

A Theology of the Urban Space

Néstor Míguez

39th Trinity Institute National Theological Conference
Radical Abundance: A Theology of Sustainability
January 21-23, 2009

First of all, I want to say thank you for the opportunity given to me by this invitation to share this Conference with you through these days. Even if it was not the original intention, it resulted in our being here at what might become a meaningful moment in the world history: The first days of the presidency of Barack Obama. What and how much of the awaited and needed change will really happen is yet to be seen. Unplanned things surge in human reality, sometimes opening new hopes, sometimes frustrating them. And the decisions made in the coming days will tell us which of these two will take place, or, more probably, how both, hopes and frustration, will intertwine in expected and unexpected ways.

It is also at least a coincidence that we meet on Wall Street, at the locus of the financial crisis that is shocking the world, putting on stage a dramatically misshapen world economy under the doctrines of neo-liberalism, monetarism, and financial speculation, and the impositions of the global and total free market. The preached “only way” turned out to be a way to growing injustice, leading to disaster, exposed to fraud, and driving millions of people into the abyss of uncertainty, poverty, and helplessness. The system has overtly shown its failures and, as always, the price is to be paid by the workers, the poor and destitute, the same ones who have no part or benefit from the prevailing order.

As we meet today in our conference, these things offer also a way of entry to what is one of my arguments in this discussion, and that is the tension between planning, dialogue, and the need to recover the eschatological dimension, even the apocalyptic thrust of the Christian faith, of the “already but not yet,” of a coming that is already here, of the eruption of the transcendence that is yet immanent, a nucleus of the confidence that nurtures the life of the people oriented by the messianic dynamics of Jesus.

Some theologies have read in Scriptures a “plan of salvation” as a predetermined route that God provides to humans for their restitution. In modern times it has been highly influenced by the idea of progress, of a more or less continuous plan of salvation, influenced by the notion of “planned development.” In ancient understanding, development was a matter of putting into action what was already “potentia.” But the Enlightenment and Modernity brought about another concept: it was a matter of human activity to create the possibilities of one thing to become another. And these achievements were to be implemented through certain stages, intentional actions, and successive steps. This possibility is not an act of nature, but the expression of human capacity to investigate and foresee, to imagine and transform, to desire and do.

It is also the case of the Marxist idea of a class struggle that will lead to the classless society of perennial welfare for all. Also the capitalistic “end of history” sees in neoliberal economics the climax of individualistic happiness, with the invisible hand of the market taking care of all contradiction, solving unexpected conflicts and, through competition and technology, endlessly increasing riches, establishing a paradigm of human nature in which greed and speculation bring about perennial happiness.

These philosophical and economic ideas have had their theological correlates, some more crude, others more sophisticated. Along the same line, biblical scholars were able to depict a “history of salvation” in Scriptures, a plan that takes us one step to another in God’s redeeming plan. The idea of progressive revelation, through the Old and New Testament, from polytheistic religion to monotheistic faith, from sacrificial religion to the love commandment, or the interpretation of the biblical scheme in a successive Trinitarian timely disclosure, dominated certain trends of Scriptural studies.

Why should we take time to consider this particular point of “progress” in the philosophies and theologies of the past century? One reason is that these ideas have been accompanying the process of urbanization of the world population. They are ideas born and bred in and with the growing of city life, and, in many respects, are closely associated with the notion of “civilization,” that life in the *civitas*, in the city, is a superior way of life. The “bourgeoisie,” the inhabitants of the “burgo,” has been considered the motor of historic change. The possibility of bourgeois ideas to become hegemonic is at the root of the ideologies of unlimited progress. More so as urban culture penetrates also the rural areas through the expansion of mass media, of the automobile culture and the shopping center, which propagate the illusions of city-centered consumer society even in unsuspected rural “wilderness.” As a matter of fact, urban residence continually increases; it already surpasses the rural population globally and continues to grow, specially in certain countries, like Bolivia or Peru, that were rural countries until 15 years ago.

The economy of the city may have provided the pattern for this understanding of history. From urban artisanship to industrial production, and now to digital virtual finance capitalism, the city was able to disentangle itself from the cyclical rhythm of agriculture, and was able to plan and foresee (at least to a certain point) the development of work and market. So the idea of progress and the habit of planning were matched in the mind of the bourgeois.

