Praying, speaking out and acting together: Theological Reflection on Advocacy

A joint contribution of the WCC's Global Platform for Theological Reflection and the United Nations Advocacy Week

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Background and context

The theological reflection text which follows was developed in response to a five-day meeting of the fifth annual United Nations Advocacy Week (UNAW), and a three-day meeting of the Global Platform for Theological Reflection (GPTR), in Manhasset, New York, from November 15 through November 22, 2009. The focus of this joint UNAW-GPTR meeting was on three areas of crisis: Climate Displaced Peoples, Indigenous The theme of the GPTR meeting was "Praying, Peoples' Rights, and Colombia. Speaking Out, and Acting Together." During the UNAW meeting, more than seventyfive people from every region of the globe participated in sessions held at the Church Center for the United Nations (CCUN). There, at the CCUN, we worshiped corporately; and gave and received reports from advocates working on behalf of those adversely affected by the crises noted above. Although we heard personal pleas which grieved our hearts deeply from our brothers and sisters of our member churches, we were also privileged to engage in joyful fellowship as we made new friends and re-connected with old friends over refreshments and a common mid-day meal each day. During the five days we spent together at the UNAW, a deep sense of community was forged.

After the adjournment of the meeting of the UNAW, a much smaller contingent of twenty-one met for the Global Platform for Theological Reflection during the weekend. At the St. Ignatius Retreat Center in Manhasset, we gathered to reflect theologically on what we had seen, heard, experienced, and felt during the previous days, as preparation for the task of developing this theological text on advocacy. Although we were a small group, our hope was that the text we developed would inspire a wider and ongoing debate with member churches globally. Our group was comprised of biblical scholars, theologians, and social activists. We were vastly diverse in age; race and ethnicity; cultural experiences and backgrounds; nationalities; and theological perspectives. Although the task of theological consensus-building was complicated, it was also quite exciting, as pragmatic and experiential insights enriched the content of our reflection. Each one of us came to the task of contributing to the development of this text with a desire that it would be truly responsive to the needs and concerns of the members of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In the formal presentations from GPTR participants, frequent small-group sessions, periodic plenary reflections, and sharing over common meals, we overcame the difficulties inherent in such a gathering in what we believe was a true spirit of koinonia.

As a result, the method of our reflection was inductive, rather than deductive. The resultant text emerged in the context of paying particular attention to one another as we shared not only empirical data regarding our respective circumstances related to the focus of the conferences. We also shared our stories of heartache and sorrow, as well as the

resolve and the hope which continues to fuel our struggle for justice for all of God's creation. In our reflections, we drew from our distinctive experiences of faith, the wisdom of our cultural traditions which have been passed down to us, as well as from biblical texts and theological traditions of the past and present. In this context of sharing insights, praying and talking with each other, key themes and insights emerged regarding the nature of advocacy which we believe are more responsive to the crises which plague us at this time.

We acknowledge that there have been previous attempts to offer guidance to the churches on advocacy. However, as we reviewed previous texts, we were convinced that these earlier efforts failed to question sufficiently the corruption of global economic, social, and political structures. As such, we believe that previous theological resources have been inadequate to guide our member churches toward the kind of advocacy strategies which would address the plight of significant populations adversely affected by the concerns cited above. A more realistic reading of the signs of the time, ecumenically, must function on the local, regional, national, and global levels, simultaneously – not just We determined that a new guideline for theological reflection should be made available to the WCC members that would provide them with cultural wisdom and biblical and theological resources for the kind of advocacy which could facilitate a more holistic transformation in the lives of our sisters and brothers. As a result of our hearing the persistent cries of lament from fellow Christians, and hearing the reports on the current efforts of United Nations officials to respond to the human tragedies and ecological devastation, we are convinced of the severity of these crises and the urgent need for effective advocacy rooted in the cultural, biblical, and theological resources of our collective communities of faith.

