

# Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity

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## INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to write about “how my mind has changed,” and I must say that it has changed indeed—though not just my mind, I hope, but my will and heart as well. Because the changes that I have experienced and will write about have also been experienced by many others in El Salvador and throughout Latin America, I will be using singular and plural pronouns interchangeably.

I am writing for the North American reader, who, almost by definition, has difficulty understanding the Latin American reality and the deep changes which that reality can bring about. I will therefore try to explain the essence of such fundamental change from the perspective of El Salvador, comparing it with another change which is often said to lie at the heart of so-called modern Western civilization. From the time of Kant, such change has been described as an awakening from a “dogmatic slumber”—an awakening that is like the liberation of reason from subjection to authority and which, in turn, gives rise to the dogmatic proclamation that the fundamental liberation of the human being lies in the liberation of reason.

In the Third World, the fundamental change also consists of an awakening, but from another type of sleep, or better, from a nightmare—the sleep of inhumanity. It is the awakening to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world, a world whose liberation is the

basic task of every human being, so that in this way human beings may finally come to be human.

Such is the change that has occurred in me and in many others. And what has brought about such a profound and unexpected change is encounter with the reality of the poor and the victims of this world. In order to put all this in simple terms, permit me to offer a bit of biographical background prior to more deliberate reflection.

I was born in 1938 in Spain's Basque region, where I grew up. In 1957, I came to El Salvador as a novice in the Society of Jesus, and since then I have lived in this country, with two notable interruptions: five years in St. Louis studying philosophy and engineering, and seven years in Frankfurt studying theology. So I know fairly well both the world of development and abundance and the world of poverty and death.

I must confess that until 1974, when I returned to El Salvador, the world of the poor—that is, the real world—did not exist for me. When I arrived in El Salvador in 1957, I witnessed appalling poverty, but even though I saw it with my eyes, I did not really see it; thus that poverty had nothing to say to me for my own life as a young Jesuit and as a human being. It did not even cross my mind that I might learn something from the poor. Everything which was important for my life as a Jesuit I brought with me from Europe—and if anything had to change, that would come from Europe as well. My vision of my task as a priest was a traditional one: I would help the Salvadorans replace their popular “superstitious” religiosity with a more sophisticated kind, and I would help the Latin American branches of the church (the European church) to grow. I was the typical “missionary,” full of good will and Eurocentricity—and blind to reality.

Further studies in philosophy and theology induced a rude awakening from “dogmatic slumber.” During those years of study, I and my fellow students went through Kant and Hegel, through Marx and Sartre, and engaged in serious questioning at every stage. To put it bluntly, we began questioning the God we had inherited from our pious Central American, Spanish, and Basque families. We delved into exegetical criticism and Bultmann's demythologizing, into the legacy of modernism and the relativism of the church—all of which took one logically to a profound questioning not only of what we had been taught by the church, but also of the Christ.

We had to awaken from the dream. Awakening was painful and wrenching in my case; it was as if layers of skin were being removed one by one. Fortunately, there was light as well as darkness in the awakening. Karl Rahner's theology—I mention him because he was for me the one who left the most lasting and beneficial impression—was my companion during those years, and his pages on the mystery of God continue to accompany me even today. Vatican II gave us new insights and new enthusiasm; it helped us realize that the church is not itself the most important thing, not even for God. In working on my doctoral thesis on Christology, I began again to discover Jesus of Nazareth. He was not the abstract Christ I had imagined before, nor was he the Christ being presented by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as “the final point of all evolution,” nor by Rahner as “the absolute bearer of all salvation.” I discovered that the Christ is none other than Jesus and that he conceived a utopia on which all too few have focused: the ideal of the kingdom of God.

The churchly triumphalism of our youth was far behind us now. We considered ourselves avant-garde and “progressive,” even thinking ourselves well prepared to set the Salvadoran people on the right track. Nevertheless, even with many changes for the better, we had not changed fundamentally. I, at least, continued to be a First World product, and if I were changing, it was in accordance with that First World's process, at that world's pace, and by that world's laws. Although it was a necessary change in many ways, it was insufficiently radical and, from a Third World point of view, it was superficial. For me, the world continued to be the First World, the church continued to be the European church of Vatican II, theology continued to be German theology, and utopia continued to mean that in some way the countries of the south would become like those of the north. That was what many of us wanted, consciously or not, to work for at that time. We had awakened from the dogmatic slumber, if you will, but we continued to sleep in the much deeper sleep of inhumanity—the sleep of egocentrism and selfishness. But eventually we did wake up.

