

I. The Theology of Liberation

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The Theology of Liberation is an indigenous theology. Although we cannot say that this theology has completely no relationship with European theology, it is really born in the context of Latin America, and is deeply concerned with the situation of that continent.

Like every indigenous theology, the theology of liberation has a twofold mission, that is, serving the local community and inspiring the universal Church. No theology exists for itself. It starts from the needs of a local community and is directed towards the universal service of the whole Church. Liberation theology is not a completed theology, nor is it a perfect theology. Liberation theologians are also the "first generation" theologians in Latin America. Liberation theology can be called a contextualized theology.

Actually, the first appearance of liberation theology in Latin America is not in the 20th century, but in the 16th century, when the first group of missionaries tried to spread the Gospel in the continent. In the 16th century, the Gospel was preached to the Indians in Latin America who were dominated by the

Spanish Government. Some Spanish theologians and missionaries stood up against the Government and struggled for human rights and equality for the Indians. Facing the situation, some of the Spanish theologians began to reflect upon the social reality and tried to find a new way to present the Good news to the people of that continent. Perhaps, we can say that from the 16th century until now, liberation theology has had a history of over 400 years, albeit frequently interrupted.

From the very beginning, liberation theology was different from European theology. The difference between these two theologies is due to the cultural and socio-political background against which the two theologies were born. The starting point of liberation theology is the social reality and the particular historical experience of the people of Latin America.

(1) The Situation In Europe:

Generally speaking, most of the European countries are rich, civilized, modernized and developed. A democratic political system has to a certain extent been establish-

ed. The primary concern of the Church living in such countries is how to preach the Gospel to non-believers in an age of technology.

(2) The Situation in Latin America:

The situation in Latin America is quite different from that in Europe. Latin American theology is a product of poverty, underdevelopment, colonialism, dependence, and of a situation in which the cultural, political, and social systems are not stable. This theology, therefore, is not primarily concerned with non-believers (actually, most Latin Americans have a fervent religious faith), but with a non-human or sub-human reality.

The important element in Latin America's liberation theology is the background which spawned it. At the same time, this theology's method of thinking is quite different from that of the traditional theology of the West. Because this theology considers social reality and the situation of the masses as important, when it carries out theological reflection, it borrows heavily from "social science." When carrying out theological reflection, liberation theology uses scientific methods to analyze Latin American social reality. However, this scientific material is not the main subject of liberation theology. The main subject rightfully revolves around a discussion of Christian faith. Because Christ's revelation happened in the midst of history, and because it developed in a cer-

tain social and political environment, liberation theology, therefore, uses the help of social science to do its preliminary work, i.e., to analyze the situation. The second step is to point out the response of revelation regarding the situation. Real theological reflection actually takes place in the second step. Nevertheless, the work of the first step, which makes theology really relevant to the situation, is also important. Since the concern of liberation theology is the "inhuman," and these inhuman situations are created by social causes, so interest in social situations and dialogue with social science are the distinctive features of liberation theology.

I. A Look at the Development of Liberation Theology from use of the word "liberation"

Before liberation theology became popular in Latin America, the Latin American Church of the '50s had already begun to search for a suitable local theology. In the beginning there appeared the so-called "Theology of Development." But after being pursued for a number of years, it was discovered that the theology of development was used by rich countries and privileged classes to make the poor undergo even greater exploitation and drudgery. Since the countries that needed development were the underdeveloped countries, and because the models for the underdeveloped countries were always the progressive and technologically advanced countries, so a situation was created where progress in the

underdeveloped countries took place only on the level of technology, economics and material goods. The result of this kind of development was that the underdeveloped countries became more dependent on the developed countries, and could not stand on their own two feet. Reflecting on this situation, Latin American theologians searched diligently for a theology which would more completely liberate the masses. Thus liberation theology gradually appeared to replace or complete the former theology of development. The liberation theologians think that real development must include freedom and independence.

II. Official Documents which led to the Development of Liberation Theology

A. The Encyclical, Populorum Progressio, of Pope Paul VI:

The encyclical Populorum Progressio played a very important role in the beginnings and development of liberation theology. When Pope Paul VI issued this encyclical in 1967, he revised, supplemented and strengthened "the theology of development," which had been popular in Latin America in the 1950's. In the encyclical, Pope Paul advocated the "development of the whole man" and "complete development." He meant that development should not be limited to material goods, nor to the economic, social and political fields only, but should also include moral and religious development. Actually, this "com-

plete development" contained the seeds of "liberation" within it.

B. The Second Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin:

The Latin American Bishops' Conference met in Medellin in 1968. It was at this time that the word "liberation" first appeared in an official church document. However, it was still not widely used. At that time the word "liberation" was similar in meaning to the "complete development" indicated in the encyclical Populorum Progressio. A little later, "liberation" underwent a further development. The word came to mean that man is the master of history and of his own destiny. God had given man the right of freedom and independence. Man's basic rights include the overcoming of all unjust and unreasonable situations of dependence and treatment.

C. The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, Evangelization in the Modern World:

In 1975, Pope Paul VI issued another document called Evangelization in the Modern World. In this message, the Pope began to use the term "liberation" formally. The Pope promoted a theology of "Christ as the model of liberation." He maintained that a life of faith should include liberation in all aspects of life, even the life of matter (economics, politics, social and cultural).

