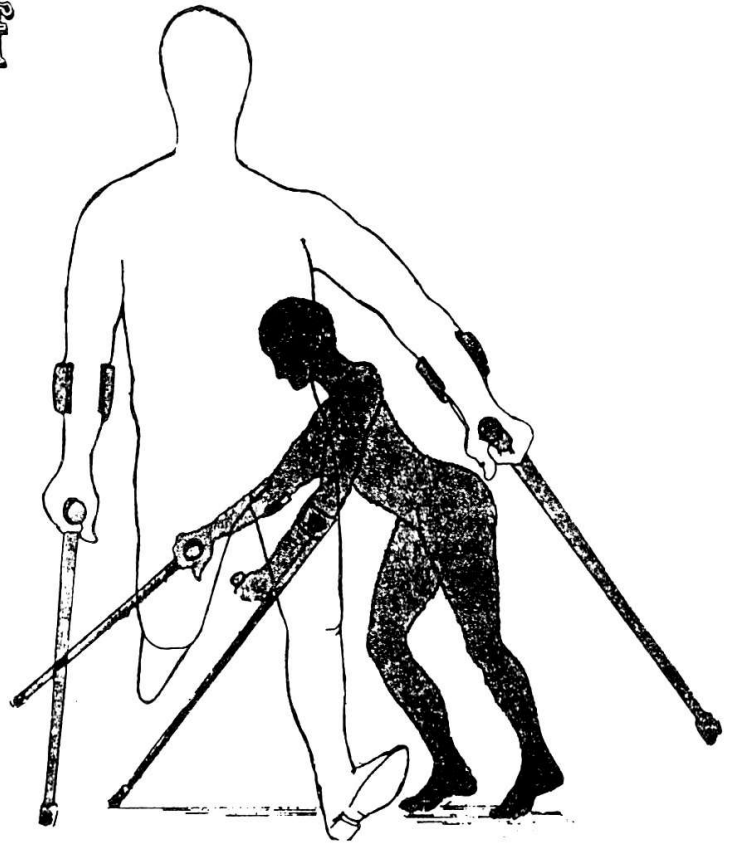


A Brief Analysis of the Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation

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On the feast of the Transfiguration, August 8, 1984, the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document entitled an *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*. This article will deal briefly with the document, its nature and structure and the questions it raises and addresses. The article will conclude with a few personal reflections.

THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

In addition to a brief introduction and conclusion, the document is divided into eleven sections: 1. An Aspiration, 2. Expressions of This Aspiration, 3. Liberation - A Christian Theme, 4. Biblical Foundations, 5. The Voice of the Magisterium, 6. A New Interpretation of Christianity, 7. Marxist Analysis, 8. Subversion of the Meaning of Truth and Violence, 9. The Theological Application of this Core, 10. A New Hermeneutic, 11. Orientations.

The Instruction does not intend to undertake a complete examination of liberation theology. It only wishes to draw attention to "deviations and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought by some forms of liberation theology"(*Introduction*). The most apparent dangers noted are: stressing secondary causes almost to the exclusion of sin which is the primary cause of man's bondage, advocating the use of violence to bring about radical and immediate change in unjust social structures, and the uncritical use of marxist analysis.

According to the Instruction, certain theologies of liberation in stressing liberation from unjust and oppressive political, economic, cultural and social conditions fail to give proper emphasis to the Christian teaching "that liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin" (*Introduction*). They seem to ignore sin as the primary cause of social injustice. Furthermore, in order to bring about radical change in society and to obtain immediate results, certain liberation theologies advocate violence. The advocates of violence fail to realize that violence only generates more violence, and, that those who use violence as a means of liberation become slaves of certain ideologies and find themselves entrapped in a new form of bondage.

The document raises certain questions concerning the uncritical use of marxist theory. It cautions pastoral agents, theologians and all believers to be wary of views advocated by those forms of liberation theology which, in making an uncritical use of marxist categories, can easily lead to errors in faith.

