

# Liberation Theology

## Practice of a people hungering for human dignity

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### *Introduction*

**L**IBERATION THEOLOGY IS COMMONLY RECOGNIZED as 'a theology of Latin America' although its impact has been felt throughout the universal Church. Its association is justified by history, with roots in the continuous struggle of oppressed peoples since the time of the Conquest and on through the waves of subsequent socio-religious-political persecutions, eloquently expressed by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and like-minded authors. To identify liberation theology exclusively with Latin America, however, is to ignore both the dynamic nature of *praxis*, and the resonance with which the theology has been received in the wider world, especially, for our purposes, in the unfolding spirituality of North America.

Liberation theology cannot be separated from the praxis of the Christian experience. Praxis is the lived experience of human beings as they confront the challenge of how to live as committed Christians and what such a life implies; it is a committed practice which seeks the liberation of the oppressed, poor and marginalized. Praxis precedes the act of doing theology. Theology as a second moment seeks to understand the action, the liberating practice undertaken by committed Christians.

Praxis is an ancient part of the Christian experience. Examples of committed Christians who actively engaged in seeking liberation for the oppressed of the 'New World' is evident. Fray Antonio de Montesinos, a gifted preacher of the Dominican community, was chosen to deliver a sermon condemning the abuse and enslavement of the Indians by Spanish landowners on the island of Hispaniola. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas who spoke at Valladolid, Spain in defence of the humanity of the Indians, devoted his life to this cause.<sup>1</sup> In each instance, Montesinos and Las Casas were confronted by the reality of injustice and as committed Christians they sought to live out their faith in undertaking liberating actions for the oppressed. That kind of practice is the hallmark of any authentic

spirituality and theology. And where there is oppression, there is ground for 'liberation theology'.

*The Church and the modern world: stirrings in the Americas*

On 8 December 1965, Vatican II, convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and directed by his vision, held its final session. This pope recognized the need for a second Vatican Council in which the Church would be open and respond to society and the realities of the modern world, not least the reality of the poor, and would make a preferential option for the poor. In Latin America the first fruits of Vatican II were seen in the 1969 Latin American Conference of Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia. The decisive acknowledgement of the massive reality of the poor by the Church in Latin America, and the preferential option made by the bishops gathered in Medellín, set in motion a process of liberation.

The realities of the poor and the quest for liberation connected the spirits of the marginalized and oppressed of Latin America and of the Hispanic communities of the United States. The liberating words of Medellín were of particular interest in both communities. The relevance of Medellín to the experience of US Hispanics began a movement in the 1970s of inviting Latin American theologians to interact with US Hispanic grassroots church leadership. This was especially true at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in San Antonio, Texas, which had been established by Father Virgilio Elizondo in 1971. Elizondo's personal ties with Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Enrique Dussel, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Ricardo Antoncich<sup>2</sup> enriched the offerings of MACC and contributed to the theological awakening of US Hispanics. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in particular, was a frequent presenter at MACC.

US Hispanics found not only hope in Gutiérrez' articulation of liberation theology and that of other liberation theologians, but also commonalities between the Latin American reality and that of their own. The emergence of a Church concerned with the 'poor', as reflected in the bishops' conferences of Medellín (1969) and later of Puebla (1979), provided a new vision of Church which resonated with the hopes of the US Hispanics.

*New theological voices*

From both South and North America, new theological voices were emerging. In many respects, these voices bore the weight of 500 years of history. Gutiérrez, Elizondo and Cone articulated the struggles for liberation which were central to the history of their peoples – a process for liberation and a quest for faith which had been set in motion by the 1492 event by the encounter of two worlds.

It is difficult to think of an encounter with Latin America without thinking of Gustavo Gutiérrez and his contribution of liberation theology to the wider world of theology and pastoral practice. Gutiérrez' assessment of the overwhelming poverty and oppression of the people of Peru has undeniable links with the movements occurring within the Church and within the socio-political realities of his native Peru and Latin America. Pope John XXIII's desire to promote a serious engagement of the Church with the world, coupled with the growing restlessness among Christians committed to struggle against the apparent injustices in Latin America, provided fertile ground for Gutiérrez' theological thought.<sup>3</sup> There is little doubt that the appearance in 1968 of Gutiérrez' presentation, *Hacia una teología de la liberación*, marked a turning point in theology.<sup>4</sup>

Gutiérrez had the opportunity to share the fruits of his work in preparations for the convocation of the meeting of CELAM in Medellín which followed one month later. As a theological advisor, Gutiérrez influenced the Medellín document by serving on two working subcommittees and drafting the speeches delivered by Cardinal Juan Landazuri Ricketts of Lima to the plenary sessions of the assembly.<sup>5</sup> In acknowledging the overwhelming reality of poverty in Latin America and the gospel responsibility of the Church to grapple with that harsh reality, Medellín articulated key aspects of Gutiérrez' emerging liberation theology.

