

Chapter 5

A Concise History of Liberation Theology

Antecedents

The historical roots of liberation theology are to be found in the prophetic tradition of evangelists and missionaries from the earliest colonial days in Latin America—churchmen who questioned the type of presence adopted by the church and the way indigenous peoples, blacks, mestizos, and the poor rural and urban masses were treated. The names of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio de Montesinos, Antonio Vieira, Brother Caneca, and others can stand for a whole host of religious personalities who have graced every century of our short history. They are the source of the type of social and ecclesial understanding that is emerging today.

Social and Political Development

The populist governments of the 1950s and 1960s—especially those of Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Cárdenas in Mexico—inspired nationalistic consciousness and significant industrial development in the shape of import substitution. This benefited the middle classes and urban proletariat but threw huge sectors of the peasantry into deeper

rural marginalization or sprawling urban shantytowns. Development proceeded along the lines of dependent capitalism, subsidiary to that of the rich nations and excluding the great majorities of national populations. This process led to the creation of strong popular movements seeking profound changes in the socio-economic structure of their countries. These movements in turn provoked the rise of military dictatorships, which sought to safeguard or promote the interests of capital, associated with a high level of "national security" achieved through political repression and police control of all public demonstrations.

In this context the socialist revolution in Cuba stood out as an alternative leading to the dissolution of the chief cause of underdevelopment: dependence. Pockets of armed uprising appeared in many countries, aimed at overthrowing the ruling powers and installing socialist-inspired regimes. There was a great stirring for change among the popular sections of society, a truly prerevolutionary atmosphere.

Ecclesial Development

Starting in the 1960s, a great wind of renewal blew through the churches. They began to take their social mission seriously: lay persons committed themselves to work among the poor, charismatic bishops and priests encouraged the calls for progress and national modernization. Various church organizations promoted understanding of and improvements in the living conditions of the people: movements such as Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Agriculturalists, the Movement for Basic Education, groups that set up educational radio programs, and the first base ecclesial communities.

The work of these—generally middle-class—Christians was sustained theologically by the European theology of earthly realities, the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain, the social personalism of Mounier, the progressive evolutionism of

Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac's reflections on the social dimension of dogma, Yves Congar's theology of the laity, and the work of M.-D. Chenu. The Second Vatican Council then gave the best possible theoretical justification to activities developed under the signs of a theology of progress, of authentic secularization and human advancement.

The end of the 1960s, with the crisis of populism and the developmentalist model, brought the advent of a vigorous current of sociological thinking, which unmasked the true causes of underdevelopment. Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin. All the nations of the Western world were engaged in a vast process of development; however, it was interdependent and unequal, organized in such a way that the benefits flowed to the already developed countries of the "center" and the disadvantages were meted out to the historically backward and underdeveloped countries of the "periphery." The poverty of Third World countries was the price to be paid for the First World to be able to enjoy the fruits of overabundance.

In ecclesial circles by now accustomed to following developments in society and studies of its problems, this interpretation acted as a leaven, yielding a new vitality and critical spirit in pastoral circles. The relationship of dependence of the periphery on the center had to be replaced by a process of breaking away and liberation. So the basis of a theology of development was undermined and the theoretical foundations for a theology of liberation were laid. Its material foundations were provided only when popular movements and Christian groups came together in the struggle for social and political liberation, with the ultimate aim of complete and integral liberation. This was when the objective conditions for an authentic liberation theology came about.

Theological Development

The first theological reflections that were to lead to liberation theology had their origins in a context of dialogue be-

tween a church and a society in ferment, between Christian faith and the longings for transformation and liberation arising from the people. The Second Vatican Council produced a theological atmosphere characterized by great freedom and creativity. This gave Latin American theologians the courage to think for themselves about pastoral problems affecting their countries. This process could be seen at work among both Catholic and Protestant thinkers with the group Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) taking a prominent part. There were frequent meetings between Catholic theologians (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Segundo Galilea, Juan Luis Segundo, Lucio Gera, and others) and Protestant (Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana, Rubem Alves, José Míguez Bonino), leading to intensified reflection on the relationship between faith and poverty, the gospel and social justice, and the like. In Brazil, between 1959 and 1964, the Catholic left produced a series of basic texts on the need for a Christian ideal of history, linked to popular action, with a methodology that foreshadowed that of liberation theology; they urged personal engagement in the world, backed up by studies of social and liberal sciences, and illustrated by the universal principles of Christianity.

At a meeting of Latin American theologians held in Petrópolis (Rio de Janeiro) in March 1964, Gustavo Gutiérrez described theology as critical reflection on praxis. This line of thought was further developed at meetings in Havana, Bogotá, and Cuernavaca in June and July 1965. Many other meetings were held as part of the preparatory work for the Medellín conference of 1968; these acted as laboratories for a theology worked out on the basis of pastoral concerns and committed Christian action. Lectures given by Gustavo Gutiérrez in Montreal in 1967 and at Chimbote in Peru on the poverty of the Third World and the challenge it posed to the development of a pastoral strategy of liberation were a further powerful impetus toward a theology of liberation. Its outlines were first put forward at the theological congress at Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1969: "Toward a Theology of Liberation."

