

The Biblical Foundations of the Spirituality of Dom Hélder Câmara
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Introduction

When Hélder Câmara became the Archbishop of Recife and Olinda in 1964, he refused to live in the Episcopal Palace, offering its space for social projects and retreats for youth, and choosing instead to live in a simple room in the back of a church in Recife.¹ He lived a life of simplicity in solidarity with the poor, wearing only an old worn white cassock. His actions were consistent with his pleadings to his fellow bishops at Vatican II, that they should abandon titles of nobility like 'Your Eminence' and 'Excellency', and that they should exchange their bejeweled crosses for bronze or wooden ones. He wrote to his brother bishops at Vatican II: "Let us end once and for all the impression of a bishop-prince, residing in a palace, isolated from his clergy whom he treats distantly and coldly."²

Dom Hélder Câmara was a radical defender of the poor, calling the Church to follow the example of Christ, "who although he belonged to all people, identified himself with the poor, the oppressed, and all who suffered."³ He was a leader in teaching the entire Church to accept its vocation of servant-hood and self giving to the poor, and to embrace a humility that could recognize God in all people, not only Roman Catholics.⁴

He was not content to proclaim a call to justice in the Church: he also called upon the State to enact just laws and to ensure equity for the poor. Because of his prominence, and his vocal opposition and criticism of the exploitation of the poor in both his own Brazil and in Capitalist and Communist societies, he was seen as a threat to the government. He was not killed by the Military Dictatorship which ruled Brazil because of his popularity among the masses, but he was silenced by the government and forbidden to speak in Brazil outside of his See. As a result, he took his message to the world,

1 Mary Hall, *The Spirituality of Dom Hélder Câmara: The Impossible Dream* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 15.

2 Francesco Neves, "The Red Bishop Goes to Heaven," Brazzil.com, <http://www.brazzil.com/p08aug99.htm> (accessed February 20, 2012).

3 Hélder Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with Jose de Broucker*, trans. Hilary Davies (London: Collins, 1979), 198.

4 Jose de Broucker, *Dom Hélder Câmara: The Violence of a Peacemaker* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 5.

speaking for justice for the poor and the equality of all people. “As a bishop,” he once said, “I have the responsibility to try by every means to change the system in order that the Church be faithful to the Gospel. I would not be worthy of Christ if I remained silent.”⁵

Based on Câmara's activism, one might think that his spirituality was rooted in the active life; but, in fact, he was a mystic, who prayed daily from 2 am-5am. During these times of prayer, he would recollect the experiences of the previous day, looking for the presence of God in the people he met and the circumstances he experienced. These prayerful reflections became the inspiration for poetry, which he prolifically composed. He even claimed to have witnessed “the unclouded Christ” during these times of prayer.⁶ His contemplative practices fed his action, and his active life was a rich source for his contemplation. In a real sense he was truly a contemplative-in-action, following the prayer practices of Jesus himself, who would often withdraw from the disciples in order to pray with his Father after a time of ministry with the multitudes.⁷ “Such is my life.... to pray and to work,”⁸ Câmara once said, believing that religious practices must directly impact one's engagement with society: authentic prayer must never be disassociated from political and social action.⁹ This did not mean that Dom Hélder was opposed to the contemplative life of prayer in solitude. He had great respect for contemplative religious who have given their lives to prayer on behalf of others who can not or will not pray. He would often visit them, share world events with them, and encourage their work of prayer for others. “You mustn't present yourselves alone before the Lord. You've got to carry the whole world in your hands, on your backs.”¹⁰ For him, even contemplatives in solitude could be active once they became “peopled solitudes” carrying the sufferings of the poor in their hearts, and presenting them to God in prayer.¹¹

5 Hall, 80.

6 Hall, 59-61.

7 Luke 4:42, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:45-46.

8 Hall, 60.

9 Zildo Rocha, “Hélder Câmara, o Dom,” Centario Dom Hélder, entry posted April, 1999, <http://centenariodomHelder.blogspot.com/2009/04/zildo-rocha.html> (accessed February 24, 2012).

10 Hélder Câmara, *Through the Gospel with Dom Hélder Câmara*, trans. Alan Neame (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 107.

