Chapter One

THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

Theological reflection—that is, the understanding of the faith—arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God. Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community. There is present in *all believers*—and more so in every Christian community—a rough outline of a theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology—in the precise and technical sense of the term—can be erected. This foundation is not merely a jumping-off point, but the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength.[1]

But the focus of theological work, in the strict sense of the term, has undergone many transformations throughout the history of the Church. "Bound to the role of the Church, theology is dependent upon its historical development," writes Christian Duquoc.[2] Moreover, as Congar observed recently, this evolution has accelerated to a certain extent in recent years: "The theological work has changed in the past twenty-five years."[3]

THE CLASSICAL TASKS OF THEOLOGY

Theological study has fulfilled different functions throughout the history of the Christian community, but this does not necessarily mean that any of these different approaches has today been definitively superseded. Although expressed in different ways, the essential effort to understand the faith has remained. Moreover, the more penetrating and serious efforts have yielded decisive gains, opening paths along which all subsequent theological reflection must travel. In this perspective it is more accurate to speak of permanent tasks—although they have emerged at different moments in the history of the

Church—than of historically successive stages of theology. Two of these functions are considered classical: theology as wisdom and theology as rational knowledge.

Theology as Wisdom

In the early centuries of the Church, what we now term theology was closely linked to the spiritual life.[4] It was essentially a meditation on the Bible,[5] geared toward spiritual growth. Distinctions were made between the "beginners," the faithful, and the "advanced," who sought perfection.[6] This theology was above all monastic and therefore characterized by a spiritual life removed from worldly concerns;[7] it offered a model for every Christian desirous of advancing along the narrow path of sanctity and seeking a life of spiritual perfection.

Anxious to dialogue with the thought of its time, this theology used Platonic and Neoplatonic categories. In these philosophies it found a metaphysics which stressed the existence of a higher world and the transcendence of an Absolute from which everything came and to which everything returned.[8] The present life, on the other hand, was regarded as essentially contingent and was not valued sufficiently.

It is important to remember, however, that at this same time the reflections of the Greek Fathers on the theology of the world—cosmos and history—go well beyond a mere personal spiritual meditation and place theology in a wider and more fruitful context.

Around the fourteenth century, a rift appears between theologians and masters of the spiritual life. This division can be seen, for example, in such books as *The Imitation of Christ*, which has made a deep impact upon Christian spirituality during past centuries. We are suffering from this dichotomy even today, although it is true that Biblical renewal and the need to reflect upon lay spirituality are providing us with the broad outlines of what might be considered a new spiritual theology.[9]

The spiritual function of theology, so important in the early centuries and later regarded as parenthetical, constitutes, nevertheless, a permanent dimension of theology.[10]

Theology as Rational Knowledge

From the twelfth century on, theology begins to establish itself as a science: "The transition has been made from *sacra pagina* to *theologia* in the modern sense which Abelard . . . was the first to use."[11] The process culminated with Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. On the basis of Aristotelian categories, theology was classified as a "subaltern science."[12] St. Thomas's view, nevertheless, was broad and synthetical: theology is not only a science, but also wisdom flowing from the charity which unites a person to God.[13] But this balance is lost when the above-mentioned separation appears between theology and spirituality in the fourteenth century.

The Thomistic idea of science is unclear today because it does not correspond to the definition generally accepted by the modern mind. But the essential feature of St. Thomas Aquinas's work is that theology is an intellectual discipline, born of the meeting of faith and reason.[14] From this point of view, therefore, it is more accurate to regard the theological task not as a science, but as rational knowledge.

The function of theology as rational knowledge is also permanent—insofar as it is a meeting between faith and reason, not exclusively between faith and any one philosophy, nor even between faith and philosophy in general. Reason has, especially today, many other manifestations than philosophical ones. The understanding of the faith is also following along new paths in our day: the social, psychological, and biological sciences. The social sciences, for example, are extremely important for theological reflection in Latin America. Theological thought not characterized by such a rationality and disinterestedness would not be truly faithful to an understanding of the faith.

