

Church in the Caribbean Today

By Gerald Boodoo

Preface

The upcoming 10th anniversary of the Conference on Theology in the Caribbean Today is an event that cannot be taken lightly. It will mark ten years of a sustained, deliberate and unifying space set aside for theological reflection in and on the region, which up until this conference was sporadic, ragmented, individualized and foreign, at best. It is no coincidence that the impetus for this conference came out of the theological “hubs” of the Catholic Church in the Caribbean, the Regional Seminary of St. John Vianney and the Ugandan Martyrs, Tunapuna, Trinidad, and the Pastoral Centres of St. Augustine, Trinidad and Castries, St. Lucia. The three “father figures” in this regard were Fr. Joseph E. Harris, C.S.Sp., Fr. Michel de Verteuil, C.S.Sp., and Fr. Patrick A.B. Anthony. It seemed only fitting that these institutions and persons should take the lead since the only previous local attempt from the Roman Catholic perspective was with the Antilles Pastoral Institute which came to an abrupt close in 1974.

That this space for theological reflection has been sustained for this long in the Caribbean is no mean feat, and signals not just that we have staying power, but that we are beginning to understand and take theological reflection as a necessary and vital part of our calling as Catholics and Christians in a Caribbean Church. With this in mind, the conference wanted to do something a little different for the 10th anniversary meeting by issuing a small pre-publication paper with some reflections on the Church in the Caribbean Today. Hopefully this paper will provide some theological and conceptual context for further discussion.

The 10th anniversary conference revolves around the theme of ecclesiology (theology of church). There will be an opening address by Fr. Patrick A. B. Anthony, feature addresses by Fr. Henry Charles and Fr. Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. and many other stimulating and thought provoking presentations. As always, the conference is indebted to Ms. Cheryl Herrera, who as Conference Secretary does the work necessary to ensure continuity and stability in the running of the Conference Secretariat. She is aided in her work by an Executive Committee currently composed of Fr. Martin Sirju, Fr. Stephen Geofroy, Fr. Jason Gordon and Fr. Clyde Harvey. The secretariat’s commitment to the conference in recent years has been the difference between our having instead of not having the conference. Lest we feel that we are running these conferences on a lonesome, thanks must be given to the Bischofliche Aktion ADVENIAT whose funding over the years continue to support the conference and its publications. See you all at the 10th anniversary Conference on Theology in the Caribbean Today, January 6th-10th, 2003, Trinidad.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to raise some questions and issues related to the Church in the Caribbean today. That it is primarily addressed to the Roman Catholic Church does not take away its application to all Christian Churches in the region. It would be difficult to separate theology in the Caribbean between Roman Catholic and Presbyterian, Anglican or other denominational boundaries. This is so because of our common contexts and heritage as well as our close proximity geographically and intellectually. So this paper is also a reflection on the Christian Church in the Caribbean today.

In order to situate the reflection I will look at how we have understood Church in the past. Here I will be very specific and look primarily at the publication of our first conference which was held in St. Lucia in 1994. Though the conference was not listed as one on ecclesiology, it in fact concerned itself with how to understand Church and theology in the Caribbean. So I will begin there and mention how that conference sheds light on past and future ecclesiological reflection.

It will become clear that though we are unanimous in our concern about having a local Church and theological reflection grounded in this local Church, there still is not a systematic theological understanding of what this means and how we are to go about it. Here I will introduce the notion of vocation and ask what is the Church in the Caribbean called to be and do. For us to understand what we want to be we must understand what we are called to be.

Closely aligned with issues of discernment and choice is our understanding of power and its use. This is a tricky area. At the same time that we want to be empowered (ultimately by the Holy Spirit) we have to be careful that this power is not a manipulative and exploitive one. The exercise of power in relationships, both personal and communal, guides and shapes who we are and what we become. In speaking of Church, we cannot shy away from questions of power and its use.

To be called as Church and to exercise that power is to be called in a place among a people and to exercise that power with and for our people in response to the context. We therefore need some understanding of our context that can be useful theologically. Our colonial past, post-colonialism and globalization makes reading our situation more complex and because of this, more urgent and necessary. Here I will once again briefly speak of our context as forced.

But in the end, all of this reflection on Church is supposed to direct our actions as the body of Christ living in this world. Though the Church in the Caribbean has made explicit its desire to be a genuinely local Church and has made attempts in this direction there still does not seem to be an explicit option that our Church takes. Our Church has not officially committed to an option that would define and characterize its calling and being. So I will also outline a proposal for such an option with the intention of presenting it in more detail at the conference. And in a final section I will briefly list some ecclesiological implications for the stance taken in this paper.

I. Historical Perspectives

Since the emergence of clear and conscious attempts by regional theologians to forge a more local Caribbean theology in the late 1960's and early 1970's, there are three approaches that have been and are being used as the basis for theological reflection in our region. The first uses cultural and literary sources as well as analyses of racial and social stratification as a way of understanding the complex cultural patterns of the region. This approach is the dominant position and has been most clearly evidenced in liturgical practices that have been adapted to use the wide range of local expressions available in the region. The obvious advantage of this approach is that it grounds theology squarely in our own expressive genres and allows for a more respectful understanding of our context and the experiences arising out of that context. The main disadvantage is that the use of social scientific analysis often replaces theological analysis altogether and theology becomes reduced to sociology. The theologian becomes a *macomere*.

