

3. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff

LIBERATION THEOLOGY: FROM CONFRONTATION TO DIALOGUE (1985)

Since the earliest Spanish and Portuguese conquests in the New World, the Catholic Church's relationship with ruling secular authorities in Latin America has been marked by extreme contrasts. On the one hand, many bishops and other powerful clerics have supported various authoritarian regimes and rigid social hierarchies, seeing them as part of the divine order. On the other hand, numerous individual priests, brothers, and nuns have attempted to correct, sometimes by revolutionary means, the profound economic and political inequity that still characterizes many nations of Central and South America. In the wake of the reform council Vatican II (1962-1965), the forces of social change were given an enormous boost when the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) issued a scathing indictment of "institutional violence" at its 1968 meeting in Medellin, Colombia. This document, sometimes referred to as the Magna Carta of the liberation theology movement, inspired several activist

clerics to use ever more radical interpretations of church doctrine to justify their own involvement in political reform. The most famous of these have been the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (b. 1928) and the Brazilian Franciscan and theologian Leonardo Boff (b. 1938). In the following defense of liberation theology, written with his brother and fellow theologian Clodovis, Boff rejects assertions that Christianity must remain apolitical or neutral in the face of mass social injustice. His theologically based demands for a fundamental restructuring of Latin American societies, combined with his frequent reliance on Marxist terminology, resulted in his suspension from teaching by Pope John Paul II in 1984. By the time this work was published a year later, the ban on Boff was lifted, but he eventually left the priesthood in 1992. The term "liberation theology" has since come to be applied to other oppressed groups as well, particularly women and African-Americans.

... Before the emergence of a theology of liberation at the close of the 1960s, a full-fledged liberation praxis was already under way in Latin America. Before liberation theology there were the prophetic bishop, the committed lay person, and liberation communities. A life *practice* was well under way even in the early 1960s. The *theology* of liberation, then, came in a "second moment." It came as the *expression* of this liberation praxis on the part of the Church. Liberation theology is the *theology of a liberation Church*—a Church with a preferential option for solidarity with the poor.

Of course, the theology of liberation is not the mere *reflex* of a liberation faith. It is also a *reflection* on that faith—an in-depth explanation, a purification, a systematization of that faith. In other words: liberation theology enlightens and stimulates the life and practice of the actual, concrete Church.

To be sure, a *reciprocal relation* obtains between action and reflection—faith action and theological reflection in the Church maintain a two-way relationship. Still, theology is more an effect than a cause of the practice of faith, and it is a cause only because it is an effect.

Removed from its *Sitz im Leben* [lit., "seat in life"] withdrawn from the vital context of its origin and development, the theology of liberation becomes altogether incomprehensible. Liberation theology cannot be understood merely

by reading books and articles. The books and articles absolutely must be connected with the soil of the Church and of society, from which these writings have sprung, inasmuch as they seek to interpret and illuminate that Church and that society.

It is *only within a process*, then, a fabric whose warp and woof are suffering and hope, that liberation theology is born, and therefore understood. From above, or from without, there is no understanding it at all. We might even go so far as to say that the theology of liberation can be understood only by two groupings of persons: the poor, and those who struggle for justice at their side—only by those who hunger for bread, and by those who hunger for justice in solidarity with those hungering for bread. Conversely, liberation theology is not understood, nor can it be understood, by the satiated and satisfied—by those comfortable with the status quo.

The implication here is that, down at the "base," antecedent to all theologizing, is an option for life, a particular, determinate faith experience, the taking of a position vis-à-vis the concrete world in which we live. It is from a pre-theological element as one's starting point, then, that one is totally "for," or totally "against," the theology of liberation.

In other words, it is crucial to grasp liberation theology in its locus. Theologians of

liberation must be read not in the ivory towers of certain departments of theology (to borrow an image from Pope John Paul II), but in the slums, in the miserable neighborhoods of the destitute, in the factories, on the plantations—wherever an oppressed people live, suffer, struggle, and die.

To pretend to “discuss liberation theology” *without seeing the poor* is to miss the whole point, for one fails to see the central problem of the theology being discussed. For the kernel and core of liberation theology is not theology but liberation. It is not the theologian but the poor who count in this theology. Were the theology of liberation somehow to pass into oblivion, would the problem it has raised thereby be solved? To fail to see this is to fit the Brazilian proverb to a tee: “You heard the rooster crow, but you don’t know where.”

