The poor do not decide on their poverty, nor are the illiterate guilty for not reaching the minimal material conditions that would permit them to acquire the knowledge they have been denied.

At the same time, we must be aware that the webs in which our society is trapped are complex. The situation is marked by contradictions, by historic processes that come and go, by promises and longings that seem to be indefinitely postponed. For this reason, we must not fall into the superficiality of assigning personal blame to problems that are structural and that require answers at a structural level. Yet, nor can we cease to identify the actors involved, with the objective of clarifying where our energies should be directed, if we are striving to carry out mature actions with a degree of social efficacy.

This is life as we know it today. A life in danger, a life in fragments, lived by actors who, at times, have no options beyond surviving, stretching out their days as long as possible. Other contemporary actors have the will to transform the world, but distrust the social and political mechanisms which seem to have failed in the past, and search for other roads, at times sinking into the new pitfalls of inaction or adaptation to a system which smothers their hopes. What must be clear to us is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls upon us to stand up against this situation and to put all of our energies into describing the world that God wills for his sons and daughters and then working to approach that will as closely as possible. In the face of a certain social, and also Christian, apathy, we are in need of new ideas to motivate us, innovative projects in which to place our hearts and lives and to make our faith more than just an idle declaration or identification with the Church in which we were baptized, to make it the central criterion and motor for our life choices.

## **2. A theological task**

From our perspective as believers, this is a theological task. By this we mean that those of us who live trusting in Christ as the redeemer and savior of personal and social life cannot approach these concerns without reference to that affirmation of faith which is the foundation of our thoughts and actions. The Scriptures give witness that Christ gave his life for the life *of the world* (John 6:33.51), and it should be emphasized that it does not say “of the Church,” “of the believers,” or “of the faithful,” though of course, they’re all included. And, it is this same life that is Christ which is today being threatened and devalued. The statement that every attack against life is an attack against God is as true today as it was during the blackest pages of the past history of humanity. It is thus that our search for understanding about what is happening around us, its causes and our possible contribution to its solution, must always pass through the sieve of what God expects of his sons and daughters, of what we are called upon to do. We must give witness to the light of the Gospel that has been given to us.

The deterioration of life is occurring not only at the macro-structural level of the global economy, but also, and perhaps as a consequence of the former, in the

personal and micro-social levels, which are experiencing crisis not just in straightforward material terms, but also as a crisis of meaning. The question of the meaning of life is as old as humanity itself and takes us into a realm where words are inadequate to express what we want to say, but, we must make do with them. This is an unavoidable challenge not just because it is impossible to undertake any life project without having articulated at least some of its meaning, but also because our faith has a lot to say on this subject, since at the moment of assuming Christian faith, we discover new meaning in life. At the same time, however,—and it's necessary to call attention to this—our faith bears part of the responsibility for the loss of orientation in which our society is plunging. Perhaps this is because the churches have become trapped in a culture that is "Christian" by its history and tradition, but not by conviction, or because, in part, they have assumed the so-called Western model which grants them certain moral, and even economic, privileges. Or, perhaps it is because the churches have presented only moralizing and superficial critiques of profound and essential problems. What is certain is that we cannot simply attribute the critical situation in which we find ourselves to the fault of those who do not profess our faith, as though the churches were the innocent victims of atheism or religious indifference. Rather, we must search for the origin of that indifference in the frequently contradictory testimony of the churches, which present themselves to society in divided, ambiguous ways. At times, they are lukewarm toward venial political powers, or enthusiastic about any novelty with a religious air, which by the simple fact of convoking multitudes, disguises, and makes people forget, the real problem, which is faithfulness to the Word.