Postmodernism did at least bring a certain suspicion to this overarching scheme. Progress and planning were not as sure as they seemed. While it would be foolish to deny that changes have occurred, and in some sense for the betterment of human life, new foes and inequality have been brought up. The gap between rich and poor is constantly increasing, reaching now a level of unfairness unprecedented in economic history. The planet is at risk due to the uncontrolled waste of resources and unpredicted consequences of certain developments in the areas of technologies, sanitary conditions, use of energy, and so on. New immoral war theories are formulated, and corruption, as I will explain later, is the leading attitude in business. The idea of linear, unlimited or even dialectical progress has to be submitted to falsification by these and other facts. Progress in some fields has to be balanced with decay and increasing injustice in others, or with blindness to our own human fallibility.

Without ignoring, then, the various changes in human situations, we should not look at them as a one-way paved street to happiness, not even as a bumpy way, but as an ongoing effort to find how to deal with things and modifications as they come about or we provoke them. There is a necessary dialogue that has to take into account new circumstances, different ways of posing and solving problems, alternative ways to see things and to respond to them, not only from human beings, but by the whole created reality.

Another reading of the Bible allows us to see things in a different way. What God does is not to act out a preconceived plan, but to maintain a dialogue with humanity, which takes into account the diversity of situations and human responses. God maintains the intention of salvation, but not the rigidity of a given plan. As individuals and communities engage in the exercise of their freedom, with their predicted and unpredicted consequences, acts of selfishness and solidarity, courage and cowardice, mistakes and violence, but also in their love and hopes, we go about changing our situations, living conditions, and ways of conceiving our relationships with our neighbor, nature and the divinity.

God is the giver of that freedom that allows us to perform in such a way. It would be a self denial of God's love if God would go ahead with God's own plan, ignoring or only judging human action, demanding always one and only one possible response to God's presence. God's omniscience is not about knowing in advance what humans are about to do, now and always, or requesting the "correct answer" to an ethical test. Instead, I understand God's perennial wisdom as embracing multiple ways of giving loving responses and renewing creative relationships amid the changing scenarios caused by our activity, and that of the whole of creation. So there is no "sacred history" in which God runs God's own plans in parallel to human events, inserting here and there a few stitches in the tissue of human dealings.

That is why it is necessary to think that in the divine paradigm, the whole task of "planning" must maintain a momentum of dialogue and openness, with persons, peoples and cultures (forms of family, habitus, class issues and sectors, etc.), but also with the built and natural environment. God's action in history takes into account human planning and expectations, but also the unplanned events that produce unexpected results. Through history, God hears humans' answers, sees our activity, discerns our goals, and takes them seriously. But not only that; through the prophets, through the visions and the faith community, through unannounced happenings and

promised fulfillments, through the action of the people or the claims of the weak, God also takes the initiative, proposes alternatives, invites new involvement of human beings in our own salvation. That is the way of grace, a grace that does not depend of human agency, but neither disallows human synergy.

Thus, the different, and often ambiguous and contradictory responses of human beings are part of the salvation dialogue. Instead of looking at history as a succession of God predetermined events, or even as a mechanical development of what is inscribed in nature, in human society or in economic laws, we consider history the ever changing setting of an ongoing interaction of multiple actors and facts. Humanity is not, by any means, single and unique. We are crisscrossed by realities of class, culture, gender, and ways of living. These are not neutral facts in this dialogue. Human responses to historical situations are built out of concreteness. And God's action in this dialogue is also partisan. God's messianic presence is that of the born in total modesty, of the political refugee, of the wandering artisan, of the popular leader, of the despised prophet, of the crucified by the powers that be. God's concern in God's dialogue with humanity is tied up with the different historic situations, but also with the luck of the weak. When we think about the built environment as Christians, we cannot look at it without bringing into the picture God's partisanship.

But, coming to our own concern in this conference, how does this view affect our understanding of "radical abundance?" It has to do, among other things, with planning: Who plans "development," and for whom? With what sense of power and with what perspective of human life does planning occur? How does dialogue enter into the situation? How do different attitudes and circumstances in life affect the vision of the planner? Any planner is in a power position, and that means a class and culture location. City planners do not come from the margins, are not chosen among the underprivileged dwellers of the outskirts of the city. In most cases, gender is also a factor, and patriarchal vision is not excluded even in women planners.