Similar theological reflection was happening in North America. The period after World War II was marked by a struggle by Blacks and Hispanics to achieve an integration that would ban the segregation of their young in the educational system in the US. The decade of the 60s witnessed the struggle of the black community to gain civil rights. Hispanics, too, were part of that struggle. Other changes in the Church in both the northern and southern hemispheres would have an impact on both communities. In 1968 Virgilio Elizondo, a Mexican-American theologian, wrote a decisive article, *Educación*

*religiosa para el Mexico-Norteamericano*, which advocated the need for religious educators to link culture and faith in their teaching. Elizondo had forged friendships with Gustavo Gutiérrez and other Latin American theologians and the theological exchanges enriched his work. In 1969 James Cone's *Black theology of liberation* was published.<sup>6</sup> In North America, the spirit of the US Hispanic community would be seized by this life-giving theology, a theology which gave voice to the praxis which Hispanics had lived in their struggle to achieve liberation.

### ***Towards a new model of Church for US Hispanics***

The movement toward liberation in many sectors of life could not be bridled. Engagement in the praxis of liberation and the ongoing contact with the movements occurring in the Latin American Church and amongst liberation theologians from the south continued to nourish the mind and spirits of many US Hispanics. In 1969, the organization PADRES was born (Priests Associated for Religious, Educational, and Social Rights). Fifty Mexican American priests met in San Antonio and agreed to form PADRES in order to advocate the rights and needs of Hispanics within the Catholic Church and in society. The newly established membership of PADRES formulated twenty-seven resolutions to be presented at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC. The resolutions pressed for the appointment of Hispanic bishops to areas with large Hispanic populations; the assignment of Spanish-speaking clergy in Hispanic parishes; the presence and involvement of Spanish-speaking clergy in the inner-city; the Church to lend support to the farmworkers' plight; and the promotion of Hispanic vocations to the priesthood along with appropriate seminary formation programmes. The assembled Hispanic clergy were motivated to pursue such measures by the desire to join the struggle with the Hispanic communities to which they belonged.<sup>7</sup>

In similar fashion, many Hispanic women religious felt isolated from involvement with the Spanish-speaking communities. It became evident that many religious communities failed to assign Hispanic sisters to minister to the Spanish-speaking people. In addition, Hispanic women in religious communities felt that they were not offered the same opportunities for education as other members of their community enjoyed. Eventually, a meeting of fifty sisters was held in Houston on 2-4 April 1971 to respond to these

realities. The group called themselves *Las Hermanas*. The sole purpose for their organization would be 'more effective and active service of the Hispanic people by using the expertise, knowledge, and experience of religious women in the fields of education, health, pastoral work, and sociology'.<sup>8</sup> *Las Hermanas* promoted a liberation process focusing on the development of Hispanic women in order to respond more effectively to the needs of the Hispanic community.

### *US Hispanic grass roots and the Encuentros*

The momentum in the struggle for liberation was felt in various sectors of Hispanic Catholic life. The commitment made by Hispanic clergy and religious women to advocate the rights of their community was one example of faith in practice. In 1972 the first National Hispanic Pastoral Encounter (*Encuentro Nacional Hispano de Pastoral*) was celebrated. The Encuentro initiated a grass-roots process by which the Hispanic community, for the first time in its history, began a search to identify its own pastoral needs and its relationship to the US Church. A succession of Encuentros would follow in 1977 and 1985. The net result was a growing consciousness on the part of the Hispanic people of their identity as Church and their role within that Church. For many Hispanics it brought about a greater cultural awareness and with it self-confidence. Hispanics would no longer conform to being a passive presence in the US Church, nor would they readily accept a position of non-leadership.<sup>9</sup> In the process of the Encuentros, Hispanic Catholics engaged in the process of liberation for themselves and their own communities in the creation of a new understanding of Church.

### *Liberation theology beyond the churches in North America*

In the last three decades liberation theology has resonated passionately not only with the experience of US Catholic Hispanics but with other minorities who struggle to be free from oppression, poverty, discrimination and marginalization. In North America, committed Christians confronted the anti-immigrant sentiments which compromised the future of countless people seeking residence in the USA. Solidarity groups arose in defence of the basic rights of immigrants for food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care. A growing number of supporters lobbied against legislation which endangered the quality of life for immigrants. The plight of farm-workers was espoused by others outside of the Hispanic/Latino com-

munity. The lack of just working conditions and wages became the concern of committed Christians who could not stand by and silently give their consent to the mistreatment of other human beings. Cesar Chavez was supported in his effort to improve the life of the farm-worker by clergy, politicians, and others who sought to liberate oppressed peoples.

