

RESPONSE TO FERNANDO PICÓ, S.J.

MICHAEL E. LEE

Let me begin my response by saying what a great honor and privilege it is to be here. It is an honor because in the more than 12 years that I have sat in the audience of CTSA plenaries, I had never imagined myself being up on this stage, much less responding to a scholar and person of the stature of Professor Picó. I feel particularly privileged to do so here in Puerto Rico, the native soil of my parents. The wonderful memories of spending childhood summers with my grandparents in the town of Humacao flood my mind as I speak to you this evening. In many ways, this is a joyous homecoming.

Yet, as joyful as this moment is, I am also gripped by a profound sense of ambiguity, both personal and professional. For even though I have fond memories of Puerto Rico, I struggle, like many of the 5 million of Puerto Rican heritage on the mainland, to articulate my identity in relationship to the island. What does it mean to be Puerto Rican? For some, the answer is found in continuity. I recall having a plumber come to my apartment in the Bronx. As we were talking, I asked him, “¿De donde eres?” He answered, “Soy de Puerto Rico.” I said, “Ah, mi familia también. ¿De donde? (Puerto Ricans love to know what town you’re from.) He replied, “Del Bronx.” I could never make that tight a connection. I identify more with that Puerto Rican writer, who when asked whether she was more comfortable in Puerto Rico or New York, replied, “I feel most at home on the airplane.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond identity, I am also confronted by the ambiguity that I have spent the last 15 years researching, writing, and accompanying Christians in El Salvador whose base communities, martyrs, and Jesuit university have profoundly shaped my theological vision. It is a land and people who suffer the effects of U.S. military and economic hegemony that has unmasked childhood innocence toward Puerto Rico that I may have held. Yet, my experiences journeying from the U.S. center of power to the periphery of El Salvador underscore the central question at the heart of our plenary speaker’s presentation. Why a Caribbean setting for our theological gathering?

As a society, we must ask ourselves, why travel this distance to be here? I trust that it is not to come and spend some days at the Caribe Hilton enjoying its amenities while ignoring the reality of the island. I also take encouragement from the diligent work of the board and planning committee and hope that we are not arriving here as theological voyeurs with a complacent sense of largesse that sentimentally and politely acknowledges the island and then moves on. Indeed, as a starting point, our presence here should challenge us to the ongoing task of becoming the Catholic Theological Society de Las Américas.

In the introduction to her groundbreaking novel *Maldito Amor*, the late Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré identified the irony inscribed in the name Puerto Rico, the “rich port.”<sup>2</sup> Tragically, for an island that surrendered its meager stock of mineral ore early in its colonial occupation, Puerto Rico has been far from rich over the course of its history, and Ferré’s writing subverts any quaint reveries of a time long ago that never existed. No, it is her insistence that it is the overlooked notion of “Puerto,” the

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Rosario Ferré, *Maldito Amor* (New York: Vintage Español, 1998).

port, that drives the ongoing identity and reality of this island. The port, the place where immigrants come and natives depart. The port, that serves as a node of global interconnection. The port, that allows my family tree in the Caribbean to include names like: Lee, Bird, Gonzalez, Saldaña, Franco, and even Bastarrachea. The port, whose waters convey both the isolation of an island and the pathway for the ships to arrive. Ah, the ships.

I would like to spend my brief time using the image of ships: 1) to reflect on the implications of a Caribbean setting for our theological gathering; 2) to identify the ways that the themes of justice and mercy are important, particularly in relation to truth and peace; and finally 3) to see how in responding faithfully to the reality presented to us by the Caribbean we can embark on a reoriented theological journey worthy of this year of mercy.

From the arrival of Spanish *conquistadores* at the end of the 15th century, the Caribbean has seen its fair share of ships coming in to seize the spoils of conquest—whether pirate ships, British galleons, or warships from the U.S. The latter established Puerto Rico as a commonwealth, a people subject to U.S. law with no voting member of Congress. Puerto Ricans pay payroll taxes like mainland workers, but get significantly lower reimbursement for Medicare and Medicaid. Lower income Puerto Ricans are not eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit. The Jones Act prevents any non-U.S. registered ship from delivering goods to the island, so imported goods, which need to be transferred to U.S. ships, are more expensive.