But it is well to remember, especially with respect to the outdated views which still persist in some quarters, that in Scholastic theology after the thirteenth century there is a degradation of the Thomistic concept of theology.[15] There arises at that time, regardless of outward appearances, a very different way of approaching the theological task. The demands of rational knowledge will be reduced to the need for systematization and clear exposition.[16] Scholastic theology will thus gradually become, especially after the Council of Trent, an ancillary discipline of the magisterium of the Church. Its function will be "(1) to define, present, and explain revealed truths; (2) to examine doctrine, to denounce and condemn false doctrines, and to defend true ones; (3) to teach revealed truths authoritatively."[17]

In summary, theology is of necessity both spirituality and rational knowledge. These are permanent and indispensable functions of all theological thinking. However, both functions must be salvaged, at least partially, from the division and deformations they have suffered throughout history. A reflective outlook and style especially must be retained, rather than one or another specific achievement gained in a historical context different from ours.

THEOLOGY AS CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRAXIS

The function of theology as critical reflection on praxis has gradually become more clearly defined in recent years, but it has its roots in the first centuries of the Church's life. The Augustinian theology of history which we find in *The City of God*, for example, is based on a true analysis of the signs of the times and the demands with which they challenge the Christian community.

Historical Praxis

For various reasons the existential and active aspects of the Christian life have recently been stressed in a different way than in the immediate past.

In the first place, *charity* has been fruitfully rediscovered as the center of the Christian life. This has led to a more Biblical view of the faith as an act of trust, a going out of one's self, a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others.[18] It is in this sense that St. Paul tells us that faith works through charity: love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one's self to the Other, and invariably to others. This is the foundation of the *praxis* of Christians, of their active presence in history. According to the Bible, faith is the total human response to God, who saves through love.[19] In this light, the understanding of the faith appears as the understanding not of the simple affirmation—almost memorization—of truths, but of a commitment, an overall attitude, a particular posture toward life.

In a parallel development, Christian *spirituality* has seen a significant evolution. In the early centuries of the Church there emerged the primacy, almost exclusiveness, of a certain kind of contemplative life, hermitical, monastic, characterized by withdrawal from the world, and presented as the model way to sanctity. About the twelfth century the possibility of sharing contemplation by means of preaching and other forms of apostolic activity began to be considered. This point of view was exemplified in the mixed life (contemplative and active) of the mendicant orders and was expressed in the formula: *contemplata aliis tradere* ("to transmit to others the fruits of contemplation").[20] Viewed historically this stage can be considered as a transition to Ignatian spirituality, which sought a difficult but fruitful synthesis between contemplation and action: *in actione contemplativus* ("contemplative in action").[21] This process, strengthened in recent years by the search for a spirituality of the laity, culminates today in the studies on the religious value of the profane and in the spirituality of the activity of the Christian in the world.[22]

Moreover, today there is a greater sensitivity to the *anthropological aspects* of revelation.[23] The Word about God is at the same time a promise to the world. In revealing God to us, the Gospel message reveals us to ourselves in our situation before the Lord and with other humans. The God of Christian revelation is a God incarnate, hence the famous comment of Karl Barth regarding Christian anthropocentrism, "Man is the measure of all things, since God became man."[24] All this has caused the revaluation of human presence and activity in the world, especially in relation to other human beings. On this subject Congar writes: "Seen as a whole, the direction of theological thinking has been characterized by a transference away from attention to the being *per se* of supernatural realities, and toward attention to their relationship with man, with the world, and with the problems and the affirmations of all those who for us represent the *Others*."[25] There is no *horizontalism* in this approach.[26] It is simply a question of the rediscovery of the indissoluble unity of humankind and God.[27]

On the other hand, *the very life of the Church* appears ever more clearly as a *locus theologicus*. Regarding the participation of Christians in the important social movements of their time, Chenu wrote insightfully more than thirty years ago: "They are active *loci theologici* for the doctrines of grace, the

Incarnation, and the redemption, as expressly promulgated and described in detail by the papal encyclicals. They are poor theologians who, wrapped up in their manuscripts and scholastic disputations, are not open to these amazing events, not only in the pious fervor of their hearts but formally in their science; there is a theological datum and an extremely fruitful one, in the *presence* of the Spirit."[28] The so-called new theology attempted to adopt this posture some decades ago. The fact that the life of the Church is a source for all theological analysis has been recalled to mind often since then. The Word of God gathers and is incarnated in the community of faith, which gives itself to the service of all.