The second approach sees the struggle for justice in its social, political, and economic forms as central to the Christian message. The advantage of this approach is its clear demand for justice and the commitment to realizing the gospel in our present context as an indication of the coming kingdom of God. Theology here takes on a more prophetic role and uses social scientific theory as a basis for understanding existing human relationships. The main disadvantage is that this type of analysis, though appropriate to the mechanisms of colonization and conquest that have shaped our region, doesn't seem to be able to adequately analyze our more current contexts of post-colonialism and globalization. This approach tends to be anachronistic (outdated), adequate for an earlier period that presented more clarified distinctions between employer and laborer, oppressor and oppressed, slave owner and slave, foreigner and native. With the blurring of these distinctions, psychologically as well as geographically, an analytical method that can more adequately account for the personal, social, regional and global complexities of our lives is needed.

The third approach uses historical method as the basis for theological reflection. Rather than viewing the historical importance of the Caribbean as a theater of personalities or absentee landlords, the region is understood as a geographic space that is shaped by its material relations. The region must be looked at over a long period of time that exposes inter-relating and overlapping cycles of human agency, culture, and economics. The advantage of this approach is that it clearly takes into account the complexity of our material relationships and can present a narrative of our region that makes sense of our many levels of historical being. In addition, this approach recaptures in contemporary form the traditional pre-theological disciplines of philosophy and history. The main disadvantage is that whereas it was clear in times past that history was the stage where one saw the hand of God at work and philosophy was in the service of the attempt to understand the nature and mind of God, this new historical method is solely about exposing the stark reality of our context. As necessary as this is, it still is not theology and must find a way to make theologically useful the insights gained from its analysis or run the risk of reducing theology to a sophisticated anthropology.

These three approaches are not exclusive and theologians in the region frequently use aspects of some or all of these approaches in establishing their bases for theological reflection. What is apparent is that we are still searching for an adequate way to go about doing our theology, a theological method. With this in mind let us now look at the published report of the first conference that was held in St. Lucia in 1994 to see what possible solutions are offered there and what notions of Church are presented.

In so far as we are searching for an adequate theological method and hence a proper way to theologically understand Church (ecclesiology) we should first take a look at Michel de Verteuil's presentation at the St. Lucia conference entitled "A Theological Method for the Caribbean Today". De Verteuil makes two very important points as he sets up his argument. The first is that the

Church in the Caribbean "should be a communion, one where poor people experience that they are not poor, but full creative members of the communion", and the second is that the Caribbean Church "should be a sign and an effective instrument of social transformation. Then he goes on to state that theological method must be adapted to the people of the region. He means by this that theology has also to be done in settings other than the traditional theological schools, such as in the local parish community, it must be taught at times that cater to the people, it must not be abstract language, and it must acknowledge the fact that the main practitioners of theology will be the laity. De Verteuil then presents the theological method he thinks is adequate for the Caribbean today: *Lectio Divina*. This method is a community theology that "is a way of reading the Bible by which in reading biblical texts we read our own stories". According to De Verteuil, this theological method allows us to recognize God's work in our daily lives, in our culture, and in our ancestors. It is an inculturated way of doing theology that allows us to interpret what is going on in society, allows us to develop a critical consciousness, and to discover our dignity as God's people.

De Verteuil's proposal of *Lectio Divina* as an adequate theological method for the Caribbean today is an interesting one. He clearly wants to make theological reflection, and by implication the Church, accessible to, and engaged by, all members of the Church. This "de-elitizes" who does theology and where it is to be done. It also changes who determines what Church should be. In breaking down intellectual and location barriers this method seeks to empower local communities with a theological voice and as such to literally transform and shape what Church will be.

De Verteuil's proposal appears to go beyond the three approaches mentioned before and to offer a genuine way to do theology that pays attention to our context. However, though it is successful in bringing persons and communities to recognize the importance and significance of theological reflection for our region, *Lectio Divina* is a pre-theological method that uses a "soft" combination of the first two approaches mentioned earlier to inform theological method and reflection. I say this in no way to demean the method or its practitioners, but to place it in its proper perspective. Any reflection arising out of this method still has to find an analysis that accounts for our current complexity and must then reinterpret this analysis in theological terms which quite possibly will not be found from a reading of the bible. The practitioner who makes the link between bible reading and social analysis must still make the further link of the

theological significance of the reflection, which in turn relies not on the already made link between the bible and our contemporary situation but on the particular reflection's place in our theological tradition. Here the formally trained theologian becomes indispensable and in the end is the one who situates, guides and directs the reflection. Though we are all implicit and latent theologians by virtue of baptism, it is obvious that the more persons who make this implicit gift explicit through formal theological training, will be the more persons who become empowered to have a theological voice in our region. This is the great value and success of *Lectio Divina*.

At this point, let me summarize the other presentations at that conference and then comment on them in general.

