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AEM-8

Being Political

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Dear Peter,

A basic tenet of the left here is that "everything is political". Politics is not only political parties, elections, and the Constituinte, but also the day-to-day of one's personal life within a social system (or shall we say, within this contradictory, many-layered conglomeration of parts of systems that makes up Brazil's political and social reality). But in my recent discussions with teenagers in the churches, the schools, and the student movement, I've been struck by how difficult it is to grab on to the concept (or concepts) of what it means to "be political". The difficulty exists for anyone, but has special characteristics and implications among adolescents and young adults. I've already touched on this in previous newsletters, but I'd like to spend a few letters examining more deeply the nature of this difficulty. I'll begin here by discussing the political difficulties of youth involved in the church, and continue in my next letter with a discussion of those in the student movement and the political parties.

I'll start by going straight to the kids themselves. In AEM-5 I described a visit I made last January to a youth group in the church community of Jardim Veronia, in the periferia of the Zona Leste.* On that day we began discussing the conflicts involved in the newly evolving role of politics in the church. I recently returned to Jardim Veronia to continue the discussion. To try to locate the source of the kids' confusion on this issue, I asked them each to articulate their answers to the question "what is politics?" I'll quote here a few of their responses:

1. I think (politics) is the system. We are within a system and have no way to get out. Politics are the laws that we have to follow, like it or not. There exists, let's say, chaos. When there is no politics, a person can do what he wants, feel at ease, live as he wants. But this isn't possible. So he depends on a person who is a level higher than himself. This passes to be politics. He has to obey a series of laws, of commandments. The power come from above. - Edilson

* The Zona Leste is the expansive Eastern section of São Paulo, where the poorer working class neighborhoods are located, as well as most of the city's favelas (slums of makeshift shacks). The periferia is the outer edges of the city, where services are few and poverty is often extreme.

2. Politics for me are those laws that are written on paper, and suddenly we are obliged to obey them. We see the delegates to the Constituinte making laws, and suddenly afterwards we follow them, we use them as our defense. If you were a whale in the sea, and I wanted to kill you, you would have the law of the whale to protect you. - Adelvar

3. Politics is something separate from the Word of God. The Word of God is one thing, material things are another. I think they don't have anything to do with each other. Politics should stay with the politicians. Politics for me is one thing, commercial. You'd think the priest would have better things to say without it being politics, poverty, money. - Penha

4. Today politics basically already lives in the church. I think that everywhere we are, politics is always on top of us. I think that today everything we plan has a type of politics. Let's consider this youth group. If we want to play a game, perform a play, but everyone can't do it, we have to decide how to resolve this. I think this is already politics. - Antonio

5. I think our life today is politics. In my way of thinking, when you wake up and go walking in the street already it's a kind of politics. Like it or not, you are involved in politics, in your mode of living. José Reis



A meeting of the youth group of Jardim Veronia, within the church that is still being constructed.

I presented the kids' responses in this order to make it possible to see a certain shift in vision about the nature of politics. If one risks over-simplifying, it is possible to see in these five responses the conflicting concepts of politics involved in Brazil's "transition to democracy". If Edilson expresses the authoritarianism of the military dictatorship, the sense of obligation "from above" with no way out, than Adelar can be read as expressing the current constitutional process, with laws expressed "on paper" for "our defense", although still handed down rather automatically. Penha articulates the all-to-common (and all-too-commonly grounded) conception of politics as dirty, commercial, something for the "politicians" who are only out for themselves, a conception exacerbated by the confusion of the democratic process. Antonio offers an alternative vision, based in the democratic conception nurtured in the Christian base communities, in which politics is a necessary daily companion of community decision-making, and which rejects the hierarchical power structure of decisions imposed from the top down. And José Reis has it down that "everything is politics", although he remains vague on just what that means.

