Fellowship of Learning

Dr. Justo L. González

Nebraska

Fellowship of Learning

It is customary, on an occasion such as this, to begin by declaring that one is delighted to be here. And it is true that I am delighted to be here. But I must say that I am also surprised. I am surprised, not so much at being here, as I am surprised at the subject we shall be discussing these few days. Some fifteen years ago, I would not even have thought of discussing the subject of faith and wealth in the early church. Yet now I am convinced that that the question of faith and wealth is not only basic to a proper understanding of early Christian theology, but is also among the most urgent theological issues of our day

When I first read the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, some thirty-five years ago, I was fascinated by what Ignatius had to say about the meaning of communion and about the unity of the church. I was so fascinated that ever since that time I have spent most of my professional career studying the history of Christian thought. During the first twenty years of that study, I paid much attention to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, to Christology, eschatology, etc. but little or no attention to matters having to do with wealth and its use.

It has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that prompted by new developments in theology and in the life of the church, I have begun asking different questions of the same texts and paying more attention to texts dealing specifically with the economic and social order. As I have begun to do this, I have become increasingly convinced that such matters, far from being

tangential to the life of the early church, were central to it, and that without a proper understanding of them we have a very truncated view of that life.

The most important factor leading to this awareness –at least in my case-- has been the development of liberation theologies. In Latin America, and in other parts of what is commonly known as the Third World, Christians involved in the struggle for social justice are claiming that the issues in which they are involved are theological issues, deeply rooted in Christian doctrine and Christian tradition. With sound scholarship and cogent arguments, they claim that the best way to understand the God of Scripture is not through philosophical discourse, but by doing justice, and that this justice includes matters such as land tenure, the distribution and management of wealth, and food for the hungry. They are not simply affirming the commonplace, that Christians ought to be concerned about these matters. They are indeed saying that, but they are saying much more. They are saying that the Christian faith and the Christian God are radically misunderstood when theology does not place these concerns at its very heart. And they are also saying that economic realities and agendas both influence and are influenced by seemingly abstract theological discourse.

At this point, liberation theologies draw on another development that has led not only them but the entire theological enterprise, to ask new questions and develop new methodologies. This is the growth of the social disciplines, particularly sociology and economics. These relatively new disciplines have impacted the way we read all of history. Thus, for instance, a history of the

Roman Empire written today can no longer deal exclusively with cultural and military matters, without paying significant attention to trade, the ownership of land, the systems of production and finance, etc. The same is true with the history of Christianity, which is increasingly taking into account, researching, and debating the social composition of the church at various stages in its history.

However, what I hope to explore with you is not the "social history" of Christianity during the first four centuries of its existence. It is rather the history of the views which Christians held on economic matters, particularly on the origin, significance, and use of wealth. The central question I am asking is not how rich or how poor Christians were at a given time and place, but rather what Christians thought and taught regarding the rights and responsibilities of both rich and poor. Quite clearly, the two questions are entwined and cannot be entirely separated for whatever Christians taught on these matters presumably had something to do with the economic and social conditions of their communities. Yet my emphasis here. is on the history of Christian ideas on social and economic relations and not on the history of such relations themselves. One could say that what I am attempting to do falls within the doctrines, which has long been my own field of interest —the difference being that now, instead of studying what Christians had to say on the Trinity or the eucharist, I am investigating what they had to say on the origin and use of wealth.

Unfortunately, this aspect of Christian doctrine has been ignored by historians of theology and is even less known by the church at large. This may be one of the reasons why, when the Catholic Bishops in the United States issued their Pastoral Letter on the U.S. Economy, or when John Paul II issued the encyclical *Solicitudo rei socialis*, so many Christians, Catholics as well as Protestants, questioned the wisdom of church leaders straying from the field of theology in order to make statements on economics. The truth is that from the earliest time the economy was a theological issue, and it still is. Thus, part of my purpose is to make known some of the patristic material on issues such as the proper distribution and use of wealth, land tenure, the rights of the poor, etc.

As I look at the total picture we shall be surveying in these days, I am struck both by the continuity of certain themes and by the vast difference between the world of Augustine and that of the earliest Christian preachers. Let us look first at the themes in which there is continuity, sometimes almost to the point of unanimity, and then at some of the more significant developments during the four centuries we will be studying.

