

Chapter 3: Paul Farmer: A Model for the Theologian

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Paul Edward Farmer (1959–2022) was a physician, medical anthropologist, and social justice activist. Although interested in theology, particularly influenced by liberation theology, and spirituality, Farmer was not a professional theologian, a point that he himself would readily admit. Nonetheless, I want to present him as a model for those of us who seek to serve the world and the Church as doers of theology. Farmer presents, in my view, a dual form of modeling. I call the first one *analytical*. The second one is *existential* or *praxical*.¹ He models an *analytical methodology* that searches for the deeper structural causes of suffering and injustice. I propose that our analysis, as theological ethicists, must follow his lead without sacrificing the peculiar tools and identity of our trade. Yet, Farmer's work does not end with the publication of a paper or a book.

¹ I am using “existential” and “praxical” almost as interchangeable terms, although they do have different nuances. *Existential* emphasizes that it is a commitment in one's personal life. *Praxical* places the accent on the transformative dimension of the person's action. Thinking that perhaps I was coining a neologism, I did a Google search to see if “praxical” was already in use in English. It turned out two interesting websites. The first one is called *Dart Learning*. *Praxical* is defined as “a new learning initiative creating online workshops where everyone can experience science firsthand. We provide everyday people with the opportunity to be a scientist” (dartlearning.org.au/provider/praxical/). The second one is the website of the Society of Praxical Scholarship. Their definition of *praxical* is closer, although not identical to the meaning that I give to the term. They believe that students and scholars can change the world “through on the ground praxis that parses theory through empirical data, makes that abstract legible and accessible, and transforms experience into meaningful learning” (www.theoryandpraxis.institute/). In this paper, by praxical, I mean the practical dimension of intellectual work and analysis. We are reminded of the last of Marx's *Theses of Feuerbach*: *Until now, the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point now is to change it* (Theses XI). Theory must come together with an action that transforms the world at the service of those who are impoverished because of the way we have organized the distribution of power and wealth in society. Theory and practice form a unity, one is empty without the other.

Indeed, publication plays an ancillary role in his work. The main thrust of Farmer's work is practical. He and his associates engage directly with the service of the impoverished.² Their work, particularly through Partners In Health, focuses, as the name suggests, on issues of health. Our focus, as theological ethicists, normally has a broader scope. I argue, however, that we cannot exonerate ourselves from a practical commitment at the service of justice.

To establish a connection between the *analytical*, what we may perhaps considered as the strictly scholarly, and the *praxical*, the dimension of service, advocacy, and activism, I use a concept borrowed from the work of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937): the *organic* as opposed to the *traditional intellectual*. Farmer was a model of the organic intellectual, and I argue that we are called to be likewise. Ultimately, as followers of Jesus of Nazareth and as theologians, we are called to conjugate the analytical and the praxical in the footsteps of Farmer, yes, but also and foremost in the footsteps of Jesus who was teacher and Good Samaritan.

The Ecclesial and Social Mission of the Theologian

On May 24, 1990, the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published an instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, known as *Donum Veritatis*. The emphasis of this document is on what we may call the strictly intellectual and religious dimension of theological work, particularly on the relationship between the Church's official teaching and the work of the theologian. According to this document, the role of the theologian is:

² I prefer to talk about the "impoverished" rather than the "poor." In my view, the term "impoverished" underlines the structural causes of much poverty. The people served by Partners In Health are not poor because of their personal limitations or faults. Structural global and national inequities have robbed them of fair equality of opportunities and, therefore, of full participation in the basic rights and goods required for a life according to human dignity.

...to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church. He does this in communion with the Magisterium which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 6).

Throughout the document, we find a distinct emphasis on the authority of the Church's official Magisterium. The healthy critical role of theological reflection as a contribution to the development of doctrine, in a virtuous circle with the Magisterium, is not denied, but it is not in the forefront.³ The main concern seems to be the moderation of dissenting theologians. No one doubts that it is a legitimate concern, but if overemphasized, it runs the risk of impoverishing the understanding of the work of the theologian.