Gabriel Malzaire's presentation suggests that we work "Towards a Caribbean Christian Civilization" so that we could reach the ultimate fulfillment of humankind: the knowledge of God. Malzaire briefly addresses what he calls the ecclesiological question in the body of his text, but attends to it in more detail in his conclusion. His main point when approaching the ecclesiological question initially is that the Caribbean Church must reflect the peoples and spaces of the Caribbean. In his conclusion he presents six points in reference to what a Caribbean Church must be if it is to promote a Christian civilization. First, she must be a Church of compassion; second, she must be therapeutic and accepting of its members; third, she must be a dialoguing Church; fourth, as a liberating Church she must boost people's sense of dignity, self-respect and uniqueness; fifth, she must have a prophetic voice which promotes justice for all; sixth, the Church must pay special attention to women, especially because they form the major sector of its membership. I would add a seventh point that he does not list but sees as important: the Church must educate its members and use this as a means to liberation of the mind.

Joseph Harris, at the time rector of the Regional Seminary of St. John Vianney and the Ugandan Martyrs, looked at how to change ministry and its formation from a model of dominance to one of partnership. His whole thrust is that the local Christian community should be the locus and agent of ministerial formation. The role of the Church according to Harris is "to reveal to the world the way in which God acts". In a section on ecclesiology Harris makes six main points to outline what is required to fulfil this role in our context. The first is that the Church must exist as a response to God in a historical cultural context, and in our context that means in the structures and forms of the culture of the Caribbean. Second, the Church must be an agent of cultural transformation in that it must offer an alternative consciousness to the consciousness of the dominant culture. Third, the Church must be a sign of the kingdom of God and as such transcends all cultures. Fourth, the Church must be a community which takes for granted a basic equality of persons, favoring mutuality of ministry and co-responsibility. Fifth, following from the previous point, the Church must permit the true participation of all its members in their various ministries and in matters of decision making. Sixth, the Church must be missionary. By this Harris means that the Church must not be turned in on itself but must recognize, relate and act responsibly towards the world. The outlines of Church presented in his six points require a further commitment to an educative process in which all members of the Church take part. This process is characterized first of all by being rooted in experience as against education as an acquisition of knowledge. This experiential basis for education promotes critical awareness, dialogue, the understanding, creation and use of symbols, and dialogue with religious traditions.

My own contribution “On The Christian Presence in the Caribbean” attempted to show that theological reflection in the region in the 1990's had not progressed beyond that of the 1970's. I suggested that the main reason for this was that the Church in the Caribbean and theological endeavor was too caught up in the dominant ideologies of the 80's and 90's. Hence, despite our will and desire to make the Church more local, our understanding of Church still remained within the dominant paradigm left by colonialism. The way out seemed to be to find a theology and theological method that could expose and break the dominant ideology while still giving us a space to search for who we are and who we want to be. A space of confrontation that is at the same time a space of belonging.

Martin Sirju in his “Attempt at Indo-Inculturation” tackles squarely the inter-religious dimensions of Church. Through a comparison of Mary and Lakshmi he unveils what he considers to be similar structures between Catholic and Hindu beliefs. His analysis shows that Church in the Caribbean must find ways to relate to religions that seem very different from Christianity and that Christianity in the region must take into account its East Indian population.

Lambert St. Rose urged that we “Keep Traditions, Local Customs, Religion and Christianity Together”. In his section on ecclesiology, St. Rose claims that “the ecclesiology of the first Christian community, was never severed from the anthropology or ontology of the Jewish people.....They saw no contradiction or distinction in belonging to the Church and belonging to their respective traditions.” St. Rose wants an inculturated Caribbean Church which can be evidenced by our use of the anthropology and ontology of the Caribbean peoples. By implication, St. Rose is calling for further anthropological and ontological study in the region.

Patrick Anthony explored the relationship between faith and culture in the region in his “Changing Attitudes Towards African Traditional Religion and the Implications For Afro-Caribbean Tradition in St. Lucia”. Through an examination of the Kélé ceremony, an African Traditional Religious ritual in St. Lucia, Anthony demonstrates “the potentials of Kélé for catechesis on the Eucharist, one of the central tenets of Catholic doctrine”. Anthony’s point is to show that Christian faith can be enhanced and not necessarily diminished by local and indigenous religious customs.

In the final presentation, Robert Schreiter, the only international observer invited to the conference, posed and answered the question “Why a Caribbean Theology?” He makes three points in terms of what he considers the region to uniquely offer to the rest of the world by means of faith and theology. First, the complex way our identity has and is being put together and our engagement and encounter with one another in the many hybrid forms we take. This understanding and language of mixture is becoming significant for the rest of the world. Second, our cultural influence on the rest of the world through music, art, literature etc. Third, our history of encounter with different religious traditions. Schreiter goes on to encourage a theology in the Caribbean “that is true to the kind of Church you hope to be....the kind of Church you want to be.”

