

Chapter 6: Theologians in the Field: “Dices que eres un teólogo, ¿cuál es tu practica?”

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A medical anthropologist and a practicing theologian who studied medicine were bound to recognize in each other their shared love and commitment for healing the wounds of humanity. The friendship between Paul Farmer and Gustavo Gutiérrez is well known, and it invites reflection on their methodologies and, more particularly, on the centrality of fieldwork or “lo pastoral” as the foundation for generating theory and theology that is at the service of a suffering world.¹ The phrase and question that is the subtitle of this chapter—“you say you are a theologian, what is your practice?”—is one of many sayings that Gutiérrez has used to spark deeper thought about the vocation of the theologian.² In light of this provocation, the chapter weaves together the insights of Farmer and Gutiérrez to illuminate key aspects of the path that these two friends have walked, and unto which they invite us.

I begin by centering friendship as the heart of the preferential option for the poor that has grounded Farmer’s work. Then I analyze how Farmer’s liberationist-infused anthropological fieldwork is a bridge for theologians who are also turning to fieldwork for theological reflection. Lastly, I gesture toward Participatory Action Research as a framework that

¹ See, for example, Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

² For a longer analysis of this phrase in relation to Gutiérrez’s work, see Leo Guardado, “Haciendo Teología para un Futuro de Liberación,” in Andrés Gallego, Carmen Lora, and Pedro De Guchteneere, eds., *Memoria, Presencia y Futuro: A los 50 Años de Teología de la Liberación* (Lima, Perú: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2021), 502.

challenges new generations of theologians to work, like Farmer and Gutiérrez, for the healing of humanity.

Friendship is the Way

To speak of a method is to speak of a way of doing something, to examine the inner logic of how one carries out one's work. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in elaborating on the method of theology, places the accent on what he calls “a lifestyle, a way of being and of becoming a disciple of Jesus.”³ He goes on to add, making reference to the name given to the early followers of Jesus as a people of “the way,”⁴ that “our methodology is our spirituality (that is, our way of being Christians).”⁵ Theological work, then, is the fruit of a particular manner of living one's faith in history. To go deeper into Gutiérrez's understanding of spirituality, we must emphasize with greater precision that this way is marked not only by a preferential option for the poor—the central category at the heart of liberation theology and of the first and second testaments—but by friendship.

Friendship is at the core of a preferential option for the poor.⁶ The word and concept may seem “lite,” a detour from the otherwise radical calls typically associated with the struggle for historical liberation from oppression. Yet friendship is the way, the very ground that binds us together with others and with God.⁷ Father Bruno Cadoré, Master of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) from 2010–2019, writes that the

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 5.

⁴ See Acts of the Apostles 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

⁵ Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 5.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ,” in *In the Company of the Poor*, 157; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxi.

⁷ Meister Eckhart, a Dominican theologian and mystic, uses the metaphor of breaking through into the ground to speak of one's “being” and God's “being” as one. In this vein of Dominican mystical theology, we can add that friendship is that ground, that core or essence, that unites and makes one the encounter between God and others. See Meister Eckhart, sermon 52, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 199–203. In the Gospel of John 15:12, friendship with God is the following of Jesus.

friendship between Paul and Gustavo is sealed by "an urgent concern for mutual friends. These are, first, the poor, the sick ... But the world itself is another mutual friend of these two friends ..." ⁸ Cadoré is pointing toward a spirituality, a way of living that affirms that the presence of the transcendent mystery of God is encountered through being present to the whole of wounded creation. The response one gives in enfleshing the urgent concern for these friends—the poor, the sick, the world—are, in Cadoré's words, "mediations of the mystery of a truth that makes free." ⁹ To enter into the inner logic of the preferential option for the poor is to enter into the gratuitousness of friendship, without which the preferential option for the poor loses its grounding. As Gutiérrez has emphasized, the work of Paul Farmer and the thousands with whom he worked was "propelled by friendship." ¹⁰ This is the dynamism, the spirit that energizes the way the work is worked, "the key action" ¹¹ of a spirituality that is also the method for doing theology or medical anthropology attuned to what is simultaneously most human and divine.

