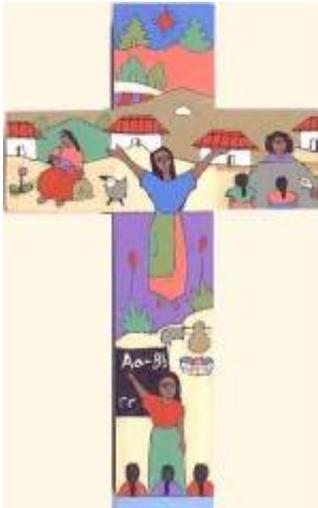


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# "Accompaniment from El Salvador on..."

by Jim Barnett, O.P.




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## **Introduction.**

For me, it began in 1984 when I arrived in El Salvador. I was to spend a two-month period with the Dominican friars there, simply learning about the reality, observing what the friars were doing, seeing where I might fit into the pastoral plan.

On the first day, they took me to the outskirts of San Salvador, to a place called the "22<sup>nd</sup> of April". The name came from the date when the people had taken over the land. It was a community of some 10,000 people, jammed into about a three-block square area. It wasn't exactly a choice piece of real estate--it had been a garbage dump--and it smelled like it, and there was plastic sticking out of the ground in places. The complete property was on a steep hill, stretched out from the road below to the railroad tracks above.

There was no water, no electricity, no sewage system. Some of the homes were made of concrete blocks with a tin roof; others were completely tin or cheap aluminum sheets; some were of scrap lumber; others were plastic; and still other houses--those of the new arrivals--were made of cardboard. Nearly all of these were one-room shacks (about the size of my room in River Forest) but anywhere from three to ten people lived in the shacks .

The people were called "desplazados", displaced persons. They were "internal refugees" and had been driven from the countryside by the civil war raging in El Salvador. "22nd of April" was not a United Nations re-settlement, it was not a church program, it certainly was not a government

project. It was simply a place where people ended up when they could find nothing else. About fifty new folks arrived each day--typically a single mother with 3 or 4 kids and maybe an elderly grandparent or aunt.

[I witnessed my first example of "accompaniment" on the part of the people when I saw a family of 5 welcome a newly arrived widow, age 23 with her 3 kids, into their one-room home to live. They didn't even know them--they weren't relatives--they just took them in.]

It was a community of women and children--there were few teenagers around, and almost no young men. These had not left the countryside: they were in the war.

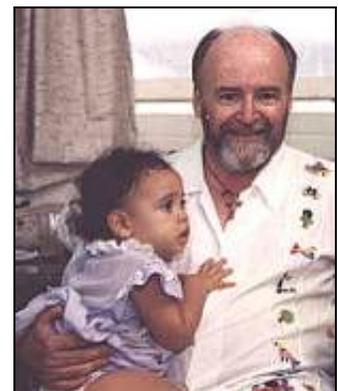
Now I had lived in big cities before, and had seen their slums--Chicago, Houston, Denver, Minneapolis--but I'd never in my life even imagined what I experienced that first day in "22nd of April". My senses were bombarded, dilated with gruesome sights, garbage-pit smells, and I heard so many horror stories that my ears ached. I saw open sewage pits with ragged kids in bare feet running through them, gaunt women with hollow [yet enchanting] eyes, lugging a baby on their hip, or at the breast, or their heads carrying a huge bucket of water or a pan of corn to go to the grinder to make tortillas.

We spent most of the day just walking around, meeting folks, hearing the stories, being hit on for money, or food, or aluminum sheets for the houses. In late afternoon, we went to the church, rang the bells and within a half-hour hundreds of women and children and dogs had crammed into this biggest building in the community. There my tour guide, a seasoned Dominican missionary from Spain, Padre Alejandro, presided at Eucharist. At the end of the Eucharist he introduced me to the people--as their new pastor!

My head jerked when he said the words. He had told me beforehand simply that "we'd like you to work with us in their new community that has grown up" but PASTOR! Of 10,000 displaced people, of the poorest of the poor! There was no discernment process, there was no consultation with the bishop and the diocesan pastoral planning board, there was simply this Spanish priest saying, "Here's your new pastor!"