Vatican Council II has strongly reaffirmed the idea of a Church of service and not of power. This is a Church which is not centered upon itself and which does not "find itself" except when it "loses itself," when it lives "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of persons of this age" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 1). All of these trends provide a new focus for seeing the presence and activity of the Church in the world as a starting point for theological reflection.

What since John XXIII and Vatican Council II began to be called a theology of the *signs of the times*[29] can be characterized along the same lines, although this takes a step beyond narrow ecclesial limits. It must not be forgotten that the signs of the times are not only a call to intellectual analysis. They are above all a call to pastoral activity, to commitment, and to service. Studying the signs of the times includes both dimensions. Therefore, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 44, points out that discerning the signs of the times is the responsibility of every Christian, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truths can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage. Attributing this role to every member of the People of God and singling out the pastors—charged with guiding the activity of the Church—highlights the call to commitment which the signs of the times imply. Necessarily connected with this consideration, the function of theologians will be to afford greater clarity regarding this commitment by means of intellectual analysis. (It is interesting to note that the inclusion of theologians in the above-mentioned text met opposition during the conciliar debates.)

Another factor, this time of a *philosophical* nature, reinforces the importance of human action as the point of departure for all reflection. The philosophical issues of our times are characterized by new relationships of humankind with nature, born of advances in science and technology. These new bonds affect the awareness that persons have of themselves and of their active relationships with others.

Maurice Blondel, moving away from an empty and fruitless spirituality and attempting to make philosophical speculation more concrete and alive, presented it as a critical reflection on action. This reflection attempts to understand the internal logic of an action through which persons seek fulfillment by

constantly transcending themselves.[30] Blondel thus contributed to the elaboration of a new *apologetics* and became one of the most important thinkers of contemporary theology, including the most recent trends.

To these factors can be added the influence of *Marxist thought*, focusing on praxis and geared to the transformation of the world.[31] The Marxist influence began to be felt in the middle of the nineteenth century, but in recent times its cultural impact has become greater. Many agree with Sartre that "Marxism, as the formal framework of all contemporary philosophical thought, cannot be superseded."[32] Be that as it may, contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and human action in history.[33] Further, this confrontation helps theology to perceive what its efforts at understanding the faith receive from the historical praxis of humankind in history as well as what its own reflection might mean for the transformation of the world.

Finally, the rediscovery of the *eschatological dimension* in theology has also led us to consider the central role of historical praxis. Indeed, if human history is above all else an opening to the future, then it is a task, a political occupation, through which we orient and open ourselves to the gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and with other humans. "To do the truth," as the Gospel says, thus acquires a precise and concrete meaning in terms of the importance of action in Christian life. Faith in a God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history. Moreover, only by doing this truth will our faith be "verified," in the etymological sense of the word. From this notion has recently been derived the term *orthopraxis*, which still disturbs the sensitivities of some. The intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of *orthodoxy*, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life.[34] "And this, it seems to me, has been the greatest transformation which has taken place in the Christian conception of existence," said Edward Schillebeeckx in an interview. "It is evident that thought is also necessary for action. But the Church has for centuries devoted its attention to formulating truths and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world. In other words, the Church focused on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis in the hands of nonmembers and nonbelievers."[35]

In the last analysis, this concern for praxis seeks to avoid the practices which

gave rise to Bernanos' sarcastic remark: "God does not choose the same ones to keep his Word as to fulfill it."[36]

Critical Reflection

All the factors we have considered have been responsible for a more accurate understanding that communion with the Lord inescapably means a Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others. They have likewise led to the rediscovery or explicit formulation of the function of theology as critical reflection. It would be well at this point to define further our terms.

Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements. But we are not referring exclusively to this epistemological aspect when we talk about theology as critical reflection. We also refer to a clear and critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues in the life and reflection of the Christian community. To disregard these is to deceive both oneself and others. But above all, we intend this term to express the theory of a definite practice. Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose—and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis.[37]

By preaching the Gospel message, by its sacraments, and by the charity of its members, the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history."[38] The Christian community professes a "faith which works through charity." It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step.[39] What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises only at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community.[40]

A privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the faith will be the life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church.[41]

To reflect upon the presence and action of the Christian in the world means, moreover, to go beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. This is of prime importance. It implies openness to the world, gathering the questions it poses, being attentive to its historical transformations. In the words of Congar, "If the Church wishes to deal with the real questions of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them, . . . it must open as it were a new chapter of theologico-pastoral epistemology. Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start

with facts and questions derived from the world and from history."[42] It is precisely this opening to the totality of human history that allows theology to fulfill its critical function vis-à-vis ecclesial praxis without narrowness.

This critical task is indispensable. Reflection in the light of faith must constantly accompany the pastoral action of the Church. By keeping historical events in their proper perspective, theology helps safeguard society and the Church from regarding as permanent what is only temporary. Critical reflection thus always plays the inverse role of an ideology which rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesial order. On the other hand, theology, by pointing to the sources of revelation, helps to orient pastoral activity; it puts it in a wider context and so helps it to avoid activism and immediatism. Theology as critical reflection thus fulfills a liberating function for humankind and the Christian community, preserving them from fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism. Understood in this way, theology has a necessary and permanent role in liberation from every form of religious alienation—which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord.

As critical reflection on society and the Church, theology is an understanding which both grows and, in a certain sense, changes. If the commitment of the Christian community in fact takes different forms throughout history, the understanding which accompanies the vicissitudes of this commitment will be constantly renewed and will take untrodden paths. A theology which has as its points of reference only "truths" which have been established once and for all—and not the Truth which is also the Way—can be only static and, in the long run, sterile. In this sense the often-quoted and misinterpreted words of Bouillard take on new validity: "A theology which is not up-to-date is a false theology."[43]

Finally, theology thus understood, that is to say as linked to praxis, fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning. According to Cullmann, this is the meaning of the prophetic role: "The prophet does not limit himself as does the fortune-teller to isolated revelations, but his prophecy becomes preaching, proclamation. He explains to the people the true meaning of all events; he informs them of the plan and will of God at the particular moment."[44] But if theology is based on this observation of historical events and contributes to the discovery of their meaning, it is with the purpose of making Christians' commitment within them more radical and clear. Only with the exercise of the prophetic function understood in this way, will the theologian be—to borrow an expression from Antonio Gramsci—a new kind of "organic intellectual."[45] Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples. In the last analysis, the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis. "The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God," observed Schillebeeckx,

"consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means."[46] We have here a political hermeneutics of the Gospel."[47]

CONCLUSION

Theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather it presupposes and needs them. But this is not all. We are not concerned here with a mere juxtaposition. The critical function of theology necessarily leads to redefinition of these other two tasks. Henceforth, wisdom and rational knowledge will more explicitly have ecclesial praxis as their point of departure and their context. It is in reference to this praxis that an understanding of spiritual growth based on Scripture should be developed, and it is through this same praxis that faith encounters the problems posed by human reason. Given the theme of the present work, we will be especially aware of this critical function of theology with the ramifications suggested above. This approach will lead us to pay special attention to the life of the Church and to commitments which Christians, impelled by the Spirit and in communion with others, undertake in history. We will give special consideration to participation in the process of liberation, an outstanding phenomenon of our times, which takes on special meaning in the so-called Third World countries.

