

- 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

prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor" (Puebla, §1134). It is for them, and with them, that the church seeks to act in a liberative manner. Such an option is neither self-interested nor political, as would be the option of the institutional church for an emergent historical power—the popular classes taking an ever more dominant role in the conduct of affairs. No, this option is made for intrinsic reasons, for reasons inherent in the Christian faith itself. Let us look at them one by one.

Theological Reasons for the Option for the Poor

Theological Motivation (on God's Part)

The biblical God is fundamentally a living God, the author and sustainer of all life. Whenever persons see their lives threatened, they can count on the presence and power of God who comes to their aid in one form or another. God feels impelled to come to the help of the oppressed poor: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. . . . And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them" (Exod. 3:7, 9). The worship that is pleasing to God must be a "search for justice" and a turning to the needy and the oppressed (see Isa. 1:10–17; 58:6–7; Mark 7:6–13). By opting for the poor, the church imitates our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:48).

Christological Motivation (on Christ's Part)

Christ undeniably made a personal option for the poor and held them to be the main recipients of his message (see Luke 6:20; 7:21–22). They fulfill his law of love who, like the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), approach those who have

fallen by the wayside, who make into neighbors those who are distant from them, and make neighbors into brothers and sisters. The followers of Christ make this option for the poor and needy the first and foremost way of expressing their faith in Christ in the context of widespread poverty in the world of today.

Eschatological Motivation (from the Standpoint of the Last Judgment)

The gospel of Jesus is quite clear on this point: at the supreme moment of history, when our eternal salvation or damnation will be decided, what will count will be our attitude of acceptance or rejection of the poor (Matt. 25:31–46). The Supreme Judge stands by the side of anyone who is oppressed, seen as a sister or brother of Jesus: "I tell you solemnly, insofar as you did it to one of these least brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). Only those who commune in his history with the poor and needy, who are Christ's sacraments, will commune definitively with Christ.

Apostolic Motivation (on the Part of the Apostles)

From its earliest days the church showed concern for the poor. The Apostles and their followers held all things in common so that there would be no poor among them (see Acts 2 and 4). In proclaiming the gospel, the one thing they emphasized was that the poor should not be ignored: "The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do" (Gal. 2:10). As the greatest of the Greek fathers, St. John Chrysostom, put it, for the sake of the mission of the church, humankind was divided into pagans and Jews, but with reference to the poor there was no division made whatsoever, because they all belonged to the common mission of the church, as much to that of Peter (to the Jews) as to that of Paul (to the pagans).

Ecclesiological Motivation (on the Part of the Church)

Faced with the marginalization and impoverishment of the great majority of its members, the church of Latin America, moved by the motivations listed above and seized with a humanistic sense of compassion, has made a solemn "preferential option for the poor," defined at the Medellín conference in 1968 and ratified at Puebla in 1979, when the bishops reaffirmed "the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation" (§1134).

Because of the sufferings and struggles of the poor, the church in its evangelization seeks to urge all Christians to live their faith in such a way that they also make it a factor for transforming society in the direction of greater justice and fellowship. All need to make the option for the poor: the rich with generosity and no regard for reward, the poor for their fellow poor and those who are even poorer than they.

In the Final Analysis, Who Are the Poor?

This question is often posed by those who cannot really be counted among the poor. They come up with so many definitions and subdivisions of poverty that any real meaning in the term is dissipated, and they end up seeing themselves as one sort of poor—usually the "poor in spirit." When those who are actually poor (lacking the means to sustain life) discuss the question, they easily come to an objective assessment of the situation and of specific remedies that would liberate them from their situation of dehumanizing poverty.

In the context of our examination of liberation theology, we can make a distinction between two basic classes of the poor.

The Socio-economically Poor

These are all those who lack or are deprived of the necessary means of subsistence—food, clothing, shelter, basic health

care, elementary education, and work. There is such a thing as innocent poverty, independent of any will or system (infertile land, chronic drought, etc.), but today, in most cases, widespread poverty is maintained by the capitalist system that derives cheap labor from it; this prevents a region or people from being developed, excluding them from minimal human advancement.

