

# THE SPIRITUALITY OF LIBERATION

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WHILE IT IS common knowledge that both the theology and the spirituality of liberation originate mainly from the present day catholic pastoral experience of Latin America, it would be less accurate to state that they represent a uniquely 'christian Third World' view. For one thing, latin american culture forms part of western culture. Its Christianity is western, even though this statement needs several qualifications. Its spirituality stems from western—chiefly iberian—spiritual traditions. But latin american culture and Christianity are not western in the same way that those of Europe or North America are western. There are significant differences, to the extent that in some respects Latin America might be considered as a bridge between the West, and Africa and Asia; between the North and the South. We may identify some of these differences in so far as they affect Christianity.

Firstly, latin american Christianity and spirituality are strongly influenced by traditional popular devotions. Popular devotions, as they find expression in popular Catholicism, are alive today and live on in ways that they do not in other western areas. Such popular Catholicism could be seen as a synthesis of iberian devotions and spiritual traditions on the one hand and indigenous religious traditions on the other, a synthesis of western culture and popular or native culture.

Hence a second difference emerges: secularization is less powerful in Latin America than in the north atlantic countries. Of course there are areas of dechristianization where the influence of Christianity has weakened as, for instance, in an increasing secularization among the educated classes. But christian sentiment and avowed values are still strong. The prestige and influence of the Catholic Church are greater than in the remainder of the West, partly because of the strength of popular Catholicism and partly because of the role the Church has played recently in social issues.

A third difference stems from the challenges that are peculiar to

latin american Christianity. Putting things in a rather simplistic way, in the rest of the West christian faith and spirituality are challenged by secularization, by a scientific and technological mentality, by a heavily rationalistic culture. I do not mean that these factors are not present in Latin America; they are, but as already stated, in a different degree and context. What I mean is that the main challenge to latin american Christianity stems from what the Church itself has labelled as 'institutional injustice': the inhuman poverty and even oppression in which the majority of Latin Americans live, those latin american people who are Christians, who belong to countries with 'christian cultures'. And this is a major challenge to latin american Christianity and to its spirituality. A christian contribution to justice and to an authentic liberation of the poor is of paramount importance.

Within this context we can understand better the particular nuances of latin american Christianity and spirituality. We can also understand better the inspiration and development of a theology of liberation: the Church and its Christians perceive that their commitment to bring about justice for the poor and the oppressed is an important dimension of their apostolic mission.

### *The theology of liberation*

To understand a 'spirituality of liberation' therefore, we must first try to understand the core of the theology of liberation for they are closely linked. Liberation theology has been a major theological event in Latin America; it has aroused interest and had an effect upon the rest of the Church. It has also aroused controversy. Not all the so-called 'liberation theologians' think alike. To some extent 'liberation theology' has become an ambiguous term, which needs to be explained whenever it is used.

I shall not enter into distinctions and controversies; they would not serve our purpose. I would rather go to the heart of the matter, and work from what is substantial and widely accepted in liberation theology (as, for example in the Puebla documents), because it is also from this core of liberation theology that we are able to recognize an emerging spirituality. Sound christian mysticism does not come out of controversy or provisory statements.

If we come to the core of liberation theology, we find ourselves facing a way of doing theology that is at the same time both new and very traditional. It is traditional if we consider its themes and statements in isolation; it is original in that the theology is formulated

from within the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and the experience of evangelizing the poor supports its theological thinking. This perspective and experience must be borne in mind when we consider a spirituality of liberation.

*Characteristics of liberation theology*

First of all, christian practice makes a crucial contribution to theological reflection. In this instance the practice in question is that of christian compassion—commitment, out of charity, to the service of the poor and oppressed. This practice has theological significance (drawn from the parables of the Last Judgment and the Good Samaritan, amongst others), which is expressed in christian practice and spirituality. In this sense liberation theology is a 'pastoral theology' (its aim is a proper evangelization that takes into account the historical situation) and also a 'spiritual theology' where christian practice and compassion can become the source of a genuine experience of God. Liberation theology is chiefly concerned with the biblical-theological meaning of the 'poor' as the oppressed and needy ones. It aims at developing the theological reasoning behind the option for the poor in christian tradition, and in today's Church. This means focussing upon the meaning of the poor in the bible and in Jesus's life and mission, and upon the privileged place of the poor in the Church and in the announcement of the kingdom of God.