On the other hand, the Instruction is at pains to point out that it by no means intends to disavow or discourage those who, in the spirit of the Gospel, offer themselves wholeheartedly to the service of the oppressed poor. Its warning should in no way serve as an excuse for those who "maintain an attitude of neutrality and indifference in the face of tragic human misery and injustice,"(*Introduction*) those who remain idle spectators of oppression and the exploitation and degradation of their brothers and sisters. The aim of the Instruction, then, is to correct certain "ideological deviations which inevitably tend to betray the cause of the poor"(*Introduction*) - errors which frequently bring about even greater calamities for those suffering under oppression.

THE ESSENTIAL PROBLEMS ADDRESSED BY THE DOCUMENT

1. The Basis of the Document

First, the Instruction affirms that the human aspiration for liberation is one of the principal "signs of the times" in the 20th century. The Church,



therefore, has an obligation to seriously examine and interpret this "sign of the times" in the light of the Gospel. Moreover, it is among the poor, the people who bear the burdens of misery, the disinherited of the earth, who are gradually becoming more and more aware of their right to be treated with dignity and respect as human persons. The Church has always taught that the source of all human rights and personal dignity is God who creates men and women "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1,26). People, then, have a fundamental right to obtain the conditions necessary for their spiritual and material development. However, in order to satisfy this true aspiration for justice and human dignity, many political and social movements, who present themselves as spokespersons for the "the poor", make an appeal to violence in their

demand for radical and immediate change. Unfortunately, this results in the poor falling into even more tragic circumstances. Because the Church is under an obligation to interpret this "sign of the times" - the human yearning for liberation - in the light of the Gospel, it must carefully examine the theoretical and practical expressions of this desire - a desire which is also a deep human cry of anguish that produces a strong echo in Christian hearts.

The instruction notes that liberation theology first saw the light of day among the Christian cultures of Latin American countries. As a pastoral movement, this theology quickly spread to other countries of the third-world and in certain circles of industrialized nations as well. It has become a new force in the Church. Theologies of liberation have as their special concern the poor and oppressed; this concern compels liberation theologians and believers to commit themselves wholeheartedly to social justice. While the term "liberation theology", itself, originally comes from the Bible, some recent expressions of liberation theology manifest a certain deviation from the mainstream of traditional biblical revelation.

2. Foundations in Biblical Revelation

The Instruction clearly points out that one of the main errors of some theologies of liberation is to cast the biblical concept of deliverance from sin into a secondary role, and to consider political, cultural and economic liberation as the primary focus of its theology. The Instruction reaffirms sin as the fundamental cause of bondage, and this radical form of slavery finds concrete expression in all areas of culture, politics and economics.

Jesus Christ is our Liberator. He has liberated mankind from the slavery of sin, "from slavery to the Law and to the flesh, which is the mark of the condition of sinful mankind." (IV, 2) Christ has given us a new life of grace in the Spirit, a new life of freedom in love.

The book of Exodus is one of the favorite books of the Bible used by liberation theologians. The Exodus from Egypt will certainly never fade from the memory of the Israelites, and that this experience taught the Israelites that it is God who is the true liberator. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in order that they might freely enter into a sacred covenant with him. This covenant requires of its adherents a continual reconversion from the slavery of sin.

Continuing along this line of argument, the Instruction offers examples of how the biblical theme of liberation is developed further in both the Old and the New Testaments. The Psalms and the books of the Prophets all affirm God as the Saviour of the poor and oppressed. For the prophets, Amos especially, God's justice and justice among men are inseparable. In the New Testament, Paul's letter to Philemon demonstrates that the authentic freedom of the children of God must find expression on the concrete social level - in this case, the freeing of a slave.

It must not be forgotten that the Bible does not regard political and social change as prerequisites for entrance into this freedom (the freedom of the children of God). On the contrary, when man obtains this freedom of being delivered from the bondage of sin, he manifests, or should manifest, concrete and practical expressions of this freedom in all areas of society.