We believe that churches are called to be nurturers of a culture of life in the context of cultures of death. Our intentions in this document are to: 1) describe more clearly the nature of a Christian understanding of advocacy in our time; 2) present more compelling reasons to exercise more faithfully the prophetic task of stronger advocacy; and 3) provide some of the necessary resources for the churches to improve their efforts toward the kind of advocacy that fosters liberating change. We have been prayerful in our discernment of what God is calling us to do in this context and believe that the theological reflection which follows is a faithful response to that divine call. Our hope is that this current document will encourage our churches to develop even better strategies for effective engagement and accompaniment with those who suffer under these present crises.

Although this text arises out of our engagement with our sisters and brothers who suffer unjustly and disproportionately in their particular contexts, we believe that readers will find many important insights which would be easily applicable to other contexts which also demand advocacy. We believe we can answer affirmatively that our theological reflections have responded attentively to the sense of urgency conveyed by the testimonies and stories shared by our sisters and brothers in the global ecumenical community.

What We Mean by Advocacy

We believe it is important to articulate our understanding of the nature of advocacy. We offer the following definition:

Advocacy is a prophetic activity of the churches, in which we accompany and support our sisters and brothers who struggle mightily for justice and peace in the context of injustice and violence against fellow human beings and the rest of creation. Advocacy involves speaking up for those who are silenced in their efforts to rectify injustice. It demands our engagement with the issues and initiatives of those who struggle for life, justice, equity, rights, and peace. Advocacy is a mission activity of the church in the world. It is one way in which the church participates in the ongoing mission dei.

Christian faith is not only life-affirming, but also change-oriented. Such faith seeks to effect change in external realities for the flourishing of life. Therefore, advocacy is an inevitable Christian vocation of affirming the sanctity and dignity of life.

We recognize that advocacy is multi-dimensional. We also acknowledge that there is no single understanding of the nature of this holy work of accompaniment nor is there one prescribed method of advocacy that fits every context. Any theology of advocacy must take into account the diversity of contexts in which this form of witness may take place. However, despite the inevitable variety in carrying out the task of advocacy, we suggest that there are three major components of the kind of advocacy demanded in these times. These components are: praying, speaking out, and acting together.

Praying

Advocacy arises from our personal and corporate worship experiences as people of God, and is expressed first and foremost through our prayer for others. Intercessory prayer is itself an act of faithfulness that Jesus himself practiced on behalf of his disciples, and those of the future (John 17). The apostles, including Paul, would exhort fellow believers to pray for one another – even one's enemies. The ministry of accompaniment should be reflected not only in our prayers, but also through our litanies, sermons, as well as through our poetry, songs, and other acts of creative expression. The ministry of accompaniment should be most visible in our celebrations of the Eucharist. As the late Father Pedro Arrupe¹ reminds us,

If somewhere in the world there is hunger, the Eucharistic celebration is in some way incomplete. In the Eucharist, Christ comes to the encounter together with the poor, the oppressed, and the hungry of the earth, who through him look at us waiting for help, for justice. [From his address at the Forty-First International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, in 1976.]²

Moreover, as the prophet Isaiah warns us in chapter 58, the kind of worship, expressions of piety, and spiritual discipline the God of Justice seeks is the kind that loosens the bonds of injustice, undoes the yoke of oppression, feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless, clothes the naked, and brings them into community with us.

A life of this kind of prayer and worship, which reflects the love of God and the love of our neighbor, as expressed not only in words, but more importantly, in action, forms the foundation for the caliber of advocacy we propose. It is permeated with a spirit of love which is fiercely directed toward justice and peace, not only for humanity, but for our Mother Earth and all creatures. We believe that this kind of spiritual discipline and heartfelt commitment are needed to fuel our engagement, for the work of accompaniment and solidarity is long and arduous.

Speaking Out

There is no question that advocacy involves a prophetic dimension of witness. Part of the function of advocacy is to speak truth to power. There are multiple ways of doing so. In some instances it will involve quiet diplomacy or careful negotiations governed by a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity. At other times it may require an uncompromising candor along with persistent, firm pressure. Advocacy includes educating some and reminding others within our own churches, regarding not only our corporate, but also our spiritual and moral responsibility for all of creation. This advocacy also includes offering guidance to persons and agencies with respect to the ways in which they can better serve those among us who are in need.

