



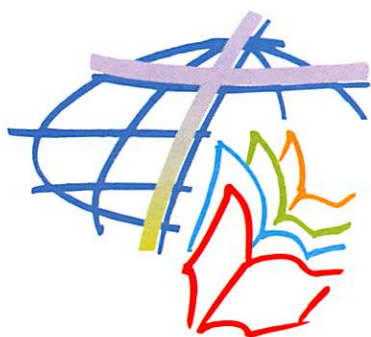
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The Year of Jubilee and the Remission of Debt

**From the biblical-
pastoral perspective**



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EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

The year 2000 will be a Jubilee Year. Many people think of this as the transition to a new millennium: grounds for an exhilarating celebration. It should not be taken for granted – especially if one considers the last decades of the outgoing millennium – that the earth has survived so long. Or that we (or at least some of us) are so well off. There are in fact good grounds for thanksgiving and celebration. Many look beyond this point as well. Full of confidence in the Lord reigning over time and eternity and at the same time full of concern for the fact that many fellow human beings in our day have little reason to celebrate – in spite of millennium change and Jubilee Year.

The Jubilee Year in the biblical sense of the term, the Old Testament *yobel-year*, has a deeper significance. In the *yobel-year*, original relationships of ownership are restored. It is a year in which solidarity with the poor and with people who have fallen upon hard times overcomes all barriers of egocentric, ethnocentric and religiocentric behaviour; a year in which the logic of the market and of money gives way to the logic of mutual responsibility and of love. This is truly a reason for celebration.

In his article *The Year of Jubilee and the Remission of Debt - Elements of Reflection in View of the Biblical Apostolate*, Thomas Osborne undertakes an examination of the biblical statements on the Jubilee Year and raises the question of their relevancy for today. It is astounding how pointed and precise are the Bible's observations about things like unjust market mechanisms, exploitation through usury, or the question of debt and responsibility – even beyond the material dimension of these phenomena. And how challenging the questions that arise from this discussion can be for our present situation.

The article *Debt Remission - yes, but...* underscores the point that debt remission involves more than just economic questions and questions of infrastructure. What is at issue here is the whole fundamental orientation of societal as well as personal existence; the question of values and their concrete application is raised. This leads also to reflection on the roles and tasks of the Catholic Biblical Federation with reference to the question of debt remission. The results of relevant surveys circulated among members of the Federation are also included in this reflection.

Many members of the CBF have been dealing with the theme of debt remission in their respective contexts. An example would be the *Centro de Estudios y Relaciones Judeo-Cristianas* (CERJUC) in Costa Rica. Its small publication on the Jubilee Year, which discusses the various aspects of liberation, will be found under the rubric *From the Federation*. In the final pages of this issue we have assembled a fairly extensive, multi-lingual bibliography, complete with references to interesting internet links.

However complex world economic networks and finance mechanisms may be, no less clear and simple is the Bible's challenge: that human beings, with their dignity, their rights, and their freedom should occupy the centre of our concerns. Within the framework of our engagement in the biblical pastoral ministry let us make our modest contribution to the process of translating this vision into reality. May all human beings in the year 2000 find reason at least for optimism, if not for celebration.

Alexander M. Schweitzer



The Year of Jubilee and the Remission of Debt

Elements of reflection in view of the biblical apostolate

THOMAS P. OSBORNE

In this article the author studies the various passages in the Bible that treat the theme of a periodical liberation of indebted or enslaved human beings. The problem of indebtedness moved Israelite society during different periods of its history, and it came up with a variety of responses, ranging from an appeal to family and ethnic solidarity to a periodic remission of debts.

Biblical legislation sees through the dynamic of economic pressures and shows an awareness of the human tendency to profit from the desperate situation of others. In order to restrict this kind of abuse it proposes a kind of solidarity pact. Even if this response is not one that can be directly transferred to today's situation, it nevertheless poses the decisive questions.

The Bible reminds us that human dignity and the respect owed to it do not depend on a person's economic situation or financial solvency, and that lending money at interest rates to people in desperate situations amounts to a form of exploitation. In light of these observations, some provocative questions are put to the economic and value systems of today.

At the time of its Fifth Plenary Assembly in 1996, the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation present at Hong Kong committed themselves to "working actively for the cancellation of international debts by the year 2000, in order to make it a real year of Jubilee, a lifting of burdens from the oppressed" (Final Declaration, § 8.1.7).

This resolution followed the appeal of Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994), in which the pontiff draws on a series of biblical texts which describe the periodical liberation of slaves and the restoration to their land of Israelites who had lost their property because of debt. According to the Pope, "the purpose of the Jubilee Year was precisely to reestablish equality among all the children of Israel, opening new possibilities to families that had lost their goods and even personal liberty". Its aim was to reestablish "social justice" (§ 13). In the tradition of the Church, the Jubilee Year is that "year of grace" of which Isaiah speaks (chap. 61). It has become above all a "year of forgiveness of sins and of the penalties due to sins, a year of reconciliation among enemies, a year of multiple conversions and of sacramental and extrasacramental penance" (§ 14). A little later in this same document, the Pope emphasizes the importance of the preferential option for the poor and the excluded which should shape Christian engagement:



"Indeed, it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee. Thus, in the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations" (§ 51).

Numerous Christian groups have rallied to this appeal. Under the rubric of Jubilee 2000, a vast international campaign of sensitization and collection of signatures has been organized in view of the meeting of the G-8 countries which took place in Cologne on 19 June, 1999.¹ *Caritas Internationalis* has set in motion an effort of sensitization under the rubric "Putting Life before Debt".² Numerous Bishops' Conferences, Justice and Peace Commissions and ecumenical church agencies have drafted thought-provoking documents on this question. In the wake of these discussions, several countries have already obtained a reduction, or even an outright cancellation of their international debt, in particular a number of countries that have recently been struck by natural catastrophes.

The participants in the meeting of Hong Kong more than once raised the question: "What can we do in the face of such a complex situation? We know how to read the Bible and to do biblical animation, but the questions of international finance and the management of loans are so complex that we would be going beyond our area of competency by involving ourselves in this discussion." It is true, in fact, that the questions are not easy and there is no single, universal response. Nevertheless, if we believe that the Bible has a word to say on behalf of the lives of men and wom-

en of our time, we do not have the right to hide behind pious words. We are called on to open our ears and our hearts both to the biblical texts and to our brothers and sisters who are victims of a debt that is impossible to bear.

This article would like first of all to pass in review the principal biblical texts that treat the periodical liberation of persons who are in debt or in slavery. It will then go on to make a few comments on the relevancy of these texts for the issue of the remission of debt. Since it is not possible to date these texts or the law collections of which they form a part with certainty, nor to demonstrate conclusively the literary relationships between them, we will remain cautious as far as concerns elaborating a theory of the progressive development of this legislation. We simply note that the problem of indebted individuals was one which preoccupied Israelite society and its legislators at different periods and in diverse situations, and that they came up with a variety of solutions.

The Covenant Code

The Covenant Code (Ex 20:22-23:19) drew on the model of the rhythm of a six day work week and a seventh day of rest (23:12) when it decreed the liberation of Hebrew slaves after six years, if they so desired (21:2-11) and when it legislated a fallow year for the land in the seventh (23:10-11). These directives have essentially a social purpose: the seventh day of rest allows beasts of burden, servants and emigrants alike to catch their breath; the fallow year allows the soil to recover its strength and the poor to procure nourishment from the uncultivated produce of the soil; the emancipation of slaves imposes a certain limit on the exploitation of Hebrew brothers.

Despite the positive accents of this legislation, a reader of the late 20th century remains unsatisfied regarding the acceptance of the practice

and the institution of slavery, limited to six years for compatriots, unlimited with respect to emigrants; the decidedly less favourable treatment of women-servants compared to that of men-servants; the rights of the master over the family of the slave. Ultimately, it boils down to a certain limitation placed on the exploitation of human persons. But viewed from the present day perspective, this remains an insufficient compromise. Let us note, however, that this first beginning of sensitivity to the situation of exploited persons is based on a common experience of precariousness: "You must not oppress the stranger; you know how a stranger feels, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9).

The Deuteronomic Code

In the middle of the book of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomic Code constitutes a collection of laws designed to cover the whole of human, religious and political relationships within Israelite society. This collection probably dates to the middle of the seventh century before Christ. More so than the *Covenant Code*, it is profoundly marked by an explicitly theological motivation. On the question that concerns us, Dt 15 lays out the ordinances regarding the remission of debts (15:1-11) and the emancipation of Hebrew slaves (15:12-18) at the end of seven years.

A two-fold relationship underlies these texts: the relationship among brothers, members of a single people, on the one hand, and the relationship between this people and their God on the other. The legislation considers two levels of precariousness.

If a person has been forced to go into debt to his brother in order to provide for his needs, the possibility of lending him money, if necessary on security – and not against interest – is legitimated, but the validity of the security is limited to seven years. At the end of seven years the debts will



be remitted, the *sh'mittah* in Hebrew. On the other hand, people are urged to do everything within their power to insure that there be no poor in the country, or, to put it another way, among brothers. The progression towards poverty must be broken in time. The way the text unfolds is significant:

"There will be no poor among you" (15:4).

"If there are any poor among you ..." (15:7).

"Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the land" (15:11).