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

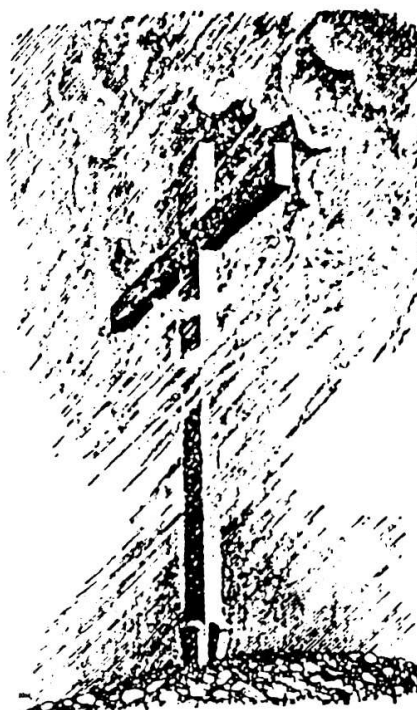
1. To Stand With the Poor

"It is impossible to overlook the immense amount of selfless work done by Christians, pastors, priests, religious or laypersons, who, driven

by a love for their brothers and sisters living in inhuman conditions, have endeavoured to bring help and comfort to countless people in the distress brought about by poverty." (VI, 1)

The Instruction points out that some Christians when faced with the appalling conditions of the poor are tempted to misinterpret the passage from the Gospel that "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God (MT. 4:4). They separate material values and spiritual values, emphasizing bread first and postponing the work of God for some future time. Some even go so far as to state that salvation itself consists in political and economic liberation and in improvement in the material conditions of life. They thus change the "Good News" into a secular Gospel and neglect its transcendent and spiritual side. The Instruction illustrates this point with an example from the Puebla Conference of theologians which affirmed "a preferential option for the poor and for the young." Yet, since the conference ended, there has been no word about the preferential option for the young. In a word, the danger and temptation of liberation theology is to place the material order above the spiritual. The Instruction points out that the spiritual and the material influence one another, that the one cannot be separated from the other, and that they ought not to be placed in opposition to one another. Orthodox liberation theology must sink its roots deep into God's work and interpret God's word correctly.

In the opinion of some liberation theologians, marxist analysis is the most effective and "scientific" method on which to base effective social change, given the present critical conditions of society. They believe that this "scientific" analysis leads to the immediate discovery of the "roots" of poverty. The Instruction cautions these believers that before borrowing this method, it should be subjected to an "epistemological critique" in the same manner that other methods of approach to reality are. Presently, liberation theologies using this method of social analysis fail to show this necessary criticism. "The warning of Paul VI remains fully valid today: marxism as it is actually



lived out poses many distinct aspects and questions for Christians to reflect upon and act on. However, it would be 'illusory and dangerous to ignore the intimate bond which radically unites them, and to accept elements of the marxist analysis without recognizing its connections with the ideology, or to enter into the practice of class-struggle and of its marxist interpretation while failing to see the kind of totalitarian society to which this process slowly leads'." (VII, 7)

The Instruction holds that no matter what method of analysis is employed, the primary condition is that it be completely open to social realities. This is so because social reality is very complicated. Any analytical hypothesis only explains one aspect of social reality. Actually, every human science has its limitations, but those who use marxist analysis tend to deny this and to consider it to be very comprehensive.

3. Truth and Practice

In Marxist social analysis, the concept of "praxis" is most important. This idea is not only inseparable from marxist analysis, it is also closely linked with the "historical outlook" (dialectical materialism) of marxism. According to marxist doctrine, analysis is only the tool; in revolutionary struggle, it must reach the stage of criticism. Through struggle the stage of dictatorship of the proletariat will be reached. Criticism is a step in the proletariat's carrying out of its historical struggle. Marxists contend that only those who are engaged in the struggle can make a true analysis. So, praxis and analysis are mutually linked. Also, marxists consider class struggle to be a fundamental law of history and its primary truth. In addition, truth is only manifested in praxis. Thus they say that if there is no praxis, then there is no truth. Truth then becomes relative, and truth and violence (struggle) are interdependent.

