

The Forest of Theological Education¹

Ecumenical Congress: Mission and Ecumenism in Latin America

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What do tropical forests and theological education have in common? In this short essay I want to show the relationship of these two components as part of one reality. I intend to do this by mixing an approximation to environmental reality with a metaphor. I introduced these ideas during the meetings of the Ecumenical Congress,² in which about 100 students participated, representing every continent and a large variety of churches, nationalities, ethnic groups and races. The organizers took great care to see that there was a balance of participation between women and men. Therefore, the Congress was one of the most profound ecumenical experiences for those of us who participated, and constituted a conference model that all theology students should experience some time in their life. What the students learned during those days of sharing, studying, spirituality and cultural encounter, without a doubt, will make a lasting impression on their lives.

The following is a summary of the ideas that I shared at the Ecumenical Congress. First, I gave a short overview of theological education in Latin America and the Caribbean. I limited the overview (not included in this summary) to the beginning of regional associations such as the Association of Evangelical Theological Seminaries (ASTE), the Association of Theological Institutions (ASIT), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Ecumenical Theological Education (CETELA), the Latin American Association of Theological Education Institutions (ALIET), and the Association of Theological Schools in the Caribbean (AETC). The second idea that I shared took advantage of being in Brazil, which provided a context for thinking about what the Amazon means to humanity and for all creation; I introduced the reality of tropical forests, their impact and the threats to them. A third idea was the nefarious reality of deforestation as well as environmental and cultural pollution. Immediately after, I emphasized the idea that it is possible to reverse the process of deterioration if we take a prophetic, theological and pastoral role to do so. Lastly, by using a metaphor, I called attention to the tree nurseries of theological education as a means of recreating God's forest.

Tropical Forests

¹ This paper was presented at the Ecumenical Theological Education "Round Table," that was held in São Leopoldo, Brazil, during the Ecumenical Congress for theology students. Wati Longhear participated in the round table in representation of Asia, Vladimir Fedorof represented Eastern Europe, and José Duque represented Latin America and the Caribbean.

² The Ecumenical Congress for theology students was held during the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in São Leopoldo between February 23 and 25, 2006. The Superior School of Theology (EST), the Association of Evangelical Theological Seminaries (ASTE), and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Ecumenical Theological Education (CETELA) shared responsibility for this Congress. Financial support for the Congress came from various institutions and donor churches of the National Council for Scientific Development of Brazil and of the World Council of Churches, specifically from ETE.

As we know, thanks to scientific studies,³ there are more than one billion hectares of tropical forests that have developed over millions of years and that provide a balanced habitat, not only for the flora and fauna, but for all life forms, including humanity. In Latin America and the Caribbean, tropical forests, thanks to the Equator, constitute a strip of land that goes from southern Mexico to the Bolivian Amazon. These predominantly rainy jungles are home to as many as 300 distinct tree species per hectare, some of which are 70 meters high. But, the tropical forests are not only vegetation, they also hold the greatest biodiversity on the planet. The animal life in these forests includes a large variety of insects, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. The tropical Amazon zone, considered to be the greatest “lung” of planet earth, also holds the most abundant river basins on the globe. Tropical forests are also the largest of the sophisticated, aromatic and colorful gardens. Tropical forests are a marvel of creation.

A Threatened Marvel

However, tropical forests are being rapidly destroyed by a perverse rationale, that is to say, irrationally. In Central America, 60% of the tropical forests have been cut down, mainly to cultivate pastureland for cattle in order to export meat to make hamburgers in the USA. According to scientists, between 1960 and 1990, in just 30 years, 20% of the tropical forests in the world were destroyed. At this rate of destruction, scientists estimated that 50% of these forests would be destroyed by 2004. Which means that in approximately 50 years, one-half of the sources for life, that had taken millions of years to develop, were destroyed. By this irrational conduct we are destroying a marvelous home, whose construction was a work of grace for humanity.

Destructive Causal Factors

It has been widely demonstrated that deforestation constitutes one of the most direct causes of destruction of the natural and animal world. But, there are many reasons for deforestation, among which we can emphasize: the economic model that places priority on producing for export. This reasoning gives free rein to the exportation of beef, agricultural products and wood. This became the model for the Third World, and included exploiting and exporting its natural resources. This was the recipe for development: exploit and export for economic growth. Then, the doors were opened for exploiting and exporting minerals and petroleum reserves. And, the deforested areas were filled with monocultures, which were accompanied by the respective chemical fertilizers and pesticides that have polluted the air and river basins. We insist that this model of exploitation is sustained by an underlying cause, the instrumental reason for encouraging consumerism and accumulation.⁴ That is, with this model of production, the sustainability of life was no longer a priority; the instrumental reason reoriented the priority toward the rate of profit. The critical ethical criteria were taken off the negotiating table and, with that, the criteria of justice, equity, sustainability and dignity of the entire natural world and of human beings were also removed.

