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Cultural Immersion and Global Health: An Experience Among the Guarani

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I. INTRODUCTION

Different authors, health advocates, and medical providers have different definitions of global health. Paul Farmer et al., for example, think it is more accurate to define global health as the “role of nonstate institutions, including international NGOs, private philanthropists, and community-based organizations.”¹ The action of these institutions focuses on global health delivery towards health interventions that begin with the question: “How can a health system efficiently provide health services to all who need them?”² Ruth Macklin argues that global health meets the value of “health as a primary good for individuals.” As a public good, public global health must be promoted by governments. For her, therefore, governments have obligations to go “beyond their own national boundaries, they have the obligation to promote global public health.”³ Farmer et al. suggest that the international governmental action in health care must be differentiated from global health as “international health” because it has implications for relationships among nation-states.⁴ Regardless of differences in the definition of global health, one common assumption among those who advocate for global health is that health care is a human right and any action of global health delivery must consider broader socio-economic aspects. Global health requires a biosocial approach in broad interdisciplinary cooperation. This includes disciplines ranging from medicine to anthropology to theology.

In this paper, I will not enter the debate of definitions of global health. To begin our conversation, I take a broad definition as any healthcare action beyond national and cultural borders. I also take that favorable socio-economic environment to allow people to have the highest possible stands of health and access to healthcare services are human rights, as declared by international documents.⁵ My aim is to present an experience of companionship in global health that I had in my work with an indigenous group of Guarani in the south of Bolivia. In a dialogical perspective and with an open-mind, I will present some aspects of the Guarani worldview and

¹ Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim et al. *Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 10.

² Ibid.

³ Ruth Macklin, “Global Health” in *The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*, ed. Bonnie Steinbeck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 697.

⁴ Farmer, Kim et al. *Reimagining Global Health*, 10.

⁵ Andrey R. Chapman, *Global Health, Human Rights and the Challenge of Neoliberal Policies* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8-9

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theology and the immersion in this new world as important for an efficient healthcare delivery. Therefore, this paper is an interdisciplinary effort that aims to provide a modest contribution for those who are working in global health and developing strategies for healthcare delivery.

II. AN OPTION FOR BEING IN COMPANIONSHIP

I understand that any action directed to helping impoverished communities must start with a heart and mind to be with those whom you are joining. This needs to be grounded by a commitment that you are there not only to do something to those you will be serving, but to be in company with them, so then we can do something together. Companionship is being with those who are different than I am and to live in an area marked by social injustice, poverty, and lack of basic needs, such as health care. Although they are humble and poor people, they understand most of the reasons for their suffering, they have acquired a practical knowledge to deal with their struggles. They have culture, values, and wisdom among other things. In other words, one should not go to serve the poor with a mentality that they are mere passive people who need help and will accept anything you offer them. We have something to learn from them. They need help, but this help is a process of interaction and mutual learning, in which a process of exchange is established.

This is a humble posture that finds a light in the teaching of Pope Francis. In a different context and considering the mission of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis stresses his preference: “A Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”⁶ He exhorts the contemporary disciples of Jesus to leave their comfort zone and go to encounter the others, taking the risks of this encounter that makes different people companions. Francis takes this from the heart of Jesus’ life that was a life in companionship with others who were in need, especially the poor and the sick. Being in companionship is a choice for being on the way with others in their suffering and struggles. It is a movement of solidarity with those who are at the bottom of a society marked by injustice and poverty. Pope Francis also adds that a preferential option for the poor is a foundation for this movement of solidarity, as an option that originates in the Christological faith.⁷ In a context of poverty (the main reason for health inequalities and premature death, usually the context of global health delivery), solidarity means to recognize the faces of those who are suffering because of lack access to basic goods. Seeing these faces means recognizing their dignity and that oppression and marginalization are preventing them from having access to an essential good as healthcare and a secure environment that permits their flourishing.