There is also a socio-economic poverty that is unjust because it is produced by a process of exploitation of labor, as denounced by John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (no. 8). Workers are not paid a just wage, the price of raw materials is held down, the interest charged on loans needed by cooperatives is exorbitant. Poverty in such cases means impoverishment and constitutes injustice on a societal and even international scale.

As we have said, there are various forms of poverty brought about by socio-economic circumstances, which in addition embody specific oppressions and therefore require specific forms of liberation. So there are those who are *discriminated* against by reason of their race (such as blacks), by reason of their culture (such as native tribes), or by reason of their sex (women). The poorest of the poor are often to be found among such groups, for they incur the whole gamut of oppressions and discriminations. In one base community a woman described herself as oppressed and impoverished on six counts: as a woman, as a prostitute, as a single parent, as black, as poor, and because of her tribal origin. Faced with such conditions, what can being a Christian mean except living the faith in a liberating way, trying every possible avenue of escape from such a set of social iniquities? We have to tell poor persons like her that God loves them in a special way, whatever moral or personal situation they find themselves in, because God in Jesus established solidarity with the poor, especially in his passion and death: "For this reason alone, the poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves" (Puebla,

§1142). They are preferred by God and by Christ not because they are good, but because they are poor and wronged. God does not will the poverty they suffer.

Their situation of poverty constitutes a challenge to God himself in his innermost nature and to the Messiah in his mission to restore rights taken away, to bring justice to the helpless and comfort to the abandoned.

The Evangelically Poor

They are all those who place themselves and their strength at the service of God and their sisters and brothers; all those who do not put themselves first, who do not see their security and the meaning of their lives and actions in profiting from this world and accumulating possessions, honor, power, and glory, but open themselves to God in gratitude and disinterestedly serve others, even those they hate, building up means of producing a more worthy life for all. Faced with a predatory, consumerist society, the evangelically poor will use the goods of this world with moderation and sharing. They are neither rigid ascetics who disdain God's creation with all the good things God has placed at the disposal of all, nor spend-thrifts who intemperately and selfishly take all they can for themselves. The evangelically poor are those who make themselves available to God in the realization of God's project in this world, and thereby make themselves into instruments and signs of the kingdom of God. The evangelically poor will establish solidarity with the economically poor and even identify with them, just as the historical Jesus did.

Those who, without being socio-economically poor, make themselves poor—out of love for and solidarity with the poor—in order to struggle against unjust poverty with them and together seek liberation and justice, are evangelically poor to a preeminent degree. They do not seek to idealize either material poverty, which they see as a consequence of the sin of exploitation, or riches, which they see as the expression of

oppressive and selfish accumulation of goods; instead they seek the means to social justice for all. In the Third World context, one cannot be evangelically poor without being in solidarity with the lives, causes, and struggles of the poor and oppressed.

Sometimes love for the poor can become so intense that individuals give up their own station in life to share in the sufferings of the poor, even to the point of sharing their premature death. This is perfect liberation, for they have set themselves free from themselves and, in following Jesus, the poor man from Nazareth, they have freed themselves fully for others and for the God dwelling within these others.

Liberation theology would like to see all Christians, including the socio-economically poor, evangelically poor. It seeks, in the light of the challenges posed by the oppressed poor, to work out and apply the liberating dimension of faith so that the fruits of the kingdom of God can be enjoyed within history. These fruits are, principally, gratitude to the Father, acceptance of divine adoption, life and justice for all, and universal fellowship.

Let us now see how the classic themes of our faith can be seen in relation to liberation and the kingdom.

Some Key Themes of Liberation Theology

1. *Living and true faith includes the practice of liberation.* Faith is the original standpoint of all theology, including liberation theology. Through the act of faith we place our life, our pilgrimage through this world, and our death in God's hands. By the light of faith we see that divine reality penetrates every level of history and the world. As a way of life, faith enables us to discern the presence or negation of God in various human endeavors. It is living faith that provides a contemplative view of the world.