The first point of agreement is obvious but still merits mention. All early Christian writers agree that issues of faith and wealth belong together. There is not a single voice in favor of the argument, so often heard in modern times, that these issues ought to be kept separate and that preachers or religious teachers should leave them to others. Presumably some of Chrysostom's wealthy hearers who protested the content of his sermons might have voiced such views.

Probably Empress Eudoxia, who had him sent into exile, would have done so. We have no way of knowing. What is clear is that not one major Christian leader held that issues of faith and wealth should be kept apart.

When it comes to the actual relationship between faith and wealth, there is also remarkable unanimity, to the point that certain themes appear again and again almost as if one author had been copying from another. This is true both of themes drawn from Scripture and of those derived from the classical wisdom of Greece and Rome. Thus, for instance, much of what early Christians had to say on usury was clearly borrowed from classical wisdom. The same is true of the reinterpretation of the reinterpretation of "rich" and "poor," so that the seemingly rich are in truth poor in virtue and poor in joy. So is the theme that excessive wealth brings nothing but worry, and that a moderate level of poverty leads to a happier life.

A common theme in practically all Christian writers is that the accumulation of wealth is evil. Yet there is an equally unanimous positive attitude towards the things themselves that constitute wealth. Since "wealth" can mean both things and their accumulation, some authors at times appear almost to contradict themselves . Yet, in the midst of a church beset by gnostic notions about the evil of material creation, it was important to insist that all things, including those that are usually counted as wealth, are good. At the same time, however, the same authors who defended the value of things —and even of "wealth" — against the gnostics, also insisted on the evil of accumulating such things.

Most remarkably, there is a surprising level of agreement on the issue of whether property should be private or held in common. The sort of sharing described in the early chapters of Acts was not abandoned as quickly nor as easily as we sometimes assume. On the contrary, it continued at least until well into the second century, and probably in some mitigated forms, throughout most of the third. At the same time, as the church grew in numbers, and as it came to include a wider variety of economic levels in its membership, the voluntary nature of such sharing was underscored, and in some instances the emphasis was shifted from commonality of goods to almsgiving.

By almsgiving, however, the writers of the first four centuries did not mean the practice of giving loose change to beggars. On the contrary, the criterion one finds most often is that one should keep for oneself only the necessary and give the superfluous to the needy. Augustine encapsulated this principle by declaring that what is superfluous to some is necessary to the poor. At the same time, those who proposed this principle were willing to concede, as did both Chrysostom and Augustine, that out of custom or weakness some may find certain things necessary that others who are poorer would consider superfluous. In such cases, these teachers and pastors are flexible enough not to set stringent rules, but rather to let believers determine what in their own case is necessary and what is superfluous —although some give the advice that believers should not make this decision strictly on their own but rather guided by a spiritual mentor.

Back on the matter of commonality of property, a fairly frequent notion is that in creation God intended all things to be common and that the existence of private property is part of our fallen condition. Such views often combine the stories of the garden of Eden with the ancient myth of an original golden age. What stands between Eden and us is sin, and hence the frequent connection between the notion of private property and sin. Private property, whereby some can keep the produce of the land from others, is, as Ambrose would say, the result of "usurpation" —words which come very close to the modern socialist's dictum that private property is theft.

At the same time, all our authors take private property for granted. Clement of Alexandria is the first to argue that, if no one had anything, it would be impossible to obey Jesus's commandment to give to the poor. One cannot give what one does not have, is his argument. Even when that argument is not explicitly stated, it is clear that the Christian writers of the first four centuries, in calling believers to give, are assuming the existence and continuation of private property. There are, however, drastic limitations on such private property. These limitations are more readily seen in contrast with the prevailing view of Roman law, which considered property rights absolute —to the point that in earliest Roman law, private property was not subject to taxation. In Roman law, ownership entailed the right to enjoy and the right to abuse. Christian teachers consistently rejected such an understanding of property rights. From their perspective, there is always a sense in which all property is "alien." By this two things are meant, to which a third is sometimes added. First and most consistently among early Christian authors, all property is alien to its owners because it ultimately belongs to God. This has important implications for the

question of the proper use of property. Secondly, property is "alien" because we cannot claim more than a temporary ownership of it, to which death will most certainly put an end. It is along these lines of argument that some early Christian writers comment on the number of owners an estate has had before its present owner, and how many more owners it will have in the future. Thirdly, a number would say that property is "alien" because it is the result of injustice —so, among others, Irenaeus and Jerome, who simply declared that a rich person is either an unjust person or the heir of one.

