

Dom Hélder Câmara
Speeches to the Mani Tese Youth Movement, 1972

A Commentary

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Someone, after all, must always begin. Call it a vanguard or a pilot project or a creative minority. In any case, far from being a discouragement, the minority status of change agents within any social group -- including the Church -- is not only to be expected but necessary. Dom Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Recife, Brazil, from 1964 to 1985, knew this well: "I call them 'Abrahamic minorities' in honour of Abraham, the father of all those who over the centuries have continued to hope against hope."¹

Rightly understood, the most effective model for both social change and ecclesial change shares a common "Abrahamic" dynamic. This does not mean importing the pressure tactics of special interest groups into the Church, but living God's own model of social transformation within both Church and world. Ever since God offered Abraham and his family the blessing of a distinct identity formed in covenant relationship with God, yet simultaneously called him to make this blessing accessible to all the families of the earth, the pattern has threaded its way through history. Israel, the Church, or any family of faith that claims to walk with God is called to demonstrate the viability or "blessing" of the life it offers to the world through loving service to some larger whole. One can think again of Gandhi's aphorism, "Be the change you seek in the world." Such change must always take a distinctive and communal shape. But an Abrahamic community cannot live merely for itself, either in the older form of "sectarian" groups that withdraws from the larger society, or in the newer form of "special interest" groups who compete for a controlling stake within it. The paradoxical identity of an Abrahamic community is one that it will lose if it tries to protect the blessing of communal identity by avoiding the risks and tensions inherent in its call to serve and seek the good of the whole.²

Perhaps the circumstances of Câmara's flock in the poorest region of Brazil helped him discover the creative dynamic of Abrahamic minorities. He could not really be a true pastor without being a prophet, nor a true prophet without being a pastor. Caring for his church impelled him to travel the world as a fiery orator on behalf of social justice for the peoples of the global South. At the same time, rootedness in the life of his people nurtured an acute suspicion of merely ideological solutions from either right or left. That did not prevent Câmara from drawing the charge that he was a communist, but his famous oft-reprinted answer reflected his pastoral orientation: "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist."

As Câmara told an interviewer in 1977, his path moved him "[f]rom one error to another" through "a succession of conversions ... under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."³ Câmara's first decade in the priesthood -- the 1930s -- coincided with the growth of a Brazilian form of fascism, which initially seemed to offer prospects for social development under the influence of the Church, but he soon came to see his passing support for the movement as a mistake. In the 1950s and early 1960s deepening concern for the "sub-human" conditions in which his people lived made him a forerunner of liberation theology and an advocate for the world's poor at the Second Vatican Council. That same concern, however, led him to reject the temptation of violent revolution, which he believed would only perpetuate cycles of violence. The result is that "Dom

Helder is unclassifiable. Capable of dialogue with everyone, he is a challenge to all. In fact, the sovereign liberty in which he practises his faith is something of an embarrassment to all.”⁴

Because he was first of all a pastor, Câmara was never so concerned to systematize his thought and theology as to speak out in the name of those “sem vez e sem voz”-- with no hope and no voice.⁵ Others had to gather together his scattered speeches, homilies, and pastoral letters. Still, animating his words and work was a coherent social strategy at once thoroughly biblical and sociologically astute. One of those who edited Câmara’s writings and speeches thematically, Benedicto Tapia de Renedo, went so far as to contend that “taken as a whole, they constitute a complete treatise on applied psychology and experimental sociology.”⁶ Câmara did lay out his strategy for social change quite succinctly in three speeches, given on three successive days in November 1972, upon the invitation of an Italian Christian movement for Third World development, Mani Tese, which means “outstretched hands.”⁷

Key to Câmara’s strategy was the belief that “in the womb of all races, of all religions, in all countries, in all human groups,” are change agents whom the Spirit of God is raising up. “They already exist, we do not need to create them.” These are the groups he called “Abrahamic minorities,” for “like Abraham, they hope against hope and decide to work, even to sacrifice, for a world more just and human.”⁸

The way for nonviolent structural change to occur, said Câmara, was for these minorities to form a broad alliance as each works outward from its local problems, local injustices and local organization toward regional, national and global concerns. “Each Abrahamic minority can and should preserve its own name, can and should preserve its religious or simply humanist inspiration, can and should continue with its own leaders and its own methods. What is indispensable is not unification or uniformity, but to unite.” They need not even unite organizationally, but rather “agree together on certain priority objectives.”⁹

The basic posture of the Abrahamic minorities, as Câmara saw it, is to stay within the institutions of the current order, holding them accountable to the values and humanity of the masses who live in poverty and oppression, while working to re-create the structures accordingly. This posture involves permeation, but it is not the diffuse individualistic strategy of some Christians who take Jesus’ images of salt, light, and leaven to mean that if only enough well-intended born-again Christians are involved in the system, positive social change will happen automatically. Abrahamic minorities are not simply statistical. They are sub-groups working collectively, organized in clusters and networks, yet not acting independently of the larger group or society they seek to transform. In advocating such a posture, Câmara could chide those who were so anxious about change that they habitually counselled patience even as others in the Church pressed ahead and demonstrate the viability of change. In nearly the same breath, though, Câmara could also chide those who were so intent on change that they thought merely of tearing down. Those on one side were confusing “the prudence of the Holy Spirit and the prudence of the flesh, human prudence.” Those on the other side seemed motivated by a desire “to overthrow all structures.”¹⁰ The strategic posture of Abrahamic minorities, in contrast, continually negotiates a path between these twin temptations.