The first Catholic congresses devoted to liberation theology

were held in Bogotá in March 1970 and July 1971. On the Protestant side, ISAL organized something similar in Buenos Aires the same years.

Finally, in December 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez published his seminal work, *Teología de la liberación*. In May Hugo Assmann had conducted a symposium, "Oppression-Liberation: The Challenge to Christians," in Montevideo, and Leonardo Boff had published a series of articles under the title *Jesús Cristo Libertador* (see the Bibliography for details on these and other basic works). The door was opened for the development of a theology from the periphery dealing with the concerns of this periphery, concerns that presented and still present an immense challenge to the evangelizing mission of the church.

Formulation

For the sake of clarity and a better understanding of the advances made, the formulation of liberation theology can be divided into four stages.

The Foundational Stage

The foundations were laid by those who sketched the general outlines of this way of doing theology. Besides the all-important writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, outstanding works were produced by Juan Luis Segundo: *De la sociedad a la teología* (1970), *Liberación de la teología* (1975); by Hugo Assmann: *Teología desde la praxis de liberación* (1973); Lucio Gera: *Apuntes para una interpretación de la Iglesia argentina* (1970), *Teología de la liberación* (1973). Others who should be mentioned are Bishop (later Cardinal) Eduardo Pironio, secretary of CELAM, Segundo Galilea, and Raimundo Caramuru, principal theological consultant to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference. There was also a great ferment of activity in the shape of courses and retreats during this period.

On the Protestant side, besides Emilio Castro and Julio de

Santa Ana, the outstanding contributions were made by Rubem Alves: *Religion: Opium of the People or Instrument of Liberation* (1969), and José Míguez Bonino: *La fe en busca de eficacia* (1967) and *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975).

Lay persons such as Héctor Borrat, Methol Ferré, and Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza did valuable work in linking theology with the social sciences, as did the Belgian priest François Houtart and the Chilean G. Arroyo.

The Building Stage

The first stage was characterized by the presentation of liberation theology as a sort of "fundamental theology"—that is, as an opening up of new horizons and perspectives that gave a new outlook on the whole of theology. The second stage moved on to the first efforts at giving the liberation approach doctrinal content. Three areas received most attention as corresponding to the most urgent needs in the life of the church: spirituality, christology, and ecclesiology. There was a wide range of publications from many Latin American countries. The main writers: in Argentina, Enrique Dussel, Juan Carlos Scannone, Severino Croatto, and Aldo Buntig; in Brazil, João Batista Libânio, Frei Betto, Carlos Mesters, José Comblin, Eduardo Hoornaert, José Oscar Beozzo, Gilberto Gorgulho, Carlos Palácio, Leonardo Boff; in Chile, Ronaldo Muñoz, Sergio Torres, and Pablo Richard; in Mexico, Raúl Viales, Luis del Valle, Arnaldo Zenteno, Camilo Maccise, and Jesús García; in Central America, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, Juan H. Pico, Uriel Molina; in Venezuela, Pedro Trigo and Otto Maduro (sociologist); in Colombia, Luis Patiño and Cecilio de Llorca.

The Settling-in Stage

With the process of theological reflection well advanced, the need was seen for a dual process of "settling in" if the

theology of liberation was to become firmly established. On the one hand was the understanding that the theological current needed to be given a firm epistemological basis: how to avoid duplications and confusions of language and levels while giving coherent expression to the themes arising from original spiritual experience, taking in the analytical *seeing* stage, moving on to the theological *judging* stage, and so to the pastoral *action* stage? Good liberation theology presupposes the art of linking its theories with the explicit inclusion of practice; in this area liberation theology found fruitful collaborators, not only for its own purposes, but for those of the overall theological process. On the other hand, the "settling in" process was effectively achieved through the deliberate mingling of theologians and other intellectuals in popular circles and processes of liberation.

More and more theologians became pastors too, militant agents of inspiration for the life of the church at its grass roots and those of society. It became usual to see theologians taking part in involved epistemological discussions in learned congresses, then leaving to go back to their bases among the people to become involved in matters of catechesis, trade union politics, and community organization.

Names again are many; a selection should include Antônio A. da Silva, Rogério de Almeida Cunha, Clodovis Boff, Hugo d'Ans, Francisco Taborda, Marcelo de Barros, and Eliseu Lopes, all from Brazil; Elsa Tamez and Victorio Araya from Costa Rica; D. Irarrazaval, Carmen Llorca, Rioldo Ames, R. Antoncich, and the late Hugo Echegaray, from Peru; Victor Codina from Bolivia; Virgilio Elizondo from Texas; J. L. Caravia from Ecuador; Lâennec Hurbon from Haiti.