Paul Farmer was not only a partner to the poor; he was a friend of the poor, a friend of God. ¹² "Spirituality is always social," Farmer wrote, and in his first book we have glimpses of how he understood a spirituality grounded on friendship in the midst of geographies of suffering. ¹³ These glimpses are most evident in three sets of epigraphs he employs in a few chapters of *AIDS and Accusation* (1992), all of them from the book of Job and from Gutiérrez's insights into Job. Below I analyze these epigraphs in their context. The first set invites us to think of friendship as a form of witnessing.

⁸ Bruno Cadoré, "Foreword," *In the Company of the Poor*, viii.

⁹ Cadoré, "Foreword," xi.

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Saying and Showing to the Poor: 'God Loves You,'" in *In the Company of the Poor*, 34.

¹¹ Gutiérrez, "Saying and Showing to the Poor," 34.

¹² *Partner to the Poor* is the title of the 2010 Paul Farmer reader published by University of California Press.

¹³ Paul Farmer, "Conversion in the Time of Cholera," *In the Company of the Poor*, 100.

Epigraph 1¹⁴

When I lie down to sleep, the hours drag; I toss all night and long for dawn. My body is full of worms; it is covered with scabs; pus runs out of my sores. My days pass by without hope, pass faster than a weaver’s shuttle (Job 7:4–6).

*This cry cannot be muted. Those who suffer unjustly have a right to complain and protest. Their cry expresses both their bewilderment and their faith.*¹⁵

To witness to the cry of those who suffer one must be close enough to hear. Farmer gifted to the world his capacity to witness to the complexity of human suffering and to the agonizing search for meaning. The chapter that accompanies this first set of epigraphs tells the story of Manno, one of the first residents of the Haitian village of Do Kay to die from AIDS in 1987. Manno’s own story echoes Job’s own bewilderment in trying to understand not only the nature of the illness but the way that it was embedded within—and altering—the social world of his communal existence. In the midst of suffering, the search for causation is pressing. Manno sought to know whether the cause was a “microbe,” or whether it was “sorcery,” or whether it was a microbe that was sent through sorcery. Farmer ends the chapter by reminding the reader of the many layers of causal possibilities that, though at times in opposition across cultures and religious frameworks, are all in fact united as part of the fabric that sustains both the complaint and the faith of those in agony.¹⁶ As a friend of Manno and of the village of Do Kay, Farmer was a close witness to their struggle for meaning.

Epigraph 2¹⁷

Will no one teach you to be quiet—the only wisdom that becomes you! Kindly listen to my accusation and give your attention to the way I shall plead (Job 13:5–6).

If these men were to be silent and listen, they would demonstrate the wisdom they

¹⁴ Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 61.

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 101.

¹⁶ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 79.

¹⁷ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 80.

*claim to possess. Those who experience at close range the sufferings of the poor, or of anyone who grieves and is abandoned, will know the importance of what Job is asking for. The poor and the marginalized have a deep-rooted conviction that no one is interested in their lives and misfortunes. They also have the experience of receiving deceptive expressions of concern from persons who in the end only make their problems all the worse.*¹⁸

The chapter that accompanies these epigraphs tells the story of Anita, who is about twenty years old and is the second person in the village of Do Kay to die from AIDS in the spring of 1988. In the epigraph, Job is responding to his friends whom he has just called “worthless physicians” (Job 13:4) in their vain attempts to distill the complexity of his situation into a single explanation. In her village, Anita is the subject of many theories that attempt to make sense of her illness, though the villagers generally agree that she is “innocent,”¹⁹ meaning that she could not have possibly brought envy or sorcery upon herself because all of her life has been one of misfortune. In the midst of the theories and discussions, Anita’s godmother, Mme. Pasquet, takes Anita into her home and cares for her, healing her unto death, incarnating the vows she made twenty years prior when Anita was born. In the words of Mme. Pasquet, “a decent death is as important as a decent life. ... The child has had a hard life; her life has always been difficult. It’s important that she be washed of bitterness and regret before she dies.”²⁰ Farmer’s moving description of Mme. Pasquet tending to a dying youth speaks of a contemplative silence that cuts right through all theories, bearing with it the gift of loving attention in the midst of affliction, communicating a presence that can heal the bitterness of life.²¹

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 24.

