

Interview with Leonardo Boff

Author of *Francis of Rome, Francis of Assisi: A New Springtime for the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014).

Interview by Jonathan J. Armstrong

Interview received on: September 12, 2016

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Jonathan J. Armstrong: In the chapter titled “Can We Save the Catholic Church?”, you allude to the many sexual and financial scandals that have plagued the institutional Roman Catholic Church in the past decades. You conclude this chapter: “But the church can be saved as long as it is inspired by the tradition of Jesus, returns to drink from the well of the gospel, sets out to serve the world rather than itself, and puts the poor at the center in a quest for liberation and social justice. Then it is good not only for Christians but for the whole world. It is a force for humanization and peace among peoples” (p. 25). When you express hope that the church can be saved, you seem to be writing about the institutional church. But, isn’t institution necessarily resistant to the “tradition of Jesus”? Is it reasonable to ask an institution to “set out to serve the world rather than itself?”

Leonardo Boff: We have to make a distinction between the church as a community of faith—the people of God—and a group of leaders who are the ecclesiastical authority. In the organization of the church, the authority is concentrated in the hands of a few. The church is commonly talked about as a hierarchal body. However, this common understanding is not true. The hierarchal body, which is part of the institution of the church, has the responsibility to lead the community, or the people of God, in the faith. The body of leaders, however, are disconnected from the community of faith, which is a big problem. I believe that this is not the way Jesus would act. Jesus wanted *hierodulia*, sacred service, instead of *hierarchy*, which is sacred authority. Unfortunately, the hierarchy is not practicing love and mercy; they are rude, legalistic, and arrogant, and because of this they are distanced from the community of faith. This type of organization has always created conflicts throughout history between the body of people and the hierarchal leaders.

The problem is that the hierarchal leaders exclude and condemn the people. This current type of organization serves themselves before serving the people of God and the world. I don’t see how we can save the church as an entity. The church has to go back to the practice of humility like Jesus and the apostles, where the priority is to first serve the community of faith and then the body of leaders. It is in this way that Vatican Council II, in *Lumen Gentium*, is serving the

community of faith before the hierarchal leaders. For example, in his first public appearance, Pope Francis cared more about the approval and blessing of the people of God rather than that of the hierarchal leaders.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: You write of the pope's humility and simplicity: "It would not be surprising if one day, as John Paul II wanted, the pope should decide to abandon the Vatican and go off and live in a modest lodging, with plenty of outside space to receive visits from the faithful. The times are ripe for this type of revolution in papal customs" (p. 49). You also write: "It is not unthinkable that representatives of the people of God, from cardinals to women, should be invited to elect a pope for the whole Christian world. It is urgent to reform the curia so that it becomes decentralized. Surely Pope Francis will do this" (p. 52). It is now the third year that Pope Francis I has held office; do you see from Pope Francis I the kind of radical action that had you hoped for when you first published this book?

Leonardo Boff: I suggested to Don Helder Camara, the bishop prophet of Brazil and very close friend of Pope Paul VI, that the pope should leave the Pontifical Palace and live away in the outskirts of Rome, in the "borgattas" near the poor. There he could receive the faithful in Christ and not refuse anyone. The Pope was sad and said that he would want that but the Curia and all of the apparatus of the Vatican opposed it strongly. The popes before Pope Francis had a way of living which looked more like Caesar's lavish palace rather than the humble scene of the nativity. But Francis has made the first step. He actually left the Pontifical Palace and went to live in Santa Marta, a hotel attached to the Vatican. There he lives like the others do. He eats together with the others, and even gets in line to get his plate of food. He comments with humor: "Here is very difficult to have me poisoned."

I think that the church needs to change several things: it should not follow Western church practices, pagan practices, and should get rid of the symbols that have been influenced by the Roman emperors.

Pope Francis acted symbolically. He took the mozetta, a cloak worn over the shoulders which demonstrates the authority of the Roman emperor, and handed it over to the secretary. He said that this symbol of power was not necessary. He wanted to lead the church not with power of the law but with the gentle power of love. As a result, he preferred to be called the bishop of Rome, and only after that he would accept to be the pope of the universal church, which is collegially directed along with a few cardinals. These are some of the changes in the way that the pope's ministry is being understood. Pope Francis also proposed a reform of the curia so that it would be decentralized. He wanted to put individuals in the curia positions who would represent the whole church, such as woman and notable laity. He has promised this. However, we know that one finds terrible oppositions within the body of the curia because of the habits and privileges they have had for more than a thousand years. In this case, one does not do what one wants to do but one does what one is allowed to do. I desire that Pope Francis will take on this difficult work of reforming the management structures of the Universal Church. For now, though, he focuses on the central issue at hand, which is the basis of all the other projects: to ensure a future for humanity and the earth, which is being seriously threatened. For the

systematic crisis right now is the ecological crisis. He wrote the encyclical letter, *On Care of Our Common Home*.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Please expand on your chapter “What Has Pope Francis Brought Us That Is New?” (pp. 87–89). If you were writing this chapter today, are there additional accomplishments that you would mention?

