

THE SUBVERSIVE TASK OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

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By remembering the Passion of Christ, the church inserts a subversive memory into the world. This memory creates a social and political conscience expressed as concern for the suffering of others. Jesus, by taking the place of others, reveals the innocence of the victim. Wherever this consciousness takes root in society, political life is largely protected from totalitarianism, for the church is called to take a “prophetic stance” that opposes idolatrous attempts of social or political ideologies to usurp the place in history that belongs to God alone.

Moreover, through the work of the Holy Spirit, who “convicts the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment” (Jn 16:8), a Christ-consciousness emerges. The same Spirit also inspires the church to be conformed to Christ, who is the model of a new humanity. Yet, the church as new community possesses no authority, truth or holiness of her own. She has no power save through the gospel of the eternal Spirit. This power is present in the church by the Holy Spirit and released in proclamation and sacraments, unmasking the dark forces that hold humanity captive. This critical role depends entirely on her humility before God. This she must demonstrate in confession and self-judgment of her own collusion with sin and violence. For only a penitent church can authentically testify to the explosive force of the gospel. Only her repentance gives substance to the vision that the new community is also the bearer of a new history with God.

At the same time – in light of the imminent expectation of the kingdom – the church must not align herself with political and economic ideologies that call all suffering “oppression” which can and should be eliminated. These ideologies negate the Christian proclamation that our God is the God of “the living and the dead”. A world-view that relies for human progress on “moral evolution” has no room for a God who redeems the past and even calls the dead to account.

When the church truly proclaims the imminent expectation of the kingdom, she contradicts the gradualist-evolutionary character of time pointing instead to a profound discontinuity in history. In fact, her very existence in the world is a sign that the nature of time is “catastrophic”. Although the good news of salvation shines the radiance of Christ into the world, it also fulfills a subversive function in history, highly distasteful to the entire human enterprise in its independence from God.

Paradoxically, it is this imminent expectation of the kingdom, which offers true hope for the world. Yet, this spiritual reality thrusts the church into the struggle for an authentic solidarity with the oppressed, with the disgraced, with the poor and with all victims of violence. While this task has never been a marginal one for the church, for the sake of credibility it must feature ever more centrally in her praxis. The church must urgently demonstrate (at least in the West) that she is more than just the religious superstructure of middle-class society, more or less complicit with society’s materialist-consumerist ethos. What ought to emerge is a church that is visibly solidarity with that underclass to which the vast majority of the world’s population belongs.

To the degree she fails to take her place in the spiritual, political and economic struggle alongside and on behalf of the desperately poor, she ceases to be true to herself. In that case, she can no longer sit at the same table with Jesus Christ in his solidarity with the oppressed.