¹⁹ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 87.

²⁰ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 90.

²¹ Simone Weil claimed that attention is the rarest of gifts: “Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance.... The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare

Epigraph 3²²

Everything you say, I have heard before. I understand it all; I know as much as you do. I’m not your inferior. But my dispute is with God, not you; I want to argue my case with him (Job 13:1–3).

Job is not a patient man, at least not in the usual sense of the word. He is rather a rebellious believer. ... Job the rebel is a witness to peace and to the hunger and thirst for justice (those who live thus will one day be called ‘blessed’); he is more than simply patient, he is a peace-loving man, a peacemaker.²³

Farmer’s last set of epigraphs frame the story of Dieudonné, whose name means “given by God.” Dieudonné, Farmer says, was marked by an “independence of spirit” that led him to attempt to make a living in the city, working for the wealthy in Port-au-Prince until he fell ill and was forced to return to his village of Do Kay.²⁴ Convinced that an illness had been sent to him in the city out of jealousy, Dieudonné entered into a cycle of accusations and sorcery that blurred the boundaries between offensive and defensive magic, which adversely affected Dieudonné’s location in the geography of blame in his village. Not unlike Job’s predicament, in the social landscape of Do Kay, Dieudonné was caught in a web of retributive justice that could only be transcended by directly engaging the divine in the search for the truth of his tribulation. For Dieudonné, a divination ritual confirmed what he already suspected, that the illness had been sent to him, a confirmation that also gave him the space to reflect on the need to stop the cycles of jealousy that lead to death.²⁵ Farmer’s use of the epigraphs in relation to Dieudonné convey that some struggles can only find a re/solution with the divine. But also, that in a world of vast inequality and injustice to be a friend of life is to enter into the struggle to

and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.” Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1951), 64.

²² Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 95.

²³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 14.

²⁴ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 95.

²⁵ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 107.

know what it is that kills people before their time and to transform it.²⁶

Thus, as early as his first major work, Farmer began to incorporate a spirituality and theology of liberation that invited his readers to contemplate, medically and theologically, their place in the ecologies of injustice that ravage the life of the poor. The epigraphs are not simply theological adornments on a book primarily informed by medical anthropology but direct challenges for the readers of his primary disciplines to think beyond their fields in order to approximate ever more the weight and density of the world of the poor. This same challenge is also for theologians.

Following Jesus into the Field

Fieldwork is a way of dwelling with Jesus, of making one's home among the poor and insignificant. Farmer's long-term commitment to dwell with particular communities around the world, from Peru to Rwanda, but especially with the people of Haiti, invites theologians to ask about their own field and about the communities with whom they work. In theology departments in the United States, however, “theology” and what could be called “pastoral” work are still separated by a barbed wire fence that in the name of scholarship creates and replicates borders in a wider fertile landscape. More recently though, some theologians have turned to ethnographic fieldwork as a means of crossing these borders.²⁷ The interest in fieldwork, especially among younger generations of theologians, points

²⁶ For Farmer's deeper analysis of how sorcery in Haiti has to be understood in relation to structures of inequality, see his chapter “AIDS and Sorcery,” in *AIDS and Accusation*, 193–207.

²⁷ See, for example, Todd Whitmore, *Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Sara Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022); Jasiy Joseph, “The Decentered Vision of Diaspora Space: Theological Ethnography, Migration, and the Pilgrim Church,” *Practical Matters* 11 (2018): 88–102; Rachele Green, “Ethnography as Critical Pedagogy: Prisons, Pedagogy, and Theological Education,” in Knut Tveitereid and Pete Ward, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, UK: Wiley, 2022), 38–48.

to the hunger generated by the separation of spirituality as the methodological foundation for theology.²⁸ Whether we call it a way, a method, a spirituality, or *lo pastoral*, all of these signifiers point, with their own particularities, to a historical encounter with the presence of God in the fractures and fissures of the world. It is an encounter that provides an experiential taste of the divine. But as ethnographic fieldwork makes its way into theology and as theologians make their way into the field, it is helpful to reflect on what Farmer and Gutiérrez offer theologians, especially those formed in the US and in the global north.