No one doubts that theological reflection is a ministry with an *ad intra* mission in the ecclesial community. As *Donum Veritatis* points out, theology is at the service of the progressive deepening of the understanding of the Christian message. It cannot be overlooked, however, that theology also has an *ad extra* mission. Theological reflection is a form of social engagement, rooted in the Gospel, with the world and its cultures. As theologians, we cannot be content with an aloof intellectual exercise, isolated in the ivory tower of academia or of the Church. This is particularly true in the work and vocation of the theological ethicist. Engagement with current social issues does not exonerate theologians

³ The bibliography about the relationship of theology to the magisterium is voluminous. Looking at some recent contributions from the perspective of theological ethics, I would suggest the book recently published under the auspices of Pontifical Academy for Life: Vincenzo Paglia, ed., *Etica teologica della vita: Scrittura, tradizioni, sfide pratiche* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Città del Vaticano, 2022), and, in that volume, Pier Davide Guenzi, "La riflessione teologica al servizio del magistero e *sensus fidei*", 165–175. For a general overview of the volume, Roberto Dell' Oro and M. Therese Lysaught, "Theological Ethics of Life: A New Volume by the Pontifical Academy for Life," *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no. 1 (2022): 65–77; and Jorge José Ferrer, "Rileggere l'etica teologica della vita," *Civiltà Cattolica* 4129 (2022): 60–71.

from the hard work of exegetical and historical research. It does not lighten in any way the requirements of theological scholarship. Quite on the contrary, it increases them. Besides traditional linguistic and historical learning, today the craft of theological ethics demands serious engagement with scientific contributions, particularly those from social sciences. Such an engagement has become an indispensable requirement for the theologian. Therefore, I insist that the intellectual demands are in no way diminished.

I propose that the work of Paul Farmer, his use of social analysis at the service of global health and the plight of the impoverished provide a model for a kind of theological ethics that we are called to articulate as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century in a globalized and acutely divided world. The incorporation of the results of social analysis and a commitment to the service of the impoverished, as Farmer did, are particularly important for those of us who live and work in what Pope Francis calls the peripheries of the world. It is also a duty for those who theologize from universities and research centers located in the rich countries, perhaps even more so. Social analysis, if taken seriously, can open our eyes to our own complicities with oppression. Such unconfessed complicities may invalidate the results of a theologian's work. As a sample of Paul Farmer's intellectual work, I primarily use what probably is his most explicitly theological book: *Pathologies of Power*.⁴ In this book, he engages extensively with the contributions and methods of liberation theology.

***Pathologies of Power* and the Analytical Component of Theological Work**

Farmer presents *Pathologies of Power* as the effort of a physician and medical anthropologist to reveal the ways in which a person's most basic right—the right to survive—is trampled in an age of great affluence. He

⁴ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

argues that this matter should be considered as the most pressing issue of our times. Anyone who professes, argues Farmer, even a passing interest in human rights should be concerned with the tragedy of the destitute sick. He rightly points out that human rights violations are not random in distribution or effect but rather symptoms of deeper pathologies of power, intimately linked to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm.⁵ If assaults on dignity are not random, he argues, “whose interests are served by the suggestion that they are haphazard?”⁶ In other words: Who benefits from the obfuscation of reality, a particularly urgent issue in the age of post-truth and alternative facts?

Farmer worked in places, such as Haiti, Rwanda, and the Siberian prisons in Russia, marked by conditions that can only be described as violent. Those who must endure extreme conditions of deprivation, lacking access to fundamental goods required for a life according to human dignity, are the victims of real and unadulterated violence. Since the misery confronted in those places and circumstances does not necessarily involve bullets and knives, it easily eludes the analysis of those who seek to identify situations of violence. Nonetheless, Farmer points out, we are talking about a different and perhaps a more insidious type of violence: *structural violence*. He correctly argues that if someone does not have access to sufficient and adequate nutrition, decent living conditions, and access to adequate health care, among other necessities of life, that person is being denied the most basic of rights: the right to live. Among these basic rights, I would add and emphasize access to quality education and information, particularly for the younger generations. It is a fundamental requirement

⁵ “Pathologies of power” has, in my opinion, a twofold meaning. On the one hand, oppressive power is pathological since it generates dysfunctional relationships. Oppressive power distorts the meaning and function of power. On the other hand, the pathologies suffered by the impoverished, as described by Farmer, are, to a large extent, the result of the pathologically oppressive uses of power. In other words, they are pathologies engendered by oppressive (pathological) power. When people die of preventable and easily treatable diseases, we are facing social pathologies, not only unfortunate biological infirmities.

