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. . . " this is going to be a series which both illuminates Latin American realities and provokes thought about the relevance to the rest of the world of a theology which springs very powerfully out of these realities – out of the people's suffering and out of a still vibrant faith."—David L. Edwards, *The Church Times*

LIBERATION AND THEOLOGY

INTRODUCING LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Leonardo Boff
Clodovis Boff

Translated from the Portuguese by
PAUL BURNS

BURNS & OATES

To:
Our friend Dom José Maria Pires,
archbishop of Paraíba,
theologian of a liberating pastoral practice
based on the poor and the blacks;

Our sister and companion Benedita Souza da Silva (Bené),
popular, ecumenical, and black theologian,
who took up the political diaconate
by taking the side of the workers;

Sergio Torres, liberation theologian and pastor,
builder of bridges in theological dialogue
on behalf of the poor of all continents.

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Editor's Foreword

Introducing Liberation Theology is the first, introductory, volume of a series of books that will be published by Burns & Oates under the title 'Liberation and Theology'.

After more than five hundred years of Christianity in the Americas, a group of more than a hundred theologians, pastoral agents and social scientists from Latin America and elsewhere have set out to re-examine the whole spectrum of Christian faith from the standpoint of the poor and oppressed. The project involves the publication of a collection of volumes in which God, grace, sin, Christ, the Church, Mary, politics, culture, economics, the position of ethnic minorities, and that of women are subjects that will be re-examined systematically in the light of faith lived in a context of oppression and liberation.

Theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Enrique Dussel, biblical scholars such as Carlos Mesters, Pablo Richard and Manuel Mateos, bishops, priests and religious including Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga, Sergio Torres and Frei Betto, such social scientists as Otto Maduro, Läennec Hurbon and Xavier Albó: these and many others have spent more than five years in committed preparation of a major project that will finally establish the importance and value of the religious and cultural thought of the Third World.

Aimed primarily at pastoral workers, catechists, group leaders and theology students, these volumes will be valuable to all Christians committed to the evangelical cause of the poor and who are looking for a more solid link to be established between faith and politics with the aim of building a new society.

Although the authors' main point of reference is the Third World, they show how Liberation Theology is equally relevant

Author's Preface

Much has been written about liberation theology, but we felt there was still a need for a short book giving an overall, non-technical, and objective account of this new way of "doing theology."

This work is the fruit of an intense process of thinking and of commitment to the poor in order to bring about their liberation.

All that is said here is the responsibility of both authors without distinction, because it was conceived and worked out together, just as both of us, in fact, feel ourselves to be "brothers, sharing your sufferings, your kingdom, and all you endure" (Rev. 1:9).

Chapter 1

The Basic Question: How to Be Christians in a World of Destitution

A woman of forty, but who looked as old as seventy, went up to the priest after Mass and said sorrowfully: "Father, I went to communion without going to confession first." "How come, my daughter?" asked the priest. "Father," she replied, "I arrived rather late, after you had begun the offertory. For three days I have had only water and nothing to eat; I'm dying of hunger. When I saw you handing out the hosts, those little pieces of white bread, I went to communion just out of hunger for that little bit of bread." The priest's eyes filled with tears. He recalled the words of Jesus: "My flesh [bread] is real food . . . whoever feeds on me will draw life from me" (John 6:55, 57).

One day, in the arid region of northeastern Brazil, one of the most famine-stricken parts of the world, I (Clodovis) met a bishop going into his house; he was shaking. "Bishop, what's the matter?" I asked. He replied that he had just seen a terrible sight: in front of the cathedral was a woman with three small children and a baby clinging to her neck. He saw that they were fainting from hunger. The baby seemed to be dead. He

said: "Give the baby some milk, woman!" "I can't, my lord," she answered. The bishop went on insisting that she should, and she that she could not. Finally, because of his insistence, she opened her blouse. Her breast was bleeding; the baby sucked violently at it. And sucked blood. The mother who had given it life was feeding it, like the pelican, with her own blood, her own life. The bishop knelt down in front of the woman, placed his hand on the baby's head, and there and then vowed that as long as such hunger existed, he would feed at least one hungry child each day.

One Saturday night I (Clodovis) went to see Manuel, a catechist of a base community. "Father," he said to me, "this community and others in the district are coming to an end. The people are dying of hunger. They are not coming: they haven't the strength to walk this far. They have to stay in their houses to save their energy. . . ."

Com-passion, "Suffering with"

What lies behind liberation theology? Its starting point is the perception of scandals such as those described above, which exist not only in Latin America but throughout the Third World. According to "conservative" estimates, there are in those countries held in underdevelopment:

- five-hundred million persons starving;
- one billion, six-hundred million persons whose life expectancy is less than sixty years (when a person in one of the developed countries reaches the age of forty-five, he or she is reaching middle age; in most of Africa or Latin America, a person has little hope of living to that age);
- one billion persons living in absolute poverty;
- one billion, five-hundred million persons with no access to the most basic medical care;
- five-hundred million with no work or only occasional work and a per capita income of less than $150 a year;
- eight-hundred-fourteen million who are illiterate;

- two billion with no regular, dependable water supply.

Who cannot be filled with righteous anger at such a human and social hell? Liberation theology presupposes an energetic protest at such a situation, for that situation means:

- on the social level: collective oppression, exclusion, and marginalization;
- on the individual level: injustice and denial of human rights;
- on the religious level: social sinfulness, "contrary to the plan of the Creator and to the honor that is due to him" (Puebla, §28).[1]

Without a minimum of "suffering with" this suffering that affects the great majority of the human race, liberation theology can neither exist nor be understood. Underlying liberation theology is a prophetic and comradely commitment to the life, cause, and struggle of these millions of debased and marginalized human beings, a commitment to ending this historical-social iniquity. The Vatican Instruction, "Some Aspects of Liberation Theology" (August 6, 1984), put it well: "It is not possible for a single instant to forget the situations of dramatic poverty from which the challenge set to theologians springs—the challenge to work out a genuine theology of liberation."

Meeting the Poor Christ in the Poor

Every true theology springs from a spirituality—that is, from a true meeting with God in history. Liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor. By "poor" we do not really mean the poor individual who knocks on the door asking for alms. We mean a collective poor, the "popular classes," which is a much wider category than the "proletariat" singled out by Karl Marx (it is a mistake to identify the poor of liberation theology with the proletariat, though many of its critics do): the poor are also the workers exploited by the capitalist system; the underemployed, those pushed aside by the production process—a reserve army al-

ways at hand to take the place of the employed; they are the laborers of the countryside, and migrant workers with only seasonal work.

All this mass of the socially and historically oppressed makes up the poor as a social phenomenon. In the light of faith, Christians see in them the challenging face of the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. At first there is silence, silent and sorrowful contemplation, as if in the presence of a mystery that calls for introspection and prayer. Then this presence speaks. The Crucified in these crucified persons weeps and cries out: "I was hungry . . . in prison . . . naked" (Matt. 25:31–46).

Here what is needed is not so much contemplation as effective action for liberation. The Crucified needs to be raised to life. We are on the side of the poor only when we struggle alongside them against the poverty that has been unjustly created and forced on them. Service in solidarity with the oppressed also implies an act of love for the suffering Christ, a liturgy pleasing to God.

The First Step: Liberating Action, Liber-a(c)tion[2]

What is the action that will effectively enable the oppressed to move out of their inhuman situation? Many years of reflection and practice suggest that it has to go beyond two approaches that have already been tried: aid and reformism.