All these presentations share some common traits. They all share the concern that the theology we do must be generated by, and reflect, our Caribbean context. Contextual theology would then shape the contours of a contextual Church. This is a simple yet significant point. If we are

engaged in contextual theology then we do not have to choose between competing theological methods nor do we have to “name” the type of theology we do (feminist, cultural, revisionist, liberation). We are free to use various methods and theologies to shed light on our theological endeavors. The one criteria that must be used is whether our reflection is contextual. This of course is where the differences of opinion begin, in determining whose reading of the context is genuinely representative of it. Here the study into tricky issues of theories of interpretation (hermeneutics) is necessary. How are we to read our context such that we get a genuine reading of what’s going on? More importantly, how are we to understand our context so that we could understand what our Church could and should be?

In response to this, the presentations generally seem to say that we must take into account who and what we are in terms of our history and culture. This is good in that it reflects the three approaches to theology mentioned earlier and it signals continuity with theological reflection in the region since the late 1960's. But it also indicates a 30 year old wish list that still has not developed into a systematic theology of Church in the region.

I have no doubts that our Caribbean Church is still gripped by the legacy of a colonial paradigm. But in a post-colonial and globalized world, aspects of which can readily be found in our context, the colonial paradigm alone cannot account for our stagnation. The problem facing us is not one of desire nor will, but fear. The fear to be vulnerable in the face of each other as we stammer and stutter in our attempts to forge anew a genuine interpretation of our region’s history and the fear of trying to look beyond the uniqueness of culture to the uniqueness of relationships. In different ways all of the presentations hint at this but Harris and Schreiter point to this more clearly when Harris says that the “great difference between first and third world Christianity is the fact that there is continuity in the spiritual journey of first world peoples, a continuity that is absent in the third world” and Schreiter says “the very complex way that you have been and continue to put together your identity, in terms of encounter, and the way you engage each other.....What we are seeing in the world today, is that the really strong people, the people who are going to be able to live in increasingly pluralist societies-and all the world is becoming like that-are the people who have mixed and do mix.” The real issue is not about restoring continuity through cultural belonging but about understanding how our lack of continuity in our religious and spiritual journeys shapes us and shapes our history. In increasingly more ways the rest of the world is becoming more like how we already are. In some strange way, they can either be our future or our past depending on the direction we take. What helps us to choose is our understanding of what we are called to be and to do as a Church in the Caribbean. So how are we to understand this call?

II. Vocatio

That the Church exists in the Caribbean does not mean that it will continue to exist or that it should exist simply by reason of its “being there”. If there is no contextual understanding of why it is here and what it is here for, it will be limited to an institution that is concerned solely with its own survival as distinct from the survival of people in the region. Especially in our region where there are breaks in continuity in our religious, spiritual, historical and cultural lives, the notion of

the Church as called into existence for particular purposes must be explored. I'd therefore like to explore briefly the notion of *vocatio* and then try to make theological sense of it in terms of understanding Church in our region.

Vocatio which means "calling" has its origins for the Christian within the Hebrew scriptures. There it basically means *to give a name to* or *to name*. This definition came to be understood as laying claim to, or taking possession of, or appointing for, a particular destiny that is expressed by the name that is given. (Genesis 17:5 and 32:28) In the more technical sense, the meaning in the Christian scriptures, derived from its Hebrew refers to a people being *called*, or *to be called* as a people to a divine destiny. (Romans 8:29 f) In this sense, God takes the initiative and the role of the people is to respond to that call. Calling also suggests *a separating out*, a kind of consecration.

The Christian scriptures uses the word *klesis*. (Ephesians 4:1) to mean *calling, invitation, vocation, state or position in life*. This call is not just a *call*; it is a *call to follow*. In early Christian literature *klesis* is used almost exclusively in a religious sense. It is almost always a *heavenly or divine call*, an invitation to enter into the kingdom of God. From its root in the Greek one of the words derived from it is the word *ekklesia* which means *Church or Assembly*.

Vocatio is therefore a calling that is related to the Christian community, a community of believers. In a very real sense, we can say that *vocatio* is rooted in the community, and, if we apply what is suggested in its Hebrew Scripture origins, we can say that the divine call is to the community, the *ekklesia*. Therefore, the context for its discernment and exploration is the community engaged in critical reflection. This insight draws us to an understanding that *vocatio* must also be *historical* in nature. This means that it cannot be disconnected from the context of a people struggling for meaning within that context.

As faith seeking understanding, theology can be understood as the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith. In our contemporary modern, post-colonial and global context however this can be more concretely understood as critical reflection on historical praxis in the light of our faith. This definition emphasizes human action (praxis) as the point of departure for all reflection and as the determining factor in our encounter with the Lord and with other humans. Our actions in history (past, present and future) therefore shape our theological reflection. As critical reflection, theology is a *critical attitude* regarding all the historical issues that affect the Christian community. In this sense, theology is a second step which follows upon our attentiveness to historical transformations in the church and in the world. Thus understood, theology "fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning". Theology therefore combines both wisdom and rational knowledge with a view toward "ecclesial praxis"; the critically reflective action of the concrete community we are immersed within.

The preceding exploration indicates that *vocatio* is not just a calling that is rooted in and related to the Christian community, but is a *call to* the community. Not only does the community shape the call, the call/calling also shapes the community. So the community and the call/calling should become the same vehicle for critical reflection on our historical context. The community, in a

broad sense, is called. In a more specific sense, the various talents of community members are called upon to fulfill the comprehensive calling of the wider community.

