The AGAPE Economy: The Church’s Call to Action

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Introduction

At a family reunion a grandfather tells a story: A grandchild questions his grandfather about many things, people, and places. To every question comes the answer, “I am so sorry, I don’t know the answer.” After about an hour, the grandson said, “Grandpa, I hope you don’t mind that I keep asking you questions.” “Of course I don’t mind,” said the grandfather. “How are you going to learn unless you ask questions?” May I quote Dom Helder Camara and Archbishop Tutu: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask [the question] why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” The point is not only having an answer, but making sure we ask the question.

In the Gospel of John the history of salvation gets revealed in questions. First, Jesus is described as the “Word”—the very power and meaning of God. Jesus fulfills God’s salvation and is an answer to human needs; Jesus stands as the answer to all questions that human beings have and experience. For God so loved the world that God answered the world by giving Jesus to the world (John 3:16).

John 1:35–38 frames the entire experience of the Christian journey: “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks the two disciples who are following him on the road. The Word questions us, we respond, and the Word of God invites us to keep on seeking, keep on questioning, but also to respond with concrete actions.

When the church embraces difficult questions the potential exists for meaningful growth. Today, in the midst of tremendous inequalities

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caused by bad distribution of wealth, the church is seeking answers about God’s economy as an opportunity to respond in concrete actions.

We live a crisis in a civilization where words like social inequalities, exclusion, misery, external debt, speculation, and financial instability are used not only by economists or sociologists, but also by politicians who are interested in responding to the needs of the people. These are the terms that are also used in some of our churches these days, as we seek to describe the context in which we are called to do mission.

The neoliberal economic system has produced in the so-called third world countries a growing number of impoverished, marginalized, and persecuted people. Christians are recognizing the need to give some sort of response to these victims, to become more active in denouncing the issues that are threatening lives, and also to seek creative and alternative answers. After decades of applying the recipes from the neoliberal economic system, countries in Latin America are now suffering: the middle class is disappearing, external debt is draining their economies, insecurity saps their energy, the capacity to feed the people is in danger, and the growth of poverty is also rising.

The social and economic promises that were announced as part of the introduction of the neoliberal economic system were not true: not because they did not deliver development as promised, but because the system was installed without restraints or regulations. When the global market is left to its own devices and desires, it has serious negative consequences, most notably the exclusion and exploitation of the majority of the world’s population. Many people in the global South believe they are harmed by global economic policies. Global trade and investment can serve development goals. The problem remains of unfair rules designed by affluent governments to advance their own commercial interests, remains often at the expense of farmers, business owners, laborers, and people struggling to overcome poverty in developing countries.

As we face this reality of a crisis in a civilization, our faith compels us to seek justice, to witness to the presence of God, and to be part of the lives and struggles of the people made weak and vulnerable by structures and cultures—women, children, people living in poverty in both urban and rural areas, indigenous people, people of African descent, racially oppressed communities, people with disabilities, forced migrant workers, refugees, and religious ethnic minorities. Jesus says,
“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40, NIV).

We cannot build a just society in the midst of unjust structures and systems. For this reason the framework for the AGAPE\(^1\) economy is based on:

- Rejecting an economy that is driven by debt and financialization, affirming an economy of for-giveness, caring, and justice, and declaring that debt and speculation have reached their limits.
- Rejecting the ideology of consumerism and affirming an economy of Manna (Exodus 16) and of the bread of life (John 6), which provides sufficiency for all and negates the idea of greed.

These points are among a list of rejections and affirmations of the World Council of Churches’ São Paulo Statement of October 2012,\(^2\) which also laments the manner in which economic and financial legislations are in favor of the wealthy. In that statement we “affirm the God of justice for all those who are oppressed (Ps. 103:6)” and we are called to work for “an economy of sufficiency.” The ethics of sufficiency means recognizing limits in all our activities: in the economy, in the use of natural resources, in our personal lives, and in the performance of public authorities.

The words of the prophet Ezekiel remind us that what is required in a healthy society is not only the need to avoid all oppression, but also to restore the debtor’s pledge in due time, to commit no robbery, to give bread to the hungry, and to cover the naked with a garment (Ezekiel 18:7). We need—in a common and differentiated way—to


shift from cultures and economies of greed to cultures and economies of sufficiency.