11 *Ibid.*

Biblical Foundations of Dom Hélder Câmara's Spirituality

Zildo Rocha, the principle biographer of Dom Hélder Câmara, who also lived with Câmara for some time in Olinda, has summed up the main tenets of Câmara's religious life in the following six points:

1. God is Creator and Parent of all.
2. Jesus is the firstborn among his brothers and sisters
3. Mary is the Mother of Jesus and our Mother
4. Humanity is one family, in which everyone, without exception, is a part.
5. The immense human family extends into and complements the family of the angelic spirits, who offer us fellowship, help, and protection.
6. The central act in which the human and angelic families are gathered together to meet with the Creator and Father is the Holy Mass, understood not as a magical ritual of a particular sect, but as a cosmic and universal act in which the divine-human One, Jesus Christ, the Priest of Creation, recapitulates and perfects all things, leading them in the Spirit back to the Father.¹²

1. God the Creator and Parent of us all

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*¹³

One major biblical stream seen in Dom Hélder Câmara's spirituality is the recognition that all human beings are worthy of respect because all humankind are children of the One God, our Creator and Parent, who created us out of the divine desire to love: to offer love to the creature and to invite the creature, in particular the human creature, to share in the divine life. The divine love for humankind is so integral to who God is in God's essence and Being, that, Câmara believes, God would

¹² Zildo Rocha, "Hélder Câmara, o Dom," <http://centenariodomHelder.blogspot.com/2009/04/zildo-rocha.html> (accessed February 24, 2012).

¹³ Genesis 1:27, NRSV. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the Bible will be from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1995).

have still become incarnate in order to teach humanity how to fully share the divine life, even if there was no need for the incarnation as a remedy for sin.¹⁴ Because we are all children of God, created from divine love and endowed with the gifts of intellect, freedom and will, we all share equal rights and equal access to the gifts God has given us in Creation. We also share a common call to care for the Earth¹⁵ and to complete the work of Creation started by God. Câmara believed that God merely began the creative process, but that all of humanity is called to continue God's work of creations as co-creators with God. We are called to realize the unity of all creation, to work towards our own perfection- and the perfection of the earth, and to share in “the very intimacy of God's own life.”¹⁶ One implication of God's creative gift to us, and God's charge that we be caretakers of the earth, is that humankind is responsible for finding solutions to social problems and crisis brought on by the environment. We have no right to blame God for problems in the world, when God has given us the ability to find solutions to the problems we face as co-creators, especially those that we have created ourselves. How easy it could have been, Câmara wrote, if God had created all at once a perfect universe. “But it would have been terribly boring,” he continued, “for us to come into a world where everything was already done, and done well, where everything was complete. So the Lord merely began a creative process and entrusted man with the task of completing it.”¹⁷ Thus, social inequalities, injustice, even dealing with natural disaster, is a human problem, not God's.

Câmara's beliefs are rooted in the theological assumptions in the Genesis Creation myths that humankind is created in the image of God.¹⁸ There is no agreement among theologians from various Christian traditions about what the *imago dei* actually means, but for Câmara, at least part of its meaning is summed up in the 1986 pastoral letter of the US Conference of Bishops, where the bishops

14 Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop*, 8-10.

15 Genesis 1:28 “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

16 Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenes and Hélder Câmara, *Charismatic Renewal and Social Action* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 14.

17 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 124-126.

18 Genesis 1:27 “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

wrote that, "Men and women are also to share in the creative activity of God. They are to be faithful, to care for the earth (Gen. 2:15), and to have "dominion" over it (Gen. 1:28), which means they are "to govern the world in holiness and justice and to render judgment in integrity of heart" (Wis. 9:3). Creation is a gift; women and men are to be faithful stewards in caring for the earth. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work."¹⁹

This means, according to Dom Câmara, that every human person has a vocation. Every person has been called by God to some state of life and to some profession.²⁰ For Dom Câmara, this meant the Church was called by the Holy Spirit to empower the laity for leadership roles in ministry, as equal apostolic ministers- and this is what he worked to achieve at Vatican II.²¹ But more than that, he felt that this meant that the poor and oppressed must be educated to recognize their own oppression, and empowered to work for their liberation. The poor must be given assistance to help identify their problems and work to find solutions. They must not rely on the government or any other institution: they must be empowered to act for themselves.²² To do this, Dom Câmara encouraged the clergy, religious, and lay leaders to live among the poor as community organizers and educators. He also created grassroot communities, that he called Abrahamic Minorities, small groups that would gather together to serve one another and work for a more peaceful and just society.²³ The human work of co-creation is not limited to Christians, however. Dom Câmara believed that all people in every culture and religious group shared the same hunger for peace and justice. He taught that all people of good will were capable of serving the poor and working peacefully for justice, including atheists, with whom he regularly engaged in dialogue. To atheist humanists he wrote: "Don't think you have been forgotten. Translate what I say in my language into your language. When I talk of God, translate, perhaps by 'nature', 'evolution', what you will... if you hunger for truth, justice, and love, you can and

¹⁹ *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf (accessed February 23, 2012).