An option for being in companionship is more than recognizing the faces and dignity of the poor, but it is also becoming their friends and being open to learn from them. Pope Francis affirms that the poor “have much to teach us”⁸ as well as different cultures that many Western people consider inferior, such as indigenous peoples. Francis highlights:

There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people *from within their proper culture*. Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group.⁹

Then, he emphasizes that indigenous communities and their traditions deserve a special care and be treated as “principal dialogue partners,” especially where their lands, traditions, and well-being have been threatened.¹⁰ Dialogue and cooperation for the promotion of the common good are the perspective of Pope Francis. He presents his writings and reflections as a contribution to the dialogue and development of actions for justice. He recognizes that those who are at the bottom of society, the poor and the marginalized, must participate in decision-making processes and actions for building a fair and sustainable world. They are essential partners with much to teach. Considering organized communities and indigenous peoples, Francis stresses: “They are able to instill a

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation] (24 November 2013), no. 49, accessed Oct. 12, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 198.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí* [Encyclical Letter] (24 May 2015), no. 144, accessed Oct. 12, 2017, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals.index.html>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 146

greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and grandchildren. These values are deeply rooted in indigenous peoples.”¹¹

The two Francis’ texts highlighted here address specific issues: *Evangelii Gaudium* is directed to the Catholic Church and Francis’ preoccupation with a “Church which is poor and for the poor”¹² able to serve the world towards justice and opportunities for all. Then *Laudato Sí* addresses the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”¹³ in which Francis invites all to participate in a process of building an integral ecology based on care for our common home and for the poor. In both texts, Francis suggests dialogue as a principle for decision-making processes and social actions that include those who are at the bottom and, perhaps begins from them.

Whether or not one professes Francis’ Catholic faith, he offers insights for our engagement in global health delivery and promotion. These insights strengthen my convictions that efficient, respectful, and sustainable global health action must begin with commitment to be in companionship with those who are the bottom, that is, with those who are the first victims of structural violence, social injustice, and health inequalities. Companionship is to walk with partners who have much to teach and to contribute in the pursuit of the dream stated by the Alma-Ata Declaration: “Health for All.”

III. COMPANIONSHIP WITH THE GUARANIS

Global health is a work that crosses boundaries: from national borders to cultural differences. My aim now is to share what I have learned from my time in companionship with Guaranis in a little village located in southern Bolivia. Being in a different country and culture requires one to be open to whatever might happen and trust that good things might happen. At the same time, openness to learning from the other is an essential posture to establish an effective work in health promotion. *Tekove Katu* (healthy life) is a small nursing school that educates assistant nurses to serve the indigenous communities in Bolivian Chaco. Based on this school, some primary healthcare services are offered. (This project began in 1976 by a Franciscan Priest and it is sponsored by Catholic communities in partnership with the Ministry of Health of Bolivia.) In this text, I will not describe my activities with the Guaranis, but rather present what I learned from my encounter with people from a different culture, and reflect on the insights from these encounters. Thus, I hope I can show how a real cultural immersion is important for global health.

First of all, being in companionship is an experience of listening and learning. This creates a foundation for the work of healthcare delivery with local partners. One of the most interesting things of this experience is to listen to Guaranis telling about their culture and world-vision. Of course, nobody can understand these people after a few conversations. This is only enough to introduce the size of the challenge to be in a different culture, with little contact with “my world” and almost no reference to the Western mentality. I have always been fascinated with all I have heard from Guarani people that were fulfilled by what I have seen. Being open to whatever might happen is a posture that makes me feel insecure, especially because my Western mentality works more at making plans than living the spontaneity of life.

Living in the spontaneity of everyday seems to be one aspect of Guarani culture. It seems Guaranis do not have a sense of accumulation, that is, they do not work to accumulate goods, but rather for what is sufficient, and always trust that tomorrow they will find the sufficient again provided by nature. Many people criticize this way of living in the modern age. Seen from the outside, this mentality does not seem to fit in the current world, which is marked by an idea of unlimited progress and exploitation of nature. So it is necessary to accumulate more and more to guarantee plans for tomorrow. This also occurs inside an individualistic perspective because one who is accumulating more and more does not care for those who cannot do the same, or do not have access to the same opportunities and goods. This perceptive of having the sufficient, what is enough, really questions the modern way of life in Western societies.

Living with the sufficient was one of the first things I learned from being in companionship with Guaranis. Of course, when my ears heard this, immediately came to my mind: “what is the sufficient? What is the sufficient for me?” Some people (including myself) who live simple lives in high-income countries feel proud of themselves for trying to embody a humble life style. Observing the way of life of Guarani people, I realized there is no humble life in these countries. There are people in poverty, but this is not what the Guaranis teach about living with the sufficient. Certainly, the perspectives of what is sufficient vary. However, there is no doubt that people in

¹¹ Ibid., no. 179.