This points out an important ecclesiological insight, in that the Church, as called, is deeper and greater than the institutional Church. Indeed, understood most fully as the reign of God, it also goes beyond the boundaries of confessional Christianity's histories and cultures. This shifts the understanding of a universal Church from one primarily in communion with a denominational structure to one in communion with the diverse histories and cultures of humankind. In a sense, it is because of the particularity of local and regional Churches that the universality of Christianity is possible.

More important for our context, the theological understanding of *vocatio* indicates that the Church that is called understands this calling as a response to the local community and not as a dictate for institutional well being and expansion at the expense of the local community. This means that a secure and vibrant institutional Church should also mean a secure, respected, appreciated and assertive local community. That there may be a disconnection between the two really indicates the lack of a mediating interpretation (ecclesiology) of the role and place of

the Church in the local community, and in reverse, the role of the local community as Church in the wider universal Church.

This theological exploration into the notion of *vocatio* perhaps raises more questions than it gives answers but it has served to direct us to question the choices that have been made in directing the Church in the Caribbean. More fundamentally, it questions who has the power to discern and make these decisions and the exercise of that power. Ultimately, what is being asked is how are we to understand and use power in our Caribbean Church context?

III. The Power that Is Jesus Christ

I would like to shift my use of sources a bit in order to explore how we might understand power and its use in our context by utilizing the work of some third world theologians from Asia and Latin America.

At the 2001 annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in the World Church Theology Group, Leo Kleden presented a paper entitled "*Missio Ad Gentes: An Asian Way of Mission Today*". In that paper he spoke about European missionaries going to Asia from positions of political, cultural and religious superiority. However, times have changed. According to Kleden, in "comparison to the former missionaries from Europe, the Asian missionaries today seem to be sent empty handed. This fact is their weakness and should be their strength as well." I will quote at length from Kleden here:

"First of all, it is their weakness. Many of them come from a rural background with their cultural heritage in the pre-modern worldview. But very soon they enter into the modern world through education and schools. Now they are further confronted with the post-modern condition. They

live in tensions between three worldviews which are not easy to harmonize. These missionaries need much more time than their predecessors not simply to learn another language and culture but also to orient themselves within the tensions and conflicts between those worldviews. And what can they concretely do in their mission? We know that former missionaries preached the Gospel, taught catechism, and baptized people; but they were also actively involved in education, health care, and in promoting social and economic development. All these were considered integral parts of their mission. Today many of these jobs have been taken over by the state or secular institutions. When new missionaries are sent from Asia to Europe or America they cannot get involved in these fields. Even in teaching catechism or preaching many local people can do better than they. From the religious perspective, former missionaries went to the countries where mythic-religious values were still predominant, whereas new missionaries are thrown into secularistic society. It is much more difficult to preach the Gospel in the post-Christian situation. On the other hand, this kind of weakness can and should be the strength of the new missionaries. Here is a golden opportunity to follow the example of the first disciples of Jesus who were sent empty handed but who were inspired by the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Lord. The empty handed approach is therefore possible if their heart is full of faith, with the willingness to serve others as the Lord Jesus. Through the Spirit of the Lord human weakness (in socio-political sense) is transformed into evangelical *kenosis*. This approach becomes efficacious and fruitful on two preconditions. First, it presupposes that the missionaries believe in the people to whom they are sent. If you have nothing in your hand, and if you do not have any kind of superiority, then you have to rely on the people to whom you are sent. Missionaries are expected to work not simply for the people (from a position of superiority), but to work with the people. Above all, this approach presupposes that missionaries believe in the One who calls and sends them. "I am with you always to the end of time" (Matthew. 28:20)."

Obviously there are problems with Kleden's analysis in that it has become clear that some missionaries who go in "weakness" are looking to clothe themselves in the "superiority" of the post-Christian countries they are going to. And there are other factors at work apart from the mission impulse. However, Kleden points out an aspect of power, or the lack thereof, that bears directly on our reflection. If mission is to be divested of its images of political, cultural, religious and economic dominance, it must be taken up from the perspective of "weakness" in the sense that one is forced to rely and listen to the people to whom one is sent. This significantly shifts the tone of conversation from educating the "natives" to being forced to be educated by the natives. The missionary has no choice but to be attentive to the context in which he or she is present. This "empty handed" approach, as Kleden calls it, changes the understanding of power from one of an imposition that already precludes and determines the parameters of conversation, to one of service (and he would claim active contemplative service) in the interests of those with whom one is engaged.

Kleden here echoes what Leonardo Boff has written in his book on *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. Boff clearly advocates an understanding of the exercise of institutional power in the church as one of service. He uses Mark 10:42-44 and Luke 22:25-27 as examples of how to both understand and exercise power as a Christian.

"You know how those who rule the nations exercise tyranny over them and they practice violence against them. This is not to be among you: on the contrary, if one of you wishes to be

great, he must be your servant; and he who desires to be first among you must serve all; because the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life for the redemption of many.”