I was *overwhelmed*. How could he do this? How could **I** do this? He must have mistaken my misty eyes as tears of compassion rather than smarting from the strong stench of garbage; he must have thought my playing with the kids was a sign of fatherly affection rather than an escape from talking to the adults because I could think of nothing to say to them in this setting.

On the way back to the Priory in the city, Padre Alejandro said simply, "This is where we work--if you're going to be with **us**, **you'll work here.**" And then he told me about something that had occurred some years before, when Archbishop Romero was still alive:



A group of new missionaries from the States had had an orientation to the country and finally met with the Archbishop for his blessing...He told them: "We're very grateful for your coming here--you've had many opportunities for education and the people will appreciate you. In the U.S. you have great churches and schools and pastoral programs and wonderful parish plants.

But what the people really need is that you simply WALK WITH THEM in their lives, that you ACCOMPANY them on their own faith journey, that you are THERE WITH THEM as they struggle to work out their own historical destiny. If you do that--if you simply accompany the people, I tell you, you will discover a wonderful faith, and YOUR faith and YOUR lives will be transformed. That's what Jesus did--He didn't cling to his divinity but emptied himself and became as we are; He made a choice to be with the people in their sickness, in their poverty, in their struggles with the civil and religious authorities. We say here [Romeo said] that Jesus made a preferential, fundamental option for the poor and the marginalized and the little ones--He walked with them and they came to believe that THEIR walk was important. That's what the Salvadoran people need: ACCOMPANY them, and I promise you, your own journey will be transformed.

### **New Word--A New Concept of Ministry.**

These words of Archbishop Oscar Romero were the first time I'd heard about the "theology of accompaniment" but this was to be a source and a force in my life for the next 14 years--up to this very day. It also began a whole new approach to preaching and to all of my ministry...accompaniment...

For me, it started right there in the "22nd of April" colony--partly (I admit it to you) out of frustration, out of MY NEED, my felt need: I was a foreigner, my Spanish was terrible, I didn't know the culture of the people at all, they were as poor and as destitute as any I'd ever seen, I was afraid, the country was in a fierce civil war-- the folks there had family members on both sides--I met two families who later confided to me that they had one son in the military and another with the guerrillas.

So that was the situation--I didn't know what to do--I felt helpless--the "ministry of accompaniment" began. My first discovery was that it was a ministry of mutuality (I had so much to learn--I could learn it only from them) They ministered to me. I simply couldn't look at them as "objects" of my ministry: *They* were the actors/subjects/initiators/animations.

I began meeting every week with a couple of the comunidades de base--"small Christian base communities". Their meetings started with a shared reflection on the gospel reading for the coming Sunday. I would come prepared, with some things I'd remembered from commentaries or my own preaching in the States, and invariably I would be almost speechless as I listened to how THEY responded to the Scriptures. Most of them couldn't read...one fellow always brought his 10-year-old daughter because she could read for him.

The stories and experiences that came from those weekly meetings--the interpretation that came from a life of suffering and struggle--the whole *perspective of the poor* in hearing the Gospels opened for me a new way of reading the Scriptures. THESE are the poor to whom Jesus preached the Beatitudes...THESE are the ones who first heard the parables...And that crowd of 5000 who ate the loaves and fishes??? I'll never forget the first time I heard it: "The miracle of the loaves and fishes," said one toothless, wizened old man, "it wasn't Jesus saying magic words and then the bread multiplied. It was rather the miracle of hungry people SHARING what little they had, giving up what they'd saved for their own kids in order to share it with other kids-- THAT'S the real miracle here--the miracle of SHARING--and it's the same miracle of Eucharist..." And everyone smiled and nodded their heads enthusiastically.