The instrumental reason also has created a passive conscience in individuals as well as in social institutions. Churches have been passive, governments have been passive, society in general has

³ Compare these websites: www.jmarcano.com; www.wrm.org.uy; www.somosamigosdelatierra.org

⁴ Dussel, Enrique, cp. “Algunos principios para una érica ecológica material de liberation” in Pixley, Jorge (ed.), *Por un mundo otro*. Quito: CLAI, 2003, pgs. 29-44.

been passive. And, even worse, for theological education seminaries also are passive. Maybe there is something more than passivity—there is no shepherding; there is obvious negligence and abandonment of pastoral responsibilities with our neighbor and with creation.⁵ Because of this negligence and passivity, natural and cultural pollution continues to cause nearly irreparable destruction. But, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! ... You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost...” (Ez. 34:2 ff).

Pollution of Nature and of Culture

The destruction of the forests by the logic of instrumental reason has produced disastrous, nearly irreparable, effects. We can say that deforestation produces serious pollution in nature as well as in cultures. For example, for the peoples who have lived in tropical forests for centuries, deforestation results in the loss of their cultures. When equilibrium is lost in the forests, the cultural balance of the peoples who have lived in the forests is lost. This results in a loss of the production of their own food, a loss of the natural medicines developed by them, a change in their customary use of energy resources; this also means the extinction of their languages and traditional spiritual expressions. After their forest culture is undermined, these peoples have no choice but to migrate to the cities where cultural pollution increases due unemployment, malnutrition, prostitution, overcrowding and acquiring an inferiority complex.

Cultural pollution also impacts the region and not just the peoples who live in the forest. Without forests water cannot be preserved, soil is eroded, pests appear, there is a proliferation of disease; in addition, the loss of drainage produces floods or prolonged drought. These evils do not deal a death blow just in the local area, deforestation and cultural pollution also produce extremely negative impacts at the global level. According to scientists, deforestation and pollution are producing rapid global warming. In addition, many life forms in both plant and animal life are condemned to extinction. However, the cultural pollution produced by the desire to acquire wealth not only destroys forests but is also producing unprecedented social catastrophes. The cultural pollution in Latin America is now reaching the wealthy countries through waves of immigrants. According to the latest statistics, eleven million undocumented aliens live in the USA, and are now loudly asking for justice. This has occurred because there are 220 million poor people living in the region.⁶ Also, there are nearly 100 million indigent persons living in our region. But if we add together all the population classified as poor and indigent, we are talking about more than 60% of the total population in the region, which is, nearly two-thirds of our total population. It is said that in Latin America and the Caribbean, three of every five children work, and they do so in unhealthy conditions, even though they should be in school.

Cultural pollution also includes ethnic, racial, gender, age, and, of course, class discrimination. But an even more tragic item is that the current neoliberal capitalist system denies a mutually binding sensitivity in favor of the “little ones.” It denies joint liability and all alternative possibilities that would benefit the enormous population of disposed and excluded persons.

⁵ Boff, Leonardo, *Saber Cuidar. Ética de lo humano-compasión por la tierra*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2004.

⁶ Cp. Annual Report of ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), which shows the tragedy of poverty in alarming numbers, www.bbcmundo.com, August 26, 2003.

Moreover, it denies them the possibility of solidarity and transforms this into a diabolic force.⁷ In this way, in addition to cutting down mahogany, cedar, palm, ceiba and other well-known tree varieties, cultural deforestation has cut down prophetic trees such as Francisco Chico Mendes,⁸ or Monsignor Arnulfo Romero, and thousands and thousands of other martyrs—ecologists, educators, defenders of human rights, pastors in all ministries that cry out for justice and peace for the well-being of creation. Because cultural contamination, in addition to cutting down forests, represses, excludes, disposes and exploits.

Reverse the Process of Destruction: Good News and a Task

The situation that I have partially outlined is critical and chaotic, but it is not definitive. According to scientists, there is good news, which consists in knowing that it is not only possible to stop the rate of pollution and destruction of the environment, and with it of humanity, but we can reverse it. This means, as a starting point, accepting that the precariousness of the natural and cultural environment is not outside of ourselves; we have something to do with this imbalance. Therefore, to interrupt this situation and reverse it we must accept that we are part of the problem, then begin to think about and organize projects that will help resolve the problems. By this, we understand that such a project will set out to recreate an enormous natural and cultural forest that will recuperate all the tropical as well as the polar areas. In other words, this is not about a project to save only the tropics, but it is a project that will include the well-being of all creation.

The Nurseries of Theological Education

Refining our visions of faith, we can see in the current ecological environment in our region the formation of numerous new nurseries. This deals with novel and diverse nurseries or gardens oriented to cultivating another tropical forest, which will be able to clean up the environmental pollution, biological and cultural, in order to recreate the well-being of creation's life. On the horizon of these hopeful nurseries, similar to the Garden of Eden, the cultivation of heavenly vegetation are taking shape as signs, as a foretaste and first fruit of the new heavens and earth announced from time immemorial by the prophets, such as Isaiah: "Because I will create a new heaven and earth; of the first there will be no memory" (Is. 21:17 ff:).