My own personal experience, the only time I was involved in some way in a housing project, was about twenty years ago and was not a very happy one. With all good will and social concern, a project was agreed upon between an ecumenical social action group and the municipal authorities in the city of Moreno, part of the so called "third collar" of Greater Buenos Aires. The houses were meant especially for single parent families headed by women, and all the inhabitants came from what we would call "lower class." It was a neat project, and the women participated in different aspects of the planning.

Finally we came to a certain agreement as to what was to be done and how. Planners, architects, and builders brought their own expertise to the project. In a sense, because of the technicalities involved, they had the final word. Ecumenical institutions and the city council shared the financing. So finally the power was there, and not with the women involved. Beyond all the problems and difficulties that sprout when politicians are involved, the "barrio" was finally inaugurated (even if it was never totally finished). When compared to the previous living conditions of those families, it was like heaven. I was asked to go house by house to bless them, following the ways of popular religiosity. Women were shocked by the idea that they were having their own house. Many tears came to their eyes as they took possession of the houses, that for our middle class standard we will consider modest, but for them they were deemed palaces.

Then, cultural issues that no one had considered appeared. For example, these women, living under very poor conditions, were not used to paying for electricity. Or to contributing for the maintenance of the common water well. The fact that now they had a brick house had not bettered their economic or working conditions. For some, transportation to their work place became more expensive. Some of them believed that we had lured them into a trap to get money out of them (that was their experience with other institutions). These things eroded the women's confidence in the churches, and even in themselves, creating tensions between those who were able to pay and those who were not, or refused to do so.

Some of them invited their casual partners to live in the house, and police and judicial matters came to the fore when some of the men took possession of the house when the relationship was over: it is typical for men to send the woman away and not the other way around. As small children grew into teenagers, the problem of sexual harassment and drug abuse became urgent. Following ancestral custom, some relatives moved in, and some of the houses became so crowded that once again one of the foes we thought to combat, promiscuity, became a matter of concern. Other sources of conflict appeared. At the end, the betterment of the quality of life we had envisioned for those families, after some years, had faded away. And the institutions that had supported the project withdrew little by little, unable to cope with the new problems. Even the ecumenical base community we had created in the "barrio," together with an Anglican pastor and a Catholic priest, broke up because of the internal struggles originated by these circumstances. Finally the ecumenical institution was dissolved.

I can now see some of the facts of this failure:

Some cultural habitus are hidden even, and especially, for those who live in them. It was totally "natural" and culturally expected that relatives will move in: it is part of family solidarity imbedded in popular culture. Yet we were unaware of it in planning the use of space and no provision was made for that.

The "educational" process failed. We did certainly have preliminary meetings, in which things were discussed and rules were spelled out and agreed, but many of these were women that had learned to stay alive beyond and against the rules. It was thought that changing their living conditions would help them to incorporate new habits. But centuries of survival culture were more powerful than a couple of years of monthly meetings.

The system had not changed, and oppressive conditions championed over our good will. Abusive conditions and the consequences of poverty could not be done away with through planning a friendlier "barrio." We had overlooked the fears and prejudices, the cultural mistrust, the aggressiveness and loss of dignity created by centuries of exploitation, by the political system based on a patron-client scheme, by the framework of violence in which these people were brought up, the persistence of some gender-marked attitudes-even in the case of women who became aware of them, but were unable to avoid the consequences.

Other things were part of the “built environment” that we had not considered. There was already there a whole “built environment” of institutions, private and governmental, with their laws and bureaucratic instances. An economic environment built through capitalistic exploitation, a cultural environment that stressed the limits of the poor, the women, the excluded. An environment built, not only outside, but also in the subjectivity of all of us who were involved in the project, much more solid and stable than the bricks, and that persisted beyond what we had thought, resisting the creation of alternative building.

Finally, the “natural environment” also gave unexpected answers. The soil did not behave well with the new situation. That could be explained afterwards, but was not expected beforehand. The “reaction” of the soil, of the trees, of the water well, protested in its own language. The natural means and the materials also give their answers.

We have learned much also from this frustrating experience. New projects are being designed by other groups, that try to overcome these shortcomings of our previous experience. This makes me appreciate in new ways God’s patience and incarnation. Planning is an open business, and results are never what we expect. The new and unexpected comes in; surprises, for good or bad, appear. Sometimes they can be explained afterwards and then they seem logical, but in practice we always ignore some of the facts: the reaction of free human beings, the deepness of cultural persistence, the changes in politics, the behavior of nature, and many other things are never strictly predictable. And it is not only the human environment, but the Divine and the whole of creation that becomes part of the dialogue. It is necessary to take into account the integrity of creation, the material dimension of the dialogue. It is a dialogue of all creation.