When speaking in Italy, Câmara called for Abrahamic permeation at three specific levels:¹¹

1. Abrahamic minorities within the world. Why, asked Câmara in Italy, “don’t the hundreds of technicians within the European [economic] community, instead of putting their intelligence and their specialized preparation at the service of increasingly restricted groups..., force a change of structures, concretely showing the way to a human economy and sketching sure paths to liberation?” Câmara lamented that while technology may play the role of shock absorber in the modern world, the world was becoming increasingly inhuman nonetheless. As the world became intolerable even to their own children, however, the Abrahamic minority within each profession was questioning its role as shock absorber. “These Abrahamic minorities of

technicians -- who knows? -- at least where conditions are more favorable ... could conduct a peaceful rebellion of professionals.”¹²

2. The Abrahamic minorities within the church. To those with faith, those belonging to a religion, and particularly to Christians, Câmara asked, “Instead of abandoning the faith and rebelling against our church, why don’t we root ourselves even deeper in our faith, staying with the church in order to demand coherence, authenticity and the application of those texts that are in our religious literature, with all their beauty and ringing conclusions?” Specifically, he said, let us “demand of each religious group that it not separate love of neighbor from love of God.”¹³ In other words, why don’t we act as an Abrahamic minority, a collective change agent, within the church itself? As Câmara insisted elsewhere, this did not mean acquiescing to the “false prudence” of those within the Church who resisted living out the implications of the Church’s own stated commitments.¹⁴ Instead it meant a confident trust that the Holy Spirit would raise up Abrahamic minorities within episcopal conferences around the world, and even within the Vatican itself!¹⁵

3. That the church may fulfill its Abrahamic calling in the world. Here Câmara directed his suggestion specifically to his own, Roman Catholic, church, though others can easily make their appropriate analogies. Pope Paul VI had recently created the pontifical commission “Justitia et pax.” Câmara believed it was on its way to becoming “the church’s prophetic organ of greatest audacity.” It was not lacking in vision or in courage. It enjoyed the mandate of papal encyclicals and Vatican II. Its mandate, according to Câmara, was to be “a sensitive antenna within the church, denouncing the great injustices of our times and stimulating the peoples to promote changes in the structures of slavery, wherever they may exist.” Yet the commission lacked support. “Let us help it, lest it only go half-way...[in order that it might] promote concrete measures that free the church of Christ from the entanglements into which our human weakness has taken us.” Among those entanglements, Câmara explained elsewhere, was the “anomaly” of the Vatican State itself; Câmara believed that John XXII and Paul VI shared his own wish that the pope truly be a pastor and not a head of state. “Oh, when will we manage to help the Church of Christ to liberate itself! If we’re going to help to liberate the world we must work to liberate the Pope, and the bishops, and all Christians....”¹⁶

The specific program of Abrahamic minorities must necessarily involve many local variants. In the Mani Tese speeches, in only three days, Câmara varied his suggestions a little according to each audience. Nonetheless, certain themes came through loud and clear; certain steps are “indispensable.”

Some of Câmara's points would now be recognizable as the basics of grassroots organizing that “thinks globally and acts locally.” Beginning locally, they must work outward toward global issues. “We must repeat and underscore this truth,” said Câmara: “In order to feel the world’s injustices as if they were our own, the best path is to set out from the local injustices.”¹⁷ Then work with “the neighbors, the barrio, the community, until reaching brothers and sisters of all races, all tongues, and all religions.”¹⁸ Don’t stop at the local level, however. Here Câmara criticized both philanthopists and protesters alike. Too many activities have been generous and well-intended but have not taken into account the economic, cultural and political structures that engender local problems.¹⁹

Throughout his exposition of the Abrahamic social strategy, staying rooted in one's faith tradition was much more than one point among many. The step that makes all others possible, he insisted, is the impulse of grace when we gather in Christ’s name. Câmara turned shortly to the obvious question as to where this might leave those who do not profess Christ, but let us first notice his core point: All the talk about “changing structures” could amount to so much rhetorical cackle -- never “moving on from theory to practice,” never getting beyond “good intentions.” Thus he insisted: “As forerunner and sign of the profound changes that must be achieved at the national, continental and global levels, we need something more than the force of an idea: we need a touch of grace, an impulse from on high.”²⁰

That touch of grace, that divine impulse, he predicted, would happen upon living out the word of Christ, that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). “And we are not only two or three, we are thousands upon thousands.”²¹ The work for justice depends, finally, on more than a program or strategy, whether local or global. It depends on being a people, a people animated by God’s grace.