In reflecting on the sources of the kids' visions of politics, we have to consider first that Brazil's adolescents were all born or experienced their childhood after the military coup in 1964. During the years between the coup and the opening to democracy in the early eighties, politics (and here I am using the word in its traditional sense, referring to matters of power and politicians) did not appear on television and radio, except in a highly controlled and sugared form. Political discussion was completely foreign to most households, and studiously avoided in the schools. A friend who is now in his early twenties described to me how as a fifth grader in the 1970's he tried to raise a question about "parlamentarismo", an issue about government structure in debate at the time of the coup. The teacher not only froze his question immediately, but made a point to tell the other students that "he said it, not me" and thus they were not to go telling their parents that she was discussing the issue in class. The kids continuously received the message that politics did not belong in school, in church, at the dinner table. And here we see one source of the conceptual distortion of politics, in which it is turned into something dislocated from one's daily life.

These days the situation is changed, at least superficially. From a near absence of politics the kids are all at once experiencing a bombardment, although still within a limited perspective. Every night between the 7:00 novela (nightly soap opera) and the 8:00 news (always containing at least one drug bust, catastrophe or corruption scandal) the television stations are required to broadcast "Diario na Constituinte", a ten minute series of short clips and split-second interviews documenting the day's "progress" in the slow-moving Constitutional Assembly. The objective is to keep the public involved and informed. But recently there has been discussion among the leaders of the Constituinte to stop the daily broadcasts, because they have been having the opposite effect. "So many meetings and so little accomplished!" as the chorus goes. The actual content of the debates is little understood; what gets picked up by most people are the fights between factions, the party bickering and alliances, the defense of petty interests, the charges of corruption, and the never-ending debate about such distant and little defined things as "presidencialismo" and debt-amnesty for micro-businesses and the sovereignty of the sub-soil. This then is "politics", and most kids seem to feel a weight in their stomachs whenever someone threatens to talk about it.

Since February I have been helping a group of teenagers start a youth group in the church community of Monte Santo, in the same region of the periferia as Jardim Veronia. One of the first things we did was make a list of the topics the kids were interested in discussing. The usual adolescent themes arose: family, drugs, sexuality, relationships, and with a little digging on my part they came up with work and education as well. "Politics" was a final tag-on - "maybe we could learn about the Constitution," they admitted dubiously. They were a bit stunned with my assertion that there was politics in everything they had listed. I made a bet that every conversation would eventually turn to politics. This is eventually turning into a humorous slogan of our discussions, although the kids remain in the ambiguous position of "not liking politics" while accepting vaguely that "everything is political".

But what exactly does it mean to say that "everything is political"? This question has long been problematic within the pastoral de juventude (youth ministry) of the Catholic church. The problem is not only the split within the church between the conservative factions and those involved in the theology of liberation*. Even within the sectors of the church that clearly consider themselves to be doing the work of liberation theology (and thus are clearly involved with politics), the nature of political involvement presents difficulties. There is the repeating question about the relationship between politics and faith. The Catholic Action movement, which began in the 1940's and lasted until the coup of 1964, characterized the call to faith as the call to political involvement and succeeded in mobilizing youth around the country to work in literacy campaigns, union organizing, health and neighborhood improvement movements, popular culture, etc. During the years of the repression the church became a sort of umbrella or holding company not only for these so-called "popular movements", but also for intellectuals and organizations of all of the varying degrees of the left, including the clandestine Communist parties. The result of these influences was that the "progressive" sectors of the church became radicalized; it was during this period as well that much of the basic theorizing of the theology of liberation was taking place in various parts of Latin America.

But at the same time that a small, intellectual branch of the church, together with hundreds of comunidades eclesiais de base (CEBs)** were moving rapidly forward in a transformation of the concept of religious commitment, the great mass of Catholics resisted the sudden insistence that religion was political. The backlash against the highly politicized youth groups of Catholic Action was the creation of many groups that were stridently apolitical, determined to restore the "spiritual" nature of faith and religion. Remember Penha's

* The theology of liberation is a product of the Latin American church, which proclaims its "preferential option for the poor", and insists that the Kingdom of God is here on earth, rather than in a heavenly after-life, as proclaimed by the traditional church. Liberation theology emphasizes community prayer, reflection, and organization in order to transform social injustices. For a more complete discussion of the history and principles of liberation theology in Latin America, see Joel Millman's ICWA newsletter (JAM-2).

