

# Helping Dominican Evangelicals to assume their political responsibility. A socio-political project.

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I present a project directed to help Dominican Evangelicals to assume their political responsibility and their personal and social development. The philosophy of this project is sustained in two principles:

1. Jesus preached the Gospel in a holistic way, He didn't separate drastically material help (giving bread to people, healing the sick) and the verbal preaching. Our brethren in Dominican Republic need hearing our preaching, making clear their cultural commandment and their political responsibility, but they need also receiving our material help for their practical needs.
2. Jesus didn't create a pathologic dependence in His disciples, but stimulated their personal responsibility (Lc 8.38-39). In a similar way, we must look after a collaboration that may empower our Dominican brethren and give them the means for getting to grow without depending on us.

This project starts from vivid events experienced by my wife Eva and me from last year to last days and reflects the way in which we were surprised by the Lord, who showed us that He wanted us there for specific goals, really quite different from those we could imagine.

I have had in mind two verses:

*"Give ye them to eat"*, the indication of Jesus to His disciples in Mk 6.37. They understood that Jesus had fulfilled already His mission with those people to whom He had taught many important things. Verbal preaching was what the people needed, but Jesus made clear that healthy doctrine is the doctrine that cures, and it includes a loving heart that doesn't limit to say the truth, but *"is moved to compassion"* (Mk 6.34) and expresses it in vivid ways. The disciples said: *"Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat"* (v.36), understanding that it was their responsibility to preach them, but it was not their task looking after the people's material needs, and in fact, entering in this area looked as unrealistic (v. 37: *"Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat?"*). But what looked unrealistic turned to be surprisingly possible in the hands of Jesus. This leads me to the second text that I am taking in mind in this project:

*"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them"* (Eph 2.10). I have felt and thought like the disciples:

“Yes, there are plenty of things to do, many things to be changed, but it is unrealistic to try to do everything and there are so many things to do and so many remain unapproachable, that one doesn’t know where to begin”. The text of Ephesians make us clear that there are specific works that God has individually prepared for me to do, and so the important question is making me clear that I am working just in these specific works and I am not wasting my time in interesting things, but things that are not just those that God has prepared specifically for me to work in. From some months ago, I begin the morning praying: “Lord, which are the works that you have prepared for me today”. Being open to be surprised by God is getting to be a realistic and challenging way to live. In this sense, I am sure that there are many needs in Dominican Republic, but I have not much time and I must make sure that I don’t waste my time in there and the project I work in there fulfils the condition that it was prepared by God for me to walk in.

Dominican Republic is a Caribbean Spanish-speaking country. It has a Latin culture, with a deep respect to transcendentals (the Bible is present in its national flag) but a poor political and social development of individual rights and a relatively high level of violence. It was a definitely Catholic country, but in the last years Protestantism has had a spectacular growth reaching 20 % of population and it continues to grow. Its population is almost 10 million people and it is receiving many immigrants from Haiti. It is a developing country, with many natural resources but a low GDP; the incomes are not well distributed among population. Corruption and lack of accountability is the main problem in political life.

More than one year ago my wife and me travelled there just for resting in Dominican beaches, I confess. A newspaper and a little factory building dramatically changed our expectations in this country.



One day in the beach we read in the newspaper that the Dominican Constitution was to be reformed; one of the articles conceded official privileges to Catholic marriages, not permitted to Evangelicals. We read that the Evangelicals were quite displeased and tried to change things. I contacted by phone to the general secretary of CODUE (an Evangelical Dominican organization that was in the core of the protest) and to one Evangelical member of the Parliament, Mr Carlos Peña. I offered them my personal support and the support of the



Spanish Evangelical Alliance. I travelled to the capital for participating in a rally before the Parliament and I had a meeting with the two Evangelical members of the Parliament and members of CODUE and I explained them some political suggestions from our Spanish Alliance experience. The Evangelicals and their representatives made a great work and some weeks later they finally got to change the original draft of the reformation of the Constitution.

I had asked a believer to take me in his car from the east to the capital for these meetings and in the travel I got to understand the feelings of Dominican Evangelicals in political grounds. He explained me that in the recent past most Evangelicals were quite opposed to participation in politics, and some churches had excommunicated some members just for participating in politics. They saw this area as the kingdom of corruption and sin and they saw no place for Christians in it. Things were slightly changing, but I had the feeling that Evangelicals gave the back to politics and politicians gave the back to Evangelicals.

In contrast, Evangelicals have conquered the respect of Dominican society, for their honesty and faithfulness. In fact, they have conquered the territory of semantics: in the hotel, my wife heard a woman calling "sister" to other person and so she thought the woman could be an Evangelical; she addressed to the woman and asked her: "Are you a Christian?" I got surprised that my wife, who had previous contact with Dominican people and knew better the

expressions, asked her if she was “a Christian”, not “an Evangelical”, but I got more surprised when the woman answered: “No, I am not a Christian, I am a Catholic”. A Catholic explained me later that Evangelicals were the most coherent with Christian faith and so in Dominican Republic, to be a “Christian” means to be an Evangelical.