It is not entirely true to say that liberation theology has developed a new catholic christology, but in certain respects it brings christology up to date when it emphasizes the social and cultural consequences of Jesus's message and practice. The fundamentals of his mission are retained: the dimensions of eschatological salvation, conversion, the call to communion with the Father and with all our neighbours. But liberation theology would claim that Jesus's own radical liberation, by which he saves from sin and death and gives eternal and abundant life, should be integral to authentic human experience here on earth; we should live free from social sins and servitudes, and establish communion and fraternity in anticipation in this world. In responding to the pastoral needs of Latin America, a balance has to be achieved between a 'pietistic' private christology (and spirituality), and an appreciation of the attitude of Jesus towards the poor, outcasts, the rich, the powerful; the compassion and commitment with which he offered integral humanization.

Liberation theology is important to the Church's mission. It is an attempt to answer the crucial question of how to evangelize, how to transmit the christian experience in a society dehumanized by injustice. It is an attempt to preach the gospel in a way that frees people, and to preach the coming of the kingdom and the human growth of the poor and oppressed. And in the process it generates those christian attitudes, motivations and values which permit Christians to cope with this synthesis and these challenges. These values, attitudes and motivations are what we call spirituality. If this theological perspective is valuable in Latin America, it is also valuable in the rest of the Church, especially in those areas of the world with similar social problems and cultural contexts.

*A 'spirituality of liberation'?*

If what we have been saying so far is sound christian-catholic theology, then it must contribute to the renewal of christian spirituality, because down the centuries of church history, good theological movements always brought about spiritual movements of renewal; and the way to check and discern the validity and significance of a school of theology is to assess its capacity to help Christians to deepen their faith, their compassion and love, their total spirituality. We are entitled therefore, to ask ourselves some key questions. Firstly, has the theology of liberation really generated a particular spirituality, or at least encouraged a spiritual renewal? I do not necessarily mean a renewal among the theologians or others who cultivate liberation theology, but among the christian people who in some way are influenced by this perspective or are evangelizing more or less along these lines.

I think it is too soon to answer this question one way or the other. The liberation journey in Latin America is too recent to be submitted to any final evaluation. Nevertheless, some relevant things can be said. In the very beginning the liberation theology movement soon came under criticism for neglecting specific spiritual values, or reducing them in practice to the option for the poor. This criticism may have had some foundation. It could still be true in some cases. But it is also true that in the last six or seven years we have witnessed significant signs of a spiritual concern and renewal stemming from a liberation theology perspective. What is still more important is that in its own development and deepening, and in its purification process as well, it is christian liberation and liberation theology, rather than social analysis and

the like, that are increasingly fostering the spiritual roots and motives behind the option for the poor and the struggle for justice. For many christian latin american leaders at this point a theology of liberation would be, at its best, spiritual theology, that is to say, a study of the inspirational themes and evangelical motivations that lie behind any christian action for the sake of justice and the liberation of the poor.

A second key question is whether it is in fact legitimate to speak about a 'spirituality of liberation' as a special form of christian spirituality. In my opinion the answer is 'no', but with a qualified 'yes'. No, in the sense that there is substantially only one christian spirituality, that is to live by the Spirit according to the gospel and to follow Jesus Christ with the help of the Church—whatever the epoch, whatever the society, whatever the culture, whatever the personal circumstances. In this sense, all forms of spirituality, and in our case the spirituality of liberation renewal, must be in continuity with the best spiritual traditions of the Church. They must reproduce and renew the essential values of any genuine christian spirituality: the paramount value of love, prayer and contemplation, asceticism and self-denial, a predilection for the poor and needy ones, fraternal charity, spiritual nourishment by the word and sacraments, and so on . . . Clearly, a spirituality of liberation is about all of these.