²⁰ Hélder Câmara, *Sister Earth: Creation, Ecology, and the Spirit* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990), 62-63.

²¹ Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop*, 41-45.

²² Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop*, 120-122.

²³ Hélder Câmara, *The Desert is Fertile*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 10-12.

should go with us... You are our brother and sister. Accept our friendship. We will learn to understand each other and we will be able to go forward together.”²⁴

2. Jesus, the firstborn among his brothers and sisters.

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.*²⁵

So, why have we not used the gifts with which our Creator has endowed us to achieve the perfection that God dreams for humankind and for the universe? Dom Hélder Câmara believed that the obstacle to human perfection and equality for all is human greed and selfishness.²⁶ While he affirmed the reality of sin, even the Church's categorization of mortal sin, he believed that human selfishness was more a result of weakness than of sin, since there must be full awareness and total consent in order for an action to be a mortal sin.²⁷ Therefore, we are not to judge others for their sins. Rather, we are called to convince sinners to live just and loving lives,²⁸ realizing, with Christ, that we often sin “because we know not what we are doing.”²⁹ We refuse to judge in imitation of Jesus, God-made-human, who redeems us by showing us the way to love, and calling us to work as co-redeemers, “so that liberation from sin and from the consequences of sin may be achieved in us and with us.”³⁰ As co-redeemers, we proclaim the good news revealed by the incarnation, that in Jesus Christ, in whom we are incorporated, we are invited to share the very life of God. This revelation was made known to us in God's humility- who in Christ became a servant and identified himself with the poor, the oppressed and those who suffer.³¹ We become co-redeemers and participants in Christ's redemptive work, by becoming servants of all, and by embracing poverty, in imitation of Christ, so that we may stand in solidarity with those who live in destitution and oppression.

24 Câmara, *The Desert is Fertile*, 14.

25 Romans 8:28-29.

26 Câmara, *The Church and Colonialism*, trans. William McSweeney (London: Sheed & Ward, 1969), 112-114.

27 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 33.

28 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 97-98.

29 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 33.

30 Suenens and Câmara, *Charismatic Renewal and Social Action*, 14-15.

31 Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop*, 198.

Dom Câmara's belief that the authentic Christian life is one modeled after Christ's servant-hood, is deeply rooted in St. Paul's kenotic Christology beautifully summarized in the hymn he quotes in his Epistle to the Philippians, where he likewise encourages Christians to be imitators of Christ:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.³²

Our call to work as co-redeemers also means that we must recognize Christ in the faces of the poor; we must heed the prophetic words of Christ, written in Matthew's Gospel³³, wherein Christ warns that we will be judged for serving or not serving him by how we treated him in the hungry, naked, imprisoned, sick and lonely.³⁴ Dom Câmara once told the story of a church in Recife that had been robbed. The thief had broken into the Tabernacle, stolen the ciborium, and threw the Precious Body of Christ onto the ground. The people were outraged, and asked Dom Câmara to schedule a diocesan wide liturgy of atonement in reparation for this terrible sin against Christ. He agreed, and when everyone had assembled for the liturgy, Dom Câmara said:

Lord, in the name of my brother thief, I ask thy pardon. He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know that thou art truly present and living in the Eucharist. We are deeply shocked by what he did. But, my friends, how blind we all are! We are shocked because our brother, this poor thief, threw the Eucharistic Christ into the mud. But here in the North-East Christ lives in the mud all the time! We must open our eyes!... the best possible outcome of our communion with the Body of Christ... would be if Christ thus received would open our eyes and help us recognize the Eucharist of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering.³⁵

For Dom Câmara, this must mean more than feeding the hungry. It must mean bringing an end to the social inequalities which exploit and oppress the poor. It means denouncing injustice, and working to create a just world where there no longer exists a rich minority who own most of the resources of the