Through one of those strange miracles which happen in history, I came to realize that while I had acquired much knowledge and gotten rid of much traditional baggage, deep down nothing had changed. I saw that my life and studies had not given me new eyes to see this

world as it really is, and that they hadn't taken from me the heart of stone I had for the suffering of this world.

That realization is what I experienced upon returning to El Salvador in 1974. And I began, I believe, to awaken from the sleep of inhumanity. To my surprise, I found that some of my fellow Jesuits had already begun to speak of the poor and of injustice and of liberation. I also found that some Jesuits, priests, religious, farmers, and students, even some bishops, were acting on behalf of the poor and getting into serious difficulties as a consequence. Having just arrived, I didn't know what possible contribution I might make. But from the beginning it became quite clear that truth, love, faith, the gospel of Jesus, God, the very best we have as people of faith and as human beings—these were somehow to be found among the poor and in the cause of justice. I do not mean to imply that Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann, whom I studied avidly, no longer had anything to say to me. But I did come to understand that it was absurd to go about trying to Rahnerize or Moltmannize the people of El Salvador. If there was something positive I could bring from the perspective of my studies, the task would have to be the reverse: if at all possible, we needed to Salvadorize Rahner and Moltmann.

At this point, I was fortunate enough to find others who had already awakened from the sleep of inhumanity, among them Ignacio Ellacuría and Archbishop Oscar Romero, to name just two great Salvadoran Christians, martyrs, and friends. But beyond those happy encounters, little by little I came face-to-face with the truly poor, and I am convinced that they were the ones who brought about the final awakening. Once awakened, my questions—and especially my answers to questions—became radically different. The basic question came to be: are we really human and, if we are believers, is our faith human? The reply was not the anguish which follows an awakening from dogmatic sleep, but the joy which comes when we are willing not only to change the mind from enslavement to liberation, but also to change our vision in order to see what had been there, unnoticed, all along, and to change hearts of stone into hearts of flesh—in other words, to let ourselves be moved to compassion and mercy.

The jigsaw puzzle of human life, whose pattern had broken apart as we went through a period of analysis and questioning, again broke apart when we met the poor of this world. But there was a significant

difference. Following the awakening from dogmatic sleep, we had the hard task of piecing the puzzle together again, and we obtained some rather positive results. But such a first awakening was not enough to shake us from ourselves. Wakening from the sleep of inhumanity was a stronger jolt, but a more joyous one. It is possible to live an intellectually honest life in this world, but it is also possible to live sensitively and joyfully. And then I realized another long-forgotten fact: the gospel is not just truth—which must be reconciled in the light of all our questioning—but is, above all, good news which produces joy.

In reflecting on this questioning and this joyful change, I would like to zero in on what is most important: the new eyes we receive when we awaken from the sleep of inhumanity to the reality of what is fundamental.

For the past 17 years in El Salvador, I have had to witness many things: the darkness of poverty and injustice, of numerous and frightful massacres, but also the luminosity of hope and the endless generosity of the poor. What I want to stress, however, is the discovery which precedes all this: the revelation of the truth of reality and, through it, the truth of human beings and of God.

In El Salvador, a phrase of Paul's in his Letter to the Romans was driven home to me: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who, by their wickedness, suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). I began to understand that it is not enough to go beyond ignorance to truth, as we are often taught to believe. It is pointless to aspire to truth unless we are also willing to distill its consequences. From that moment, I considered myself fortunate to have reality show forth its truth to me.

The first thing we discovered in El Salvador was that this world is one gigantic cross for millions of innocent people who die at the hands of executioners. Father Ellacuria referred to them as "entire crucified peoples." And that is the salient fact of our world—quantitatively, because it encompasses two-thirds of humanity, and qualitatively, because it is the most cruel and scandalous of realities.