The Instruction holds that the most serious danger for a theology of liberation which makes use of marxist theory is that it threatens the moral principles of the Christian faith. Moreover, marxism's understanding of "truth" and the Christian's idea of "truth" are really very far apart.

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

1. A Monistic View of History:

For some liberation theologians, there is only one history. They think it is unnecessary to distinguish between "salvation history" and "secular history". If these two histories are strictly differentiated, they claim, dualism is the result.

There is actually a hidden danger present in a monistic view of history, namely to identify indiscriminately the growth of the kingdom of heaven with human social liberation. Some even develop a theory of "self-redemption," by which they think that mankind can be saved by undergoing class struggle. This danger poses a threat to the heart of the Christian faith (God is the only Saviour; the Kingdom of Heaven has appeared in history, but it also transcends history.) Some Christians even equate history with God. They define faith as "fidelity to history," hope as "confidence in the future," and charity as "an option for the poor." Thus, faith, hope and charity are no longer theological virtues; rather, they have been emptied of their theological content.

These Christians no longer regard the Church as a mystery. They consider it a reality within history, subject to the natural laws of historical development. The Church of the poor becomes a class which is struggling for liberation. In the liturgy, they celebrate the struggle and liberation of the community; they do not celebrate the death, resurrection and second-coming of Christ.

The Church of the people of God becomes, in this view, the "Church of the oppressed people." It might better be called the Church of the "oppressed class". This Church is in need of "conscientization" in order to rise up and overthrow the structures of oppression. As a result, the hierarchy and magisterium of the Church are criticized and challenged. They are considered part of political and oppressive structures which must be opposed. No longer are they looked upon as servants of the Christian faith, but as representatives of another oppressing class.

In summary, the monistic view of history implies a denial of the Christian faith, that is, its transcendental, supernatural character. In the final analysis, it means that all the mysteries of faith (the Church, sacraments, grace, etc.) are reduced to the secular sphere, and they lose their supra-historical and absolute character.

2. A Political Hermeneutic

The Instruction points out that some theologies of liberation are really "theologies of class". These theologians are reluctant to accept the traditional teachings of the Church regarding social justice. They want to create a "new hermeneutical method." This new hermeneutics is nothing more than a re-reading of the Bible from a political point of view. Thus, the liberation of Exodus is considered purely political and the Magnificat of Mary is given a political reading.

The Instruction is of the opinion that to read or interpret the Bible from a political point of view is not a mistake in itself. The problem arises when we consider the political aspect as the only principle for reading and interpreting the Scriptures. In the final analysis, this attitude would find it difficult to avoid misinterpreting Jesus' mission and the nature of the New Testament. Furthermore, the greatest danger of a solely political interpretation of Scripture is that in departing from Church tradition, it well might lead to the separation of the "Jesus of History" from the "Christ of Faith."