The colonial histories of anthropology, medicine, and theology all serve as an important reminder of the fraught landscape in which theologians engaged in fieldwork are moving. After all, theology has been placed at the service of imperial desires, justifying conquest as a baptism into (Christian) civilization.²⁹ As theologians turn to fieldwork, we must ask about the why and wherefore of this methodological adjustment. Farmer’s reflections on his own disciplines are instructive:

Anthropologists ... have long argued that their task is to observe rather than intervene, but this claim is undermined by the arguments that anthropology’s supposed neutrality was in fact perceived by others, including those studied, as a small but at times integral part of the colonial project. So, too, researchers from the modern university are invariably actors in a social field, and medical ethicists who work across steep gradients of inequality are, all objections to the contrary notwithstanding, powerful actors when compared to those they study.³⁰

The classical distinction and assumption of cultural, social, or political

²⁸ For Gutiérrez’s classic explanation of this bifurcation, see Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxii.

²⁹ The *Requerimiento* (“notification”) that was used in the forced baptisms of the indigenous peoples of the Americas is but one example. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 103–125.

³⁰ Paul Farmer, “Rethinking Medical Ethics,” in *Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader*, ed. Haun Saussy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 483.

observation rather than intervention may be tempting for theologians who either romanticize the cultures, practices, or rituals they encounter, or those who for whatever reason feel a need to live into a mythical objective neutrality. As Farmer suggests though, the place from which one sees determines what and how one sees and, of course, how one is perceived by with whom one studies or works. All (scholarly) observation already participates in a history of violence.

Farmer worked to develop ways of observation and intervention that were life-giving. As a physician, Farmer was trained to intervene, to provide treatment to the sick, which in his contexts meant treating illnesses affecting the poor, but as an anthropologist, Farmer was also committed to placing medical interventions within a wider social and cultural context that did not lose sight of the political economies that generate the diseases of the poor. As he said, “I wanted to link ‘experience-near’ writing to an understanding of the larger structural underpinnings of lived experience in the places where I work[ed].”³¹ It was his attention to the structures that created sickness among the poor that made his ethnographic observations a vital means for designing medical interventions that challenged the beliefs of the medical community in the US and Europe.³² Too often, these medical communities place the blame for disease, and the failure of healing, upon the poor themselves. Without a sustained focus on structural factors one may not understand how the agency of the poor is constrained,³³ leaving them with no choice but to “live sicker and die quicker,” as Linda Villarosa also argues in regards to poor communities in the US.³⁴ All of this points to the need for theologians, and especially those

³¹ Paul Farmer, “Introduction to Part 1,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 31.

³² Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Paul Farmer understand structures as the “social relations and arrangements—economic, political, legal, religious, or cultural—that shape how individuals and groups interact within a social system.” Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Paul Farmer, “Structural Violence, Poverty, and Social Suffering,” in David Brady and Linda Burton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 47.

³³ Paul Farmer, “Social Scientists and the New Tuberculosis,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 189.

³⁴ Linda Villarosa, *Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives and on the Health of our Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 2022), 2.

engaged in fieldwork, to discern the ills of observation without intervention, while nonetheless being aware of the extractive histories and legacies of colonial(ist) interventions.

A brief anecdote from Gutiérrez similarly echoes the dangers that are present in observation that does not include a commitment to eradicating structures that deal death to the poor. A few years ago in the midst of a conversation about early moments that shaped his thinking on poverty, Gutiérrez shared with me the story of reading a book while he was finishing his studies in Europe in the late 1950s. The book he was reading sought to emphasize the spiritual value—especially for religious orders—of imitating the poverty of Jesus by essentially imitating the poverty of the poor. Thinking particularly of white European missionaries to Latin America who sought to live with the poor without working against their poverty, Gutiérrez argued that from the perspective of the poor, one possible and disastrous interpretation was that it was actually good to be poor since those who were not insignificant, or in the words of Farmer, those who “work across steep gradients of inequality,” were choosing to live like them without attending to the political economies of the context.³⁵ For Gutiérrez, an imitation of poverty that does not seek the transformation and eradication of poverty is against the gospel of Jesus Christ. Gutiérrez’s notes on the margins of that book later helped him to develop three key distinctions for understanding poverty: real poverty as an historical evil; spiritual poverty as an openness to the following of Jesus; and poverty that arises from a voluntary and incarnate commitment to struggle against real poverty in solidarity with the poor.³⁶ Akin to Farmer’s practice of fieldwork that intervenes against diseases that have made a radical