** Comunidades eclesiais de base, or church base communities, are community prayer and reflection groups, generally but not necessarily based in the churches. They are the nuclei of the theology of liberation, and often also the nuclei for social movements in the poorer communities, such as health, education, housing and land movements, women's groups, youth groups, etc. In the periferia of the Zona Leste they are a flourishing social force, stronger than the political parties or most other civic organizations.

Members of the youth group at Monte Santo celebrate First Communion:



"The people are hungry for lack of our daily bread"



"Land, gift of God"

characterization of politics as commercial and self-interested; the fear was that in entering politics the church would lose its spiritual purity, become tainted by secular corruption.* Soon there would be no room (or need) for God, since everything would be reduced to the material. This resistance was exacerbated by the presence of leftist intellectuals who entered the church during the repression but who were not "of the church" (and who in fact left the church soon after the repression let up.) Schooled in the marxist analysis of religion as the opium of the people, they tended to be skeptical of the so-called spiritual components of the church, such as prayer and ritual. While on the one hand these intellectuals served the conceptual development of liberation theology, on the other hand they helped to confirm those critics who accused the new theology of having "lost its faith".

The leaders of youth ministry with a commitment to liberation theology were faced with a problem. How could they reconcile faith in God, and the ritualistic celebrations of the church, with the call to political commitment, without secularizing God or mistifying politics? The most effective answer I've seen to this problem was given in a study booklet published as the work of a congress of the pastoral de juventude (PJ) in the late 70's, when the repression was starting to cool down. The booklet is called "Subjects of History", a code phrase of both liberation theology and of Paulo Freire's concept of concientização*† referring to the process by which the oppressed discover that they are not objects, but subjects of history, with the power to choose and to transform social reality. The booklet distinguishes between "politics" and "political practice". Politics is simply everything having to do with human relations (coming from the Greek word, polis, meaning "city".) This provides the basis for saying "everything is political". Political practice is organized action to gain or maintain power, such as that of political parties or other organizations. Faith, the booklet maintains, cannot be transformed into political practice. Faith is related to the revelation of God (through Jesus Christ and through the Gospels), and thus is not connected to any ideology or political-economic system. But, since every human action has political repercussions, including those inspired by the Gospels, faith inspires Christians to choose a political practice coherent with the Gospels. By this mechanism the sphere of faith (and thus of the church) maintains its autonomy, but the path is cleared for involvement of Christians in political movements. And for those who believe

* Those involved with liberation theology would insist that politics did not "enter" the church with the arrival of the new theology; in fact, politics was always involved in the church. The so-called separation of religion and politics was a mystification that served to disguise the church's traditional support for the oppressive economic and political forces of Latin American history. In presenting itself to the population as an escape from "secular corruption", it was actually working to keep the masses of the people obedient and uncritical, silently suffering their poverty in order to gain "salvation" after death.

** The term concientização had its origins in the method of literacy training developed by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire in the early 1960's, but since then has become absorbed more generally into the Brazilian political vocabulary. It refers to the process by which reflection on social reality leads to a "critical consciousness" of that reality, and most importantly, a recognition of one's own power to effect changes. It is different from the English term, "consciousness-raising", because of the personal, moral dimension involved. Concientização is not just knowledge of social wrongs, but the development of a personal commitment to the struggle for social change. Crucial to the concept is the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, action and reflection. For a more complete discussion of Paulo Freire's concept, see my first newsletter (AEM-1).

that the Gospels present a clear message of liberation for the poor and the oppressed, the road of faith leads, if not to revolution, as was the case in Nicaragua, then at least to popular organizing among the poorer sectors of the population.