Prof. Picó has invoked the image of the cruise ship to depict the ongoing exploitation of the Caribbean which, in the new global economy, is relegated to providing rest and recreation for tourists. Tourism is left because after the 1996 congressional repealing of Section 936, the tax exemption for U.S. manufacturing in Puerto Rico, the economy (that had enjoyed a limited, parasitic prosperity governed by trans-nationals) sank into recession and unemployment spiked. The issuing of debt only deepened the problem. Because of a 1984 congressional amendment, Puerto Rican municipalities cannot get Chapter 9 protection. The so-called “vulture” hedge funds realized that Puerto Rico has neither the recourse of any U.S. state to declare bankruptcy, nor that of an independent nation to seek relief from agencies such as the IMF. In the current financial crisis, the ongoing exercise of colonial domination reaches its apotheosis not just in the cruise ships but in the luxury yachts of hedge fund managers who profit from the island’s crisis. It is a merciless irony that hedge fund managers who demand that Puerto Rico pay all of its debts also want to use the island as a tax haven to avoid paying their own obligations.<sup>3</sup>

The striking element of Puerto Rico’s debt crisis resides in how it reveals the ongoing dynamics of the colonial project that continue in the world today. The colonial logic and mechanisms that are utilized to exploit this island are the very ones operative globally—even within the United States. For the vulture funds, Puerto Rico is just another opportunity among others such as Greece, Argentina, and yes, Detroit.

What has been the church’s response? Prof. Picó has noted its dual legacy, and the sad truth that it has been marked more by defensiveness and fear than justice and

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<sup>3</sup> David Dayen, “How Hedge Funds Deepen Puerto Rico’s Debt Crisis,” *The American Prospect Longform*, <http://prospect.org/article/how-hedge-funds-are-pillaging-puerto-rico>. (accessed June 2, 2016).

mercy.<sup>4</sup> Thankfully, we hear less today of a church that is “smaller but purer” but still, the remnants of a spirituality that disdains the world, and especially the modern world, linger. Perhaps the image of the church that best exemplifies this spirituality is that of Noah’s ark that floats on the waters of a drowning world. Though at its best, the church might salvage a few swimming in the waters, it does not really touch the ground, it doesn’t incarnate itself in a world that it rejects, nor does it see itself implicated by that world of injustice. While surely there is need today for a counter-cultural strain of Catholicism, the fact of the matter is that a spirituality of fleeing the world is unable to confront today’s challenges and is shamed by the courageous efforts of others.

As Catholic theologians, our gathering in Puerto Rico demands that we inquire why many, especially young, people no longer find the Catholic Church a home for their meaning-making, or indeed, why theologians might not feel at home at the CTSA. Puerto Rico serves as a microcosm for a situation in which people either turn to the intense communal experience and opportunity for agency in other Christian communities, or more frequently, in outright rejection of a church perceived, as Prof. Picó put it, an “adversary of modernity, intolerant and patriarchal.” They find in other places more compelling responses, more just and merciful responses, to the problems of the world today. In light of the cruise ship and the luxury yacht that mask reality, we need to heed the words of Ignacio Ellacuría who said, “Lo que las industrias del turismo hacen para la diversión, eso es lo que la iglesia debería de hacer para la conversión” (All that the tourism industry devotes to diversion, that is what the church should be doing for conversion).