Social reality then seems ultimately to carry the day over moral proclamations. But brotherly solidarity remains a requirement: "Always be open-handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and poor" (15:11). This solidarity is grounded in God who was the first to fill his people with his blessing.

The second level of precariousness is reached when an individual, whose situation has become so fragile that borrowing on security is no longer sufficient, is forced to sell himself in order to survive. The author of the text does not pause to comment on the reasons for this slavery "chosen" by a person who has fallen into a situation of inextricable distress. He once again invokes generosity, motivated by the awareness that the "master" had himself been liberated from slavery by his God, but also by a correct estimation of the work supplied by the slave. The relationship "master-slave"

is not destined to become definitive: in principle, it is limited in time, thanks to the release from slavery that takes place in the seventh year.

The release of slaves under King Zedekiah

Lovely as these social and theological options might be, they are at the same time difficult to realize in concrete life, as is attested by the narrative of the release of Hebrew slaves under King Zedekiah (Jr 34:8-22). At the time of the siege of the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, in 588-587, Zedekiah gave the order to free all the Hebrew slaves, doubtless in order to allow them to participate actively in the defense of Jerusalem. But as soon as the siege of the city was lifted, the people reneged on their commitment and re-appropriated their former slaves.

Jeremiah takes the position that the people's failure to respect their commitments vis-à-vis their fellow countrymen and their return to exploiting them as slaves is something like a profanation of God's name leading to disastrous consequences for the whole of the society. This is a constant experience in human society: the break of the social contract among persons compromises the chances of a people's survival. The voice of the prophet points to the way in which this behaviour impinges on the relationship with God: the God of Israel is a God who does not tolerate exploitation among brothers. For Jeremiah, the return of the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in 587 are a direct consequence of this breach of commitment.

The Jubilee Year in the framework of the priestly legislation

In the present state of the Pentateuch, the legislation on the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 is as it were the crowning point of a vast legislative col-

lection which originated within a priestly current, toward the end of the Babylonian exile. The great complex begins in Ex 24:15 and continues all the way to Lv 26. It speaks, in order, of the dwelling place of God, or the tent of meeting, of the ritual of sacrifices and of the priesthood in view of obtaining the remission of sins, of the rules for maintaining the purity of the people and of the tent of meeting. It provides precise measures for the purification of persons and of objects and it fixes the rite for the day of the great annual pardon. Finally, it specifies the behaviours required for the people to participate in the divine holiness as well as the sanctions to be applied in the case of non-compliance with directives.

A Calendar based on the Sabbath

Throughout these texts, but above all in Lv 23 and 25, the legislator develops a calendar based on the seventh day and the Sabbath. The underlying structure of this calendar is as follows:

- the seventh day – the weekly Sabbath (Ex 31:12-17; 35:1-3; Lv 23:3)
- a cycle of seven days – feasts that last seven days: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, with a Sabbath at the beginning and at the end of the week, in the spring (Lv 23:6-8), the Feast of Booths, with a Sabbath at the beginning and at the end of the week, in the autumn (Lv 23:33-36)
- a cycle of seven weeks – a feast at the end of a period of weeks (seven groups of seven days): First Sheaf (Lv 23:15-21)
- a cycle of seven years – a sabbatical year (Lv 25:2-7)
- a cycle of seven periods of seven years – the Jubilee year, after seven groups of seven years, 49 years (Lv 25:8) or 50 years (Lv 25:10,11).

This "septenary" rhythm of time is of extreme importance for the priestly current which developed it at the time of the exile of a part of the Jewish people to Babylon in the 6th century before our era. It amounts to a theo-

People must do everything within their power in order to break the progression towards poverty in time



logical reading of history and a coherent religious system aimed at helping the Jewish people to understand their situation of exile and to preserve their religious identity and their ethnic cohesion in the face of the political power and the religious lure of Babylon. Every people that has been subjected to foreign rule knows how important it is to affirm one's identity through particular institutions, persons and objects. It is in this context that we are to understand the new significance attached to this ancient institution which is the seventh-day rest, which was called "shabbat" already before the exile. For the priestly circles, the Sabbath constitutes the master key, not simply of the structure of time, but of the entire theological reading of the people's history. Taking a closer look at the texts relative to Sabbath in the priestly history and legislation, we can make the following observations:

- The activity of God the Creator supplies the basic model: six days of work, a day of rest.
- This day of rest places a limit on the productivity drive of humankind and constitutes at the same time a means of liberation for individuals. Human existence does not have its only raison d'être in work.
- This day of rest is "consecrated": it releases human life from an exclusively productive framework so as to allow it to attain a more complete participation in the holiness of God.
- The practice of the Sabbath is a distinctive sign, a mark of distinction of a people with respect to other peoples. In this respect it constitutes one of the signs of the covenant, together with the ark in the heavens of the flood narrative (Gn 9) and circumcision in the story of Abraham (Gn 17).

The great collection of priestly legislative texts culminates with Lv 26: the exhortation to observe the Sabbaths and to respect the sanctuary (26:2), a series of blessings in the case of the observance of the Lord's commandments (26:3-13) and a series of curses in the case of non-observance

of these ordinances (26:14-39), and finally, a text which leaves room for the possibility of conversion (26:40-45). It is interesting to note that the failure to respect the Sabbath is cited as one of the essential reasons for the dispersion of the people far from their country. This exile will enable the land to fulfil the Sabbaths it was unable to keep because of the people:

"Then the land will observe its sabbaths indeed, lying desolate there, while you are in the land of your enemies. Then indeed the land will rest and observe its sabbaths. And as it lies desolate, it will rest, as it never did on your sabbaths when you lived in it" (Lv 26:34-35).

"Abandoned by them, the land will keep its sabbaths, as it lies desolate when they are gone. But they must atone for their sin, for they have spurned my customs and abhorred my laws" (Lv 26:43).

It is perhaps not without interest to remark that the exile did in fact last for about 50 years, from the time of the destruction of the temple in 587 till the return of the Jews in the years that followed the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, in 539. Would not the priestly author be seeing the hand of God in the phenomenon of the exile, as well as in its duration? Is it not perhaps the case that he is converting this tragic incident into a model of divine punishment and liberation, to be erected into a religious institution thereafter? The possibility is at least worthy of consideration.

The Sabbatical Year

The first section of Lv 25 (vv. 2-7) is devoted to the sabbatical year, in the proper sense of the term. At the time of the people's entry into the land, this land will observe a year of repose; more precisely, the land will not be cultivated nor will the fields or grapevines be harvested. To allow the soil to rest periodically, to practice a fallow year, was a common practice in agricultural societies that were not familiar with the use of strong fertilizers. It was generally accomplished through rotation, often in cycles of

more or less three years, for a part of the cultivable land. The regulation of Lv 25 required however a complete year when the entire land is at rest.

The food shortages created by this system are enormous, as one can imagine. They are attested in 1 M 6:48-54 which recounts the circumstance of a siege that was life-threatening because it happened to occur in this seventh year, and the Israelites brought back to Judaea from the midst of the pagan world had consumed the last reserves in the city. Lv 25:20-22 offers a theological response to food problems: the blessing of God will enable the sixth year to produce in sufficient abundance to sustain life till the harvest of the eighth year. This is reminiscent of the double portion of manna on the sixth day which made it possible to get over the hurdle of the Sabbath. But can what applies to a day also apply to a whole year? This would require the competence in food management of someone like Joseph in Egypt, a management that can rely on the solidarity of all the members of an entire people and on a divinely supported productivity.

In this whole context, confidence in the divine blessing goes hand in hand with confidence in the productivity of the land and in human solidarity, together with a just management of food resources. These last issues are not alluded to in the text of Lv 25 on the sabbatical year. In any case, one finds no further trace of the emancipation of slaves in the seventh year, as was the case in the legislation of the Covenant Code and of the Deuteronomical Code. In the priestly legislation, one must await the ordinances for the year of Jubilee to see this problem become the object of discussion.

The Jubilee Year

1. The legislation on the Jubilee Year in the proper sense of the term is found in Lv 25:8-19, 23-55. After the general proclamation of the Jubilee



(8-13) there is a whole series of concrete stipulations that concern not simply the liberation of the 49th/50th year, but also the right and the duty of ransom of property in the strict sense and of individuals whose realization does not await the elapse of 50 years to be valid (14-19, 23-55). Let us look

The God of Israel is a God who does not tolerate exploitation among brothers and sisters

more closely at the general proclamation. This is how the text reads in a fairly literal translation:

"And you will count for yourself seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years.

And the days of seven Sabbaths of years will be for you forty nine years.

And you will have the trumpet sounded everywhere in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.

And you will consecrate the year of the fiftieth year,

and you will proclaim a liberation (an emancipation) in the land for all its inhabitants.

This will be for you a Jubilee!

And you will return, each to his family property;

and each to his tribe, you will return.

The year of the fiftieth year will be for you a Jubilee!

You will not sow,

and you will not reap what grows of itself, and you will not harvest the untended vines.

For this Jubilee will be holy for you!

You will eat only what is taken directly from the fields.

In this year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property" (25:8-13).

