

# BEING IN TUNE TO GOD'S LOVE IN ME

Michael Bingham

## *Biographical Introduction*

I was born in England in 1941 of a Protestant father from Northern Ireland and a Catholic mother from London. I was sent away to a Jesuit boarding school for 10 years, after which I joined the novitiate in 1959. Philosophy followed, then graduate studies in English at Oxford. I taught in another Jesuit boarding school for three years before starting theology at Heythrop College in London, which I completed at Regis College in Toronto, Canada, returning to England for ordination in 1974.

After a few months studying Spanish in Mexico I took up residence in Medellín, Colombia, attending the *Instituto Pastoral Latinoamericano* for another few months before doing Tertianship in a poor neighbourhood under Miguel Elizondo from 1975-6. I stayed on for a further three years in the Jesuit parish there as a member of the staff, moving to another poor parish of ours in Cali for two years, and lastly to a country parish near Barrancabermeja before returning home at the end of 1983.

Since then I worked in a Jesuit parish in inner-city Liverpool for 14 years, and in 1998 moved to Northern Ireland to join a small insertion community in a 'nationalist' (catholic) area of Portadown.

## *My Life in the Society and the Social Apostolate*

It was not till I moved to Canada in 1972 to complete my theology that I felt able to develop my interest in social justice. I first did a pastoral placement in an Institute for young female offenders, and then as member of a small community did supervised chaplaincy work in prisons. On several

occasions I stayed at various Jesuit missions to the native American people.

In 1975 I visited various basic Christian communities, mainly in Mexico, before arriving in Medellín, Colombia, to study pastoral practice in Latin America following the principles of the 1968 CELAM Conference. In Tertianship there we ministered to the poor amongst whom we lived. Afterwards I helped briefly in 1976 on the mission teams in the diocese of Riobamba, Ecuador, being caught up in the military raid on the Latin American bishops' meeting there, detained briefly and expelled from the country.

Until 1983 I was assigned to poor parishes in Colombia. Besides performing regular pastoral duties I was chaplain and catechetical coordinator in the Fe y Alegría schools in Medellín (until I was effectively declared 'persona non grata' by the bishop), and in Cali did some conscientising work amongst neighbourhood groups. The Jesuit social centre CINEP in Bogotá offered training and reflection to those of us in the popular pastoral sector. Before leaving Latin America I helped out for several weeks in a parish on the outskirts of Managua in Nicaragua, at that time facing the Contra rebellion. For the next 14 years from 1984 my work in an inner-city parish in Liverpool, marked by high unemployment and sub-standard housing, was part pastoral, part community development. I helped to organise housing tenant groups, children's play schemes and adult learning, all in a context of good relations with the local Anglican church. I did some work with drug addicts, studying for a Master's degree on the subject. During the 1980s I was active in promoting Central American solidarity, and took part in protest rallies against the presence of nuclear bases. Within the British Province I belonged to our Social Apostolate group, becoming a member of the social ministries Commission, and helped to host two meetings of the northern sector of Mission Ouvrière.

In Northern Ireland, where I have been now since 1998, my work has been marked throughout by the issue of political and religious division. Besides helping in the parish and in a nearby prison, I have become involved in our local neighbourhood organisation, being currently on the management committee, and have supported people in their opposition to sectarian

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parades through the area. Within the town of Portadown I belong to an inter-church group of clergy and church workers, a lay-led group that promotes reconciliation, and another that offers mediation services to individuals and groups in dispute, aware of the recent influx of migrant workers into the area and the growth of racism. Further afield I work with Mediation Northern Ireland, based in Belfast, providing training sessions to groups on issues around conflict. I recently did a Master's degree in Reconciliation Studies in Belfast, and have done courses in dealing with trauma, suicide and depression. I also help to staff a telephone service for those contemplating suicide.

I continue to be a member of my Province's social ministries Commission, liaising with Irish Province representatives in the field, and maintain links with Mission Ouvrière. I recently contributed an article in a publication by the Faith and Justice Centre in Dublin on 'The Church's Social Teaching in Action'.

### *Times I have experienced Movements of the Spirit*

In spite of a conventional, even privileged upbringing, around 1968 certain interests and concerns were emerging in my consciousness before theology, apparently extraneous to any religious or spiritual dynamic: awareness of social inequities, the call for radical change, the survival of human cultures and natural resources.

