

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUNDER: A VOICE FOR JUSTICE

You are invited to read this reflection aloud with others, pausing at each highlighted question to share your own responses with one another as a group.

The Lord hears the Cry of the poor (Psalm 34:17). We believe in a God who is revealed to us by the very act of hearing the cry of the poor. What is this cry of the poor? It is not only a voice of suffering, a voice of supplication; it is a **voice for justice**. The cry of the poor calls out for justice and God responds.

Time and time again, God enters history on the side of the poor and the powerless. It is through this action that God's power and God's love is revealed. Furthermore, God invites us to *participate* in this revelation of holy power and love. By actively participating in God's defense of the poor and oppressed, our own relationship to God is deepened.

One striking aspect of God's interventions is how they often begin by **hearing** the cry of the poor and oppressed. We see this in the *Book of Exodus* when God frees the Israelites from the Pharaoh's bondage in Egypt. God responds to suffering and injustice in a deeply personal way. It is not God who initiates the liberation; it is the people who cry out to Him. Their voice for justice leads God to act: *Yes indeed, the Israelites' cry for help has reached me* (Exodus 3:9).

Likewise, we are called to begin our own work for integral human development not by hearing the cry of politicians or the cry of experts, but by hearing the cry of the poor. If our response does not start from here, it is not authentic. We need to ask ourselves, **"Do we hear the cry of the poor?"**

God, having heard the cry of the poor, this voice for justice, *acts*. How? By sending Moses to confront the oppressive power of the Egyptians in the person of Pharaoh. This is also striking; God never acts alone. There is always a call to join the work of liberation. Moses responds to that call, *'Here I Am'* (Exodus 3:4).

We believe that today, God has heard the cry of the poor who are affected by the extractive industry around the world. They are people whose livelihoods are destroyed, whose homes are taken away and who are not benefitting from the wealth under their feet. We believe God has heard this voice for justice, because we have experienced God's call to act, just as Moses did. God may not appear to us in a burning bush, as he did to Moses, but we find this call in the burning of our hearts. For, do our hearts not burn within us when we see the suffering of our brothers and sisters? **Are we ready to respond to this call? Will we speak the words of Moses: 'Here I am'?**

When we say to God, "Here I Am," we commit ourselves to becoming a voice for justice. Though we may not be poor ourselves, our cry is one and the same. Our voice for justice is one of solidarity, one that reflects our belief in the common good of the entire human family and the planet we call home. What is to be done when we find this voice for justice? God says, *Come, I will send you to Pharaoh...* (Exodus 3:10). **But where do we find Pharaoh today? To whom is God sending us?**



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Pharaoh is to be found wherever we find people whose actions for wealth and power oppress and lead the poor to cry out for justice. Pharaoh is to be found where wealth and power have hardened hearts to the cry of the poor. The first place to look for Pharaoh is in the mirror. For example, do we have investments in mining companies that extract the mineral wealth of developing countries, bringing returns to us while leaving poor communities with polluted rivers and lost livelihoods? If so, we need to use our influence as shareholders to bring about change.

Looking in the mirror may also mean that we need to act as public citizens. Our tax dollars provide support to some Canadian extractive companies that are guilty of carrying out human rights

and environmental abuses around the world. This has the effect of tarnishing Canada's good global name. If we want to be global citizens worthy of our reputation, going to Pharaoh means going to our own government to ensure that companies who receive our support are held accountable for their actions overseas. We believe this accountability could be increased by the establishment of an extractive sector ombudsman.

Just as his relationship with God helped to guide Moses, our own relationship with God can help guide us when we approach Pharaoh today. **Are we able to speak the language of faith when acting as a voice for justice or do we relegate it to the private dimensions of our life?**

To help guide us, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE has based its ecological justice campaign on five principles of Catholic Social Teaching:

The Sacredness of Creation

If we approach the extraction of natural resources from a purely economic perspective, it is easy to see why a company looking to increase shareholder value would want to operate in a country with weak environmental laws, as this will incur fewer costs for the company. However, bearing these costs should be imperative, no matter where a company operates, if we are to protect the sacredness of Creation.

Solidarity

As children of the same God, we are all interconnected, both this generation and future generations. We believe that solidarity is established when people seek just relationships. Canadians must seek a just relationship between our extractive companies and countries of the Global South whose mineral wealth our companies seek to exploit.

Option for the Poor

God's special love for the poor is one that we are called to emulate. This means that if the mineral wealth of any country does not directly contribute to the development of its poorest communities, then new ways of using that wealth must be found. It also means that we must listen to the voices of those who are most affected by the extractive industry.

Common Good

We believe God created us as social beings, made to live with one another. Respect for the common good is essential for establishing the well-being of any society. Far too often, the mineral wealth of countries is extracted primarily for the foreign good. Foreign companies will extract wealth for a certain period of time and then leave, without fully rehabilitating the area or

properly compensating the communities that must live with the consequences of the mine. We need to support efforts that ensure that companies respect the common good, whereby the profits from mining contribute to the real development of host communities and countries, and whereby companies exercise care for people and care for the environment.

Integral Human Development

We believe that development is not merely an economic enterprise but one that includes the political, social, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of the human person. Any model of development that only focuses on economic gain, such as extracting wealth from the Earth as quickly and efficiently as possible without regard for the other dimensions, cannot be true development. If Canadian companies are extracting the wealth of other nations in this way, while harming the other dimensions of the human person, then this model of development must be questioned.

Moses doubted the wisdom of God's choice in sending him: *'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?'* (Exodus 3:11). We too find it easy to doubt that God could invite us to become a voice for justice. Faith is necessary to overcome doubt. God assured Moses, *'I will be with you...'* (Exodus 3:12). **Can we find the faith within us to trust these words as Moses did?**

