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Wisdom from the Unseen World: Looking at God from the Margins and Seeing Creation Through the Eyes of the Poor¹

Jaclyn M. Ross

The Adverse Effects of Climate Change on the Poor and Vulnerable

Your house is on fire.

A knot just lodged itself deep within the pit of your stomach, telling you its presence will not soon be forgotten. With overwhelming exasperation, you look on helplessly; billowing waves of flame envelope your home, the heat of which is strong enough to blind you. You want to look away, but the sight of it is all you have left to hold onto now, and you feel that shielding your eyes would be giving up this one last piece of home before it truly disappears. Most importantly you and your family are safe – but where will you go? Certainly, a house can be rebuilt, but you will never get back what you’ve lost. You were struggling to support yourself as it was, you put on a brave face but you know full well that you don’t have the resources to fix this on your own. How do you explain this to people? How will they truly understand your experience? How do you begin to convince other people that this could happen to them as well?

This is an experience that many marginalized communities are being faced with, but these people are not necessarily combatting flames. While some in power fail to recognize the ways in which the earth’s climate is changing, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis points to “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, and the conviction that everything in the world is connected” (LS 16).² But the truth is, oftentimes those with the largest capacity to change this reality are the ones who are not directly affected by climate change in the first place. If you stand there watching a house become engulfed in flames, you would not look at the homeowner and say, “No, your house is not on fire.” But with the nature of the environmental problems the world is facing today, it is much easier to tell someone that the science is not proven, or that the data is being manipulated, than it is to simply accept the truth of something which is already affecting others, but you have not yet experienced.

The best way to motivate someone is to convince them that the issue is important to them and also in their best interest. This might be why it has been so difficult to get many mainstream thinkers to understand the gravity of the earth’s predicament. If you’re explaining to someone that your house is on fire, you wouldn’t necessarily discuss the chemical properties of fire, or why timber burns so easily, or how elevation changes the temperature at which it burns. You

¹ Editor’s Note: This essay won the 2017 Prize for the Best Undergraduate Theological Studies Paper for the LMU Department of Theological Studies.

² Pope Francis. *Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Francis; On Care For Our Common Home: Laudato Si’*, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), 2015.

would say, “Imagine your home was being destroyed – what would you do about it?” You would explain why it is precious to you, why your home is worth saving. You would make an emotional appeal.

For this truthful and heartfelt dialogue to happen in the first place, those being adversely affected by climate change must be invited to the table. Pope Francis explains that climate change’s “worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry” (LS 25). The realities and the stories of those on the margins are inherently important to fully understanding the way God reveals God’s self to us. But if one enters into a relationship with someone from a radically different reality with the predisposition of fear or hesitation, the long sought common ground becomes that much more difficult to find. But even more, why would anyone attempt to deeply understand those they believe are unnecessary, or even a nuisance? Those they believe are simply creating more problems than there are being solved?

Clearing through this fog of misunderstanding is essential to first seeing the “other” as inherently good and loved by God. Once this line of sight has been established, it becomes possible to work through the differences and recognize the beauty of the stories and the realities of others. Once this understanding has been bridged, the depth of knowledge that wells forth from those on the margins is finally able to extend its own light to further reveal the Kingdom of God.

Solidarity and the Heart of the Gospel

One need not look far in order to see that the importance of the realities and stories of the poor and the marginalized lies rooted in the heart of the Gospel. God revealed Godself to humanity as a child from the margins. Jesus entered the world as an outsider, an immigrant - and soon thereafter a refugee. In doing so he grounds his experience in alignment with those who most desperately long for the message of hope and salvation that he brings for all of creation. By only emphasizing the knowledge that comes from the lofty buildings of renowned institutions and academies of thought, those lying in the shadowed, obscured parts of the world are essentially shut out from participating in the dialogue that brings about a better understanding of who God is and how God reveals God’s self to creation.

In her article *Picturing Paradise: Imagination, Beauty, and Women’s Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown*, Rebecca Berru Davis explains that over the course of her research, she turned to “ethnography because [she was] inspired by [theologian] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’s call for a theological method that seeks to understand the lived experiences of Latina women.”³ This methodology would “[position me] as one who accompanies the women throughout their daily tasks. It keeps [me] attentive to the generative themes that emerge in conversations and in art.”⁴

³ Rebecca Berru Davis, “Picturing Paradise: Imagination, Beauty, and Women’s Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown” in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 147.

⁴ Ibid.