But faith also has to be true, the faith necessary for salvation. In the biblical tradition it is not enough for faith to be

true in the terms in which it is expressed (orthodoxy); it is verified, made true, when it is informed by love, solidarity, hunger and thirst for justice. St. James teaches that "faith without good deeds is useless" and that believing in the one God is not enough, for "the demons have the same belief" (2:21, 20). Therefore, orthodoxy has to be accompanied by orthopraxis. Living and true faith enables us to hear the voice of the eschatological Judge in the cry of the oppressed: "I was hungry . . ." (Matt. 25:35). This same faith bids us give heed to that voice, resounding through an act of liberation: "and you gave me to eat." Without this liberating practice that appeases hunger, faith barely plants a seed, let alone produces fruit: not only would we be failing to love our sisters and brothers but we would be failing to love God too: "If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?" (1 John 3:17). Only the faith that leads on to love of God and love of others is the faith that saves, and therefore promotes integral liberation: "Our love is not to be just words and mere talk, but something real and active" (1 John 3:18).

It is the task of liberation theology to recover the practical dimension inherent in biblical faith: in the world of the oppressed this practice can only be liberating.

2. *The living God sides with the oppressed against the pharaohs of this world.* In a world in which death from hunger and repression have become commonplace, it is important to bring out those characteristics of the Christian God that directly address the practice of liberation. God will always be God and as such will constitute the basic mystery of our faith. We cannot struggle with God; we can only cover our faces and, like Moses, adore God (Exod. 3:6). God, who "dwells in inaccessible light" (1 Tim. 6:16), is beyond the scope of our understanding, however enlightened. But beyond the divine transcendence, God is not a terrifying mystery, but full of tenderness. God is especially close to those who are oppressed;

God hears their cry and resolves to set them free (Exod. 3:7-8). God is father of all, but most particularly father and defender of those who are oppressed and treated unjustly. Out of love for them, God takes sides, takes *their* side against the repressive measures of all the pharaohs.

This partiality on God's part shows that life and justice should be a universal guarantee to all, starting with those who are at present denied them; no one has the right to offend another human being, the image and likeness of God. God is glorified in the life-sustaining activities of men and women; God is worshipped in the doing of justice. God does not stand by impassively watching the drama of human history, in which, generally speaking, the strong impose their laws and their will on the weak. The biblical authors often present Yahweh as *Go'el*, which means: he who does justice to the weak, father of orphans and comforter of widows (see Ps. 146:9; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6, 22:3; Job 29:13, 31:16).

In the experience of slavery in Egypt, which bound the Israelites together as a people, they realized their longing for liberation and witnessed to the intervention of Yahweh as liberator. The liberation from slavery in Egypt was a political event, but one that became the basis for the religious experience of full liberation—that is, liberation also from sin and death. As the bishops of Latin America said at Medellín in 1968:

Just as formerly the first people, Israel, experienced the saving presence of God when he set them free from slavery in Egypt, so we too, the new people of God, cannot fail to feel his saving deliverance when there is real development—that is, deliverance for each and every one from less human to more human conditions of life [Introduction to Conclusions, no. 6].

Finally, the Christian God is a trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each distinct from the other, they co-

exist eternally in a relationship of absolute equality and reciprocity. In the beginning there was not merely the oneness of a divine nature, but the full and perfect communion of three divine persons. This mystery provides the prototype for what society should be according to the plan of the triune God: by affirming and respecting personal individuality, it should enable persons to live in such communion and collaboration with each other as to constitute a unified society of equals and fellow citizens. The society we commonly find today, full of divisions, antagonisms, and discriminations, does not offer an environment in which we can experience the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It has to be transformed if it is to become the image and likeness of the communion of the divine persons.

3. *The kingdom is God's project in history and eternity.* Jesus Christ, second person of the Blessed Trinity, incarnated in our misery, revealed the divine plan that is to be realized through the course of history and to constitute the definitive future in eternity; the kingdom of God. The kingdom is not just in the future, for it is "in our midst" (Luke 17:21); it is not a kingdom "of this world" (John 18:36), but it nevertheless begins to come about in this world. The kingdom or reign of God means the full and total liberation of all creation, in the end, purified of all that oppresses it, transfigured by the full presence of God.