2. Is the Jubilee Year the forty-ninth year (25:8) or the fiftieth year (25:10,11)? To calculate the Jubilee Year would appear to be an easy matter. Based on the idea of the sabbatical year, defined as every seventh year, one need only arrive at the sev-

enth sabbatical year (7 periods of 7 years = 49 years) and add one year (49 years + 1 year = the 50th year). This calculation however raises a very concrete problem. If the 50th year is also a fallow year, as is implied by verses 11 and 12, this would mean that the harvest of the

48th year would have to suffice for the 49th year, the 50th year and the 51 year, till the new harvest. How is it possible to survive with a single harvest for what amounts to about two and half years?

In all probability, the legislation refers to the calendar of the priestly tradition in which the year begins in the springtime with the month *Aviv* or *Nisan*, probably under Babylonian influence.³ According to Lv 25:9, the year of Jubilee is proclaimed in the seventh month, the 10th day of the month, on the great Day of Atonement. Would not then "the year of Jubilee" or "the 50th year" be a shortened year, which would last only from the great Day of Atonement until the end of the current year? This hypothesis has the benefit of not unduly aggravating the hardships regarding food supplies of a Jubilee year associated with a sabbatical year, but it is difficult to pronounce on it with certainty.

3. What is this great Day of Atonement which marks the beginning of the year of Jubilee and of its "liberation"? The *yom hakippurim* in Hebrew or the "day of atonement" is described in Lv 16 and Nb 29:7-11 and it is mentioned in Lv 23:27-30; 25:9 and Ezk 45:18 that is in texts that date to the time of the exile. The text of Ezekiel seems to be the most ancient: it fixes the date for the celebration in the

springtime, on the first day of the first month. The other texts, all of the priestly tradition, situate it in the fall. We are dealing with an annual celebration, a very solemn one, marked by fasting and rest, and intended to atone for the sins of the highpriest and his family and of the people in general, but also to purify the entire sanctuary. These expiatory rites and purification are accomplished through a series of sacrifices and sprinklings with blood around – and inside of – the sanctuary, and also by the sending away from the camp a goat upon which the people's sins have been laid. In these rites, the blood plays a role of primary importance as the seat of life. According to Lv 17:11, "it is the blood that makes atonement, for it is life." In sum, within the framework of its legislation regarding ritual and moral purity, the priestly tradition is concerned to raise the level of consciousness regarding the sinfulness of individuals as well as of the people and to insure regular release from sins. In this way it hopes to prevent the divine sanction attached to these sins.

The beginning of the Jubilee is situated in the framework of this general absolution and of this generalized purification. It proclaims a year of liberation (*d'ror*), of return to the family property and of rest for the land. The beginning of the Jubilee is marked by the sounding of the trumpet (*shophar*), a musical instrument employed to proclaim certain religious feasts and fasts, but also to sound the alarm in situations of danger. The Hebrew word which we translate "jubilee" is *jobel*. It has nothing to do with the Latin word *jubilaeus*, from the verb *jubilare*: to rejoice. As Jos 6:4, 5, 6, 8, 13 and Ex 19:13 attest, *jobel* originally signifies the "horn" of a ram. The call of the horn invites, not to public exuberance, but to the awareness of oneself as a sinner, to the interiorization of attitudes of repentance and to the awareness of having been forgiven and saved from the divine wrath. By moving in the direction of



a liberation, the Jubilee seems however to be pointing beyond the expiations of the great Day of Atonement.

4. Indeed, even before pronouncing the word "Jubilee", Lev 25 announces that the 50th year will be holy and that "a liberation in the land for all its inhabitants" will be proclaimed. The next lines of the text supply the following clarifications:

"And you will return, each to his own property; and each to his tribe, you will return" (Lev 25:10).

Here we are in the middle of the text on the Jubilee! What is the liberation that is alluded to here? What return? To what property? Return of whom: of everyone or only of some individuals? To what tribe?

The Hebrew word *d'ror* translated here "liberation, release", is not frequent in the First Testament. It reappears in Jr 34:8, 15 and 17 (twice), in a narrative regarding the emancipation of Hebrew slaves at the time of the siege of Jerusalem; in Ezk 46:17, a text which likewise treats of the emancipation of slaves in the framework of the property rights of the prince; and in Is 61:1 which speaks of the liberation of prisoners. The text of Ezekiel brings together a whole series of themes that are common to Lv 25:

"The Lord God says this.

"If the prince presents his sons with part of his hereditary portion, the gift is to pass into the ownership of his sons, and become their hereditary property. If, however, he presents part of his hereditary portion to one of his servants, it shall only belong to the man until the year of liberation and then it is to revert to the prince.

Only his sons may retain his hereditary portion.

The prince may not take any part of the people's hereditary portion and thus rob them of their rightful possessions; he must provide the patrimony of his sons out of his own property, so that no member of my people is robbed of his rightful possessions" (Ezk 46:16-18).

This text speaks about rights in connection with the princely inheritance, rights which differ according to the quality of the person, whether he is the son or the slave of the owner. The son can regard the family land as his own patrimony, while the slave must return it to his master in the year of emancipation. The section concludes with a warning against the prince who would be tempted to take for himself the patrimony belonging to the members of the people. We encounter this theme in the story of the vineyard of Naboth (1 K 21) but also in a series of prophetic oracles (Mi 2:1-3; Is 5:8-9), texts which all bring out the tendency of kings and more generally of the rich to appropriate the lands and houses of the people. The differences between Ezk 46 and Lv 25 are not to be underestimated. Ezekiel is speaking to us of the recovery of land by the prince at the time of the emancipation of the slave, while the author of Leviticus is speaking rather of the recovery of the land, indeed of the country, by people who have been released. But the observation can be made that in both cases the primary perspective seems related to the maintenance of the integrity of the patrimonial or national land.

5. Who is liberated? And from what? According to Lv 25, all the individuals whom the text addresses are targeted by the directive: "Every one of you will return to his property!" In a first moment, a casuistic type of clarification is not given: "If you have become a slave and have lost your patrimony..." No, the prescription is addressed to all, and one must suppose that they are all away from their familial land.

The Bible speaks on several occasions of the partitioning of the land for the benefit of the tribes of Israel: in Nb 26:52-53; 27:1-11; 34-36; Jos 14-21; Ezk 48; and Ne 11. Although the geographical delimitation of the allotments does not correspond exactly in the different texts, the principle is nevertheless clear: each tribe finds itself allotted a plot of land in

the country of Canaan to settle on and to serve as a source of subsistence... to the detriment, it should be recalled, of the peoples who lived there before. The author of Leviticus seems to allude to this partitioning of the land, i.e., to that described in Numbers and Joshua (with their levitical towns), rather than to that of Ezekiel. In these texts one encounters a number of terms, in part synonymous, to designate the parcel of land assigned to a particular tribe. These terms do not imply a relationship of "ownership" in the strict sense, but rather the connection between an object (land, slave, etc.) and the person or tribe who has the use of these items, who can benefit from their use.

This object can be a place where one has a right to live. The text of Leviticus specifies that the land belongs to God and not to the people or to individuals: one lives there as guests and foreigners (Lv 25:23) and God can, at any moment, "show his people the door". With regard to persons, the Hebrews cannot become "slaves" or the property of other persons, because they became slaves of the Lord at the time of their liberation from slavery in Egypt (Lv 25:42-43, 46b, 55). One can benefit from their services only for a limited period of time. When "ownership" or "heritage" is spoken of in Lv 25, it is a question of an object (a plot of land, or a human person) which one can have at one's disposal so as to insure one's own survival and that of the family. One has the use of such property or the labor of such a person, but does not become their "owner" in the strict sense of the term.

It is interesting to note that the Sabbathical rest, weekly or other, regularly recalls this fact: to be sure one benefits from the products of the soil as from the divine blessing, but one does not possess the land and one has no right to (over-)exploit it. Yes, there are definite limits to this exploitation of the soil, as there are to the exploitation of persons. In other words, one has been granted the



privilege of access to the means of subsistence – an access which according to Leviticus is guaranteed by God in the framework of respect for the covenant; but this privilege is not a right which one can invoke to deprive a brother of the means of subsistence, to expropriate him in a definitive way or to reduce him to slavery for an unlimited period of time.

6. Would it not be possible to understand this text in the framework of the return from Exile? From the time of the destruction of the Temple in 587 until the capture of Babylon by Cyrus in the year 539, the exile lasted 48 years. Could not the year 538-537 be viewed, under this perspective, as a sabbatical year and a year of Jubilee in the course of which all the exiles would be liberated from their captivity and authorized to return to their country, to their tribal lands? Without wishing to enter too deeply into cabalistic word-puns, one can nevertheless ask whether there might not be some connection between the Hebrew roots *sb'* (seven), *sbt* (sabbath) and *shûb* (return). To borrow the words of Lv 26, the abandoned land was fulfilling the Sabbaths that had not been observed at the same time as the people were living out their punishment in exile. It is only after this period, according to the priestly view, that the people can return home.

Although he does not employ the same terminology, the anonymous prophet of the end of the exile, the one referred to in modern scholarship as Second Isaiah, appeals to the motifs of the fulfilment of the chastisement of the people and the preparation of a way of return to Jerusalem marking the end of the exile :

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,
speak to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her punishment has been accomplished,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice proclaims: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord:
make straight in the wilderness a high-way for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken' " (Is 40:1-5).

"The ransomed of the Lord will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads" (Is 51:11).