32 Philippians 2:3-6.

33 Matthew 25.

34 Hall, 74.

35 Câmara, *The Conversion of a Bishop*, 156.

world, while the majority suffer in misery.³⁶ But even this work must be done peacefully, lovingly, and mercifully. We can never judge nor condemn; rather we are to embody the Beatitudes, and help the rich learn to love and share. Dom Câmara expressed our responsibility to convert the rich in a prayer he offered in conversations with Catholic Charismatics: “If all of us who believe in You had helped our rich brothers, by opening their eyes, stirring their consciences, the unjust would not have advanced, and the gap between rich and poor, between individuals and groups, between countries, even between continents would not be so glaring. Do in us, O Lord, what we have failed to do.”³⁷

3. Mary is the Mother of Jesus and our Mother

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*³⁸

Mother, I want nothing,
I just came to see you.
Do not take it wrongly
that I forget
requests I was given
to bring to you.

It is not selfishness, Lady,
and the proof is that I will not do it either,
no request to me
nor I wish to calm down,
contemplating your serene face.

On behalf of all men
who live begging you,
on behalf of all the brothers
who have already come close to you
with outstretched hands,
let me forget for a moment
the valley of tears,
our misery of beggars,
our poverty of creatures,
our sorrow of sinners,
to salute you,
Queen of Angels
Virgin Mother of God!

³⁶ Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 87-88.

³⁷ Suenens and Câmara, *Charismatic Renewal and Social Action*, 59.

³⁸ John 19:26-27.

Blessed be the Creator
of your stainless hands
through which all light passes
that shines on the darkness of men!

Blessed be the Creator
of your best gaze
which has the gift
to kindle hope
in disheartened souls,
in hearts in despair,
near the abyss,
of hopelessness,
of the end!

Blessed be the Creator
of your most suave shadow
as I have already noted,
dear Mother,
that just your memory,
your perfume
is enough to fill the loneliness of life
the solitude of man.

Mother, I want nothing.
I just came to see you.³⁹

This poem, written in *Nossa Senhora no Meu Caminho*, a collection of poetry written by Dom Câmara about the Mother of God, expresses his deep devotion and love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. He referred to the Virgin Mary as his mother who always listened to him.⁴⁰ He would talk to Her often when he was distressed or overcome by doubts, fears and concerns, just as a child shares his or her heart with a mother. Once in seminary he was so humiliated by an act of betrayal that he nearly lost his faith. Finally, he ran to the chapel, knelt before an image of The Virgin Mary and, addressing Blessed Mary as his Mother, told Her he would not leave the chapel until She had helped him regain a sense of calm.⁴¹ This became common practice for Dom Hélder, often looking to Mother Mary for guidance, comfort, and strength; often holding before Her the names and stories of the poor, the oppressed, and

39 Hélder Câmara, trans. Luiz Coelho "Mãe, não quero nada," Irmãs Maristas, http://www.irmasmaristas.org.br/07_noticias_Detalhe.asp?cod=32 (accessed February 26, 2012).

40 Hall, 18.

41 Hall, 32.

those who were suffering, confident that Her motherly prayers would bring healing and comfort.

The Bible does not explicitly say very much about the Blessed Virgin Mary, and even less about Her relationship to humanity as our spiritual Mother. However, since the early days of the Church, John 19:26-27 has been understood as a foundational biblical text for supporting the belief that the Mother of the Redeemer is also the Mother of the faithful. In this text, the Crucified Jesus, seeing His Mother and the disciple whom He loved at the foot of the cross, says to His Mother, “Woman, behold your son,” and to the disciple, “Behold your Mother.”⁴² Origen, in his Commentary on John, was among the first to interpret this text in this way:

We may therefore make bold to say that the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but that of the Gospels that of John is the first fruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it except he have lain on Jesus' breast and received from Jesus Mary to be his mother also. Such an one must he become who is to be another John, and to have shown to him, like John, by Jesus Himself Jesus as He is. For if Mary, as those declare who with sound mind extol her, had no other son but Jesus, and yet Jesus says to His mother, "Woman, behold thy son," and not "Behold you have this son also," then He virtually said to her, "Lo, this is Jesus, whom thou didst bear." Is it not the case that every one who is perfect lives himself no longer, but Christ lives in him; and if Christ lives in him, then it is said of him to Mary, "Behold thy son Christ."⁴³

The ancient church, however, saw Blessed Mary also as the Mother of all humanity- the new Eve whose obedience to God brought salvation to all of humanity. This title to the Virgin Mary is rooted in the Pauline doctrine of Christ as the new Adam, “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”⁴⁴ The early Fathers argued that since Blessed Mary gave birth to the

42 John 19:26-27 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

43 Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1,6, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen-john1.html> (accessed February 26, 2012).