This kind of theology, arising from concern with a particular set of issues, will perhaps give us the solid and permanent albeit modest foundation for the *theology in a Latin American perspective* which is both desired and needed. This Latin American focus would not be due to a frivolous desire for originality, but rather to a fundamental sense of historical efficacy and also—why hide it?—to the desire to contribute to the life and reflection of the universal Christian community. But in order to make our contribution, this desire for universality—as well as input from the Christian community as a whole—must be present from the beginning. To concretize this desire would be to overcome particularistic tendencies—provincial and chauvinistic—and produce something *unique*, both particular and universal, and therefore fruitful."[48]

"The only future that theology has, one might say, is to become the theology of the future," Harvey Cox has said."[49] But this theology of the future must necessarily be a critical appraisal of historical praxis, of the historical task in the sense we have attempted to sketch. Moltmann says that theological concepts "do not limp after reality . . . . They illuminate reality by displaying its future."[50] In our approach, to reflect critically on the praxis of liberation is to "limp after" reality. The present in the praxis of liberation, in its deepest dimension, is pregnant with the future; hope must be an inherent part of our present commitment in history. Theology does not initiate this future which exists in the present. It does not create the vital attitude of hope out of nothing. Its role is more modest. It interprets and explains these as the true underpinnings of history. To reflect upon a forward-directed action is not to concentrate

on the past. It does not mean being the caboose of the present. Rather it is to penetrate the present reality, the movement of history, that which is driving history toward the future. To reflect on the basis of the historical praxis of liberation is to reflect in the light of the future which is believed in and hoped for. It is to reflect with a view to action which transforms the present. But it does not mean doing this from an armchair; rather it means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history, who irreversibly committed himself to the present moment of humankind to carry it to its fulfillment.

It is for all these reasons that the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open—in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society—to the gift of the Kingdom of God.

Chapter Two

LIBERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The world today is experiencing a profound and rapid socio-cultural transformation. But the changes do not occur at a uniform pace, and the discrepancies in the change process have differentiated the various countries and regions of our planet.

Contemporary thinkers have become clearly aware of this unequal process of transformation, of its economic causes, and of the basic relationships which combine to determine conditions and approaches. They examine their own circumstances and compare them to those of others; since they live in a world where communication is fast and efficient, the conditions in which others live are no longer distant and unknown. But thinkers go beyond the limited expectations which such a comparison might create. They see the process of transformation as a quest to satisfy the most fundamental human aspirations—liberty, dignity, the possibility of personal fulfillment for all. Or at least they would like the process to be moving toward these goals. They feel that the satisfaction of these aspirations should be the purpose of all organization and social activity. They know also that all their plans are possible, able to be at least partially implemented.

Finally, history demonstrates that the achievements of humanity are cumulative; their effects and the collective experience of the generations open new perspectives and allow for even greater achievements in the generations yet to come.

The phenomenon of the awareness of differences among countries characterizes our era, due to the bourgeoning of communications media; it is particularly acute in those countries less favored by the evolution of the world economy—the poor countries where the vast majority of humans live. The inhabitants of these countries are aware of the unacceptable living conditions of most of their fellow citizens. They confirm the explanation that these inequalities are caused by a type of relationship which often has been imposed upon them. For these reasons, the efforts for social change in these areas are characterized both by a great urgency and by conflicts stemming from differences of expectations, degrees of pressure, and existing systems of relationships

Chapter Three

THE PROBLEM

To speak about a theology of liberation is to seek an answer to the following question: what relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation? In other words, we must attempt to discern the interrelationship among the different meanings of the term *liberation* which we indicated above. The scope of the problem will be clarified in the course of this work, but it might be helpful to point out at this stage some of its fundamental features.

The question is essentially traditional. Theological reflection has always at least implicitly addressed itself to it. In recent years the theology of temporal realities[1]—an expression which was never fully accepted—attempted to deal with it in its own way. Other attempts have been the theology of history[2] and, more recently, the theology of development.[3] From another viewpoint, the question is also considered by "political theology";[4] and it is partially treated by the much-debated—and debatable—theology of revolution.[5]

We are dealing here with the classic question of the relation between faith and human existence, between faith and social reality, between faith and political action, or in other words, between the Kingdom of God and the building up of the world. Within the scope of this problem the classical theme of the Church-society or Church-world relationship is also considered.

Its perennial quality, however, must not make us forget the new aspects which the traditional question takes on today.