To use plain Christian talk, we have come to identify our world by its proper name: sin. Now this is a reality which a lot of believers and non-believers alike in the First World do not know how to handle. We call it by that name because, Christianly speaking, sin is

“that which deals death.” Sin dealt death to the Son of God, and sin continues to deal death to the sons and daughters of God. One may or may not believe in God, but because of the reality of death, no one will be able to deny the reality of sin.

From this basic reality of the cross and of death, we have learned to place in its true perspective the massive poverty which draws people to death—death which is slow at the hands of the ever-present structures of injustice, and death which is swift and violent when the poor seek to change their lot. We are currently numbering 75,000 dead in El Salvador.

We have learned that the world’s poor are practically of no consequence to anyone—not to the people who live in abundance or to the people who have any kind of power. For that reason, the poor may also be defined as those who have ranged against them all the powers of this world. They certainly have against them the oligarchies, the multinational corporations, the various armed forces, and virtually every government. They are also of no great consequence to the political parties, the universities, or even the churches. (There are notable exceptions, of course, such as Archbishop Romero’s church and Father Ellacuria’s university.) If the poor are of no consequence as individuals within their own countries, they are also of no consequence as entire peoples amid the nations of the world. The First World is not interested in the Third World, to put it mildly. As history shows, it is only interested in ways to despoil the Third World in order to increase its own abundance.

People do not want to acknowledge or face up to the reality of a crucified world, and even less do we want to ask ourselves what is our share of responsibility for such a world. The world of poverty truly is the great unknown. It is surprising that the First World can know so much and yet ignore what is so fundamental about the world in which we live. It is also frustrating, because the problem is not a lack of means by which to learn the truth. We have enough knowledge to place a man on the moon or on Mars, but we sometimes do not even know how many human beings share this planet, much less how many of them die every year from hunger (the number must be around 30 million), or what is happening in Guatemala or in Chad, or how much destruction was caused in Iraq by the 80,000 bombing sorties of the so-called allies.

It isn't that we simply do not know; we do not want to know because, at least subconsciously, we sense that we have all had something to do with bringing about such a crucified world. And as usually happens where scandal is involved, we have organized a vast cover-up before which the scandals of Watergate, Irangate, or Iraqgate pale in comparison.

To "wake from sleep" in El Salvador goes far beyond the endless discussions on secondary topics which go on within churches and parties, even progressive churches and parties. The important thing is to remember that such an awakening is made possible by the world of the poor and the victimized. And it requires a fresh reading of some basic scriptural passages.

In El Salvador, we have rediscovered how God looks at God's crucified creation. To recall the anthropomorphic but eloquent words of Genesis: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." To put this in even more anthropological terms, we do not know how it is possible to be a human being and not sometimes feel the shame of belonging to inhuman humanity. We have rediscovered many other passages from Scripture whose original power far exceeds any meaning uncovered by exegetical and critical scholarship—passages such as "the darkness hated the light" and, even more radically, "the Evil One is an assassin and a liar."

This world of poverty and crucified peoples has allowed us to overcome blindness and discover mendacity. As Scripture says, in Yahweh's suffering servant there is light, and in the crucified Christ there is wisdom. If we are blessed enough to look closely at those peoples, we begin to see a little more of the truth of things. The discovery can be startling at first, but it is also blessed, because in this way we are true to ourselves and because the truth of the poor is more than just suffering and death.

Indeed, the poor of this world continue to demonstrate that they have hope, something which is close to disappearing elsewhere, other than the hope generated by an optimistic belief in progress or by the possibility of life beyond death. And the latter is not at all what Christian faith postulates. What Christian faith says is that God will grant definitive justice to the victims of poverty and, by extension,

to those who have sided with them. This is an active hope which unloosens creativity at all levels of human existence—intellectual, organizational, ecclesial—and which is marked by notable generosity and boundless, even heroic, altruism.

Such is the deepest reality of our world, and that is the totality of its reality: it is a world of both sin and grace. The First World shows little or no interest in either aspect, but such is the reality from the perspective of the poor and the victimized.