Within the context of our dialogue and reflection during the UNAW and GPTR, many of us expressed the belief that our churches have not always exercised this prophetic dimension of ministry. Historically, we know that the churches have been co-opted too often by governments, and fallen captive to economic, social, and political systems. We are also aware that our churches have been too close to power, and identified far too often with the ideologies of the nation-state. We do not believe that we can advocate justly, if we fail to acknowledge that the prophetic task of advocacy takes place within imperial contexts; and that we cannot hope to be credible witnesses, promoters of peace, or agents of transformation if our churches fail to distance themselves from these powers and also hold them accountable.

At times our churches, through their desire to exercise power, have forgotten their rightful place among the poor. Our churches have sometimes lost their way. Too often our communities of faith have failed to stand with those who suffer. They have been complicit in perpetuating racism, sexism, poverty, violence, and even war. These realizations call for an acknowledgment of these transgressions, collective repentance from these evils, and a re-commitment to change our ways of relating to political systems and powers in keeping with the proclamation and ministerial vision of Jesus Christ. However, as we seek to return to the pattern of discipleship to which we have been called by Christ, we realize that we must not presume to *be* the voice of the poor, but rather the *amplifier* of their voices. This requires that we walk *alongside* our sisters and brothers, accompanying them in solidarity, rather than presuming to lead them paternalistically, as though we alone know the path which they should take. There is a form of power which resides in the social location of people who are aware of their covenant with God. They have a conviction that things as they are must end, but they also have a hope fueled by a vision of community. What we are describing here is a "hopeful realism," where we

recognize the need for a contextual approach, which promotes community-based initiatives that allow for a meaningful process of radical change.

During our time of Bible study and reflection in Manhasset, we found from the Old Testament scriptures diverse ways of speaking truth to power, whether it is royal, governmental, or priestly in nature. For example, in Amos 7:1-17, the prophet Amos speaks to the chief priest. In this text we have a clear sense of the link between religious and political factions. In this context, the prophet was feared because it was believed that his word was very powerful because what was spoken would actually come to pass. In 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12, King David is challenged in a very subtle way by Nathan the prophet, whose method is indirect and his message told through a parable. By this method, King David was condemned by his own mouth. From these examples, along with other Old Testament texts, we learned that it is sometimes dangerous to speak truth to power.

We also learned from our Bible study lessons which challenged our own motives in advocacy. We found that sometimes in our role of advocates, we are sometimes caught in the grip of antagonisms which allow arrogance and the pride of righteousness to flourish within us. As in the case of Jonah, we may not want those to whom we speak the truth to repent and do the right thing. Sometimes the work of advocacy reveals important insights about the nature of God: namely, God's capacity for mercy. Additionally, we have learned in our study of Old Testament prophets that there is a dual role of the prophet. This dual role is most apparent in our reflection on texts in the book of Jeremiah. The prophet not only speaks the Word of God to the powers that be; the prophet also intercedes for the people. This dual role can sometimes tear the prophet in two. The task of prophetic ministry cannot be undertaken apart from grace. Because the prophetic task requires courage, strength, and steadfastness, those who willingly shoulder the burden of that task must rely on the power of the Spirit.

Our time of deep reflection and dialogue in the context of the UNAW and GPTR meetings also taught us that not only does advocacy involve speaking truth to power, it also involves the act of lamentation. In fact, we believe that lamentation is another way of speaking the truth. It is a way that not only the oppressed can be heard, but they can also be empowered to act. In those instances, speaking and listening become both a spiritual and political act. In such biblical texts as Number 27:1-11; Lamentations 5:1-5; and Ezekiel 27:1-11, those who suffer and grieve in the context of their oppression and domination are allowed to speak of this, with the assurance that their lamentations are heard and noted. Not only do we lament and weep, but in Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, we learn that God laments and weeps, too. If there is no place for lament, then questions regarding justice disappear and the language of lament is made to appear inappropriate. Without lamentation those who might have accompanied the oppressed in their work for change would not be moved. As a spiritual speech and act, lamentation does not end with cries of sorrow. For we note that in Psalm 22, the psalm ends with an affirmation of faith in God, which restores life and dignity, and animates the psalmist. We maintain that serious change will not occur without lamentation.