On another front, women began to voice their discontent with the treatment given them in the workplace and in other sectors of society. The feminist movement is evident among minority women theologians who see the need to reconsider liberation theology through the perspective of women's realities. Issues of cultural, ecological, domestic, physical, economic and military violence against women gives another face to liberation theology as previously articulated by men. Women's struggle for life adds another critical element to the development of liberation theology. This enriched articulation of liberation theology brings together the struggles of women as conditioned by their specific social and cultural contexts. Dialogue about the realities of their particular lives take place between women of the Third World and women of the First World, exchanges which challenge those who engage in them. The quest for liberation is accompanied by the particularity of each woman's socio-political reality.<sup>10</sup>

Transnational awareness of the liberation movement is reflected in a variety of ways. Peace movements sought alternative solutions in war-torn sectors of Latin America. Fact-finding groups travelled to Central American countries to document the abuse of human rights and the violations committed against the poor and defenceless. Amnesty programmes were created and supported by advocates for peace and justice. Links between Latin America and those beyond their borders are forged by both formal and informal connections. The emergence of sanctuary movements in North America arose as a response to protect the political refugees who flee from the violence of war and persecution in their countries. Collaborative efforts between Latin America and North America come together in the sanctuary coalitions. On another front, the immigration and deportation policies of the US resulted in the creation of groups who press for the social, political and economic rights of refugees. *Pro bono* services on behalf of immigrants are provided by committed Christians who undertake such activities as an integral part of practising and living out their faith.

Other natural links between Latin America and the US come about at theological meetings that foster a mutual exchange. Missionary communities such as the Society of Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers have organized a number of Indigenous Women's conferences which provide North Americans with the privileged opportunity to come into direct contact with women who represent their own reality and that of their communities. The cross-pollination that occurs in these settings facilitates the mutual enrichment of committed Christians who are seeking more authentic ways of engaging in a liberating praxis.

The missionary endeavour in itself has provided a form through which the influence of liberation theology has extended beyond the borders of Latin America. The training of missionaries for Latin America undertaken by the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas or by Maryknoll, the Foreign Mission Society of the US, has introduced countless numbers of men and women to a new way of living out their Christian commitment. In these formation programmes, the importance of a liberating Christian praxis is foundational. In addition, returning missionaries influence others through their lived example of what it means to be a committed Christian. In many instances, their committed faith stance against oppression and injustice embodies a liberating praxis. Another important avenue of influence is found in the support that publishers such as Orbis Books lend to the dissemination of liberation theology publications.

### *The influence of liberation theology*

While it is undeniable that the articulation of liberation theology emerged from Latin America, others far beyond its borders have been influenced by it. The dynamic nature of 'praxis' has resonated not only with the realities of oppressed peoples but also with women and men who strive to live out their faith commitment. The engagement of those influenced by liberation theology in facing many of the challenges indicated throughout this article creates a genuine experience of liberation theology in North America. The connections between North America and Latin America are real and influence the development of Christian awareness and practice. Liberation theology is not merely a 'borrowing' from Latin America, but the making of a spirituality rooted in experience and Christian commitment of people elsewhere.

### **Conclusion**

Liberation theology is rooted in the varied and continuous history of the Americas, of oppressed people struggling for their human dignity and the right to live their faith. The practice of liberation precedes any articulation of it. Seeking liberation is an undertaking which men and women realize within their concrete circumstances. How one strives for this kind of liberation is found within the specific situations of life, and is inspired and directed by the values of the gospel. It is a hungering for human dignity, a dynamic rooted in a faith which testifies to the precious value of each human being.

Similarly, the articulation of that process results in a theology grounded in the reality of oppression in its many modes. The circumstances of immigrants, indigenous *campesinos*, marginalized minorities, or persecuted races or classes differ from one actual situation to another. But the common experience of striving for liberation grounded in faith provides people with opportunities to dialogue and learn from each other. Each testimony of life and commitment inspires and motivates others. It would be an error to assess the 'authenticity' of 'a' liberation theology by comparing one experience of oppression and praxis to another. Faith is commitment to God and to human beings, an existential stance which is lived out, in real time and circumstances. Liberation theology – in any hemisphere – is not a matter of provenance or publications or geography; it is a matter of faith, of realities, of praxis.

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#### NOTES

1 Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Toward a theology of liberation' in James B. Nickoloff (ed), *Gustavo Gutiérrez: essential writings*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p 24. See also 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance' in this issue of *The Way*.

2 *Ibid.*, p 25.

3 See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing liberation theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), pp 4–6.



- 4 See Justo Gonzalez, 'Voices of compassion', *Missiology* 20 (1992), pp 165-167.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp 165-167.
- 6 See Alex Garcia-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp 45-54.
- 7 Bartolomé de las Casas, *The only way*, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992) ed Helen Rand, pp 202-204.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 203.
- 9 See Allan Figueroa Deck SJ (ed), *Frontiers of Hispanic theology in the United States* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 'Introduction', pp xiv-xv.
- 10 See Arturo Banuelas, 'U.S. Hispanic theology', *Missiology* 20 (April 1992), p 275.
- 11 James B. Nickoloff (ed), *Gustavo Gutiérrez: essential writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 'Introduction', p 4.
- 12 See Arturo Banuelas, 'U.S. Hispanic theology', pp 275-280.
- 13 See Moises Sandoval, *On the move* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp 64-69.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p 68.
- 15 See Ana Maria Pineda, 'Personal and ministerial formation in a Hispanic context' in Ana Maria Pineda and Robert Schreiter (eds), *Dialogue rejoined: theology and ministry in the United States Hispanic reality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp 150-152.