⁶ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 7.

to break the cycle of impoverishment and oppression. Education gives tools for critical thinking, empowering people as agents of much needed structural change. It is striking to see that many people who declare themselves as prolife do not show much sensibility for challenges related to fundamental human rights and social justice, forgetting what the late Cardinal Bernardin taught us almost four decades ago about the seamless garment of a consistent ethic of life.⁷ A prolife stance that is not committed to social justice is hollow and inconsistent.

According to Farmer, an analytical model adopted to study the phenomenon of structural violence must be both *geographically broad* and *historically deep*.⁸ I propose that these two traits are also requirements for analysis developed by theological ethicists. It is interesting to notice here a virtuous circle between Farmer's methodology and liberation theology. He readily admits that the writings of liberation theologians enlightened his work as a medical anthropologist and physician at the service of the impoverished. In a similar fashion, I claim that Farmer's work can shed light on the appropriate analytical methodologies for our work in theological ethics. We can also talk about inter or transdisciplinary cross-fertilization between his anthropological reflection and our theological task. Indeed, the complexity of contemporary global ethical issues can only be fruitfully approached from an inter and transdisciplinary perspective.

In a globalized world such as ours, geographical broadness is indispensable for the analysis of most, if not all, social and ethical issues.

⁷ This idea was promoted by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928–1996) in several lectures in the mid-eighties. He advanced his proposal for the first time, as far as I know, in the Gannon Lecture at Fordham University in 1983. I think that the recuperation of his central idea is of the utmost importance. It would seem at times that Catholics are only interested in contraception, abortion, and euthanasia. No one doubts the relevance of those issues, but a genuine prolife stance requires much more. Commitment to human flourishing, global social justice, and ecological responsibility are essential components of a prolife commitment. It is interesting to reread a volume published in 1988 with Cardinal Bernardin's interventions and papers delivered by distinguished scholars in response to the Cardinal's proposal: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *A Consistent Ethic of Life* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988).

⁸ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 158.

More than in any previous age, we live in one world.⁹ Issues related to challenges such as pandemics or global warming can only be understood and fruitfully tackled when approached in the context of geographical broadness. The same can be said for the problem of extreme poverty in Haiti, or in the slums of Lima, or in New York. However, geographical broadness is, by itself, insufficient. Present global challenges are the result of long and complex historical processes.¹⁰ Our analysis needs to be “deep enough to recall—for instance—that modern-day Haitians are the descendants of a people kidnapped from Africa in order to provide our forebears with sugar, coffee, and cotton.”¹¹ It is impossible to understand the challenges of poverty and exclusion in Haiti, and in many other countries and populations, without considering the history of slavery, racism, and colonialism. These insights about analytical methodology are essential for our work in theological ethics, if we want to fully understand and to respond appropriately to the most urgent ethical issues of our time. Most of them are intimately related to the pathological uses of power that generate suffering, impoverishment, and diverse forms of violence. We certainly continue to live in a very structurally violent world.

Farmer’s analytical model requires the simultaneous consideration of multiple “social axes.”¹² It is important to consider factors such as gender, race or ethnicity, refugee or immigration status, sexual orientation,

⁹ This idea recalls the title of Peter Singer’s book *One World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ According to Henk ten Have, there are certain features that characterize global problems. A problem is global when it is not geographically located in a specific place or nation. Among other traits, global problems are systemic in character and their solution requires concerted global action. See Henk ten Have, *Global Bioethics. An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 55–57. The pathologies of power identified by Farmer are truly global problems requiring structural transformation on a global scale. Today, in a globalized world, social justice must be recast in *global* (or *cosmopolitan*) and not merely *political* terms. Traditionally, theories of justice, from Plato to Rawls, have been “political”: the State is the locus where distributive and social justice have meaning and can be required. I am convinced that we need to move from political to global or cosmopolitan theories of justice.

¹¹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 158.