It is also true that we live in an epoch marked by a certain skepticism regarding institutional solutions. Confidence in historic processes and institutions has been losing ground in the face of proposals constructed more around the individual and his or her capacity for self-help, or around small groups or sectors. Perhaps this has been a reaction to the previous period, marked by the investment of hopes in social processes which were to come about as the logical and inevitable consequence of historical development. At the same time, there has been a reaction to the incapacity of many revolutionary and reformist processes to carry forward their projects in a concrete way. People have thus begun to weave their own hopes, with tighter threads, less ambitious than the classic social actors and discourses, which have not borne effects directly in daily life. But, to the extent that this skepticism leads to the extreme of trying to separate oneself from social processes—which do not cease to exist just because we deny them in our thoughts or actions—it becomes the source of new frustrations and, ultimately, deepens the disorientation about where our life is going, about the society we are shaping, and about our fundamental thirst for justice and equality.

This situation of social disorientation in the context of serious injustices has also led many Christians to question their faith and their way of sharing it. Such questioning has come to constitute a sort of paradox. Celebrating the good news of the Gospel is felt to be incompatible with a world which day by day shows itself to be more burdened and without horizons. The weight of daily bad news seems to smother the joy of the biblical message, such that it almost feels shameful to give thanks for life and to celebrate God's love for humanity, in the midst of so much tragedy and death. What is there to thank God for, we ask, when a little child dies for lack of the nourishment which is being thrown out in the trash in houses not far away? Or, when an adolescent loses her life in a clandestine induced abortion? Or, when a father drops his arms in exhausted anguish from looking for work and not finding it, and not being able to meet the basic needs of his family? At this point, the questions that tend to cross our minds are: How do we talk about the love of God to those who live in a world that is hostile to them, to those condemned to misery or ignorance, to those excluded by society, to those who are alone in the midst of an indifferent multitude? Or, how do we announce the Gospel in such a

way that when the poor of our society embrace it, they are not led to forget their own needs and their right to fight for a dignified life? These questions have emerged as our own contemporary version of that other question, that which has not lost its relevance or validity since it was formulated in the context of the Nazi crimes during the Second World War: Where was the presence of God in Auschwitz? It is our question about God's silence in the face of the atrocious, the inexplicable, the human experiences which we desperately want to believe are just a bad dream from which we will soon wake up.

But this is not the case. When a group of Latin American students met with Emanuel Levinas, who was one of the survivors of the European Holocaust and, subsequently, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century, they asked him what he thought about the other holocausts, such as that committed against the original inhabitants of America during the European conquest, or that of the millions of people who die slowly, of hunger, or who are condemned to inhumane conditions as the result of poverty and the lack of social attention. Levinas responded simply: On these subjects, it is you yourselves who have to speak out. Certainly his answer was not meant to evade his own responsibility, but rather to emphasize that this life is *ours*, and that we are responsible for all that we are given to witness, just as he was an inalienable witness to his own experience.

Questioning our faith may also be prompted by the realization that Christians have not been outside the shaping of the unequal society in which we live; at times, they contribute by omission, and, at other times, by clear and deliberate action in favor of the powerful and to the detriment of the most poor. Yet, at the same time, recent decades in Latin America, and undoubtedly in other places, have shown that even while Christianity may be used to lull popular consciousness and to divert the people from the struggle for that which is due to them, its message also contains a powerful force capable of inspiring processes in favor of the weak, of opening consciousness to social solidarity, and of supporting the fight for dignity and justice. This is demonstrated by the thousands of believers who live in solidarity with their fellow men and women, who work in love for the benefit of the most needy, who put their knowledge and gifts at the service of just political causes, and many of whom, in extreme circumstances, have given their lives to sustain the Gospel's link to the search for justice. These people are proof that Christian hope is possible not as a distant, theoretical, or unattainable ideal, but rather, as a response to the call from God, in the form of concrete lives which inspire us to not drop our arms, to not give up. But, they also alert us to the reality of how difficult the conditions are today in which Christian faith is called upon to act, both in Latin America and in the world. To be a witness of Christ has never been easy, and it certainly is not in our time. We are driven to confront the real challenge of how to speak of God, who is love and life, when reality seems to be governed by selfishness and death. And, this is not just a fortuitous and passing situation, but the objective social conditions in which we must face up to our own mission.