In El Salvador, we have also learned to ask ourselves what is truly human about human beings. To put it bluntly, we have learned to place under suspicion the Western understanding of the nature of humanity. There are many partially valid philosophical, theological, and critical anthropologies. But historically and operatively, these generally seem to suggest that what is human is “the way we are,” or at least the way we imagine ourselves to be. Much political speech making and even much philosophical and theological discourse presuppose this notion, if in more subtle terms. The ideal consistently held up for all people is that of “modern man” or “Western man,” even though here and there, an occasional lament is voiced as to this ideal’s failures and shortcomings.

The war in the Persian Gulf has shown, among other things, that the Western world has discovered or invented almost everything—except justice, solidarity, and peace. The sum total of the West’s scientific and technological knowledge, its impressive political democratic and Judeo-Christian traditions, the power it has amassed in its governments, its armies, its enterprises, its universities, and its churches has not been sufficient to enable it to find a just and humane solution to conflict.

Yet, despite this failure, we continue to suppose that we know what it is to be human and that everyone else must be like us in order to become human. The same dangerous premise holds sway in religious circles: Primitively religious people must overcome any indigenous or superstitious elements in their Christianity before becoming genuinely religious in today’s world.

All of this has changed for me since returning to El Salvador. The most important change is the very way of seeking the answer to the question of what it means to be human, coupled with the nagging

suspicion that we have asked the question in a rather “dogmatic” and uncritical manner.

I am appalled at the triumphalist naïveté with which *human being* becomes interchangeable with *Western human being*, when the truth of the matter is that the latter has not humanized anyone or become more human. Those who lavish praise on Western individualism ignore how such an attitude has fostered insensibility toward the human community and even encouraged selfishness and aloofness. The Western capacity to achieve, to struggle and emerge victorious, has been so highly valued that it has enabled the westerner to feel like a Prometheus, unneedful of anything or anyone else, including grace—a subject few First World philosophies and theologies know what to do with. Western human beings have to a great extent produced an inhuman world for those in the Third World and a dehumanizing world in the First World. And still, no change seems imminent.

I am also appalled at the lack of a sense of history in Western efforts to understand humanity, as if there were a human essence which is replicated with slight variations throughout the planet. Of course, there is some truth to this view. But it is really an affront to continue to say to the many millions of the poor and the victimized that they are human beings “like everyone else,” or to continue to exhort them to “hold out” because someday they will be like everyone else, complete with democracy and television sets.

In the face of this circumstance, we need to place the human reality in historical context. We must realize that there are fundamental differences in the way people live. There are those who take life for granted and those who take anything but life for granted. To be a human being today has much to do, for instance, with whether one has food to eat.

At the level of human worth, it might be said that things are improving, since the modern world, the U.S. Constitution, the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, and so on, have all proclaimed equal rights for all human beings. But that is not the way things are. Whether one has dignity, self-respect, and rights depends to a great degree on an accident of birth. It helps considerably to have been born in the United States or Germany rather than in El Salvador or Pakistan.

Finally, I am troubled by the lack of dialectic in discussions about humanity. People naively speak of a common destiny for all humanity, ignoring the basic fact that a sharp division exists between those who have and those who do not—a gap which is ever growing.

We have discovered in El Salvador that we really did not know very precisely what it means to be a human being. Now, at least, I suspect that the mystery of the human being is not exhausted in what I knew before; there was much inhumanity in the ideal of humanity to which I formerly adhered. Above all, I have discovered that what is truly human has been showing itself to me where I once would have least expected it—in the faces of the poor. Although the mystery of what is human goes beyond any one particular instance. I have concluded that in order to comprehend our human essence, it is necessary to do so from the point of view not of the powerful but of the poor, and on their behalf. As the gospel says, the truth of the human being manifests itself in the Beatitudes of Jesus and in the parable of the good Samaritan.

From the perspective of the poor, we have rediscovered the need for a new kind of civilization, a civilization of poverty or at least of austerity, rather than one of impossible abundance for all—a civilization of work and not of capital, as Father Ellacuria would say. That more humane civilization can be made concrete by considering first the community rather than the individual, by upholding transcendent values over crass pragmatism, by favoring celebration over mere diversion, and by emphasizing hope over calculated optimism and faith over positivism.