This "great return" after 48 years of exile from the country of the fathers was to become, in the perspective of the priestly author, a model of behaviour for the handling of debts in Judaea.

Casuistic stipulations

The legislation on the year of jubilee climaxes with a long series of stipulations of a casuistic nature. What should one do in the following cases?

- when an Israelite has been obliged to sell a part of his land to a compatriot
- in the case of the sale of houses within walled towns and outside of walled towns
- in the case of the houses of Levites
- in the case of Israelites who are in precarious situations, such that they have been forced to borrow money, to sell themselves to another Israelite, to sell themselves to a foreigner.

We cannot discuss each of these stipulations in detail, but we will outline a few general orientations.

The country or the land belongs to God. Human "owners" have no rights over it except to its use. In this perspective, God places the land at the disposition of the Israelites in order to insure their subsistence. This is why houses that are within fortified towns have a distinct status, since a house without a field is not of primary necessity for human subsistence.

This legislation concerns itself with the situation of precariousness of Israelites, but not of foreigners. The relationship between brothers constitutes the basis of the responsibility an individual has toward his fellow-Israelite. In the framework of this relationship, there is no place for exploitation or for the violent domination of a brother. The same does not hold true with respect to foreigners. At the time of the composition of these priestly laws, Israel does not have a sense of solidarity with the nations. And this is all the more so since the major concern of the priest is to make known and respected the distinction between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane (cf. Lv 10:10).

The legislators have established certain protective measures in favor of Israelites in a precarious situation who have been forced to sell a part or the whole of their landed property or real-estate:

The price of the land should be fixed in function of its use, that is to say the number of harvests remaining till the next Jubilee. This principle protects both the seller and the buyer. In this system of reckoning, there is on both sides the recognition of the eventuality of the restoration of the land to its original "owner".

In the majority of cases, there exists a right and even a duty of redeeming the land or the house by a member of the family of the person in difficulty. In the absence of redemption by a member of the family, the person in difficulty may himself proceed to the redemption of the sold object if he manages to assemble the necessary resources. These measures of family solidarity have as their objective to maintain the integrity of the heritage, or patrimony, which is to remain at the disposition of a particular tribe.

If the redemption of the land or the house is not effectuated either by a family member or by the person himself, then the person or the tribe will



recover their land on the occasion of the next Jubilee. The Jubilee "release", then, constitutes a last resort. It does not dispense from the obligation of shortterm or mid-course redemption.

When a person who, having sold his land and spent all his resources, is brought to the point of having to ask for assistance, whether the request is made to a brother, or even to a migrant or host, one is urged to lend him money, without requiring interest or profiteering from the precarious situation of the person. This legislation is made for the benefit of the person in the precarious situation and not of the individual who comes to his aid.

Finally, the legislation envisages the situation of a person who has been so stripped that he must sell himself either to his brother, or even to a foreigner. In the case of sale to a compatriot, no redemption is provided for, since it is taken for granted that he or she will not be treated as a slave, and will be able to leave the situation of slavery at the time of the Jubilee. When an Israelite is sold to a foreigner, the mechanism of redemption by a family member comes into play or, if necessary, the release of the person, together with his children, at the time of the Jubilee. In any case, Israelites are bound to prevent the brutal treatment of a slave.

Particular directives regulate the precarious case of Levites. They do not have lands at their disposal for their subsistence, but they have a home in the towns set apart for them and the surrounding "pastureland". Their basic subsistence is guaranteed by the part of the offerings which goes

to them in exchange for their services in the cult. It is in this context that they have a right to the redemption of their houses and that the pasturelands are exempted from sale.

The function of "buyer" or "redeemer", the *go'el* in Hebrew, is of primary importance in this text. The *go'el* is the individual who, in virtue of his family rela-

tionship, is to avenge the murder of a family member (cf. Nb 35:12, 19, 24, 25; Jos 20:3, 9; 2 S 14:11). He is to intervene to redeem an Israelite who, for economic reasons, has been compelled to sell himself (Lv 25 *passim*) or to redeem the land of an Israelite who has had to sell it for reasons of indebtedness (Lv 25 *passim*; Jr 32:6-44; Ruth *passim*). Jeremiah makes this type of intervention himself to redeem the field of his cousin Hanamel. The final sections of the book of Isaiah, dating from the end of the exile or the beginning of the post-exilic period, transpose this institution of family solidarity into the theological domain: God redeems his people from exile in Babylon so that they can return to Jerusalem (cf. Is 35:9-10; 48:20).

The different stipulations of Lv 25 are regularly associated with motives of a theological type (see Lv 25:17-19, 38, 42-43, 55; 26:3-13). One could summarize them as follows:

- a. The observance of the laws of the Lord constitutes the guarantee of prosperity and security in the land of Canaan.
- b. Exploiting one's fellow-countrymen will never insure prosperity. On the contrary, such behaviour shows a

lack of respect for the Lord, his laws and his rights!

c. The Lord liberated the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. By this very fact he became their God and they became his "servants". "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Lv 26:12). He does not tolerate the idea of his people being reduced to slavery either by the nations or by members of his own people.

The Jubilee and its place within the biblical legislation

At the conclusion of our summary review of the legislative texts of the Old Testament regarding a remission of debt in general, we could draw up an initial, even if somewhat provisional balance sheet. This balance sheet would have to be complemented, of course, with the help of other Old Testament texts (Is 61 and Ne 5, for example) and of the New Testament (the inaugural speech of Jesus at Nazareth, in Lk 4).

We have observed that at different times and in various circumstances the problem of indebted persons and possibly even of persons reduced to the state of slavery sufficiently preoccupied Israelite society that it devoted a part of its legislation to the issue. In this context, it raised the question about the meaning of productivity, of human beings as well as of the land, and on the limits to be placed on their exploitation.

The Deuteronomic Code and the priestly legislation provide concrete and intermediary measures bringing into play the resources of familial and ethnic solidarity. If these do not produce the effect of sufficient aid, the codes propose a remission of debt and the abolition from various kinds of slavery either at the end of seven years or at the fiftieth year (the Jubilee year).

These texts enable us to make a number of observations which remain fully relevant for our discussions and commitments at the end of this millennium.



The precariousness of human existence – past, present or future – places all human beings, whether they like it or not, in the same boat. "We have all been slaves in Egypt or elsewhere" – "We are all in danger of becoming victims to indebtedness". How are we to conceive personal, family and ethnic relations among persons who are advantaged and persons who are disadvantaged? The biblical legislation makes us attentive to the tendency of individuals in a situation of

power to take advantage of persons in situations of weakness. To limit abuses, these texts legislate on the conditions of a kind of solidarity pact.

Solidarity is to be "insured" through a system of legislation and a higher court of appeal (in the biblical texts the king and/or the divinity) which is committed to protect those in danger of becoming victims of their debts and of a system of exploitation from which they are incapable of exiting by themselves.

In a religious system, such as that on which our biblical texts draw, it is God who grants liberty and land and it is he who makes the land fruitful. The situation of human persons is not exclusively the result of personal effort or ingenuity, but likewise of "chance", in the view of some, or of "grace", according to others, of which those persons are the beneficiaries.

When there are considerable economical differences between human beings, the Bible frequently reminds us that the dignity of human persons and the respect that is due them are not determined by their economic situation or their solubility.

The priestly legislation sets in place a whole system of liberation. Its calendar makes it possible for us to take our distances with respect to the ex-

igencies of productivity. Every seven days, for a few weeks each year, every seven years, every 49th or 50th year, the machine is brought to a halt, people and even plots of land are allowed to rest. The priestly legislation, by establishing a "pedagogical" cal-

The remission of economic debts forms part of the movement of forgiveness which God grants his people

endar which establishes a critical distance, seems to have well perceived the stubborn and determined nature of the "economic reason".

Its system of sacrifices of atonement enables the effects of personal or national culpability to be contained, through the remission of debts toward God. The "great day of atonement" is an important element in this system. It is significant that the remission of economic debts and the return to the land together form part of the movement of forgiveness which God grants his people. An extension of this line of thought will be found in the New Testament: the forgiveness of God is to be extended into forgiveness between brothers (cf. Mt 18:23-35).

The priestly legislation seeks to maintain the purity of the nation, the non-exploitation of brothers, and in this way, life in security in the country.

Failure to respect this "solidarity pact" has harmful consequences for the society. Its survival is what is at stake. Already the priestly flood narrative was reproaching people for having filled with violence the space that God had given them. The non-respect of the divine commandments has led to the fact that "the land vomits its inhabitants", according to the terminol-

ogy of Leviticus. For the priestly redactor the exile is the consequence of the non-respect for the "solidarity pact" and at the same time it can become a means of atonement for sin – moral and economic – which will enable the return to the land.

The "solidarity pact" is however limited to the "children of Israel" and in a few cases to the foreigners who reside in the land. And the lot of female slaves is different from that of male slaves. Seen from the perspective of today, these orientations would appear nationalistic and sexist. We should note, however, that even in our own enlightened, western societies, we have great difficulties when it comes to putting into practice the equality of women and men or to agreeing to substantial economic aid to foreign countries. We are obliged to point out that even "traditional", direct solidarity – familial and ethnic – is more and more lacking in a society that is geared above all to profit and productivity. The market tolerates no weakness, structural or human. What are the "fuses" put in place today to avoid a situation in which the mechanisms of productivity and the market have occasioned indebtedness, poverty and slavery? What attention do we pay to those in debt within our geographical borders and within our ethnic and family ambi-ents? A heightened sensitivity and engagement at this first level will invite us to look beyond the geographical and political borders, toward the misery of other peoples. In accordance with its style, the biblical text confronts us with the fundamental questions of life. It does not supply us with ready-made responses.