But if the distinction between faith, politics, and political practice helps clear up a conceptual difficulty, many practical difficulties remain in the present-day involvement of church youth in the political sphere. Recently I accompanied the youth groups of my region (including those of Jardim Veronia and Monte Santo) on a weekend retreat outside of São Paulo. Since the region of Ermelino Matarazzo where these youth groups are located contains some of the most politically active church communities of the periferia, and I was interested to see how politics would be presented to the kids. I was surprised to find very little overt discussion of "politics" on the retreat. Padre Carlos, the young priest from the archdiocese who led the reflections, emphasized "an explosion of the possibilities we have inside." The kids were in fact led to the edge of political involvement - "God manifests himself in those happenings that wake in us the desire to act, to do something." But what that "something" might be was left a blank. This was very different from some of the earlier material I've seen of PJ, which embarks on a historical analysis of capitalism and socialism, leads the kids through a biblical reading of Jesus as defender of the oppressed and exploited, analyzes current social injustices and equates the "kingdom of God" with the construction of a "new society".

Commenting with Padre Carlos on the apparent depoliticization of PJ, I was told that the local coordinating team of PJ had chosen to develop commitment from the inside out, rather than forcing an abstracted, foreign "political consciousness" on the kids. "We've had bad experiences in PJ, in which extremely militant youth leaders or adult advisors lead the groups in political expressions that end up being alienating for the other kids, the iniciantes, whose political consciousness has not had the same degree of development. We have to respect the personal caminhada (journey) of each member of the group. It's a much slower process, but the only way to develop genuine commitment."

Two things are worth noting here about the involvement of youth in politics. First is the emphasis on the personal nature of political commitment. One problem with the language of politics is that it is framed in strong moral rights and wrongs, generally pre-determined, especially when they claim to be "objective" or "scientific", as in the case of Marxist theory. "Commitment" becomes something imposed by ideology, rather than developing from the concerns and interests of the person. When an ideology is thrown at a person without this personal concern genuinely present, "politics", of the left or right, becomes alienating. I've noted this in several of the church communities of the periferia, which in their catechism classes for children work heavily around the political themes, with the goal of conscientização. In one community each child was required to make a poster on themes handed out by the adult leader, such as "Housing" or "Workers" or "Blacks" or "Indians" or "Abandoned children". The kids willingly made the posters, but as far as I could tell did not feel any special attachment or commitment to the issues involved, just a vague, official sort of "concern". If "being political" requires a degree of internal commitment, moving from the "inside out", then those posters were a questionable way to go about developing political consciousness.



Pastoral de Juventude - scenes from the weekend retreat

- Clockwise: 1. Youth group members present biblical interpretations
2. Singing with Padre Carlos
3. Participating in the liturgy
4. Rap session in the patio



The second interesting point is that within the youth groups the kids have different paces, or *caminhadas*, in the development of political consciousness. This seems obvious, but it has important implications. PJ has had to develop two distinct type of youth groups, those for the *iniciantes* referred to earlier, and those for the *militantes*. *Iniciantes*, such as the kids in my group at Monte Santo, become alienated and disinterested if the question of politics is pushed too quickly. Some groups simply avoid overt discussion of politics; others proceed according to the more gentle method of *concientização* promoted nationally by PJ, using the sequence VER, JULGAR, AGIR (see, judge, act) to gradually awaken political awareness and commitment. Some kids catch hold of this basic methodology quicker than others, and in accordance with PJ's concept of "AGIR", feel the need to act on their concerns. These become the *militantes*, and they become frustrated and impatient when the church does not give them the more advanced political formation and involvement for which they now feel the need. Many of these youth leaders begin to look for involvement outside of the church, in the political parties, for example, or the labor movement, the student movement, or the community organizations. The adult advisors of PJ, composed of religious and lay workers, have viewed this process with considerable ambivalence. The leaders they were preparing were being grabbed by others; "we are preparing the bride, but others will marry her," they wrote in a 1986 discussion booklet on the theme, "Christian youth and political militancy."