Leonardo Boff: What is new about Pope Francis compared to the popes prior to him? His practices and acts are revolutionary. First, he doesn’t think of himself as a doctor of faith but as a pastor who encourages the Christian community to produce an attractive message. His focus is on encountering the Lord and meeting with all people despite their backgrounds. In light of this, he receives everyone: Muslims, refugees, atheists, and everyone else who comes to him. He insists that pastors, bishops, and priests must have a revolution of tender compassion and mercy.

He says what many theologians have been thinking: the message of condemnation will not last forever. We should stop using the message of the fear of hell to win people. Rather, we should encourage them by using the beautiful message of love, compassion and mercy, which is a more attractive message than one of hellfire and damnation. Maybe the difference between Francis and the other popes is that he does not simply speak about the poor, but he embraces them and defends their rights. Francis is the only pope that has directly condemned the system of anti-life. He is impartial, one-sided, and on the side of the poor. Never in the history of the papacy has a pope ever insisted on social programs that analyze the causes of exploitation and denounce the factors responsible for the misery in the world. He has done the same while visiting Santa Cruz, Bolivia in Latin America, the city where representatives of the social movements in all Latin America were gathered. The pope has become a worldwide example of humility and courage through ethical and humanitarian movements. Everyone listens to the pope because he has a message for humankind and not only for Christians. The pope represents the movement of a church that practices humility, fellowship, sympathy, compassion, a culture of peace, and dialogue.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: You write: “The church, as we have it today, will never be like the poor, but it can be for and with the poor” (p. 75). Please explain in detail.

Leonardo Boff: The church has had a history of taking care of the poor, following the practical example of Jesus and the apostles. The church used the strategy of assisting the poor like a father would. While they helped the poor, they never explained the reason for poverty, nor how to overcome it. The church in Latin America, in their documents of Medellin and Puebla, assumed a different position. This position is to work and live with the poor, thus participating in their way of life, culture, and ways to pray to God. This act of sympathy acknowledges that although they lack material things, they possess much else. They have a culture, they have faith, and they have knowledge on how to survive in the midst of poverty.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Throughout your book, you use the phrase the “tradition of Jesus,” dedicating a chapter to the exposition of this principle (“The Tradition of Jesus and the Christian Religion,” pp. 114–117). There, you describe the “tradition of Jesus” as composed of certain values, such as unconditional love for others and the use of power in the service of the community. In your view, does the tradition of Jesus have a doctrinal content? If so, what are the precise bounds of this doctrinal content?

Leonardo Boff: The expression “tradition of Jesus” is a recent issue of the new Christology that is being established in Spain with Pagola and Castillo and in Latin America with various authorities like Jose Comblin, Carlos Mesters, and others. This expression presupposes all of the meticulous work of contemporary and ecumenical exegesis.

It gives insight that what we know about Jesus is from sources written 40–50 years after the crucifixion. Jesus left nothing written. Many people of the ancient world, including people among the Jews, were illiterate.

During the time of silence between the death of Jesus and the New Testament writings—beginning with Apostle Paul and the rest of the Gospels—the information was gathered from different Christian communities. Each of the writers elaborated about his vision of Jesus. Thus arose the four gospels. But before all is the practice of Jesus, his way of relating with God as his Father, his perception of being Son of the Father, his conflicts with the religious traditions of the time and his resistance to the imperial power of Rome. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is greater than the kingdom of Caesar, something that would be a crime against the majesty.

The book of Acts speaks of “the way of Jesus”, that is to say, to live according to the standards of the Kingdom of God, of unconditional love even of enemies, of love for the poor, of compassion with those that suffer, humility, and service to others. Jesus did not create a new religion just because there were many at that time. Jesus taught us to live the values of the Kingdom, live in love, in unity and committed to the Father.

Jesus’ teachings are more than doctrines but are a way of life. They obviously imply a vision of things, but the important thing is to follow the way and manner of the life of Jesus. This is the tradition of Jesus, an original and primitive element that precedes the Gospels and where these writers take their theological elaborations. The Gospels are more than history; they are theology, an attempt to understand what happened to Jesus after being crucified; God raised him. They gave him a thousand titles. At the end they stated: Jesus is God, he is not simply human. They started to call him the son of God and finally God incarnate in our misery.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Do you believe that Pope Francis I will call an ecumenical council? If such a council were to be convened, what do you see as the most pressing matters requiring resolution?

Leonardo Boff: I don't think that the Pope is going to convene a council. I personally talked with the Pope and suggested having a council with all the churches. His response to me was that a council is a Catholic thing. It is necessary to have an assembly of all the churches, religions, and spiritual people in order to help humanity find a resolution to the systemic crisis we live in, and find another way to live together. The primary problem does not revolve around the future of the Catholic church and Christianity, or western culture. Rather, it is about the future of humankind, and how the churches and religions should help guarantee a better future with hope. This is the primary question to be asked. We are not sure that doing what we are doing right now will answer this question. For this reason, the pope does not emphasize the role of the church but rather the condition and suffering of the poor. According to my judgment, this is the vision that the pope has. He confessed that nobody knows where we are going, not even the Dalai Lama or the pope. All together, we must find a common way that will save us all. This time Noah's ark is not there to save us from death. We have two options, either we will die together or we will be saved together. The papal encyclical calls for a collective responsibility, for a great hope because, "God is the sovereign lover of life" (Wisdom 11:24, quoted three times by the Pope), and he will not permit a tragic end of life like the time of Noah.