Or another time, when we were reading in Matthew 20 about the workers in the public square who were hired--some in the morning, others at noon, others at the last hour --but they all got the SAME WAGES as those who worked a full day. And we were talking about the generosity and the mercy of the land owner and some lady said, "I don't think this is a story about generosity at all--it's about JUSTICE, GOD'S kind of justice. You men [she said], when you go to the plaza every day and wait there for someone to come by in their pickup and give you work for the day--your wives and kids DEPEND on what you make that day for the food they eat that night. Are the kids of the guy who worked only one hour--are these kids LESS HUNGRY than the kids of the guy who worked all day? What's justice for them? That they get food each day. And that's the way God looks at it: from the perspective of the little ones, the hunger of the worker's wife and children! THAT'S God's justice!!!"

So my "accompaniment" of the people was a learning/deepening experience for ME --an experience of mutuality in ministry. I was being evangelized by them and my faith has never been the same.

A second element had to do with my outlook, my mentality as preacher. During my homilies the people would always have polite but often blank looks on their faces. This was to change when I'd use the stories and experiences from the comunidades de base--or just what I'd heard while visiting folks in the community. The people would come alive to the Word when it would speak to THEIR lives and experience, when it was a Word that was already present in them, when MY word touched THEIR word--or better, when the Word of God in me touched the Word of God in them: "Cor ad cor loquitur".

This led me to look at the fact that my role as preacher was to SPEAK THE PEOPLE'S FAITH BACK TO THEM in the preaching, to MIRROR and reflect back to them THEIR OWN GOODNESS, to reveal to them what was already there, to say to them: "Look, this is you--YOU are the beloved disciples, YOU are the sheep that the good shepherd searches out and leaves the others for, YOU are the generous and faithful servants, sharing of the little you have. I gradually developed the nerve to tell this ragtag, illiterate, poverty-stricken, displaced people that YOU are the chosen ones, that the GOOD NEWS is *for you*, and redemption and salvation is *already yours*, and the FULL LIBERATION of God is *now taking place*...and God's reign is *for you*...

It wasn't just my "attitude" that was changing. Day by day, *by* my being with them, *by* my entering their lives, *by* my accompanying them, I was experiencing their extraordinary faith, I was seeing their incredible goodness, I was falling in love with them. So it wasn't a difficult task to hold up a mirror to them and say, "Look at yourselves: YOU are beloved, special, chosen daughters and sons of God--YOU are faithful servant friends of Jesus!" One time Archbishop Romero said, "With this people, it's easy to be a good shepherd." It's a truth: the *people* make the pastor.

Accompaniment can be the most intimate, transforming process imaginable--the reality of friendship--love is an ultimate expression of accompaniment--to BE WITH a person, to get inside of their skin, their life, their experiences, to know the world through their eyes, to stand with them and be at their side in their pain and struggles, to walk with them...That is *love*--and accompaniment is the way to it.

We can also see how the concept of accompaniment applies to contemporary spirituality. I

remember when I first began to study and then to "give" SPIRITUAL DIRECTION. The only model seemed to be Ignatian. I was very uncomfortable with the very term--to "direct" or "order" someone's spiritual life seemed just not right--either ostentatious and arrogant, or at worst, *heretical* for assuming the role of the Holy Spirit! A Dominican model seemed more relational, dialogic, communal (as was eventually developed by Parable Conference with the Dominican "directed" retreat,) which came to be known as the "Encounter with the Word." When I began to see other paradigms--spiritual companionship, the anam cara [hara] of Celtic spirituality--a soul friend, a spiritual mentor, a companion along the journey--for me these are much more solid theologically, plus indicate another level of "accompaniment." [To be sure there is some "guidance" that takes place, but it's more as one who's walked this way before, who points things out along the way: "Oh, watch out, that could be dangerous...wait a minute, let's pause here for awhile, spend some more time on this...are you on target?...is this where you want to go?.." but this type of guidance is more as a friend, a mentor, a companion than an expert or a "director."]

So ... there are various, many ways of talking about accompaniment...we've already mentioned "walking with", "sharing" the struggle, "being present to" the poor and suffering. I have a friend who goes to the hearings of the Immigration Service accompanying the folks without papers. She says she "stands with" them as they listen to the proceedings, to make sure they understand what's going on, to support them emotionally, to "stand with" them, to "be for" them.