This employment of ethnography emphasizes the importance of connecting theology to lived experience.

Davis employs ethnography as a way to immerse herself in the experiences of the women of Peru’s slums. Davis adds that “[e]thnography is disposed to the complexities, confusions, and unexpected turns of human relationships, creating at times what James Clifford calls ‘lucid uncertainty,’” as a scholar she feels that in order to understand this complexity, we must begin “with the lived realities” of those on the margins. She elaborates that, “[t]hrough shared experiences and dialogical processes, [ethnography] attempts to get at meaning and bring to light the women’s sensibilities, understandings, and perceptions. It assumes that their experiences and wisdom warrant attention and that knowledge is not limited solely to experts in the academy.”⁵

The *cuadros* which she studies – intricately hand sewn textiles depicting anything from the artist’s home or community to biblical stories - stand as a call for greater academia to turn its gaze towards those who have theological understandings to share, but remain unheard because of a lack of resources and the inability to share these insights in an academic setting.

Davis presents “the art of these women as evidence of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino’s contention that if the kingdom of God is Good News, its recipients, the poor, will fundamentally help in clarifying its content.”⁶ This is just one example of the ways in which the understandings of those on the margins allow the rest of the world to grasp the way God reveals God’s self to all of creation. While it may be easy to simply dismiss these *cuadros* as souvenirs to be sold to passing tourists, the deep theological truths which they illuminate are curiously beautiful and mystifying.⁷ Such insights are often overlooked because of the way most of the academic world is accustomed to sharing information – through journal articles, published works, and formal conferences.

Those on the margins are largely excluded from such tables of dialogue because of their inability to access education and the overwhelming poverty they experience. But Davis explains that “the women’s *cuadros* were evidence of what Jon Sobrino claims as the graced insights of the poor. They were, in fact, focused expressions of a utopian vision where there can be life, justice, fraternity, and dignity in a world in which history seems to render them impossible: a world that is good, that is both imminent and eschatological – *here* and *not yet*.”⁸ These Peruvian women do not have the ability to articulate themselves through writing, and yet they have found a way to express profound theological perspectives through their artwork.

The *cuadros* depict the women’s realities, dreams, aspirations, and oftentimes their difficulties. However, they also depict the lives of the saints and Biblical narratives. Davis takes the material textiles that these Peruvian women sew by hand and interprets them as a way of expressing their theological understandings. For example, many of the *cuadros* depict the women themselves taking part in the biblical scenes they depict. One such *cuadro* displays the nativity;

⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁷ The Full Library Exhibit by Loyola Marymount University “Picturing Paradise: Cuadros from the Peruvian Women of Pamplona Alta as Visions of Hope,” (2014) including photographs of *cuadros* and related exhibit materials may be viewed at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/picturing-paradise/>

⁸ Ibid., 156.

in addition to the Magi bringing their precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the artist herself is present, bringing oranges as her offering to the newborn Jesus. In fact, nearly all of the *cuadros* depict women as “active agents, whether leading a campaign for milk for their children, a teachers’ strike, or a march for peace.”⁹ Women are not solely depicting picturesque scenes, they are using their artwork to immortalize or imagine the possibility of their own experiences – both good and difficult. Although “the whimsical quality of the little figures and the bright, cheerful palette juxtaposed against the disconcerting depictions of protest and strife create an unexpected dissonance... the subtle strength of the *cuadros* lies in the images and themes with multivalent meanings that create complexity and gravity under the guise of simplicity and charm.”¹⁰ This complexity is an art form that should not be so easily overlooked. The realities and the theological understandings that are shared through the *cuadros* are something to be honored. They not only have the right to be seen, it would be an absolute loss to the rest of the world should these insights be lost to the test of time.

Solidarity on the Streets of Los Angeles

Father Greg Boyle, SJ¹¹ is another proponent of the dignity of those considered on the peripheries of society – the gang members and “homies” on the streets of Los Angeles. The work Boyle has done in creating Homeboy Industries and rehabilitating ex-gang members back into contributing members of society has granted him national recognition. The root of Father Boyle’s work is much deeper than job training and tattoo removal – he affirms the dignity of those who have been considered violently inhuman and far beyond the reaches of salvation and forgiveness. He has opened countless people to the beautiful wisdom that can be gleaned from the realities of those on the margins of the city’s barrios.