In this he favors *exousia* (understood as submitting to God’s will) over *dynamis* (understood as exercising might) as representing more adequately how power is to be understood in the exercise of authority and, by implication, how we relate with each other. If one is to have genuine relationships it must be rooted in an understanding of service that allows weakness to be one’s strength. But how is this to be understood? Perhaps Sobrino’s understanding of the presence and absence of God in the cross of Christ can be of help here.

In his *Christology at the Crossroads* Sobrino writes on the death of Jesus and the scandal of the cross. The cross is a scandal because it forces us to raise questions about our concepts of God and who God is in relation to us such that he would give up his only son. For Sobrino, “The path to the cross is nothing else but a questioning search for the true God and for the true essence of power.” Obviously, for Sobrino power is to be used in the service of the oppressed, but what sort of power are we speaking about? What sort of power makes God present in our midst? The cross of Jesus throws into serious doubt all the notions we have accrued about the power of God. The event of the cross shows God’s power centered in suffering and love. More than this, “we see God submerged in the negative”, indeed, on the cross, God is against himself, God questions God. According to Sobrino, God “bifurcates” himself on the cross so that “transcendence is in conflict with history”. To quote Sobrino again:

“On the cross of Jesus God was present...and at the same time absent...Absent to the son, he was present for human beings. And in this dialectic of presence and absence is the way to express in human language the fact that God is love. The cross is the contradiction of humanity, but it is grounded on an ultimate solidarity with it.”

In this theological abandonment of Jesus we have the ground for solidarity and relationship at the deepest level of human and divine interaction: love born out of and in the midst of suffering. Perhaps we can understand the empty handed approach of Kleden in this light. Precisely the abandonment of power as *dynamis* (control and might) allows the true power of solidarity and love to be present. Genuine power in this sense always flows from conditions wherein one has no choice but to be forced to act with and on behalf of those you love. True power is not a choice but a forced option that is necessary for genuine relationships and for meaningful dialogue. Our *vocatio* now begins to take shape in a specific manner. The engagement with persons out of love demands a clarified acknowledgment of the contours and shapes of their suffering and pain. Genuine dialogue is only possible when power is exercised as engaging the suffering of loved ones with a view to transforming that void and pain into the presence of God’s grace. This could be considered as the general call of the Caribbean Church. That these relationships of love occur in a particular place beg the question of how to characterize in a theological manner the space of these relationships.

IV. Our Context as Forced

I have already presented to this conference the idea of a forced theological context as a way to understand the space of our existence in the Caribbean, so I will be brief in presenting it here. However, I would like to explain how I happened upon this understanding.

In responding to a theologian with Cuban heritage who had written a book on how we should understand Jesus accompanying us on our journey of life, I found it curious that he used examples of popular religiosity from Mexico and not Cuba. We all know that Christianity in Cuba and its popular expressions have been and are very much alive. This led me to question why he ignored the obvious local religious expressions of Cuba, where he has roots, and used Mexico instead? Maybe his use of Mexico was dictated by political, economic and social constraints since he is understood to be a Cuban-American, which community by and large in the United States opposes Castro's regime. It was clear to me that he was forced (in the sense that he felt constrained, willingly or otherwise) to ignore the Cuban context and therefore had to find an analogous context, though not his heritage in the strict sense, to ground his theories. It immediately struck me that in many ways, the Caribbean context was and is one that has forced us to ground ourselves in contexts that are not our own. That is why we have to and are able to navigate multiple relationships at different levels. In exploring this further, I wanted to make this understanding of a forced context theologically relevant and I sought to do this by turning traditional philosophical theological categories on their head in order to provoke an "alternate consciousness".

The first category I wanted to "turn" was the traditional understanding of free will. I wanted to show that the genuine option for the suffering person is not the result of reasonable choices made based on an exercise of the will. Even further, that will and freedom are not compatible, because meaningful human action is based not on the possibility and availability of choice but on the lack thereof. We do theology because it must be done. We have a Church because we must witness to God's grace in the midst of our suffering, not merely because a Church is a nice thing to have. Our actions are determined not by the possibilities before us but by the urgency of our present condition. Freedom is therefore not dependent on the possibility of new and alternative structures, but on our resistance to the present conditions of suffering and exploitation.

The second understanding I wanted to adjust was the notion that freedom and hope are necessary partners. If the condition of being forced propels us to identify and move towards what is urgent in our existing and continuing situation, then hope can often serve to deprive us of an understanding of our context rooted in the here and now. It would be better to fully recognize our forced and despairing situation created by exploitation and suffering, than to rely on a hope that might deceive and paralyze us. Hence the provocative statement that we should understand freedom not in the light of hope but in the context of despair.

The third issue I wanted to find a way around was the very individualistic way in which we understand what it means to be human and by extension, faith. This is based on the classical understanding of our having some essential human nature and identity grounded in the individual as a singular being. Hence I claimed that the forced context calls for the non-essentiality of the human condition in an attempt to underscore that our identities take shape as a result of differentiation. Only because of the other person(s) do I have meaningful *human* existence. This is why I claimed that the notion of the non-essentiality of the human condition forces us to strive

towards the realization of a condition which allows us to be most fully human and most fully free, that is, in solidarity.