There is a kind of "spiritual solidarity" that Paul mentions in First Corinthians--of people praying for one another, of the stronger members of the body responding to the needs of the weaker--the kind of accompaniment and solidarity that happens in Twelve Step programs, or an AA sponsor who "takes on" the sobriety program of another member. And in psychology there's "co-counseling" and "peer counseling" ...types of accompaniment.

The word "accompaniment" itself is intriguing: "to accompany" is to "go with another on an equal basis," to "go with or attend as a companion." (In French it has the same root as "companion" and its more basic meaning is *sharing*.) They both come from the Latin ad cum panis which means "to go with bread." So accompaniment has to do with a companion who attends a friend with bread, who "goes with" a friend with bread, who "breaks bread" with a friend, who *shares* food, who *shares life*. It sounds very Eucharistic, doesn't it?--like the old man who said the miracle of the loaves and fishes is really the miracle of sharing bread, the miracle of Eucharist.

I have another story--a beautiful story that I first heard when the Salvadorans came back from the refugee camps of Honduras in 1986. It was the story of two women in their late teens, Marta and Teresa, who lived in a small village that the military had attacked. They fled into the nearby mountains and were separated from the other villagers. Marta was rather thin and sickly; Teresa had a child she was nursing. They began what is called a "guinda"--running from the soldiers--traveling by night and hiding and sleeping by day. After about five days they were very weak and had only one tortilla between them. Teresa insisted, "YOU take it, Marta. You're very weak, you aren't going to make it much further. You take the tortilla." But Marta said, "No, Teresa, YOU take it. You're feeding your baby...the baby needs it." And Teresa said, "But I'm strong and the baby's ok...YOU take it". And so it went, back and forth, neither wanted to take the last tortilla. Finally Teresa said, "OK, here's what we'll do". And she tore the tortilla in two and gave half to Marta. "Tonight we share the tortilla...tomorrow we share the hunger."

What is more Eucharistic? "She broke the bread, shared it with her friend and said, 'Take and eat. Tonight we share the tortilla...tomorrow we share the hunger.'"

### **Archbishop Oscar Romero.**

I want to return to the example of Archbishop Romero--partly because he was one of the first to articulate some of this "theology of accompaniment"--and partly because he was so profoundly changed when *he* began to truly listen to the poor, when he went to the small Christian base communities and began to be with the people at that level, when he accepted their challenge to be their "voice"--"la voz de los sin voz"--the voice of those without voice...and when he literally laid down his life for his friends...

Archbishop Romero took accompaniment to a deeper level. Care for the poor had been consistent with his life as a priest all along. But when he became archbishop of San Salvador, he took sides, he chose the side of the poor, he directly faced the forces aligned against them, he entered their conflictive, messy social struggle--and this was a very different matter. He became "political". It was the poor that converted him--their eyes pleading with him after the assassination of the activist priest, Rutilio Grande: "Will you STAND WITH US as Rutilio did?"

Archbishop Romero did precisely that: he entered the *total experience* of the poor--physical, spiritual, social, economic AND political. With the small Christian communities, the labor unions and other organized groups he began to ask the question WHY. "In this Christian country, WHY is there such massive injustice and violence? WHY such poverty and inequality? What structural forces are causing such misery? WHY?" Do you remember the words of that other bishop/prophet of Latin America, Don Helder Camara of Brazil? He said, "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask WHY the poor are hungry, they call me a Communist." When one starts asking the question WHY, we move beyond works of charity--even beyond social action or social work. We move into *social analysis*.

In the pursuit of social issues, Archbishop Romero's accompaniment was different from, say, a Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who literally accompanied the poor to be sure, but often insisted her mission could never be political. Archbishop Romero's accompaniment forced him into the political arena: he preached often about *social sin*, about *institutional* injustice, about *structural* violence, about the fact that there cannot be true political democracy unless there is *economic* democracy and the opportunity for *all* to work with dignity (which meant, in that agricultural economy, to have a patch of land to cultivate.)

