

## ASIAN

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**Book Review**

**Vincent Leclercq, *Blessed Are the Vulnerable: Reaching Out to Those with Aids***, New London: Twenty-third Publications, 2010. Pages: xi+257. ISBN: 978-1-58595-776-7.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has provoked a wide range of theological reflections, challenging many of the traditional ethical stances and inviting a deeper understanding of the Christian vision of life and its response to the changing situations of life. A great amount of theological works have focussed on the debate over the use of condoms to control the spread of the virus. But, theological works dealing with the ethical dimensions of accompanying those who are already infected with and affected by the HIV/AIDS are not many. *Blessed are the Vulnerable. Reaching out to those with Aids* by Vincent Leclercq, a physician and moral theologian of the Assumptionist congregation, is an original theological contribution on the ethical responsibility of accompanying with compassion those who are already infected/affected with HIV/AIDS, the most vulnerable of our times. This is the published version of Leclercq's doctoral dissertation at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, "Vulnerability and the Kingdom of God: A Theological Ethics in a Time of Aids," done under the direction of James F. Keenan, SJ. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Daniel Harrington, S.J. were the readers of the thesis, and Enda McDonough was the examiner. The entire discussion is set in the background of a profound theological vision, so that we are invited not only to re-think about our response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, but also to enter into a new approach to Christian theology and ethics. Leclercq is convinced that the reality of HIV/AIDS is a call to "enter into a new experience of vulnerability and hospitality" and that "persons who live with the virus or care for people living with HIV/AIDS need also to hear about the 'goodness' of their human life and their Christian vocation" (p. 5). In such a perspective, the sick are no more "objects" of pastoral attention or theological teaching, but subjects and actors. The ethics of AIDS first of all calls for the recovery of the integral well-being of those implicated. For this, Leclercq proposes "the empowerment of the sick as the ethical norm for overturning the situation of the most endangered groups or populations or nations" (p. 7).

The first chapter, "Vulnerability as a Common Experience in the Context of HIV/AIDS," developing the notion of vulnerability, describes the experience of the HIV/AIDS crisis and its ethical challenges. Research studies show that the most

vulnerable to AIDS are both the beneficiaries and partners of prevention. The authentic question about AIDS is not 'how did you get it, but how do you get through it' (p. 21). AIDS may not be confined within the conventional limits of moral theology and here the concept of vulnerability gives a realistic framework for our responses, keeping in mind that an ethics based on vulnerability is committed to addressing HIV/AIDS issues without any fatalism (pp. 30-31). Leclercq affirms that the HIV/AIDS crisis requires us to displace the limits of our compassion and that we have to pass from the status of 'spectator' to the status of a 'travelling companion' (p. 32). AIDS is an experience of the vulnerability of the physical body, an experience of vulnerability for the medical community and an experience of vulnerability of our economic, social and political body (pp. 39-47). Based on the concept of vulnerability, AIDS pandemic prompts us to commit ourselves to a social agenda where inequalities concerning health can be addressed politically, locally and personally (p. 45). We should also remember that stigma is the denial of humanness and God's active and loving presence among those who face the disease (p. 49).

The second chapter, "The Kingdom of God," places vulnerability on scriptural foundations and examines the experience of vulnerability in the background of the theology of the Kingdom of God, the central message of Jesus and the 'goal and horizon of Christian ethics' (p. 53). According to Leclercq, the Kingdom of God is the theological context for an ethics of vulnerability and he underscores that to downplay the place of the most vulnerable in the economy of salvation means to reject the very identity of Jesus, his life and ministry (p. 64). In the light of a profound understanding of the scriptural and theological vision of the Kingdom, the author delineates the ethical demands of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God at a time of the experience of the vulnerability to AIDS.

Chapter third, "The Kingdom of God Leads Us to Christ Event," develops the Christological dimension of the experience of vulnerability. In the experience of vulnerability to AIDS, Christians are those who believe that Jesus is the kingdom in person and the only interpretation of the Kingdom of God. The author points out how the AIDS crisis and its cortege of injustices distort God's covenant, how God intervenes in a time of AIDS and how it is a *kairos*, an opportune moment perceived by God for a new loving initiative (pp. 88ff).

The next chapter, "Liturgical Practices, Both Sacred and Secular for the Living and for the Dead," looks at the ways of praying, celebrating and ministering with the people affected by AIDS. Sacramental celebrations are our ways of dealing with human experiences in faith (p. 139). The attempt is to explore how the liturgical practices promote a praxis of liberation, integrating the experience of vulnerability (p. 119). Four sets of practices, two for the living and two for the dead, one secular and one sacred each, are analyzed, in order to show how liturgical practices shape an ethics of hospitality and solidarity for a time of AIDS. Leclercq underscores that the AIDS challenge calls for a revision in the way in which the Church understands herself and

her mission and that “to be hospitable to the other and to receive him or her in the experience of vulnerability constitutes the test of communion with the Holy” (p. 159).

The final chapter, “The Hospitality of Ethics and Ethics of Hospitality in a Time of AIDS,” reviews the relationship between vulnerability, hospitality and empowerment of the most affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and identifies the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom in a world that lives in the night of HIV/AIDS. Today our presence at the side of those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS reflects the actuality of Jesus’ ministry (p. 199). By providing an orientation for the present, ethics based on the Kingdom’s values seek to preserve the future of the most vulnerable. The Kingdom calls for personal as well as social and political conversion (p. 225).

*Blessed are the Vulnerable. Reaching out to those with Aids* inspires and challenges us to be compassionate companions of the HIV/AIDS affected people, the most vulnerable of our times. This book is an excellent example of the dialogue that Christian ethics has to engage with life. Ethics has to challenge the life situations, but at the same time has to be challenged by life in its concreteness – with its pain, suffering, experience helplessness and vulnerability. Only then ethics becomes relevant to human life, lived here and now. Leclercq has succeeded in presenting the issue in a profound theological context and hence, we find in this work, not only an ethical response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but a whole theology. The author, Vincent Leclercq, and James F. Keenan, the director of Leclercq’s doctoral thesis, deserve our appreciation.

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