The Formalization Stage

Any original theological vision tends, with the passage of time and through its own internal logic, to seek more formal expression. Liberation theology always set out to reexamine

the whole basic content of revelation and tradition so as to bring out the social and liberating dimensions implicit in both sources. Again, this is not a matter of reducing the totality of mystery to this one dimension, but of underlining aspects of a greater truth particularly relevant to our context of oppression and liberation.

Such a formalization also corresponds to pastoral requirements. The last few years have seen a great extension of situations in which the church has become involved with the oppressed, with a very large number of pastoral workers involved. Many movements have come into being under the tutelage, to a large extent, of liberation theology; these in turn have posed new challenges to liberation theology. In Brazil alone, there are movements or centers for black unity and conscientization, human rights, defense of slum-dwellers, marginalized women, mission to Amerindians, rural pastoral strategy, and so forth—all concerned in one way or another with the poorest of the poor seeking liberation.

To cope with this broad pastoral need and give theological underpinning to the training of pastoral workers, a group of more than one hundred Catholic theologians (with ecumenical contacts and Protestant collaborators) have been planning a series of fifty-five volumes under the heading *Theology and Liberation*, with Portuguese and Spanish publication starting in late 1985 and translations into other languages planned. Its aim will be to cover all the basic themes of theology and pastoral work from a liberation viewpoint. There are too many persons involved at this stage to list them here: all those from the earlier stages would be included, together with a number of new collaborators.

Support and Opposition

Liberation theology spread by virtue of the inner dynamism with which it codified Christian faith as it applies to the pastoral needs of the poor. Meetings, congresses, theologi-

cal reviews, and the support of prophetic bishops—Hélder Câmara, Luis Proaño, Samuel Ruiz, Sergio Méndez Arceo, and Cardinals Paulo Evaristo Arns and D. A. Lorscheider, among many others—have helped to give it weight and credibility.

A series of events has been instrumental in spreading this theology and ensuring its "reception" among theologians the world over:

- The congress at El Escorial, Spain, in July 1972 on the subject of "Christian faith and the transformation of society in Latin America."
- The first congress of Latin American theologians, held in Mexico City in August 1975.
- The first formal contacts between liberation theologians and advocates of U.S. black liberation and other liberation movements—feminist, Amerindian, and the like.
- The creation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976 and the congresses it has held: Dar es Salaam in 1976, Accra in 1977, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, in 1979, São Paulo in 1980, Geneva in 1983, Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1986. All these produced Final Conclusions with their particular characteristics, but all within the framework of liberation theology.
- Finally, the international theological review *Concilium* (published in seven languages) devoted a complete issue (vol. 6, no. 10, June 1974) to the subject of liberation theology, with all the articles coming from Latin American liberation theologians.

A number of important reviews in Latin America have become regular vehicles for the publication of articles and discussions by liberation theologians: in Mexico, *Christus, Servir*, and *Contacto*; in Venezuela, *SIC*; in Chile, *Pastoral Popular*; in Brazil, *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* (REB), *Grande Sinal*, *Puebla*, and *Perspectiva Teológica*; in El Salvador, *Estudios Centroamericanos* (ECA) and *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*; in Panama, *Dílogo Social*.

Most countries in Latin America also have centers for theological and pastoral studies: CEAS (*Centro de Estudos e Ação*, Salvador), CEP (*Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones*, Lima), ITER (*Instituto de Teologia do Recife*), DEI (*Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones*, San José, Costa Rica), CAV (*Centre Antonio Valdivieso*, Managua), and many more. They have been important for training students imbued with a liberation approach.

While all these developments were taking place, reservations and opposition began to be expressed by some who feared the faith was becoming overpoliticized, and by others who mistrusted any use of Marxist categories in analyzing social structures. Also many were unable to accept the deep changes in the structure of capitalist society postulated by this theology. This negative reaction crystalized around three figures in particular: Alfonso López Trujillo, formerly secretary and later president of CELAM, Roger Vekemans of CEDIAL (*Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo e Integración de América Latina*, Bogotá) and the review *Tierra Nueva*, and Bonaventura Kloppenburg, formerly director of the Medellín Pastoral Institute, later auxiliary bishop of Salvador, Brazil, and author of *Christian Salvation and Human Temporal Progress* (1979).

The Magisterium of the Church

As a general rule, the magisterium watches the development of new theologies with close attention but rarely intervenes and then only with great caution and discreet support or opposition.

As far back as 1971, the final document "Justice in the World," the topic of the second ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops, already showed traces of liberation theology. Its echoes had become much stronger by 1974, at the third assembly of the Synod, on "Evangelization of the Modern World." The following year, Paul VI devoted fifteen para-

graphs of his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* to the relationship between evangelization and liberation (nos. 25-39). This discussion forms the central core of the document, and without attempting to summarize the pope's position, we can just say that it is one of the most profound, balanced, and theological expositions yet made of the longing of the oppressed for liberation.

