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AEM-5

Youth groups, politics, and peace

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Dear Peter,

I intend to make this a shorter newsletter than usual, mostly because I am starting many things at the moment and none of those things seems ripe enough to write about. Carnival will be arriving shortly, and so like most Brazilians I'll throw myself (or at least, my "productive" self) into the future until "after Carnival", when people promise to re-dedicate themselves to work, school, politics, compromises in general.

Among the things that I will be starting "after Carnival" is work with kids involved in youth groups in various churches of the "periferia". I've been invited to start a youth group in one church, and participate in another which is trying to develop some sort of educational activities for the "moleques" ("kids", in a pejorative sense) of the neighboring favela whose only participation in the church up to now has been a steady campaign of stone-throwing, lock-breaking, wall-painting, and other acts of petty vandalism. Their campaign has gone on for seven years, ever since the beginning of construction of the church on the site of their former "campo de futebol" (soccer field), which had been the only space for recreation available to them in this hillside neighborhood, consisting on one side of a favela (shacks built into the side of the hill) and on the other of next-stage block houses with sewage drains running out into the street gutters. The church is as of yet a rough, uncompleted structure of cement blocks, partly open roof, glass-less windows, and makeshift benches for those participating in mass and other community activities of the church. Seven years of continued vandalism seems to be a signal that these kids are looking for some sort of participation, although thus far their only expression of that desire is a negative, resentful participation through destruction.

As of yet the church community has not found a way to address these kids. One elderly woman, who has been very active in the various community projects of the church, called the kids together to talk with them. They came willingly, sat "bonitinho" while she invited them to participate in the church, and returned the next day to their stone throwing. On my two-day visit to the community I didn't have the chance to talk to them, although I noticed their presence Saturday night as I was attending group session to plan the next day's liturgy. All of a sudden the meeting was interrupted by the sound of bare feet running on the roof to the side of the meeting room. "The moleques," grimaced those in the room. The next day during mass I watched a pack of kids flying kites

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in the street, several of the "vandals" among them.

While I didn't talk to the moleques during this visit, I did spend a good deal of time talking to the older kids involved in the "grupo de jovens" (youth group) of the community. When I speak of "community" here I am referring to those involved in the activities of the church, structured around the "Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base", the the base movements of Christian reflection and action coming out of liberation theology (or rather, out of which liberation theology was born). Joel Millman's new letter from Central America (JAM-2) gives a good background on the historical origin of the Theology of Liberation and of the CEB's, as the communities are known here. In the periferia of the Zona Leste (extreme eastern edge of São Paulo) there are bunches of such communities with varying degrees of mobilization. In this half-constructed church of the Jardim Veronia, for example, the political message of liberation theology expressed openly during mass, with appeals to praise God for the organization of unions, prayers for the gold-diggers in the Serra Pelada recently massacred by the Polícia Militar, declarations of support for the land invasions taking place these weeks by 6000 families in the Zona Leste. "Libertação" and "luta do povo" (struggle of the people) are terms frequently used both in the liturgy and in the song book recently issued by a committee from one of the churches in the archdiocese.

The planning of the liturgy in itself was a striking process in interpreting the Bible in accord with the day-to-day problems of the community. Saturday night I attended a meeting along with seven other people from the community, of varying ages, levels of education and political consciousness. They included two teenage members of the youth group, two elderly sisters and a middle aged man involved in organizing "grupos da rua" (literally, groups of the street, which meet to discuss the conditions of their lives in accord with biblical readings and political "conscientização"), a middle-aged woman who underwent a transformation from a timid housewife to a strident, untiring activist in the educational movement, woman's groups, church ministry and union organization (it was she who invited me to come to the church), and an young American woman who works with Maryknoll, a Catholic mission group which has several teams of lay workers active in the Zona Leste. "Preparation" for the liturgy meant that they read through all of the readings aloud, then going around the group to give each one a chance to comment on what they though the reading was saying. As a visitor I, too, was invited to add my thoughts to the group reflection.