¹² Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 42–43.

religious and political beliefs, and language or educational differences.¹³ We know that both during the HIV crisis in the 1980s and in the present COVID-19 pandemic, certain sociological groups have been disproportionately affected on account of some of these determinants of health and general welfare. These considerations are extremely important for the promotion of justice and the practice of medicine at the service of the impoverished. They are also essential for a lucid ethical analysis. Otherwise, we may end up blaming the victims. Farmer presents the example of recurrent tuberculosis in Haiti:

Authorities rarely blame the recrudescence of tuberculosis on the inequalities that structure our society. Instead, we hear mostly about biological factors (the advent of HIV, the mutations that lead to drug resistance) or about cultural and psychological barriers that result in “noncompliance.” Through these two sets of explanatory mechanisms, one can expediently attribute high rates of treatment failure to the organism or to uncooperative patients.¹⁴

This approach misses the point. Focusing on the biological tends to forget that “almost all tuberculosis deaths result from lack of access to existing effective therapy.”¹⁵ In a similar fashion, to attribute noncompliance to patients’ uncooperativeness or cultural backwardness ignores the structural barriers to what we normally call “therapeutic compliance.”

Certainly, patients may be noncompliant, but how relevant is the notion of compliance in rural Haiti? Doctors may instruct their patients to eat well. But the patients will “refuse” if they have no food. They may be told to sleep in an open room and away from others, and here again they will be “noncompliant” if they do not expand and remodel their miserable huts. They may be instructed to go to a hospital. But if hospital

¹³ These differences become barriers that marginalize people, that unfairly prevent them from reaching their full human potential, living lives according to the demands of human dignity.

¹⁴ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 147.

¹⁵ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 148.

care must be paid for in cash, as it is the case throughout Haiti, and the patients have no cash, they will be deemed “grossly negligent.” ... Similar scenarios could be offered for diseases ranging from typhoid to AIDS. In each case, poor people are at higher risk of contracting the disease and are less likely to have access to care. And in each case, analysis of the problem can lead researchers to focus on patients’ shortcomings (for example, failure to drink pure water, ignorance about public health and hygiene).¹⁶

Farmer penned these pages two decades ago. Unfortunately, we have, as already suggested, seen similar situations in the present COVID-19 crisis. In impoverished environments, citizens are advised to wash their hands frequently, but they do not have access to clean water. They are instructed to keep physical distance, but how can anyone comply living in an overcrowded refugee camp?¹⁷ It is obvious that the structural barriers need to be removed if we want patients to be “compliant.” It is necessary to engage in a form of analysis that seeks to understand the root causes of the problem.

Identifying the root causes is essential but insufficient. Once they are identified, action is required in the form of practical and timely aid to those whose very right to exist is threatened by impoverishment due to structural inequities. However, immediate aid, in the form of social services like providing food, medicines, health care, is essential but also insufficient. Engaging in the work of social transformation is required if we want to address the situation from the perspective of justice. It is important to help the person who is now in need. But it is equally important to understand and to change the pathogenic social and political structures. Social scientific analysis grounds a form of ethical reflection that inspires its practitioners to engage in transformative action, if it is going to come to

¹⁶ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 151.

¹⁷ Jorge José Ferrer, “Pandemia e inequidad en América Latina”, in *La humanidad puesta a prueba*, ed. R. Amo and F. de Montalvo (Madrid: Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2020), 377–392.

fruition, reaching its proper *telos*. An ethical analysis that does not engender a social commitment is empty. It is what “traditional intellectuals” (a category to be developed in the next section of this paper) are content to do.

Before we move from the analytical to the *existential* or *praxical* dimension of our presentation of Farmer’s work as a model for the theological ethicist, it is fruitful to consider his distinction between charity, development, and social justice as different approaches to the service of the impoverished. The in-depth analytical approach espoused by Farmer favors a social justice approach as the right option in the struggle against problems raised by diseases and suffering. We can and should expand the horizon beyond the medical idea of diseases to the full gamut of suffering and exclusion generated by impoverishment and structural violence.

As already suggested, the first approach is charity. Theologically, charity is the form of virtues, the very heart of Christian life and ethics. However, when Farmer talks about charity, he refers to what perhaps would be better to call beneficence or social assistance. The author is critical of the charity approach as he understands it. In his view, charity programs often tend to see those needing aid as intrinsically inferior, perhaps because poverty is seen as a result, at least in part, of the impoverished person’s own shortcomings. Certainly, Farmer points out, the impoverished are largely powerless but not mainly because of their faults and shortcomings. Mere beneficence has the danger of keeping the impoverished in their situation rather than empowering them, promoting the understanding of the hidden social dynamics—such as slavery, racism, colonialism, sexism—that have generated their plight.¹⁸

What has been said about charity does not mean, as it has been already suggested, that social assistance should be totally dismissed. People in need require timely and appropriate help. The person who needs food or medical treatment, needs them now. Farmer admits that it is possible “to

¹⁸ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 153.

overstate the case against charity Sometimes holier-than-thou progressives dismiss charity when it is precisely the virtue demanded.”¹⁹ What is important is not to ignore the “causes of excess suffering among the poor,”²⁰ which obviously need to be identified and remedied through social transformation. Partners In Health seeks to do both and so should the Church. Otherwise, we may be doing a sort of a patchwork that naively perpetuates oppression.

