

SPIRITUALITY AND THE PROCESS OF LIBERATION

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A Theology of Liberation

FR GUTIÉRREZ defines spirituality as a concrete way of living the gospel, inspired by the Spirit. However, a spirituality has to be lived before it can find definite expression in the Church. This has not yet happened. The reflections that follow have been developed over fourteen years whilst working amongst the poor in Latin America, helped by the writings and talks of Frs Gustavo Gutiérrez, Ricardo Antoncich, José Antonio González Hernández, Jorge Alvarez Calderen and others, and by the testimony of peruvian and foreign priests, religious, and laity committed to the process of liberation. What is needed in our times is a spirituality of conversion – continual conversion – to Christ, and of openness to the world, in order to know God's will in our concrete situation. In this article I will endeavour to discuss what appear to me to be the main elements in a spirituality of conversion which will, hopefully, emerge from the developing theology of liberation.

Personal freedom and responsibility

The only worthy response a human person can give to God is a free response, because the dignity of man consists in his responsible use of freedom.¹ In religious formation we need to promote responsibility at every level – personal and group, so that men can become persons, make their own choices, be responsible for their own actions, and realize that they are responsible for those who depend on them. Freedom also involves the acceptance of the separateness of others: the plurality which allows them to be different from ourselves, to use their critical faculty, and to participate with each other for the common good. There needs to be a wider understanding that to be a christian is a responsibility and not a privilege; every christian must develop the courageous and responsible exercise of his own initiative, because God has made each one of us unique, so that the

¹ *Dignitatis humanae*, 1.

mystery of Christ might be reflected in a thousand different faces and personalities.²

Openness

If the christian is to be committed to the process of liberation, he must be open not only to God but also to man and to the whole world. Fr Antoncich has said it succinctly: 'How men have to love each other today is not in the bible but in life'. Through continual discernment in community, the christian will discover what his service should be by his recognition of the signs of the times. Discernment demands that we collaborate with the gifts of the Spirit – wisdom, understanding and counsel; it is not merely a question of examining the facts of the situation. It was only with the coming of the Spirit that a 'power' overtook the apostles, driving them out of hiding into the market-place to share the experience of their deep and transforming knowledge that Jesus is alive. So the Church prays: 'Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth'. We cannot doubt the action of the holy Spirit over the centuries; but what appears to have been lacking is the christian's concern that the holy Spirit should guide him in his 'secular' decisions. It is a matter of gravest concern that in the awakening of the world's conscience with regard to basic human rights, liberty of conscience, world government, rights of minorities, racial equality, and population problems, official religion has played only a minor role. 'They are officially accepted now because they must be recognized to be parts of the human patrimony'.³ If the Church is to give meaningful service to the world and have a prophetic role therein, the christian must be open to what men and the world are saying. More than that, laymen and pastors alike must discuss common problems, make use of each other's talents, evaluate the needs of their people, and address themselves to the crucial issues of the day, so that it is evident to the world that the christian message is more than ever relevant in our times.

Poverty

Traditionally, christians have long practised poverty in imitation of Christ, and in order to free themselves to serve others without encumbrances. Gutiérrez speaks of poverty as spiritual childhood,

² Cf Cooke, Bernard: *The Challenge of Vatican II* (Chicago, 1966), p 55.

³ Schall, James: *Redeeming the Time* (New York, 1968), p 41.

the ability to receive, the total posture of human existence before God, men, and things.⁴ God's communication with us in a gift of love; to receive this gift it is necessary to be poor.⁵ In addition, poverty is freeing. The poor man can enter into the centre of evil unprejudiced and unafraid, because he has nothing to defend. Thus he can destroy evil at its roots.⁶ Voluntary poverty should be undertaken out of love of the neighbour with a great confidence in God, without fear of risk and without looking for or accepting privilege. Our only security should be the knowledge that God is with us. Gutiérrez sees voluntary poverty as solidarity with the poor and, at the same time, a protest against material poverty. By it a man breaks with his own social class and, in doing so, helps the poor and the exploited to become aware of their exploitation and seek liberation from it.⁷ Poverty today should represent a sparing and sharing lifestyle, a responsible use of what we have and an honest evaluation of what is necessary. Misery is not the ideal, but superfluity and extravagance should be avoided. Simplicity of life is the key. González stresses that christian living should be marked by austerity. 'This degree of incarnation is indispensable for one who is to be accepted by the people'.⁸ Gutiérrez makes the same point: '... it will remain for the Church on a continent of misery and injustice to give the theme of poverty its proper importance: the authenticity of the preaching of the gospel message depends on this witness'.⁹ By working for his living, the religious can help develop respect for manual work, show solidarity with the people, and express conversion to reality: all of these are values to be encouraged in latin America.¹⁰

The Word of God

Scripture has always been the corner-stone of christian spirituality, and recent studies have revealed the richness of the liberation theme in both the Old and New Testament. God reveals himself by his initial liberating action – by freeing his people from a foreign and

⁴ Gutiérrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, (New York, 1973), p 299.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 297.