Reading a passage from the book of Job, for example, which referred to Job's suffering, his illness, his tiredness with life, those in the group compared his suffering to that of those living in favelas or working in factories. He was compared with those who think that illness comes as a punishment from God - when it is not God, but the injustices of society, which cause such suffering. Many might find this group's condemnation of society a questionable reading of Job, which is traditionally interpreted as an admonition not to question even the apparent injustice of God. But the group's "misreading" is really beside the point, as the political implications of their reading was clear. They were rejecting the attitude, common among the poor, that suffering is either a blessing or a punishment from God, and thus not to be struggled against.

Rather than finding in Job an admonition to keep silent, to refrain from questioning the causes of suffering, they were able to find in Job's endurance of suffering a basis for hope, for continuing to question and struggle against injustice. This interpretation of Job was then discussed at mass the next day with the larger community, in the reflections which are offered before and after the readings.

Not everyone in the church concords with the heavy investment of the community in political conscientization. This was one of the topics that emerged in my discussion with the youth group as I talked with them about their reasons for participating (or not participating) in the youth group and in the church. I'm going to base most of the rest of this newsletter on the kids' own words, which I recorded on tape with their permission. I've recently been presenting my work as a kind of "participatory research", documentation and discussion of the movements here which does as much to help with their own self-reflection as it helps me to deepen my understanding of youth and education. It is important to give the people here a return of my observations, reflections, records. That way I avoid a kind of journalistic rape, a kind of alienation from the history of which they are the "subjects", and not merely my "objects", to use the terminology of liberation theology and pedagogy.

About 15 kids between the ages of 16 and 23 gathered in the church after the 8:00 mass, with perhaps 4 or 5 of them attending mass and the others drifting in towards the end or after everyone was clearing out, a process which takes a long time in this church, since everyone needs to greet everyone before leaving, talk about the sick relative at home or the arrest of the neighbor's son the night before. All of this takes place in the open air of the half-constructed church. Luckily it wasn't raining, because when it does, rain falls through the holes formed by the moleques' rocks and onto the head of the congregation. This particular week there was the additional demand to greet the priest who had come to say mass. Most weeks the community is without a priest, celebrating the entire liturgy themselves with pre-consecrated hosts. One of the youths of the group, whom I had met the previous night at the planning session for the liturgy, had brought his guitar, and the kids warmed up informally with music, singing several songs with lyrics referring to New York for my benefit. As the "adults" began drifting out of the church the kids re-arranged the chairs and benches, previously used for the liturgy, in a close circle. Gradually they began to begin (this process, typical of Brazil, can only be described in this way). I was asked to talk about myself and what I was doing there, as was another youth visiting that day who was at that time attending a conference on liberation theology. Then they rushed through the bible reading of the day without the usual commentary, since they had a very full agenda involving the evaluation of the previous year and planning for the year to come.

They began the evaluation by reading the list of proposals accepted by the group a year ago as projects for last year. Among the proposals were group excursions, presentations about topics of interest to their lives, visits to youth groups of other communities, a dance, an ice cream party, and the assumption of responsibility for "Radio Popular"* once a month. One by one they went down the list - how many of these had been accomplished? Only, it

* "Radio Popular" is a growing project in neighborhoods of the periferia, in which loudspeakers are mounted on church buildings or other community centers from which are projected music, community news, interviews, conversation, run by people (usually youths) from the community, addressing community concerns and providing entertainment.

turned out, the ice cream party. Why had the other projects failed to be realized? Marcia, the coordinator of the group, and her "namorado", Cleiver, who runs the Radio Popular, pressed the group for responses, with most people at this point edgy with the recognition of failure of responsibility. "Disinterest" was the answer they guiltily gave for the failures. Marcia challenged them:

What is this group for? To sit here every week, play around, talk, read the bible, say you want to do this, you want to do that, and in the hour of assuming responsibility no one assumes anything. What is missing? Someone to pull you along?

Cleiver added his own criticism:

We have to take responsibility to know what it is we want. This business of saying "I participate", well if you're not into it, it's better to keep quiet, say "I don't participate", and be done with it.