"Aid" is help offered by individuals moved by the spectacle of widespread destitution. They form agencies and organize projects: the "Band-Aid" or "corn-plaster" approach to social ills. But however perceptive they become and however well-intentioned—and successful—aid remains a strategy for helping the poor, but treating them as (collective) objects of charity, not as subjects of their own liberation. The poor are seen simply as those who have nothing. There is a failure to see that the poor are oppressed and made poor *by others;* and what they do possess—strength to resist, capacity to understand their rights, to organize themselves and transform a subhuman situation—tends to be left out of account. Aid increases the dependence of the poor, tying them to help from others, to decisions made by others: again, not enabling them to become their own liberators.

"Reformism" seeks to improve the situation of the poor, but always within existing social relationships and the basic structuring of society, which rules out greater participation by all and diminution in the privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes. Reformism can lead to great feats of development in the poorer nations, but this development is nearly always at the expense of the oppressed poor and very rarely in their favor. For example, in 1964 the Brazilian economy ranked 46th in the world; in 1984 it ranked 8th. The last twenty years have seen undeniable technological and industrial progress, but at the same time there has been a considerable worsening of social conditions for the poor, with exploitation, destitution, and hunger on a scale previously unknown in Brazilian history. This has been the price paid by the poor for this type of elitist, exploitative, and exclusivist development in which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, the rich become ever richer at the expense of the poor who become ever poorer.

The poor can break out of their situation of oppression only by working out a strategy better able to change social conditions: the strategy of liberation. In liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization,[3] discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion. First, they claim everything that the existing system can give: better wages, working conditions, health care, education, housing, and so forth; then they work toward the transformation of present society in the direction of a new society characterized by widespread participation, a better and more just balance among social classes and more worthy ways of life.

In Latin America, where liberation theology originated,

there have always been movements of liberation since the early days of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest. Amerindians, slaves, and the oppressed in general fought against the violence of the colonizers, created redoubts of freedom, such as the *quilombos* and *reducciones*,[4] led movements of revolt and independence. And among the colonizers were bishops such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio Valdivieso, and Toribio de Mogrovejo, and other missionaries and priests who defended the rights of the colonized peoples and made evangelization a process that included advancement of their rights.

Despite the massive and gospel-denying domination of the colonial centuries, dreams of freedom were never entirely extinguished. But it is only in the past few decades that a new consciousness of liberation has become widespread over the whole of Latin America. The poor, organized and conscientized, are beating at their masters' doors, demanding life, bread, liberty, and dignity. Courses of action are being taken with a view to release the liberty that is now held captive. Liberation is emerging as the strategy of the poor themselves, confident in themselves and in their instruments of struggle: free trade unions, peasant organizations, local associations, action groups and study groups, popular political parties, base Christian communities.[5] They are being joined by groups and individuals from other social classes who have opted to change society and join the poor in their struggle to bring about change.

The growth of regimes of "national security" (for which read "capital security"), of military dictatorships, with their repression of popular movements in many countries of Latin America, is a reaction against the transforming and liberating power of the organized poor.

The Second Step: Faith Reflects on Liberating Practice

Christians have always been and still are at the heart of these wider movements for liberation. The great majority of

Latin Americans are not only poor but also Christian. So the great question at the beginning and still valid today was—and is—what role Christianity has to play. How are we to be Christians in a world of destitution and injustice? There can be only one answer: we can be followers of Jesus and true Christians only by making common cause with the poor and working out the gospel of liberation. Trade union struggles, battles for land and for the territories belonging to Amerindians, the fight for human rights and all other forms of commitment always pose the same question: What part is Christianity playing in motivating and carrying on the process of liberating the oppressed?

Inspired by their faith—which must include commitment to one's neighbor, particularly to the poor, if it is to be true (Matt. 25:31–46)—and motivated by the proclamation of the kingdom of God—which begins in this world and culminates only in eternity—and by the life, deeds, and death of Christ, who made a historic option for the poor, and by the supremely liberating significance of his resurrection, many Christians—bishops, priests, religious, nuns, lay men and women—are throwing themselves into action alongside the poor, or joining the struggles already taking place. The Christian base communities, Bible societies, groups for popular evangelization, movements for the promotion and defense of human rights, particularly those of the poor, agencies involved in questions of land tenure, indigenous peoples, slums, marginalized groups, and the like, have all shown themselves to have more than a purely religious and ecclesial significance, and to be powerful factors for mobilization and dynamos of liberating action, particularly when they have joined forces with other popular movements.

Christianity can no longer be dismissed as the opium of the people, nor can it be seen as merely fostering an attitude of critique: it has now become an active commitment to liberation. Faith challenges human reason and the historical progress of the powerful, but in the Third World it tackles the

problem of poverty, now seen as the result of oppression. Only from this starting point can the flag of liberation be raised.

The gospel is not aimed chiefly at "modern" men and women with their critical spirit, but first and foremost at "nonpersons," those whose basic dignity and rights are denied them. This leads to reflection in a spirit of prophecy and solidarity aimed at making nonpersons full human beings, and then new men and women, according to the design of the "new Adam," Jesus Christ.

Reflecting on the basis of practice, within the ambit of the vast efforts made by the poor and their allies, seeking inspiration in faith and the gospel for the commitment to fight against poverty and for the integral liberation of all persons and the whole person—that is what liberation theology means.

Christians who have been inspired by its principles and who live out its practices have chosen the harder way, exposing themselves to defamation, persecution, and even martyrdom. Many have been led by its insights and the practice of solidarity at its origins to a process of true conversion. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who had been conservative in his views, became a great advocate and defender of the poor when he stood over the dead body of Fr. Rutilio Grande, assassinated for his liberating commitment to the poor. The spilt blood of the martyr acted like a salve on his eyes, opening them to the urgency of the task of liberation. And he himself was to follow to a martyr's death in the same cause.

Commitment to the liberation of the millions of the oppressed of our world restores to the gospel the credibility it had at the beginning and at the great periods of holiness and prophetic witness in history. The God who pitied the downtrodden and the Christ who came to set prisoners free proclaim themselves with a new face and in a new image today. The eternal salvation they offer is mediated by the historical liberations that dignify the children of God and render credible the coming utopia of the kingdom of freedom, justice,

love, and peace, the kingdom of God in the midst of humankind.

From all this, it follows that if we are to understand the theology of liberation, we must first understand and take an active part in the real and historical process of liberating the oppressed. In this field, more than in others, it is vital to move beyond a merely intellectual approach that is content with comprehending a theology through its purely theoretical aspects, by reading articles, attending conferences, and skimming through books. We have to work our way into a more biblical framework of reference, where "knowing" implies loving, letting oneself become involved body and soul, communing wholly—being committed, in a word—as the prophet Jeremiah says: "He used to examine the cases of poor and needy, then all went well. Is not that what it means to know me?—it is Yahweh who speaks" (Jer. 22:16). So the criticisms made of liberation theology by those who judge it on a purely conceptual level, devoid of any real commitment to the oppressed, must be seen as radically irrelevant. Liberation theology responds to such criticism with just one question: What part have *you* played in the effective and integral liberation of the oppressed?