⁶ Cf Neuwen, Henri: *Pray to Live* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1972), p 36.

⁷ Gutiérrez, pp 300–301.

⁸ González, Hernández, and José Antonio; 'Es Posible Una Teología Tipicamente Peruana?' in unpublished monograph (Peru, 1972), p 16.

⁹ Gutiérrez, p 288.

¹⁰ C.L.A.R. *Vida Religiosa y Desarrollo* (6), p 28; *La Religiosa Hoy en America Latina*, 13, pp 45–46.

polytheistic yoke: an action culminating in Christ, who frees man from the internal domination of sin. After being prepared by poverty to receive the word of God, the christian can nourish his interior life therein. Scripture becomes the basis for his response to the needs of the times, the criterion by which the individual or the group judges the merits of a situation. It is also used in the continual search to apply gospel values to the here and now, to assure our own fidelity to the gospel. Finally, the word of God should have a prominent place in one's personal prayer and community prayer.

Authentic commitment to the gospel

Authentic gospel commitment accepts the reality of oppression, dependency, illiteracy and hunger. The christian committed to the process of liberation must reaffirm that his holiness will not be worked out in his own situation by 'fleeing from the world of sin, injustice, and misery'. Nothing human is foreign to God save sin. It is here that a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation is helpful.

The word of the Father assumed through the Incarnation the entire man, body and soul: in him he sanctified all nature created by God, not excluding matter; thus everything that exists acclaims the Redeemer in its own way. The God made flesh, the God present in each and every man . . . is no less involved in human history. On the contrary, he has a greater commitment to the implementation of his peace and justice among men . . . Since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The 'pro-fane', that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists.

. . . the bond between the neighbour and God is changed, deepened, and universalized by the Incarnation of the Word.¹¹

In Matthew chapter 25 we have the classic description of the last judgment, when our behaviour towards others provides the measure of our behaviour towards God. There will be no evasion then. But this commitment to our reality requires more than an understanding of the Incarnation. It demands courage and confidence, and perseverance in face of discouragement and weariness. It requires a maturity of judgment that is not eroded by apparent set-backs: one which understands that the process of liberation is a slow one and therefore does not look for immediate results. Patience, generosity,

¹¹ Gutiérrez, pp 185-6, 193-4, 196.

steadiness, enthusiasm, perseverance, are the virtues that will serve to realize this commitment to the reality.

Liberation theology makes a deliberate choice on behalf of the oppressed from motives of faith. Gradually we are taught to realize that it is not a question simply of helping the poor, but rather of working to change unjust systems. In this way we come closer to the poor, and we learn to appreciate their values. Indeed, by our very contact with them we are led to read the gospel in a new way.

It should be mentioned here that in this commitment to the actual situation we quickly learn that we are being enriched by our suffering, oppressed and illiterate brothers. We come to recognize the 'wealth' of the poor family who, without fanfare, takes in the child of the neighbour who died in childbirth; the wisdom of the old man whose experience in a life of sacrifice has helped him to understand human nature without becoming embittered; the deep faith of the simple farm worker who puts his own needs aside to buy a candle and flowers to honour the blessed Virgin; the poor widow whose son is killed in a brawl and can offer pardon to his murderer. There are countless examples of graciousness, nobility, and inner strength in this reality of oppression, dependency, illiteracy and hunger; but only by a steady commitment to this reality does one discover its richness and beauty as well.