Something were not fitting in my mind: Evangelicals are growing in this country, they have the respect of society, they are quite proactive in the expression of their faith (they use to put Bible verses everywhere in their cars, their jobs, the windows of their homes, they give Biblical names to their shops), but their socio-political presence is disproportionately low, they give up to claiming it. The experience of the reformation of Constitution was a blow for them that I hope may help to change their political attitudes. I shared my thoughts with my brother in the car and I explained him that God is sovereign in all areas of human activities and political life is not out from it; I shared with him some experiences from Spanish Evangelical Alliance. In the return way from the capital I realized that he had made too a return way in his mind; he is thinking now in engaging in this area.

Another day, in Veron (East Dominican Republic), we saw a little factory building with an announcement: “Home of Mercy and Restoration”. It was an Evangelical church; its pastors, José and Mara, rented the facilities and began a church quite sensitive to personal needs of



people. We got involved in their projects and we got to know hard individual situations that need urgent action. For example, they have recently had an urban holiday camp and a teenager came to Mara and explained her that her father had sold her to a man in Haiti, and one may imagine the consequences of it. Some immigrant children came with red wristlets, which means they have been offered to vudu gods. We got to know that a lone Haitian woman wished to give away her baby; an Evangelical couple, Nicole and Santo, with very low incomes, decided to take care of him, in a great show of loving generosity, and we offered to help, but a

powerful woman came in and she insisted that nothing could be done without her consent; God used us for overcoming the situation and get rid of this woman; later we learned that maybe she wanted the baby because he was a perfect candidate (no birth registration, no



father, no claiming from the mother) for a vudu ritual. Chavez in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua, Haitian leaders, have surrendered power to vudu priests in their countries and no doubt there is a spiritual fight for conquering socio-political power in these countries. In a very literal way, our political fight in Caribbean is a spiritual fight against gods that bring oppression, corruption and economic and personal poverty and slavery, and praying is not a minor weapon in this fight.

With this information in mind, it is not difficult to design several areas of socio-political work in this context. These are my proposals of action:

## **AREAS OF POLITICAL HELP:**

1. **Helping to develop a sensitiveness in Evangelical Dominicans to politics and to assume their responsibility in this area.** Evangelicals must turn their eyes to politics and politicians must turn their eyes to Evangelicals in this country.
  - a. Challenging Evangelicals to participate in politics has benefits for the Evangelical community, because they need to realize they have social relevance and they need to make sure that their rights are respected. There is a sense of stoicism in Dominican Evangelicals that I may understand because I found it in my parent's generation in Galicia and Spain: they had suffered much repression in dictatorship and they assumed that their sufferings were the unavoidable consequence of their differentiated condition; sometimes I asked them to think in Paul's attitude in Acts 16.37-39, claiming his civic rights, but they don't use to think in these terms; it is one of the perdurable effects

of totalitarianism in people's mind: they get to think that a Christian should not claim his political civic rights. There is a long work to be done in Evangelical Dominican people, not only in attitudes and behaviour, but mainly in mind and ways of understanding the created world, the social world and their role in it.

b. But challenging Evangelicals to participate in politics has benefits for the rest of Dominican society. Dominican society has been deeply influenced by Catholicism, and this influence has reached politicians from right and from left in many ways; I would just pinpoint two consequences of this influence in Dominican socio-political life:

i. The lack of accountability: In their religious life they understand that there is a priestly caste that assumes the main role, the responsibility of the salvation of the souls: the Catholic church, as the reference institution, assumes the keys of salvation and the priest is a mediator between God and the believers. Catholic believers are not used to assume their individual responsibility before God, it is a matter of the priest and the Catholic Church, people give up their personal responsibility in the hands of the priests. When they approach to political life, they translate the same scheme and they assume that political responsibility is a matter of a "priestly caste", in this case the "political caste", and the political caste is ultimately responsible of their decisions. Citizens are not used at all to claim responsibility and accountability to their politicians, as much as they never would claim accountability of the work of the priestly caste in the salvation of their souls. As Max Weber explains, it is very difficult to appear a dictatorship in a Protestant society, but Catholic cultures are more vulnerable to totalitarianisms.