Under new forms it maintains all its topicality. J.B. Metz asserted recently that, "despite the many discussions about the Church and the world, there is nothing more unclear than the nature of their relationship to one another."[6] But if this is so, if the problem continues to be current and yet the attempted responses are not wholly satisfactory, it is perhaps because as traditionally stated the problem has become tangential to a new and changing reality; as traditionally stated the problem does not go deep enough. In studying these questions, the texts and especially the spirit of Vatican II are undoubtedly necessary as points of reference. Nevertheless, the new design of the problem was—and could only be—partially present in the conciliar documents. "It

seems to me of utmost importance," said Karl Rahner recently, "to agree on the fact that the ideas explicitly considered during Vatican Council II do not actually represent the central problems of the postconciliar Church."[7] It is not enough to say that Christians should not "shirk" their earthly responsibilities or that these have a "certain relationship" to salvation. *Gaudium et spes* itself sometimes gives the impression of remaining at this level of generalization.[8] More regrettably, the same is true of a considerable number of commentators. The task of contemporary theology is to elucidate the current state of these problems, drawing with sharper lines the terms in which they are expressed.[9] Only thus will it be possible to confront the concrete challenges of the present.[10]

In the current statement of the problem, one fact is evident: the social praxis of contemporary humankind has begun to reach maturity. It is the behavior of a humankind ever more conscious of being an active subject of history, ever more articulate in the face of social injustice and of all repressive forces which stand in the way of its fulfillment; it is ever more determined to participate both in the transformation of social structures and in effective political action. It was above all the great social revolutions—the French and the Russian, for example, to mention only two important milestones—together with the whole process of revolutionary ferment that they initiated which wrested—or at least began to—political decisions from the hands of an elite who were "destined" to rule. Up to that time the great majority of people did not participate in political decisions or did so only sporadically and formally. Although it is true that the majority of people are far from this level of awareness, it is also certain that they have had confused glimpses of it and are oriented in its direction. The phenomenon that we designate with the term "politicization"—which is increasing in breadth and depth in Latin America—is one of the manifestations of this complex process. And in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed classes on this continent—which is implicit in the effective and human political responsibility of all—people are searching out new paths.

Human reason has become political reason. For the contemporary historical consciousness, things political are not only those which one attends to during the free time afforded by one's private life; nor are they even a well-defined area of human existence. The construction—from its economic bases—of the "polis," of a society in which people can live in solidarity, is a dimension which encompasses and severely conditions all human activity. It is the sphere for the exercise of a critical freedom which is won down through history. It is the universal determinant and the collective arena for human fulfillment.[11] Only within this broad meaning of the political sphere can we situate the more precise notion of "politics," as an orientation to power. For Max Weber this orientation constitutes the typical characteristics of political activity. The concrete forms taken on by this quest for and exercise of political power are varied. But they are all based on the profound aspiration of a humankind that wants to take hold of the reins of its own life and be the artisan of its own destiny. Nothing lies outside the political sphere understood in this way. Everything has a political color. It is always in the political fabric—and never

outside of it—that a person emerges as a free and responsible being, as a person in relationship with other persons, as someone who takes on a historical task. Personal relationships themselves acquire an ever-increasing political dimension. Persons enter into relationships among themselves through political means. This is what Ricoeur calls the "lasting and stable" relationships of the *socius*, as opposed to the "fleeting and fragile" relationships of the neighbor.[12] To this effect, M.D. Chenu writes: "Man has always enjoyed this social dimension, since he is social by his very nature. But today, not accidentally but structurally, the collective event lends scope and intensity to the social dimension. What is collective as such has human value and is, therefore, a means and object of love. Human love treads these 'lasting' paths, these organizations of distributive justice, and these administrative systems."[13]

In addition to this universality of the political sphere, we are faced with an increasing radicalization of social praxis. Contemporary persons have begun to lose their naiveté as they confront economic and socio-cultural determinants; the deep causes of the situation in which they find themselves are becoming clearer. They realize that to attack these deep causes is the indispensable prerequisite for radical change. And so they have gradually abandoned a simple reformist attitude regarding the existing social order, for, by its very shallowness this reformism perpetuates the existing system. The revolutionary situation which prevails today, especially in the Third World, is an expression of this growing radicalization. To support the social revolution means to abolish the present status quo and to attempt to replace it with a qualitatively different one; it means to build a just society based on new relationships of production; it means to attempt to put an end to the domination of some countries by others, of some social classes by others, of some persons by others. The liberation of these countries, social classes, and persons undermines the very foundation of the present order; it is the greatest challenge of our time.