Continual personal conversion to Christ

This element in the spirituality of one committed to the process of liberation is perhaps the most essential. The theology of liberation has been severely criticized because it leans heavily on Marx both in his analysis of reality and in the revolutionary method proposed to achieve a classless society. As far as they go, both criticisms are correct. But what critics have failed to understand is that Gutiérrez's thesis is far from being a simple humanism. It presupposes a deep faith and a sincere desire to be faithful to God's plan. Nor does it presume that, once oppressive structures are eradicated, all will be well; rather, oppressive structures are taken as symptomatic of the personal sin in man. Gutiérrez describes sin as the rupture in friendship with God and fraternity among men.¹² Without conversion to the 'new man', new structures will achieve little. We need to discover the deep roots of selfishness in ourselves (the root of all sin) and move forward to establish brotherhood among men. Gutiérrez speaks of

¹² Gutiérrez, 'Evangelio y Praxis de Liberación', in *Contacto* (April, 1973).

'conversion to the neighbour, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race, the dominated country . . . a radical transformation of ourselves . . . thinking, feeling, and living as Christ – present in exploited and alienated man. To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed . . . lucidly, realistically and concretely'.¹³ (In this regard, sharing reflection on insights from the Third World could be of special value to the world-powers, whose political and economic decisions have such vast implications for the rest of the world. Indeed, it could be a first step toward helping to change policies that perpetuate poverty and dependency.)

This will mean compassion for others – the deep experience of solidarity, in which one recognizes that the evil, sin and violence, which one sees in the world and in others, are deeply rooted in one's own heart.¹⁴ It will include trust in a merciful God who brings good out of evil, and is present in the reality. This conversion will express itself in reconciliation – the willingness to receive forgiveness and also to give it to other men. 'Be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you in Christ'.¹⁵ Another manifestation of this conversion to Christ is the ability to distinguish what is accidental, and to identify the permanent elements in christianity so as to give witness to them: truth, justice, charity practised in freedom.¹⁶ Finally, continual conversion will be possible only for those who develop a spirit of prayer.

Prayer

Reference has already been made to the use of scripture in prayer. What needs to be emphasized is the profound need one has for personal and shared prayer, not only to nourish one's commitment, strengthen one's charity, orientate one's action, but also to avoid the pitfalls of mere humanism and simple crusading for social reform. Those working for the liberation of men need to contemplate carefully the reality in which they live, to share the fruits of this contemplation, to help others and to be helped by others to see why people do what they do and say what they say. Insights and experiences need to be shared in the context of prayerful searching for what the reality is saying. Here the exchange between those engaged in pastoral ministry and contemplative religious would be

¹³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp 204–5.

¹⁴ Neuwen, p 66.

¹⁵ Eph 4, 32.

¹⁶ Cf *Pacem in Terris*, 167.

invaluable: the first receiving deeper insights as the results of contemplative prayer; the latter having their prayer nourished by knowledge of the suffering and struggle of those seeking liberation. As Henri Neuwen wrote in *Creative Ministry*, 'Christian life is not a life divided between times for action and times for contemplation. No. Real social action is a way of contemplation, and real contemplation is the core of social action'.

Each one will find his own rhythm of prayer, but everyone will need to give it the priority it deserves. 'Pray at all times', says St Paul: and again we read, 'Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people. And pray also for me, that God will give me a message when I am ready to speak, that I may speak boldly and make known the gospel's secret'.¹⁷ To deepen our own relationship with Christ, prayer is necessary. Liturgical prayer, especially the mystery of the Eucharist, is a most copious source of nourishment for the spiritual life.¹⁸ No christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the holy Eucharist.¹⁹

Participation in a fraternal faith community

Such a community exists as a sign of love and service; and its members may or may not be religious. Within the community, dialogue, initiative, and responsibility are promoted; there is sharing at a deep level, and experience of mutual inspiration in fidelity to the Spirit. Such a community serves as an assurance of Christ's presence; for he promised, 'Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them'.²⁰

Such a faith community points up the need to penetrate the mystery of the Trinity and its relation to our life:

... the Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father 'that all may be one', opened up vistas closed to human reason. For he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man . . . cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.²¹

Segundo explains the gradual revelation of the Trinity in scripture

¹⁷ 1 Thess 5, 17; Eph 6, 18-19.

¹⁸ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

¹⁹ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6.

²⁰ Mt 18, 20.