¹² Ibid., no. 198.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí*, no. 49.

rich countries have things that go beyond the sufficient. Although there are differences that cannot be changed between a “Western humble life” and the Guarani because of culture, priorities, vocation, geography, weather and so on; differences that make one accumulates so much in a level that shows (or promotes) the injustice of the world cannot be tolerated. This creates poverty, the first responsible for health inequalities, vulnerability to be ill, and premature death.¹⁴

Everybody must have access to what is sufficient. This is not happening for most people in the world. The Guarani culture or *ñandereko* (the way of being Guarani) teach the awareness that we do not need much, but only what is sufficient. This is not a narrow perspective of a life with more austerity and humility, but a search for a harmonic relationship with nature and others.

In the Guarani village, people live in a very humble way. But they are not in a miserable life. Unlike other areas I had been in developing countries, I did not see people starving on the streets. They have food and some other resources. But this does not seem the sufficient to avoid poverty. Malnutrition is a huge health issue in this community. It has serious problems with water. Lack of healthcare assistance and basic sanitation are visible. All these things are not luxurious. They are necessary for the sufficient. Why do not Guarani in the Chaco have these basic goods? They have been prevented from having what is sufficient.

I cannot affirm it for sure, but I guess that many people might use the Guarani perspective against the Guarani to explain why there is poverty among them. These people might say that the Guarani are indigenous (in a pejorative way) who do not like to work and still live in a pre-colonization world. In addition, they might argue that indigenous peoples must accept the Modern Western way of life and work to produce wealth. But the contradiction is so huge, because these same people, through this Modern Western (Capitalist) way, exploit the indigenous, take their lands, and use their force as cheap labor to produce wealth for a few who prioritizes accumulation of goods. In addition to losing their lands, indigenous people do not have opportunities to access the goods that Modern Western development can offer, such as the benefits of medical development.

Indigenous people must live inside their traditions and lands. Their freedom and cultures must be preserved. But they cannot be isolated, prevented from having access to advances and benefits of the modern world, such as healthcare and modern medicine. A harmonic encounter between peoples with ancestral traditions and the benefits of modern development is necessary; an encounter of exchange of learning, and not meetings of depreciation, force, and exploitation that have marked the history of Latin America since the arrival of the first Europeans.

Possibly there are several answers to the question about the sufficient. But no answer can deny the importance of a sense of creating limits to the unending desire of accumulation and exploitation of the earth. The awareness of having the sufficient is a perspective of justice, in which essential goods become available for all, and a perspective of care, which undergirds and respects the limits of nature.

This leads to another aspect of the Guarani worldview, that is, the relationship with nature, *Pachamama*, Mother-Earth, the big-mom who provides everything to the survival of people. The Guarani worldview is very connected to their theology, in which earth has almost a status of a God, a female God who is deeply inserted in the Guarani life. God is in their history and provides everything needed to living-well (*vivir bien*).¹⁵ This concept seems to be essential for the indigenous people in South America, especially those peoples from regions that include parts of Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil. *Vivir Bien* is to live with the sufficient provided by nature, *Pachamama*. She is generous, everything is there for humans to build their lives. At the same time, this mom requires attention and care. She is generous, but has limits created as part of the finite existence of the world. It is as a God who made herself vulnerable to be generous, because she gives everything she has for the good of her children. But, as venerable, she needs to be cared for to renovate the gift of creation.

This relationship with the earth shapes Guarani theology¹⁶ and the way of life grounded on a communitarian aspect. For the Guarani, although *Pachamama* has almost the status of a divinity, God is *Ñanderu Tumpa*, the father of all human beings. Life, that is *tekove*, is a piece of God as a gift providing a historical existence. *Tekove* never ends. The human life is a piece of God that returns to God when the historical life ends. Of course, Guarani do not separate historical and eschatological lives as I am didactically making a distinction. For them, life is only one, a gift that will never leave the community. After death, *tekove* returns to *Ñanderu Tumpa*

¹⁴ In order to check that, see the report on population health from the health issues related to the Sustainable Development Goals proposed by United Nations: GBD 2015 SDG Collaborators. “Measuring the health-related Sustainable Development Goals in 188 countries: a baseline analysis from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2015,” *The Lancet* 338, no. 10053 (September 2016): 1813-50, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31467-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31467-2).

¹⁵ “Reframing Health in Bolivia Around the Concept of Living Well” in *Global Health Watch: An Alternative World Health Report 4* ed. People’s Health Movement et al. (London: Zed Books, 2014), 333-340.

