



Year-End Reflection: Penultimate Words

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In recent years, our “Year-End Reflections” have been characterised by a feeling of permanent threat: the surge in authoritarianism, the breach of the social contract, together with a rise in inequality and unrest for an important share of the population, or even the impact of a pandemic which, if it has brought to light much solidarity and generosity, has also revealed our weaknesses and deepest fears. In all of these reflections, we have tried to highlight the cracks that let a little light in, sometimes engaging in a certain proactive exertion and always rushing into believing that everything was already over. Time goes on repositioning us and making us more humble: it seems that what we imagined as transitory is

here to stay, and that the list of threats not only does not abate, but instead increases, plunging us into a sadness and bewilderment that can become paralysing.

So as we bring this year 2021 to a close and usher in 2022, right now we shan't be reaching for grand words, but only penultimate words, spoken in fear and trembling, uttered from an urge to help: penultimate words that serve as an invitation to recover two principles which, in the present moment, can provide guidance in the life of people, communities and institutions. These principles are not new, but instead draw from the tradition that has guided forty years in the life of our study centre and which we go on revindicating as valid.

The Principle of Reality

A few years ago on a visit to Barcelona, the theologian Jon Sobrino explained the awakening of his political conscience after years of teaching a theology that turned its back on reality. And he said then that this awakening was rooted in his vision of blood running through the streets of the capital of El Salvador, in his realisation that “the blood was red.” The blood was blood, and it was red: it was impossible to hide it by resorting to subterfuge or politically correct euphemisms.

We need to go back and recover the principle of reality so as to rehabilitate it in all of its senses: to restore the word eviction by determining its full significance (22 532 evictions in Spain in the first half of 2021); to refuse to play down the seriousness of the structural evil in misogynist violence (42 women and 6 underage girls killed in Spain in 2021, only taking into account crimes committed by partners or ex-partners); to remain focused on the 30 700 deaths that have befallen the elderly in old people’s homes in Spain since the onset of the pandemic; to go on and raise questions about why 17 % of workers in Spain struggle to pay basic bills, or why tens of thousands of foreigners are subjected to administrative illegality, forced to work in exploitative conditions in an underground economy; to wonder how on earth some 22 % of children below the age of five (or 149.2 million) suffered from growth retardation on a global scale in 2020, some 6.7 % (45.4 million) endured emaciation while 5.7 % (38.9 million) were overweight; or to condemn the fact that between 2015-2019 two big banks like the BBVA and Santander, leaders of the Banca Armada

española, transferred more than 5.231 million dollars to the eight arms companies which supplied the Alawite and the United Arab Emirates armies in their military operations in the Yemen war. And the blood was red...a red blood that roams the earth’s veins. Aching and crushed veins. A forsaken earth that clamours for a response over and above the failed and repetitive attempts such as the latest in the Glasgow summit.

The principle of reality compels us to raise real questions about the causes. There are structures of injustice and there is a culture that justifies this reality, which hides it, which considers this reality necessary and inevitable collateral damage to preserve our “freedom,” our “lifestyle,” our rhythm of rampant, money-making consumerism, our ideal of individualistic “happiness.” A culture which seeks to place us in a virtual world where other people’s pain does not disturb us, where compassion disappears, where others turn into mere competitors and where the obvious ceases to be obvious, concealed in a thousand and one justification narratives.

If we have never spoken as we do now of emotional well-being and our need to preserve it, never have we neglected as we do now our connection with what is real, which makes us realise that underlying our uneasiness there are vital and specific predicaments, palpable injustices, and a dehumanising culture of disproportionate dimensions. To try to address well-being in an abstract way, without substantiating it in our way of living, consuming or sharing, in our social politics, in our housing, education or international co-operation...amounts to nothing more than running away from the root of the problems, running away

from realities that hurt because they directly concern our living conditions or because they call into question our insensitivity.

In this light, experiences of movements such as the PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, or Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) prove to be hopeful, as in specific cases they manage to convert processes of individual blame into collective action which turns into political cause. Or hospitality campaigns that have inspired many organisations and families to open their doors and welcome people who have come to our country seeking refuge.

