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ANNOTATION

Nguyen van Phat, Peter. “Prophetic Role of the De La Salle Brothers among the Poor in Vietnam.” S.T.D. dissertation, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines, 2006. 299 pp.

The author grounds this study on the preferential option for the poor in the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel and in the teaching of the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church as articulated by the Vatican (130-139), the Latin American Episcopal Conference (139-143), & the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (146-150). “The Church knows that she is being questioned by the signs of the times, to carry out a preferential option for the poor that is in keeping with the authentic radicalism of the Gospel” (5).

He establishes as the backdrop of his dissertation: (a) the paradoxes and contradictions of advancements in science and technology resulting in prosperity and comfort for many of the world’s peoples and (b) the 1.1+ billion poor people around the globe still suffering the ravages of hunger, malnutrition, illness, illiteracy, and unemployment. Nguyen views this disparity as the consequence of “systems of domination” that foster economic and political dependence and result in “the oppression of peoples” (1-2). “The poor are poor because of the existence of systems that exploit and marginalize them” (101).

While acknowledging that new opportunities and economic benefits for many Vietnamese are clearly the consequence of globalization, he voices concern about “the invasion of an all encompassing consumerism and individualism” and a grave social, economic, environmental and cultural crisis that are its consequences (36-37). “The cry of the poor is a cry for transforming present social structures from the standpoint of those most concerned – the oppressed” (3).

Nguyen connects the De La Salle Brothers’ long commitment to the educational service of the poor with a reality for consecrated religious in Vietnam that has, since 1975, in order to continue their mission “moved from the center of the social system to the periphery, living in small communities among the poor” (9). He suggests that such liminality might be the new and more prophetic way of living out the Lasallian charism in the 21st century and a new direction for Christian education in Vietnam (14-15).

In the dissertation, Nguyen analyzes: (a) the current context of Vietnamese society; (b) the foundation and development of the option for the poor in Sacred Scripture, the Catholic tradition, and social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church; and (c) the prophetic task in the educational service of the poor in Vietnam according to the Lasallian charism (10). The methodology followed is that of the “see-judge-act model” of pastoral theology: (a) an analysis of the context of Vietnamese society, (b) followed by theological reflection of this reality, and (c) concluding with a proposal for liminal communities as the pathway of prophetic praxis for De La Salle Brothers in Vietnam (29).

The dissertation unfolds in six chapters. The first chapter (1-34) provides an introduction to the study, its objectives and methodology, and a review of some related literature. The second chapter (35-96) presents the context of Vietnam through its socio-political, economic, educational, and cultural reality under the pressure of globalization. Nguyen asserts that the “impact of globalization is creating havoc in developing countries” like Vietnam (58); and he observes that education in Vietnam, despite many achievements, remains “weak in quality, unbalanced in structure, and with low effectiveness” (71).

The third chapter (97-152) discusses the concept of the option for the poor in Sacred Scripture and in the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Nguyen asserts that the option for the poor is, “in a special way, the will of God for our generation” (98); and he observes that the option for the poor results in “a solidarity leading to a simple lifestyle, sharing resources with the poor, and a commitment to changing unjust and oppressive social structures through dialogue” (151). The fourth chapter (153-204) studies prophetic charism in Sacred Scripture as the biblical foundation of the prophetic charism of consecrated religious life. Nguyen asserts that “intrinsic to the prophetic stance of religious life is a certain ‘marginality’ . . . They, on the margin, cry out in lament about the injustice systems, evoke the memory of God’s plan for creation and the Church, and energize hope to strive toward the Kingdom of God” (172).

The fifth chapter (205-266) proposes a way for the De La Salle Brothers to live this prophetic ministry in Vietnam. After presenting an analysis of the Lasallian mission, charism, and heritage from the time of the origins to the present (206-226), Nguyen proposes for De La Salle Brothers in Vietnam Lasallian communities of insertion into the world of the poor as a prophetic response to a gospel-based reading of the signs of the times. Faced with the situation where they can no longer run schools, these Lasallian ecclesial communities of insertion would be grounded in a spirituality of presence (256-260), of kenosis (260-263), and of harmony (263-264); and they would be a manifestation of solidarity “in being with the poor in their desperate situation and in their struggle for a better world” (266).

Finally, the sixth chapter (267-282) re-captures or summarizes the main lines of thought presented in the dissertation and makes some specific recommendations concerning the formation or training of De La Salle Brothers in Vietnam (280-281) and concerning the strengthening of relationships and collaboration, especially through education, with organisms and organizations in promoting justice and in defending the poor from exploitation (281). Nguyen concludes by proposing three possible avenues of future study: (a) the option for the poor throughout the history of the Church and the history of religious life; (b) the option for the poor in Buddhism and its relation to Buddhist concepts of compassion and liberation; and (c) informal education as a means of offering the poor access to human and Christian education (281-282).