Acting Together

Advocacy calls for a commitment to explore and implement more effective strategies for genuine holistic transformation. It involves actively listening to our brothers and sisters and allowing them to lament freely and unreservedly, even when it overwhelms us and brings on sorrow. It involves trust in their discernment as to what their needs are, rather than imposing our own ideas as to what is needed. It seeks, encourages, and assists their active participation from all sectors of the community. Advocacy emerges out of an understanding of the nature of the churches as members of one Body – the Body of Christ This means that such advocacy is people-centered and (I Corinthians 12:13). community-based, rather than institutionally driven and hierarchically directive. Advocacy requires an unwavering commitment to accompany those who suffer, in season and out of season, whether it is costly or inconvenient, whether the need is within our own local communities or thousands of miles away. In short, advocacy embodies a servant-church paradigm for ministry in the world, which is not only concerned with individuals but with the redemption of communities. This mission paradigm seeks the transformation of the structures and systems of sin and injustice and the promotion of the fullness of life for all persons and for all of creation. We believe this kind of advocacy springs out of an alternate vision of life together, where communities of faith act together based upon values consistent with the reign of God.

There are several biblical texts from the New Testament which invite our member churches to consider paradigms of advocacy which strengthen and empower those of us who face crises of a global proportion. For example, in Mark 3:1-8, in the story of the healing of the man with a withered hand, we discover that Jesus brings the marginalized to the center of activity. This man had been pushed to the margins because he was viewed as not being whole because of his disability. However, Jesus brought the disabled man out of a position of exclusion to one of communal embrace. By ensuring that those who do not count in our economic, social, cultural, and political structures, are brought to the center of advocacy, we become agents of a living theology which values life amidst cultures of death.

Other New Testament texts speak quite openly about a way of organizing our common life together which affirms that communities of faith not only pray for one another but they also actively work in common when the survival of its members is being threatened. For example, as stated in Acts 4:32-37, none of the believers living in community claimed private ownership of any possession. As a result, none among them suffered in need. Likewise, in Acts 2:43-47, all who believed were together and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all. Additionally, the text tells us that they broke bread together and ate their food with "glad and generous hearts." Moreover, according to Acts 11: 27-30 and Romans 15:25-26, after a famine, members of the community sent relief to their brothers and sisters who were in need.

Self-Critical Reflection on Advocacy

As participants of the GPTR prayerfully reflected on the nature of advocacy, we gave considerable thought to the underlying motives governing our prayer and worship, our approach to the prophetic task, and the quality of our actions. Many of us have been engaged in advocacy for quite some time. We are aware of strategies which work and those which do not. But we probed deeper. We asked ourselves key questions, which included: Who speaks for the oppressed? Who acts for them? On whose terms do we advocate? For whose benefit do we act? We believe that without giving attention to these questions, we would be complicit in silencing those for whom we purport to speak.

We were reminded that Christian theology involves a quality of reflection which requires us to be courageous, self-critical, and constructive, as we encounter heavenly matters which embrace earthly things. Ours is a collective journey of participants in the transformation of the world in accordance with the vision of God, in the way of Jesus Christ, along side the Holy Spirit. This agenda is not ours, nor do we work alone. Even as we acknowledge that theological reflection is not done in a vacuum; and that it is done in contexts involving empires, in which economic, social, and political powers work at cross purposes, we are reminded that there are many kinds of power. Power is never just brute political power. Because of God's grace and gifts, power is ubiquitous. Thus, there is also power available for the victims of regimes and abusive power. Realizing this gives us a reason to hope and to continue to struggle.

