Faculdades EST/Eurodiaconia

**About Diaconia and Liberation Theology**

Theses for debate

1. The question of diaconia is central to the practice and message of Jesus of Nazareth. The only ones who do not accept it are those who find it difficult to understand the meaning of Jesus' words in Mark 10.42, where he states clearly the meaning of his mission as the Son of Man: 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant: and whoever wants to be first among you must be slave (*diákonos*) of all. For even the Son of Man did **not** come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'.
2. It is important to note that Jesus' words appear in the *context* of his understanding of the exercise of ***political power*.**The interpretation of the *diaconia of Jesus* which hides this context possibly misses the point of what it means for the Christian mission and the practice of the faith of people who are committed to following Jesus. 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **Not** so with you [...]'. This brings up the question of what we mean by *authority* in the sense of the Gospel of Jesus or his missionary practice.
3. When I looked deeper into the question of how Liberation Theology (LT) addresses the issue of *diaconia*, I had my first surprise. The first classic works of LT do **not** *explicitly* mention the concept of diaconia. I'm referring, for example, to some of the classics of Liberation Theology: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), *Jesus Christ Liberator*, by Leonardo Boff (1972), *The Liberation of Theology*, by Juan Luis Segundo, and the book edited by Pablo Richard, *Raíces de la teología latinoamericana* (1985) and others, if I had the time to look them up. I consulted dictionaries and received further confirmation. The classic work *Mysterium Liberationis*. Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación (1990), in two volumes, edited by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, in El Salvador, also does **not***explicitly* address the issue of diaconia. It is the same with the huge *Conceptos fundamentales del cristianismo* (1993), totalling more than fifteen hundred pages, edited by Casiano Floristán and Juan José Tamayo. For what reason? I suspect: *compromising inattention* to one of the concepts that define the *practice of Jesus* from the Gospel narratives.
4. This first observation led me to something even more surprising, in a positive sense. A small book written in Lima by Hugo Echegaray, a personal friend of Gutiérrez and who died prematurely of a disease, addresses the issue of *diaconia* explicitly and in a very particular way. This is ***La práctica de Jesús***, a book published posthumously in 1980! The book was written before this date, in the late 1970s, and then edited by his friends. The author lays out a Christocentric theology and examines the *messianic* practice of Jesus. He says, for example, that a person cannot be considered healthy alone, independently from the others, besides the fact that he lives in the midst of a 'sick' society. Echegaray points to the core concepts of Jesus' practice: freedom, solidarity and the experience of God's Kingdom and His righteousness. Moreover, in practice and in the message of Jesus, God manifests Himself to everyone, including the insignificant, the poor and the dispossessed of life. Conversion is something radical from the Gospel of Jesus, it happens every day and does not end ever. The emergence of the Kingdom of God in this world assumes, however, one condition: **one needs to *enter* the world of the poor and destitute** (cf. Mary's Hymn of Praise, the *Magnificat*, Luke 1) to understand the nature of the Kingdom of God. According to the discipleship of Jesus, the following is not only something *personal* but explicitly *community based* (this became the hallmark of CEBs in Latin America), which points to a new understanding and experience of the church as a community of equals.
5. Echegaray approaches the theme of *diaconia* in Chapter IV, which deals with the mission of Jesus (p. 155-222). And *diaconia* appears under the topic of Jesus' *messianic practice*. *Diaconia* has to do with *messianic practice*, therefore. What does this mean? Echegaray presents an analytical framework (p. 201, cf. Annex) in which he outlines the practice of Jesus on three levels or dimensions that articulate his actions and cannot be viewed separately, but jointly and dialectically: the *economic* level, which is characterised by the *logic of giving and communion with the poor*. This is where the practice of spiritual reciprocity and benefits of life come in. The *ethical and social* level, which is characterised by the *logic of freedom and love*. This is where the argument about the Kingdom of God comes in, which implies work and most likely suffering. This means that the practice of Jesus is a militant practice which contradicts the logic of the imperial system, just as life is opposed to death, the new to the obsolete, grace to sin (p. 201). The *political* level is the one that interests us here. Within the analytical framework, this level is between the other two and *diaconia* is at the centre, along with equality and true power. At this level, the Kingdom of God is expressed in its own particular way in order to put into practice the exercise of authority. Echegaray writes that this is the *authority as a mass diaconia, as a service which implies the fundamental equality of all people and as* ***true power****, i.e., power based on justice and equality* (p. 199).