²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

in this way: God the Father is seen as God 'before us' in the Old Testament; God the Son is referred to as God 'with us' in Paul and John, while God the holy Spirit is the unifying factor.²² According to Gutiérrez, the basis for brotherhood is full communion with the persons of the Trinity: 'Men are called together, as a community, to enter into the circuit of love that unites the persons of the Trinity. This is the love which 'builds up human society in history'.²³

As a consequence of this trinitarian life, Christians are obliged to promote communication by truth and love. Discussion and mediation should be fostered in place of violence and war. Fraternity should be established, which respects the individual person while recognizing his brotherhood with all others. But brotherhood among men is only possible if we recognize God as our common Father. Anything that disregards the person or impedes union or communion among men is foreign to God's triune life which is a personal life of love and freedom.²⁴

Joy

Joy or gladness is truly evangelical. Based on confidence in God, it is an enthusiasm that is contagious and should serve as a sign of hope.²⁵ Those seeking liberation for either themselves or others have great need for both joy and hope to sustain them in their struggle and to attract others to join them in a common cause. The first task of the Church, according to Gutiérrez, is to celebrate with joy the gift of the salvific action of God in humanity, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the Eucharist.²⁶ The same author, speaking of the source of Christian joy, writes:

The conversion to the neighbour, and in him, to the Lord, the gratuitousness which allows me to encounter others fully . . . is the foundation of communion of men among themselves and of men with God; these are the source of Christian joy. This joy is born of the gift already received yet still awaited and is expressed in the present despite the difficulties and tensions of the struggle for the construction of a just society . . . This joy ought to fill our entire existence, making us attentive both to the gift of integral liberation of man and history as well as to the details of our life and the lives of others. This joy ought not to lessen our commitment to man who lives in an unjust

²² Segundo, José: *Teología Abierta para el Laico Adulto* (Buenos Aires, 1970), pp 31-46.

²³ Gutiérrez, p 265.

²⁴ Cf Schall, *op. cit.*, p 92.

²⁵ Cf González and Antonio, *op. cit.*, p 12.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, p 262.

world, nor should it lead us to a facile, low-cost conciliation. On the contrary, our joy is paschal, guaranteed by the Spirit. It passes through the cross in order to enter into life.²⁷

Finally, he concludes that the *Magnificat* expresses well the spirituality of liberation. 'A song of thanksgiving for the gifts of the Lord, it expresses humbly the joy of being loved by him: Rejoice, my spirit, in God, my Saviour; so tenderly has he looked upon his servant humble as she is . . . So wonderfully has he dealt with me, the Lord, the Mighty One'.²⁸

Conclusion

All these elements have always played a part in christian spirituality and probably always will. What is new, perhaps, is the emphasis on some aspects of christian life. No longer is there concern for pious practices. As was said of Merton, the more he discovered the concrete demands of living, the less he emphasized living to purify himself.²⁹ As one tries to promote fraternity among men, one discovers the self-denial that such a posture demands – availability, enduring criticism, misunderstanding, tension, weariness and so on. This spirituality puts great importance on fidelity to the Spirit through discernment with others, personal and group responsibility: a move away from simple decisions of superiors, while not denying the role that authority must play.

Through a better understanding of the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity, spirituality no longer counsels man to flee the world in order to seek God, but rather to embrace the world that God so loved as to give his only Son, and to spend himself there in building community among men: this is a reflection of the trinitarian union.

In this spirituality which is based on liberation, no one is content with the old paternalistic help to the poor which simply increases dependency. True help consists in giving people the capacity to solve their own problems, make their own choices, meet their own needs, and forge their own destinies.

Poverty here takes on new dimensions: to imitate Christ in striving to free the person to serve others better, and in seeking solidarity with the oppressed, to protest against their misery and exploitation, and to establish the credibility of the christian message on a con-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 207.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 29.

²⁹ Cf Neuwen, p 68.

tinent where injustice and misery abound. In true conversion to Christ, the soul empties itself of everything, so as to be filled with God alone.

Prudence yields to confidence in God and the readiness to take risks. 'Blessed is that church which, faced with a situation of oppression and loss of property, initiates and assumes a commitment of solidarity and protest, even though it signifies risking itself, and even losing its life. Then it will find it'.³⁰ In this spirituality the christian will have to define himself in the cause of Christ without side-stepping issues, bowing to influences or to fear of standing alone.

Finally, there is recognition of what it means to love one's enemies. 'To love all men does not mean avoiding confrontation . . . Universal love, that which is solidarity with the oppressed, seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness. It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love'.³¹

These are some of the elements necessary for a spirituality of conversion. With the theology of liberation as a basis, it seems to me not only possible but necessary that a spirituality be developed that is relevant to the needs and consonant with the aspirations of the people among whom we live and work.

³⁰ González and Antonio, p 8.

³¹ Gutiérrez, p 275-6.