Finally, forced contexts borne out of exploitation and suffering always tend to equate religion, religious expression and theology with the impulse toward survival. Sometimes this loses sight of the Christian fact that salvation at times denies even the possibility of survival. Indeed, at times, salvation demands death, the closure of all possibility. Our equation of religion with survival, and now more so with success, has robbed us of the important distinction to be made between survival and salvation. The religion of survival speaks the language of freedom but does not add any specific theological elements to the historical struggle. It remains an Old Testament dispensation. We need a theology of salvation more than we need a theology of survival.

If this is our context theologically considered, then what is our Church theologically considered? Understanding our historical and cultural space in terms of discontinuity, reading our call as making present God's grace in the midst of our complex existence, and characterizing that existence as forced, how are we to claim and proclaim our Church? Forced to look at our context in its stark reality, recognizing that we can only survive together, and knowing that this survival is only meaningful in terms of salvation, it seems clear that if our Church reflects who and what we are it also takes on a forced character. Insofar as it does take on the characteristics of a forced context, it too is determined by the urgency of our situation and therefore does not have a choice except to make an option that signals its commitment to, and love of, the region and its people. This means that the Church in the Caribbean must make some clear option which can be used as the basis for its being and action.

I perhaps need to state that an option is not the same as a choice. In our relating to God and one another one can choose to love or not to love but though we are free to commit ourselves as we please, we are not free not to love if we claim to be committed to a God of love. In this sense we must make an option to love and are not free to choose otherwise, though it is possible that we could. In a similar manner, by speaking of an option I want to outline a way of being and acting that we must choose as a Caribbean Church. I must emphasize that the following outline of such an option is still in its germinal stages and needs more studied work. However, I will sketch some main points with the intention of presenting them more substantially at the conference.

V. Church In the Caribbean: What Option?

In a short essay entitled "The Limbo Gateway", Wilson Harris explores a philosophy of history for the region. He sees in the African myth of limbo "a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles." For Harris, *limbo* is a new sensibility that can translate and "accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures". He goes on to say:

"It is my view- a deeply considered one - that this ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence born of great peril and strangest capacity for renewal -pointing away from apartheid

and ghetto fixations - is of the utmost importance and *native* to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole”.

This art of creative coexistence is created by, and creates, a “dislocation of interior space” which serves “as a corrective to a uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism”. What I find interesting in Harris’ essay is the use of the notion of dislocation and how it takes on positive and negative aspects. In a departure from him, I would like to use the term to describe not just physical and mental space but a people. I think dislocation historicizes the discontinuity characteristic of our historical, spiritual and cultural context, and also adequately describes the nature and state of our current context. I want to suggest that our Caribbean Church make an option for the dislocated which at the same time implies an option against persons, structures and situations that create and maintain dislocation.

If the Church is to make an option for the dislocated it must be an option that can be supported and clarified by scripture. The first step in understanding this option therefore is to explore how the word of God sheds light on the issue. In the Old Testament the most obvious scriptural text that speaks of a dislocated people is Psalm 137, the Ballad of the Exiles. As the Israelites sit by the rivers of Babylon in exile, they contemplate their fate which makes them cling closer to their God and the land he had given to them. Genesis 4:14 presents another understanding of dislocation where God makes Cain a fugitive and a wanderer as a result of killing his brother Abel. The point here is that in antiquity if you did not belong to a group you were most likely a thief or at least a criminal and therefore subject to retribution. Upon Cain’s request God gives him a mark to warn others that God’s retribution will be severe if anyone interferes with Cain. Genesis 12:1 gives yet another context in that Abraham is called to leave his country and familial relations to find a land God will show him. The order here is interesting, getting more specific as it goes. Not only would it be difficult for Abraham to leave his country but especially his father’s house (immediate family). Thus the order and call is linked not only to land but also to relations. And in Exodus 2:22 Moses names his son Gershom because he is a stranger in a foreign land, indicating the difficulty Moses experienced in his exile from Egypt. When we look to the New Testament it is more difficult to pinpoint specific passages that address dislocation, but it can be said that Jesus himself suffered rejection from his own people and as such was forced to preach his message outside his home of Nazareth. Perhaps the parable of the lost (prodigal) son, Luke 15:11, is of interest to us here also. In this parable, the dislocation made explicit in the younger son’s departure and return takes on the many shades of the relationships between the father and the younger son, the father and the older son, and the two brothers. These texts and others need to be studied and their relation to the option for the dislocated explained. But at least we have some scriptural texts and themes that can be explored to understand what such an option might mean.

Second, as study based in areas where persons have experienced massive dislocation, contemporary work in post-colonial theory will help to update and clarify the increasing situations of dislocation occurring in our region and in the world. We must analyze the post-colonial and globalized context of our world and our region to point out the social, political, economic and cultural factors at work in our region. This will also be aided by the use of the method of history developed by those who use the third approach to theology in the region, mentioned in section one.

Third, dislocation can also be seen as freedom to relocate. We must investigate immigration patterns and trends in our region. Contemporary studies on displaced populations and immigrant communities will shed light on a significant aspect of Caribbean reality. We all know the joke that was told about Trinidadians coming home to Trinidad to celebrate the new millennium- if all Trinidadians returned the island would sink because there seems to be more of us out of Trinidad than in. The same can be said of any Caribbean island or territory.