On the other hand, there is a spirituality of liberation in the sense that there can be a plurality of 'spiritualities', due to the fact that any authentic christian spirituality has a human face. The uniqueness of gospel spirituality is fashioned in new ways, and expressed in new forms where different social and cultural contexts, different human and christian experiences, different faith and pastoral challenges introduce fresh accents, underline fresh themes and create fresh sensitivities and expressions. In this sense we can agree that there is a 'spirituality of liberation', at least emerging, in the same sense as we agree that there is a monastic spirituality, or a medieval spirituality, or an eastern christian spirituality, or, as in our case, a spirituality of marriage, or of mission or a spirituality of the exile. Strictly speaking, no christian spirituality is 'a spirituality of something'; it is always 'of the gospel'. But the gospel experience is lived in different cultures and situations. Perhaps, therefore, it might be more accurate to talk about a 'spirituality in times of liberation' or 'in cultures or societies in need of liberation'. Just as we prefer not to say 'spirituality of

conflict' but 'a spirituality in times of conflict'.

However, the specific characteristics of today's latin american catholic experience, as formulated in liberation theology, are sufficiently strong to allow us to speak not only about a 'liberating evangelization' but also, and very specially, about 'a spirituality of liberation' rooted in the life of christian communities.

### *Key themes*

Let us look into the gospel values and spiritual themes that make 'liberation spirituality' both a sound christian mysticism and here and now an incarnational mysticism. In doing this, we immediately perceive the obvious: the themes and emphases of liberation spirituality largely coincide with the basic themes of liberation theology. This is quite logical. Christian spirituality and its different expressions ('spiritualites') are authentic and valid to the extent that they presuppose a sound theological background. And in our case a spirituality of liberation in the end is a synthesis of evangelical values and personal motivation, inspiring different forms of solidarity with the poor, and nourished in turn by the experience of solidarity and compassion.

It is not easy to attempt to classify these themes. As always happens in spirituality, they are inclusive and dependent upon each other—they bring together contemplation and commitment, or the love of God and the love of our neighbour. And again, if liberation spirituality is to be deep and long-lasting it has to be rooted in a renewed experience of the incarnate God and of our brothers and sisters. However, let us try to identify the themes, transformed in christian experience, which characterize this spirituality.

The first emphasis of liberation spirituality is on the historical Jesus with his goals and attitudes and on the call to follow him. The humanity of Jesus as shown in the gospels and transmitted by the Church becomes a main source of christian experience and apprenticeship. There are several reasons for this spiritual emphasis. For one thing, the revaluing of Jesus's humanity is a constant theme in the great movements of christian spiritual renewal—for example, in the Desert Fathers, St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Ignatius and St. Teresa, and more recently Charles de Foucauld. This revaluing of Jesus's humanity became possible in latin american communities through an increasing familiarity with the gospels. This fact is bound to balance traditional shortcomings of

the Jesus image in popular devotion, where he is often distant and 'dehumanized' (his divinity unilaterally underlined), apart from the valid exceptions of Christmas and Good Friday.

Latin American Christians (often poor) have seen the similarities between the historical and social context within which Jesus performed his mission (the challenges and conflicts in Jesus's activity), and the historical and social context within which Latin American Christians are now living their faith and their commitments. This makes of the historical Jesus someone close, living and inspiring to these believers. Thus the humanity of Jesus—as ever the paramount place of Christian experience—is able to blend this same experience of faith and love with the historical tasks of Jesus's present-day followers.