It was frustrating to listen to this discussion, and probably just as frustrating to take part in it, because it didn't go anywhere, just people re-affirming that they had "messed up" and that the group needed to have more responsibility in the future. Without settling anything, and with a general nervousness in the group, they passed to the next item on the agenda - a rather official discussion of whether or not the youth group was isolated from the larger church community. There was such wide divergence on this point (people expressing completely opposite analyses of the situation) that I felt something to be wrong with the question. With the general nebulosity of purpose in the group there was really no basis to say they were or weren't isolated. It turned out that the ones who felt the group to be isolated were the ones who were assuming most of the work, principally Marcia and Cleiver. Those who were coming out of a vague need for friendship and communication thought that the group was just fine, the community supports us. It seemed to me that the problem was more internal (within the group) than external (between the group and the community), and that the isolation felt by Marcia and Cleiver came from a kind of disjointedness between all of the plans they were eager to realize and any sense of a group necessity to realize those plans. Or as Cleiver said above, they weren't looking deeply enough at "what it is we want."

At this point I as well as Cris, the other youth who was visiting, were both getting restless. Cris already had a lot of experience with articulating the experience of "Pastoral de Juventude" (youth ministry) and asked permission to make a few "esclarecimentos". In soft-spoken but didactic style he began to talk about the need for the "identity of the group":

The problem is the identity of the group. Who is the group? Do all of you know everyone here? There are two principal points a group has to have, objectives and friendship . . . When is this objective born? The objective is only born in a group if each one thinks of his own objective, is able to say, I come here with this objective. It is very difficult for a young person so say, "I come because of this." I come because of the group, but what is the group? What do I need, what do I personally need from the group? . . . And from this point I begin to say what interests me. Why does this interest me? Because I am involved in this reality, and see the necessity of doing this. We have to look at reality beginning with the person. Who am I, who are we, who are all of us? And what is a group of

youths? ... You have to know your objectives, your needs, on all levels - personal, affective, spiritual, at school, at work, in the neighborhood. And you need friendship. I think it has to be something more personal, because if it isn't, if the people don't know each other, it goes no place.

Listening to this discourse on tape afterwards, I realized how well Cris expressed exactly what was missing in the group, the "wrongness" I sensed with the discussion about lack of responsibility and isolation. As Cris said, it is very hard for most young people to come to a meeting or a group knowing what they want from it. Generally they have not well enough articulated to themselves the needs they feel in their lives or how those needs connect to the larger world, much less how to mobilize their forces, develop some sort of methodology for pursuing their as of yet vague "objectives". Hence the feeling of disjointedness, of isolation, of vague, guilty "disinterest" offered as an excuse for not assuming responsibilities. And the need, I felt, for a more personal (rather than project-oriented) articulation of the meaning of the group for the individuals involved.

I sensed that the didactic nature of Cris' discourse was not going to help the group along the road to any of these articulations, so I decided to challenge the group with a few questions. Why were they coming to the group, I asked. What necessity did they feel for this sort of participation? What was it giving them, or not giving them? After that I let them talk.

The first person to speak up, an earnest-faced boy named Marcelo of about 18 years, launched into a discourse on the most basic of reasons for participation, the search for "amizade" (friendship):

At times I am coming for friendship. After we begin to feel that great, open friendship, we begin to walk on a better path, working together with others. After I began to come to mass here, I got to know the group of youths, it was something excellent, you know, really excellent.

Taking up this point of friendship was JÓ, the guitar player who participates in the ministry and whom I met the previous night at the meeting to plan the liturgy. He was also coming for friendship, he said, but not just for friendship. For him it was very important to have a participation in the ministry of the church:

I have a kind of dream, that we (in the group) would have more objectives and more participation in the church. I think that one day this will be a reality, when we have more faith. I think that we have to have direct participation in the mass. In this youth group there are some who come only for the group. They don't come to the mass, they come only for the meetings. I think this is completely wrong.