³⁵ For a more detailed narrative of this key moment in Gutiérrez’s thinking on poverty, see Leo Guardado, “From Liberation Theology to (Liberationist) Peace Studies,” *The International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution* 4, no. 1 (2016), 17.

³⁶ These distinctions were codified, with Gutiérrez’s influence, in the documents that resulted from the 1968 Bishops’ conference in Medellín Colombia, documents that became foundational for liberation theologians then and now.

preferential option for the poor,³⁷ Gutiérrez’s understanding of pastoral work is always oriented toward interrelated forms of structural, intellectual, and theological/spiritual liberation, and it is this orientation that can direct how and why theologians engage in fieldwork.

It would be reductive, without qualifications, to fully identify ethnographic fieldwork with the kind of pastoral work that Gutiérrez consistently centers in his theological work. Yet, in Latin America, one can point to a convergence or affinity between “lo pastoral” and “trabajo de campo” (fieldwork) because of the social and political histories of oppression that have demanded an interdependent relationship between the creation of theory/theology and the *dwelling with* communities from whom such theory/theology arises. Gutiérrez’s pastoral work and Farmer’s fieldwork certainly echo each other, but it is perhaps in the wider context of what is known as Participatory Action Research (PAR) that they also become uniquely resonant for a new generation of theologians in the US who are entering or are already engaged in the field. PAR accentuates aspects of both Farmer’s and Gutiérrez’s contributions by highlighting the nature of collaborative research in the struggle for a more dignified future.

Theologians Working the Fields

It is well known that accompaniment is a key concept and practice for both Farmer and Gutiérrez. In this last section, I reflect on accompaniment through the tradition of Participant Action Research (PAR) in order to emphasize the need in the US for more collaborative ways of creating theology/theory in relation to communities rendered insignificant. This is a critical way of continuing to bridge the division between theology and pastoral work. Typically associated with Orlando Fals Borda’s work with the campesino communities on the Caribbean coast of Colombia in the 1970s, PAR is less a strict methodology and more of an approach or set of principles and commitments that are cultivated in the research process.³⁸

³⁷ Paul Farmer, “Health, Healing, and Social Justice,” in *In the Company of the Poor*, 36.

³⁸ Joanne Rappaport, *Cowards Don’t Make History: Orlando Fals Borda and the Origins of Participatory Action Research* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xviii.

Although PAR has its own genealogy in the history of ideas and movements, it is part of that dynamic experimentation that took place in Latin America in the late twentieth century to break down the borders dividing theory and practice, “scientific” and “popular” knowledge, and scholarship and politics.

PAR was both influenced by liberation theology and influenced liberation theology. As Joanne Rappaport states, “Participatory analysis by working-class people and peasants was undertaken in the Christian base communities that arose out of liberation theology.”³⁹ For these communities, PAR and liberation theology went hand in hand, for both placed the poor at the heart of the struggle for historical change. Fals Borda’s close friendship with Camilo Torres, and Camilo Torres’s close friendship with Gustavo Gutiérrez, also point to the interconnections between PAR and liberation theology.⁴⁰ There is also an affinity between Paul Farmer’s practice of medical anthropology and the commitments of PAR,⁴¹ and both make important interventions in how theologians can accompany and collaborate across fields.

One of the key commitments of PAR, as its name implies, is the creation of participatory processes. The aim is to overcome as much as possible, “the hierarchies that even today separate researchers from researched.”⁴² This means even questioning the justifications that a researcher (theologian) may have for their presence among a given

³⁹ Rappaport, *Cowards Don’t Make History*, 13.