The magisterium has also produced the "Instruction on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology," under the auspices of the Prefect and Secretariat of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dated August 6, 1984, and published September 3. The main points about this document are its legitimation of the expression and purpose of liberation theology, and its warning to Christians of the risk inherent in an uncritical acceptance of Marxism as a dominant principle in theological endeavor. The subject had been studied in Rome since 1974, and had been the concern of innumerable sessions of the International Theological Commission, though it did not publish any results until 1977, when it produced a "Declaration on Human Development and Christian Salvation" (included as an appendix in Kloppenburg's book mentioned above), which shows a grasp of the questions such as was to be expected from such an august theological body.

The magisterium of the church in Latin America has expressed itself primarily through the documents of two conferences. The second general conference of the episcopate of Latin America, held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, spoke of the church "listening to the cry of the poor and becoming the interpreter of their anguish"; this was the first flowering of the theme of liberation, which began to be worked out systematically only after Medellín. The third general conference, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, shows the theme of liberation running right through its final document. The liberation dimension is seen as an "integral part" (§§355, 1254, 1283) of the mission of the church, "indispensable" (§§562, 1270), "essential" (§1302). A large part of the document (§§470-506) is

devoted to evangelization, liberation, and human promotion, and a whole chapter (§§1134-56) to the "preferential option for the poor," a central axis of liberation theology.

The general tenor of the pronouncements of the magisterium, whether papal or coming from the Synod of Bishops, has been to recognize the positive aspects of liberation theology, especially with reference to the poor and the need for their liberation, as forming part of the universal heritage of Christian commitment to history. Criticisms of certain tendencies within liberation theology, which have to be taken into account, do not negate the vigorous and healthy nucleus of this form of Christian thinking, which has done so much to bring the message of the historical Jesus to the world of today.

Chapter 6

Liberation Theology Worldwide

Liberation theology has been called an "infant theology." It is certainly young: born in the early 1970s. Yet there is no denying that it has already made its presence felt worldwide. This chapter aims at providing a brief sketch of its worldwide presence in three broad areas: theology, the institutional church, and social and political issues.

A Dynamic and Inspiring Theology

Among theological currents in the churches today, there is no doubt that liberation theology stands out as having particular dynamism. The roots of this dynamism are to be found much more in popular movements, in society, and in the local churches with which it is associated than in theology itself. Because its subject matter is relevant and specific, its writings are read in very wide circles, particularly by those who are engaged in pastoral work among the very poor.

Here, however, we are confining ourselves rather to professional liberation theology and its spread through the professional theological field, leaving aside its pastoral and popular expressions. These expressions, it goes without saying, are strongly present in many institutes of higher education, in seminaries and training centers for pastoral workers, and lie

behind the pastoral approach of innumerable local churches and even some national ones.

Let us now see how liberation theology relates to the wider field of universal theological endeavor: in the Third World, and in the First and Second, respectively.

In the Third World

There is no doubt that Latin America and the Caribbean are the areas where the influence of liberation theology has been most strongly felt, to the point where it has become virtually synonymous with "Latin American theology." This is readily understandable: it came to birth there, and there found the fruitful soil of peoples the vast majority of whom were both Christian and oppressed, and of a church seeking to march with this people on the road to liberation.

The strength of liberation theology varies from country to country, though it is present in all. In some it is relatively weak; in others strong—Peru, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Central America.

The Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR) has become a major arena for elaboration and experience of the great intuitions of liberation theology, especially as it affects the religious life. The same is true of many national religious conferences, particularly that of Brazil.

Three major scholarly institutes that support the basic orientation of liberation theology should be mentioned: CEHILA, the Commission for Studies in Latin American Church History; CEBI, the Center for Biblical Studies; and CESEP, the Ecumenical Center for Service and Evangelization of the People. CEHILA has undertaken the vast task of rewriting the whole history of Latin America and the Caribbean from the viewpoint of the poor—from a liberation perspective, that is—and several volumes of this huge project have already been published. CEBI promotes studies, courses, and publications that re-present the Bible in a liberating and

popular sense. In Brazil it has a network of more than fifteen regional centers, rooted in the base communities in different parts of Brazil, whose object is to encourage widespread reading of the Bible among the people and the training of "people's exegetes." It is currently publishing a series of "people's commentaries" on the whole Bible. CESEP is an ecumenical institute which trains qualified agents from all over Latin America and the Caribbean in liberating pastoral work. There are also other ecumenical organizations inspired by liberation theology, such as CEDI (the Ecumenical Center for Dissemination and Information), in Brazil, ISAL (Church and Society in Latin America), and others.

In addition, other religious bodies, such as Catholic publishers (Vozes, Paulinas, Loyola, DEI, CRT, etc.), act as vehicles for the production and dissemination of liberation theology. It is *in* and *with* all these bodies that this theology develops, enriching them and being enriched by them in its turn.

The main areas of concern of Latin American and Caribbean liberation theology are, as we have seen, concern for the socio-economically poor and their struggle for liberation. This approach is being developed in dialogue with fraternal theologies, particularly from Africa and Asia, whose accents—as we shall see—are different, but always complementary.