In Latin America, inspired by an old indigenous tradition of sumak kawsay (in Quichua), the concept of “good living,” in contrast to “living good,” is expanding more and more. The latter model of “living good” imposes on us a hedonistic lifestyle, each time with greater force, based on values of consumption that do not accept any limits to their ambitions of accumulation and satisfaction. In order for a few people to “live good,” how many millions of people have to “live bad”?

The concept of sumak kawsay has been included in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia as part of the responsibilities of the state and the objectives of society. It explains economic poverty as the political control over scarcity. Economic poverty cannot be resolved or changed by more economic growth, but only by changing the economic system. The present economic system will always generate poverty and create inequalities to maintain power and control.

We need an economy that conserves and celebrates the ways of life and economies practiced by marginalized communities. These ways of life depend on need rather than greed, and respect the integrity of all living beings, which are considered of equal importance. They are rooted in the understanding that we belong to the land and the land does not belong to us, that we are all part of one wondrous organic web of life. This principle is present in many communities, such as Ujama and Ubuntu, the African concept of personhood in which the identity of self is understood to be formed interdependently through community.

We need an economy that serves people, where people are important, an economy that is based on providing the means of livelihood for future generations. Global society has to regard improving the situation of its poorest and most vulnerable members as its prime responsibility. We need a financial system that is subordinated to these responsibilities. For its proper functioning, the economy needs the counterbalance of democratic politics based on a strong civil society. Such politics need to be open to reform and renewal, accepting an ethical frame, which cannot be invented by politics itself.

We know we need these things, yet what is still missing is the way forward in determining how these values could be brought into reality: from paper to streets, from statements to daily life. We need to find ways of making a vision of God’s economy a reality in the countries of the world. Where and how can the church make a difference?
Let me share some information that may help us respond to this call to action.

1. The church’s call to action takes place from the margins, where the church uses its prophetic voice to seek justice.

   We belong to a faith tradition that is built around the memory of the One who defied the power and glory of the contemporary political and religious establishments. Instead, he embraced the marginalized people and communities. We are called to be an alternative community by the One who:

   - asserted the act of a widow who gave only two small copper coins was greater than those who gave huge sums;
   - applauded the prayer of the scorned tax collector as more acceptable than that of the glorified Pharisee;
   - valued the faith of the despised gentile over those of his own centuries-old religious tradition;
   - rewarded the poor Lazarus with a seat next to Abraham in his parable, while the arrogant rich man was left to thirst forever;
   - defied the protocols and traditions of rituals and propriety for the sake of the healing of the sick;
   - taught his disciples that to have power is to be a servant, even washing their feet on the night before he was killed.

Much of the biblical tradition speaks of this ministry from the margins and this denouncing voice of prophecy, despite some assertions on the contrary, unveiling to us the place of God’s presence and power among the Last, the Lost, and the Least.

However, many in our churches and church organizations are too preoccupied with our desire to rub shoulders with the powerful and the prominent, even as we call ourselves the community that belongs to the One who was killed for rubbing them on the wrong side. The issues and concerns of the marginalized people only receive marginal response. But it is in the company and the call of marginalized people that the prophetic voice of the church becomes vital, radical, and relevant. In the words of the São Paulo Statement, “We are called to find a new and just financial architecture oriented towards satisfying the needs of people and the realization of all economic, social and cultural rights and human dignity. . . . This requires a system that does not
serve greed but embraces alternative economies that foster a spirituality of enough and a lifestyle of simplicity, solidarity, social inclusion and justice.”

Example 1

The sustainable agriculture program of the community in Coclé del Norte, Panama has been successful in transforming the way the farmers produce food. Using different techniques, they have planted tomatoes, onions, potatoes, green peppers, and other crops in land that was not producing because it lacked nutrients and minerals. The farmers got together and exchanged ideas and methods, and today the land is productive. When the owners saw the transformation, however, they told the farmers that they had to leave or else they would be put in jail. The church, with the help of volunteer lawyers and with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, identified these owners and advised them to either lease the land or sell it, but maintained that they could not kick the people off the land now that they have been working there for more than five years and have produced food for their family and community.