Many of the youthful militants complained of the church's reluctance to let them enter more fully into the political sphere. As one youth explained in the same booklet, "the church conscientizes the fellow; when he has the ability to discern, he enters the PT, for example. This is something not foreseen by the priest, the nun, the advisor. Necessarily the fellow will have contacts, etc., that can't be controlled by them. There they tighten the reins."

Why this reluctance on the part of the church to let its youth leaders loose in the political world? Here we return to the question of what it means to be political. The confusion over this question is as strong for militant youth as it is for those with little or no political involvement, although the confusion is on another level. *Militantes* accept that "everything is political", but as the leaders of PJ described in the booklet, they tend to turn that principle into an absolute, inverting the phrase so that suddenly "politics is everything". "On discovering the world of the political the youth becomes fascinated by it. Frequently he can't talk or think of anything else. He delivers himself to politics with the passion and the ingenuity of a fist love . . . He can't talk anymore with common people about daily life, and reduces human existence to one sole, and thus impoverishing, dimension of human existence."

Related to the tendency to turn politics into an absolute is the ease with which many church youth leaders are "coopted" by certain extreme factions of the political left. When militant youth leave their youth groups in search of more advanced political involvement, they are eagerly awaited and recruited by a score of political organizations, mostly with Marxist-Leninist or Trotskiest orientations. Some of these express themselves as political parties (PCdoB, PCB) while others function as clandestine groups within the PT or other organizations.*

*PCdoB - Communist Party of Brazil PCB - Brazilian Communist Party
 PT - Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party). The mainstream of the PT is neither Marxist-Leninist nor Trotskiest, but rather preaches what it calls "democratic socialism" (not the same thing as "social democracy"). The PT has within it several extremeist, semi-clandestine groups, and it is these that go church-youth hunting.

These groups have ready-made explanations of the world that correspond to the confusion and hunger for political clarity of the adolescent. One youth who left a youth group to enter one of these organizations explains how it helped him "advance" beyond the church: "In the parish youth group, we had campaigns to help the poor with food. Here they give me a scientific explanation of society, show me the structural causes of poverty and how to construct an alternative project."

The coordinators of PJ blame the weakness of the youth ministry itself for the ease with which its leaders are sucked into political factions that are often the most authoritarian and sectarian. "Our militants were not sufficiently prepared to confront a terrain very different from the church community: terrain marked by ideological pluralism, conflict between factions, manipulations, alliances. They haven't mastered such new questions as Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, tactic and strategy, the character of socialism, parties of quadros (blocks)." The church itself remains highly divided over these issues, and the youth militants go walking alone in unknown territory. Because of the weakness of their political formation within the church, and its failure to provide a "next step" for its militants, they are ripe material for these factions, which don't have the patience to do the slow work of developing leaders themselves.

I should note here that it is not all involvement in political parties or organizations that worries the church. It is leaders in the progressive branch of the church who make up one of the biggest bases of political support for the PT, for example, and it is the church that is the motivating force behind many of the popular movements, such as land invasions, literacy training and neighborhood pressure groups. But there is a qualitative difference between the Marxist-Leninist groups cited above, and the PT or the popular movements. The extremist political groups do not have what is known here as "work with the bases", the slow process of conscientização and organization in the communities, the workplaces, the schools. "The masses" are important ideologically as the raw material of revolution, but as individual faces and minds they have little importance, since the revolution is already determined by the intellectuals. The "vanguardism" of these groups is rejected by the Christian base communities and the popular movements, and by the mainstream of the PT as well. Rather than discounting the role of the individual, these groups call upon the individuals living in the periferia and other poor regions to reflect on the difficulties and injustices involved in their day-to-day lives, and rather than awaiting solutions by either vanguardist, populist, or authoritarian leaders, take community initiatives to improve the conditions of their lives. Through dialogue in community, the individual recognizes that he is a free agent capable of making choices and thus capable of transforming social reality. This is the source of the "popular power" called for by community organizations, the church, and the PT, and has its strongest expression in local pressure movements, such as those demanding more participation and improved services in health, education, transportation, sanitation, etc.