D. The Third Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Mexico:

In 1979, the Latin American bishops held their third general meeting in Mexico. The reigning Pontiff, John Paul II, was present and delivered a long discourse at the opening ceremony. In his speech, the Pope clearly spelled out the meaning of "Christian liberation." At the Mexican meeting a clearer picture was developed of liberation theology. A document containing twelve chapters was published at the conclusion of the meeting. The chapter headings are listed below:

Chapter 1: The Historical Vision of Evangelization in Latin America: Great Moments

Chapter 2: Christ, the Center of History

Chapter 3: Human Dignity

Chapter 4: Evangelization, Liberation and Human Development

Chapter 5: Evangelization: Ideologies and Politics

Chapter 6: Family

Chapter 7: Comunidades de Base, Parishes and the Local Church

Chapter 8: The Laity

Chapter 9: Preferential Option for the Poor

Chapter 10: The Church's Action among the Builders of a Pluralistic Society

Chapter 11: The Church's Action on Behalf of the Human Person in National and International Society

Chapter 12: Conclusion: Pastoral

Options

Thus, it can be said that in 1979 the official church to a certain extent recognized liberation theology as a legitimate local theology. At the same time, it can be said that the Latin American church began to possess a theology that was exclusively its own. However, this theology has many problems which still await explanation. Actually, the liberation theology of the 70's manifested two main trends: one called, "a theology of change," and the other, "a theology of revolution." Up to the present time there are still disagreements among followers of the two main trends, and these have not yet been resolved.

III. The Content and Main Themes of Liberation Theology

Generally speaking, liberation theology (no matter what kind it is) concerns itself with history. The "liberation" it emphasizes is a kind of "historical liberation." Liberation theologians have their own view of "history." They all hold that there is only one history. World history and salvation history permeate one another and make up a single history of salvation. The "sacred" and the "profane," though different, are not opposed to each other. This is because the "sacred" is in the "profane." This point is related to the theological view one takes of the relationship between nature and supernature.

Latin American theologians

maintain an "unacceptable" attitude towards past Latin American history. In the past, Latin American history was a story of control, dependence, oppression and exploitation. Latin Americans could not stand on their own two feet. Therefore, the work of liberation tends towards a complete break with the "past," and the creation of a new people, culture and history. This work of "recreation in the midst of history" is considered to be one part of the work of redemption. From this we can see why most South American theologians attach great importance to the relationship between creation and redemption.

A. Conscientization

South American theologians consider that the situation of Latin America can be said to be full of sin, and to be experiencing the effects of sin. The sins they speak about are not abstract, but are concrete historical actions, and the effects of these actions in history. Liberation would then completely free man from this historical situation of sin, and change such sinful conditions as poverty, oppression, dependence and exploitation.

In order to arrive at this kind of liberation, man needs to be "conscientized." The most important thing about so-called "conscientization" is not that the oppressed person recognizes the reality of oppression and stands up to oppose it. For this is only a one-sided awakening. More importantly, Chris-

tians must deeply understand that the oppressed both live in "a situation of sin," and both are in need of liberation from a situation of "oppressing" and of "being oppressed." On the contrary, if only the oppressed become aware of the fact of oppression and rise up to oppose it, and if at the same time, all people are unaware that both oppressor and oppressed are in an unjust situation, then after the situation has changed for the oppressed, it is possible that they could become even crueler oppressors. Thus, evil would make a complete circle, and the situation would become even more tragic and unfortunate.

B. Liberation from Oppression

Paulo Freire has written a book called Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In it, the author gives not only a detailed explanation of the meaning of "conscientization," but he also points out the real meaning of "liberation from oppression." Although it is necessary for the oppressed to stand up and resist the things which oppress them and which hinder their human nature from attaining its full potential, the author at the same time reminds the oppressed that when basic human rights have been restored, they should not turn into oppressors of another kind. Real liberation takes place when both oppressor and oppressed are liberated.

IV. **Liberation Theology, the Theology of Reconciliation and Ideology**

The Chinese Christian theologians in Montreal said that that if they were to create a local theology, it would not be the liberation theology of Latin America. Although the peoples of China and Latin America have had a similar historical experience, the Chinese situation is still special and unique. China needs a theology with "reconciliation as the object."

The writer feels that after the great changes of the last thirty years, Chinese theology now gives forth some brilliance in the midst of its special situation. Chinese theological researchers know at least what kind of theology they want to develop. Although at present it is impossible to predict whether they will succeed or fail, what counts is that they have vigorously taken the first step. In a spirit of concern and good will, the writer wishes to express a few thoughts, hoping that they may be used as points of reference for the beginnings of a Chinese local theology.

It is hoped that China's theological researchers will be able to distinguish clearly between "theology" and "ideology." After a long, hard struggle and much reflection, the Latin American liberation theologians gradually recognized the distinction between the two. The relationship between "ideology" and "evangelization" was spelled out at the third assembly of the Latin American bishops conference. Granted that not all ideologies are negative, nevertheless, "ideology" as such always tends to absolutize those

values, systems of thought, or strategies which it supports. When ideology absolutizes a system of thought or values, ideology then becomes a "religion," requiring everyone to "worship," accept, and obey it. Sometimes "ideology" will use the masses or certain systems in order to achieve its objectives. The ideology of the Latin American "security state" is a good example.

Theology and ideology are different. Theology is not ideology. Theology's purpose is to serve God's holy word and the church. If a church is really the church of Jesus Christ, then this church should be free. And the theology which serves the church of Jesus Christ should possess the freedom of the Gospel. Only if conditions are like this will theology have the capability of offering real criticism, and be able to challenge every kind of "ideology." But if theology becomes an ideology and does not maintain its gospel freedom, that theology will lose its ability to offer criticism. Are theologians doing theological reflection in an atmosphere influenced by a Marxist, atheistic ideology able to heed the distinction between "theology" and "ideology?" It is hoped that China's developing "theology of reconciliation" will be able to bring the kingdom of Jesus Christ to Chinese society, and will be able to present challenges to Marxist atheism. Finally, it is hoped that this Chinese theology will give Marxists the opportunity to hear the good news of God, and through concrete actions of reconciliation, will make atheists aware of the fact of God's presence in China.