No other theological or biblical concept is as close to the ideal of integral liberation as this concept of the kingdom of God. This was well expressed by the bishops at Puebla, in the hearing of John Paul II:

There are two complementary and inseparable elements. The first is liberation from all the forms of bondage, from personal and social sin, and from everything that tears apart the human individual and society; all this finds its source in egotism, in the mystery of iniquity. The second element is liberation for progressive growth in being through communion with God and

other human beings; this reaches its culmination in the perfect communion of heaven, where God is all in all and weeping forever ceases [§482; cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 9].

Because the kingdom is the absolute, it embraces all things: sacred and profane history, the church and the world, human beings and the cosmos. Under different sacred and profane signs, the kingdom is always present where persons bring about justice, seek comradeship, forgive each other, and promote life. However, the kingdom finds a particular expression in the church, which is its perceptible sign, its privileged instrument, its "initial budding forth" and principle (see Puebla, §§227-28) insofar as it lives the gospel and builds itself up from day to day as the Body of Christ.

Seeing the kingdom as God's universal project helps us to understand the link joining creation and redemption, time and eternity. The kingdom of God is something more than historical liberations, which are always limited and open to further perfecting, but it is anticipated and incarnated in them in time, in preparation for its full realization with the coming of the new heaven and the new earth.

4. *Jesus, the Son of God, took on oppression in order to set us free.* Jesus is God in our human misery, the Son of God become an individual Jew, at a certain time in history and in a particular social setting. The incarnation of the Word of God implies the assumption of human life as marked by the contradictions left by sin, not in order to consecrate them, but in order to redeem them. In these conditions, Jesus became a "servant" and made himself "obedient even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-11; Mark 10:45). His first public word was to proclaim that the kingdom of God was "at hand" and already present as "good news" (Mark 1:14). When he publicly set out his program in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), he took on the hopes of the oppressed and announced that they were now—"this day"—being fulfilled. So the Messiah is the

one who brings about the liberation of all classes of unfortunates. The kingdom is also liberation from sin (Luke 24:27; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 13:38), but this must not be interpreted in a reductionist sense to the point where the infrastructural dimension in Jesus' preaching stressed by the evangelists is lost sight of.

The kingdom is not presented simply as something to be hoped for in the future; it is already being made concrete in Jesus' actions. His miracles and healings, besides demonstrating his divinity, are designed to show that his liberating proclamation is already being made history among the oppressed, the special recipients of his teaching and first beneficiaries of his actions. The kingdom is a gift of God offered gratuitously to all. But the way into it is through the process of conversion. The conversion demanded by Jesus does not mean just a change of convictions (theory) but above all a change of attitude (practice) toward all one's previous personal, social, and religious relationships.

The liberation wrought by Jesus outside the law and customs of the time, and his radical requirements for a change of behavior along the lines of the Beatitudes, led him into serious conflict with all the authorities of his age. He knew defamation and demoralization, persecution and the threat of death. His capture, torture, judicial condemnation, and crucifixion can be understood only as a consequence of his activity and his life. In a world that refused to listen to his message and to take up the way of conversion, the only alternative open to Jesus as a way of staying faithful to the Father and to his own preaching was to accept martyrdom. The cross is the expression of the human rejection of Jesus, on the one hand, and of his sacrificial acceptance by the Father, on the other.

The resurrection uncovers the absolute meaning of the message of the kingdom, and of Jesus' life and death. It is the definitive triumph of life and of hope for a reconciled kingdom in which universal peace is the fruit of divine justice and the integration of all things in God. The resurrection has to be

seen as full liberation from all the obstacles standing in the way of the lordship of God and the full realization of all the dynamic forces for life and glory placed by God within human beings and the whole of creation.

The resurrection also, and especially, reveals the meaning of the death of the innocent, of those who are rejected for having proclaimed a greater justice—God's justice—and of all those who, like Jesus, support a good cause and are anonymously liquidated. It was not a Caesar at the height of his power who was raised from the dead, but someone destroyed by crucifixion on Calvary. Those who have been unjustly put to death in a good cause share in his resurrection.