### **3. Changes in Our Cultural Models**

Many are the authors who insist that the changes we are experiencing in our culture today surpass those corresponding to the normal development of a society. They refer to the sense in which we have crossed an epochal line and are living in a new era, which has come to be called postmodernism. This new stage of humanity is said to be marked by a crisis of ethics and a lack of confidence in human beings and their achievements. It is difficult to take a position on this, and it doesn't seem necessary to do so, at least for those of us who live and analyze reality from the perspective of the victims of the system. For these people, there has not been so much change in the past decades, unless we consider as changes the intensification

of labor exploitation and the concomitant destruction of the working class and popular organizations which had carried forward the demands of the majority for most of the twentieth century. Looked at from this angle, a better way of conceptualizing the current situation would be as a superlative phase in the spirit of capitalism. This has produced a society where one of the parts in tension, that which defends the interests of the majority, has become very limited in its capacity for pressuring and resisting, and therefore, finds itself at the mercy of the rapacity of a system specialized in the generation of wealth by the many for the advantage of a few. Whatever our analysis might be about historical development, we can be sure that there are real changes affecting life, which we cannot ignore. We highlight two of these changes because we perceive that they have consequences in other areas of life, and that when they are intertwined, their effects may be decisive.

### ***a. A World Without Work?***

There are changes in the world of work. It is not just that technology has replaced a large part of the human workforce, but also that the quality and nature of the jobs remaining for human beings have been modified. The employee used to be a person who was responsible for a certain area of work, which required his ability and knowledge, and from whom it was expected that he make certain decisions or lead a group of people, a person who had the discernment to act in unforeseen situations and who could ultimately resolve the problems generated by the work process itself. This type of employee has been disappearing and is today an endangered species. Thousands and thousands of jobs such as that described here have been reduced to the tasks of operating a machine, monitoring a panel of lights, and issuing a trouble signal when a problem is detected. This new employee does not need to understand the tools he or she is working with, so the job requires no more than minimal training. And, the worker is generally unconnected with the final product to which his or her time and life are dedicated.

When this new labor model first appeared in the core countries, it was naively celebrated as a marvelous possibility for reducing weekly work hours, and freeing up time for leisure activities and personal development. This was in the context of the new blessing of being able to leave the brutal and exhausting work to the machines, and to rely on people for the neat, clean, and calm task of monitoring a robot, which, anyway, was operating quite well and didn't require much attention. Yet, soon the marvelous possibility was to become a very different reality. If, at first, a slight and controllable increase in unemployment was observed, by the end of a decade, it was evident that the absence of jobs had itself transformed into new actor, already entrenched in the system. It is not just a problem of young people struggling to enter the labor system, but increasingly, it has been the heads of households who are swelling the ranks of those expelled from production. If the situation is serious in opulent countries, its effects in dependent countries is catastrophic. A high technology cotton harvester imported to Argentina replaces the labor of three hundred workers. These tend to be temporary workers, those who move for the months of the harvest season and then return to their homes. In other words, these three hundred workers were already suffering from bad pay, bad working conditions, and a total lack of social security or medical assistance. They held what were considered to be the worst remunerated jobs in the country. Now, however, hundreds of these workers are in desperate need of even that job. Before they were poorly paid workers; now they wander around in abject misery.