6. According to Echegaray's interpretation, Jesus does not exclude the *dimension of power* in social and community life. This dimension constitutes human life in society. **Jesus condemns the exercise of power as domination of the few over others.** 'It is not so among you' (Mark 10:43, cf. parallels in the Synoptic Gospels). In Jesus' view, the greatest takes the place of the smallest (or youngest) and the boss takes the place of those who serve. Positions and values are reversed! He justifies this with his *authority*: 'I am among you as one who serves.' There are several parables on this subject.
7. In the Christian community, the *only justification for power shall be to serve people's lives*, never the enjoyment of authority for personal gain. The poverty of Jesus, the practice of *giving* and free action therefore *constitute* his practice of *diaconia*. The opposite of this is the use of power as a force, such as violence, as accumulation of wealth and corruption. All this denies equality between the sons and daughters of God.
8. For Echegaray, the practice of Jesus is presented as a concrete standard of criticism (p. 201) and as founder of a community that gives rise to a historic, social and spiritual ecclesiastical tradition, opposed to the inertia of the empire. 'The *here and now* of the Kingdom of God with which it (in *ecclesia*) acquires a particular boundary translates into the germ of a new *social organisation*, by a dialectic that the world cannot offer after Easter, and that announces [dialectically] the *not yet* of the fullness of the Kingdom' (p. 201).
9. Thus, the early Christian community began to feel that its *practice* based on the *practice of Jesus* no longer corresponded to the rules of imperial society in which it had begun to take shape. To be guided by the practice of Jesus, their community life was open to the gift of the Kingdom and to a new experience: **a new spiritual and communitarian experience** (p. 202). Echegaray explains that this experience is 'to divest oneself of the *old human being*, the one that corresponds to previous practice grounded and imposed by the empire; and vest oneself in the *new human being* that corresponds to the historical life of Christ, which animates, through the Spirit and as the One who has Risen, the current existence of the community' (p. 202). One can see here a close proximity to the Lutheran concept of the Christian experience of *baptism*.
10. In this *new community* (*ecclesia tou Theou*), new values​are opposed to the anti-values​of the imperial system, which are characterised as demonic (they separate, divide and fragment), which lead to darkness and death. In this *new human being*, what predominates is *life*, which favours the development of *life*, and reconciliation of people among each other and with themselves, with God as the source of Life.
11. One last suspicion: for practical reasons, LT no longer *uses* the concept of *diaconia* either through ignorance of its *critical political* potential, or because it has *translated* this concept into other more contemporary terms such as solidarity, commitment to the poor, citizenship, the fight for equality and grassroots democracy, and so on. With Gutiérrez, it seems to me that the *diaconal* dimension appears in his concept of *Christian spirituality*, which is already present in *A Theology of Liberation* and later in other important books such as *We Drink from our Own Wells*, *God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*.
12. I have found examples of this reinterpretation in more recent writings by theologians who identify with liberation theology: a) Texts from the CESE (Ecumenical Coordination Service – Salvador, BA) *Debate* book on *Citizenship and Diaconia* (No. 5, year VI, July 1996). In this book, two studies point to this dimension of the *current Christian diaconia*: the first by Sebastião Gameleira Soares (a Catholic theologian who later became an IEAB Anglican bishop, now emeritus), who writes about 'Evangelisation and diaconia' (p. 45-60); the second text is by Ivoni Richter Reimer, Lutheran pastor and professor at the Catholic University of Goiás, which addresses the theme 'Diaconia and citizenship. Biblical and theological reflections' (p. 61-68).
13. Even so, we find new leads in this search for the presence of Diaconia in Liberation Theology. In 1993, Casiano Floristán, a Spanish theologian linked to LT, wrote an important book entitled *Teologia Practica*.Teoría y práctica de la acción pastoral. It presents the five dimensions of the church's action: *Missio, Didaskalia, Leitourgia, Koinonia and Diakonia.* In this book, Floristán devotes no fewer than **69 pages to Diaconia** or **Church Service**.