Following Jesus means taking up his cause, being ready to bear the persecution it brings and brave enough to share his fate in the hope of inheriting the full liberation that the resurrection offers us.

5. *The Holy Spirit, "Father of the poor," is present in the struggles of the oppressed.* Like the Son, the Holy Spirit was sent into the world to further and complete the work of integral redemption and liberation. The special field of action for the Spirit is history. Like the wind (the biblical meaning of "spirit"), the Spirit is present in everything that implies movement, transformation, growth. No one and nothing is beyond the reach of the Spirit, inside and outside the Christian sphere. The Spirit takes hold of persons, fills them with enthusiasm, endows them with special charisms and abilities to change religion and society, break open rigid institutions and make things new. The Spirit presides over the religious experience of peoples, not allowing them to forget the dimension of eternity or succumb to the appeals of the flesh.

The Holy Spirit becomes a participant in the struggles and resistance of the poor in a quite special way. Not without reason is the Spirit called "Father of the poor" in the liturgy: giving them strength, day after day, to face up to the arduous struggle for their own survival and that of their families, finding the strength to put up with a socio-economic system

that oppresses them, one that they have no hope of changing from one day to the next; helping keep alive their hope that some things will get better and that, united, they will eventually set themselves free. Their piety, their sense of God; their solidarity, hospitality, and fortitude; their native wisdom, fed on suffering and experience; their love for their own children and those of others; their capacity for celebration and joy in the midst of the most painful conflicts; the serenity with which they face the harshness of their struggle for life; their perception of what is possible and viable; their moderation in the use of force and their virtually limitless powers of resistance to the persistent, daily aggression of the socio-economic system with its consequent social marginalization—all these qualities are gifts of the Holy Spirit, forms of the ineffable presence and activity of the Spirit among the oppressed.

But this activity is seen even more clearly when they rise up, decide to take history into their own hands, and organize themselves to bring about the transformation of society in the direction of the dream in which there will be a place for all with dignity and peace. The history of the struggles of the oppressed for their liberation is the history of the call of the Holy Spirit to the heart of a divided world. It is because of the Spirit that the ideals of equality and fellowship, the utopia of a world in which it will be easier to love and recognize in the face of the other the maternal and paternal features of God, will never be allowed to die or be forgotten under the pressure of resignation.

It is also in the light of the action of the Spirit that the emergence of base Christian communities should be understood. More a happening than an institution, they bring into the present the movement Jesus started and commit themselves to the justice of the kingdom of God. This is where the church can be seen to be the sacrament of the Holy Spirit, endowed with many charisms, ministries and services for the good of all and the building of the kingdom in history.

6. *Mary is the prophetic and liberating woman of the*

people. The people's devotion to Mary has deep dogmatic roots: she is the Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin of Nazareth, and the one human being taken up into heavenly glory in all her human reality. From the standpoint of liberation, certain characteristics of hers stand out as dear to Christians of the base communities committed in the light of their faith to the transformation of society.

In the first place, all the theological greatness of Mary is based on the lowliness of her historical condition. She is Mary from Nazareth, a woman of the people, who observed the popular religious customs of the time (the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem [Luke 2:21ff. and 41ff.]), who visited her relatives (Luke 1:39ff.), who would not miss a wedding (John 2), who worried about her son (Luke 2:48-51; Mark 3:31-32), and who followed him to the foot of the cross, as any devoted mother would have done (John 19:25). Because of this ordinariness, and not in spite of it, Mary was everything that faith proclaims her to be, for God did "great things" for her (Luke 1:49).

In the second place, Mary is the perfect example of faith and availability for God's purpose (Luke 1:45, 38). She certainly did not understand the full extent of the mystery being brought about through her—the coming of the Holy Spirit upon her and the virginal conception of the eternal Son of the Father in her womb (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18), but even so she trusted in God's purpose. She thinks not of herself but of others, of her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39ff.), of her son lost on the pilgrimage (Luke 2:43), of those who have no wine at the marriage feast at Cana (John 2:3). Persons can be liberators only if they free themselves from their own preoccupations and place their lives at the service of others, as did Mary, Jesus, and Joseph.