In the world of labor, many of the social conquests dating from the beginning and middle of the twentieth century have been overturned. This unravelling of social conquests has occurred to such an extent that it seems that the grandchildren of

those workers will once again have to raise the same banners that their grandparents lifted with such immense effort and sacrifice, in many cases giving their lives for these causes. Today the eight-hour workday has again become an unattainable ideal, and the right to rest and the right to a dignified remuneration proportionate to the labor expended are disappearing. Workers live under the threatening shadow of losing their jobs, in a society where for each job, there is a long list of applicants, who, just to get a foothold position from which to enter the labor system, are willing to accept jobs on any conditions, including terms greatly inferior to those required by the labor laws. This situation, referred to as job precariousness, has come about because the system has generated a new social sector: the excluded. Up until a few years ago, society was divided between employers and employees, owners of the means of production and laborers, and was constructed as a pyramid with a graduated incline going from the extremely small tip, representing the wealthiest, down to the wide base of the poorest, who were fighting to subsist while stuck in the worst paid and most undesirable jobs. Today society has knocked out the floor of the pyramid and, beneath that base, an abyss has opened which swells with those who remain outside the system. It is clear that in an economy which does not generate new sources of work, but rather reduces them, what *is* generated is an overabundance of unemployment. And, this is the first step toward marginalization and misery. When neoliberal economics are combined with State policies which are increasingly devoid of social content and unable to control the effects of the economy on human life, the only possible result is that millions of people are condemned to hunger, sickness, ignorance, and death.

### ***b. The Crisis in Education***

This new situation in the labour market has been reflected in changes in the conception of education which, for more than a century, has been one of the pillars of people's formation. From the beginning, classic liberalism insisted on education as a vehicle for social ascent and as a motivator in the economy. Even with its contradictions, it is important to acknowledge that access to free public education made possible the development of ideas, and more than a few workers' battles were generated in the heat of texts learned in school, in State schools, even though, in general, the workers took them far beyond the official platforms and objectives for which they had been created. The philosophy of education developed by Paulo Freire and his followers presented a strong critique of this classic model of education, centered on the transfer of information. Their aim was not to eliminate scholastic education, but rather to reformulate its objectives with an eye to making it a space for greater community reflection and consciousness-raising about the real problems faced by people and collectivities. It is not necessary to exaggerate the influence of Freire in systems of education, but, without a doubt, it has been one more element among those which have led to the move by States in the past decade to abandon the education system and transfer responsibility for it, as much as possible, to the private sector. But, as we well know, what is a duty of the State then becomes a profit deal for the investor. And, this is how a society is formed in which education is increasingly a privilege enjoyed by those who can pay for it, while the quality of the education offered by the State continues to decline, until it is the last, poorest recourse, resorted to only by those who simply do not have access to education in the private sector. In more than a few cases, primary school has been transformed by the evident need of the people into a school meal program, where the students come to receive the nourishment which is not found in their homes. In this way, on one hand, the system expels people from their places of work, appealing to the State's non-interference with the laws by which the economy operates, and demanding free market conditions for business dealings. On the other hand, the system transfers to the State the consequences of the unemployment generated by this order of affairs and expects it to intervene to prevent social explosions, or upheavals, among the most affected sectors of the

population. It is obvious that the resources of a dwarfed State will never be able to cover the real needs of the society, but can only respond very obliquely to demands for the individual and social rights which are basic to the life of each person.

This deterioration of public education is in keeping with the needs of the newly shaped labor market, described above. This labor market is not interested in education as a form of cultural elevation for people or groups, nor as a way of preserving, or, more importantly, constructing and developing social values. The interest now centers on the production of goods, and because of this, the segment of employees who must have an integral formation is increasingly smaller, while there is rapid expansion of the great mass of workers for whom only minimal training is required to carry out their functions.

What happens to the labor rights which were conquered through decades of demands and struggles? Salary scales and social security are now conceived not as retribution earned by work, but as a production cost which must be reduced to the absolute possible minimum in the same way that is done with any other input cost. If labor laws set limits on how far salaries can be reduced, there is always the option of bringing people from other, poorer areas, people who are willing to work for lower wages, and without medical insurance or retirement benefits. The majority of these people are brought illegally, such that they find themselves in defenseless situations and at the mercy, in all senses, of the people who hired them. In Argentina, it is common to hear denunciations of situations of semi-slavery in which immigrants' documents are kept by the employer, making it impossible for them to return freely to their own countries. And, not long ago, the world learned of Asian people who were being transported as cattle across the clean and winding routes of Europe, to end up as semi-slaves in cultured England. Could we have imagined twenty years ago that we would be starting the third millennium with discussions of new forms of slavery in Latin America and other parts of the world?