¹⁶ Gabriel Siquier, *Ñanderu Tüpa Regua Ñande Reko Rupi: Teología Guarani* (La Paz: Fundación Centro Arakuaaenda; Compañía de Jesús en Bolivia, 2017).

because it is part of him, but this life remains in the community. Those who are still “alive historically” and all who are also pieces of God have the obligation to care for the life of all in the community and of the earth, *Pachamama* who is also part of God’s reality, a big special piece, almost another God.

All individuals have an intrinsic dignity because the origin of all persons is a word sent to the earth to stand up and to speak up to contribute to the community. Hence, word has a deep meaning for the Guaranis. *Ñee* (word) – that is the same root for *Ñanderu Tumpa* (God) and *ñandereko* (way of being) – must always be a word of truth, and upon the truth, life must be built. As a *ñee* sent to the earth, a Guarani must use his/her word for the good of the community. As *tekove* is a piece of *Ñanderu Tumpa*, the *ñandereko* is a *ñee* to be shared. Consequently, life is *mbororekua*, that is, sharing.

The human person has a deep connection to the community. This connection along with a theology of creation (including the relationship with God and the Earth) shape the way of being (*ñandereko*) Guaranis. The individual connection to the community (*tenta*) is not something seen by an individual who looks at the community, but it is from the community as a tent that contains all individuals inside it. Therefore, all persons do not recognize their identity and being outside the tent. All are *compaisanos*, a fraternity of brothers and sisters who share the same origin, existence, and destiny.

The tent belongs to all and, as the same time, it is the responsibility of all to keep this tent a welcoming place for everyone. Thus, everything is to be shared. Nothing belongs to an individual, but to *Pachamama*. No private property exists. The land belongs to all as well as the fruits of the land. All must work on the land for the good of the community. Of course, some people can work more than others, so they will produce more. In a Western meritocratic mentality, one who works more and produces more, deserves that. This person is worthy to be richer. Among the Guaranis, one does not find this mentality, but rather a distributive one. I heard a story that illustrates this well. A man produced more than others in one season. When it is time for the harvest, this man with more has the responsibility of sponsoring a big party for the entire community. This party goes on for days, so that this man will have reduced this harvest to be equal to the others. This reflects a perspective of distributive justice for the good of all.

One last aspect of Guaranis I want to highlight is their feelings. Guaranis speak little when they do not know you. The word (*ñee*) is very important. They say words of truth and want to feel confident you will do the same. When a Guarani feels this confidence, he/she will never greet you without stopping to talk to you and see how you actually are. A simple greeting – such as *how are you?* – is meaningful. A Guarani honestly wants to know about you and will take time to listen to you. At the same time, he/she expects equal care from you. Failing this destroys your relationship with a Guarani group; a relationship that might never be reconstructed again. Guaranis have strong and passionate feelings. They love you or they hate you. These feelings come from the liver, that organ of love for them. It is not from the heart, but from the liver that the Guaranis feel the world. In other words, from the liver Guaranis contemplate nature and the other. From the liver comes words of truth and confidence. From the liver comes the gall that sees the falsehood of an outsider.

IV. CONCLUSION

Perhaps some readers are frustrated with this essay because they have not found an evidence-based study in global health nor a deep theological effort to connect theology and health care. This was never my goal. Rather it was to share an experience of companionship among a minority group and to learn from their culture. Hopefully, I have presented an attempt of cultural immersion that provides an anthropological basis for global health experiences in non-Western cultures.

As I have shown above, the *ñandereko* of Guaranis, shaped by their theology and worldview, is very complex and difficult to explain using a modern Western language such as English. In addition, my experience with Guaranis is not enough to go beyond what I said. Perhaps the only way to understand the *ñandereko* is a life spent with the Guaranis, even with no guarantee that this will be enough. A Guarani told me: “If you are not a Guarani, you will never fully understand us.” I have to admit that this makes sense. However, I have presented some aspects of their culture, beliefs, and values as a minimum that one must know to interact with Guaranis in a positive cultural exchange. Moreover, this worldview and way of life have wisdom that we, marked by a Western mentality, need to learn.

Although limited, my experience has shown that when a group goes to a place with a different culture, beliefs, values, and worldview in order to develop actions of healthcare promotion, a minimal cultural immersion in the mentality of the locals is essential, as well as a deep and committed openness to learn from them. Therefore, this can create an environment of mutual leaning that favors an efficient healthcare delivery.

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