Biblical legislation and the remission of the debt of poor countries

To look in these biblical texts, which are over 2000 years old, for concrete directives for our economic engagements at the end of the 20th century is an enterprise full of pitfalls. A di-



rect and immediate, that is a fundamentalistic application of these texts could prove very dangerous. In a first step, one would have to measure the distance between these law codes and what is usually called the "remission of the debt of poor countries". Here are a few lines of reflection.

1. The biblical legislation seeks primarily the engagement of an individual vis-à-vis another individual, both of the same family or the same group. It is personal, familial and ethnic sensitivity and solidarity that are urged. The remission of the debt of poor countries is a question that, at an initial stage at least, involves commitments among national banking or monetary institutions and particular governments. What is the role that can and should be played in this question by individuals, alone or in concert with others, whether they are or are not members of financial institutions? What levels of awareness can they bring to this reflection and to the search for viable solutions?

2. The biblical legislation seeks to maintain tribal, familial integrity (with regard to indebted individuals) and to maintain the integrity of landed

property with regard to the land: one cannot cede to a foreigner, nor even to a member of another tribe of Israel, what belongs to one's familial or tribal territory. The sentiment of belonging to a particular group is doubtless what constitutes the essential motivation for the action of the *go'el* on behalf of the recuperation of the indebted individual or the ceded land. Action on behalf of the remission of the debt of poor countries has to be based on an international solidarity which renounces an outlook that is ego-, ethno- or even religio-centric. It must recognize that the bonds of solidarity extend beyond ethnic, racial, religious, etc. barriers. A number of New Testament texts can help us in this broadening of the sphere of solidarity – texts such as Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan (Jn 4) or the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37).

3. The biblical legislation rejects the exploitation model with regard to the children of Israel, whether this be in the form of violent domination, the requirement of interest on a loan or the reimbursement of funds engaged to procure food for minimal subsistence. Those who are reflecting on the

political economy and the eventuality of the remission of debt should acknowledge that money lent at interest to persons in a situation of extreme poverty is a form of exploitation the primary goal of which is the profit of the lender and not the assistance of the poor. We have but to observe how the lender countries recover the money lent through the sale of arms or technology. This observation holds not only for countries that are thus burdened with debt but also for indebted individuals who are victims of our societies of consumption in which financial in-

stitutions draw profit from the weak position of borrowers.

4. The biblical legislation situates the Jubilee liberation in the framework of the "day of atonement" or "day of pardon" in the course of which the entire people as well as institutions acknowledge their sins and their actions that threaten to compromise the future of the country and the survival of the people. The effort to remit the debt of the poor countries should be accompanied and motivated by the recognition of the debt owed by the countries of the "first world" to the countries of the third-world. What I mean is of course the exploitation and the exportation of human resources [slavery], of natural resources and of cultural resources during and after the colonial periods.

5. For concrete individuals, the biblical legislation takes the view that access to the means of subsistence should be assured through access to land (for cultivation and pasture). The royal authority has the responsibility to protect the rights of individuals (and not to exploit the subjects of the realm). One should avoid reducing the remission of the debt of poor countries to the mere cancellation of a financial debt, often contracted by the leaders and paid for by the people. One should put a stop to the bleeding of vital resources, a bleeding due to the payment of loans, capital and interest, and the access of all to the means of subsistence should be restored. The problem is complex, because the borrowers are governments and institutions. They have often profited from loans, while the people now have to support the payments through the sale of food products on the foreign market to the detriment of their own existential needs.

Conclusion

The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation has loudly proclaimed that the Word of God is the source of life for the men and women of the world. The fact is that

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even in a question as complex as the problem of international debt and its effects on the poor countries of our planet, with all of its extremely technical political, economic and historical aspects, this Word calls us. It was

addressed to the complex reality of the Jewish people of 2000 years ago. It challenges us today, us and our institutions, at this end of the second millennium. We are called to hear this Word and to listen to the individuals

and groups who are uttering their cry of distress. Would not the role of contextual biblical animation be that of offering this possibility to hear, with the hope that the heard Word be translated into commitment?

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



¹ The web-site www.jubilee2000uk.org/ links provides a quick, overall view of the different organizations linked with this movement. One can also consult www.sedos.org/groups.htm and www.oneworld.org/jubilee2000.

² See the brochure *Faire passer la vie avant la dette*, prepared by CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis.

³ See Ex 12:2; Lv 23:5: both texts situate the feast of Passover in the first month of

the year; another, more ancient tradition situates the beginning of the year in the autumn: see Ex 23:16; 34:22.



Debt Remission - yes, but...

Why the CBF is involved in the question of debt remission

ALEXANDER M. SCHWEITZER

In the Final Statements of its last two Plenary Assemblies in Bogotá and Hong Kong the Catholic Biblical Federation expressed its willingness to work for the remission of international debts as a way of actively preparing for the Jubilee Year 2000.¹ Since 1997, two questionnaires have been sent out to members of the Catholic Biblical Federation. In these surveys, Federation members were asked about initiatives relative to the Jubilee Year and the remission of debts in their own countries and regions; opinions on the peculiarities of their local situation and estimates on the role they would be able to play were also requested. Happily we now have responses from the various regions of the Federation and thus from many parts of the world, and these reflect therefore the perspectives of the materially richer as well as the materially poorer countries. The responses were not so numerous and productive as that they would amount to an evaluation in a comprehensive or statistical sense; however, certain fundamental themes are recurrent in the reactions from the different countries. These observations and indications that run like a red thread through many of the replies are assembled in this article.

Remission of debts - yes, but... This expression should be understood here in a two-fold manner. Firstly, with reference to the theme of debt remission itself. Hardly anyone today is still lobbying for a "simple" remission, a remission of debts without conditions, without programmes for structural adjustment, without supervision and transparency of action. Remission, - yes, but... only on condition that the resources thereby released will actually benefit the poorest of the poor; that through counterpart funds² the meaningful use of resources will be secured; that with help from international regulating agencies, with improved world-economic rules of play - e.g. an international insolvency law³ would be in order - some stability and durability in the system will be insured. Remission - yes, but only in the form of a "qualified" debt remission. This attitude is prevalent both in the affected countries of the south itself and in the industrial countries. In both, and for some time now, there have been ongoing efforts to sensitize people to the problem of the plight of countries with enormous international debts.

People in the wealthier countries often do not directly feel the negative and unjust effects of the debt crisis, because their national economies profit to some extent from world-economic conditions and rules of play. For this reason, it is precisely these rich countries that need this sensitization to issues of injustice, to the wounded dignity and freedom of many human beings that results from the crisis of international debt. There is a need to strengthen human consciousness of the fact that in the world's global network - primarily in the economic sphere, but also in the political, social, cultural and religious spheres - all people and societies are intimately interconnected, that things can literally go to pieces as a result of long - term inequity and injustice. There is a need for sensitization to values, to personal responsibility in this global interaction.



There are numerous concrete examples of such a sensitization process, of a committed "lobbying", which also shows initial and tangible signs of success. Among others would be the "Jubilee 2000" initiative that many developmental – political and church-sponsored groups have joined⁴, a number of ecclesial initiatives, enlisting the services of funding agencies and religious orders⁵ and the publications and campaigns of the Commission "Justitia et Pax" in many countries. Such examples would also include numerous statements by Bishops' Conferences, personal interventions of bishops with political leaders and the clear position taken by the Pope. Collections of signatures in many countries of the world had as their goal to highlight the project of the remission of international debts at the G8 summit in Cologne, Germany, in June 1999. But even small – scale involvement, e.g. the individual partnership between parishes of the richer countries and parishes of the poorer countries contributes in its own way to the furthering of justice. Without all these efforts the decisions made at the G8 summit in Cologne on the question of debt remission would hardly have come about.⁶ At the same time, most of the participants agreed that this can only have been a first small step. Under existing conditions the developing countries have no real chance to make a definitive escape from the spiral of ever-mounting debts.⁷

A sensitization on the question of debt remission is, however, also indispensable in the indebted countries themselves. It is primarily in these countries that the concrete consequences of a remission must be administered, i.e., the flow of currency, the liberated resources must be organized, channelled and monitored, as it were, on the spot. Many have made the point that the handling of the money must be made public and transparent. Misuse and poor management on the side of receiver countries are enormous. This requires

strict conditions. Alongside the practical there is also the psychological dimension: the poor, who are to be the beneficiaries of a debt remission must learn where the responsibility of their own governments for their indebtedness and lack of development lies and how their governments intend to forestall mismanagement and corruption in the future.