Example 2

Let me share some general observations about the economic situation lived in Latin America and the Caribbean, with data from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL).

On an international scale, Latin American and Caribbean countries are economically very important. We represent 8 percent of the world’s commerce. Productivity and exportation from our countries is based on primary sectors: factories (or sweat shops) and natural resources. Construction, tourism, and our geographical position are also important for economic growth.

In the last decade (2000–2010) important steps have been taken in the region:

- We are making progress in combating extreme poverty, where the numbers of people living with less than $1.25 per day has dropped from 12 percent in the year 2000 to 6 percent in 2010.
• Malnutrition has dropped from 15 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2010.
• In education we have experienced growth from 88 percent to 95 percent of girls and boys who attend primary school.
• There is more access to clean water and we have reduced tuberculosis (TB) in children below five years of age.

In Panama we have experienced high economic growth because of foreign investments for construction of the Panama Metro (train system), the widening of the Panama Canal, and other projects. However, there is an unequal distribution of wealth in Panama. The country is very high on the list of countries in the region living with inequalities. We are especially affected because of the high level of deforestation, especially in the Southern Cone, and the effects of climate change in the Caribbean. Infant mortality among the poor also continues to be an aspect of inequality, though progress has been made in survival rates. It would seem that Latin American society will always present the highest level of inequalities in the world in spite of the economic growth. The Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OCDE) has registered a level of inequalities 60 percent higher than the goal expected.

Extreme inequalities are present in terms of salaries, of course, but also in the access to land for farming and to essential public services such as education, health, housing, and security. For example, in Honduras, Guatemala, and Panama there are cases of powerful land owners who grab land from campesinos (peasant farmers) and indigenous people to produce corn or sugar cane that later is transformed into ethanol or clean fuel. These crops represent a lot of money for the owners, versus the production of food for the people. Among the most affected are women, children, the elderly, people who are disabled, and ethnic groups such as African descendants and the indigenous peoples, who historically have been excluded from society. These inequalities are a threat to life and life abundant granted to us all by Jesus Christ (John 10:10).

Example 3

The owners of small parcels of land have planted exotic lumber (the ones used to make furniture—teak, mahogany, and others) to sell later in order to help pay for the education of their children. The big
companies buy the land around the owners of these small parcels and block the exit to the main highway so that the small owner is forced to sell his property and its produce to the big companies. They, in return, become stronger and wealthier, since the profit is never used to help the people in the community. Because they have access to the highways and the small producer cannot get the lumber to make furniture and other produce to the markets, they are forced to sell and this way they do not have the land anymore. All the transactions are done “legally” but the effect leaves hunger and fewer small farmers for the big companies to contend with.

Does the church have an interest in the production of food for the people?

2. The church’s call to action takes place when there is transformative power.

In God’s economy, power is shared as a system of checks and balances, and all people—regardless of class, gender, race, caste, sexual orientation, indigenous identity, or religion—have a voice and participate in decision-making at all levels. Decision- and policy-making on economic matters must genuinely “embrace those who suffer the most from systemic marginalization” because “nothing determined without them is for them.”

At his glorious ascension, our Lord Jesus Christ promised to his disciples an outpouring of power (Acts 1:8). Transforming power is God’s promise that we may fearlessly live out, speak out, and build a base of powerful people called to resist and subvert the destructive hegemony of economies of death. Though not without risk or cost, we must as Christians take courageous public stances, have an impact on public policies, and where there is abuse of power, raise a common voice, demanding from public authorities and institutions a commitment to ensure justice and peace and challenging corporations and businesses to care for people and creation.

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3. The church’s call to action takes place in ecumenical or/and inter-faith contexts.

Our churches live with an ever-growing tendency toward the valuing of the denomination over ecumenical movements. Those who oppose ecumenism often do so because they do not know what the ecumenical movement stands for, and do not know that the ecumenical movement has been committed to the poor for years.