Africa has a liberation theology with its own sources. Since the Second Vatican Council (and even earlier), African theologians have been reflecting on the need for cultural integration of faith and the church on the continent of Africa. Their exchanges with Latin American theology have only served to enrich an already established indigenous current of thought. African liberation theology is particularly well rooted in Zaire, Tanzania, Ghana, and South Africa. In South Africa the part played by the churches in the struggle against apartheid is well known. Here "black liberation theology" and "contextual theology" are the most deeply committed currents in the struggle. They are in regular contact with both black liberation

theology in the U.S.A., and with Latin American theology. Latin American theology in turn has benefited from African theology, which has forced it to more basic thinking about cultural and racial phenomena.

Asia too has its own process of liberation thinking, particularly in India, Korea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Here the main accent is on establishing a fruitful dialogue between Christianity and the other great religions of the area, with a view to awakening their huge potential for social liberation. Particularly at the outset, Asiatic theology took its inspiration from Latin America, whose theology it has in turn enriched through its sensitivity to the values of the great Eastern religions and especially to their strongly mystical bent.

In the First World

First world theologians have also woken up to the confrontation between Christian faith and the contradictions specific to so-called advanced societies. Thus black liberation theology has become firmly established in the U.S.A., deeply committed to the civil rights campaign waged by American blacks.

There is also a European theology of liberation developing under the direct influence of Latin American theology, particularly lively in Spain. This European liberation theology is concerned with the responsibilities of the First World with regard to the Third, with the problems of the "new poor" of advanced industrial societies (young drug addicts, the institutionalized elderly, migrant workers), not to mention questions such as ecology and nuclear energy.

The influence of feminist liberation theology—produced, naturally, by women theologians—is widespread throughout the First World. This theology sees women's liberation as an integral dimension of overall liberation, and is taking ever-increasing account of the close links that exist between sexual and economic oppression, and therefore of the political power

of a feminist movement based on majority classes. It has the further tasks of trying to eliminate the sexist elements in traditional theology and rethinking the whole of faith from a feminine standpoint.

There is also the growing influence of liberation theology in the underdeveloped pockets of the First World, such as the thirty million persons of Hispanic origin in the United States, especially Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants.

In general, however, the way Latin American theology is making an increasing impact in theological, ecclesial, and cultural circles in the First World is through translations of books and discussions held in a large number of cultural congresses and institutes. Symptomatic of this is the number of young persons taking doctorates at famous European universities—Louvain, Paris, Salamanca, Rome, Tübingen, Münster—who choose themes connected with liberation theology for their doctoral theses.

In the Second World, the Socialist Bloc

There is little known about the state of theological thinking in this area, and still less about possible developments along the lines or influence of liberation theology. Just a few echoes come through, such as the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret's comment that the Roman document on liberation theology shows Rome to be afraid of it because it is afraid of socialism.

There is also the fact that seventy theologians from socialist countries met with a group of theologians from Latin America in Matanzas, Cuba, in January 1979, to discuss the social responsibilities of the Christian faith faced with challenges of our time.

As a final note to this section, it should be said that liberation theology, rather than trying to invade the field of universal theology, has been waking up to its proper function, which

is to meditate on faith in history. So we are not here dealing so much with one theological current influencing others or even recolonizing them, nor with one particular theology engaging in dialogue with others within an ill-defined "theological pluralism." It is rather a question of a movement of the whole of theology, albeit with varied emphases, energizing and influencing all theologies. To put it succinctly: liberation theology is not a *theological movement*, but *theology in movement*. Latin American theology is therefore not so much a source or focal point of liberation theology as, more modestly, a humble catalyst and relatively dynamic element in this universal current. But until its central inspiration has been incorporated into theology as a whole, liberation theology has to appear as a particular current, devoted to what its name implies, distinct from other currents and programmatic in character. But even at this stage it is open to all theology and conscious of the fact that its final destiny is to disappear as a particular theology and become simply theology.

A Theology with an Impact

This section deals with the impact of liberation theology on the church as institution, from its highest levels down to its bases.

On the Universal Level

Starting out in Latin America, the concerns of liberation theology soon reached the highest levels of the Catholic Church, particularly during and since the 1974 Synod of Bishops, as we saw in the preceding chapter. Today the language of the poor and of liberation has become an integral part of papal pronouncements and of those of the ecclesiastical magisterium as a whole.

The Vatican document on liberation theology had the effect of bringing it to the attention of a wide public throughout the

world, and producing a real "boom" in discussion of it throughout the universal church. Investigations into the works of Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez likewise had the effect of spreading interest in their type of theology.

Other Christian churches have also become involved in discussion of liberation theology, particularly in assemblies of the World Council of Churches, such as the fourth general assembly at Uppsala in 1968, the Bangkok assembly in 1973 on "Salvation Today," and the fifth general assembly in Nairobi in 1975.