The spirituality of liberation tends to emphasize the following of Jesus under the impulse of the Spirit as the essential thrust of Christianity. This same tendency can also be found in devotion to Mary, always an important factor in any Latin American spirituality. Mary is now viewed more in her relationship with Jesus, as presented in the Bible; the perfect follower of Jesus, sharing his mission and concerns, the paramount example of Christian life. Her privileges and her special role with regard to humankind—as important as ever in 'popular Catholicism'—are 'humanized' for the people when we start from Mary of Nazareth, her humility and simple life, her way of suffering and her caring for the oppressed.

A second emphasis of liberation spirituality comes from our experience of life among the poor and needy. This experience brings about a concern for and a solidarity with justice. For Christians such experiences, which at first tend to be ethical and sociological, will become spiritual experiences as they discover in the poor a place of God's compassion and predilection, and a mysterious revelation of the humanity of Jesus. Knowledge and contemplation of Jesus and the option for the poor become inseparable. We understand the poor to be a source of spirituality through the humanity of Jesus's words and deeds. We understand Jesus and the way to follow him, his kingdom and his Father all the more clearly through the experience of living and committing ourselves to the poor. This is the profound meaning of the statement of the Puebla Conference: 'The poor also evangelize the Church'. The poor evangelize us; they make it easier for us to find the true God; they make it easier for us to understand the gospel Jesus

and to purify our experience of God and prayer.

A third emphasis of course is charity, but expressed in terms of mercy and compassion. Compassion, understood as effective solidarity in order to free each other from our miseries, becomes the main motivation of the option for the poor as a spiritual experience. Growth in compassion is what maintains christian identity and spirituality in commitments for justice and for the rights of the oppressed, a compassion that is universal and not discriminating; for faith and not ideology is our primary resource. As we do not fully understand the poor without Jesus, neither can we understand compassion independently of Jesus's own compassion. Jesus is the incarnation of God's mercy and compassion. His love which is compassion is the inner force of his commitment to his brothers and sisters, particularly the poorest of the poor. When we act out of love of compassion we share Jesus's own spirituality.

Liberation spirituality then becomes a way of inner liberation; liberation from personal sin and selfishness, from slaveries and blindness of the heart. This of course is not a novelty; it is a fundamental and common trait of all true forms of christian mysticism. But there again, neither are the other themes of liberation a novelty; they are traditional in the best sense. As I have already said, what is characteristic in the spirituality of liberation is not the themes in themselves, but the particular social and cultural experience in which these themes and values are lived, and the relationship of these themes to the evangelical liberation of the poor.

When stressing inner liberation, this spirituality is placing christian social commitments and the option for the poor in their right perspective. There is no lasting way for justice and human solidarity without a change of heart. No one can truly contribute to another's liberation if he himself is not undergoing liberation from selfishness and all forms of idolatry. What the Church today calls 'integral liberation' is the synthesis between social and inner liberation; between the way of deeds and the way of the heart. In the first stages of liberation theology Christians were somewhat over-optimistic and naive with regard to the achievements of social justice. Now we know better, having learned the hard way. For if inner deliverance has been neglected up till now, it is not neglected any longer; liberation theology is becoming more whole.

Growth in human freedom highlights another theme, which is to be integrated in the christian journey of liberation, namely that



human liberation is Christ's grace and gift and not merely the product of human works and enterprise. In this lies a discovery of the meaning of prayer, contemplation and the experience of God's love and freedom as values in themselves. A prayer renewal is taking place in latin american communities, in many diverse forms, in which popular devotion blends with the God of the poor and of hope.

Once again prayer and contemplation are not exclusively a theme of a spirituality of liberation; no mysticism can do without them. What is perhaps special here is that prayer and contemplation are fostered and nourished by the challenge of poverty and oppression, by the way that the poor hope and believe in their God, and by the fact that our prayer, identified with the prayer of Jesus, has a mysterious part to play in our deliverance from human servitudes.

In conclusion, a spirituality of liberation is not so much a collection of particular themes as a spiritual synthesis within a certain perspective. We do, however, find some special emphases and themes. These are not intended to create a new school of spirituality, but rather to enrich the fundamental values and attitudes in our christian mysticism as a whole with the present-day experience of Latin America.