44 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

Incarnate Son of God, the new Adam who destroyed death and brought new life to humankind, She is the new Eve- the Mother of all humankind. Justin Martyr was the first to write about this Eve-Mary parallel in his work *Dialogue with Typho*:

We know that He, before all creatures, proceeded from the Father by His power and will, ...and by means of the Virgin became man, that by what way the disobedience arising from the serpent had its beginning, by that way also it might have an undoing. For Eve, being a virgin and undefiled, conceiving the word that was from the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death; but the Virgin Mary, taking faith and joy, when the Angel told her the good tidings, that the Spirit of the Lord should come upon her and the power of the Highest overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One that was born of her was Son of God, answered, 'Be it to me according to Thy word.'⁴⁵

Justin Martyr's work was further developed by many of the early fathers⁴⁶ and became church dogma, affirmed by many 20th century Church documents including *Lumen Gentium*, where She is called “the Mother of the Living,”⁴⁷ *Evangelium Vitae*, where She is referred to as “the Mother of believers, the Mother of the Living,”⁴⁸ and in the Anglican-Roman Catholic shared statement on Mary, *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ*, where Anglicans and Roman Catholics are encouraged to see the Virgin Mary as both the Mother of the Faithful and the Mother of all the Living:

Christian believers acknowledge Mary to be the mother of God incarnate. As they ponder our Savior’s dying word to the beloved disciple, “ behold your mother” (John 19:27) they may hear an invitation to hold Mary dear as ‘ mother of the faithful’: she will care for them as she cared for her son in his hour of need. Hearing Eve called “ the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20), they may come to see Mary as mother of the new humanity, active in her ministry of pointing all people to Christ, seeking the welfare of all the living.⁴⁹

Dom Hélder Câmara's deep devotion to Mother Mary, as the Mother of the Faithful, who

45 Peter Kirby, *Early Christian Writings: Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter C*,

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

46 The scope of this paper does not allow a full development of this theological assertion concerning the Virgin Mary, but a good source for further reading, which fully traces the Patristic development of this doctrine, may be found in *Mary as the New Eve*, a compilation of Marian reflections written by John Henry Newman in his *Tracts of the Times*, compiled by Sister Eileen Breen, FMA, with the approval of the Fathers of the Birmingham Oratory, which may be accessed at <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/marian/newman1.html>.

47 Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 56, 1964, Documents of Vatican II, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed February 28, 2012).

48 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 103, 1995, Documents of Vatican II, http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM (accessed February 28, 2012).

49 The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ*, 72, 1994, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/mary_grace%20_and_hope.cfm (accessed February 28, 2012).

nurtures and cares for those who are members of Christ's Body, and the Mother of all Humanity, who has compassion and intercedes for sinners, calling them to embrace the love and compassion of God, is rooted both in Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Dom Câmara sees the compassion of Mother Mary to be so great, that She even embraces those who are confused about Her true identity. He writes, in *The Conversions of a Bishop*, of how many Brazilians confuse the Mother of God with the Afro-Brazilian deity, Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea. Many Brazilians sincerely love and honor the Virgin Mary in private prayer and in the Church's liturgical celebrations, yet, he muses, at least 2/3 of them think she is Iemanjá. He compares this confusion to the confusion many have when trying to say his own name.

When you're in my house you often hear someone knocking at the front door and shouting: "Dom Helda! Dom Hebe!" All sorts of different names. It isn't the people's fault that my name is rather difficult... to pronounce!... But imagine if I were to open the door and say: "You've come to the wrong house. There's no Dom Helda or Dom Hebe here!" People don't need to pronounce my name impeccably for me to know that it's me they're calling... It's the same with the Mother of God, who is also the Mother of Men, and the Mother of Fishermen: it really doesn't matter if people confuse her name with that of Iemanjá!⁵⁰

This is true because in the Incarnation, God in Christ humbled himself, and came down to our level, so that we could be raised with Christ into the divine life. Blessed Mary, as our model of discipleship, likewise humbles herself, as we are also called to do, so that following Her example, we can help raise the poor and oppressed out of their misery. Dom Hélder writes, "Incarnation means putting yourself on the level of the people you live and work with. Not so you can stay there... but so you can help them rise above it. The only way to help them rise is to start where they are."⁵¹ This was indeed how Dom Hélder lived his life: among the poor in poverty, working for the liberation of all.