This conversion is possible only through justice and mercy. Our program is filled with wonderful presentations on this theme, and I cannot hope to contribute something substantial in this brief response. However, in reflecting on justice and mercy in our Caribbean location, I would like to offer two thoughts on the well-known text of Psalm 85:9–10 that reads, “Surely salvation is near for those who fear God, that glory may dwell in our land. Mercy and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss.”<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, mercy is linked to truth. The Christian tradition has a deep well from which to draw for examples of those who have shown mercy to the suffering. However, our times demand that the showing of mercy must be linked to truth, a truth that recognizes the historical and structural causes of human suffering. It must be an extension of mercy that does not gloss over sins with impunity, but it must be, as Jon Sobrino has written, a mercy that is “honest with reality.”<sup>6</sup> It must be a mercy that is grounded in an openness to see how one is implicated in the injustices of the present, an openness that demands conversion. To paraphrase Luke’s Magnificat, a mercy that lifts up the lowly will inevitably involve a truth that casts the mighty from their thrones.

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<sup>4</sup> Hernán A. Vera Rodríguez, *La pobreza en Puerto Rico: estadísticas, políticas públicas e impacto en la vida de los ciudadanos: una mirada desde la perspectiva de la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* (Ponce: PUCPR, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Author’s translation of the LXX text, [https://www.blueletterbible.org/lxx/psa/85/1/s\\_563001](https://www.blueletterbible.org/lxx/psa/85/1/s_563001) (accessed June 2, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 681.

Ps. 85:10 follows the linking of mercy and truth with the wonderful image of justice and peace kissing. The text of the Septuagint, however, presents us a problem with the term for justice, δικαιοσύνη. It is the same problem that the Greek NT presents us with Jesus’ injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to, “Seek first the Reign of God and its δικαιοσύνη.” (Mt. 6:33) The term can be translated as “justice” or as “righteousness.” Yet, what a difference in connotation there is between seeking the Reign of God and its righteousness and seeking its justice! As we have seen in the Caribbean, the Christian heritage has shown far too much (self-)righteousness and not enough justice. In Ps. 85, δικαιοσύνη renders the Hebrew *sedeq*, a term that J.P.M. Walsh helpfully captures as that sense of “rightness,” a sense of the ways things should be.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, justice (and for that matter, righteousness) describes God’s will for human flourishing that is grounded in a communion amongst human beings and with God. That is why the text of Ps. 85 has justice kiss peace (*shalom*). It is why Paul VI’s words endure, “If you want peace, work for justice.” It is not the negative peace, not the Pax Romana or Americana, of an oppressive status quo, but the *shalom* of communion, a peace where voices are heard, not silenced.

Following the verses we have been considering, Psalm 85 continues with the line, “Truth will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from heaven.” (Ps. 85:11) Two more ships offer us loci that can direct more meaningful responses toward this vision.

In her recent book, *Ask the Beasts*, Elizabeth Johnson invites us to board Charles Darwin’s ship, the HMS Beagle, and participate in a dialogue between “Darwin’s account of the origin of species and the Christian story of the ineffable God of mercy and love.”<sup>8</sup> The challenge she lays out is whether a Christian theological tradition can listen to the truth that springs from the ground, from the earth and all of the natural world, *in its own right* and not merely subordinate to an anthropocentric model. Of course, as Pope Francis has articulated in *Laudato Si’*, our listening to the truth of the earth goes hand in hand with mercy toward the poor, whose fate is inextricably linked to the land and water.

We cannot speak of ships and the Caribbean without mentioning the Middle Passage. We must remember those ships that dislocated and enslaved peoples and whose legacy with which we still live. Indeed, we must acknowledge that even today the waters of the world still carry ships filled with human cargo. Whether forced to do labor in the fishing industry off Thailand or taken to the U.S. for forced sexual labor, we know that slavery still continues unabated.

In the waters off of Hunt’s Point in the Bronx lies the Vernon Bain Maritime Facility, an 800-bed prison barge built because of overcrowding. Prison overcrowding, violence, and police brutality are symptoms of the deep roots of racism that mercy and justice demand we confront. If mass incarceration is, in Michelle Alexander’s words, the “new Jim Crow,” then we as academics have a particular call to make sure that our universities do not become their colonial double,

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<sup>7</sup> J.P.M. Walsh, *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Continuum, 2014), xv.

whose costs, instruction, composition, and other structures represent invisible but very tangible placards saying, “Whites Only,” and rich ones at that.<sup>9</sup>