We were reminded that our advocacy should reaffirm the spaciousness and generosity of our triune God. We are called to trust resistively and restlessly in the providence of God our Creator. Our trust and surrender to God's providence is never the antithesis of advocacy. Prophets can operate in hindsight or with foresight. Those who operate in hindsight focus only on the negative circumstances surrounding them and remain mired in acts of the past. Prophets who operate with foresight are those who see beyond the negative, are energized by the vision of the reign of God, and advocate for justice and peace *now*. Their activity is shaped by the pattern of Jesus Christ the Liberator, where solidarity and advocacy go together. As we move into the fullness of life shaped by the Spirit, we find surprise coupled with advocacy. That element of surprise shows us that our advocacy is able to work through and with the Spirit to alter the course of a variety of forces lodged against us.

By reaffirming the mystery of God's economy we inject a "Thou-ness" into our advocacy, which can prevent us from relating to those for whom we advocate as instruments of our own ends. This Trinitarian framework can keep before us that the image of God also resides in those who oppress us. This calls us to *re*-member the organic nature of life – where human justice and ecological responsibility can no longer be separated from each other. The crises of global warming, continuing discrimination against indigenous people across the globe, and the suffering which plagues our brothers and sisters in Colombia all demand new forms of engagement. We believe a Trinitarian framework, which injects the notion of "Thou-ness" into each other, and all creatures of Mother Earth, can help us in this constructive engagement of advocacy, locally and globally.

Multiple Levels of Advocacy

Just as advocacy by our churches is a ministry with multiple dimensions, it is also a ministry of accompaniment conducted on multiple levels. As individuals, we may be called upon to pray, speak on behalf of, or act together with a sister or brother within our local churches or within the communities in which are churches are located, as they work to obtain the kind of support needed to meet their basic needs. Beyond the personal level, our local churches themselves are often approached to accompany those in our respective communities who are struggling to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Of course, at a macro-level, there are national and international Christian organizations whose mission is to advocate for large numbers of people to help eliminate the unjust conditions which make it difficult for people to flourish in their own contexts. However, we wish to emphasize that advocacy is not a specialized ministry limited to large organizations alone, or reserved for a courageous few. Rather, it is, in fact, a fundamental activity of Christian discipleship which we may be called upon to engage in, both personally, locally, and globally. Whether our advocacy takes place at the level of our local churches or in ecumenical contexts, advocacy is a visible expression of the unity of faith and practice the churches profess in the name of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Why Do Church Advocacy?

We affirm that God is a God of life who loves and cares for the world. Life is an expression of God's continuing presence for the glory of God. Anything that overshadows this understanding is a threat to life in community. Advocacy is an act of obedience to the divine call to be faithful stewards of the good creation and to be our siblings' keepers. The advocacy which we have articulated here is a concrete expression of the commandment to love God and neighbor as ourselves. It is constitutive of our call to follow the way of Jesus Christ as his faithful disciples, attuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Even though in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament we are reminded often of the brevity and fragility of life, the created world and what dwells therein is deemed "good." Its intrinsic goodness arises solely from the fact that God is the "author" of the good creation. Affirmation of the goodness of creation, despite the presence of sin and corruption, entails recognition of the value and worth of all human beings and the rest of creation. This theological connection transcends familial ties, patriarchy, racial and ethnic categories, caste systems, national allegiances, and global alliances. This recognition makes claims on us. The quality of our life together depends upon the degree to which we are committed to the common good and exercise our obligations to one another – especially to those treated as the "least."

Insofar as we our bound *theologically* to each other and all that lives on Earth, we are obligated to manifest this bonded-ness in the context of our economic, social, and political life together. This theological bonded-ness should be reflected in the institutions that relate to the making of policy in the societies in which we live. The cries of present hardship and impending disaster reverberate in the heavens, and the urgent appeals for

aid from the churches, are a rebuke and a judgment against any notion that our churches have no obligation to advocate along side those in distress.

Moreover, there are texts from both Testaments which convey quite clearly that concrete acts of care, accompaniment, and solidarity with those who are oppressed are clearly the kind of actions which should govern the lives of people in covenant with God. Micah 6:8 tells us that God requires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Luke 4:16-21, in which Jesus inaugurates his public ministry, is a passage quoted directly from Isaiah 61. In the passage from Luke, Jesus announces the nature of his ministry, which includes: preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to those who are captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and the release of the oppressed of the land. In response to a question regarding who our neighbor is, Jesus tells us in Luke 10:25-37 that our neighbor is the one who stands in need, regardless of the many racial, economic, cultural, social, and political barriers we might erect to obscure our connection to one another. And finally, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus identifies himself with the ones who are in need. When we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, we do so unto Christ. Likewise, when we fail to do any of those things, we actually fail to do so unto Christ.