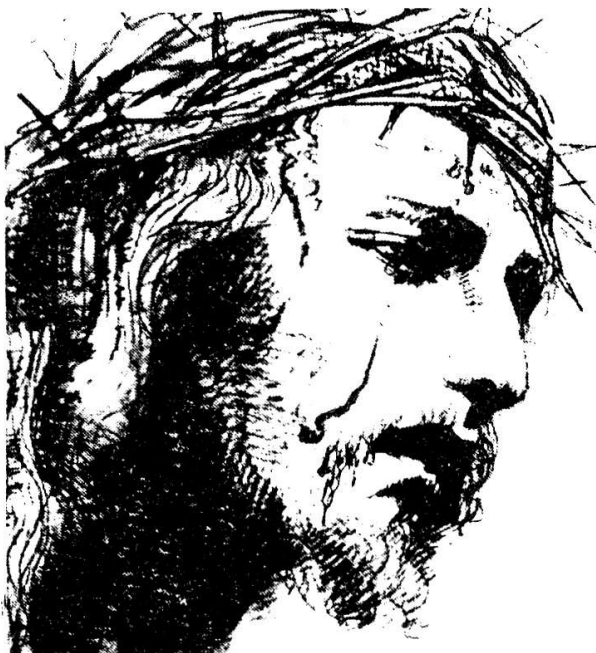
REFLECTION

The purpose of this document is not to lay blame on all theologies of liberation. In fact, it recognizes the legitimacy of liberation theology. It only means to point out deviations and dangers in some theologies of liberation and to appeal to theologians and pastoral workers alike to heighten their awareness and take precautions against errors. The Instruction also cites certain principles for creating a purer form of a theology of liberation. For example: Jesus as our Saviour, the mystical nature of the Church, man made in the image of God, God's bestowal of human dignity on man, etc. These are fundamental truths which must be protected and can never be distorted. Furthermore, liberation theologians ought to cultivate and maintain an attitude open to continual dialogue. Not only should they continue to dialogue with the teaching authority of the Church, but they ought also to recognize the nature and value of the total deposit of Church teaching regarding social justice. This teaching tradition does not represent a closed system; on the contrary, it is continually open to change, modification and enrichment as it listens to and reflects on new questions, difficulties and needs. In the world today the contribution of all theologians and philosophers is a positive aid to the Church in her own ongoing theological reflection.

It is not the purpose of the Instruction to censure any individual liberation theologian or any specific work of liberation theology. It attempts to systematically collect deviations and errors which sometimes appear in the presentation of various theologies of liberation. While the Instruction mentions an uncritiqued marxist analysis as a risk to the development of a purer form of liberation theology, it does not say that all theologies of liberation are marxist. The Instruction does point out, however, the close relationship between praxis, marxist analysis and dialectical, historical materialism. It also indicates that if for the purpose of evangelization the truth of Jesus Christ is

"put into practice" and from this "praxis" comes a deeper understanding of truth, then, "praxis" has its value. However, praxis here is at the level of faith; it is not coloured by any particular political ideology.

Finally, the Instruction expresses the Church's need for many experts among Catholics in all fields of social sciences and technology, including political science. It is hoped that pastoral agents will encourage Christians and help nourish the faith of such specialists so that, adhering to the spirit of the Gospel, they might continue to further authentic social development and continue to work for the necessary changes in mankind's social conditions. At the same time, the Instruction urges the whole Catholic community to contribute to the welfare of society each according to his vocation and means. Although we have here no lasting city, the Church is incarnate in this world, and so it must strive with all its strength to promote peace, justice and brotherhood among men, with special concern for the needs of the poor and dispirited who are indeed our brothers and sisters and on whom we must lavish our assistance.



In my own opinion, this Instruction serves as a guideline: it informs those involved in the theological enterprise the limits beyond which they should not go, and where they have crossed over into a "danger zone". It certainly does not forbid the on-going development of liberation theology. It only wishes to remind theologians to take necessary precautions. Furthermore, the development of liberation theology with its emphasis on advocacy for the oppressed needs to be balanced by another kind of theology, namely, the theology of reconciliation.

In the Gospel, liberation and reconciliation are mutually related themes. Jesus Christ came into the world to liberate man from all bondage so that liberated from sin man might once again freely live in

communion with God and with his fellowman. Sin causes deep divisions. It not only divides man within himself, but it also brings about his separation from God and from his fellowman. Divided man is incapable of drawing near to both God and his fellowman. Sin is like a rope that tightly binds man, restricting his freedom and leaving him with a deep sense of his own impotence. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ liberates man from impotence by restoring his freedom and giving him the power to rebuild all relationships through the unconditional love revealed in the Gospel. Liberation and reconciliation are two faces of the same coin of salvation, and both are the gift of God. The theology of reconciliation can provide a proper balance for liberation theology, to keep it from going to extremes and degenerating into an ideology of violence and class struggle. On the other hand, a theology of liberation would serve to curb a theology of reconciliation from a tendency towards individualism and abstraction. It would stimulate a theology of reconciliation to move beyond the reconciliation of individuals extending itself in concrete ways to include the social levels of society, to reach out to mankind's cultural, political, economic and religious wounds, which are sorely in need of healing.

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