Therefore, charity continues to be essential, but it is unacceptable to stop there. The idea is to empower, transform, and work for a world without structural violence and impoverishment. Probably, we will never be able to have a perfectly just society, but it is the horizon towards which we are called in the service of the Kingdom of God announced and realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. A well-known paragraph of Vatican II’s *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* captures this:

While every exercise of the apostolate should be motivated by charity, some works by their very nature can become especially vivid expressions of this charity. Christ the Lord wanted these works to be signs of His messianic mission. ... At the present time, with the development of more rapid facilities for communication, with the barrier of distance separating men greatly reduced, with the inhabitants of the entire globe becoming one great family, these charitable activities and works have become more urgent and universal. These charitable enterprises can and should reach out to all persons and all needs. Wherever there are people in need of food and drink, clothing, housing, medicine, employment, education; wherever men lack the facilities necessary for living a truly human life or are afflicted with serious distress or illness or suffer exile or imprisonment, there Christian charity should seek them out and find them, console them with great solicitude, and help them with appropriate relief. This obligation is imposed upon every prosperous nation and person. In order that the exercise of charity on this scale may be unexceptionable in appearance as well as in fact, it is altogether

¹⁹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 154.

²⁰ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 154.

necessary that one should consider in one's neighbor the image of God in which he has been created, and also Christ the Lord to Whom is really offered whatever is given to a needy person... *and especially that the demands of justice be satisfied lest the giving of what is due in justice be represented as the offering of a charitable gift. Not only the effects but also the causes of these ills must be removed, and the help be given in such a way that the recipients may gradually be freed from dependence on outsiders and become self-sufficient.* (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 8, emphasis added)

Having examined the charity approach, the second approach is *development*, a notion that has been questioned and rejected as insufficient by liberation theology since its inception as a movement. The development approach seeks the overcoming of poverty through technological progress and increased economic productivity. The problem is this perspective preserves the power of major local and global economic interests: "Developmentalism not only erases the historical creation of poverty but also implies that development is necessarily a lineal process: progress will inevitably occur if the right steps are followed."²¹ As Gustavo Gutiérrez pointed out more than half a century ago: true development must tackle the root causes of the situations of impoverishment and oppression, transforming all relations of domination both on the transnational and national levels.²²

The third approach is the one favored by Farmer: *the social justice* model. The condition of the impoverished is ethically unacceptable since it is the result of human-made structural unfairness and violence. Uniting his voice to well-known thinkers in the field of disaster studies, Farmer talks about *unnatural disasters*. Talking to the graduating class of 2008 of Tulane School of Medicine, he commented that "Katrina, surprisingly, has

²¹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 155–156.

²² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación. Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1974), 50–52.

something in common with war: neither are ‘natural disasters.’”²³ It is common in disaster literature to distinguish between the natural event and the disaster. Considering an event, such as an earthquake or hurricane, may be useful to illustrate the point. The natural event affects everyone in the impacted geographical area, but it does not affect everyone in the same way. Those who are financially and socially weaker normally are impacted in a more severe way. In “Acts of God or Human Choices?” I wrote:

The naturalness of disasters... has been questioned or even totally rejected in much of the professional literature in the field of disaster studies. The habitual distinction between natural and anthropogenic disasters needs to be critically examined. Hazards such as hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, volcanoes, and pandemics traditionally have been labeled as “natural disasters.” On the other hand, consequences of war or an oil spill in the ocean have been labeled as anthropogenic or human-made disasters. Dónal P. O’Mathúna, Bert Gordijn, and Mike Clarke point out, however, that “such classifications can be arbitrary, especial as both natural and human-related factors are involved in most disasters.” ... Ben Wisner, Ilan Kelman, and J. C. Gaillard go even further. They affirm, in no uncertain terms, that there are many causes of disasters “but one clear truth: disasters are not natural.”²⁴

The absoluteness of the latter affirmation in the quote goes too far. It is possible to think of situations in which the natural component is

²³ Paul Farmer, *To Repair the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 157–158.