50 Câmara, *The Conversions of a Bishop*, 122-123.

51 *Ibid.*

4. Humanity is one family, in which everyone, without exception, is a part.

*Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?*⁵²

If, as Dom Hélder believes, following the teachings of the Church, God is the Creator and Father of all humankind, and the Mother of God is also the Mother of all the Living, then it follows that humankind is one family, in which all human persons are included. Câmara believed that each human person was worthy of dignity and respect, because each bears the divine image. Dire poverty must be abolished, among other reasons, because it mars the divine image in those who are oppressed in poverty.⁵³ The Church must peacefully work to end the exploitation of the poor because this exploitation is contradictory to the work that Christ accomplished by becoming human, showing us the way to love, and liberating us from the bondage of sin by His death and resurrection.⁵⁴

This belief is foundational to his prophetic mission to work toward the creation of a just society, by being a voice for the voiceless poor, by empowering them to peacefully participate in their own liberation, and by compassionately influencing the rich to a conversion which would enable them to share their wealth with the poor. This is a belief that he not only proclaimed in sermon and tract, but by the way he lived his life- truly treating every person, rich and poor, Christian and non-Christian, as his brother and sister. Dom Hélder once told the story of a man named Antonio who came to him seeking help. He was homeless and unemployed. Dom Hélder wanted to help him, so he wrote a letter to a friend who owned a large shop, asking him to give him a job because Antonio was his blood-brother. The shop owner could not refuse to give a job to Dom Hélder's own blood-brother, but he was bemused to find that the bishop's own brother could have become so impoverished. He called Dom Hélder and asked whether or not Antonio was truly his brother, or whether Dom Hélder had only said that so the shop owner would employ him.

52 Malachi 2:10

53 Hélder Câmara, *Charismatic Renewal and Social Action*, 57.

54 Câmara, *Sister Earth*, 32.

“Not at all. He is my brother, I tell you.”

“Brother, brother: I know, all the world's your brother!”

“Honestly, he is my brother. We've got the same Father.”

“Didn't you tell me: blood-brother?”

“We call those blood-brothers who have the same blood of the same father in their veins.

So there you are: Christ shed the same blood for you, for me, for Antonio. So, we're brothers in the blood of Christ.”⁵⁵

Dom Câmara's theological thought is rooted in the Pauline theological declaration of Christ's universal self-offering in love which has brought salvation to all humanity. The writer of the First Epistle to Timothy writes: “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.”⁵⁶ The writer makes this declaration in context of an admonition on prayer: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁵⁷ N.T. Wright explains that this text was written to provide an explanation for how Christians were to respond to the Emperor's demand that prayer be offered to the Emperor as 'lord and savior.' Jews were exempted, and allowed to pray to God on behalf of the Emperor, as were Christians initially, when they were viewed as a sect of Judaism. But, with increasing Gentile conversions, Christians lost this exemption, and were forced to pray to the Emperor. Of course this presented a problem for Christians: the author of the Epistle addressed the issue by admonishing the faithful to pray for their rulers, because it is pleasing to God our Savior. They were to pray to God on behalf of the Emperor, in order that there might be a peaceful and godly society, but the author was clear that God alone is our Savior, not the Emperor.⁵⁸ The proclamation of God's desire to save us is of primary importance to the author of this Epistle. In the first chapter he writes that the purpose of Christ's coming was to save humankind: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ

55 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 58.

56 1 Timothy 2:5-6

57 1 Timothy 2:1-4

58 N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastorals*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 25.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”⁵⁹ In chapter 2, he continues by explaining God's desire that all humanity be saved, and that Christ, the one mediator between God and humanity, became human and offered himself “a ransom for all.”⁶⁰ A.K.M. Adams comments that this Epistle never explains what salvation is, nor from what humanity needs God's saving intervention. What is important for the author is the fact that God wills to deliver humanity from some worse condition to a better one, and that God desires to do this through Jesus Christ for every human person. Since this is true, the Christian is called to live a holy and peaceful life which respects the dignity of every other human being. Thus, “our lives in the earthly city display to the world an embodiment of an alternative, more wondrous possibility: a world of grace without bounds, peace without oppression, abundance without exploitation — a world of grace opened for us and for all people uniquely by God's redemption of creation in Jesus Christ.”⁶¹

5. The immense human family extends into and complements the family of the angelic spirits, who offer us fellowship, help, and protection.

*Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.*⁶²

Dom Hélder held a firm belief in the literal existence of angels and the traditional teaching of the Church that we each have a Guardian Angel. In fact, he had a close friendship with his own Guardian Angel, who he named Jose, after the nickname his mother had given him as a child. He often prayed to Jose, asking for protection in times of danger, and assistance when he needed strength to do some task when there was no human help available. He looked to his angel for solace, encouragement, and the courage to help the oppressed.

Dom Hélder said that he had never seen an angel- not even his Guardian Jose- but he was convinced with all certainty that angels exist, and that they are near us, protecting us and helping us. In

59 1 Timothy 1:15

60 1 Timothy 2:4-6

61 A.K.M. Adams, “Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1-7,” 2010, Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/19/2010 (accessed February 29, 2012).

62 Matthew 18:10

1950, while in Rome, Dom Hélder had gone to a Church in order to say daily Mass, as was required of all priests then. He waited in line for his turn, but it seemed a fellow priest always slipped in front of him, most likely because of his small stature. At last all of the priests had taken a turn, and the Franciscan friar who was serving at the altar for each Mass was clearing the altar and ready to leave when he noticed Dom Hélder. The friar was annoyed, and Dom Hélder meekly suggested that he leave and return the next day, believing that God would honor his intention to say Mass. However, the friar refused to allow him to leave without saying Mass, and prepared the altar, but informed Dom Hélder that he would not stay to serve at the altar. “Don't worry,” Dom Hélder replied, “my angel will serve the Mass.” At that moment, a brilliant light filled the church, and the friar fell to his knees trembling and weeping until the Mass was ended.⁶³

Dom Hélder admitted that the simplicity of his faith baffled many. And yet, his belief in angels was rooted in a theological system that was not as simplistic as Dom Hélder's humble faith would lead some to believe. Dom Hélder was an ardent disciple of Teilhard de Chardin, especially his reflections on matter as “something living.” Following de Chardin, Dom Hélder did not see a distinction between spirit and matter, and given the diversity of created things: animals, humans, minerals, plants, etc., it was easy for him to see room for the existence of a creatures “between humans and God.”⁶⁴

Holy Scripture defines angels as ministering spirits and servants of the people of God.⁶⁵ They appear throughout the biblical narratives, from the Creation story in Genesis, to the Apocalyptic visions recorded in the book of Revelation. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes believers to practice hospitality to strangers, because in doing so, some have met angels unawares.⁶⁶ Finally, the existence of Guardian Angels is alluded to by Jesus himself: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in

63 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 10-11.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Hebrews 1:14

66 Hebrews 13:2

heaven.”⁶⁷ The Book of Tobit provides one of the most explicit stories of the service of an angel, in this case the Archangel Raphael, who is sent by God, disguised as a human, to offer protection and healing to human beings. Some assign angels to the realm of myth and legend, despite their place in the calendar of saints, and the liturgies and prayers of the Church. Dom Hélder Câmara, however, truly believed in their existence and their assistance to God's people. He believed they protected him, guided him, and empowered him to be a servant.

6. The central act in which the human and angelic families are gathered together to meet with the Creator and Father is the Holy Mass, understood not as a magical ritual of a particular sect, but as a cosmic and universal act in which the divine-human One, Jesus Christ, the Priest of Creation, recapitulates and perfects all things, leading them in the Spirit back to the Father.

*He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.*⁶⁸

Dom Hélder Câmara held deep devotion to the Sacramental Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He celebrated Mass daily at 6 AM, after his daily three hour prayer vigil, and found great comfort in the Presence of Christ housed in the Tabernacle on the wall opposite his bed in the little apartment in which he lived in the back of a church in Recife.⁶⁹ However, for Dom Hélder, the Church's celebration of the Mass is more than a liturgical act by which Christ is made present in the remembrance of His death and resurrection; It is a sign of the Cosmic Mass offered to God the Father by Christ, the Priest of Creation. In Dom Câmara's view, our Eucharistic celebrations point to the teleos of the cosmos- to the true Mass, which is the perfection of all things in Jesus Christ, who gathers all things together, and presents them back to God, their source.