To come to know God, to hold and keep faith in God, is the ultimate mystery of the human being. It is not an easy thing to accomplish, and it cannot be achieved automatically from any perspective, not even a Salvadoran perspective. But I am convinced that true knowledge of God is facilitated in this milieu—at least of a God who resembles the God of Scripture—and faith in God becomes possible and sustainable here.

I believe in the God made manifest in Jesus, a God on whom one can rely, a father who continues to be God and therefore will not let us be. To put it another way, I believe in the goodness and the mystery of God, and both of these have become sharply real to me in El Salvador.

The goodness of God is made real in the fact that God tenderly loves those dispossessed by life and identities with the victims of this world. This fact can be difficult to accept in other places, but here it becomes patently clear and is reinforced in Scripture. A long-standing tradition has led us to think of a God who is directly universal, even though in reality this God is essentially a European and North American construct.

The mystery of God emerges even more clearly in this world of victims, for this is a God who not only favors the victimized but is at the mercy of their torturers. There are those who think that in a religious Latin America, faith in God is not as serious an issue as in the more secularized world. However, given the fact of so many victims, Latin America is the quintessential place to question God—as Job did, and as Jesus did from the cross—especially since God is confessed as a God of life. That God should permit victims to suffer and die is an insurmountable scandal. In the midst of such a situation, a believer can only accept the fact that God on the cross is as impotent as the victims themselves, and then interpret such impotency as God's way or being in solidarity with those victims. The cross on which God is placed is the most eloquent proclamation that God loves the victimized of this world. On that cross, God's love is impotent yet believable. And it is from that perspective that the mystery of God must be reformulated.

Finally, from a Salvadoran perspective, it is clear that the true God is at war with other gods. These are the idols, the false divinities—though they are real enough—which Archbishop Romero has concretized for our time in speaking of the absolutization of exploitive capitalism and “national security.” Idols dehumanize their worshipers, but their ultimate evil lies in the fact that they demand victims in order to exist. If there is one single deep conviction I have acquired in El Salvador, it is that such idols are real. They are not the inventions of so-called primitive peoples but are indeed active in modern societies. We dare not doubt this, in view of such idols' innumerable victims: the poor, the unemployed, the refugees, the detainees, the tortured, the disappeared, the massacred. And if idols do exist, then the issue of faith in God is very much alive.

I have also learned in El Salvador that to believe in God means to cease having faith in idols and to struggle against them. That is the

reason we humans must make a choice not only between faith and atheism but between faith and idolatry. In a world of victims, little can be known about a person simply because he calls himself a believer or a nonbeliever. It is imperative to know in which God she believes and against which idols she does battle. If such a person is truly a worshiper of idols, it matters little whether he accepts or denies the existence of a transcendent being. There really is nothing new in that: Jesus affirmed it in his parable of the last judgment.

In order to speak the whole truth, one must always say two things: in which God one believes and in which idol one does not believe. Without such a dialectic formulation, faith remains too abstract, is likely to be empty and, what is worse, can be very dangerous, because it may very well allow for the coexistence of belief and idolatry.

Moreover, I have learned that to have faith in God means to do the will of God, to follow Jesus with the spirit of Jesus in the cause of God's kingdom. In El Salvador, I have seen this faith quite clearly; innumerable martyrs have witnessed to it. I have learned that faith is difficult but entirely possible, that it is very costly but deeply humanizing. In El Salvador, God's solemn proclamation in the prophet Micah becomes very real: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Reproducing justice and love in human history is the way we respond to God's love. Walking humbly throughout history is the way we respond to the mystery of God.

Such is the reality that has been revealing itself to us in El Salvador. In itself, it is at once a clear clarion and good news. The reality that is a curse represents a call for us to transform it, but it also becomes a blessing and good news which transforms *us*. These become one in the response of mercy toward crucified peoples.

In El Salvador, we have rediscovered that the faithful response to this world of victims is the constant exercise of mercy, as in the parable of the good Samaritan, which Jesus uses to describe the true human being. The Samaritan sees someone wounded along the way, is moved to pity, and treats his wounds. The importance of mercy in the gospels can be deduced also from the fact that Jesus himself and the Father who receives the prodigal son are described as being merciful.