²⁴ Jorge José Ferrer, “Acts of God or Human Choices? An Ethical Reflection on Natural Disasters,” *Revista Iberoamericana de Bioética* 14 (2020): 5. The works cited within the quotation are: Dónal P. O’Mathúna, Bert Gordijn, and Mike Clarke, “Disaster Bioethics: An Introduction,” in *Disaster Bioethics: Normative Issues When Nothing Is Normal*, ed. Dónal P. O’Mathúna, Bert Gordijn, and Mike Clarke (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 4; Ben Wisner, Ian Kelman, and J. C. Gaillard, “Hazard, Vulnerability, Capacity, Risk and Participation,” in *Disaster Management. International Lessons in Risk Reduction, Response and Recovery*, ed. Alejandro López-Carresi, Maureen Fordham, Ben Wisner, Ilan Kelman, and J. C. Gaillard (London: Routledge, 2014), 13.

overwhelming, such as a tsunami. For the most part, however, it is true that disasters are anthropogenic. There is a direct correlation between the social vulnerability of a person or a group and their proneness to be victims of a disaster. Social vulnerability is not only related to socioeconomic status. Other factors such as race, gender, or citizenship status may enter in the equation. But the socioeconomic factors are of primary importance. Not infrequently other forms of marginalization also have a socioeconomic component. Disasters reveal in a very clear way preexisting social pathologies. At the root of disasters are structural inequities in the distribution of power and wealth in society, which are not natural.

In other words, disasters are caused, at least to a large extent, by preexisting social pathologies. Farmer's analysis uncovers those root causes of disasters and of health inequities. He carries out his analysis with the intellectual tools provided by his medical and anthropological training. It is my contention that this is also the type of analysis that we, theological ethicists, are called to adopt if our reflection is going to be at the service of a faith that does justice and promotes universal brotherhood and sisterhood. To carry out our own work we need to use both the results of qualified social scientists' work and the tools proper to theological and ethical analysis. We are called to uncover and denounce the situations of inequity and its structural roots.

Organic Intellectual

Ethical analysis of structural sin is difficult, in part, because we do not have a single identifiable person who is responsible for the situation under scrutiny. We are facing what has been called a "nonparadigmatic moral problem."²⁵ If A, for example, steals B's wallet, we have a responsible individual, who can be punished, as well as an identifiable victim. When we face problems such as colonialism, racism, or other forms of structural violence, the decisions that have generated the problem have been made by

²⁵ I borrow the idea of "nonparadigmatic moral problems" from Marion Hourdequin, *Environmental Ethics: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 150–151.

thousands of individuals across continents and throughout centuries. No one is entirely responsible, but we all share responsibility in the situation at hand. It is important to stress that such analytical complexity does not cancel our personal and collective moral responsibilities. Quite to the contrary, both personal and collective responsibility are enhanced. It is the task of the ethicist to unravel the complexity and to clarify the responsibilities that we all share in different degrees. Farmer's books and speeches constitute masterful models for the kind of intellectual work that we are called to do as ethicists and theologians.

But it seems to me that his modeling goes beyond the methods of ethical analysis. Farmer can also be seen as a model of the kind of intellectuals that we are called to be. Intellectual work and social analysis were undertaken by him within the broader context of an existential commitment to social transformation through advocacy and sustained action at the service of the impoverished in Haiti, Peru, Rwanda, or Russia. It is my conviction that we can apply to Farmer's life and work Antonio Gramsci's category of the *organic intellectual*. I think that the essential elements of this notion have been beautifully exemplified by Farmer, and I also think that we as theologians and ethicists are called to follow suit.

To understand Gramsci's interest in the role of the intellectual, it is necessary to understand his own history. Steve Jones's observations are illuminating:

We might ask why Gramsci was so concerned with intellectuals (indeed, his original plan was that the *Prison Notebooks* would be a history of Italian intellectuals). The answer lies in the problem of political representation: in other words, who is entitled to speak and think on behalf of a particular constituency? Like many other socialist intellectuals, Gramsci was a disaffected bourgeois who aligned himself with the working class.... The distance between middle-class intellectuals and the working class was a persistent problem for revolutionary socialism.²⁶

²⁶ Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 82–83.