[I remember one time a fellow in "22nd of April" pointed to a soccer field and said, "If I had THAT MUCH LAND I could feed my family. But they took even that away from me and now my children are hungry--THAT'S why we're fighting this war."] [One time the military had occupied the parish church in Aquilares and Archbishop Romero went there to RECLAIM the parish and he proclaimed, "I bring you the word Christ sent you: a word of solidarity, a word of Incarnation." He said it was the MISSION of the Church to "accompany the Passion of Jesus in the Passion of the people--to be incarnated in the life of the poor and their struggle for life, to ENTER INTO the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the BODY of Christ."]

And so Archbishop Romero entered a more and more radical form of accompaniment. The words on his episcopal coat of arms were "Sentir con la Iglesia"--to FEEL with the Church--and

he was quick to add that the Church is the people, so it's "To feel with the people." [In Spanish, the word "sentir" is more than just "to feel", which connotes an emotional response. It also means "to know", an experiential form of knowledge, an intimate form of knowledge, a perception involving the whole person..."sentir" is sapiential and ethical, it is of the heart. To "sentir" with the poor is to be one with them--affectively AND ethico-politically -- to KNOW them with the heart and the minds and the conscience.] That was his life: "Sentir con la Iglesia" ...and it cost him dearly. He accompanied the poor so profoundly, he entered so intimately into relationship with them that he mixed his own blood with theirs and offered his life in martyrdom out of love for the poor.

## **Solidarity.**

This kind of political accompaniment is sometimes called *solidarity*. For generations *solidarity* has been a labor union term, and achieved some prominence because of Lech Walesa and the Solidarity trade union in Poland. [I might mention parenthetically that it was Karol Wojtyla who wrote in the 60s about *solidarity* as a practical inspiration for a popular, non-violent uprising...And I should also mention that as John Paul II his social encyclicals often refer to the concept of solidarity. In "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis", for example, he writes: "The Church feels called to take her stand beside the poor...This commitment to solidarity demands a readiness to accept the sacrifices necessary for the good of the whole community...Solidarity (he continues) is not a feeling of vague compassion, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the concrete goal"--and this "concrete goal" in the writings of the Latin American bishops at Medellin is no less than the *transformation* of social structures...*systemic social change*.]

Though in different words, solidarity has been a significant part in the history of Dominican mission. My friend and cohort, Brian Pierce, in his studies on Bartolome de Las Casas, has discovered that there are four dimensions to Las Casas' "vocation" to solidarity: (1) an incarnate nearness to the poor, (2) a commitment to community, (3) a constant openness to ongoing conversion, and (4) the willingness to move beyond immediate solutions to problems, *in order* to be true to the larger struggle for structural transformation. [See Brian Pierce, O.P., "Bartolome de las Casas and Truth: Toward a Spirituality of Solidarity" in Spirituality Today (Spring, 1992, Vol.44, No. 1, pp. 4-19)]

"Solidarity"...I can remember how I used to try to explain to the novices the difference between Franciscan and Dominican poverty--and the vow of poverty: the Franciscan ideal was to try to *identify with* the poor, to *become one* with the poor, in a very literal way...whereas Dominicans try to be in *solidarity* with the poor, to accompany them in their struggle, sometimes literally to walk the picket lines or be in the protest march alongside them--even to go to jail with them, as did Gandhi or Dorothy Day or Martin Luther King or Roy Bourgeois or Mary Kay Flanigan--but also to realize that we cannot be poor in exactly the same way as they.. We used to carry on this discussion in Central America...in spite of our desire to be with the people completely, we realized that our education, our moral and intellectual and community *resources*, prevented us from a total identity with the poor.

[I can also remember how I struggled with this very personally in weighing my decision last year whether to come back to the States for medical treatment--and now whether to receive chemotherapy...*or* go back to Central America and live and die the way 90% of the people there do--without cat-scans or chemo or radiation or sophisticated medicines.]