 And it is he who edited with Juan José Tamayo the *Conceptos fundamentales del cristianismo* Dictionary (Dictionary of the Fundamental Concepts of Christianity), published the same year in Spain in which the concept is not present. This is difficult to understand.
14. One last observation. At the Continental Congress of Theology (Congresso Continental de Teologia) held in São Leopoldo in 2012, at the Jesuit Unisinos University, the young Mexican theologian *Carlos Mendoza* gave a conference closing talk that was extraordinary for the novelty of its thesis and his courage in putting the importance of indigenous, African, feminist and *queer* theologies at the centre of the debates. His thesis was expressed in the old Latin: *extra victimas salus non est*, which can be translated as: *There is no salvation without victims!* From this, we can include all those people who suffer under the imperial system that dominates the world today. His starting point was an analysis of the Second Vatican Council (in 2015 it's celebrated the anniversary of its ending, 50 years ago). Mendoza characterised the Second Vatican Council as 'a council of *the diaconia of the church*.' The word *diaconia* appears to my mind as a great innovation in the popular discourse of LT. And then you realise the reason: this council did not hold an *ecclesiocentric* vision, but an was oriented towards the '*prophetic diaconia* of the church, through the service of truth, justice and peace in modern societies as an eschatological sign of the Kingdom of God' (p. 329). This policy had as its starting point a reading of the *signs of the times* through which God continues to communicate his universal plan for the salvation of mankind. In the following decades, the Christian church was losing *credibility* (Mendoza calls this phenomenon the 'saturation of mediation') which poses new challenges for us today. And these come precisely from the sectors that have been 'made invisible' by the dominant system: women, indigenous peoples, other ethnic groups, migrants, the LGBTT community and its *queer* theology (in BRIGHENTI, Agenor; HERMANO, Rosario. *A teologia da libertação em prospectiva.* Congresso continental de Teologia. São Leopoldo, RS, Brasil. Conferências e painéis, p. 323-341).
15. I conclude with the following challenges posed by Mendoza:
16. the credibility of the *prophetic diaconia* of the Christian church depends on its *testimonial* capacity to monitor the processes of emancipation of the various modern and post-modern human identities through a compassionate and critical presence of the idolatries that replace *love without measure and without condition* which is God revealed in Christ Jesus.
17. This implies *difficult giving* (the concept is reminiscent of the formulation of *costly grace* of Dietrich Bonhoeffer) that is given by assuming a new anthropology of the *person in a relationship* (there is no chance of *being* in this world without forming *relationships*). Mendoza says that to speak of the *person in a relationship* in the post-modern context as a process of *giving* assumes several very demanding philosophical and theological elements. For example, the challenge of *anti-systemic practices* (he is referring here to Walter Benjamin and his view of the presence of the *messianic* today, and to Franz Hikelammert who speaks of the construction of *difficult hope*). Mendoza writes: 'to think the *person in a relationship* [with the] connotation of *giving* carries a phenomenology of giving that overthrows the idea of an ontology of substance and opens up the questions of an *ontology of otherness*. The other is in its difference, primarily its victims, but also its executioners in their powerlessness to be absolved themselves; there is a *cry* from them that asks to be redeemed of their finiteness, of their guilt and the sacrificial violence that supplants the sacred' (p. 339). For Mendoza, 'the victims would be carriers of this *contraction of time* which is characteristic of the Messiah [as G. Agamben addresses in his work *The Time that Remains* (2004)], when they can loosen the bonds of rivalry by a *non-reciprocal* or unsymmetrical love. Then the coming of the Kingdom of God shall begin in the form of a *messianic counter-history*' (p. 340).
18. To sum up:
* Christian *diaconia* today needs to decisively take the prophetic perspective that hides behind the word *transformational*. And prophecy in this regard has to do with attitude and complicity with the *victims* of the imperial domination system in which we live today. These are victims who question our faith and the practical experience of love we proclaim.
* *Extra victimas nulla salus est* means to affirm that while we are separated from our relationship with the victims of the imperial system – wherever they are – there is no possibility of creating a **credible Christian diaconia**.

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**Annex:**

Source ECHEGARAY, Hugo. *La práctica de Jesús.* Lima: CEP, 1980, p. 201.