Notes

1. The Latin American bishops' conference, CELAM, has held three General Conferences since the Second Vatican Council. The second, held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, can be considered the "official launching" of the theme of liberation. The third, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, with Pope John Paul II in attendance, developed in some ways, but also watered down, the conclusions reached at Medellín. Puebla produced its own "Final Document," published in England as *Puebla: Evangelization at Present and in the Future: Conclusions of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops.* Catholic Institute for International Relations (Slough, Berkshire: St. Paul Publications, 1979) and in the U.S.A. as *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary.*

Ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).—TRANS.

2. The Portuguese word for "liberation" is *liberação*, which is composed of the root *liber*, "free," and, by chance, the Portuguese word for "action," *ação*. This coupling cannot be reproduced in English.—TRANS.

3. "Conscientization" was a term brought into general use by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his work with illiterate Brazilians, the basic learning unit was always linked with the social and political context of the learner, as distinguished from purely objective learning or indoctrination.—TRANS.

4. *Quilombos* were villages formed and inhabited by runaway slaves. *Reducciones* were enclaves of relative freedom from colonial powers for baptized Latin Americans, especially Amerindians, supervised by religious orders, especially the Jesuits, in Paraguay and elsewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.—TRANS.

5. The Portuguese term *comunidade* (in Spanish, *comunidad) eclesial de base* is variously translated "base church community," "basic Christian community," "grass-roots community," etc. They are small groups that come together for Bible study, liturgy, and social action, usually without a priest but with trained leaders. Smaller than parishes, they represent the "base" of society. They are the operational base of liberation theology in practice.—TRANS.

Chapter 2

The Three Levels of Liberation Theology: Professional, Pastoral, Popular

From Head to Foot: A Continuum of Reflection

The term "liberation theology" conjures up the names of its best-known exponents such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, and Pablo Richard. But liberation theology is a cultural and ecclesial phenomenon by no means restricted to a few professional theologians. It is a way of thinking that embraces most of the membership of the church, especially in the Third World.

In fact, at the "base" of the church there is a whole process of what one might call diffused and generalized theology of liberation going on in Christian base communities and Bible study groups. Their way of thinking is similar to that of the more nuanced theology of liberation pursued by professional theologians in that it also juxtaposes Christian faith and the situation of oppression. As we shall see, this is the basic constituent of liberation theology.

Between this basic level and the "highest," or professional, level of liberation theology, there is an intermediate level. This is the field of the thinking of bishops, priests, nuns, and other pastoral workers. This level serves as a sort of

bridge between the thought of professional theologians and the liberating thought of the Christian "bases."

Each of these levels reflects the *same thing*: faith confronted with oppression. Each of them, however, reflects this faith *in its own way*—as we shall explain later. At this point it is important to note that from the bases to the highest level, going through the middle level, there is one continual flow of thought, one overall theological process at work.

Liberation theology could be compared to a tree. Those who see only professional theologians at work in it see only the branches of the tree. They fail to see the trunk, which is the thinking of priests and other pastoral ministers, let alone the roots beneath the soil that hold the whole tree—trunk and branches—in place. The roots are the practical living and thinking—though submerged and anonymous—going on in tens of thousands of base communities living out their faith and thinking it in a liberating key.

From this it will be seen that attacking the so-called liberation theologians merely lops off a few top branches. Liberation theology continues living in the trunk and still more so in the roots, hidden underground.

This also shows how this theological current is indissolubly linked to the very life of the people—to the faith and the struggle of the people. It has become part of their conception of the Christian life. It is also an organic part of the pastoral work carried out by priests and others, the theory behind their ministry. Once a theology has taken root as deeply as this, reached this level of incarnation in a people, once it has come to suffuse spirituality, liturgy, and ethics to this extent, and has become incarnated in social action, it has become virtually indestructible, as any analysis of religion will show.

The Levels of Liberation Theology

The table on page 13 shows in schematic form the three levels on which liberation is worked out, and how the three levels relate to each other.

The Three Levels of Liberation Theology

	Professional	*Pastoral*	*Popular*
Discourse	Detailed and rigorous	Organically related to practice	Diffuse and capillary, almost spontaneous
Logic	The logic of erudition: methodical, systematic, dynamic	The logic of action: specific, prophetic, propulsive	The logic of life: in words and deeds, sacramental
Method	Socio-analytical, hermeneutical, and theoretico-practical	Seeing, judging, acting	Confrontation: the gospel and life
Locus	Theological institutes, seminaries	Pastoral institutes, study centers	Bible study groups, base communities
Promoted through	Theological congresses	Pastoral congresses	Training courses
Practitioners	Theologians, professors, teachers	Pastoral ministers: priests, religious, lay persons	Members of base communities and their coordinators
Spoken works	Conference papers, lectures, seminar papers	Sermons, talks	Commentaries, celebrations, dramatizations
Written works	Books, articles	Pastoral instructions, guidelines	Notes, letters

This shows liberation theology to be a broad and variegated phenomenon. It encompasses a wide range of ways of thinking the faith in the face of oppression. Of course, when one speaks of liberation theology, one is generally using the term in reference to its expression in published form, and this is the sense in which it will most often be used in this book. But it is important not to lose sight of the rich and fruitful thinking at "base" level that feeds the professional work through which liberation theology has become known throughout the world.

What unites these three levels of theological-liberational thought? It is the one basic inspiration: a faith that transforms history, or, as others would put it, history seen from the basis of the ferment of faith. This means that the liberation theology of a Gustavo Gutiérrez is substantially the same as that of a Christian laborer in northeastern Brazil. The basic content is the same. The sap that feeds the branches of the tree is the same sap that passes through the trunk and rises from the hidden roots underground.

The distinction between the levels is in their logic, but more specifically in their language. Theology can be more or less articulate; popular theology will be expressed in everyday speech, with its spontaneity and feeling, whereas professional theology adopts a more scholarly language, with the structure and restraint proper to it.

It is not hard to see what liberation theology is when one starts at its roots—that is, by examining what the base communities do when they read the Bible and compare it with the oppression and longing for liberation in their own lives. But this is just what professional liberation theology is doing: it is simply doing it in a more sophisticated way. On the middle level, pastoral theology uses a language and approach that draw on both the ground level (concreteness, communicability, etc.) and the scholarly level (critical, systematic analysis and synthesis).

An Integrated and Integrating Theology

It is important to realize that these three sorts of theological reflection do not take place separately from or alongside each other. Most of the time they are practiced integrally, with integration at any level. So, for example, it can happen on the popular level with a pastor (priest or bishop) and a theologian sitting among the people, in the community center, reflecting on their struggle and their progress *with* them. Or it can take place at the professional level, when, for example, pastoral ministers and lay persons from base communities attend courses in systematic theology. There are more and more lay persons taking courses in theology or attending conferences on growth in faith.

But the most obvious integration is at the intermediate level, that of pastoral liberation theology. This is seen most clearly at church conferences, where you can find pastoral ministers—bishops, priests, religious, and lay persons—telling of their problems, Christians from base communities recounting their experiences, and theologians contributing their insights, deepening the meaning of the events under discussion and drawing conclusions from them. One notable aspect of these conferences is that they are not confined to church personnel: persons from other disciplines who can contribute and are committed to the progress of liberation also take part: sociologists, economists, teachers, technicians, all putting their professional expertise at the service of the people.