Because of God’s grace, there is also the new, the unexpected, the “messianic device” inscribed in us, giving hope, inspiring faith, inviting us to persist. God’s Spirit is there, coming from outside our subjectivity, from God’s transcendence. Acknowledgement of our limited capacities does not mean to renounce our involvement in human history, to propose and plan, to create and do, to will and perform. On the contrary, part of this surprise is God’s partisan mixing in human history as we carry it out. We are to celebrate God’s presence in history, most of the times in unexpected ways, as we do in Christmas. God’s grace is exactly that, the expected surprise.

Now, why is it that people and things do not behave as expected? The Bible gives us many clues. I will just mention one paragraph from Paul which seems to me extremely meaningful and appropriate for our theme: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of God’s children. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.” (Romans 8:18-22).

I am aware of the many exegetical difficulties in the passage that we do not have here the time to consider. But taking it as a whole, what struck me in this description by Paul is the image of a bondage to corruption. The present suffering is attributed to a creation under oppression, in bondage to “futility,” that is, slavery to corruption. Who subjected it and why is one of the ambiguities involved in the text. Yet, whatever our explanatory option might be, something is clear: Things are not what they were created to be. They have become something else, because they have become “vanity,” futility. The Greek word here recalls lingering, wandering about without a clear goal, doing worthless things or also emptiness: that is, actions or things devoid of their original intent. That is what is meant by a bondage to corruption. When I look up the word “corruption” in a dictionary, in this case to the English online Wikipedia, I find:

“Corruption is essentially termed as an ‘impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle; depravity, decay, and/or an inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means, a departure from the original or from what is pure or correct, and/or an agency or influence that corrupts.’ Corruption, when applied as a technical term, is a general concept describing any organized, interdependent system in which part of the system is either not performing duties it was originally intended to, or performing them in an improper way, to the detriment of the system’s original purpose.”

The corruption of an object or a human being is a deviation from its original purpose, meaning or function. And I find that today’s world system has become absolutely corrupt. It is not only the petty corruption of a bribe given to police to avoid a traffic fine. Not even some governor selling a Senate chair, or an African leader denying the reality of his country’s health system’s dramatic failure, or a president’s dishonesty in order to enforce terror while saying that he combats terrorism. Corruption is at the roots of the present world order, especially when we look at the development of the economy. Those examples just given are the hyperbolic expression of what is embedded throughout the structure of globalizing – and globalization is the “built environment” of today’s world. The system will not work if not on the basis of corruption. Corruption is the motor of the system.

The hegemonic pattern today is what has been called “late financial capitalism.” For capitalism, in any of its faces, the idea of profit is considered as an engine of all human activity. It even goes further, and some of its more radical advocates maintain that lust for gain and anxiety for accumulation are part of human nature. Yet, it must be clearly stated that that claim is far from true. The ways and objectives of exchange vary through different cultures. Economic greed is not universal, but a construction of the West. You find many sins in other cultures, but the will and ways to become rich, acquire glory or exercise power is not always the same. And, in our case, it is not considered sin, but a virtue! Not only “a” virtue, one among others, but the one that decides: to be ambitious is a requirement to be promoted to executive posts in business.

Now, the search for economic gain causes human activities to be subjected to an end other than their own. For example, a laboratory sells medicine to cure disease. The declared goal is to ensure health. But in that same act is the pursuit of another purpose, which is economic gain. And if the two conflict, then the search for profit takes the upper hand. It is more important to satisfy the shareholders than to provide medicine to a sick population, especially if it is poor. Copyright and trademark laws are enforced to protect profit, not the wellbeing of the population.

In that same order, many urban construction companies are engaged in building “houses to sell,” not necessarily for inhabitation. They design houses, buildings, and closed neighborhoods that are modeled by fashion, planned for the market, meeting the requirements of the investor, not of the occupant, even less of the complex needs of the city and its environment, natural and social. The recent mortgage crisis reveals the weakness of the housing market, since plans are made in order to sell, not for the sake of better living conditions.