All of this recovery of reality will only be possible if we are capable of opening our senses and identifying with the bodily experience of sleeping rough, in receptive exposure to every experience of injustice and pain, but also to those experiences that emerge from celebration, life and solidarity. A movement that is the opposite of the temptation, which many people feel today, of a certain escapism (at times spiritual) in shutting ourselves off in what is safe and familiar, and in relegating all social engagement to social networks.

The Principle of Hope as Opposed to the Principle of Doubt

But the principle of reality is not enough. As we said at the beginning, the pain and distress of a situation like the one which we are living in can end up overpowering and paralysing us. And even more today, now that scientific data backs up the words of certain prophets who, a few years ago when they used the word collapse, associating it with

climate change, were accused of being scaremongers. Something is changing and the consciousness that we are on the brink is no longer that of a minority, especially among younger generations who see their future threatened. In response, many temptations gain ground, with various names (versions of nihilism, negationism, neo-fascism, cynicism...), temptations before which it becomes urgent and essential to raise the flag of the principle of hope.

A hope which in the case of Christianity is grounded in the faith and trust that God kept his promise and had his last word in the crucified and risen Christ. A hope which trusts that “another world is possible” because God, in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth and in the Spirit of the Risen One, has planted the history of divine possibilities of human justice, truth and peace. We need to nurture, cultivate and celebrate this last word of God’s, which sometimes seems to go against all evidence. Come what may, he has expressed his last word, and it is on the grounds of this trust, both fragile and unshakeable, battered (crucified) and consoling (risen), that we are to root our present life. We must revindicate this, not only as a cause for intimate and personal consolation, but also as an authentic vehicle for social change. At every moment hope invites us to transform what is viable and unprecedented in God’s promise into historical reality, in support of the humanity that remains. Every growth in this sense, be it a millimetre or an inch, feeds hope and makes it more legitimate because reality can change and moral evil is not inevitable.

And that is how the last word is unfolding into a polyphony of penultimate words uttered in a multitude of languages

and different places, expressing humanity's wealth and diversity: penultimate words pronounced by people who have relinquished their fears, their comfort and safeness, and who have moved in the direction of others in an authentic transformation, at times from faith, at times out of pure humanism.

It is the word that stands up against the legal or police authorities to stop an eviction; it is the word that cries havoc in the street every time a neighbour, a sister, a stranger dies victim of the violence that has deprived her firstly of her dignity and then of her life; it is the kindly and affectionate word that cleaves the loneliness of an old man in an old people's home when we visit him; it is the word that revindicates community ties by reviving a celebration for everyone in the local village; it is the word of the trade unionist, the activist or the politician who defends decent work and social measures that improve the life of workers or pensioners; it is the word that opens our own home

to welcome a foreigner in; it is the word that keeps quiet and cherishes a space of silence on the sidelines of efficiency, providing us with lucidity and the certainty that we can walk together in fraternity; it is the word of reports that highlight the immorality of the cost and trading of weapons every year; it is the word that revindicates its resonance on behalf of national or cultural minorities threatened by globalisation...and many others.

A multitude of penultimate words that might not perhaps do away with collapse, or the transmission of new pandemics, or this sensation that we are experiencing the end of time, but which will transform the life of many people in a mysterious and often invisible way. Millions and millions of penultimate words rooted in the Last word and which can – must – be expressed throughout 2022 in an exquisite symphony which, as human as it is, will surely wind up becoming divine.

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1. According to the study "Effects of the economic crisis on judicial bodies" published by the statistical section of the General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial, CGPJ).
 2. According to government data from the Government Delegation against gender-based violence.
 3. According to data available on 21 November and compiled by the ministries of Social Rights, Health and Science and Innovation, which is still provisional.
 4. According to the report on "[The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World](#)," published by the FAO.
 5. A report on "[Financing weapons of the Yemen war. Analysis of the financing of arms companies that have exported to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates \(2015-2019\)](#)" published by the Centre of Studies for Peace J.M. Delàs.
 6. The "[PAH Instruction Manual](#)" where this experience is featured is essential reading.
 7. See for example the hospitality programme sponsored by the [Jesuit Migrant Service Spain](#) (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, SJM).