⁴⁰ Lomeli Robles, Dilean Jafte, and Joanne Rappaport, “Imagining Latin American Social Science from the Global South: Orlando Fals Borda and Participatory Action Research,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 3 (2018): 600. Gutiérrez and Torres, both priests, were classmates at the Catholic University of Louvain. Torres studied sociology and with Fals Borda helped establish the sociology department at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

⁴¹ Some scholars frame Farmer’s work as a model in health care of Participatory Action Research. See, for example, Elizabeth Shannon Wheatley and Eric Hartmann, “Participatory Action Research,” in *Critical Approaches to Security: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 152.

⁴² Robles, Jafte, and Rappaport, “Imagining Latin American Social Science from the Global South,” 607.

community. Lest the research become yet one more extractive enterprise among the poor, the presence of a researcher in a given community needs to further the actual needs and desires of the community. Practically, the community itself ought to participate in the questions to be researched and in the design of the research.⁴³ Farmer, reflecting on two decades of work, illustrates this commitment when he says:

I was never asked, in Haiti or in any of the other places in which we work, to do much in the way of *studying* suffering. In fact, I cannot remember a single such invitation from patients or their families. Instead, we were inundated in Haiti and elsewhere with a different sort of request: to *do* something to allay the awful suffering associated with these infectious diseases and with the host of other problems—hunger, malaria, death during childbirth, mistreatment at the hands of the powerful or less impoverished—that people afflicted with the new disease, AIDS, had long faced.⁴⁴

The contrast between “studying” and “do[ing]” to which Farmer draws our attention not only highlights the destructive separation between theory and practice but, more importantly, argues for the primacy of listening to what communities themselves actually want and need. Consistent with the approach of PAR, he points to grassroots communities participating in the creation of the research agenda and in the discernment of what actions and changes could help alleviate suffering.

For theologians working in the field, Farmer invites us to resist the temptation to simply produce a theologically-attuned ethnography (or an

⁴³ Collaboratively developing participatory research structures is an ongoing process for Partners In Health (PIH), the organization that Paul Farmer helped establish in the 1980s. PIH in Peru, known there as *Socios en Salud*, was established in 1996, but it was not until 2013 that they developed their first *Comité Asesor Comunitario* (Community Advisory Committee) for tuberculosis, which assesses, with the input of those most affected, the kinds of research and interventions that are needed. See *Socios en Salud, Reporte Anual 2020*, 99, sociosensalud.org.pe/noticias/memoria-anual/.

⁴⁴ Paul Farmer, “From Haiti to Rwanda,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 138.

ethnographically-attuned theology) and instead to enter into a dialogue with the communities with whom we research to collaboratively discern what in fact would be a contribution to the community and its priorities, including political priorities.⁴⁵ In Farmer’s words, this is a “pragmatic solidarity,” one that “responds to the needs expressed by the people and communities who are living, and sometimes dying, on the edge.”⁴⁶ Otherwise, research can easily remain a one-way path, where valued goods flow unidirectionally and where the chasm between researcher and researched expands even further rather than heals.

The point is not for theologians to imitate the work of Paul Farmer but to pay attention to how he carried out his work of healing, to learn from the knowledge and wisdom that the sick and the poor bear, and to understand what is in fact needed to heal. In reading Farmer’s early work in Haiti, one is struck by how firmly he located biological disease within the experience of social ills, as well as by his profound recognition and respect of what some Participant Action Researchers call a “diálogo de saberes,” a dialogue of knowledges.⁴⁷

The haunting references to the construction of the Péligre hydroelectric dam that displaced thousands of people in the Central Plateau of Haiti in the mid-1950s is one such example of this attunement to the knowledge of the afflicted. In interviews with the residents of Do Kay in the 1980s, which given his medical work were often focused on how tuberculosis or other diseases were affecting them, the dam would appear as a source of illness and poverty. People who were forcibly displaced knew, through their lived experience and that of their families, that the dam generated not electricity for their squatter settlement but rather “malignant emotions” that were killing them.⁴⁸ Decades later, reflecting on

⁴⁵ Rappaport, *Cowards Don’t Make History*, 7.