In the third place, Mary is the prophetess of the Magnificat. Anticipating the liberating proclamation of her son, she shows herself attentive and sensitive to the fate of the humiliated and debased; in a context of praising God, she raises her voice in

denunciation and invokes divine revolution in the relationship between oppressors and oppressed. Paul VI gave excellent expression to this whole liberating dimension of Mary in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* of 1974:

Mary of Nazareth, despite her total submission to the will of God, was far from being a passively submissive woman or one given to an alienating religiosity; she was a woman who had no hesitation in affirming that God is the avenger of the humble and oppressed, who pulls down the mighty of this world from their thrones (Luke 1:51-53). We can recognize in Mary, "who stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord" (LG 55), a strong woman, who knew poverty, suffering, flight, and exile (Matt. 2:13-23)—situations that cannot escape the attention of those who with an evangelical spirit seek to channel the liberating energies of man and society [no. 37].

Finally, Mary is as she appears in the popular religion of Latin America. There is no part of Latin America in which the name of Mary is not given to persons, cities, mountains, and innumerable shrines. Mary loves the poor of Latin America. She took on the dark face of the slaves and the persecuted Amerindians. She is the *Morenita* ("little dark girl") in Guadalupe, Mexico; she is *Nossa Senhora da Aparecida*, bound like the slaves in Brazil; she is the dark-complexioned Virgin of Charity in Cuba; the list is endless.

The masses of the poor bring their troubles to the centers of Marian pilgrimage; they dry their tears there and are filled with renewed strength and hope to carry on struggling and surviving. In these places Mary becomes "the sacramental presence of the maternal features of God" (Puebla, §291), the "ever-renewed star of evangelization" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 81), and together with Christ her son, in union with the oppressed, the "protagonist of history" (Puebla, §293).

7. *The church is sign and instrument of liberation.* The church is the inheritor in history of the mystery of Christ and his Spirit, and finds the kingdom in history as its conscious and institutionalized expression. With this, it is still a mystery of faith. It is the organized human response made by Christ's followers to God's gift; this makes it, without division or confusion, at once divine and human, sharing in the weakness of all that is human, and in the glory of all that is divine.

From the beginning of its presence in Latin American history, the church has spread its influence throughout the people. It was often an accomplice in the colonization process that entailed the disintegration of Amerindian cultures, but it has also proclaimed freedom and taken part in processes of liberation. In the last few decades, faced with the growing degradation of the lives of the masses, it has made itself conscious that its mission is one of liberating evangelization.

The best way of evangelizing the poor consists in allowing the poor themselves to become the church and help the whole church to become truly a poor church and a church of the poor. In order to accomplish this, thousands of base communities, Bible-study circles, and centers of pastoral work among the people have sprung up in virtually all parts of Latin America. In these communities Christians have been discovering *communion* as the structural and structuring theological value of the church. Rather than church-institution, organized as a "perfect society" and hierarchically structured, the church should be the community of the faithful living in comradely relationships of sharing, love, and service. These communities are better able to embody the meeting between faith and life, between the gospel and the signs of the times, understood in community, and to be a more transparent witness to Christian commitment, than are large parishes, with their more anonymous character. A vast network of base communities has sprung up, in which cardinals, bishops, priests, religious, and various forms of the lay apostolate all come together.

Despite the tensions attendant upon any living body, there is generally a good spirit of convergence between the institutional church and this wide network of base communities. They can recognize in one another the same evangelical spirit and cooperate in proclaiming the good news of Jesus and working for liberation in a divided society.

These Christian communities, united and in communion with their pastors, form the true base from which the church can become, as a matter of fact and not just of rhetoric, the people of God on pilgrimage, on its way. If they are to be the people of God, Christians have first to become a people—that is, a network of living communities working out their understandings, planning their courses of action, and organizing themselves for action. When this people enters the church through faith, baptism, and evangelical practice, it makes the church the people of God in history, which in Latin America is becoming more and more closely allied with popular culture.