Through our praying, speaking out, and acting together, we have come to realize that our concern and care must extend beyond our fellow human beings. Part of what our reflection upon the impact of climate-displaced peoples and the struggles of indigenous populations globally does is to remind us that the recognition of our interrelatedness to and interdependence upon all creatures prescribes a deep respect, a sense of mutuality and reciprocity, along with attention to balance and harmony within creation. Mother Earth is not only our home, but is the home of all created life. What we do has an affect on the rest of the Earth. This being the case, we believe our churches have an obligation to nurture and cultivate the values of deep respect, mutuality, reciprocity, and attention to balance and harmony, for the sake of communal well-being.

We are living under a current global structure that fails to meet the criteria for a truly just system for all creation. We are participants in a global economic system that fails to meet the criteria for a just system for everyone. We cannot continue in this vein and be faithful to God's call on the churches. A theological conception of advocacy forces us to renounce all forms of human degradation, environmental devastation, and violence. Advocacy calls us to acknowledge and affirm a divine basis for supporting and preserving the common bond between us.

We must commit ourselves to developing more imaginative ways of integrating our worship life with a more robust witness of the church that models engagement with all of those who are suffering. Our faith in Christ, our love for God and our neighbors, and our hope in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit give us the courage and the commitment to accompany our fellow sisters and brothers to affect the kind of global change that supports a more holistic life.

What is at Stake If We Do Not Act?

We have heard an expressed need from among our sisters and brothers for restoration, renewal, and healing of that which is broken on the Earth. There is a cloud of witnesses in the impoverished, the degraded, the hungry, the displaced who stand as a grim reminder of what happens when individuals, communities, and nations are disinclined to become involved, because they are being impartial or neutral. We contend that once we realize what is truly at stake, we cannot afford to remain impartial or neutral about human suffering and exploitation, and the degradation of the Earth.

When we fail to exercise our prophetic vocation, God grieves. When we fail to intercede on behalf of the marginalized, forgotten, and abused, we abandon an opportunity for service and lose credibility in our witness to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Our inaction or inadequate action denies our love for God when those of us in the community have means, and see our siblings in need, but decline to offer the kind of help that would bring relief. The kingdom of God impels us to work toward justice and peace. Even the world is expecting leadership from the churches.

We urge our brothers and sisters in the ecumenical community to exercise leadership in this area; to seek to collaborate with others, whether from secular or religious groups, who are committed to an alternative vision of life together. Impartiality or neutrality or inadequate attempts to reform structures of domination that wound and destroy will not do. By honoring the claims of theological kinship we can become more like Christ, as we are called to be. By honoring our claims of interconnectedness, we bear witness in a manner that does reaffirm the spaciousness and generosity of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all the Earth.

Father Pedro Arrupe (1907-1991) was a Catholic priest and member of the order of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). As the 28th Superior-General or head of the highest ranking authority of the Jesuit order, from 1965-1983, he saw the promotion of justice, as well as the Catholic tradition, as an essential focus of the work of the Society of Jesus. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedro Arrupe.

²The International Eucharistic Congress is held every five years, since 1881, to engage in personal and group Eucharistic adoration; receive the Eucharist fervently; have a public demonstration of faith in the Eucharist; and discuss the implications of Eucharistic belief. The Forty-First International Eucharistic Congress was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from August 1-8, 1976. The theme of this Congress was "The Eucharist and the Hungers of the Human Family." Father Arrupe delivered a sermon during the Forty-First Congress. "Spiritual Olympics," Archbishop John Foley, www.kofc.org/un/eb/en/publications/columbia/detail/1920.html and "The Excitement of an International Eucharistic Congress," Sandy Klaud, www.realpresence.org/eucharst/misc/excite.htm.