The progressive branch of the church would like to see its youth leaders involved in such movements, but is wary of the frequent political manipulations involved. These manipulations come not only from the vanguardist left, which often tries to gain control of the leadership of these movements as part of its strategy of forming quadros (blocks of influence). It comes also from populist leaders of both the left and the right, who seize opportunistically on the aspirations of the poorer population, "giving" changes in a paternalistic manner that impedes the poor from developing consciousness of the need to organize themselves to demand and construct changes. The struggle to free oneself from the passive manipulation by

others is what is meant by the phrase "becoming subjects of history", a slow and complicated process, complicated further by the demogoguery of Brazilian political life.

To help their youth steer clear of such "false prophets", the church has been developing various types of youth groups especially for militants, to give more in-depth political and theological formation, as well as a place to reflect political experience with those having the same degree of consciousness and involvement. These groups include PJE (Pastoral de Juventude Estudantil), which works within the schools and the student movement, PJR (PJ Rural), working with youth in the rural agrarian reform movements, PJMP (PJ Movimentos Populares), acting within neighborhood organizations and popular movements, and PO (Pastoral Operario), for youth in the labor movement. These groups are as of yet not very firmly established, and are still feeling their way into many difficult questions about the role of the church in politics. For example, should Christians organize themselves politically as Christians, or should they let Christian values speak anonymously for themselves within other organizations? What relationship should the church have with elections and political parties? Where are the legitimate points of convergence between the church, the popular movements, and the political parties, and where should they remain autonomous and distinct?

If these questions have not been resolved within the youth groups, it reflects the conflict existing within the church as a whole. In the lack of a consensus about the nature of its political involvement, the church has had to preach its own type of pluralism, in which Christians are united by faith but divergent in the political practices chosen as an expression of that faith. The church as a whole has an uneasy relationship with this sort of pluralism. Rome has long been ambivalent about the politization of the Latin American church, especially in its more Marxist expressions, despite the Pope's discourse on social justice. The Vatican has made recent moves to weaken the progressive church leaders in São Paulo, first by transferring Bishop Luciano Mendes, the president of the Brazilian National Conference of Bishops and a chief articulator of liberation theology, to a small archdiocese in the interior of Minas Gerais, and second, by attempting to divide the archdiocese of São Paulo. This would weaken the jurisdiction of Archbishop Paulo Evarista Arns, who has done much to strengthen the CEBs and the social movements in the periferia of São Paulo.

But beyond the political disputes within the church, there remain a few lessons here essential for youth. Accepting pluralism means accepting the personal caminhada of each person, a concept essential for working with adolescents, who are struggling to work out a personal role in a political world. It is interesting that in separating faith from politics one not only provides for individual differences, but also avoids turning ideology into an absolute, which in turn turns politics into an alienating imposition. Ideology is a problem as much for iniciantes as for militantes, although the angle is different. Iniciantes turn off from political ideology because it doesn't fill their need for personal reflection and growth, while militantes become so involved in ideology that they forget that a personal life exists.

In the booklet of PJ on "Christian youth and political militancy", a new model of militant is described, "different from the classical militant, cold, calculating, intellectual, intolerant of those who don't agree with his ideas, distant from the bases . . ." The church would like to foster the development

of a new type of militant, "who delivers himself body and soul to political involvement, but, at the same time, cultivates a profound human relationship with people, whose theory is always being tested at the ground of life, who is open for the transcendental dimension of life."

For this new militant, "being political" would be an extension, and not a domination, of being human. But even this "new militant" would have difficulties sorting out the political situation at this moment in Brazil. In my next letter I'll discuss further the conflicts involved in youth militancy, going on to examine youth in the student movement and the political parties.

Um abraço,

Jim Mische



High spirits in the patio . . .

. . . and on the train ride home.