Fourth, dislocation spawns complex relationships and forces persons to inhabit multiple worlds and religions, often at the same time. We need to understand the nature and range of human relationships that occur among a dislocated people. The conference has been doing some of this by looking at sexuality (Barbados 2002), violence (Guyana 2001), and on-going research projects on religious and inter-religious phenomena in the region. Of interest here is how to describe the multiple modes of belonging we engage and the multiple worlds we inhabit in the region.

Fifth, to sink this option for the dislocated in a broad theological context we have to articulate a theology of grace and how such grace is possible for a dislocated people. I'd like to take a quote from Roger Haight here:

“When salvation is conceived of in terms of grace, one focuses on the concrete and historical manifestations of the effects of God’s love within the Christian economy. This is certainly the dominant concept of the New Testament itself, for the primitive community of faith was constituted by the pouring out of the Spirit and lived in the experiential enthusiasm of its gifts and charisms. Here then salvation appears as an economy, a working of God in a history of human events.”

To be graced in our context is no mysterious phenomenon. It is an historical event that takes concrete

manifestations in our ways of relating and acting. The theology of grace to be developed will demystify how God’s grace can be made present in our dislocation. A Caribbean Church that makes an option for the dislocated makes an option for who we are and who we are called to be.

It is clear that a lot more work needs to be done to flesh out this option for the dislocated that I claim the Church in the Caribbean must make. That I think this option is our Church’s calling in our context will no doubt receive your critical consideration.

Before proceeding to suggest some ecclesiological considerations that arise from the reflections thus far, let me address a possible problematic that an option for the dislocated might present. It is the problem of substitutive ideology. It could be argued that an option for the dislocated, places us squarely back into the modern trap of appositional and reactionary thinking, thereby not effecting any real change but substituting one ideological position for another and as a result only continuing the current state of affairs but under a new guise.

No doubt this is a distinct possibility and is a problematic I will attend to in more detail at the conference. But it would seem that given the historical, cultural, social and spiritual discontinuity

that has plagued our region, an option that attempts to address these conditions in their personal and structural forms, might at the very least offer us a way to clarify and reconfigure the calling of the Church in the Caribbean, and at the very most, present us with a future possibility.

VI. Conclusion: Ecclesiological Implications

In conclusion, ecclesiological implications of the positions taken in this reflection will take the form of a brief mention of some themes for ecclesiological reflection in our context.

First and foremost is the issue of power and its use. Irrespective of place, space and time, relations of power (and of powerlessness) have defined the nature and role of Church as well as the range and frequency of dislocation in peoples and populations. In this reflection I preferred the understanding of power that comes from *exousia*, i.e. action done in submission to God's will. Following Kleden, I typified this action as an empty-handed approach, which is directed by the notion of *kenosis* (Phil.2:7) in the person of Jesus the Christ. Though traditionally used in the attempt to understand the nature of Christ, *kenosis* is helpful to us here in understanding the nature of Church.

Second, dislocation resonates with the theological abandonment Sobrino describes in his understanding of the theological significance of the cross of Christ. Such "abandonment", as an act of love and solidarity, echoes the empty-handed approach yet indicates the necessity for solidarity. Spirituality is thus collective and not singular. Church is not exclusive but universal.

Third, in so far as solidarity becomes necessary to what Church must be, the notion of catholicity requires more attention. The universality that is Catholic (as in catholicity) implies a way of understanding collectivity and solidarity not as a collection of individuals but as an expression of what is best for all humankind.

Finally, a theology of grace among those who are dislocated points in the direction of clarifying once more one of the marks of the Church: the Church as Holy. What is of interest here is that at the same time the Church is holy it is also sinful. So the possibility of having a saving Church is also the possibility of grace in the midst of sinful conditions. Further reflection on this will help to explain the possibility and freedom of grace in forced contexts and amidst dislocated peoples.

Let each of you look not only to his own interests,

but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves,

which is yours in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a servant,

being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form he humbled himself

and became obedient unto death,

even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him

the name which is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:6-11; Revised Standard Version; italics mine)

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See *Proceedings of the Fifty Second Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, Milwaukee, 2001, pp. 197-198.

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Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1978, p. 204.

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The conference in Jamaica on the "Faces of Jesus", 1998. See also Gerald Boodoo, "Gospel and Culture in a Forced Theological Context", *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 17 no. 2, Kingston, Jamaica, 1996; and "Paradigm Shift?" in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, G. DeSchrijver, ed., Peeters, Leuven University Press, 1998.

See Joseph Harris' use of Brueggemann in *Theology in the Caribbean Today 1*, p. 46.

Clyde Harvey used this term at our 1998 "Faces of Jesus" conference in Jamaica. He was at the time speaking about how political figures used the messianic theme in their rhetoric and presentation while holding on to an Old Testament dispensation in terms of their (and our) understanding of Christianity.

See Gutierrez' explanation of this distinction in his *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, 15th anniversary edition, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1988, p. xxvi.

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Ibid., p. 381.

Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, Paulist Press, New York, 1979, p. 165.