It is worth pointing out that to consider a person's salary as an input cost, just like any other, is to lump human beings together with things. Just as energy, wood, or steel have a price and must be paid for, this is also how working men and women are conceived in neoliberal economics. They are reduced to objects, to be freely interchanged according to the laws of supply and demand. They are a commodity which wears out and eventually needs to be replaced, thrown aside like a broken machine or yesterday's newspaper, which has lost all meaning in the world of today.

#### **4. Systems Crisis**

When we see clearly that the life of a quarter of the world's population is being so scorned that its very existence is forgotten, and a good part of the rest live in perpetual job insecurity, breathing in contaminated air, receiving rays from a sun which has become dangerous, and experiencing climatic changes which may leave humanity without sufficient drinking water or crops, we must speak of a general crisis in the system. This affirmation should be considered in light of the picture we are describing. From the perspective of pure capitalism, it is likely that not only is such a crisis not perceived, but these phenomena are considered little more than the minor, unpleasant consequences of the prevailing system, which is often said to be "the lesser evil," though it is not explained how the death thousands of people, and possibly life itself on the planet, could be construed as a lesser evil. Due to the velocity which historic periods have acquired, it is difficult not to feel that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are quite close to some form of global crisis that will force a regrouping of social sectors and a resurgence of the question of the distribution of resources. This would be the most positive outcome, but we

must not forget that, as of today, there is not one statesman with real power who is proposing the eradication of poverty as a political project. The expression that circulates among neoliberal economists, which is vulgar and shameful, but which perfectly describes the situation we are in, is that "it may be unjust that every day a rich man's dog consumes the protein that is denied to a poor child, but those are the laws of the market." This shows how far the capitalist system has consciously assumed its condition as the destroyer of life and the incapacity of its laws to resolve basic problems, such as the nourishment of those who participate in the society that these laws govern. If a system cannot provide its people with food, education, decent housing, and jobs, what purpose does it serve?

Historic processes are not pure, and in them we always find contradictory elements which are precisely what permit the collapse of one model and the emergence of the next. It's worth noting that the crisis of confidence in global systems helped to raise people's consciousness about the importance of certain social sectors. These sectors were not new, but for decades they had lost faith in the efficacy of their own propositions, precisely because, since they were not dealing with the system as a totality, they seemed to be riverboats incapable of navigating on the high seas. With time, however, it became increasingly evident that their particular demands brought to light the more general deficiencies, and even pettiness, in the political, economic, and social system. The first movement which has assumed this global scope is that of women battling for equal treatment and opportunity, without a doubt because the victims here constitute nothing less than half the inhabitants of the planet and because, from all perspectives, their demands are just and valid. This movement has pervaded almost all areas of life: politics, philosophy, churches, mass media, work, family models. The same could be said of the environmentalist movement which started in solidarity with extinct and endangered plant and animal species, and today is present everywhere, rousing battles against the suicidal greed of companies and governments. In the same vein, we can speak of the movements of indigenous groups, of the homeless, of retired persons, etc. All of these were created to defend the rights of a particular sector, but after going just a short way down that path, they found themselves challenging the very system in its entirety. And, the same system that a few decades ago put the "real and concrete" problems of social groups before ideological discussions emphasizing the analysis and critique of the general structure, today sees these groups as its true enemies. This is because the system finds that it can neither respond to the demands of these groups, nor can it hide the structural nature—not sectarian and not conjunctural—of the problems they raise. How else could we explain that the confrontation with environmentalist groups in the Pacific has reached the level of armed conflict? Or, the highly political nature of dealings with the retired persons in Argentina who are demanding their rights, or the military repression of indigenous movements in Mexico, or the subtle and crude forms of juridical persecution of women's initiatives everywhere?