NGOs (non – governmental organizations) and with them church and social/charitable institutions and groups are needed here. Their closeness to the grass roots, their on the spot contact with the concrete situations and needs of human beings allow the NGOs to appear responsible and well suited – in financial, but also in social and cultural regards – to serve as an important corrective and as potential intermediaries in debt remission programs. Here too there are numerous examples of engagement against the structures of injustice in the poorer countries themselves and of sensitizing to the issue of debt remission.⁸

Possible tasks of the CBF

Secondly, the expression "Remission – yes, but..." can be related to the role, the tasks and the competencies of the Catholic Biblical Federation. Debt remission – yes, but... what contribution can we as members of the Federation make to it? We, who lack the necessary economic competency? We, who have no real political influence? We, many of whom belong to the affected lands, to countries that number among the nations in debt?

The CBF is not usurping any national or international economic competency. It sees itself rather as called to action in the realm of values, especially of biblically based values. This means the Federation can not and should not lose itself in legal and economic detail (regardless of how indispensable this detailed work is) and neither can it offer any overall world-economic plan. But this also means that its involvement is no less than the dignity and rights of human be-

ings wounded by existing economic relationships, than the plight of a humanity burdened, enslaved and oppressed by many of its members through unjust structures, but also through the egoism of individuals (the Bible is full of narratives and stories of indebted and oppressed individuals and nations). What the CBF can do is to call attention to these dire situations, to increase the sensitivity to these issues in a manner appropriate to each individual country, and here and there also to bring to bear a biblically inspired solution.

A second competency of the CBF results from the fact that, as a Federation with member – organizations in 125 countries of the world, it treats and experiences the problem from a great variety of perspectives. The increased awareness of the just and responsible use of possessions and goods and of the right and freedom of each to partake of these goods is a necessary condition to enable the emergence of a new and more equitable economic order in individual countries, but also in the world at large. So it is the task of the Catholic Biblical Federation to bring the issue, in all its complexity, to the attention of people, and to raise with the Bible the decisive, critical questions.

The CBF members are institutions working on the spot, on the home front, and most often at the grass-roots level. This results in a third possibility for action. Unlike many international organizations the member institutions of the Catholic Biblical Federation are not caught up in the thicket of mutually enmeshed structures far from the reality of human existence; neither are they tied into the network of political interests of a country. Rather, they stand on the often meager soil of everyday reality and they put people at the centre of their engagements. Many on the spot observers – also in the ranks of the CBF – have stressed the point that mismanagement and corruption in the countries in question are an important factor in causing the situation



of the poor and national indebtedness. The creation of the necessary infrastructures is seen as an indispensable condition for the success of the debt remission measures. Part of this infrastructure would consist in counseling, guidance and supervision, and systems of verification and control; but most important of all is on the spot consciousness – building. The relevant agencies here are above all the NGOs, and perhaps also a number of member institutions of the CBF.

It is, however, a matter of fundamentals more than public control of currency flow and accompanying structural measures: what is at stake here is the establishing of values, the process of reinstating original relations among individuals, peoples and with the whole of creation. To treat the debt question only under the aspects of economic theory and infrastructure adjustment would be an inadmissible reduction. Justice in the question of debt remission can only succeed if a radical transformation occurs at

the level of reflective awareness. The call for change and conversion is not simply aimed at those who hold responsibility in the political and economic spheres; the call goes out rather to all involved: poor and rich countries, international organizations and NGOs, to the Church and to all believers. Here, too, the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation are affected and challenged in their particular situations and in accordance with their proper capacities.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



¹ Cf. the Final Statement of Bogotá (8.3.5.4) and the final document of Hong Kong (8.1.7).

² Counterpart funds: the debt remission is in each case to be tied to the payment of a certain part of the remitted debt into a counterpart fund. This fund serves the settlement of the "social debt of the governments in the North and South with respect to the poorest countries, i.e. the covering of fundamental social needs as well as the expansion of the debtor country's ability to care for itself and its productivity as directed to its home market" (Entwicklung braucht Entschuldung, Er-laßjahr 2000. Die Wuppertaler Auftakttagung, 1997, 11).

³ An international insolvency code would insure that in international finance relations a fair balancing of interests is achieved between debtors and creditors in favor of the poorest countries.

⁴ At the web-site www.jubilee2000uk.org/links one will find an overview of the various groups that have joined the "Jubilee 2000" initiative.

⁵ One initiative is the "SEDOS World Debt Working Group", which is composed of members of different religious orders and of Caritas Internationalis. Documents on debt remission that this initiative has drawn up are found in different languages on the internet under www.sedos.org.

⁶ The government leaders of France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Japan, Canada and the United States agreed on a number of points which should be transformed into decisions and moulded into a financing concept this autumn at the yearly conference of the World Bank and International Monetary Funds. In all it will amount to a possible debt remission of 70 billion US dollars. Approximately three dozen of the then 41 "HIPC's" (heavily in-

debted poor countries), that is, of the poorest countries in the world, would be affected by this action. The remission would however come into effect gradually over an approximately 40 year period. A reform of international debt management in the sense of an international insolvency code was not set on track in Cologne.

⁷ To cite but one concrete example: Tanzania is currently spending in debt payments nine times as much as it spends on health and four times its current education budget.

⁸ In many countries, e.g., in Pakistan, where relationships between various religious communities in daily life sometimes cause tensions, a common involvement on the question of international debt has brought these communities closer together.



Plea for a change in consciousness

From a letter of the DKMR

One requirement in solving the international debt question would be a radical change in the fundamental attitudes of all involved concerning the indebted countries; this would hopefully lead to more justice on earth. The international debt crisis has thus become a symbol for this necessary change in our ways of thinking and acting. The German Catholic Missionary Council - Der Deutsche Katholische Missionsrat (DKMR) – makes the following recommendations in its open letter of 18th June, 1999 :

- we should contribute more towards international justice by changing our own personal life-style, e.g. by reducing consumerism and by economizing on our energy sources;
- we should give preference to merchandise produced and sold under fair conditions;
- we, as the voice of the Church, should intervene in the discussions taking place in society concerning this theme;
- we should intervene on their behalf in all necessary steps taken in regard to remission of their debts, especially concerning the establishment of counterpart funds and their control by non-governmental bodies and the introduction of an international insolvency law;
- we should support groups and networks acting in the interests of international solidarity;
- our own financial investments should be examined in the light of natural, social and cultural criteria and we should be seeking alternative methods of investment;
- we should be focusing on human beings as the starting-point of our projects and ensuring that the poor are able to participate in the moulding of their own future;
- we should stand firm in our belief in the power and effect of small steps.

(Transl.: D. & J. Waddell)





The Jubilee Year and its Jewish Roots

Sisters of Our Lady of Sion – CERJUC, Costa Rica

Several members of the Catholic Biblical Federation have drawn up documentation material on the Jubilee Year and the question of the remission of debts. One example is documented in the pamphlet entitled "The Jubilee Year and its Jewish Roots" (El año jubilar y sus raíces judías), compiled by our associate member CERJUC (Centro de Estudios y Relaciones Judeo-Cristianas) in Costa Rica. Based on texts taken from the Old Testament (Lev 25,8-54 and Lev 28,16-24) various aspects of freedom and release are depicted: physical and economical liberation, relief of ecological burdens and the freedom of each individual due to proper education.

We are about to arrive at the year 2000. That day will be a new year, a new century, a new millennium. John Paul II has summoned all believers to pause along the way and to prepare themselves to welcome the new century and the new millennium.

The Church seeks in this way to celebrate – in accordance with tradition – the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, commemorating his work of love, manifested through his words and actions, until his death and resurrection "for the salvation of a great multitude".

The celebration of these anniversaries has been called a jubilee. This

word comes from the Latin expression "annus jubilei", which means year of jubilation, of rejoicing.

The first known Christian jubilee was celebrated by Boniface VIII. But it is in the biblical era of the People of Israel that we learn about the roots of this celebration and about its profound significance. The fundamental text is found in Leviticus 25.

The word jubilee actually comes from the Hebrew word "jobel", which means "ram's horn", an instrument played at the opening of the Sabbatical year or jubilee, and also on the feast of Yom Kippur, the day of the remission of all debts and of all transgressions (Jos 6:4).

This celebration gave everyone the opportunity to begin a new life, the chance to bring life into harmony with God's plan, which is life for all. It enabled every individual and the community as a whole to acquire liberation from the chains and snares of poverty, to eliminate economical inequalities so as to make possible the actual experience of social justice. On that day of Yom Kippur the people were reminded that prayers and fasting were not sufficient in themselves, that the "practice of justice" and "loving compassion" must go hand in hand with the ideal of "walking humbly with your God" (Mich 6:8).

The sabbatical year, celebrated every seven years, took on the charac-



teristics of a jubilee. It was a year of "rest", a "Shabbat" for human beings, for the land, and even for the animals.

The jubilee year was the sabbatical year of sabbaticals – taking place every 50 years. That is to say, every seven sabbatical years ($7 \times 7 = 49 \Rightarrow 50$).

What were the objectives of the observance of the Jubilee Year?

The Bible, Leviticus 25:8-54 and Leviticus 26:13 in particular, establishes four obligations, and all of these emphasize the liberation of the physical life of the people of God, as a prerequisite for its spiritual liberation:

A humanitarian motive: the emancipation of slaves.

An economic motive: the reordering of the use of property and of material goods.

An ecological motive: the liberation of the land.

An educational motive: "spiritual democracy", dedicated to intense instruction and formation intended for Jews - men, women and children alike - as well as for foreigners.