This strong criticism directed at the group put many on the defensive, as shown by the fidgets, guilty looks, and defiant statements. One girl murmured to the friend at her side, and then repeated out loud when I asked her to, "you don't need to go to mass, you can read the Bible at home." To which JÓ responded:

Great, read at home. But I think it is important to go to mass to have more contact with God. You have more closeness to God in the mass itself. Not that God is only in the mass, I know that he is everywhere else as well.

Cisa, a girl to JÓ's right, took up his criticism, taking the mass out of the realm of relationship of God. "You can forget God!" she said, launching into an explanation of why kids didn't like going to mass, but did like the youth group:

I think that the mass is a thing that you just go to watch, you have very little participation. Young people like to participate, and because of this they drop out, don't like it. It's not like the youth group. Here you come, you present your ideas, receive criticism, learn how to read the Bible, learn about different people... When you have a friendship outside of church, in school, for example, not everything you say is accepted, and they don't have interesting things to talk about. They like to talk about dances, parties, boyfriends, not that I don't think these are important. But I feel the need for something more, to talk about things in our reality, about God, about everything. In the community, the youth group, is where you begin. In the small projects that we do, like the ice cream party, even with so many problems, lack of participation and all that, when you come to the end you accomplished something, were able to participate, and I think this is important for us, I think this is a victory.

Cisa was able to go a bit deeper into the personal dynamics of participation than the two previous articulations, although she did not see the possibility of achieving that participation through the liturgy itself. She was answered by Cezar, from a neighboring youth group, who articulated the personal transformation he had experienced with his participation in the community:

I think that every person has his own answer, but here is my response as to why I participate in the mass. I came to participate in the community since I was seven years old. I passed through catechism, but something was lacking. I felt that just going to mass, attending and then ^{going} home, was going nowhere. I wanted more than this. I had to prove to myself that I had the capacity to work, to do what they said I could do. We had a group of friends over at Nossa Aparecida (name of a church) which began to turn into a youth group. And I began to feel I was capable of doing this kind of work, that I was capable of participating in the mass, not just sitting on the bench, listening to the priest, and when the mass was over heading straight for home, forgetting everything that happened. The youth group gave me a very big support, principally because it was born together with me. Everyone in it began to feel themselves inside the community, not just a visitor. I felt that capability more and more.

People don't trust us, they say we aren't capable of doing anything, forming a group, let alone coordinating it. So I had to prove to myself that these people were crazy, forming my head, saying that I wasn't capable, that my business was to sit on the bench. Today I celebrate mass. I take part in the ministry. And I see how important it is for me to do this. I think that it is important for every

person to get up, instead of staying quiet, get up and work. At times people enter in the group because they need a certain charisma, a certain friendship that they don't find outside. But this has to pass. He can't stay just with friendship, just playing around. He has to be serious sometime, has to begin to work, has to show his friends who he is. He is not just a part of the group. He has to be someone, he has to be himself.

In our society, it is very difficult for you to get up, to say "It's me, I'm here, I'm going to do this." So you need to begin through the community. A person enters in the community, talks with someone, begins to make friendships and play around. Afterwards someone in the community begins to call him. "We are having a celebration, will you do a reading?" In the beginning, the person is embarrassed. But he does the first reading, and likes it. From there, everything begins, and from then on the person loses that embarrassment, that fear of showing himself, of showing what he is capable of. All the people here have ideas. They are strong ideas, good ideas, they can teach many things to all of us. And when people begin to talk, to discuss, they might even have arguments, but they have a certain unity.

Cezar's account gives a very clear picture of how the church helped him in the adolescent task of taking himself seriously, of showing himself to others, and thus giving his participation in a group more individual force. Not everyone agreed that the youth group, or participation in the church, brought either the desired unity or personal accomplishment. Antonio spoke up to describe how he had been turned off by the politization of the mass he had seen at Jardim Veronia:

I participated (in the mass), but then I stopped. I participated because I liked it, I still like it. I come to mass to look for a little bit of peace, to try and understand myself. It happens that when I come here, instead of finding peace, I see everything I see the whole week. I hear talk about those disgraces, about violence, about accidents, about injustice. I know, I see these every day at work, at school, at home. When I come to mass it's more to reflect, to think about what I did wrong, what I did right, what I should do to fix things. It's not to agitate. Here they begin to talk about politics, and from politics they enter into injustice, into violence, things I see everyday. Instead of finding the peace I look for, I find the violence that I always see.