The creation of the human being is a foreshadowing of the teleos of the cosmos and Christ's offering of the true Mass. It is in the Human creature that all of the elements of the creation, to which

67 Matthew 10:19

68 Ephesians 4:10

69 Hall, 19.

we are kin: minerals, plants, animals, and angels, are all summed up and united. God desires to make human beings partakers of the divine nature, and as humanity ascends to heavenly places, so does all of the material world.⁷⁰ Dom Helder's view of humanity is similar to that of Teilhard de Chardin, who saw humanity as an arrow pointing to the unification of all things in a higher state of Christ-consciousness.⁷¹ Our celebration of the Eucharist is in part, to quote Pope Benedict XVI, "to consecrate the world so that it may become a living host, a liturgy: so that the liturgy may not be something alongside the reality of the world, but that the world itself shall become a living host, a liturgy."⁷² Our celebration of the Eucharist is likewise a foreshadowing of the ultimate unity of all creation in Christ, as in the Eucharist, humankind is united in Christ, with angels and all the hosts of heaven in the worship and praise of God.

Dom Câmara's theology of the Cosmic Christ and the teleos of creation is rooted in Pauline Christology. Deutero-Paul, writing to the Ephesians writes: "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."⁷³ Humankind was brought forth as a sum of all things in the material world, in order to bring them to their perfection, and give voice to them in praise to God. However, the use of human freedom to follow the selfish desires of the human will- which Dom Câmara understands as sin- has brought imperfection and cursed consequences to both humankind and to all of creation. For Dom Câmara, this explains the social inequalities between the rich and poor and the exploitation of the poor- and of creation- in order to satisfy human greed. However, by the Incarnation, all things have been gathered together in God in Jesus Christ, and by his death and resurrection, and his victory over death, blessing has been restored not only to humankind, but once again to all of the creation. Thus, Christ fulfills God's will for the human race, by summing up all things into one and offering them in their perfection

70 Câmara, *Through the Gospels*, 8-10.

71 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Appearance of Man* (London: Collins, 1965), 224

72 Benedict XVI, "Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI," 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724_vespri-aosta_en.html (accessed March 1, 2012).

73 Ephesians 1:8b-10.

to God. We are called to participate with Christ, by working with Him to create a just society free of human selfishness and its deathly consequences.⁷⁴

Because of Dom Hélder's belief that Christ is the Priest of all Creation, who is recapitulating all things and bringing them to perfection, he had a mystic relationship with animals, plants, even the elements. He saw all creatures as his brothers and sisters, much in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. He would often talk to animals, his roses, even the ants in garden, musing on God's generous love for all that God has made. He believed that the creation helps us to better understand God. During his prayer time, he composed many prayer-poems to the birds, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Mother Earth, Sister Trees, and other creatures. He was able to discern within the creation a window into the spiritual; for him the natural was a doorway to the supernatural.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Dom Hélder Câmara's spirituality was grounded in his belief that God is love and has created all that is out of love and for love. He believed that God is the Father of all humankind, and that God has called humankind to continue God's work of creation as co-creators. We are to love and care for one another and for all of creation. Because of human selfishness and weakness, human beings too often destroy the creation, and oppress their brothers and sisters. Christ came to liberate us from our weakness, to teach us to love and respect all equally, and to call us to continue his work as co-redeemers. The Church is called, he believed, to live simply in solidarity with the poor, to witness to human equality by empowering the oppressed to work for their own liberation, and to persuade the rich oppressors to share their wealth with the poor and to cease exploiting their brothers and sisters. He believed that Christ is bringing all things to perfection in God, but we are called to participate in the work that Christ is doing, and all of us have an essential role in God's work of creating and redeeming the cosmos.

⁷⁴ Hélder Câmara, *Catholic Renewal and Social Action*, 14-15.

⁷⁵ Hall, 67-68.

Dom Hélder is a wonderful resource for parishes who want to take seriously the baptismal calling of all of God's people to ministry. His poems are a rich source for prayer and contemplation. His wisdom offers guidance to small groups committed to works of social justice. His life and witness offer inspiration to clergy who want to empower the laity to the life of prayer and service.

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