⁴⁶ Paul Farmer, “Rethinking Health and Human Rights,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 450.

⁴⁷ Rappaport, *Cowards Don’t Make History*, 221.

⁴⁸ In “Bad Blood, Spoiled Milk,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 34, Farmer describes malignant emotions as “anger born of interpersonal strife, shock, grief, chronic worry, and other affects perceived as potentially harmful.”

those early interviews, Farmer recognized even more clearly the vital importance not only of dialoguing with the knowledge of afflicted communities but of letting their knowledge intervene in attempts to understand disease and healing. He wrote, “Mme. Gracia was among those who chided me gently for paying attention to issues that were less pressing than the need for water, health care, and education. That was it for me. I knew Mme. Gracia was right.”⁴⁹ Simply, Mme. Gracia, whose name in French means “grace,” had instructed Farmer not to forget recent history—the construction of the dam, a so-called “development” project, and how it adversely impacted the poor.

Healing is never simply biological. Farmer always spoke of disease in “biosocial” terms, as “a composite event-process,”⁵⁰ and thus healing too is biosocial, a composite event-process in which theology is already implicated as communities resist all that kills. The task is to discern, in the midst of accompaniment and immersed in the ecology of knowledges that mark pastoral fieldwork,⁵¹ which interventions will in fact contribute to healing and which will only intensify suffering. Farmer was keenly aware that his medical knowledge was simply one among other knowledges needed to begin a healing dialogue. The same disciplinary humility is demanded for theology. Yet, these and other fields are vital, and must be worked, in the company of God who is already working there, collaborating for life with a wounded humanity.

Conclusion

These brief reflections on Farmer, Gutiérrez, and the gifts and challenges of theologians in the field have sought to contemplate some aspects of their methodologies and the relevance of these approaches for scholars in the global north who seek to rebind theological reflection with

⁴⁹ Paul Farmer, “Introduction to Part 1,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 30.

⁵⁰ Paul Farmer, “Introduction to Part 2,” in *Partner to the Poor*, 153–154.

⁵¹ For more on ecology of knowledges, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 32.

its natural source—the following of Jesus, his witnessing unto death with the insignificant of history, and the sharing in resurrection with all who struggle for life. As theologians embrace what has been termed “the ethnographic turn in theology and ethics,”⁵² the challenge facing previous generations of theologians and ethicists remains—to recognize that the political nature of all research demands an accounting for how the research in which we engage furthers the reign of life that is the orienting principle of all Christian theology. Farmer translated this principle into his medical anthropology, and his friendship with communities enduring sickness and poverty transformed and refined his practice.

Time is the essence of friendship. One could say that Farmer died too early or before his time, sentiments that certainly capture the enormous loss of Farmer’s life. But the time that he did have was gifted over and over to the communities he loved, a practice that he developed early on in his studies and that continued right to his last day. In *The Little Prince*, one of Gutiérrez’s favorite stories, the fox who wants to establish ties—friendship—with the little prince says to him, “People haven’t time to learn anything. They buy things ready-made in stores. But since there are no stores where you can buy friends, people no longer have friends.”⁵³ The fox’s processual wisdom is an instructive reminder that friendship is built on the understanding that comes through shared time in a mutual commitment to each other’s fullness of life.

For some theologians, much of the time spent in fieldwork will seem unproductive, perhaps a waste of time, but this is exactly what is needed in order to begin to imagine a different way of faith seeking understanding beyond the regulated borders of knowledge, the walls of academia, or the dominant politics of the day. For the writer of the Gospel of John, friendship is nothing less than the offering of one’s life for others (John 15:12), the offering of the time one has received gratuitously, that we are

⁵² See, for example, chapter two in Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁵³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 60.

called to give away gratuitously. It is through this extravagant logic of the way of friendship that our understandings of pastoral work, or participant action research, or theology, must pass. It is then that we will have a credible and incarnate response to the question of our theological practice.



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