So one can see how liberation theology, at least the model of it that is emerging from a church committed to liberation, is a progressively integrating factor among pastors, theologians, and lay persons, all linked together around the same axis: their liberative mission. This is a long way from the old fragmentation, still largely operative, among a *canonical*, official theology, elaborated by curial and episcopal bodies, a *critical*,

confrontational theology, elaborated in centers of study and research, and a *spontaneous* theology elaborated on the margins of the church.

All members of the people of God think about their faith: all of them, not only the professionals, "do" theology in a way. There can, indeed, be no faith without a minimum of theology. How so? Because faith is human and involves a "longing to understand"—*fides quaerens intellectum*—as the classic theologians put it. All who believe want to understand something of their faith. And as soon as you think about faith, you are already doing theology. So all Christians are in a certain sense theologians, and become more so the more they think about their faith. The subject of faith is the subject of theology—thinking and thought-out faith, cultivated collectively in the bosom of the church. The base communities, trying to draw lessons for today from the pages of the Gospels, are "doing" theology, theologizing. Furthermore, popular theology is thinking about the faith in solidarity: all give their opinions, completing or correcting those of others, each helping the other to assimilate the matter more clearly. Or is it that lay persons have no right to think? Are they just the "learning church," the taught church, and in no way the educating and educative church?

The Oral and Sacramental Character of Popular Liberation Theology

Popular theology is primarily oral; it is a spoken theology. Writing has a place in it as an aid to dialogue about faith, or as a reminder, a written collection of points that need to be recorded from what has been said before. But popular liberation theology is more than speech; it is a "sacramental" theology, expressed in gestures and symbols. For example, community members depict capitalism as a tree with rotten fruit and poison dripping from its branches. They bring gospel scenes to life though dramatic presentations. One gospel study

group presented the situation of prostitutes today with a placard bearing the words, "Last in society, first in the kingdom." Another group, during a course on the Apocalypse, prepared their morning prayer by devising a silhouette show of a dragon with seven heads confronting a wounded lamb. They invited those present to give names to the dragon's seven heads. Men and women came forward and wrote, as best they could: "multinationals," "Law of National Security," "foreign debt," "military dictatorship," and names of various government officials held to be against the people. And below the lamb someone wrote: "Jesus Christ, Liberator." And a woman came forward and added: "The people of the poor."

There is genuine religious thinking behind this, a whole theology coming to light. Of course it is not called theology. Nor does it need to be. There is just the simple fact of an anonymous and collective theology with its own strength and truth. It is a theology in fact, just as folk remedies are real remedies.

Is it a critical theology? Yes, it is critical because it is clear and prophetic; critical, not in the academic sense, but really so because it gives an account of causes and puts forward measures for dealing with them. Often, it must be said, this means going way beyond the critical pretensions of the "doctors of theology" who can count every hair in the beast's coat but never look it in the face.

Pastoral Liberation Theology

There is such a thing as pastoral theology: it is the theology that sheds the light of the saving word on the reality of injustice so as to inspire the church to struggle for liberation. It is a theology in its own right: it follows the same basic lines as liberation theology as it is generally known. They both share the same root: evangelical faith; they both have the same objective: the liberating practice of love.

These two levels of theology are mutually enriching: theolo-

gians take up pastoral concepts and deepen them; pastors incorporate the most fruitful approaches and conclusions of professional theologians.

Pastors know how much they owe to the judgment of theologians. When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger issued his "Instruction" on liberation theology, the bishops of Brazil, meeting in general assembly in April 1985, declared that, despite its possible "ambiguities and confusions," liberation theology "favors evangelization" in that it "clarifies the connection between movements seeking human liberation and the reality of the kingdom of God."

Bishops, like priests and other pastoral ministers, have not been content simply to take account of the liberation theology of the professional theologians. They have been doing their own liberation theology in accordance with their particular mission. What professional liberation theology enables them to do is to enrich their own reflections with its specific insights.

It is also worth pointing out that the institutional church has never considered any particular academic theology binding in faith—nor could it. The good news of the scriptures and the normative tradition of the church are enough for faith. But in order best to carry out their mission at each period of history, pastors—inevitably—turn to the theological currents that serve them best. This is what is happening now between pastors vowed to liberation of their people and theologians of liberation.

This is why there is a great spiritual harmony between professional and pastoral liberation theology in the church in the Third World. This can be seen with particular clarity in those bishops who devote their efforts to liberation. When the Brazilian bishops met for their general assembly on May 1, 1984, John Paul II gave them this provocative exhortation: "The bishops of Brazil are aware that they must liberate the people from injustices, which, I know, are grave. Let them take up their role as liberators of the people along the right way and using the right methods."

Well, a liberating bishop can adopt only a liberating pastoral theology.

How Liberation Theology Works in Practice

Liberation theology does not end with the production of theological works in centers of theological study and research, or institutions in which the church trains its priests and lay specialists. Such places are hardly the epicenters from which liberation theology emanates; its theologians are not armchair intellectuals, but rather "organic intellectuals" (in organic communion with the people) and "militant theologians," working with the pilgrim people of God and engaged in their pastoral responsibilities. They certainly keep one foot in centers of study, but their other foot is in the community.

Where is liberation theology to be found? You will find it at the base. It is linked with a specific community and forms a vital part of it. Its service is one of theological enlightenment of the community on its pilgrim way. You can find it any weekend in any slum, shantytown, or rural parish. It is there alongside the people, speaking, listening, asking questions, and being asked questions. It will not take shape in the form of an "ivory tower" theologian, one who is only a theologian and knows only theology. Liberation theology has to be skilled in the art of articulation to a high degree: it has to articulate the discourse of society, of the oppressed, of the world of popular, symbolic, and sacramental signs, with the discourse of faith and the normative tradition of the church. In the field of liberation, trying to know theology alone means condemning oneself to knowing not even one's own theology. So liberation theologians have to be at times pastors, analysts, interpreters, advocates, brothers or sisters in faith, and fellow pilgrims. Above all else, they have to be vehicles of the Spirit so as to be able to inspire and translate the demands of the gospel when confronted with the signs of the times as they are emerging

among the poorer classes of society, in faithful reflection, hope, and committed love.

You will also find liberation theologians where the people of God congregate: in retreats, in diocesan planning meetings, in Bible study groups, in discussions of rural pastoral problems or discrimination against women, in debates on the problems of ethnic minority groups and cultures. In such groups their role is that of advisor. They hear the problems brought by the people, listen to the theology being done by and in the community—that is, the basic reflection that is the theology *of the people* reflecting on its life and progress. When invited to do so by the group, liberation theologians will then, from other points of view, try to ponder, deepen, and criticize the questions raised, always relating them to the word of revelation, the magisterium, and the normative tradition of the church.

Again, liberation theologians will be found in interdisciplinary discussion groups, round-table groups concerned with questions of social communications and the like, putting forward the view of a church that has taken seriously the option of solidarity with the poor. In all this, they will be doing theology *with* the people.

Finally, of course, liberation theologians will also be found at their desks, reading, researching, preparing their lectures and courses, writing books and articles. This is where they exercise the theoretical, professional side of their calling. This is where the experiences gathered at the base and the work done by pastoral ministers are critically examined, reflected on in depth, and worked into concepts—that is, dealt with according to the scientific criteria of theology. From here, theologians go out not only to do pastoral work and take part in meetings and discussions, but also to give lectures, to attend theological congresses, sometimes overseas, to speak in the centers of power and productivity. In this they are doing theology *from* the people.