ii. The Catholic believer solves his sins with a penitence established by the priest after confession, he has not the deep sense of feeling lonely guilt before God that a Protestant has; the Catholic believer is more prone to accept a lie as a "minor sin" that is remediable with penitence and good works. Instead, the Protestant believer knows that each sin led to Jesus' death and he is committed to continuously live in truth and light as a son of God. Consequently, the Catholic culture assumes more acritically the lie and understands that lie is unavoidable in politics and corruption is the "minor sin" of those who are in power. In the opposite, the Evangelicals don't accept the lie and the corruption as tolerable. In fact, Western democratic system began in Protestant societies in which everybody was aware of the integral corruption of man (in opposition to Tomas of Aquinas, who established that reason was not so affected by sin) and, consequently, every man in power should be controlled because every man was prone to make abuse of power; checks and balances were established to make sure that lie and corruption were not tolerated.

iii. In sum, Dominican politics urgently needs a moral biblical influence of Evangelicals that challenges the moral of society, its cosmivision, that

makes clear that, as much as every individual is responsible before God, every individual has a personal responsibility too in the government of the *res publica*. This biblical worldview is urgently needed too for eliminating the main problem of Dominican political life: corruption and lack of accountability.

iv. Which blockades will emerge against this Evangelical influence?

1. first, the Evangelical's lack of faith in the power of their propositions and the suitability of their worldview for transforming Dominican politics. The worst for our political influence is our skepticism.
  2. second, the opposition of those who are in power. Democratic changes have been produced from Trujillo's dictatorship in Dominican Republic, but mentality is more slow to change, and political and economic privileges are more difficult to overcome; my wife, Eva, a historian, uses to say that the effects of French Revolution delayed decades before it reached the rural areas of France. We may expect a formal welcome to the irruption of a regeneration of public life and fight against corruption, but powerful people in Dominican society will not calmly give up their uncontested power. Maybe we may suffer even physical violence against Evangelicals, should they dare to initiate these kind of steps in public life.
- c. We are sure that this work must begin in churches and pastors must be reached with this vision (pastors are very influential among Evangelicals in here), but the span of our contacts is limited to some churches and our time is also limited; we will work out our possibilities, but other people are needed for making this work.
- d. University Evangelicals are a strategic group: they have the formation and the intellectual resources. They must be a transforming minority and in fact they should be the political leaders that put in scene the Evangelical presence in this country. We have addressed to Rosa Brito (the general secretary of the Dominican Student Movement) and Homero, her husband, and we shared our projects with them. They have invited us to have a specific seminary with Evangelical students on Politic Responsibility. We are enthusiastic with the idea.
- e. We would extend it to a more stable program, for which the WEA program on Effective Public Engagement could be an interesting reference
- f. We wish to involve CODUE (Confederación Dominicana de Unidad Evangélica) in this project.
- g. Caribbean Evangelical Alliance could have an important role in this work too.

**2. My proposals of political action include:**

- a. Develop a non-parties project, out of the partisan area, a civic initiative for improving the quality of Dominican political life. The reference could be the OCI (Observatorio Cívico Independiente) of Evangelical Spanish Alliance, that

promotes accountability of politicians. We are completely aware of the deep roots of political corruption in this country, which constitutes the main blockage for its socio-political and economic development. We don't try to achieve a speedy elimination of corruption, but we will just work for progressively convincing people that corruption is not unavoidable (the main problem is not that politicians are corrupt, but that people assumes it as unavoidable and have been used to live with it). They need a moral revolution that changes values like this, and nobody has more moral authority for leading this change in Dominican Republic than the Evangelical community. We will use the same methods of OCI, that is, analyzing the degree of fulfillment of electoral programs and publishing the results in press conferences.

- b. A program for promoting the participation of Evangelicals in Dominican political parties. In some Latin America countries there have been founded Evangelical parties, and maybe in Dominican Republic there is already the critical mass enough for having electoral success, but I think it is not the best way; the best could be the involvement of Evangelical politicians in different political parties, making sure that all of them find strategic common objectives to be defended by all Evangelical representatives. The main targets of this program should be the university students, the best prepared Evangelicals for assuming this challenge. This program should include:
  - i. The elaboration of a consensus that includes the main political objectives to be achieved by the Evangelical Dominican community. This consensus should be compulsive for every Evangelical (participating in any political party) that wishes the support of the Evangelical voters.
  - ii. A program for preparing sensitized persons that feel the calling for participating in political life in parties. This program should include, among others, these items:
    1. Basic concepts of party action
    2. Opportunities for a Christian in a political party
    3. Risks for a Christian in a political party
    4. The role of Christians in a political party: a bridge-person, a prophetic voice, etc.
    5. The boundaries to be preserved
    6. The pragmatic measures to be used, etc.

The Spanish Evangelical Alliance has elaborated some materials that could be helpful for this area of the project.

Our experience at the local church in Veron taught us that there is a deep need of changes in social values (like corruption and lack of accountability) and structural changes, but we cannot allow ourselves to await to see these changes fulfilled before acting in specific situations: there are dramatic situations that requires urgent responses. The next part of the project relates to actions at ground level.