Liberation theology has certainly moved beyond being a regional theology and is increasingly becoming a universal theology—that is, a truly "ecumenical" and "catholic" theology.

On the Regional Level

As the documents mentioned in the previous chapter show, since the Medellín conference of 1968 the bishops of Latin America have been absorbing the message of liberation theology to the extent that it now, to a greater or lesser degree, impregnates the fields of preaching, liturgy, catechesis, spirituality, and even literary and artistic expression. There is no denying that, since Puebla, the Latin American bishops' conference, CELAM, has had some difficulty in taking a detached view of the liberation project and in understanding its import: as we have seen, there is opposition to it in some circles.

As for the churches in individual countries, the situation varies: some bishops' conferences are against it, some are undecided, and others have adopted a sympathetic approach, welcoming its positive contributions, although making constructive criticism. Brazil is probably the country where the attitude of the bishops as a whole has been most closely in harmony with liberation theology, finding its spiritual orientation close to their own prophetic approach.

On the Base Level

This is where liberation theology is most present and alive. Not that it has penetrated them: these Christian communities have not had a theology imposed on them from outside or above. By no means. But it has been these communities—leaders and members—that have begun to reflect on their faith in a liberating spirit. The special contribution made by professional liberation theology has been to increase—or at most, to awaken—the spirit of theological-liberative reflection shared by pastors and faithful. There is no doubt that liberation theology on all its levels is the mode of thinking about faith that is having the most lively and enriching effect on the pastoral practices and religious life of the churches in general.

As we have seen earlier, liberation theologians have, at the urgent request of bishops, religious, and lay persons, acted as advisors at pastoral councils, general chapters of religious congregations, national and regional meetings of socio-pastoral agencies concerned with slum-dwellers, blacks, women, indigenes, to the point where one can say that theology inspires pastoral work as much as pastoral work inspires theology.

A Public and Prophetic Theology

Liberation theology has spread beyond the boundaries of the church and today is in the public domain. Why? Because it deals with issues that affect the whole of society. Let us take a quick look at this on the civil and political levels.

On the Civil Level

The Vatican document on liberation theology had the effect of increasing still further the already widespread and growing public interest in this theology. Liberation theology is now considered news by all the communications media. It is a

subject of discussion in universities, trade unions, and all sorts of scholarly and political institutes. It is a subject of conversation in families, in bars and cafés, on street corners, to an extent that recalls the early church, where the population as a whole was passionately concerned in the theological debates of the time.

On the Political Level

Because of the political implications of a liberating Christianity, governments in various parts of the world have felt the need to take up positions either for or against liberation theology.

Alarm bells have rung most loudly in the United States. In 1969 President Nixon sent Nelson Rockefeller to Latin America to investigate the situation. His report stated that the church there was changing into "a force devoted to change, by revolutionary means if necessary." The Report of the Rand Corporation, made at the request of the State Department in 1972, came to the same conclusion. Better known is the Santa Fe Document, produced by advisors to President Reagan in 1982, which explicitly states: "American foreign policy must begin to counterattack (and not just react against) liberation theology." In order to put this into effect, the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD) was set up in the United States, with the aim (among others) of mounting an ideological campaign against Latin American liberation theology. A Catholic theologian at this institute has stated: "Events in Iran and Nicaragua began to show political analysts that it is dangerous, when making their calculations, to omit the religious factor, particularly the ideas of theologians."

As for the authoritarian regimes of Latin America, Enrique Dussel has remarked that liberation theologians are more of a threat to them than are militant communists. And the German theologian Karl Rahner commented, as did Gustavo Gutiérrez,

that being a liberation theologian in Latin America today is tantamount to being a candidate for martyrdom.

There is little information on any possible influence in the Socialist bloc, though we do know that members of the Moscow Academy of Sciences have discussed the topic of Latin American liberation theology with interest.

It is worth noting that Fidel Castro is devoting considerable attention to the political and ethical significance of Latin American liberation theology, regarding its arguments as far more persuasive than those of Marxism itself. He is known to be personally studying and discussing the works of its principal authors.

With regard to militant Marxist groups in Latin America and elsewhere, it is enough here to say that liberation theology has shown:

- that Marxism no longer has a monopoly on historical change: Christians have adopted this cause in the name of their faith and have done so without taking up combative or polemical stances;
- that the Christian appeal to social commitment is meeting with a special response among the religious masses of Latin America, and demonstrating a power to communicate that the traditional revolutionary ideologies have been losing to an ever-increasing extent;
- that Christian faith is freeing itself, irreversibly, from the shackles of capitalism, which can now no longer count on the church as one of the pillars of its ideological framework; on the contrary, it is now being surprised by frontal assaults delivered from the heart of the Christian faith.

To repeat the statement of an eminent Italian Catholic politician and intellectual: liberation theology provides the most convincing refutation of modern atheism, because it has demonstrated, through its actions, that God is no longer a source of alienation in history, but the fountainhead of social commitment.

