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INTRODUCING

LIBERATION

THEOLOGY

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Chapter 1

The Basic Question: How to Be Christians in a World of Destitution

A woman of forty, but who looked as old as seventy, went up to the priest after Mass and said sorrowfully: "Father, I went to communion without going to confession first." "How come, my daughter?" asked the priest. "Father," she replied, "I arrived rather late, after you had begun the offertory. For three days I have had only water and nothing to eat; I'm dying of hunger. When I saw you handing out the hosts, those little pieces of white bread, I went to communion just out of hunger for that little bit of bread." The priest's eyes filled with tears. He recalled the words of Jesus: "My flesh [bread] is real food . . . whoever feeds on me will draw life from me" (John 6:55, 57).

One day, in the arid region of northeastern Brazil, one of the most famine-stricken parts of the world, I (Clodovis) met a bishop going into his house; he was shaking. "Bishop, what's the matter?" I asked. He replied that he had just seen a terrible sight: in front of the cathedral was a woman with three small children and a baby clinging to her neck. He saw that they were fainting from hunger. The baby seemed to be dead. He

said: "Give the baby some milk, woman!" "I can't, my lord," she answered. The bishop went on insisting that she should, and she that she could not. Finally, because of his insistence, she opened her blouse. Her breast was bleeding; the baby sucked violently at it. And sucked blood. The mother who had given it life was feeding it, like the pelican, with her own blood, her own life. The bishop knelt down in front of the woman, placed his hand on the baby's head, and there and then vowed that as long as such hunger existed, he would feed at least one hungry child each day.

One Saturday night I (Clodovis) went to see Manuel, a catechist of a base community. "Father," he said to me, "this community and others in the district are coming to an end. The people are dying of hunger. They are not coming: they haven't the strength to walk this far. They have to stay in their houses to save their energy. . . ."

Com-*passion*, "Suffering with"

What lies behind liberation theology? Its starting point is the perception of scandals such as those described above, which exist not only in Latin America but throughout the Third World. According to "conservative" estimates, there are in those countries held in underdevelopment:

- five-hundred million persons starving;
- one billion, six-hundred million persons whose life expectancy is less than sixty years (when a person in one of the developed countries reaches the age of forty-five, he or she is reaching middle age; in most of Africa or Latin America, a person has little hope of living to that age);
- one billion persons living in absolute poverty;
- one billion, five-hundred million persons with no access to the most basic medical care;
- five-hundred million with no work or only occasional work and a per capita income of less than \$150 a year;
- eight-hundred-fourteen million who are illiterate;

- two billion with no regular, dependable water supply.

Who cannot be filled with righteous anger at such a human and social hell? Liberation theology presupposes an energetic protest at such a situation, for that situation means:

- on the social level: collective oppression, exclusion, and marginalization;
- on the individual level: injustice and denial of human rights;
- on the religious level: social sinfulness, "contrary to the plan of the Creator and to the honor that is due to him" (Puebla, §28).¹

Without a minimum of "suffering with" this suffering that affects the great majority of the human race, liberation theology can neither exist nor be understood. Underlying liberation theology is a prophetic and comradely commitment to the life, cause, and struggle of these millions of debased and marginalized human beings, a commitment to ending this historical-social iniquity. The *Vatican Instruction, "Some Aspects of Liberation Theology"* (August 6, 1984), put it well: "It is not possible for a single instant to forget the situations of dramatic poverty from which the challenge set to theologians springs—the challenge to work out a genuine theology of liberation."

Meeting the Poor Christ in the Poor

Every true theology springs from a spirituality—that is, from a true meeting with God in history. Liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor. By "poor" we do not really mean the poor individual who knocks on the door asking for alms. We mean a collective poor, the "popular classes," which is a much wider category than the "proletariat" singled out by Karl Marx (it is a mistake to identify the poor of liberation theology with the proletariat, though many of its critics do): the poor are also the workers exploited by the capitalist system; the underemployed, those pushed aside by the production process—a reserve army of

ways at hand to take the place of the employed; they are the laborers of the countryside, and migrant workers with only seasonal work.

All this mass of the socially and historically oppressed makes up the poor as a social phenomenon. In the light of faith, Christians see in them the challenging face of the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. At first there is silence, silent and sorrowful contemplation, as if in the presence of a mystery that calls for introspection and prayer. Then this presence speaks. The Crucified in these crucified persons weeps and cries out: "I was hungry . . . in prison . . . naked" (Matt. 25:31-46).

Here what is needed is not so much contemplation as effective action for liberation. The Crucified needs to be raised to life. We are on the side of the poor only when we struggle alongside them against the poverty that has been unjustly created and forced on them. Service in solidarity with the oppressed also implies an act of love for the suffering Christ, a liturgy pleasing to God.