"Solidarity"...it's an explicit and crucial reality in liberation theology. It has been used much here in the States in recent years in our relationship to the poor of Mexico and Central America, and its use has been expanded: solidarity with the people of Chiapas, solidarity with the victims of torture or domestic abuse, solidarity with those who cross the line and go to jail trying to close down the School of the Americas. It's an obvious aspect of accompaniment.

### **Preferential Option for the Poor**

[In this section, I am especially indebted to Roberto S. Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995) and in particular pp. 175-211.]

Another corollary of accompaniment as it has come to us from the reflection and the experience and praxis of Latin America is what has come to be known as the "preferential option for the poor." We've referred to it already--it's that first point of Las Casas' dimensions of solidarity, the "incarnate nearness to the poor"--a nearness not by historical or geographic accident, but by *design*: conscious, intentional choice, a "preferential option."

One of the first and most articulate theologians of liberation is the Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutierrez. He writes about the scriptural basis for this option for the poor: "The entire Bible, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, mirrors God's predilection for the weak and abused of human history. This preference brings out the gratuitous or unmerited character of God's love. The same revelation is given in the evangelical Beatitudes, for they tell us with utmost simplicity that God's predilection for the poor, the hungry and the suffering is based on God's unmerited goodness to us." [A Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), p. xxvii]

My experience as well is that when one reads the Scriptures with the poor, from the perspective of the poor, one discovers two powerful and mutually implicit themes: 1) the universality and freedom [absolute gratuity] of God's love, and 2) God's preferential option for the poor. Gutierrez says, "Universality and preference mark the proclamation of the kingdom. God addresses a message of life to every human being without exception, while at the same time God shows preference to the poor and the oppressed."

[This reminds me of how this option for the poor was once explained to me in regard to Jesus. All human beings are on a road to God, to happiness, to fulfillment, to the realm of God, to the kingdom. On this road, the poor are on one side and the rich on the other. *Jesus* enters this world and chooses to walk on the side of the poor, to walk with the poor in their journey to the reign of God. Jesus invites the wealthy, all those of us on the other side of the road to join Him, to join the poor on this journey. It is an invitation--though it sometimes is very strong, as when He said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven..." or "unless you change and become like these little ones, you shall not enter the reign of God..." or, to the rich young man, "Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come, join me."]

Roberto Goizueta has enunciated these themes in the following way: If 1) God's love is universal (i.e., given freely to all of us equally), and 2) God's love is made manifest in history, and 3) that history includes injustice, conflict and division, then 4) God's love *must* take sides with the victims of that injustice, conflict and division. As Gutierrez writes in his commentary on the Book of Job, "God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better

than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is in *God*, in God's gratuitous and universal 'agape'love."

God's accompaniment of the chosen people, God's solidarity with the anawim and the little ones, God's preferential option for these poor is evident throughout salvation history, but most particularly in the life and words and actions and choices of Jesus of Nazareth. In Matthew 25, Jesus says in the parable of the final judgment: "For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you accompanied me...When you did it to the little ones who are my sisters and brothers, you did it to me..." [I'd like to spend a few minutes on just who were these "little ones, the poor" in the culture of Jesus. In this I'm using some of the ideas of our brother, Albert Nolan, in his magnificent book, Jesus Before Christianity (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1978). ]

In first place, the "poor" of Jesus time refers to the *economically deprived*. Among these were the *beggars*. They were the *sick* and *disabled* who had resorted to begging because they were unemployable and without a relative who could afford to or was willing to support them. There were of course no hospitals, welfare institutions or programs for the disabled. They were expected to beg for their bread. Thus the blind, the hearing and speech impaired, the lame, the cripples and the lepers were usually beggars. *Lepers* were those who had any kind of disease which made them outwardly unclean...plus they had the added burden--as with many of the sick--of being judged culpable/sinful because of their disease.

Next among the economically poor were the *women* and the *orphans*: the women and children who had no one to provide for them and--in that society--no way of earning a living. They were completely dependent on almsgiving. We should also include *unskilled day-laborers*, who were often without work--and *peasants* who worked on farms, and *slaves*.