Given the immense agenda of activities and all the practical

and theoretical demands made on those who do this form of theology, it is not surprising that liberation theologians often experience fatigue, if not exhaustion. Some questions go beyond an individual's capacity for reflection and exposition. This is why liberation theology is basically a task to be undertaken collectively, working in integral collaboration with the whole church, through the various kinds of activity already described.

When all is said and done, liberation theologians can claim no more than what Jesus taught his apostles: "We are merely servants; we have done no more than our duty" (Luke 17:10).

Chapter 3

How Liberation Theology Is Done

This chapter brings us to the kernel of this work. It is an attempt to explain the question of method; in other words, how liberation theology is "done."

The Preliminary Stage: Living Commitment

Before we can do theology we have to "do" liberation. The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith: in our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed.

Without this specific precondition, liberation theology would be simply a matter of words. So it is not enough here only to reflect on what is being practiced. Rather we need to establish a living link with living practice. If we fail to do this, then "poverty," "oppression," "revolution," "new society" are simply words that can be found in a dictionary.

The essential point is this: links with specific practice are *at the root* of liberation theology. It operates within the great dialectic of theory (faith) and practice (love).

In fact, it is *only* this effective connection with liberating practice that can give theologians a "new spirit," a new style, or a new way of doing theology. Being a theologian is not a

matter of skillfully using methods but of being imbued with the theological spirit. Rather than introducing a new theological method, liberation theology is a new way of being a theologian. Theology is always a second step; the first is the "faith that makes its power felt through love" (Gal. 5:6). Theology (not the theologian) comes afterward; liberating practice comes first.

So first we need to have direct knowledge of the reality of oppression/liberation through objective engagement in solidarity with the poor. This pre-theological stage really means conversion of life, and this involves a "class conversion," in the sense of leading to effective solidarity with the oppressed and their liberation.

Three Forms of Commitment to the Poor

Of course the most appropriate and specific way for theologians to commit themselves to the poor and oppressed is to produce good theology. But what we want to stress here is that this is impossible without at least *some* contact with the world of the oppressed. Personal contact is necessary if one is to acquire new theological sensitivity.

Different forms and levels of contact can be taken up, depending on the inclinations and circumstances of persons interested:

- The first level might be called *more or less restricted,* either sporadic, in the form of visits to base communities, meetings, and the like, or more regular, through pastoral work on weekends, acting as advisor to communities or popular movements, and so forth.
- The second would be *alternating* periods of scholarly work—research, teaching, writing—with periods of practical work—pastoral or theological work in a particular church.
- The third level is that of those who live *permanently* with the people, making their home among the people, living and working alongside the people.

Whichever level is chosen, one point is paramount: anyone who wants to elaborate relevant liberation theology must be prepared to go into the "examination hall" of the poor. Only after sitting on the benches of the humble will he or she be entitled to enter a school of "higher learning."

Three Mediations

The elaboration of liberation theology can be divided into three basic stages, which correspond to the three traditional stages involved in pastoral work: seeing, judging, acting.

In liberation theology, we speak of three main "mediations": socio-analytical mediation, hermeneutical mediation, and practical mediation. The term "mediation" is used because the three stages represent means or instruments of the theological process. Briefly, these three mediations work and relate to each other as follows:

- Socio-analytical (or historico-analytical) mediation operates in the sphere of the world of the oppressed. It tries to find out why the oppressed are oppressed.
- Hermeneutical mediation operates in the sphere of God's world. It tries to discern what God's plan is for the poor.
- Practical mediation operates in the sphere of action. It tries to discover the courses of action that need to be followed so as to overcome oppression in accordance with God's plan.

Let us treat each of these mediations in more detail.

Socio-analytical Mediation

"Liberation" means liberation from oppression. Therefore, liberation theology has to begin by informing itself about the actual conditions in which the oppressed live, the various forms of oppression they may suffer.

Obviously, the prime object of theology is God. Nevertheless, before asking what oppression means in God's eyes, theologians have to ask more basic questions about the nature

of actual oppression and its causes. The fact is that understanding God is not a substitute for or alternative to knowledge of the real world. As Thomas Aquinas said: "An error about the world redounds in error about God" (*Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 3).

Furthermore, if faith is to be efficacious, in the same way as Christian love, it must have its eyes open to the historical reality on which it seeks to work.

Therefore, to know the real world of the oppressed is a (material) part of the overall theological process. Though not the whole process in itself, it is an indispensable stage or mediation in the development of further and deeper understanding, the knowledge of faith itself.

Explaining the Phenomenon of Oppression

Faced with the oppressed, the theologian's first question can only be: Why is there oppression and what are its causes?

The oppressed are to be found in many strata of society. Puebla lists them: young children, juveniles, indigenous peoples, campesinos, laborers, the underemployed and unemployed, the marginalized, persons living in overcrowded urban slums, the elderly . . . (§§32–39). There is one overarching characteristic of the oppressed in the Third World: they are *poor* in socio-economic terms. They are the dispossessed masses on the peripheries of cities and in rural areas.

We need to start from here, from this "infrastructural" oppression, if we want to understand correctly all other forms of oppression and see how they relate to each other. In effect, as we shall see in more detail later, this socio-economic form conditions all other forms.

So, if we start with the fundamental expression of oppression as socio-economic poverty, we then need to find what causes it. Here, liberation theology has found three ready-made answers, which might be called the empirical, the functional, and the dialectical explanations of poverty.

The *empirical* explanation: poverty as vice. This approach produces a short and superficial explanation. It attributes the causes of poverty to laziness, ignorance, or simply human wickedness. It does not look at the collective or structural dimension of the problem: that the poor make up whole masses of a people and their numbers are growing all the time. It is the common conception of social destitution, the explanation most generally upheld in society.

From this viewpoint, the logical solution to the question of poverty is *aid*—in all its forms, from almsgiving on an individual basis to worldwide schemes. The poor are treated as objects of pity.

The *functional* explanation: poverty as backwardness. This is the liberal or bourgeois interpretation of the phenomenon of social poverty: it is attributed to economic and social backwardness. In time, thanks to the development process itself, helped in the Third World by foreign loans and technology, "progress" will arrive and hunger will disappear—so the functionalists think.

The social and political solution put forward here is *reform*, understood as the progressive betterment of the existing system. The poor are treated as passive objects of action taken by others.

The positive side of this approach is that it sees poverty as a *collective* phenomenon; it fails, however, to see it as *conflictive*. In other words, it fails to see what Puebla saw, that poverty "is not a passing phase. . . . It is the product of economic, social, and political situations and structures . . . where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor, who get even poorer" (§30).

The *dialectical* explanation: poverty as oppression. This sees poverty as the product of the economic organization of society itself, which *exploits* some—the workers—and *excludes* others from the production process—the underemployed, unemployed, and all those marginalized in one way or another. In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (chap. 3), Pope

John Paul II defines the root of this situation as the supremacy of capital—enjoyed by the few—over labor—practiced by the many.

This explanation, also called the "historico-structural" approach, sees poverty as a *collective* and also *conflictive* phenomenon, which can be overcome only by replacing the present social system with an *alternative* system. The way out of this situation is *revolution*, understood as the transformation of the bases of the economic and social system. Here the poor stand up as "subjects."

Historical Mediation and the Struggles of the Oppressed

The socio-analytical interpretation, as presented above, leads on to a historical approach to the problem of poverty. This approach focuses on the poor not only in their present situation, but as the end-product of a long process of plunder and social marginalization. It includes a consideration of the struggles of "the lowly" throughout their historical journey.