This new route taken by the people of God with its new communities has created the various ministries and services necessary to attend to the religious and human needs that arise; roles and styles of pastoral ministration have been re-defined, and the communities as a whole have taken on the task of evangelization.

A church thus born of the faith of the people can truly show itself as the sign of the integral liberation that the Father wills for his children, and as the proper instrument for its implementation in history. In its celebrations, popular dramatizations, ritualization of sacramental life, and its whole variety of religious creativity, it gives symbolical expression to the liberation already experienced by the people—fragile, certainly, but nevertheless true and anticipatory of the full liberation to come in the final kingdom of the Father.

8. *The rights of the poor are God's rights.* Theological reflection on the primacy of dignity of the poor, as explained in the last chapter, has helped to lead the churches to develop their concern for the defense and promotion of human rights.

Pastoral work among the poor has led to the discovery of their historical strength and sacred dignity. Part of integral evangelization consists in fostering a sense of the inviolability of individual human beings and in guaranteeing their basic rights, particularly those in the *social* sphere. The liberal-bourgeois tradition defends individual rights disconnected from society and from basic solidarity with all. Liberation theology has corrected and enriched this tradition by taking account of biblical sources. These speak primarily of the rights of the poor, of outcasts, of orphans and widows. All who are unprotected and downtrodden find their guarantor and advocate in God. God and the Messiah take on the defense of those who have no one to plead for them.

The rights of the poor are the rights of God. The struggle for promotion of human dignity and defense of threatened rights must begin with the rights of the poor. They show us the need for a certain hierarchization of rights; first must come *basic* rights, the rights to life and to the means of sustaining life (food, work, basic health care, housing, literacy); then come the other human rights: freedom of expression, of conscience, of movement, and of religion.

Throughout Latin America there are now hundreds of action groups, Justice and Peace groups, centers for the Defense of Human Rights, for example, in which the poor themselves, together with their allies (lawyers or other "organic intellectuals") make prophetic denunciations of the violations they suffer, discuss their experiences with other movements, organize resistance, and defend those accused in the courts. As the bishops at Puebla said: "The love of God . . . for us today must become first and foremost a labor of justice on behalf of the oppressed, an effort of liberation for those who are most in need of it" (§327; cf. §1145).

9. *Liberated human potential becomes liberative.* Liberation theology, which is essentially practical, has an immediate bearing on human ethics and attitudes. It has produced a new schematization of how to be Christian in the contemporary

world, as we shall show at the end of this book. Here, we want only to point out some aspects of the ethical implications.

Christians are faced with the social and structural sin of oppression and injustice under which great numbers of persons are suffering. This is the sin that festers in the institutions and structures of society, inclining individuals and groups to behavior contrary to God's purpose. Let us be clear that "structures" are not just things but forms of relatedness between things and the persons bound up with them. Overcoming social sin requires a will to transformation, to a change of structures, so that they allow for more justice and participation in their functioning. Evangelical conversion requires more than a change of heart; it also requires a liberation of social organization insofar as it produces and reproduces sinful patterns of behavior. This social conversion is brought about through transformative social struggle, with the tactics and strategy suited to bringing about the changes needed. Social sin has to be opposed by social grace, fruit of God's gift and of human endeavor inspired by God.

Charity as a form of being-for-others will always have its validity. But in the social dimension, loving means collaborating in the formation of new structures, supporting those that represent an advance in the campaign for a better quality of life, and political commitment in favor of an option for solidarity with the poor. There is a particular challenge to social love in class struggle, an aspect of the reality of a society marked by class antagonisms. By his example Jesus showed that there can be compatibility between love of others and opposition to their attitudes. We have to love others as such in whatever situation, but we also have to oppose attitudes and systems that do not conform to the ethical criteria of Jesus' message. Social peace and reconciliation are possible only to the extent that the real motives that continually provoke conflict are superseded: unequal and unjust relationships between capital and labor; racial, cultural, and sexual discrimination. So there are specific challenges to the holiness of liberative

Christians: to love without hating; to fight for the success of a just cause without being deceived by emotions; and, although respecting different opinions, being objective about one's own position and safeguarding the unity of the community.