Our gathering, away from the center of the Empire and here in the gateway of the Caribbean does not present us with mere victims. Rather, it confronts us to recognize prophetic movements in our midst and thematize a robust Christian response. In Puerto Rico, we have seen a people galvanized around the defense of Vieques, and who require an ongoing commitment to issues such as the deforestation of El Yunque, dependence on fossil fuels, shrinking biodiversity, high waste and pollution. In Central America, we have witnessed courageous activism against environmental destruction, including that of Honduran indigenous activists, Berta Cáceres and Nelson García, who were assassinated for their struggles against loggers, farmers, and other projects that would destroy land sacred to the Lenca people. Is there a commitment on the part of the Church to place the environment at the center of spirituality?

Here in the Caribbean we can celebrate the Amistad—that slave ship that sailed from Havana. Its captives were able to take control of the ship and ultimately their destinies. Their eventual declaration of freedom by the Supreme Court became an inspiration for the abolitionist movement. Today, from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter and Campaign Zero, to the defense of the rights of LGBTQ people, we see brave confrontation of systems of oppression all around us. Can they inspire theological reflection this weekend that contributes to a more robust Christian commitment?

On December 1, 2015, Puerto Rico’s Governor, Alejandro García Padilla, declared in a hearing before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, “This is a distress call from a ship of 3.5 million American citizens that have been lost at sea.” Our gathering in the Caribbean prompts us to recognize how the distress call of poverty is being made by the majority of humanity. We must heed the cries of those lost at sea and do so recognizing that if we don’t respond to the demands of our world then it is we who are adrift. In mercy, we must confront the truth about poverty and privilege. In justice, we must humbly participate in making peace—and these tasks must be considered central to our faith. If not, then the truth is as “Residente” (Rene Pérez) of the Puerto Rican duo Calle 13, raps in the song, *Digo Lo Que Pienso*, “*Conformarse y dejar de insistir / Es como ver a alguien ahogándose y dejarlo morir.*”<sup>10</sup> [Conforming yourself (to the way things they are) and not insisting/pressing for change, is like watching someone drowning and just letting her die.]

If you have the opportunity to walk around El Viejo San Juan, you might see the famous statue called, “*La Rogativa.*” It depicts a Bishop surrounded by three women carrying torches and crosses. According to legend, the Bishop and a seemingly endless line of women made a procession at night holding crosses, torches, and chanting during an invasion by the British on the city in 1797. As the story goes, British commander Gen. Ralph Abercromby, thought they were Spanish Army reinforcements and gave up on the attack. Now, the thwarting of the British attempt to break up the Spanish defense system in the Caribbean was a more complex story

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<sup>9</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Calle 13, *Entren Los Que Quieran*, Sony U.S. Latin, 2010.

than the statue conveys.<sup>11</sup> However, if with Paul Ricoeur, we can allow this symbol to give rise to thought, we might focus on *La Rogativa* to imagine how the church can enact mercy and justice in a meaningful way.

Key to the statue is that the bishop, representative of the institutional church, is not at the front of the procession but in the middle of the figures. He is present, accompanying those who are pleading (rogando) God for mercy in desperate times. It is a presence supporting the agency of these women, not dismissing it with self-righteousness nor replacing it with paternalism. For their part, the women are the ones carrying the torches. Far from being merely “strawberries on the cake,” they are the ones casting the light that wards off predatory ships in the harbor.

In terms of the world’s reality and the demands of the gospel, the CTSA gathers in Puerto Rico not as a journey from the center to the periphery, but the opposite—this is the center. This port, and its many symbolic ships, its complex immigrations and painful migrations, is the place where the reality of the world is discovered and from which a merciful and just theology can emerge. Taking its cue from *La Rogativa*, CTSA’s theological work will be done best by being present, accompanying, listening, and allowing marginalized voices to find agency and provide light that will guide its reflection and its faithful obedience to the gospel’s call. Bienvenidos a Puerto Rico.

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<sup>11</sup> Fernando Picó, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 119–23.