

# JUST FAITH AND ACTION: A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

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## *A pilgrimage toward power*

*I've just made my periodic pilgrimage to the Servant Leadership School of the Church of the Saviour, up in the Adams Morgan area here in Washington. Many of you may know of this intentional community, founded by Gordon and Mary Cosby decades ago. Enriched by many others, their ministry blends a prophetic voice for justice, relational solidarity with the poor, and a community-based discernment process for active responses to human need and injustice, all tied intimately with a respect for our inner journeys — marking a vision of the interrelated nature of our own spirituality, life in community, and prophetic witness. It's quite a place, affirming and challenging all at once.*

*One of the Church of the Saviour's mission groups created the Servant Leadership School over a decade ago, and I was in their first classes. At that time I was on the staff of Samaritan Ministries, working with homeless in the area. The coordinator of the School spoke at my installation as rector of a small parish outside of Washington, and Mary led a retreat for us, notable for her efforts to hold us accountable to one another. I tried to stay in touch during my years in Kenya, and when I returned to Washington, I sought to connect again. This time the class was on "The Nature of Divine Power."*

*These classes do not treat members as consumers of theological lectures, but rather call upon us to reflect on various themes surrounding the question of power, and to share our reflections with one another. I was going to say that it's surprisingly good stuff, but in fact it's not surprising at all, that "all sorts and conditions of humankind" have something profound to say to one another. It's doses of Latin American liberation theology, South African contextual theology, and Paulo Freire all wrapped up into one, transformed into an empowering process for, by, North-Americans.*

*This power theme is an important one for those of us doing advocacy, and that's what drew me to the course. We are caught in a strange place, seeking to influence a political process that has its own understanding of power. When we say there is an alternative vision of power, we are likely to receive polite smiles, and out of earshot there may be remarks about our not being in touch with "the real world." When we call for an action by the US simply because, to our mind, it is right and just, we are reminded that US policy is designed, first and foremost, to serve US interests. When we suggest that US interests are, in the long term, best served by acting justly, we often receive... well, sighs.*

*The temptation is to contrast this power dynamic based upon what we ask for — debt cancellation is prophetic, debt relief is mere accommodation; huge appropriations for AIDS in Africa is prophetic, figures that seem somehow more practical are accommodation. But I wonder if ultimately the tension is not between prophetic vision and realistic goals. People of faith may well possess both. Perhaps instead it is between a commitment to wield a power founded upon a vision of what it means to live justly, in right relationship, and an intent to wield a power founded upon an analysis of what one can accomplish based upon one's capacity and strength. More dangerous choices may well lie there.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Leon Spencer*

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*If these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.  
Alternatively, if there are others you would like us to send this to, please pass their names and addresses on to us.*

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