So I stopped coming, even stopped participating in the group. But I had to participate in the group, because I wanted to change, to see if I was wrong or right in thinking this way. If I was wrong, I wanted to know why. If I was right, I wanted to fight to achieve what I thought was right. So, I participated in the group. It's just that in the group I didn't feel the force that I was needing. I didn't feel helped, I didn't feel unity. It's very necessary for me to have unity, principally here in the youth group. And I see so much lack of unity. I think that here in our community, it might be poor, but it should have at least a little more unity, which is most lacking.

Taking up Antonio's criticism of the politics that were invading the community of Jardim Veronia, I decided to throw this question open to the group. What role did they think politics should play in the church? Cris, fresh from a conference on liberation theology, entered with another long discourse, which I am not going into now, since I am more interested in the conflicts encountered by this ideology in practice. After listening to Cris' discourse, Antonio moderated his position so as not to reject politics completely. But he held to his point that during the mass, politics got in the way:

In my opinion, politics is part of the church. After mass, I agree. But in the hour of mass, I don't agree. Politics does not belong in the hour of the mass.

Marcia, the coordinator of the group, challenged his attempt to separate politics and the celebration of liturgy:

I think that when we are having a celebration of the mass, we are celebrating life. And when we celebrate life, how is our life? Is it only that peace, that search to finish with all of our problems, at least while we are here? What does this mean for us? It is not possible to separate politics. One thing is linked to another, everything is a consequence. If politics is this disgrace, this injustice, how are we going to stop living this while we are inside the church? We have to find an answer to this.

Cezar, the youth minister who spoke earlier, had an answer, a sort of middle ground which in my eyes does not succeed in overcoming the split between politics and religion proposed by Antonio:

In some parts of the mass, politics should enter. Principally in the homily, in the reflection, in the readings. The readings bring politics of the past. In the part of reflection you take this politics of the past together with society and bring a politics of today. In this part of reflection on the readings, there has to be politics. If you pray for abandoned children, there you have politics. Now, there are people, for example, who during celebration begin to stimulate debate, something that isn't for the moment. This debate causes people to leave the church. And the debate isn't finished until everyone has left. We have to have politics, but when the part of ritual begins, we have to proceed normally without politics. Those people who come looking for peace will have their peace. Principally the older people, who go to mass for ritual, go there to pray, to say their rosary, to have their peace of spirit, to think about God. You have a little politics, but you should have more faith than politics. Politics enters in the part of reflection, and passes for outside of the mass, when you find a group and begin to converse. In this way the mass passes to serve society.

Soon after this Marcia interrupted to say that people were needing to go to work, to eat lunch, to fulfill other commitments, but would I please come back next week to finish the discussion? The group had not reached a group articulation of objectives, nor a plan for the year to come, but had perhaps begun to raise the questions which might lead in this direction, if they succeed in directing

and developing them. I'll see over the next weeks where this group goes. But before ending this newsletter I'd like to pull together a few of threads that I found interesting in this discussion.

When Cezar defends the position that the mass should have some politics, but leave the ritual intact for those looking for "peace", he is pointing to a historical conflict in what the church means for the people of Latin America. It's like the re-interpretation of Job described earlier - is the church a place where you learn to live unquestioningly with suffering, which is sent by God? With this argument the church has filled its traditional role in keeping people passive, patient, resigned, uncritical of social wrongs. Or is the church a place where people learn their own value, their ability to speak up, to question the social structures leading to their suffering, to organize and challenge those structures. The words of a rallying song of the "Movimento Sem Terra", a church-based group working with land reform issues in the city and the country, and which is currently in São Paulo coordinating several large land invasions, show this shift in vision:


De repente nossa vista clareou/ e descobrimos que o pobre tem valor!
 Nos descobrimos que a seca de Nordeste/ que a fome/ que a peste/
 não é culpa de Deus Pai/ A grande culpa é quem manda no país/
 fazendo o pobre infeliz/ deste jeito é que não vai.