This radicality has led us to see quite clearly that the political arena is necessarily conflictual. More precisely, the building of a just society means the confrontation—in which different kinds of violence are present—between groups with different interests and opinions. The building of a just society means overcoming every obstacle to the creation of authentic peace. Concretely, in Latin America this conflict revolves around the *oppression-liberation axis*. Social praxis makes demands which may seem difficult or disturbing to those who wish to achieve—or maintain—a low-cost conciliation. Such a conciliation can be only a justifying ideology for a profound disorder, a device for the few to keep living off the poverty of the many. But to become aware of the conflictual nature of the political sphere should not mean to become complacent. On the contrary, it should mean struggling—with clarity and courage, deceiving neither oneself nor others—for the establishment of peace and justice among all people.

In the past, concern for social praxis in theological thought did not sufficiently take into account the political dimension. In Christian circles there

was—and continues to be—difficulty in perceiving the originality and specificity of the political sphere. Stress was placed on private life and on the cultivation of private values; things political were relegated to a lower plane, to the elusive and undemanding area of a misunderstood "common good." At most, this viewpoint provided a basis for "social pastoral planning," grounded on the "social emotion" which every self-respecting Christian ought to experience. Hence there developed the complacency with a very general and "humanizing" vision of reality, to the detriment of a scientific and structural knowledge of socio-economic mechanisms and historical dynamics. Hence also there came the insistence on the personal and conciliatory aspects of the Gospel message rather than on its political and conflictual dimensions. We must take a new look at Christian life; we must see how these emphases in the past have conditioned and challenged the historical presence of the Church. This presence has an inescapable political dimension. It has always been so, but because of new circumstances it is more urgent that we come to terms with it. Indeed, there is a greater awareness of it, even among Christians. It is impossible to think of or live in the Church without taking into account this political dimension.

What we have discussed above leads us to understand why for Christians social praxis is becoming less and less merely a duty imposed by their moral conscience or a reaction to an attack on Church interests. The characteristics of totality, radicalness, and conflict which we have attributed to the political sphere preclude any compartmentalized approach and lead us to see its deepest human dimensions. Social praxis is gradually becoming more of the arena itself in which the Christians work out—along with others—both their destiny as humans and their life of faith in the Lord of history. Participation in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged *locus* for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord.

If we look more deeply into the question of the value of salvation which emerges from our understanding of history—that is, a liberating praxis—we see that at issue is a question concerning *the very meaning of Christianity*. To be a Christian is to accept and to live—in solidarity, in faith, hope, and charity—the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our encounter with that Word give to the historical becoming of humankind on the way toward total communion. To regard the unique and absolute relationship with God as the horizon of every human action is to place oneself, from the outset, in a wider and more profound context. It is likewise more demanding. We are faced in our day with the bare, central theologico-pastoral question: *What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future?*[11] In the last instance, we must search the Gospel message for the answer to what according to Camus constitutes the most important question facing all persons: "To decide whether life deserves to be lived or not."[12]

These elements lend perhaps greater depth and a new dimension to the

traditional problem. Not to acknowledge the newness of the issues raised under the pretext that in one way or another the problem has always been present is to detach oneself dangerously from reality; it is to risk falling into generalities, solutions without commitment, and, finally, evasive attitudes. But, on the other hand, to acknowledge nothing but the new aspects of the contemporary statement of the problem is to forego the contribution of the life and reflection of the Christian community in its historical pilgrimage. Its successes, its omissions, and its errors are our heritage. They should not, however, delimit our boundaries. The People of God march on, "accounting for their hope" toward "a new heaven and a new earth."

The question as it is posed today is not really dealt with by the attempted responses we will look at in the next chapter. But the positive achievements of these efforts with regard to the permanent elements of the problem as well as their deficiencies and limitations can help us to sketch—often by showing us pitfalls to avoid—the itinerary we must follow.