Now, this should not surprise us. The modern city is a result, in many senses, of industrial production. It grew with the industrial revolution, and modified the medieval and feudal city by the introduction of new forms of production. This “produced” the city and the built environment that we now know and inhabit. Not only because the city was needed and adapted for industrial production, but also because the products of industry shape our lives and environment (the car being the most evident example).

Now, industrialization grew hand-in-hand with capitalism, with the rise of the bourgeois class. Even if protest grew, and eventually in some areas different sorts of socialist experiments grew and are still implemented, the basic design of the modern city is still marked by the changes brought by capitalistic industrialization, at least in the West. The ideologies and theologies of progress that we mentioned before are associated also with this development.

In Latin America and many other Third World nations and peoples, the city is the product of colonialism, which either constructed them or dramatically altered the traditional existing cities. As a matter of fact, conquest and colonial occupation are what have built today’s environment; not only the city, but also in rural areas. Traditional ways of life were submitted to the greed, needs, and customs of the invaders. And the existing economic systems and culture were modified to meet the demands of the new hegemonic impositions. The introduction of new myths and rites, of capitalist values and relationships, has hybridized the existing culture and uprooted people’s identity. It is very difficult to find oneself “at home” when home is defined, arranged, and even owned by others. The Pauline statement that “all creation... is subjected to the slavery of corruption” is not only a theological assertion, it is the life experience of the poor, of the oppressed, of the destitute, of those who suffer ethnic, gender, or class discrimination. That fragility has been worsening with today’s globalization.

Although many of these countries, through the 19th and 20th Centuries, became independent, most of them are still subject (under the bondage of futility, in slavery to corruption) to neo-colonial conditions, to the dictates of international finance centers, to the requirements of external markets. The prevailing economic scheme at the world level is that of finance capitalism, and everything built in it must adapt to its laws. While postmodernism criticized the “cunning of reason” of the Enlightenment, it goes on without a severe critique of its economic outcome: financial capitalism. Rather, in the last analysis, postmodern philosophy acts as an ideological cover of late global capitalism: the cunning of reason has turned into the reason for cunning. In its late stage, submitting the production of goods to financial speculation and the global imposition of the “free market,” it pretends to replace the collective by the individual, the *res publica* by the private interest, the needs of the majority of world population by the hedonist pleasure of the global elite. To give one example, we can mention the rise of the prices of food, especially grain

and oil producing commodities, because of the need to turn them into energy for the cars of the affluent world and its ruling class. Small agricultural producers rent their land to “seed pools,” which produce for the large world market using new technologies that replace the rural laborers. So the small farms are “swallowed up” by these great anonymous capitals, and do not feed anymore the immediate population. The farmers get a higher rent than the benefit they obtained through the hard work, and they go to the city to gamble in the commodities stock market. Away also go the laborers, and their families, to populate the miserable shanty towns that encircle the big cities. This is really the way the environment is being built in the reality of most of the Third World and also in the holes of poverty of the affluent world. This is also the cause behind the new trends of migration: people go where their money goes.

Who plans, who decides, what are the goals and considerations in the way this environment is built? The whole landscape has changed: the environment is now built and designed, not any more by the hopes, lives, and desires of the surrounding population, but by the tyranny of the “free market.” This has altered the whole agricultural scheme in the world, and is threatening to increase the suffering of the hunger stricken populations of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Not to mention the consequences for nations like Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia of the increase of drug consumption in the “developed” world, able to pay for some grams of cocaine the worth of several days of a family diet. What were bean-producing farms have turned into hidden coca plantations, and what were communal rural villages are now living afraid of the dealer’s power. Creation subjected to corruption.

It is not my intent to blame the city for the distress of the poor. City and rural poor alike are not fit for the global free market economy. The market only considers those who have money. The “free market” does not exist: market goods are never free, and what is free needs no market. Obviously I am aware that I am playing with the ambivalence of the word “free” in English. When the advocates of the free market use this expression they mean that the market should not be controlled by any rules but its own. But the two meanings are not so far apart as they seem. Because to have an uncontrolled market amounts to letting the market control everything. So in order to have a free market, nothing can be free of the market, so the market itself becomes the “slave market.” The poor of the world and the ecology of the earth are paying the price of the “free market.” By the way, Christian theology still is lacking a thorough study of the consequences of the doctrine of grace in the field of economics.