This shows that the situation of the oppressed is defined not only by their oppressors but also by the way in which they react to oppression, resist it, and fight to set themselves free from it. The poor cannot be understood without including their dimension as social subjects or co-agents—though submerged ones—of the historical process. This means that any analysis of the world of the poor has to take account not only of their oppressors but also of their own history and efforts at liberation, however embryonic these may be.

Relationships with Marxism

When dealing with the poor and the oppressed and seeking their liberation, how do we avoid coming into contact with Marxist groups (on the practical level) and with Marxist theory (on the academic level)? This is already hinted at in the use of such terms as "dialectical" or "historico-structural" explanation of the phenomenon of socio-economic poverty.

In liberation theology, Marxism is never treated as a subject on its own but always *from and in relation to the poor.* Placing themselves firmly on the side of the poor, liberation theologians ask Marx: "What can you tell us about the situation of poverty and ways of overcoming it?" Here Marxists are submitted to the judgment of the poor and their cause, and not the other way around.

Therefore, liberation theology uses Marxism purely as an *instrument.* It does not venerate it as it venerates the gospel. And it feels no obligation to account to social scientists for any use it may make—correct or otherwise—of Marxist terminology and ideas, though it does feel obliged to account to the poor, to their faith and hope, and to the ecclesial community, for such use. To put it in more specific terms, liberation theology freely borrows from Marxism certain "methodological pointers" that have proved fruitful in understanding the world of the oppressed, such as:

- the importance of economic factors;
- attention to the class struggle;
- the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones.

This is what the then superior general of the Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, wrote in his well-known letter on Marxist analysis of December 8, 1980.

Liberation theology, therefore, maintains a decidedly critical stance in relation to Marxism. Marx (like any other Marxist) can be a companion on the way (see Puebla, §544), but he can never be *the* guide, because "You have only one teacher, the Christ" (Matt. 23:10). This being so, Marxist materialism and atheism do not even constitute a temptation for liberation theologians.

Enlarging on the Concept of "the Poor"

The Poor as Blacks, Indigenous Peoples, Women

Liberation theology is about liberation of the oppressed—in their totality as persons, body and soul—and in their totality as a class: the poor, the subjected, the discriminated against. We cannot confine ourselves to the purely socio-economic aspect of oppression, the "poverty" aspect, however basic and "determinant" this may be. We have to look also to other levels of social oppression, such as:

- racist oppression: discrimination against blacks;
- ethnic oppression: discrimination against indigenous peoples or other minority groups;
- sexual oppression: discrimination against women.

Each of these various oppressions—or discriminations—and more (oppression of children, juveniles, the elderly) has its specific nature and therefore needs to be treated (in both theory and practice) specifically. So we have to go beyond an exclusively "classist" concept of the oppressed, which would restrict the oppressed to the socio-economically poor. The ranks of the oppressed are filled with others besides the poor.

Nevertheless, we have to observe here that the socio-economically oppressed (the poor) do not simply exist *alongside* other oppressed groups, such as blacks, indigenous peoples, women—to take the three major categories in the Third World. No, the "class-oppressed"—the socio-economically poor—are the infrastructural expression of the process of oppression. The other groups represent "superstructural" expressions of oppression and because of this are deeply conditioned by the infrastructural. It is one thing to be a black taxi-driver, quite another to be a black football idol; it is one thing to be a woman working as a domestic servant, quite another to be the first lady of the land; it is one thing to be an Amerindian thrown off your land, quite another to be an Amerindian owning your own farm.

This shows why, in a class-divided society, class struggles—which are a fact and an ethical demonstration of the presence of the injustice condemned by God and the church—are the main sort of struggle. They bring antagonistic groups, whose basic interests are irreconcilable, face to face. On the other hand, the struggles of blacks, indigenes, and women bring

groups that are not naturally antagonistic into play, whose basic interests can in principle be reconciled. Although exploiting bosses and exploited workers can never finally be reconciled (so long as the former remain exploiters and the latter exploited), blacks can be reconciled with whites, indigenes with nonindigenes, and women with men. We are dealing here with nonantagonistic contradictions mixed in with the basic, antagonist class conflict in our societies. But it must also be noted that noneconomic types of oppression aggravate preexisting socio-economic oppression. The poor are additionally oppressed when, beside being poor, they are also black, indigenous, women, or old.

The Poor as "Degraded and Deprived"

The socio-analytical approach is undoubtedly important for a critical understanding of the situation of the poor and all classes of oppressed. Nevertheless, its insight into oppression is limited to what an academic sort of approach can achieve. Such an approach has its limitations, which are those of analytical scholarship. It can only (but this is already a great deal) grasp the basic and overall structure of oppression; it leaves out of account all the shadings that only direct experience and day-by-day living can appreciate. Attending just to the rational, scientific understanding of oppression falls into rationalism and leaves more than half the reality of the oppressed poor out of account.

The oppressed are more than what social analysts—economists, sociologists, anthropologists—can tell us about them. We need to listen to the oppressed themselves. The poor, in their popular wisdom, in fact "know" much more about poverty than does any economist. Or rather, they know in another way, in much greater depth.

For example, what is "work" for popular wisdom and what is it for an economist? For the latter it is usually a simple category or a statistical calculation, whereas for the people, "work" means drama, anguish, dignity, security, exploitation,

exhaustion, life—a whole series of complex and even contradictory perceptions. Again, what does "land" mean to an agricultural worker and what does it mean to a sociologist? For the former, it is much more than an economic and social entity; it is human greatness, with a deeply affective and even mystical significance. And if it is your ancestral land, then it means even more.

Finally, "poor" for the people means dependence, debt, exposure, anonymity, contempt, and humiliation. The poor do not usually refer to themselves as "poor," which would offend their sense of honor and dignity. It is the non-poor who call them poor. So a poor woman from Tacaimbó in the interior of Pernambuco, hearing someone call her poor, retorted: "Poor, no! Poor is the end. We are the dispossessed, but fighting!"

From which we conclude that liberation theologians in contact with the people cannot be content with social analyses but also have to grasp the whole rich interpretation made by the poor of their world, linking the socio-analytical approach with the indispensable understanding provided by folk wisdom.

The Poor as the Disfigured Son of God

Finally, the Christian view of the poor is that they are all this and more. Faith shows us the poor and all the oppressed in the light that liberation theology seeks to project (and here we anticipate the hermeneutical mediation):

- the disfigured image of God;
- the Son of God made the suffering servant and rejected;
- the memorial of the poor and persecuted Nazarene;
- the sacrament of the Lord and Judge of history.

Without losing any of its specific substance, the conception of the poor is thus infinitely enlarged through being opened up to the Infinite. In this way, seen from the standpoint of faith and the mission of the church, the poor are not merely human beings with needs; they are not just persons who are socially

oppressed and at the same time agents of history. They are all these and more: they are also bearers of an "evangelizing potential" (Puebla, §1147) and beings called to eternal life.

Hermeneutical Mediation

Once they have understood the real situation of the oppressed, theologians have to ask: What has the word of God to say about this? This is the second stage in the theological construct—a specific stage, in which discourse is *formally* theological.

It is therefore a question, at this point, of seeing the "oppression/liberation" process "in the light of faith." What does this mean? The expression does not denote something vague or general; it is something that has a positive meaning in scripture, where we find that "in the light of faith" and "in the light of the word of God" have the same meaning.