The Historical Significance of Liberation Theology

All that has been said above leads to certain conclusions about the extent to which liberation theology overflows the confines of the traditional field of theology and affects humanity itself.

1. Liberation theology is the first theology worked out on the periphery on the basis of questions raised by the periphery but with universal implications. It is the articulated cry of the oppressed, of the new barbarians beating at the gates of the empire of plenty of the nations of the center, demanding humanity, solidarity, and the opportunity to live in dignity and peace. Today, such objectives can be achieved only after a harsh struggle for liberation, to which Christian faith seeks to make its contribution.

2. Liberation theology puts on the agenda for discussion questions that concern all human beings, whatever their ideological bent or religious adherence. They concern all those who still have a spark of humanity left for considering the problems of the millions and millions of poor persons, of international justice, of the future for the wretched of the earth.

3. There is a prophetic call coming from liberation theology, in that it denounces the causes that produce oppression, and inspires an outpouring of generosity destined to overcome destructive relationships and build freedom for everyone.

4. Liberation theology belongs to contemporary history; it does not shut itself up in splendid isolation but operates on the level of everyday life, where the fate of the individual is decided; there it seeks to take on the cause of the least of all, not fearing the most rending conflicts in its efforts to guarantee at least the minimal requirements of human dignity, human life.

5. Liberation theology forces theologians to think in terms of specific actions, of the real problems of life and of the

community of faith, instead of the classic themes established by theological tradition. This means they have to be dynamic and reject immature syntheses and artificial constructs.

6. Liberation theology gives the gospel back its credibility, because it mediates an atmosphere of joy springing from sacrifices made for the sake of the weakest, from God's promise of justice for the poor and life for the downtrodden. It is by nature a popular theology, for the masses of the oppressed are its most congenial recipients and most of them understand its language and embrace its aims. For them, it is what keeps alive Jesus Christ's utopic promise of a loving, comradely world, where it is possible for God to "pitch a tent" among ordinary men and women.

7. Liberation theology sets out to be the servant of the "faith that works through charity," inspired by hope. Therefore it should be judged by the criterion by which all true theology should be judged, as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas frequently repeat: the only subjects of this science are what generate, nourish, defend, and strengthen saving and liberating faith (*De Trinitate*, c. 1; *Summa Theol.*, q. 1, a. 2).

Chapter 7

From out of the Oppressed: A New Humanity

Liberation: The Evocative Power of a Word

Liberation is "the powerful and irresistible aspiration of the poor" and "one of the principal signs of the times" (Instruction, *Libertatis nuntius*, n. 1). It defines the spirit of our epoch, of the times in which we live. Modern humankind is in quest of liberation, of a "liberated" life, which for the poor has to come through the humble sacraments of bread, a roof over their heads, health, peace.

"Liberation" is an "evangelical" term in the original sense of the word: a life-giving word, good news, a joyful announcement. The prophets spoke of *shalom*, meaning security, reconciliation, fullness, and peace. Jesus for his part spoke of the "kingdom," meaning the complete reversal of alienation, total change, sovereign life, the life "to the full" willed by God. "Liberation" should have the same power to touch, enchant, and fascinate us as Jesus' original good news. It seeks to rekindle his flame, to fan the fire he brought to earth (Luke 12:49).

"Liberation" is an evocative word, full of resonances. In it the dimensions of the spiritual and the political, the historical

and the ultrahistorical, are fused without losing their identity. A word open, then, to above—to divine transcendence—and to below—to earth's immanence. A word at once joyous and serious. Like the idea of Jesus' kingdom, in which the salvation of the whole person and the whole world are found together, without division.

"Liberation" is a word that today describes the program of a theology that thinks as awakened faith, that has shaken off the burden of "religion—opium of the people," that seeks a faith free from alienation, the haven of a new history.

An Appeal to All Theologies

Liberation theology today, as a theology for the times, *our* times, works on the question of social and historical liberation within the larger framework of integral—human and divine—liberation. This is where it places its stress; this is the meaning it seeks to extract: historical liberation seen as a stage in the great process of overall liberation.

The stress on social liberation is not immediately related to integral liberation, but to other stages of integral liberation: the individual and eschatological dimensions. It contrasts political liberation and Christian liberation, and identifies a subsidiary relationship between them: the former is one aspect of the latter.

This is why liberation theology as it exists at present does not claim to be an absolute, everlasting, or perennial theology. It seeks and hopes for the ending of the oppression and poverty that are now the objects of its study. It is therefore a historical theology, very much of its time. This means that its applicability, although not transhistorical, is not merely transient, a thing of fashion; it covers a historical period, and this period will last for decades if not centuries.

Nor is it a partial theology, one more theological treatise to add to so many others. It is a whole theology, thought out in terms of today. As a result, its subject matter embraces the

whole body of theological investigation, unraveling the historical-liberative dimension of each aspect, as we saw in chapter 4, above. This is why it launches an appeal to all theologians, of the First, Second, and Third World, calling on them to work out the social-liberative dimension of faith. And it is a once-and-for-all appeal: once theology as a whole has assimilated this call and made it its own, then the name "liberation theology" can be dropped, because by then all theologies will be liberation theologies in their own way—otherwise they will not be Christian theologies.