There is a need for more education on matters of ecumenism, and we look to our seminaries for their continual contribution. We need to create spaces that are safe, where dialogue can be established in order to foster an ecumenical ethic among the churches. We believe that it is time to affirm an ecumenism of concrete actions.

Example

On September 19, 2014, under the auspices of the United Nations, people of faith, representatives of diverse faith-based development organizations, and interfaith groups offered a Call to Action to safeguard the dignity and human rights of all people with our actions, our words, and through our respective platforms. I will share two paragraphs of the statement:

Not in our name should any mother die while giving birth. Not in our name should any girl, boy, woman or man be abused, violated, or killed. Not in our name should a girl child be deprived of her education, be married, be harmed or abused. Not in our name should anyone be denied access to basic health care, nor should a child or an adolescent be denied knowledge of and care for her/his body. Not in our name should any person be denied their human rights.

. . . .

Therefore, as the United Nations convenes our governments to consider what the next global development priorities should be, we, people of faith, call upon the United Nations system and Member States, to ensure that sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights be made central to the Post 2015 sustainable development agenda.4

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It was not easy to sign on to this statement, but we all did, because sexual and reproductive rights are issues that have to do with health measures that threatened us. What happens when a member of one of our congregations, a loyal and committed member, comes back from her doctor and says, “I got the results of my physical tests and the doctors say that I have AIDS.” This woman is not on the streets or exposed to people she doesn’t know, so how has she contracted AIDS? It’s the responsibility of her husband, a man who makes a living driving a truck from country to country with merchandise. Only he knows who he sleeps with. On his return home he infects his wife. The church has to attend to this woman—“we will pray about it”—but we also have the responsibility to direct that woman where she can get help. The church also has the responsibility to call the husband and help him. Only when the church knows where help can come from are we able to offer relevant service. This is an example of things we can do in strategic partnership.

4. The church’s call to action takes place within civil society.

The churches need to participate in conversations with civil society: with human rights movements, civil rights movements, and others. Sometimes amidst our struggles we can redefine concepts. We can have dialogue and put together strategies as we discern the will of God for us all.

Churches are empowered as we enter into solidarity and companionship with people inside and outside our faith traditions. This partnership is mutually empowering, so that a platform is made for all to raise their cries and give voice to their vision of justice. Once we are rooted in the peoples’ struggles, the Spirit’s accompanying power flourishes and grows.

This is an invitation to analyze the available facts of the context where the mission of the church is done. There is always a risk in making such evaluations because they can paralyze us when the findings are too overwhelming. And yet these findings can also be a source of new energy and renewed hope for God’s mission.
Conclusion

In the midst of the poverty, suffering, oppression, economic exploitation, and abuse of power that shapes life for the majority of the world's people, as well as the torture and increasing death of the earth and all her beings, God weeps with us in our pain and our vulnerability.

At the same time, we see God in the lives and resilience of the people who are challenging the powers of death and oppression. We register many initiatives where churches are working with religious and secular communities for the well-being of their neighbors. We hear God calling us to live out our faith by working together to create the economy of life for the earth and all her beings, for justice and peace, for koinonia in the vision of God's economy.

The complexity of the problems and the magnitude of the challenges need to move us to recreate our hope. It is therefore even more important for us to encourage one another in our local churches and congregations to take practical steps, to take risks, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to be a sign of hope for the world.

In the Christian belief, the earth and all that is exists because of the initiative and free act of generous love given by the Creator. God has made a world in which, by working with the limitations of a material order declared by God to be “very good,” humans may reflect the liberty and generosity of God. And our salvation is the restoration of a broken relationship with this whole created order, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the establishing by the power of his Spirit a community—the church—in which mutual service and attention are the basic elements through which the human world becomes transparent to our maker.

Witnessing to our Christian faith requires us to offer spiritual and practical resistance to economic injustice and ecological destruction, and to do everything we can to promote an economy in the service of life, both globally and in our own respective countries. To this end, our spirituality needs to be deepened and our lives need to be transformed, as promised by Jesus Christ. We do not face the challenges alone, because the Triune God is with us, gathering and guiding us in company with the whole people of God. This Trinity Institute conference may end today, but the church’s action continues and finds new meaning today and tomorrow.