The liberation theologian goes to the scriptures bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine word. This is a new way of reading the Bible: the hermeneutics of liberation.

The Bible of the Poor

An examination of the whole of scripture from the viewpoint of the oppressed: this is the hermeneutics or specific interpretation (reading) used by liberation theology.

We must say straightaway that this is not the only possible and legitimate reading of the Bible. For us in the Third World today, however, it is the obvious one, the "hermeneutics for our times." From the heart of the great revelation in the Bible, it draws the most enlightening and eloquent themes that speak to the poor: God the father of life and advocate of the oppressed, liberation from the house of bondage, the prophecy of a new world, the kingdom given to the poor, the church as total sharing. The hermeneutics of liberation stresses these

veins, but not to the exclusion of everything else. They may not be the most *important* themes in the Bible (in themselves), but they are the most *relevant* (to the poor in their situation of oppression). But then it is the order of importance that determines the order of relevance.

Furthermore, the poor are not simply poor, as we have seen; they seek life, and "to the full" (John 10:10). This means that questions relevant to or urgent for the poor are bound up with the transcendental questions of conversion, grace, resurrection.

In effect, the hermeneutics of liberation questions the word of God without anticipating the divine response. Because it is a theological exercise, this hermeneutics is done in fidelity—that is, in openness to God's ever new and always surprising revelation—to the foundational message that can save or condemn. This means that the response of the word can always call the question itself into question, or even the questioners, to the extent that it calls them to conversion, faith, and commitment to justice.

There is, nevertheless, a "hermeneutical circle" or "mutual appeal" between the poor and the word (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 29). But there is no denying that the lead in this dialectic belongs to the sovereign word of God, which must retain primacy of value, though not necessarily of methodology. On the other hand, we know from the intrinsically liberating content of biblical revelation that for the poor the word can emerge only as a message of radical consolation and liberation.

The Marks of a Theological-liberative Hermeneutics

The rereading of the Bible done from the basis of the poor and their liberation project has certain characteristic marks.

It is a hermeneutics that favors *application* rather than explanation. In this the theology of liberation takes up the kind of probing that has been the perennial pursuit of all true

biblical reading, as can be seen, for example, in the church fathers—a pursuit that was neglected for a long time in favor of a rationalistic exegesis concerned with dragging out the meaning-in-itself.

Liberative hermeneutics reads the Bible as a book of life, not as a book of strange stories. The textual meaning is indeed sought, but only as a function of the *practical* meaning: the important thing is not so much interpreting the text of the scriptures as interpreting life "according to the scriptures." Ultimately, this old/new reading aims to find contemporary actualization (practicality) for the textual meaning.

Liberative hermeneutics seeks to discover and activate the *transforming energy* of biblical texts. In the end, this is a question of finding an interpretation that will lead to individual change (conversion) and change in history (revolution). This is not a reading from ideological preconceptions: biblical religion is an open and dynamic religion thanks to its messianic and eschatological character. Ernst Bloch once declared: "It would be difficult to make a revolution without the Bible."

Finally, without being reductionist, this theological-political rereading of the Bible stresses the *social context* of the message. It places each text in its historical context in order to construct an appropriate—not literal—translation into our own historical context. For example, liberative hermeneutics will stress (but not to the exclusion of other aspects) the social context of oppression in which Jesus lived and the markedly political context of his death on the cross. Obviously, when it is approached in this way, the biblical text takes on particular relevance in the context of the oppression now being experienced in the Third World, where liberating evangelization has immediate and serious political implications—as the growing list of martyrs in Latin America proves.

Biblical Books Favored by Liberation Theology

Theology must, of course, take all the books of the Bible into account. Nevertheless, hermeneutical preferences are inevitable and even necessary, as the liturgy and the practice of homiletics demonstrate. The books most appreciated by liberation theology, on its three levels—professional, pastoral, and especially popular—are:

- *Exodus,* because it recounts the epic of the politico-religious liberation of a mass of slaves who, through the power of the covenant with God, became the people of God;
- the *Prophets,* for their uncompromising defense of the liberator God, their vigorous denunciation of injustices, their revindication of the rights of the poor, and their proclamation of the messianic world;
- the *Gospels,* obviously, for the centrality of the divine person of Jesus, with his announcement of the kingdom, his liberating actions, and his death and resurrection—the final meaning of history;
- the *Acts of the Apostles,* because they portray the ideal of a free and liberating Christian community;
- *Revelation,* because in collective and symbolic terms it describes the immense struggles of the people of God against all the monsters of history.

In some places, other books too are favored, such as the *Wisdom* books, because they embody the value of divine revelation contained in popular wisdom (proverbs, legends, etc.). In some parts of Central America, after the base communities had meditated on the books of the *Maccabees* to inspire their faith in the context of armed uprising (legitimized, it may be noted, by their pastors), once the war was over and the period of national reconstruction began, Christians turned to a systematic reading of the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah,* which portray the efforts at restoring the people of God after the critical period in Babylonian captivity.

We hardly need to say here that any book of the Bible has to be read in a christological key—that is, based on the high point of revelation as found in the Gospels. The viewpoint of the poor is thus placed within a wider viewpoint—that of the lord of history—whence the word of God derives its consistency and strength.

Recovering the Great Christian Tradition in the Perspective of Liberation

Liberation theology is conscious of being a new theology, linked with the current period of history and addressed to the great masses, both Christian and non-Christian, in the Third World. Nonetheless, it sees itself as maintaining a basic link of continuity with the living tradition of the faith of the Christian church. It looks to the past in an effort to learn from it and enrich itself. With regard to theological tradition, it maintains a twofold stance.

With respect to the limits and incompleteness of the systems of the past—at least in part an inevitable consequence of their historical setting—liberation theology maintains a stance of *criticism*. For example, the Scholastic theology of the eleventh to the fourteenth century made undeniable contributions to the precise and systematic presentation of Christian truth, but liberation theology criticizes it for its overbearing tendency to theoreticism, to voiding the world of its historical character (a *static* vision of things), showing precious little sensitivity to the social question of the poor or their historical liberation. As for classic spirituality, liberation theology seeks to correct its ahistorical interiority, its elitism, and its deficient sense of the presence of the lord of history in liberative social processes.

With respect to incorporating overlooked but fruitful theological strains that can enrich and challenge us today, liberation theology maintains a stance of *retrieval*. Thus, from the patristic theology of the second to the ninth century, we can reincorporate its deeply unitary sense of the history of salvation, its feeling for the social demands of the gospel, its perception of the prophetic dimension of the mission of the church, its sensitivity to the poor.

Liberation theology also finds inspiration in the individual evangelical experiences of so many saints and prophets, many of them declared heretics at the time, but whose liberating impact can clearly be seen today—Francis of Assisi, Savonarola, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and, from recent times, Frs. Hidalgo, Morelos, Cícero. Nor should we forget the valuable contribution of the "common life" and other similar reform movements of the Middle Ages, or the evangelical postulates of the great Reformers.

Liberation Theology and the Social Teaching of the Church

Liberation theology also has an open and positive relationship with the social teaching of the church. We have to say at once that liberation theology does not set out to be in *competition* with the teaching of the magisterium. Nor could it, because the two sets of discourse operate on different levels and have differing objectives. But to the extent that the social teaching of the church provides broad guidelines for Christian social activity, liberation theology tries, on the one hand, to *integrate* these guidelines into its own synthesis, and, on the other, to *clarify* them in a creative manner for the specific context of the Third World.