The nurseries of which we bear witness, give birth to a huge diversity of trees, including the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9), because this is a forest of freedom, created to grow, multiply and produce until all the earth is filled. It will be where all classes of living species, vegetable, animal and mineral will be sheltered, feed and sustained in full health, that together will form the dreamed of forest of life. The forest of God. In this forest of life, crystalline rivers, enormous wetlands and majestic oceans will flow in all directions once again; carefree fish of all colors, sizes and species, including huge sea monsters, will plunge into the waters. The beauty and happiness in this new tropical forest confirms that justice and balance has been fully achieved through the fruit of love. In this environment, neither sounds of weeping nor heartbreaking cries will ever be heard again, and there will be no sorrow or pain.

⁷ Hinkelammert, Franz, "El desarrollo de la América Latina y la cultura de la desesperanza" in, *Educación teológica en Abya-Yala*. San José: UBILA, 1992, pgs. 37 ff.

⁸ Chico Mendes, Brazilian, was assassinated on December 22, 1998 because of his defense of the Amazon against the indiscriminate exploitation by multinational companies. More information at www.somosamigosdelatierra.org

There will never be any orphans, widows, refugees or displaced people; neither will there be immigrants or exiles, much less anyone who works in vain. Children will play pleasantly with all the wild animals and serpents and no one will be harmed. Old people will share their knowledge and live as long as the trees. This will be a forest full of wonderful flowers, aromas, flavors and sounds; it will not be cold or hot and nakedness will be an adornment. Love will be sweeter than honey and its sweetness will remain forever.

Such tree nurseries are nothing more than seedbeds of fertile soil, or altars where worship will cultivate culture. Likewise, all knowledge shared there will redound in wisdom because it deals with a wise knowledge that gives flavor to life. Yes, the nurseries are seedbeds that are known in theological education as seminaries, where seminary students are the seeds of the seed of Abraham full of faith. These become like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream ... its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit (Jer. 17:7 ff). Thus, each seminary student, like a leafy tree, has a place in the forest of life to bear much fruit, because “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life” (Pr. 11:30).

It is, therefore, from the seminaries, where enough trees will go out to radiate life over all the face of the earth that has become a “chaos and confusion and darkness over the surface of the deep (Gn. 1:1). Seminaries, institutes and theology faculties have become seedbeds so that “the land produces vegetation: seed-bearing plants and tress on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” (Gn. 1:11). In this forest of God, the diversity of species includes at least the conditions of gender, ethnicity, race, confession, nation, generation.

But, in order for the nurseries to produce trees that give fruit, each one according to its specie, the mistaken idea of monoculture must be eradicated. Single-crop production excludes biodiversity and causes the same effects as deforestation. Therefore, the nurseries of theological education are seminaries with an ecumenical spirit, capable of conforming the most varied and fruitful of the forests. The forest of abundant life in its fullest.

Of course, because there are many different species among the trees of the tropical forest none will take prominence as the head, or center, or elite, or more important than the other plants; because they all equally share the task of renewing oxygen, or providing food or energy. Others will be there to heal, others spread their aroma; in other words, all the trees together will balance the most complex and nourishing habitat. Naturally, a tree by itself does not constitute a forest. A tropical forest is made up of many varieties of species that live in communion, in other words, they make community. In the forest many reciprocal relationships are established, for example, in many cases the fertilization and spreading of seeds is carried out thanks to the work of insects and other animals, which transport them from one place to another.⁹

Therefore, a warning to all the trees that have left the restoring nurseries of God’s forest, that while a final balance is being achieved, they will still have to face storms, cyclones, hurricanes and upheavals. They will also have to deal with these disasters, but they are no more than a threat to the forest because the strength of communion will be in control. No, these harsh weather conditions will not destroy God’s forest, on the contrary, they will bring energy to readjust the habitat and to strengthen the endurance of the solid trunks, thereby endowing them with the quality that will make them able to take care of the well-being of creation.

⁹ Mires, Fernando, *El discurso de la naturaleza*. San José: DEI, 190, pgs. 135 ff.

Therefore, the nurseries as seedbeds, the seminaries where seminarians are wisely cultivated, who, with their formation, will recreate and take care of the ecological niches, a sustainable society, their fellow companions, and especially the “little ones,” as well as their own body.¹⁰ There, thanks to this new forest, for the global village, under this balanced care, the Spirit will move, transcending all forms of life to wake the most transforming utopian dreams.

The nurseries of God’s forest are, then, ecumenical seminaries, able to cultivate Grace in the integrity of creation. From these seminaries go out the seeds to cultivate the forests of life where humanity and the integrity of creation will be cared for. Each seminarian, man or women, is a tree of life. “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Ps. 1:3).

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¹⁰ Boff, L. *Op. cit.* pgs. 133-155.