## AREAS OF HELP AT GROUND LEVEL:

In Western countries we have for granted what the economists call “Social Salary”, that is, free Education and Health Services. In Dominican Republic neither education neither health care are cost-free. We saw some old people sleeping over benches and begging; we were told that there is no retirement pension and you must either save money through your labor years, either have your family for taking care of you. Children (and specially girls) don’t use to go to school and they begin to work quite early. If you have a medical problem, your family may get ruined for paying for the expenses of medical treatment or you may just die.

The pastors in Veron church realized soon that they had to develop new initiatives beyond verbal preaching. They dreamed to build a school and a medical dispensary. The hard examples of the girl to be sold and the boy to be given, taught us that urgent measures are to be implemented also in the form of a refuge home. They put all in prayer and God has opened doors for implementing these projects. So, the immediate goals at this ground level are:

a. A school.

Education is the fundament for changing values and minds and socio-politic structures. Corruption and poverty need the support of illiteracy. We have the experience of British missionaries in Galicia in 19<sup>th</sup> century, who founded schools open to everybody; the believers were stimulated to learn to read by their wish of reading the Bible by themselves, and Galician Evangelicals were more literated than other people. The same model may function in Dominican Republic.

Chavez is sending teachers to Dominican Republic for instructing children in a totalitarian communist worldview. He expelled American missionaries from the Venezuelan forest because he is quite aware that education makes people more free. In this area, the spiritual fight we recalled before has a very practical battlefield and we Evangelicals must win it. There is a lack of action of government in this area in this country and we may fill this need educating children in Christian liberating values. The example of Veron must be extended to other towns.

In Veron, the pastors have got to build a little school and have got the teachers for educational different levels. Some of them, like Yari, have come from abroad, leaving their well paid posts, for coming to teach in this school. Parents and children are responding quite well; one little boy five years old walks a mile in the morning, alone, for getting to the school bus. The school bus is a gift from Puerto Rico brethren.



I happened to see a scene that touched me: One day I was helping at the school, and I saw one teacher giving a glass of fresh water to a child; I couldn't avoid remembering Mt 10.42: *"And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward"*. Really, this school will fulfill important objectives of God for this nation, because I am sure that God judges nations and societies looking at the way in which the society behaves with its children. This glass of fresh water is no doubt a fresh input in the change Dominican society needs.

We have established a NGO in our country for helping the functioning of the school. Our proposal to collaborators is to support financing the education of a child in the school or the school materials. Our philosophy is that we may help, but Dominican brethren must responsibly participate as much as their possibilities permit them; we don't support a complete covering of the needs; for example, some parents cannot pay with money, but they have worked in building the school.

b. A medical dispensary:

It is not available as yet; it is a project of the pastor that should cover:

- iii. Medical care: general medicine and occasional visits of specialists, like an ophthalmologist, a dentist, or an endocrinologist.
- iv. Pharmacy. The medicines should not be free (unless specific cases), but it would be wise to determine a low price (even symbolic). We have learnt that it is wise to make clear that all of this is not costless, although it is generously financed.

c. A refuge home:

James 2.15-17 is a continuous challenge for each of us: *What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?* There are dramatic cases that you can see if you just don't let your eyes to be closed. And these dramatic cases made us evident the need of going ahead in preparing a refuge home for urgent situations.

Initially, it looked a long term project, but the cases of the sold girl and the left baby made us clear that God is putting it before our very noses and we cannot postpone it; another little girl comes to school with the marks of burning cigarettes in her legs. A rented apartment maybe the immediate solution, but personal is needed too.

Our contribution from here will be developed through our NGO, "Pan y Vida", but we see we cannot limit it to our friends and we must develop specific programs and specific ways of presenting them to many people, both believers and non-believers that could feel committed to collaborate.

We have established mechanisms of accountability that must show with transparency the activities that are developed with the received help. We prepared these mechanisms in the first project of urgent help to Haiti after the earthquake: my wife sent each day photos of their travel showing where the help was served.

In this occasion we learnt too that you must control who is the receptor of the help, because much of the material received in Haiti was re-sold by local mafias. Our group decided to give the help to known people and mainly to women.

d. Help to Haiti:

We will not engage in massive help, but we have limited it to a specific camp we have identified that is directed by an Evangelical church.

### **3. Other initiatives:**

I have in mind another initiatives that may offer sustainable means of work to local Evangelical people (and non Evangelical too, but we must remember Gal 6.10), but they must await. I am thinking in a cow farm, because I see there is now a good opportunity for this activity that is clearly growing up –milk consumption is rapidly increasing in this country.

Anyhow, our dream is that in this area of Dominican Republic the believers may earn their bread and butter with their work, our goal is not that they completely depend on foreign financing, but they may be protagonists of their own maintenance. We are open to hear our brethren initiatives too and to help to fit their projects with their capabilities.