Banner of a New Society

The banner of liberation theology, firmly set in biblical ground, waves in the winds of history. Its message is that today the history of faith is embarking on its third great period, the period of construction. In the past, faith has performed a *contestatory* function: this was in the first centuries, the times of the church of the apostles, martyrs, and virgins. Then, in the post-Constantinian era, faith performed a *conservatory* function in society, *consecrating* the status quo and collaborating with the powers of the world. Today, faith has decidedly taken on a *constructive* function, contesting the existing order—thereby referring back to the early church—but also taking a longer-range view—that is, taking on its responsibility in history, which is to persuade society to conform to the utopia of the kingdom.

Consequently, liberation theology longs and fights for a new society in this world: an alternative society to capitalism, but really alternative and therefore going beyond socialism as it exists today, embodying the hopes and needs of the least of all peoples and their intrinsic potential, a project with ample resonances in the tradition of faith. And in Latin America, the one area of the world whose population is both Christian and oppressed, liberation theology has realized that it cannot lose this unique opportunity of saying a new word in history; it

cannot just follow the paths trodden by other societies: it knows where they lead.

Starting from the absolute utopia of the kingdom, faith can contribute by marking out new paths to a new society—an alternative to capitalism *and* socialism—a fuller and more humane society, free and liberated, a society of the freed. But liberation theology knows that the price of this project is commitment to the process of bringing it about.

The Dream of a Truly Free Society

Liberation theology has a spirituality at its roots and a dream of its final aim: that of a society of freed men and women. Without a dream, men and women will not mobilize themselves to transform society, nor will society seek to renew its foundations. Christians believe that such a dream belongs to the realm of reality, for they have seen it realized in anticipation by Jesus Christ, who "has broken down . . . enmity . . . , so as to create . . . a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace" (Eph. 2:14-15).

What are the main characteristics of the men and women who work to bring about the dream of this society of the freed? This is what they and its members will be like:

- *Comradely.* Like the good Samaritan, they will converge on the fallen to take them with them. There will be no liberation struggle they do not make their own, determining what sort of support they can give and how they can identify with the consequences of their actions, however burdensome they may be.
- *Prophetic.* They denounce mechanisms that generate oppression. They seek out hidden interests sheltering behind the plans of ruling powers. They proclaim the ideal of a society of equals through words and deeds. They never compromise with the truth.
- *Committed.* Action imbued with correct understanding transforms reality. So commitment to the oppressed for their

liberation is worthy of the name only when it is realized along a road traveled together with others who share the same dream, expend their energies in achieving it, and are prepared to lay down their lives for it.

- *Free.* They seek freedom *from* the schemes and illusions imposed by the dominant system, in order to be free to create, with others, more adequate forms of life, of work, of being Christian; seeking freedom *from* themselves so as to be freer and more available *to* others and ready even to die in witness to the kingdom of God and its justice, becoming history in the noble struggle of the oppressed for God-given dignity, rights, and life.

- *Joyful.* The clear option for the poor and their liberation raises conflicts. The efforts required to bring about the insurrection of the gospel in oneself, in the structures of society, and in the church, often produce tensions and painful separations. Accepting such situations joyfully as the price to be paid for integral liberation is a sign of maturity and characteristic of the spirit of the Beatitudes, as so many Christians committed to the poor have shown in so many ways.

- *Contemplative.* In the midst of struggle, they do not lose the sense of the gratuitous, the value proper to every dimension of human existence—love, celebration, fellowship, communion. They will be able, like Jesus, to pray with a clear heart, to contemplate God in human history, especially in the struggles and resistance of the poor and lowly. They will appreciate the ingenuousness of children as much as the courage of fighters, and will know how to be magnanimous, without being servile, toward their adversaries.

- *Utopian.* They will not rest after advances, or be disheartened after setbacks. They will translate the eschatological hope of the kingdom for the full freedom of the children of God into historical hopes in the personal and social spheres—in work, health, culture. Those committed to integral liberation will keep in their hearts the *little utopia* of at least one meal for everyone every day, the *great utopia* of a

society free from exploitation and organized around the participation of all, and finally the *absolute utopia* of communion with God in a totally redeemed creation.

The holy city, the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven (Rev. 21:2), can be established on earth only when men and women filled with faith and passion for the gospel, united with each other, and hungry and thirsty for justice, create the human dispositions and material conditions for it. But the earth will not then be the same earth, neither will the heavens be the same heavens; they will be a *new* heaven and a *new* earth. The old earth with its oppressions will have passed away. The new earth will be a gift of God and the fruit of human effort. What was begun in history will continue in eternity: the kingdom of the freed, living as brothers and sisters in the great house of the Father.