Struggle for liberation alongside the oppressed has provoked persecutions and martyrdoms. Living the spirit of the Beatitudes in this context, accepting such consequences as a part of evangelical commitment, forces Christians to be truly free, already members of the kingdom of God, and therefore effective workers for liberation. Here the spirituality of resurrection takes on its full meaning: rather than celebrate the triumph of life, it demonstrates the victory of a crucified Liberator who, because he freely gave his life for others, inherited the fullness of God's life.

Liberative Christians unite heaven and earth, the building of the human city with the eschatological city of God, the promotion of the minimum of life in the present with the maximum of life in eternity. They reject nothing that is truly human and has therefore been taken up by the Son of God; they do everything they can toward the full liberation that will be realized when the Lord comes, to bring to its fullness all that men and women, and especially the oppressed, have brought about.

Other Challenges to Liberation Theology

Besides the key themes already listed, liberation theology faces many other challenges, specific subjects for its attention that are being studied and acted upon in the light of the intuitions and procedures proper to this type of reflection. So, for example, particularly in Central America—in view of the seriousness of the state of violence there—a "theology of life" is being worked out, in opposition to the socio-historical mechanisms of death. This has led to the associated development of a critical "theology of the economy" and "theology of politics."

Women as such are not so much a subject for study as a perspective from which all subjects can and should be examined by both men and women. Black and indigenous theologies are being worked out by these groups themselves, both collaborating with and complementing other strands of liberation theology. From the outset, of course, spirituality has been a prime concern of liberation theologians, particularly those working from within the religious orders and CLAR (*Conferencia Latinoamericana de Religiosos*), and centers of pastoral work.

Whatever the subject, the common element in the endeavor, its *tonus firmus*, is the articulation between the dogmatic content of faith and its practical and social application. The achievements of Christian faith are permanently tied to historical needs. It is this approximation and confrontation that give birth to the liberating dimension of the Christian message.

Temptations Facing Liberation Theology

Let us not pass over the temptations to which liberation theologians can be liable, temptations pointed out some time ago by critics and—at least in part—repeated by the magisterium. But at the same time it should be noted that most liberation theologians take account of these in their own work. Some of them are:

Disregard for mystical roots, from which all true commitment to liberation springs, and overemphasis of political action. It is in prayer and contemplation, and intimate and communitarian contact with God, that the motivations for a faith-inspired commitment to the oppressed and all humankind spring and are renewed.

Overstressing the political aspect of questions relating to oppression and liberation, at the expense of other, more supple and more deeply human aspects: friendship, pardon, feeling for leisure and celebration, open dialogue with everyone, sensitivity to artistic and spiritual riches.

Subordinating considerations of faith to considerations of society in one-sided constructs paying too much attention to class struggle and too little to what is specifically religious and Christian. This temptation affects exegesis and liturgy above all.

Absolutization of liberation theology, downgrading the value of other theologies, and overemphasizing the socioeconomic aspects of evangelical poverty, which can lead to underemphasis on other types of social oppression, such as discrimination against blacks, women, or indigenous cultures.

Excessive stress laid on differences between liberation theology and the classic tradition of the church in ethics, ideals, and pastoral initiatives, instead of stressing points of continuity.

Lack of concern for deepening dialogue with other Christian churches or with other contemporary theologies and the doctrinal and social teachings of the universal and local magisterium, with a consequent lack of enrichment that could be derived from them to produce a more fruitful liberation theology.

Unconcern on the part of liberation theologians for making themselves intelligible to the different levels of church authority, with a consequent delay in the process of converting the church to the poor and in the ecclesiastical championing of human rights, which apply in the religious sphere as well.

The way to overcome all these temptations is for liberation theologians to become ever more strongly imbued with a sense of Christ, being "those who have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). They also need to be firmly linked to the ecclesial community and deeply nourished by the vigorous mystical sustenance of popular religion and faith.