

SIN AND THE TELLING OF TRUTH

Brian Pierce, OP

Sin binds people in shackles of spiritual death. *Social* sin has the power of binding entire communities, villages, institutions, even nations in those shackles. Both the sinners and their victims are, albeit in different ways, shackled by the sin. As Christians we believe that Jesus offers a path toward freedom from sin, personal as well as social. That promise is made very clear in his post-resurrection appearance to the disciples (Jn. 20:19ff): "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you hold bound the sins of any they are held bound."

One of the most essential steps in the unbinding and setting free of persons and communities shackled by social sin is speaking the truth. "The truth will set you free," said Jesus (Jn 8:32). Telling the truth frees people from the bonds of sin. To attempt reconciliation and peace in situations devastated by social sin without a process of *truth-telling* simply fortifies the sin itself. It is cheap grace, a kind of white-washed reconciliation. It neither heals nor sets free.

One could test the above thesis in a myriad of social situations. For example, the medieval Inquisition of the Catholic Church was certainly a situation of institutional sin, and one cannot but be hopeful, as the Jubilee year approaches, with John Paul II's bold search for the truth regarding certain past ecclesiastical sins. German society knows what it means to struggle to be free from the shackles of social sin which linger from the Nazi era's denial of the truth. In South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has made a united effort in the last couple of years to begin the healing process in the wake of the racist Apartheid regime, and it has been done through a painful, yet freeing, series of public confessions of the truth. And many families, after years of secrecy around issues of alcoholism or incest, have come to see that the breaking of the silence with the truth is the only path toward true healing. And the list goes on.

Preaching is really the oral art of truth telling. It is the process in which the preacher seeks to form words around the central gospel truths in a way that they are grasped anew as liberating Good News by communities of faith. Allow me to share an experience of one community's experience of preaching the truth.

The Central American country of Guatemala endured a thirty year civil war which left more than two hundred thousand people killed or disappeared. The years of terror and the hundreds of massacres, perpetrated in great part by the military and their death squads, left a blanket of deafening silence over the people. Rarely did anyone speak the truth of what had really happened, for to speak the truth was to nominate oneself to appear on the next death list. It was a strangulating silence which, with a few heroic exceptions, only began to be broken after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996.

In our indigenous Catholic parish in the mountains of the Department of Verapaz there were a number of massacres in the early 1980's, clearly the most brutal years of the war. In the adjoining department of El Quiche the situation was much worse. Few families were untouched. Some villages were wiped out entirely. And for years almost no one spoke out. It was a society ruled by sinful social structures which perpetuated a culture of un-truth.

During Lent 1999 our parish team met with survivors, widows and orphans of the years of violence, all of whom had participated in the Guatemalan bishops' *Recuperation of the Historic Memory* project (*REMHI*), under the direction of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi (assassinated April 26, 1998, two days after the *REMHI* report "Guatemala: Never Again" was published). The participants in the parish gathering were given time to share their stories in small groups as well as in plenary sessions. Tears were shed and cries for justice, mostly from single mothers whose husbands had been killed, were heard throughout the day-long gathering. Two weeks later, on the 11 month anniversary of Bishop Gerardi's death, a eucharistic celebration for reconciliation and peace was held for anyone in the parish wishing to attend. The centerpiece of the liturgy was the placing of the names of the massacred members of the parish, along with flowers, before the altar, followed by four separate testimonies from parishoners directly affected by the violence. For most of the people it was the first time that they experienced the Church as a place where the oppressive silence of years of terror and fear could be broken by the telling of the truth.

The first testimony, given in the local Q'eqchi' language, was by a twenty year old young man whose father had been killed in a village massacre. He spoke of growing up burdened by the silence and shame surrounding his father's brutal murder. Next, a widow spoke her truth, mixed with tears, of having to wait sixteen years before the bones of her husband and of the others killed with him could finally be dug up from the mass grave and given a Christian burial. A high school teacher followed, speaking of how he and so many others had participated in spying and patrolling the town under the orders of the local Army commanders. "As I look back," he said, "I am aware of how we allowed ourselves to be paralyzed by fear." The final testimony, that of a man who had participated in a massacre of thirty villagers, was read by a third party before a church filled with stunned parishoners. Never, and certainly not during a eucharist, had anyone publicly admitted to participating in a massacre. His testimony ended in this way: "One by one we threw the men into the river from the bridge, their hands tied, shooting them from behind... One of them survived. I am so sad to have participated in this bloody act of violence." The man who had given this testimony was present for the celebration, and even though he did not read it himself, he had volunteered his story to be read as part of the reconciliation process in the parish. He confessed his sin by speaking the truth.

The healing of the wounds of social sin in this one parish in a Guatemala still heavily marked by the years of senseless violence will take many years, perhaps many generations. But it has begun. And it began with a community telling the truth. The tears shed during the truth-telling of our Lenten celebration have begun to water the parched earth of decades of lies and suffocating silence. The Lord has again heard the cry of the poor. It is our duty as preachers and liturgists to ensure that *we, the People of God*, hear those cries as well.

Brian J. Pierce, OP is a member of the Dominican Province of St. Martin de Porres and presently ministers in Central America.