
Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff speaks of two bleeding wounds that cry for liberation: the wound of poverty and misery and the wound of the earth, products of the systematic aggression that it suffers [Boff, Leonardo, *ECOLOGIA: Grito de la Tierra, grito de los Pobres* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Lumen, 1996), 135]. One can say that *Smokey Mountain* was an epitome of that metaphor. *Smokey Mountain* was a large landfill located in Manila—actually it was a reeking gigantic pile of garbage. For many decades it was home for 25,000 plus scavengers who, up until 1995, survived collecting garbage and recycling it. Hundreds of women, men, and children standing with the garbage knee-high gathered anything that could be eaten, sold, reused, or recycled. Even dead bodies were found in the trash pile. In Beltran’s own words, it was not only “a horrifying symbol of a planet in peril,” (x) or a “metaphor for a world gone terribly wrong” (10) but also “the sanctuary of my solitude” (8), the “hallowed burial place of countless innocents” (33), and “a real community of shared lives toward a shared good in the midst of smoldering trash” (48). The place became famous—many would say infamous—for its poverty, foulness, and squalor. Living around the area posed serious health problems. Residents had a mortality rate two to three times higher than the rest of the inhabitants of the metropolitan area. After years of people’s prayers and non-violent struggles, the area was cleared and became the site of public housing for some 5,000 scavenger families. During the early years of the decade of the 1980s I had the privilege of visiting the place twice. I was shocked at what I saw, and at the same time I was deeply impressed by the resilience, the organization, the courage, and the commitment of the people to overcome their oppressive situation. I experienced first-hand the global connections of a system that exploited the people and the earth, there, in *Smokey Mountain* and elsewhere in Latin America.

It is obvious that today’s ecological crisis has planetary dimensions. National borders mean nothing when confronted with nuclear disasters, tsunamis, chemical catastrophes, and the like. The gap between the rich and the poor both inside and between nations is widening. This book deals with these issues from concrete experiences. The author is a Roman Catholic priest of the Society of the Divine Word. Born in the rainforests of Mindanao, he decided to live on *Smokey Mountain* for over thirty years and became chaplain of the scavengers. Father Beltrán describes his experience as “awesome, . . . at once tremendous and terrifying, fascinating and repugnant, energizing and enervating” (ix). The book was written as an account of his own motivation and faith. His world as a theologian formed in the West was galaxies away from the daily world of the scavengers. In his “prophetic dialogue” with them he learned many things. Among many others, they taught him that: “they are at home with ambiguities and uncertainty . . . . they seem to have made the uncertainty of the world around them an intuitive part of their daily life” (64), and that in “the struggle for liberation in the garbage dump, we discover everything as vestiges of the Trinity” (67).
The book denounces the realities of systemic injustice, of ruthless oppression, and exploitation of both the people and the Earth and offers a small but hopeful sign of the people’s global struggle for justice and liberation. Confronted with the gravity of the situation and somehow paraphrasing the well-known Marxist dictum, Father Beltrán says that “It is not enough to describe the problems of the world; something should actually be done about them,” and he adds: “Now” (xii).

The book is divided into five chapters: “God as Cloud of Unknowing”; “God of the Poor and the Oppressed”; “God as Fearsome and Alluring Mystery”; “God as Lord of History”; and “God as Consuming Fire.” Each chapter, respectively, describes Father Beltrán’s inner pilgrimage, his prophetic dialogue with the scavengers, their religious experiences, their efforts for community organization and the author’s reflection on his own conversions—intellectual, moral and spiritual. The book also tells a personal story of an electronic engineer turned priest, who after graduation from theological studies in Rome and a deep spiritual experience in India, takes the decision to risk his life among the poorest of the poor. It starts with the first day of Father Beltrán’s visit to Smokey Mountain—which remained embedded in his mind “like a fossil preserved in paleolithic rock” (1). His living together with the struggling and surviving people of the garbage dump—"condemned without trial to be a stinking class of human beings, carrying their rattan baskets like beasts of burden: people who had been lied to, deceived, duped, and spat upon all their lives” (2)—radically changed his life forever. The theological reflections and images woven within accounts of horror and hope form a series of illuminating parables that invite the reader to solidarity and critical reflection. There is a strong criticism of a culture of obsessive consumerism and its deadly effects on peoples and the environment.

For Father Beltrán, the scavengers and the impoverished people, besides providing a vital social function and serving society, have soteriological qualities. They are those who saved him, they “were figuratively crucified in the garbage dump, their hands and feet pierced by rusty nails and broken bottles . . . climbed up their own Calvary” (2). As usual, women were doubly oppressed “because they were poor and because they were women” (22). For him, “Theological concerns must be developed from the questions and needs of the poor . . .” because, the poor people are those “who will bring back integrity to this broken world” (41). Furthermore, it is among these people that the author discovered who he really was: “With them, it is easier for me to believe in a beyond” (173).

This type of theological reflection stands in a long line of Liberation Theology with “the preferential option for the poor.” In his narrative, the author is able to knit new insights originating from modern scientific research (astrophysics, cosmogenesis, quantum physics, complexity and chaos theory, etc.) with ancient wisdom from philosophers, theologians, scientists, and mystics such as Origen, St. Boniface, Thomas Aquinas, Dionysius the Areopagite, Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Baruch Spinoza, Albert Einstein, Teilhard de Chardin, and Macarius of Optino. Modern martyrs, prophets, philosophers, and theologians, such as Monsignor Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Noam Chomsky, C. S. Lewis, Dionisio Miranda, John Haught, John