## **5. Challenges to Faith**

Upon opening the Bible, we learn that labor is a gift from God. He provides land to be worked, and from it, fruits to be extracted, for the delight of the tiller and his family (Amos 9:14-15). The Bible tells us that the person who works is worthy of his or her salary (1 Timothy 5:18) and deserves respect. It tells us that education elevates us spiritually and makes us aware of who we are, so that we may head out with confidence toward an open future (Jos 4:21-22; Lk 2:46).

All this seems to indicate, then, that we live in a society constructed without links to biblical faith. It does not cease to confound us that our civilization has proclaimed itself to be Christian and has used this banner to assert itself, and has even opposed other social models, with distinct economic interests, in its name.

This was the case in the crusades against the Muslim Arabs in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; in the conquest of America, against the natives who were considered pagan; and, in the twentieth century battles against Socialism, accused of atheism as if this were the worst of its aspects.

For the good of faith and Christian witness, this connection has been cracking. The churches have traveled a long road of maturation, which, without doubt, has not yet reached an end, in which they have come to see that the Gospel cannot remain tied to a social system which contradicts it in essential aspects. It is true that in the interior of different churches strong discussions continue about the degree of relation that should be established between faith and concrete political projects. These debates tend to be constructed around a false dichotomy between these two fields, when, in reality, they are one and the same, since neither life nor faith comes in the form of separable components. On the other hand, there have been changes in the attitudes on both sides of the ideological spectrum, as it existed in the 1970s and '80s. The groups which emphasized the need to link faith with social commitment have come to understand that the analysis of society and its conflicts cannot be unconnected to the living Christian community—always slower, and at times, stubborn, to accept new ideas and alternative projects. Nor can it be disconnected from the tendencies and trends generated in society, though we must not forget that a simple majority is not a criterion of truth.

Those Christians who are more reticent to be critical of the society in which we live have not been able to stay aloof from the severe social crisis we have described, which installed itself in the churches by the simple fact that it did so in society as a whole. In the case of the evangelical churches, due to their disinterest in politics, they have, in a certain sense, grown up on the margins of ideological vicissitudes. And, as a result of their strong sense of being a separate community, they were able to avoid the most serious effects of the social crises. But, by the beginning of the 1990s, these churches found themselves overtaken by the unemployment and social instability of their own members. How could I not recognize the need to link my faith with politics, when it is my brother, who is here at my side together with his family, who has been laid off from his job and left totally unprotected by the company and the State? It is interesting to note that in both cases, it is reality itself which has demanded a reformulation of the way of thinking about, and connecting with, the social world. This indicates that it is increasingly more important for thought to be structured in close relation to social practice and actors.

Let me present three issues which I understand are crucial for the mission of the church today. I propose them for further discussions:

1. The need for an orthopraxis which express the action related with our well known orthodoxy. After forty years of Liberation Theology in Latin America and other parts of the world, is time to think again both terms in order to reshape its meanings and consequences.
2. The centrality of the human life as privileged subject of Christian love. But this human life must be understood in an essential relationship with the whole life present in the creation. There is no future for one without the other.
3. We have to realize that human justice -as an imperfect but necessary anticipation of the final and perfect justice- is an expression of the Grace of God. It is not a gift that one nation concede to the other, or a good action that a group offer to the less favored for the system. The human community deserve right relationships and its absence offend the name of the biblical God.

To bring these reflections to a close, we want to point out that perhaps this is not the worst epoch of humanity, but without a doubt, it is not its most brilliant. It is a time with its own difficulties, which are so particular they can't be resolved with simple answers or recipes drawn from the past. It is also, however, *our epoch*, that in which we have been called upon to live because God willed it to be so, and in the midst of this epoch—not on its edges, but in its midst—is where we are summoned to share the good news and to do the works of the Gospel.

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