(Suddenly our vision cleared, and we discovered that the poor have value! We discovered that the drought of the Northeast, that hunger and disease, is not the fault of God the father. The fault is of those who rule the country, making the poor unhappy, in this way things can't go on.)

But a change in the songs sung in church, in the prayers for struggle rather than resignation, doesn't mean that everyone's vision has "cleared" or that most people easily reject the rejection of the traditional separation between politics and religion. Liberation theology argues that "everything is political", even the stance that politics doesn't belong in church is profoundly political, since it teaches and reinforces attitudes of resignation which support the status quo of social and economic relations. But the stance that everything is political is also in a certain sense exhausting. It isn't just the older people, as Cezar suggested, who find it difficult to accept this sudden politization, this "problematization" of what was sought as a relief from one's problems. It is also the young, whose chaotic burden of complicated, interrelated, and scarcely understood "modern" problems often seems impossible to bear without losing one's mind, without joining the "Bando dos Desequilíbrios" which has left its signature on walls all over São Paulo.

I've already described in previous newsletters the tendency among youth to separate the personal and the political. In AEM-3 I discussed the contradictory ability of teenagers I talked to to express no hope for the future of Brazil but high hopes for their personal futures. By this sort of illusory individualism they relieve themselves of the need to confront the many-headed monster (which seems nearly impossible to confront - better to sheathe one's sword and clear a path off to the side.) When Antonio argues that politics does not belong in the mass, his object is the same - to find a few moments of weekly peace from the monster. As he himself articulates, he wants space for personal reflection, to sort out what path to follow, "to think about what I did wrong, what I did

right, what I should do to fix things." There is something valid in this need he is feeling for a relief from the violence and absurdities of his day to day life, even if it implies an evasion (or misunderstanding?) of "political responsibilities". It reminds me of a student I worked with last year, a 17-year-old Brooklyn girl with a 3-year-old daughter and a life full of pressures from the street, from school, from family. She explained to me why she smoked marijuana almost daily - it was the only time she had to be "alone with my head."

My student's daily smoke may seem a strange parallel with Antonio's desire to preserve the purity of the mass, but I think they both have the same roots. They are a sign of the lack of breathing space, of room for reflection and relaxation, experienced by so many youth, and as a result the flights from responsibility, which can take any number of forms. Like reliance on drugs, the artificial disjunction between politics and life relieves one of the need to act, at least for the moment. The same might be said for the various anarchistic streaks among young people, which are gaining a strong articulation in São Paulo. The symbol for anarchism, , is vying in appearances on city walls with the PT slogan, "LULA PRESIDENTE". It reflects a wild, violent "everything goes", a rejection of the perceived absurdities of structured politics. It is also an expression of the desire for freedom without wanting to assume the responsibilities freedom demands.

Is there an antidote to these flights from responsibility, given the fact that responsibility is so problematic (am I the cause of this mess? And what can I really do to change it?) Living the dictum "everything is political" is also problematic, especially when you get so caught up in ideological definitions of political correctness that you lose sight of your own needs or the actual (as opposed to ideological) situations of those around you. I have seen this problem among many of my friends involved in political militancy here. When you see only the problems of the world, forgetting yourselves and your life, eventually you cave in from exhaustion and lack of center. This was one reason I was interested to hear Cris talk about the need to start with the personal in forming a youth group, which then, by constant definition and re-definition by each individual of what he needs in his life and in the group, moves outward into the political and into assumption of responsibility for oneself and for the world. This, however remains on the level of 'pretty words' for me. I will have to see how this works itself out in practice as I begin working with youth groups "after Carnaval." Once again I have not succeeded in writing a short newsletter, but this is what's up.

Take care,



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