In his much-lauded book *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Boyle recounts the story of a beloved homie named Chico. Chico comes searching for a job, and Father Boyle was able to get him out of his situation, and into a job that allowed him to grow, learn, and readjust back into society. Two months later, Boyle recalls the night he received a call from Rosa, Chico’s mother, saying he had been shot on the sidewalk during a drive by shooting. It wasn’t until after Chico’s funeral that Boyle “realized [he] really must let this grief in. For too long [he] had suspended [his] own profound sense of loss, dutifully placing it on [his] own emotional back burner. . . so [he] gave himself permission now, to allow this pain some cherished, readied place in [his] heart.”¹²

Boyle removed himself from the group, and allowed himself to feel the emotions he had repressed while supporting the homie’s family and friends. At this moment, the mortician came over, in Boyle’s mind invading the space he had carved out for himself and his grief. He recalls,

I point feebly at Chico’s coffin and know that I need to find some words to fill our blank air. “Now that,” I whispered to the intruder, “was a terrific kid.” And the

⁹ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fr. Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest gang intervention and rehabilitation program in the world.

¹² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 211

mortician, in a voice so loud and obnoxious that it turns the heads of all the gathered mourners, says, “HE WAS?”¹³

The mortician is faced with a disconnect that Father Boyle no longer understands. As an outsider, he sees a young kid caught up in a gang and shot like so many others. “The mortician’s incredulity reminds me that kinship remains elusive. Its absence asserts that any effort to help someone like Chico just might be a waste of our collective time.”¹⁴ Boyle has so effectively inserted himself into the lives of these marginalized men and women that such a thought never even crosses his mind. He is there with them through their triumphs and struggles, he rejoices and grieves with their families. He takes Christ’s example and amplifies it.

Jesus’ strategy is a simple one: He eats with them. Precisely to those paralyzed in this toxic shame, Jesus says, “I will eat this with you.” He goes where love has not yet arrived. . . Eating with outcasts rendered them acceptable. . . Recognizing that we are wholly acceptable is God’s own truth for us – waiting to be discovered.¹⁵

Boyle’s decision to fully enter into the lives of this marginalized community has forever changed his perception of those who are set apart by the rest of society. This mortician is so clouded by his lack of understanding of what Chico stands for, that he cannot even imagine the boy as being a beautiful and beloved son of God. The understanding that Boyle has developed through his relationships comes as the result of his praxis. By integrating Jesus’ call to love those cast out by society, Boyle pushes the theories and teachings of Christianity into the everyday, lived experience; “the concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on *what people do* rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology . . . is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people.”¹⁶

Boyle has learned, and has led the way to teaching the rest of the world, how to love those deemed unlovable. The key here is recognizing that not a single human being is undeserving of God’s unending love, being the imperfect creatures that humans are. Yet, God’s love is always offered and given. Therefore, learning to love the least of these brothers and sisters – those found on the margins – teaches the majority to recognize the incredible gift that God’s offer of salvation is. Seeing as we ourselves are undeserving, we in turn are faced with the reality that we have no right to deny God’s love to others.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 212

¹⁵ Ibid., 70-71

¹⁶ Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, and Johan Roeland, “Lived religion: the praxis of practical theology.” *International Journal Of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 93. Editor’s note: What today is being called “practical theology” in more mainstream academic circles has long been the explicit practice of the theological work done in Latin America, in U.S. Latino Theology, and in other theological strands from women and people of color. This practice of integrative scholarship originated at the peripheries and is renewing the whole theological enterprise.

The Gift of God’s Beauty in Creation

The main idea perpetuated by the examples of the *cuadros* and the “homies” is the importance of authentic dialogue, of listening to those who are so easily left unheard. In his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire explains:

...Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble, and full of faith – did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world.”¹⁷

This trust, once established, allows for the solidarity and accompaniment that Christ calls for in the Gospel. The insights and theological understandings that come from those on the margins are many, and can be beautifully exemplified in the experience of Fr. Pedro Arrupe:

There is this story told by Pedro Arrupe, the visionary superior of the Jesuits during the latter part of the twentieth century. Arrupe tells us how he was visiting an impoverished village in Latin America, and after the official event with the community one of the *campesinos* came up and invited him to come to his home; there was something he wanted to give him. Arrupe joined the man, walking along a dirt road up one of the hills covered with small ramshackle dwellings. Arriving at the top, the man asked him to turn his body in a certain direction and then to wait. Within minutes, the golden-orange orb of the sun began to descend in front of them, like in a magnificent command performance. The man explained, perhaps saying something like, “I am a very poor man and have no gift to give you to thank you for coming to visit us except this.” It was one of the memories that remained with Arrupe his entire life, that one man’s ability to see deeper, more completely, more fully, the extraordinary gift of God’s beauty in the world.¹⁸

This *campesino* recognizes his poverty. He tells Arrupe that he has nothing to give except to share the creation that God has given him. The humility within such a gift as this is truly captivating, but even more beautiful is the fact he recognizes creation as a gift to be shared in the first place.