We must face the fact. For many persons, a living, direct experience of poverty and of the people’s struggle with poverty will be required of them before they will be able to understand this theology. Cardinal Daneels, Archbishop of Brussels, on his return from a visit to Brazil, grasped this very clearly:

There is something tragic in what is going on in and around the theology of liberation today. Liberation theology begins with a very acute, very profound sensitivity to poverty. We see this poverty every day on television. It is another matter, however, to see it on the spot—to allow it to penetrate all five senses, to let ourselves be touched by the suffering of the poor, to feel their anguish, to experience the filth of the slums sticking to our skin. . . . This is problem number one: the plight of the poor. . . . We cannot let these people down! We must support their theologians. [*Entraide et fraternité* newswire, September 20, 1984]

The theology of liberation is the thinking of the faith under the formality of a leaven of historical transformation—as the “*salt of the earth*”

and the “*light of the world*” [Mt 5:13–14], as the theological virtue of charity exercised in the area of the social.

More simply, the theology of liberation is reflection on the life of the Christian community from a standpoint of its contribution to liberation. “Life” here is a richer and more flexible concept than that of “praxis,” which is an external activity of historical transformation. We might be tempted to represent the theology of liberation as a kind of “chemical reaction”:

Faith + Oppression → Liberation Theology

The social or political dimension of faith is the new aspect (not the only aspect) of the faith that is emphasized by the theology of liberation. We explore a specific “integral” or “constitutive part” of the “evangelization or mission” of the Church: “action on behalf of justice, and participation in the transformation of the world.”

The theology of liberation seeks to demonstrate that the kingdom of God is to be established not only in the *soul*—this is the individual personal dimension of the kingdom—and not only in *heaven*—this is its trans-historical dimension—but in relationships among human beings, as well. In other words, the kingdom of God is to be established in social projects, and this is its historical dimension. In sum, liberation theology is a theology that seeks to take history, and Christians’ historical responsibility, seriously.

Christians today are faced with an enormous, unprecedented challenge. Today, as we read in the documents of Vatican II, the Church faces a “new age in human history.” Medellín¹⁰ translates this novelty as follows, where Latin America is concerned:

We stand on the threshold of a new age in the history of our continent—an age

¹⁰The central document of liberation theology, issued by the 1968 meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia; it denounces institutional violence and other forms of social oppression.

bursting with a desire for total emancipation, for liberation from all manner of servitude. . . .

For perhaps the first time in history, the faith of the Christian community faces this challenge: to make a determined contribution—and may it be decisive!—to the building of a new society, in which the great “social dominations” will be no more.

In the first Christian centuries, the faith discharged a function, generally speaking, of *protest against the social order*. Then, during the long Constantinian era, the faith developed a function, predominantly, of the *conservation of the status quo*. Today the moment in history has arrived for the faith to perform a function of *social construction*. The end and aim of the theology of liberation is to serve as an echo of and a response to this immense challenge facing the Church, especially since the time of *Rerum Novarum*.¹¹ . . .

Commitment to liberation implies a denunciation of situations in society and the Church that are displeasing to God, such as hunger, the premature death of thousands of children, subhuman working conditions, economic exploitation, military repression, and the manipulation of Christianity for the maintenance of these conditions, with the connivance of Church authorities who limit the concept of evangelization to the strictly intra-ecclesial, “religious” sphere, as if there were no sin, no love, no conversion, and no forgiveness in the social and political areas of society. In order to grasp the proportions of prevailing social inequities, the-

ology needs an *ancilla*¹² in the form of a theoretical lucidity that can be the product only of the social and human sciences, as it is these that demonstrate the functioning of the mechanisms of poverty and thus enable theology to decide what to label as social sin. It is not a matter of whether to accept contributions of Marxism, as we shall see below, but of understanding where we can obtain the wherewithal to demonstrate that the poverty of the masses “is in many cases the result of a violation of the dignity of labor.”

Christians seek liberation, but they seek a liberation deriving from their very faith, for it is this faith that leads them and stirs them to their liberation commitment. Indeed, otherwise their faith is the dead faith of the demons, who “believe . . . and shudder” in hell itself (Jas 2:19, 26).

The theology of liberation, before being a “movement of ideas” or the “generator of a commitment to justice,” as the *Instruction*¹³ would have it (chap. 3, no. 3), is itself generated by an antecedent concrete commitment to the exalted struggle for justice. Liberation theology is “second word” that grows out of a first, primary, basic “word” of practice. It is not a theology primarily of “conclusions”—one concluding merely to the *will* to act—but is a theology fundamentally involving action itself: an action always driven and guided by faith and by the Gospel present in the life of a people at once oppressed and Christian. The concrete practice of liberation calls for something besides evangelical inspiration and theological reflection. . . .

¹²Supplement, or “helper.”

¹³The Vatican’s response to Latin American liberation theology, issued by the head of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger (b. 1927).

¹¹A papal encyclical of Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878–1903); see 8B3.

B. Feminism

Women have always played significant roles in the Christian church. Throughout most of the past two millennia, however, their involvement in worship, theology, and church administration has been generally constrained by the systematic social