To the many who might not believe themselves religious or to have faith, Câmara did not bring a rebuke or even a direct invitation to faith. Rather he presented his own inviting faith: “We are and we will be with Christ -- even though we may not know it and even though we apparently do not want it -- to the degree that our hunger and thirst for justice, truth, and love is sincere.”²²

Even a Christian whose priority is to evangelize those who do not profess Christ might do well to consider Câmara's Abrahamic strategy. The way to demonstrate that one bears a message of truly good news is always to begin where one is -- in the locale of one's own life first of all -- demonstrating its viability there, through sustainable practices that are life-giving not life-draining or -taking. But so too for those who object that they find life in some other name, besides that of Jesus or even Abraham. By name or not, the way to make their best case is still “abrahamic.” For we all do well to argue among one another primarily with our lives. The practical test of those arguments is our personal integrity, yes, and more than that, the sustainability of the communities we are building.

Notes

1. Hélder Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker” (1979), 181.
2. Long inspired by Dom Hélder Câmara’s notion of Abrahamic minorities, I have written at greater length on these themes elsewhere. See Gerald W. Schlabach, “To Bless All Peoples: Serving with Abraham and Jesus” (1991); “The Blessing of Abraham’s Children: A Theology of Service” (1991); “Beyond Two- Versus One-Kingdom Theology: Abrahamic Community as a Mennonite Paradigm for Engagement in Society” (1993); “Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?” (1999), 456–61, 463–64.
3. Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 13.
4. Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 13 For Câmara’s biographical trajectory, also see Benedicto Tapia de Renedo, ed., “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud” (1976), 10–18.
5. Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 211.
6. Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 35–36.
7. The three speeches were: “Un pacto digno de coronar vuestra marcha” [A covenant worthy to crown your march], message to the Mani Tese youth movement climaxing a march on 5 November 1972; “¿Comunidad europea o imperio europeo?” [European community or European empire?] speech at Turin, Italy, 6 November 1972; “La degradación de los mundos y la urgente renovación de la tierra” [The degradation of the worlds and the urgent renovation of the earth], speech at Turin, Italy, 7 November 1972. They appear in Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 185–204. The original Portuguese version of the speeches appears in Dom Hélder Câmara, Justiça e paz: viagens 1972-1973, Servicio de Apostillas 36 (1973).
8. Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 189. Also see Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 180–81, 187, 212–13.
9. Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 189. Also see Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 212–13.
10. Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 98–99. Among the “advocates of prudence and patience” whom Câmara had in mind were “the commissioners in Rome [who were] busy making up rules and regulations for our lives [while] the young seminarists [sic], the new priests, the laity, the people and Christian communities, go on ahead, far ahead.” Representing the second group was the then-influential priest Ivan Illich, author of Deschooling Society and other books. Câmara spoke of his deep respect and admiration for his friend Illich, but saw him attacking “schools, or hospitals, or medicine” as currently constituted to such an extent that “his idea of making life more human again seems to involve rejecting society completely and returning more or less to a natural state.”
11. Unless otherwise noted, references in the next three paragraphs are from Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 197–98.
12. See also Câmara, “The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker,” 120, 184.
13. Tapia de Renedo, “Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud,” 203.

14. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 98–99, 117–18.
15. Câmara, "The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker," 142–45.
16. Câmara, "The Conversions of a Bishop: An Interview with José de Broucker," 159–60.
17. To understand rural poverty in the underdeveloped regions of the Third World, Câmara insisted, study the neglected rural areas of one's own country. Make the connections between unemployment, migrant labor, displacement of jobs and the hoarding of technology both at home and abroad. "Since we must obtain justice as a condition of peace, may each one begin by examining whether one is at peace with justice, or whether one is committing injustices." Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 190, 203.
18. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 191.
19. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 190–91. Again we see here Câmara's willingness to critique the critics as well as those in power. Reject false solutions that only perpetuate the problems of humanity, he continued here. War and consumerism were two of his examples, but so was an elitist form of environmentalism that fails to include impoverished human beings in its concern. Capitalist extremism and socialist distortions were other false and ideological solutions he named. Finally, for all his sympathy for the desperation that was irrupting in revolution at many places in the world, he clearly considered violent insurrection a false solution too. Mere words on behalf of peaceful solutions, "as beautiful and ringing as they may be," would not do either. If active nonviolence could not "demonstrate its validity or resolve the structures of oppression, the winner will be armed violence. And then the empire of injustice will long continue, oppressing most of humanity."
20. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 203.
21. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 203.
22. Tapia de Renedo, "Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud," 204.