As theologian Alejandro García-Rivera teaches, “The cosmos cannot by itself give an account of itself. . . science can only advance by intelligent beings being open, critical, and intelligent to what is. . . It is an act of intellectual faith.”¹⁹ The earth cannot tell its own story. We human beings were made to live in community as well as to live in communion with the earth. According to Scripture, and depending on which creation story we read, we lived in full relationship with all of God’s creation before we lived in relationship with other people. In order to honor this symbiosis, we must begin by viewing creation as a gift to be cherished, not as a resource to be used.

¹⁷Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2000), 91.

¹⁸Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, “Taking Back the Aesthetic.” *The 2012 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture*. 2012., 7. <http://www.ptsem.edu/lectures/?action=tei&id=youth-2012-01>

¹⁹Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 54.

The naturalist John Muir was a mystic of his time, truly recognizing the importance of contemplating the gift that is the earth. Muir recounts a conversation he had with a passerby who happened to catch Muir in the midst of picking flowers. In response to the stranger’s admonition, Muir replied, “Do you not remember that Christ told his disciples to ‘consider the lilies how they grew,’ and compared their beauty to Solomon in all his glory? . . . Christ says, ‘Consider the lilies.’”²⁰ What a beautiful idea – to simply consider them, to behold them. These kinds of encounters with nature are becoming increasingly more difficult for those in urban settings. The earth is compacted under concrete and the purity and power of nature is tamed behind park fences. There is not much room for “considering.” But these direct experiences with the beauty of nature are exactly what touched Muir’s heart so deeply that he dedicated the rest of his life to protecting it. These kinds of experiences must be facilitated to help others appreciate why the earth is a gift, and why it is worth protecting.

A Call to Solidarity in *Laudato Si’*

Once all are seated equally at the table and the voiceless are heard, the problems the world faces suddenly become collective issues, as opposed to fractured disputes on the validity of the complaints of those who are left by the wayside. Paulo Freire states that at this “point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.”²¹ Freire’s sentiments directly echo Pope Francis’ own call to dialogue. His encyclical *Laudato Si’* emphasizes the importance of understanding the issue of climate change as something collective: “Interdependence obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*” (LS 164). The truth is that the gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue that requires patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that “realities are greater than ideas” (LS 201). Realities, experiences, are greater than lofty facts and ideas when it comes to touching the lives of others. This is why dialogue regarding climate change needs to be human centered – not based solely on scientific facts.

One problem this dialogue illuminates is the adverse ways in which changes in climate are negatively affecting the poor. Pope Francis states “the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: Both everyday experience and scientific research show the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest” (LS 48). Those who are most gravely affected by these problems have no means of stopping it, or of adapting to the changes they are experiencing. “They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited” (LS 25). This is why such an issue is not simply an issue to be discussed in the scientific communities. *Laudato Si’* calls for solidarity and attention to those who have been hurt by the decisions of others.

If I ever found myself walking through a neighborhood and confronted with a house on fire, I would probably stop and watch. I would probably see the bewildered family on their front

²⁰ John Muir & Tim Flinders, *John Muir: Spiritual Writings*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 38.

²¹ Freire, 90.

lawn, helplessly unable to stop the flames. I would feel sorry for them, but seeing as there is nothing I can do, I would eventually continue walking.

If I ever found myself having dinner in the home of a beloved friend, and I realized their house was on fire, I would be standing on the front lawn with them, sobbing, heartbroken as my love for them allowed me to completely share in their sorrow. I would feel the same way had it been my own house burning. This is what it means to stand in solidarity. The house is already on fire—in order to get past the debate of whether or not climate change is real, we need to begin listening to those who have already been hurt by the flames. The pain and consequences of climate change affect us all. We need these experiences to move us to action, but this will only happen if we begin to care about those whose homes are currently burning. Before our hearts will be touched deeply enough to be moved to advocacy on their behalf, we must first recognize Christ’s call to love thy neighbor. LMU: SST

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