We are speaking here not of "works of mercy" but rather of the basic structure of the response to this world's victims. This structure

consists in making someone else's pain our very own and allowing that pain to move us to respond. We are to be moved simply by the fact that someone in need has been placed along our way. Even though Jesus presents the Samaritan as an example of one who obeys the commandment to love his neighbor, there is nothing in the parable which would lead us to conclude that the Samaritan acts in order to fulfill a commandment. He was simply moved to pity. It needs also to be emphasized that mercy is not only a fundamental attitude at the root of every human interaction but also a principle which affects subsequent interactions.

In El Salvador, we have awakened to the fact that a heartless humanity manages to praise works of mercy but refuses to be guided by the mercy principle. Guided by this principle, we have discovered some important things.

First of all, we well know that in our world, there are not just wounded individuals but crucified peoples, and that we should en flesh mercy accordingly. To react with mercy, then, means to do everything we possibly can to bring them down from the cross. This means working for justice—which is the name love acquires when it comes to entire majorities of people unjustly oppressed—and employing in behalf of justice all our intellectual, religious, scientific, and technological energies.

Second, we must realize that mercy that becomes justice will automatically be persecuted by the powerful, and therefore mercy must be clung to vigorously and consistently. The Salvadoran martyrs—alternately called subversives, communists, and atheists—were consistently merciful. That is why they struggled for justice, and that is why they were assassinated.

Third, we must give mercy priority above all else. This is no easy task for any civil institution, any government, business, political movement, or army, nor for any religious or ecclesial institution. One must be willing to risk for mercy, the way Archbishop Romero did, risking not only one's personal life but even the ecclesial institution itself. That is why he had to witness the destruction of his archdiocese's radio and printing operations and why some of the priests around him were assassinated. All must be risked, because what is first of all is the ultimate.

Fourth, I have learned that the exercise of mercy is the measure of freedom—that state of being universally hailed as a human ideal in the Western world. When he healed on a Sabbath, Jesus was violating the rules and norms of his time because he was merciful, not because he was a liberal. Jesus understood freedom from the point of view of mercy, not the other way around. For him, freedom meant that nothing could stand in the way of the exercise of mercy.

This mercy is the demand which has been placed in our hearts by the Salvadoran reality. But the demand is also a blessing, is also good news. “Happy are the merciful,” Jesus says. From this point, we can reinterpret the other Beatitudes. “Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Happy are those who work for peace. Happy are you, when you are persecuted for the cause of justice.” And if we use the Beatitudes to reinterpret what we said above about acquiring new eyes, we can also say, “Happy are those with a clean heart.” Finally, if mercy and new vision are placed at the service of the poor and we thus participate to some degree in their lot, we too can hear. “Happy are the poor.”

The reader may be surprised that I have not mentioned several topics one might expect to be discussed in a piece coming from El Salvador. I have not spoken of liberation theology per se, of Marxism, of revolution, of problems with the Vatican. True enough, the changes in Latin America have brought about a new theology, a new way of being church as a church of the poor, new relationships with popular movements, new ways of solidarity, and so on. But we have tried to set forth what is at the root of these changes. Without the roots, one cannot understand the changes.

To sum up, then: we have awakened from a sleep of inhumanity to a reality of humanity. We have learned to see God from the point of view of the victimized, and we have tried to see this world of the victimized from the point of view of God. We have learned to exercise mercy and find joy and a purpose for life in doing so.

Remembering my dear Jesuit brother Ignacio Ellacuria, rector of Jose Simeon Canas Central American University, who was murdered with five other Jesuits and two pious women on November 16, 1989, I have learned that there is nothing as vital in order to live as a human being than to exercise mercy on behalf of a crucified people, and that nothing is more humanizing than to believe in the God of Jesus. As

I have seen this way of life become very real in many Salvadorans, in many other Latin Americans, and in many who sympathize with us in various places, another new thing I have learned in El Salvador is the importance of saying “Thank you.” Then life and faith still make sense. (*Translated by Dimas Planas*)