Gramsci affirms that all persons are intellectuals and every human task, including manual labor, has an intellectual component. However, not all persons function as intellectuals in society. Some specialized tasks are privileged in society as intellectual while others are considered a lower status. In any case, every social group needs to produce its own intellectuals with the skills necessary to perform the intellectual tasks required not only to serve its economic interests but also for social and political identity.²⁷

The Italian author distinguishes between *traditional intellectuals* and *organic intellectuals*. He favors the latter. The organic intellectual is engaged with the complexity of social life with all its difficulties and messiness. Traditional intellectuals are characterized by their apparent detachment from such matters. A man of letters or an artist who claims to be interested only in eternal truths, unconcerned about politics or the economy, is the model of the traditional intellectual, inhabiting the proverbial ivory tower.

Gramsci's devotes many pages to his reflections about intellectuals. I think, however, that the broad brushstrokes presented suffice for our purposes. The organic intellectual is engaged in ordinary life, committed to the historical struggles of her or his time. This new intellectual cannot limit herself or himself to the eloquence or the motions of the affects and the passions. He or she needs to be actively involved in the struggles of daily life as builder and organizer, as someone who is engaged in the construction of a new society. A traditional intellectual is interested, we may say, in writing his papers, getting tenured, living the comfortable life of a middle-class professional, while articulating perhaps a progressive discourse. Coffee shop or pulpit revolution is tempting; it can tranquilize one's own conscience, but it ultimately is an exercise in self-deception. These reflections about intellectual styles also apply to us, doers of theology.²⁸ We can very easily become classroom or pulpit revolutionaries

²⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, volume III (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 1513; Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 81–83.

²⁸ I use the term *style* in the strong technical sense that it has in the work of Maurice Merleau Ponty and in the theological work of Christoph Theobald. It is a way of interpreting and

with little existential risk or discomfort. Theology, more than any other subject, requires a praxical commitment of its practitioners. Otherwise, we are at risk of an inauthentic existence and a theological work lacking credibility beyond our close circle of likeminded colleagues.

As professional theologians, we are intellectuals. Our theological work requires long hours of study in front of our books and computers. But our work is not neutral, even when we might delude ourselves under the pretension of neutrality. We need to continuously ask: whom we serve, to whom are we committed, where are our loyalties? Farmer's legacy offers, as I have already suggested, a model of an organic intellectual. His research and writing have high academic quality, but they have no pretension of uncommitted impartiality. His work was the fruit of a profound commitment to those impoverished by structural violence and the unfair distribution of power and wealth in the world. His intellectual work was at the service of their cause. Moreover, Farmer did not limit himself to theoretical work. He was, as we all know, an actively committed physician at the service of the impoverished. His loyalties were clear, putting his own existence on the line.

Not everyone has his multifaceted talents and training, his working capacity, or his rich network of relationships. Our contribution will probably be more modest, less outstanding. Nonetheless, I am convinced that we as theologians and ethicists are called to be organic intellectuals at the service of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. Such service requires a commitment to a faith that does justice. We are called to contribute to the Kingdom and the cause of the impoverished through our teaching and writing.

We cannot forget, however, that our teaching and writing are not enough. Some level of praxical commitment is required from each one of us. Neutrality is not a real option for anyone. It is even less of an option for

inhabiting the world. For a deeper understanding of style as a theological notion, see Luis O. Jiménez, "El concepto teológico de estilo como clave de lectura de *Laudato si'* y *Gaudete et exsultate*: una manera de encontrar a Dios en la acción transformadora del mundo," *Theologica Xaveriana* 70 (2020): doi.org/10.11144/javeriana.tx70.ctecl.

someone who aspires to a life of authenticity in the footsteps of the Lord. We are called to learn from Paul Farmer how to carry out our analysis, but, above all, we need to learn how we are to live our lives as organic intellectuals, committed to the Gospel call of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. We are also called to support each other in the quest for truth and the commitment to the Kingdom in our theological work. As I said at the beginning of this essay, Farmer was not a professional theologian, but he certainly models for us what means to be an authentic Christian intellectual in our times, committed not only to understand but also to transform a world that needs continued healing from pathological power both in our global society and in our Church.



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