This work of integration and clarification is founded in the dynamic and open nature of the social teachings of the church (see Puebla, §§473 and 539). Furthermore, by this work, liberation theology is paying heed to the explicit appeal of the magisterium itself, which, through Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens*, stated:

> It is not our ambition, nor even our mission . . . to pronounce one word for all or to put forward one universal solution. It is for the Christian communities to analyze, objectively, the situation in their own countries; try to shed light on it with the light of the unalterable words of the gospel; discern the *options and commitments* which they need to take in order to bring about social changes [no. 4; see also nos. 42 and 48].

This is a precise indication of the three stages of theological-liberative investigation by which what is less specific in the teaching of the church can become more specific.

Paul VI launched a challenge to the social teaching of the church when he said it was "not limited to recalling a few general principles, but is, on the contrary, something that develops through means of a reflection carried on in permanent contact with the situations of this world" (ibid., no. 42). By taking up this challenge, liberation theology places itself fully in line with the requirements of the teaching of the church. This is also taken into account when it is worked out by pastors in the form of liberation theology on the pastoral level.

Furthermore, Cardinal Ratzinger himself, in his instruction on liberation theology (chap. 5), considers the social teaching of the church as a sort of preliberation theology, or "pastoral theology of liberation," insofar as it tries to "respond to the challenge posed to our time by oppression and hunger" (no. 1).

The only conclusion one can draw from all this is that there is *no* incompatibility of principle between the social teaching of the church and liberation theology. One complements the other for the good of the whole people of God.

The Creative Task of Theology

Armed with its own techniques and all the material it has thereby accumulated, liberation theology sets out to build up truly new syntheses of faith and to put together theoretically new answers to the great challenges of the times. It is not just an accumulator of theological material, but a true architect. So it arms itself with the necessary theoretical daring and with a good dose of creative imagination in order to tackle previously unknown questions posed today by the continents under oppression.

By creatively bringing out or deducing the liberating content of faith, liberation theology seeks to produce a new codification of the Christian mystery, thereby helping the church to carry out its mission of liberative evangelization in history.

Practical Mediation

Liberation theology is far from being an inconclusive theology. It starts from action and leads to action, a journey wholly impregnated by and bound up with the atmosphere of faith. From analysis of the reality of the oppressed, it passes through the word of God to arrive finally at specific action. "Back to action" is a characteristic call of this theology. It seeks to be a militant, committed, and liberating theology.

It is a theology that leads to practical results because today, in the world of the "wretched of the earth," the *true form* of faith is "political love" or "macro-charity." Among the poorest of the Third World, faith is not only "also" political, but *above all else* political.

But despite all this, faith cannot be reduced to action, however liberating it may be. It is "always greater" and must always include moments of contemplation and of profound thanksgiving. Liberation theology also leads one up to the Temple. And from the Temple it leads back once more to the practice of history, now equipped with all the divine and divinizing powers of the Mystery of the world.

And so, yes: liberation theology leads to action: action for justice, the work of love, conversion, renewal of the church, transformation of society.

Who Designs the Program of Action?

The logic of this third stage—practical mediation—has its own internal regimen. Naturally, the definition of action de-

pends on the theological level on which one finds oneself: professional, pastoral, or popular.

A professional theologian can point only to broad lines of action. A pastor-theologian can be more definite as to courses of action to be followed. A popular theologian is in a position to be able to go deeply into the particular course to be followed in a specific case. But on both the last levels—pastoral and popular—the definition of action can of course be only a collective task, carried out by all those involved in the particular question of the moment.

The process of acting is extremely complex. It involves a number of steps, such as reasonable and prudent appreciation of all the circumstances, and attempting to foresee the consequences of the action planned. Whatever else it may involve, any course of action is likely to have to take the following elements into consideration:

- A decision as to what is *historically viable,* or at least possible, through analyzing one's own and the opposition's forces, without underestimating the resistance and opposition of those who want to preserve the status quo in society and in the church, and without being utopian or satisfied with "good intentions."
- Defining one's *strategy* and *tactics,* favoring nonviolent methods, such as dialogue, persuasion, moral pressure, passive resistance, evangelical resoluteness, and other courses of action sanctioned by the ethic of the gospel: marches, strikes, street demonstrations, and, as a last resort, recourse to physical force.
- Coordinating *micro-actions* with the *macro-system,* so as to give them—and ensure they retain—an effectively critical and transformative orientation.
- Articulating the action of the people of God with that of *other historical forces* present in society.
- Drawing up a *program* (blueprint) for action, inspiring and encouraging the people to struggle, the program being, as

it were, the bridge between decision-making and implementation.

In this third stage, more knowledge is gained in practice than from theory. In other words, it is easier to experience than to think out. Therefore on this level, wisdom and prudence are more useful than is analytical reasoning. And in this, ordinary persons are often way ahead of the learned.

By Way of Example: How to Do a "Theology of Land"

Having come to the end of our exposition of the methodology of liberation theology, it seems appropriate to give an example of how the three stages work out in practice, each with its specific requirements. Let us take, for good reasons, the theme of "land." Depending on the degree of explicitation required at any of the three levels—professional, pastoral, and popular—this is how the steps in working out a "theology of land" might be summarized:

Step Zero: Participation

- being involved in the specific problem concerning land in the area, working in rural base communities, being active in trade unions, taking part in harvests and other field tasks, participating in the struggles of rural workers, and so forth.

Step one: Socio-analytical mediation (seeing)

- analyze the land situation as it affects the nation as a whole or the particular area where one is working;
- encourage rural workers to stand up for themselves;
- see how individuals experience their problems and how they resist oppression or organize their resistance to it.

Step two: Hermeneutical mediation (judging)

- evaluating how the populace faces up to the land question on the basis of its religion and faith;
- evaluating how the Bible views land (gift of God, promised land, symbol of the final kingdom to come, etc.);

• determining how theological tradition, especially as expressed by the church fathers, sees the question of land (common ownership, nonmercantile character of land, etc.).

Step three: Practical mediation (acting)

• stressing the value of worker unity and organization: unions, cooperatives, or other movements;

• publicizing the need for agrarian reform to be brought about by those who work the land;

• making a choice of particular banners under which to fight, linking with other forces, forecasting possible consequences, possible allocation of tasks, etc.

Chapter 4

Key Themes of Liberation Theology

We now need to see what overall conclusions liberation theology has reached by using the methodology set out in the preceding chapter. So let us describe briefly some of the key themes that make up the content of this way of thinking and acting in the light of faith. But first we must stress once more that we are not dealing with a new faith, but with the faith of the Apostles, the faith of the church linked to the sufferings and hopes for liberation of the oppressed of this world. So we need to ask: What liberating potential is contained in the Christian faith, a faith that promises eternal life but also a worthy and just life on this earth? What image of God emerges from the struggles of the oppressed for their liberation? What aspects of the mystery of Christ take on particular relevance? What accents do the poor give to their Marian devotion?

Let us begin by delineating the overall view a little more clearly—that is, by defining the perspective from which we have to approach all these subjects: the perspective of the poor and their liberation.

Solidarity with the Poor: Worshiping God and Communing with Christ

Liberation theology can be understood as the reflection in faith of the church that has taken to heart the "clear and