These economically poor were totally dependent on the "charity" of others. Then, as now, they suffered great humiliation and shame and disgrace. [In the Middle East, prestige and honor are as important as food or life itself. Money, power and learning give a man (I use the term deliberately...women were simply excluded from money, power and learning except by their connection with their father or husband) ...these gave a man prestige and status because they made him relatively independent and enabled him to do things for other people.] The really poor people who were dependent on others and had no one dependent on them were at the bottom of the social ladder. They had no prestige and no honor. They were hardly human. They lost human dignity. Their life was meaningless.

I mentioned women--by nature, they were considered to be in a whole category with *children* and *foreigners* and *marginated* and *illiterate* who had no rights, who were without power or dignity or respect.

This is why the word "poor" can be extended to cover all the oppressed--all those who are dependent on the mercy of others--though the prime analog of poor is the economically deprived. This too is the reason why the word can even be extended to all those who rely entirely upon the mercy of God--the "poor in Spirit" of Matthew's Beatitudes--those that the Latin American Bible translation call "those who have the spirit of the poor."

The *sinner*s were another category of the poor. They were social outcasts. Anyone who for any reason deviated from the law and the traditions were treated as inferior, as low class. The sinners were a well-defined social class, (the same social class as "the poor" in the broader sense of the word.)

The "sinners" would have included those who had sinful or unclean professions: tax collectors, herdsmen, money lenders, gamblers, as well as prostitutes and robbers. Indeed anyone who had extensive contact with the goyim the Gentiles, the pagans, the unclean--they carried with them a social stigma. The sinners were also those who did not pay their tithes to the priests (1/10 of their income) and those who were negligent about the sabbath rest and ritual cleanliness. The laws and customs on these matters were so complicated that the uneducated were quite incapable of understanding what was expected of them. So the uneducated were considered lawless and immoral, the "rabble who know nothing of the law" (says the Pharisee in John 7:49)...and therefore incapable of virtue and piety.

Moreover, there was a "Catch 22"--there was no way out for sinners. They were too ignorant to learn, or too sinful to change. Many were sinners by birth, or by physical condition or by mistakes or by ignorance. They didn't even know they were sinning.

It was *all* of these folks--beggars, the blind lame and the halt, widows and orphans, day-laborers and peasants, sinners and prostitutes and tax-collectors and uneducated and foreigners and women and children--*all* of these that Jesus *chose* to be with, to run with, to befriend, to be called not servants but friends, to be considered *their* friend. It was a *choice* on Jesus' part...a preferential option for the poor. Albert Nolan argues in one place that it can be said that Jesus came from "middle class" ...he received an education, he had a trade (carpenter). But he mixed socially with the lowest of the low. He lived among them, he shared table with them, he heard their stories and finally became one of them in their marginalization. He *chose* to become an outcast. And he invited us to follow him.

This is a fact of history, and Jesus' experience is the basis for the Church's preferential option for the poor.

### **Accompaniment and AIDS**

I want to consider briefly and to conclude with my experience of accompanying people with AIDS in Honduras. Now I am the kind of person who had avoided ministry to the sick and dying all of my ministerial life. I was uncomfortable with it, I didn't know what to say, and I was even more uncomfortable with trying to give consolation to a grieving family or loved ones.

But I couldn't avoid it in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where I've lived the last six years. AIDS is in epidemic proportion there. It has affected the families of most of the people we knew. We decided it had to become one of our ministry priorities.



One evening a doctor from a neighborhood clinic came to the door asking me (I was the only one around) to go to a 17-year-old girl who was dying of AIDS. She was a prostitute, and she'd been kicked out of the brothel when more of her symptoms began to appear, when she got close to death. I was to discover that her story was not untypical. She was from the countryside--I'll call her Rosa--a very simple girl from a very simple family. One day some people came to her village from the big city--San Pedro Sula--and told of work available in the maquilas, those small factories that produce all kinds of products for consumption in the U.S.--mostly fashionable clothes that you buy at the GAP or Marshall Field, or almost anyplace. Well, Rosa had no future in the countryside; she'd finished all the schooling available--six grades. Her parents were subsistent farmers, growing not enough food for the family. There was no work in the countryside, so she convinced her folks to let her go to the city to work in the maquila. She was 16.