The suffering of human beings and the whole of creation by this particular system of submitting creation to “corruption” shows that cities, houses, or even the way of land ownership are not built to fulfill their primary goal, but are corrupted as by another value, that measured in terms of money. As we read in the definition quoted above: “part of the system is either not performing duties it was originally intended to, or performing them in an improper way, to the detriment of the system’s original purpose.” It is profit, and not the quality of life of the majority of the people, that moves today’s developments.

It is certainly not the “free market” that Paul is thinking of when he writes that “the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Free market is not an expression of liberty, as the spokespersons of the

Imperial system want to convince us, but of corruption. Their liberty means the slavery of billions of other people. The purpose of “financial gain” is set as social organizer, thus fostering the perversion of ends. No wonder that creation groans and suffers.

Is there any hope? After depicting such an ominous panorama, is there anything that can be done but cry and lament? What would be a Christian witness in these given circumstances? What can a theology that wants to advance “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” offer?

Current pragmatic practices try to give fast and direct solutions to the problems that are arising, but they do not measure the consequences and unexpected reach of those answers. However, faith does not move as a reaction to a problem but from a vision inspired by God, guided by a commitment to life, and that begins to live up to that hope, the promised Reign of God. In many quarters, those who become aware of the present and coming problems begin to grow strategies of resistance. Yet, resistance, as opposition, is not enough. There is no future in the past. As Christian we are bound to talk of “proposition,” of hope, of the coming, of God’s surprise.

When we continue reading the passage of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we find this assertion of faith: “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for the adoption as sons (and daughters), the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what it is already seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.” (Romans 8:23-25).

Certainly, in Paul’s anthropology, material existence is not to be despised: we do not await the saving of our souls, but a bodily redemption of ourselves and the whole of creation. It has to be saved from corruption and restored to its purpose. Human life, the beauty of creation, and divine love are also manifested in the way we deal with the material reality, in which materiality is included in our salvation dialogue.

We are called to act in an “ethics of anticipation,” in such a way that our behavior shows the kind of life we are longing for. This leads to adjusting behavior to the vision, as a way of changing the prevailing symbolic system. That is to put life, and not profit, at the center of any decision. Paul is aware that this justice needs to overcome the shortcomings of what he calls “the justice of the law.” The main problem with the law, as I understand Paul, is that it conceals the real people. It acts as a screen that occults the other, and only lets us see a projected shadow. The other is not the subject with whom I interact, but the object of a regulated action. So my goal is to fulfill the formal requirements of the law. Thus, the law replaces the real other by a fiction of the other. This is why the only valid law is the one that directs me directly to the other: “Love your neighbor.”

The market has acquired the dimension of what Paul calls “the law.” It conceals the real neighbor, and relations with the other and with nature are mediated by money. Now, there is a place for market economy, as there is a place for life under the law. But law cannot save, it needs to be supplemented by grace. The same law (market) that was meant for life, because of sin, became death. Our problem is with the idea that only the market rules. The law condemns, knows no mercy, as the market knows not the idea of grace, of the gratuitous. Yet our humanness is sustained and nurtured in what cannot be priced, life is the product of love. To put a price to love has another name.

It is not simply by chance that Friedrich Hayek, the most radical champion of market economy, explicitly says that love has no place in economics, and, at most, it must be restrained to domestic relationships. If there is no place for love, for mercy, for grace, there is no place for life. The invisible hand of the market is pressing the human throat, choking life. A theology of incarnation, a pneumatology of God’s presence in creation, is bound to take love seriously in all areas of life. That will be “radical abundance.”

We live by grace: our behavior must signal that reality. We expect the unexpected, we hear the cry of the destitute, we are confident, not in the progress of history, but in the word that comes to us from the creator of times. To build a human environment of abundance we must recover the central value of human life, rescue it from the invisible hand of the market. History is not linear, not even dialectical: it is guided by the tension between memory and hope, between human liberty (with its failures and errors, its signs of solidarity and good will) and divine grace. To live in a human environment is to be aware of this ambiguity, and to be open to the transcendence that is manifested in the weakest. As W. Benjamin has said: “Every second is an open window for the Messiah to be manifested.” As Christians, we are called to live in anticipation of this reality, manifesting that “we have the first fruits of the Spirit” and for that, “we hope for what we do not see.”

© Néstor Míguez

For more information or to purchase a DVD of this talk:

Trinity Institute

Trinity Wall Street

74 Trinity Place

New York, NY 10006

www.trinitywallstreet.org/institute