In any case, the theme of the proper use of property is fairly constant in the early church, although various authors differ on the criteria by which they would determine such proper use. The criterion most often used is sufficiency. What is meant by this is that owners of property or wealth should use for themselves that which is sufficient to meet their needs. What surpasses the measure of sufficiency is superfluous and should be shared with others whose primary needs are not being met. CIement of Alexandria and others speak of usefulness. By this they mean that a criterion in the use of wealth should be not to employ it in things that are useless or that could be just as useful with less ostentation. Thus, Clement reminds his readers that an iron knife cuts better than one made out of gold or silver; and Chrysostom and others mock and condemn those whose horses wear golden bits.

Much more could be said by way of summary, but anything I would say would not be equal to the words of those early Christians themselves, who often shock us by the boldness with which they speak.

Thus, Basil of Caesarea, also known as Basil the Great:

> When their time comes, seeds germinate and animals grow; but interest begins to reproduce from the moment it is begotten. The beasts become fertile soon, but cease reproducing equally soon. Capital, on the other hand, immediately produces interests, and these continue multiplying into infinity. Everything that grows stops growing when it reaches its normal size. But the money of the greedy never stops growing.

And Basil again:

> What is a miser? One who is not content with what is needful. What is a thief? One who takes what belongs to others. Why do you not consider yourself a miser and a thief when you claim as your own what you received in trust? If one who takes the clothing off another is called a thief, why give any other name to one who can clothe the naked and refuses to do so? The bread that you withhold belongs to the poor; the cape that you hide in your chest belongs to the naked; the shoes rotting in your house belong to those who must go unshod.

And Ambrose:

> You strip people naked and dress up your walls. The naked poor cries before your door, and you do not even look at him. It is a naked human being that begs you, and you are considering what marbles to use for paving. The poor begs you for money and gets none. There is a human being seeking bread, and your horses chew gold in their bits. You rejoice in your precious adornments, while others have nothing to eat. A harsh judgement awaits you, oh rich! The people are hungry and you close your granaries. The people cry and you show your jewels. Woe to one who can save so many lives from death, and does not!

And again Ambrose:

> Why do you [the rich] drive out of their inheritance people whose nature is the same as yours, claiming for yourselves alone the possession of all the land? The land was made to be common to all, the poor and the rich. Why do you, oh rich, claim for yourselves alone the right to the land?
>
> The world has been made for all, and a few of you rich try to keep it for yourselves. For not only the ownership of the land, but even the sky, the air, and the sea, a few rich people claim for themselves . . . Do the angels divide the space in heaven, as you do when you set up property marks on earth?
>
> When you give to the poor, you give not of your own, but simply return what is his, for you have usurped that which is common and has been given for the common use of all. The land belongs to all, not to the rich; and yet those who are deprived of its use are many more than those who enjoy it.
>
> God our Lord willed that this land be the common possession of all and give its fruit to all. But greed distributed the right of possessions. Therefore, if you claim as your private property part of what was granted in common to all human beings and to all animals, it is only fair that you share some of this with the poor, so that you will not deny nourishment to those who are also partakers of your right [by which you hold this
> land].
>
> Greed is the cause of our want. The birds have abundant natural food because they have received in common that which is necessary for their nourishment, and they do not know how to claim private ownership. By claiming the private, we [humans] lose the common.
>
> Why do you consider things in the world as possessions [*proprium*], when the world is common? Why do you consider the fruits of the land private, when the land is common? Birds, who own nothing, lack nothing.

There are literally hundreds such quotes hidden in the pages of early Christian literature. They pose many questions of interpretation which are of interest to the historian and should be explored. Ultimately, however, such questions must not be allowed to obscure or to postpone the more urgent and fundamental issues facing Christians today, or what the witness of earlier

Christians has to say about those issues. They lived in a world in which the contrasts between the rich and the poor were staggering; we live in a world populated by a few who have millions and by millions who have nothing. For them, these issues were indissolubly connected with the meaning of salvation. Has the world changed so much that what they had to say is no longer relevant? I believe not. Has our commitment waned to such an extent that we can no longer take seriously the questions they pose to our use of the world's resources? I hope not.