Humanitarian Liberation

When we speak of the emancipation of slaves, it is not merely a question of a declaration of human rights in a philosophical sense, but of a "practical love" of the other (Lev 25:39). This attitude is based on the great principle of "love your neighbour as yourself". One who out of necessity or by the accidents of history had been compelled to sell himself into slavery in order to survive cannot be more than a "nominal slave", "because", says God, "before me, the children of Israel are my servants alone", because He had liberated them to be free. (Lev 25:42-43; Exod 21:2ff; Deut 15:12ff).

A Rabbi who lived before the time of Christ expressed himself thus: "Behave toward your slaves as in your prayers you ask God to behave to-

ward you. Because if we are attentive to their needs, we ourselves will be treated in the same way. Let us show compassion so that we may be treated with the same measure". We can compare this outlook with the teachings of Jesus, especially in the "Sermon on the Mount."

Economic Liberation

This ordinance is found in Lev 25:11-31 and it required the obligatory restitution of land to its original owners. It also regulated the partitioning of goods for equal distribution. This prevented the permanent accumulation of land in the hands of a few, and those who for various reasons had been sunk in poverty were offered a "new opportunity".

The institution of the sabbatical year and the jubilee year was an extraordinary safeguard against the moral and spiritual degradation that brings poverty in its wake. In a certain way, it was a revolutionary measure which resulted in the immediate introduction of morality into the economic order (Lev 25:23-24).

The Rabbis, commenting on these texts, note that one who sells a plot of land is not selling its ownership but its use, its productivity, because the land itself belongs to God. And the Rabbis point out that the Torah does not seek to abolish private property but only to heighten the ethical standards of land ownership, so that it might be organized in a just manner.

With the sounding of the trumpets of the jubilee year, the slave recovered freedom and the new partitioning of the land guaranteed the poorer members of the community their share in the gracious bounty of the Creator. The implication here is that the goodness of God for all human beings is mediated by the goodness and kindness of other persons.

Ecological Liberation

We find a hint of this in Leviticus 25:10-11. The Bible establishes that one can cultivate the land for six

years, but the seventh year will be a year of rest for the land, like a Sabbath for the Lord (Lev 25:4-6; Ex 23:10).

In a very significant way, the Bible confers a kind of personality on the land, which thus becomes worthy of respect and of care (Lev 25:2).

The land is from God and with this ordinance the effort is made to free the land of depletion. What it produces naturally during this jubilee year will be for the poor and for the animals (Ex 23:10-11). What the land formerly produced for the benefit of private consumption, was now to go to other community members, including foreigners and even animals, both domestic and wild (Prov 12:10).

Educational Liberation

The study and meditative reading of the Torah, that is to say, of the instructions, or teachings, will occupy a special place in the whole life of the people of Israel, but especially in the jubilee year (Deut 31:9ff).

The glory of Moses, says the historian Flavius Josephus, is to have universalized the divine teachings, ordering that they be read aloud and meditated on periodically in community (Deut 33:4). The Torah is the legacy of the whole people of Israel; everyone must know it and love it, because it is a "light for the poor".

It is not enough to hear it, one must learn it, meditate on it, live it (Ps 118). In Judaism, religion was not limited to the priests alone; rather, revelation is for the whole people, and this is why it has to be known, loved and lived.

This posture of the jubilee year is of great importance for the life of the people of Israel; it is of high social and moral value. For this reason it is also called the "year of Grace", which God grants to his creatures, so that they can renew themselves, turn around and choose life.

The jubilee year is the messianic symbol par excellence, the year of



redemption. It revived the intense awareness of the fact that if God had liberated them from slavery to the Egyptians so as to live the Covenant, they too can now free their brothers and sisters from the prevailing slaveries.

It was in this jubilee atmosphere that Jesus was born and raised, eagerly looking forward to the "year of Grace". When Jesus came to understand God's plan and what the Father wanted of Him, he went to the synagogue of Nazareth, as was his custom, on the Sabbath. He was asked to do the reading, and he looked for a text that would serve to inaugurate his mission, which was to be precisely this "year of Grace". The text of Luke says: "The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was

handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it was written: *'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'* Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down... Then he began to say to them: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' " (Lk 4:16-21). Jesus thus announces the great jubilee, the fullness of time, when salvation has arrived for everyone.

For this reason, the jubilee is more than an anniversary, it is the characteristic activity of Jesus. In Jesus all

the jubilees celebrated before his time have arrived at their fulfilment.

Today, celebrating the jubilee consists in acting in the same way that Jesus acted, making present the year of the Lord's Grace, making present the Kingdom.

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(Transl.: L. Maluf)



If we had learned our lesson from the prophetic tradition of the Bible then we would be aware of the fact that no economic system whatever can exclude masses of people without there being endless conflicts because of this. We would be aware that limitless growth and progress without bounds result in negative consequences for the planet earth and in mass exploitation and degradation and finally, also, in the poisoning and suffocation of each individual life. We would also be aware that we cannot withhold human dignity from others biased on race, class or gender without simultaneously endangering our own souls. We would be aware that society cannot offer safety or law and order when these are guaranteed solely by weapons and technology instead of justice and law, as the former lead only to drastic slashes in welfare systems and thus to risks of increasing violence on all levels. We have obviously not listened to those religious traditions to which we pay lip-service, and the logic of the order of those societies which we have set up instead is killing us.

Excerpt from: Jim Wallis, Die Seele der Politik, Claudius-Verlag 1995,81



The Tale of a Well

A summing up of the Final Statement of the Hong Kong Plenary Assembly

LUIS CASTONGUAY

Luis Castonguay, the CBF-coordinator for the Latin American countries of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, outlined the Final Statement of Hong Kong using the story of the well to document his summary. The CBF is endeavoured to be the well from which the source of life – the Word of God – gushes forth. This image is both encouraging and challenging. The number system in the text corresponds to that of the Final Statement of Hong Kong.

The arrival at the well? Or: When God becomes the Source...

The Final Statement of Hong Kong is a "lectio" from the passage John 4, 1-42. God, the friend of all Life (3.1), writes the book of life in the pages of the various texts, differing religious traditions and in the existence of the women and men of this world. The Word of this God allows us to exam-

ine both our reality and faith with new eyes, in so far that the reality gives us a new vision with which to read and interpret the Bible (3.2).

What well is this? - What is the CBF?

The Jesus discovered by the Samaritan woman (3.3) is the Word of this God the Father (4.2). He is the gift of God, the source of living water, the

prism through which we discover the path which leads to the fountain of life (4.2). His intense vision of the presence of God provides him, in his faithfulness (4.3), a great freedom with which to interpret the Bible in a novel way (4.4). Through the experiencing and sharing of his life, Jesus reveals the face of God the Father and permits, in the process, the people to discover their own face and identity (4.5), a difficult and uncertain path,



but for which Jesus reveals himself as Messiah and Saviour of the world (4.5).

Life at the well - methodology of the CBF

The dialogue of faith creates a reciprocal listening of one to another (5.1): the whole world and everyday life in general becomes a place to adore God in truth. The essential, therefore, is to live in the spirit of Jesus and in the service of truth, justice, brotherhood and compassion for those who suffer. As a result biblical pastorship today presents itself as:

- a biblical ministry based on dialogue, sensitivity and respect (5.3.1.)
- an extension beyond the confines of the Church in the service of life for every person and each community (5.3.2.)
- a dialogue with all aspects of life, a reaching out to the divine, up to the ultimate moment of salvation, liberation, peace and reconciliation following an encounter and confession with Jesus (5.3.3.)
- going beyond the tendency to divide the world into the good and the evil (5.3.4.),
- incompatible with any arrogance or fundamentalism (5.3.5.)

The function of the well - definition of biblical-pastoral ministry or of the CBF

Our ardent thirst accords with the divine will to find true worshippers (6.1); God wants to share his life through Jesus Christ (6.2). This initiative and longing of God to grant Life through Jesus, finds expression in the meeting with the Samaritan woman: Jesus speaks to her heart, penetrating the core of her being. He helps her to discover the Father and introduces her to worship in spirit and in truth (6.3). This is Jesus' purpose (6.4), who continues his work through his

Word, the text, which illumines and reveals his truth (6.5).

Implications of the well - the mission of the CBF

Admiration and humility are the consequence; an abandonment to the infinite to be taken up in the fullness of life (love and light) (6.6.). The woman is integrated back into the community and becomes an apostle of Jesus allowing others to share her experience of Jesus (7.1., 7.2., 7.3., 7.4.).

In the same way we are all called to take part in the mission "that all should come and see". In other words, the implications for biblical-pastoral ministry are:

- to proclaim Jesus Christ
- in an authentic dialogue which results in the joint sharing of the situations in which others find themselves
- a dialogue in which we are as much novices as masters
- Thus, in this desired joint encounter with our neighbour, we, together, discover Jesus and experience how he is the Saviour that gives life to the world (7.5).