On a visit to a Jesuit mission in Northern Ontario I recall the sensation of getting down from the ice-bound train one Christmas and approaching the township almost on tiptoe through the snow for fear of damaging fragile sensibilities with my clumsy mental and cultural baggage. Hearing the stories of the inmates in a women's gaol in Toronto where I was chaplain, I found myself looking at the underside of society and discovering that it looked, and felt, completely different. I don't think I have seen things quite the same way since.

In a cramped little Tertianship house in the 'misery belt' of Medellín I wrestled with the contradictions and dilemmas posed by our 'parachuting' into the lives of these chosen neighbours around us. I felt again the sense of awe and hesitancy before the vulnerable existences and relationships disturbed by our appearance. Our professed 'poverty' was a sham in the midst of the humble yet dignified people, for we were by any definition

'rich' - in money, resources, power, influence, education and opportunities. Yet so poor we discovered ourselves when compared to them in terms of generosity, availability, mutual dependence, authenticity and spontaneity.

We concluded that taking a leading role would only perpetuate the people's sense of impotence and incompetence. It felt like a 'handing over' - or even 'handing back' - of power and dignity to those to whom it had rightfully belonged. We reasoned that the best gift we could offer them would be to accompany them in their pains and trials, their hopes and struggles.

As I settled into the rhythm of life in the world of the marginalised, it felt like being at the centre of the world. This was where lay new hope for a better order of things. Though the senses were continually assailed by sights, sounds and smells associated with the detritus of society, it was a privilege and a blessing to be there.

The sense of being part of a continent-wide community of purpose and commitment was a powerful support and motivator. There was a clear political and social project to establish a just society with which we could identify and to which owe allegiance.

Back in Britain, in a parish in a disintegrating part of inner-city Liverpool, I recognised the same world of ordinary human lives whom wealth, success and fortune pass by, here marked by unemployment, and superfluous to the national enterprise. Here again were the friends I had already made in Latin America, whose powerlessness is their greatest poverty, their humanity their greatest richness.

Lack of access to social participation, whether in the slums of Medellín or in an inner-city estate in Liverpool, produces characteristic patterns of behaviour, values and world-view. I realised that the faith that emerged from this experience was qualitatively different. I saw the spirituality of the poor as the paradigm of all spirituality, where a sense of dependence and impotence is the absolute condition of our relationship with God. Not only that, but these virtues that survive in our impoverished and cynical society have enriched my own spirituality. One day a young man whom I had known came to me asking for help. He was one of the many drug abusers in the neighbourhood. I became aware of the pain that was not as

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public as other ills of social marginalisation, but just as real. Having tended to focus on people more as a class or collectivity I became more attentive to individual and personal needs. Building relationships in Northern Ireland I have sensed the contradiction between living in solidarity with our Catholic neighbours and trying to bridge the rift with the Protestant community. How can I be committed to one and yet detached from both? If I pursue the cause of reconciliation, can I really affirm that I am committed to anybody?

Here the priority is the healing of differences and divisions. Between the rights and demands of each, one can occasionally glimpse in the gap the ideal of a higher, or deeper justice, where truth and compassion meet.

### *Where I have been inspired by Ignatian Spirituality*

The link between justice and God came gradually for me. It was like a re-exploration of my faith as I matched my experience of the poor with my beliefs.

The image of Jesus, 'pioneer of our faith', the lowly leader who calls us to follow only where he has gone before himself, was very strong from my days of Tertianship, and the vision of his kingdom was the template for transformative action in the world. Jesus' option in favour of the excluded and vulnerable, and challenge to the upholders of power and privilege, sprang out from the pages of the gospel as I re-read them, and were reinforced by the 4<sup>th</sup> decree of GC 32.

I aspired to a more radical poverty in solidarity, like the generous 'emptying out' of Jesus, to the extent of accepting criticism and misunderstanding without defence. All choices, all judgments, tended to be made in this light – discerning them from the perspective of the poor.

In the early years of my experience little self-reflection took place, so focused was I on living out the consequence of my commitment. Only later did the people among whom I worked help me to look more closely at my moods and my desires, and integrate my own spirituality with my life-choices.

Learning to relate more to individual needs has led me to be more aware of movements of the spirit in myself, and become more understanding of people, the reasons for their being where they are, and their capacity for moving forward. Where once 'contemplative in action' was simply activity driven by a conviction, it has become more a being in tune to God's love in me.