But it was a trap. Rosa found herself in a very tight prostitution ring. At first, her friends said, she cried a lot, but then she got used to it. And she became very quiet and withdrawn...so much so that her owners had to move her from brothel to brothel. She was a fresh face, but would quickly become withdrawn and passive. She couldn't escape--it was truly a situation of "white slavery"--she knew no one in the city; the other women were very nice to her, but they too knew they couldn't escape. There were usually a couple of thugs at the brothels--to keep control of drunken men, but also to keep an eye on the women so they wouldn't escape.

So Rosa got infected with the HIV virus. She was 16. She had been chronically malnourished and anemic, so the disease moved rapidly. When they threw her out of the brothel, she was too ashamed to go back to her home. She thought her family could never accept what had happened to her, plus it would be a tremendous burden on them to try to care for a dying person with AIDS.

There's not much you can do, you know, for a terminal patient in a very poor country. No one has access to the sophisticated AIDS "cocktails" of the First World. They don't even have AZT, and can't afford even anti-biotics or modern pain medicines. If the person is in and out of consciousness, your words mean very little; if they're in great pain or are vomiting or have other sickness, they often get obsessed with their discomfort and can't think of anything else. Some people with AIDS get dementia at the end. In general, it's a terrible way to die (though there are many exceptions to this -- unexplained exceptions -- and many people just slip away, with very little effort or pain.)

So what do you do? In the six years I was in Honduras I know maybe 200 people who died of AIDS, and about 20 children. You just *be there* with them. You try to help with some of the physical things, but mostly you're just *there*. You offer to talk: you offer to talk about what's happening to them, you offer to talk about death and afterlife and God's love and that Jesus has gone through it and He's come back to guide us along this way, along the passage from this life to another life and you tell them that Jesus says, "Be at peace. I am with you." and how Jesus promised He would never abandon us but would be with us especially now, to show the way because He's gone that way before, because He died too, but came back in order to show us the way.

Some people want to talk; some want to talk about their whole life; some people want to go to confession and some people don't want to talk at all. You get your clue from them. You respect

them and what's happening to them. You're just *there* ...and you wait with them... and they may open their eyes from a coma, or from just nodding off, and a face is there or someone is holding their hand or someone is asking if they'd like some water or someone is praying softly.

So that's accompaniment. It's nothing new, it's nothing striking or dramatic like some of the other examples we've talked about. But this is also a *choice*--a decision on your part. It's also a *preferential option* and a *sign of solidarity* with the suffering Jesus. The Missionary Sisters of Charity--the Mother Teresa of Calcutta group--make a fourth vow, to serve the poorest of the poor, to seek Jesus in his "disguise as the poorest of the poor." They aren't well trained--in theology or medicine or social work. They simply find themselves in places to *accompany* the poorest of the poor.

A final story. About a sister of Loretto from the U.S., Ann Manganero, who was also a medical doctor working in a clinic behind the lines during the civil war in El Salvador. One day a baby was born about two months premature. The mother died in birth. The baby was tiny--about four pounds--and clearly would not survive. But Sister Ann kept her constantly in her arms, talking to her, singing to her, carrying her as she dealt with other patients, as she herself slept or cleaned the floor. They were literally inseparable.

After a couple of days the baby died. One of the workers at the clinic said, "What a shame... the poor baby didn't have anything." Sister Ann cried back, "Didn't have anything? That baby was powerful. That baby had the power to *draw out of me* so much compassion that I thought I would burst, to *draw out of me* pure, divine love--in spite of my busyness, in spite of the other patients, in spite of the war, that baby brought out God's own Spirit, God's love, God's life, from me.

That, my friends, is what can happen with accompaniment. Amen.