Commitments of the CBF in the world today: we are called to be labourers in the harvest: John 4, 35

- 8.1.1. consolidation of the regionalisation process
- 8.1.2. a deepening of the contextual reading of the Bible
- 8.1.3. encouragement of a Synod of Bishops on the Word of God
- 8.1.4. close relations with allied organisations
- 8.1.5. co-operation with the Pontifical Biblical Commission
- 8.1.6. collaboration networks for the Third Millennium

8.1.7. cancellation of a shameful oppression (foreign debt)

8.1.8. the advancement of women within the CBF including the use of language

8.1.9. inclusion of courses on reading the Bible in the Church in seminaries and ecclesiastical faculties

8.1.10. revision of liturgical readings and for each member:

8.2.1. study of the Bogotá Final Statement and of the document "Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"

8.2.2. inclusion of a dimension of biblical exegesis in workshops and meetings

8.2.3. lay members and clergy: priority in biblical formation

8.2.3.1. including fundamentals in the basic principles of exegesis

8.2.3.2. for a meaningful dialogue with the poor and foreign cultures

8.2.1. an improved working relationship between the Word and the Catechism

8.2.2. testimonial style of preaching

8.2.3. enter the world of the young so that the Word can become the source of life

8.2.4. use of modern techniques and technology

8.2.5. study and application of the Hong Kong Final Statement

8.3. "The harvest is plentiful". Commitment and creativity: *open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest* (John 4:35).

(Transl.: D. & J. Waddell)





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Useful Addresses in the Internet

www.jubilee2000uk.org/links

Overview of the various groups that have joined the initiative "Jubilee 2000".

www.oxfam.org

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"Slaves of Debt" – Liturgical Role Play with Children

This liturgical role play for children is pointing out how material indebtedness but also guilt which is not forgiven cause injustice and suffering for all involved. Language and contents should be adjusted to the respective context as well as to the participants.

The Arrest

Two people enter the (church-)room – one very obviously rich and important, the other a policeman, soldier or of similar function. The rich person approaches a few individuals in the community (ought to be informed about this beforehand) and states: "You still owe me\$" (various amounts of money, but always so high that nobody could possibly pay them in cash). Whoever cannot pay is arrested by the second person, there is a sign hung around his/her neck showing the amount of his/her debt for all to see and then they are led to a part of the room which is cordoned off to the rest of the community. At the end of this scene the rich person says: "You will not be set free before every cent of your debts have been paid". The second person stands guard at the "fence".

Can we come to the aid of those prisoners? Does anybody have sufficient mon.

Sauda is one day old



Discussion with the Children

What has just been happening? What are debts?

But she has 30 times as many debts as she will ever be able to earn in her whole life



ey? Can people actually be imprisoned because they are in debt?

There are many countries in the world in debt to other richer countries. Sauda comes from Mozambique, a very poor country in Africa, which was at war for many years. The government ran up many debts in order to be able to purchase weapons from rich countries. The war is now over but the debts remain.

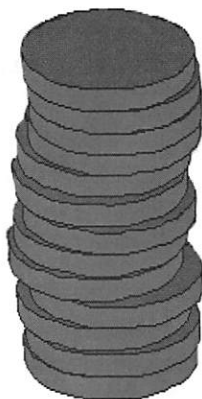
If these debts were to be distributed among the whole population each single person would be responsible for more debts than he/she could ever pay back in one lifetime, even a small baby like Sauda. Should she become ill and need medical attention the only answer she will hear will be: "We have no money to build hospitals – we have to pay off so many debts." Once she gets to the age when she should start school, she will be told: "We have no money to build schools – we have to repay our debts". Should she need water pipes, the answer will be "There is no money for water pipes – our debts have to be paid back." Should she need help because she can find no suitable work, she will be told: "There is no money that we can give you because we have too many debts which have to be paid back first", and if she ever gets to the stage that she might actually earn money and pay the appropriate taxes, nothing can be bought for the people of Mozambique from these taxes because the debts are so enormous and pressing that they first have to be paid back. It is as if the whole country were imprisoned – just like

the children in the cordoned-off part of the church. Many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America find themselves in the very same situation.

Many may now be thinking that there are lots of people in the richer countries collecting and donating money to the poorer ones – the rich countries also pay for aid to developing countries. This is certainly

Excerpt from: *Das Jahr, das Gott gefällt: Materialheft für Gottesdienst und Gemeindegarbeit. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 1999*

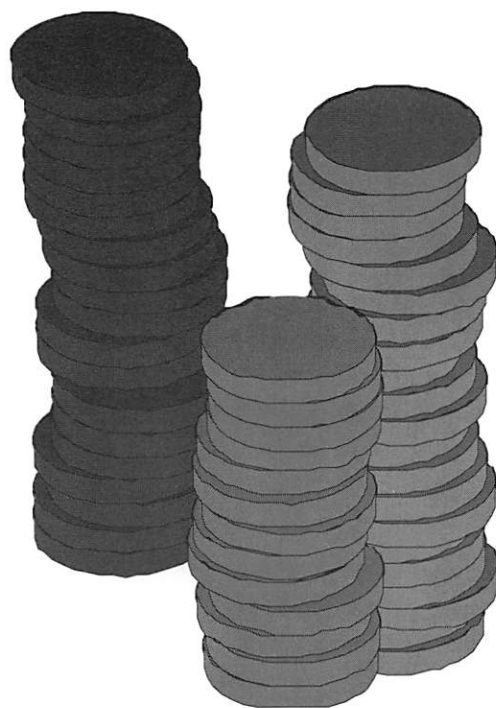
Foreign Aid to Under-Developed Countries



From rich to poor

(Development aid, etc.)

Debt Service



From poor to rich

(Interest and repayment)



true, however, this money can be compared to water poured on a hot stone, as it is not even a fraction of the money which would be needed.

The poorer countries end up paying three times as much to the richer countries as they ever receive in the way of financial aid. They are trapped and can find no way out.

The Jubilee Year – Jesus in Nazareth

The children are then asked: "Where was Jesus born? Where did he grow up?"

In Nazareth, which was a small village situated far into the mountains in the North of Israel. Once Jesus was an adult he travelled through many towns and villages telling the people of the love of God and healing those who were sick. He became very famous in his part of the world. One time when he returned to Nazareth where he had spent his childhood and where his relatives still lived he attended a religious service, and, when the people noticed that he was among them again they wanted him to preach to them and Jesus complied. Once the community had sung and prayed, a scroll was brought to him containing the words of the Prophet Isaiah, and Jesus unfurled the scroll and began to read ...

(At this point someone reads the text from the Bible or from a scroll Lk 4,18 –19).

Then Jesus began to explain what the text meant: "You have been waiting so long for this to come about – that God heals the sick, that He frees those in prison, that He shows Himself to the poor. You are always waiting for a time to come when God will put everything right. Now is the time. God has sent me to do these things".

The people of Nazareth could not believe this, as they knew Jesus from his childhood: They could in no way imagine how he would or could do these things. However, Jesus did do them – he approached the poor and told them how God loved them – he wanted people to be free. He wants the breaking of a new "Year of Mercy", a year where all will be released from the burden of debt: people's debts to God and their debts toward each other. This is

what Jesus lived and even died for. "All people shall be free – even if I have to pay the debt myself".

All those behind the "fence" should also be set free. Jesus has paid their debts for them. (The debtors' signs have notices stuck to them – "Paid by Jesus".)

Nowadays?

Those people long ago in Nazareth did not properly understand what Jesus actually meant, but the message is: "God forgives us and sets us free". We should thus also forgive each other, remit the debts and grant each and everyone their freedom. But even nowadays most people do not understand this.

We keep ourselves prisoners. Often people are angry at each other not only for a short period of time but over a period of months or even years – this means that all are actually "imprisoned" in their anger. They cannot approach each other until they are ready to forgive and to "pull down the fences" between them.

Or take, for example, little Sauda – she, too, is imprisoned behind a "fence" of debt although she, herself had nothing personal to do with this situation. But she will suffer her whole life for it unless someone responsible is willing to remove this "fence". Jesus wants us all to be free – he does not wish for us to keep ourselves imprisoned, he wants us to pull down our "fences", and we can start with this right now.

Objection: (one person in the community raises an objection)

"Stop! Not so fast! You cannot simply release these people from their debts – tomorrow they will go and make new ones because they now know that they will never have to pay them back. No, no, whoever runs into debt will have to pay the debt back – where would all this get us otherwise?"

Answer (ask for responses from the community – children or adults – if necessary, give own answer with following remarks:)

a) The poor countries have almost always paid back more than they ever borrowed



in the first place due to high interest rates carried from year to year.

b) If some have money to pay back, then they should, however, everyone should have a chance to be clear of debt.

c) God wants all people to be able to live in freedom. That is more important than anything else. If debts are a reason for people being "imprisoned" for the rest of their lives, then these debts must be remitted, no matter what.

Activity

The children are encouraged to pull down the fence and let the prisoners free.

Prayer

The children and the adults are asked about what they would like to pray for and for what they would like to give thanks. The answers are written on two large posters and then formulated into a prayer.

(Transl.: K. Donnet-Poorman)





The Catholic Biblical Federation (*CBF*) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to ministry to the Word of God. At the present time, the *CBF* membership includes 91 full members and 219 associate members coming from a total of 125 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of the Holy Scripture.

The *CBF* promotes the biblical pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in the field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. The Federation seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.

In particular, the *CBF* works toward the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

The ministry to the Word of God is ministry to the unity of and communication between human beings. A world which grows together with the help of modern communications and yet continues to show signs of hate and destruction needs more than ever words of peace and of fellowship with God and with each other.

Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen, President of the CBF