The First Step: Liberating Action, Liber-a(c)tion²

What is the action that will effectively enable the oppressed to move out of their inhuman situation? Many years of reflection and practice suggest that it has to go beyond two approaches that have already been tried: aid and reformism.

"Aid" is help offered by individuals moved by the spectacle of widespread destitution. They form agencies and organize projects: the "Band-Aid" or "corn-plaster" approach to social ills. But however perceptive they become and however well-intentioned—and successful—aid remains a strategy for helping the poor, but treating them as (collective) objects of charity, not as subjects of their own liberation. The poor are seen simply as those who have nothing. There is a failure to see that the poor are oppressed and made poor *by others*; and what they do possess—strength to resist, capacity to under-

stand their rights, to organize themselves and transform a subhuman situation—tends to be left out of account. Aid increases the dependence of the poor, tying them to help from others, to decisions made by others: again, not enabling them to become their own liberators.

“Reformism” seeks to improve the situation of the poor, but always within existing social relationships and the basic structuring of society, which rules out greater participation by all and diminution in the privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes. Reformism can lead to great feats of development in the poorer nations, but this development is nearly always at the expense of the oppressed poor and very rarely in their favor. For example, in 1964 the Brazilian economy ranked 46th in the world; in 1984 it ranked 8th. The last twenty years have seen undeniable technological and industrial progress, but at the same time there has been a considerable worsening of social conditions for the poor, with exploitation, destitution, and hunger on a scale previously unknown in Brazilian history. This has been the price paid by the poor for this type of elitist, exploitative, and exclusivist development in which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, the rich become ever richer at the expense of the poor who become ever poorer.

The poor can break out of their situation of oppression only by working out a strategy better able to change social conditions: the strategy of liberation. In liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization,³ discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion. First, they claim everything that the existing system can give: better wages, working conditions, health care, education, housing, and so forth; then they work toward the transformation of present society in the direction of a new society characterized by widespread participation, a better and more just balance among social classes and more worthy ways of life.

In Latin America, where liberation theology originated,

there have always been movements of liberation since the early days of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest. Amerindians, slaves, and the oppressed in general fought against the violence of the colonizers, created redoubts of freedom, such as the *quilombos* and *reducciones*,⁴ led movements of revolt and independence. And among the colonizers were bishops such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio Valdivieso, and Toribio de Mogrovejo, and other missionaries and priests who defended the rights of the colonized peoples and made evangelization a process that included advancement of their rights.

Despite the massive and gospel-denying domination of the colonial centuries, dreams of freedom were never entirely extinguished. But it is only in the past few decades that a new consciousness of liberation has become widespread over the whole of Latin America. The poor, organized and conscientized, are beating at their masters' doors, demanding life, bread, liberty, and dignity. Courses of action are being taken with a view to release the liberty that is now held captive. Liberation is emerging as the strategy of the poor themselves, confident in themselves and in their instruments of struggle: free trade unions, peasant organizations, local associations, action groups and study groups, popular political parties, base Christian communities.⁵ They are being joined by groups and individuals from other social classes who have opted to change society and join the poor in their struggle to bring about change.

The growth of regimes of "national security" (for which read "capital security"), of military dictatorships, with their repression of popular movements in many countries of Latin America, is a reaction against the transforming and liberating power of the organized poor.

The Second Step: Faith Reflects on Liberating Practice

Christians have always been and still are at the heart of these wider movements for liberation. The great majority of

Latin Americans are not only poor but also Christian. So the great question at the beginning and still valid today was—and is—what role Christianity has to play. How are we to be Christians in a world of destitution and injustice? There can be only one answer: we can be followers of Jesus and true Christians only by making common cause with the poor and working out the gospel of liberation. Trade union struggles, battles for land and for the territories belonging to Amerindians, the fight for human rights and all other forms of commitment always pose the same question: What part is Christianity playing in motivating and carrying on the process of liberating the oppressed?

Inspired by their faith—which must include commitment to one's neighbor, particularly to the poor, if it is to be true (Matt. 25:31–46)—and motivated by the proclamation of the kingdom of God—which begins in this world and culminates only in eternity—and by the life, deeds, and death of Christ, who made a historic option for the poor, and by the supremely liberating significance of his resurrection, many Christians—bishops, priests, religious, nuns, lay men and women—are throwing themselves into action alongside the poor, or joining the struggles already taking place. The Christian base communities, Bible societies, groups for popular evangelization, movements for the promotion and defense of human rights, particularly those of the poor, agencies involved in questions of land tenure, indigenous peoples, slums, marginalized groups, and the like, have all shown themselves to have more than a purely religious and ecclesial significance, and to be powerful factors for mobilization and dynamos of liberating action, particularly when they have joined forces with other popular movements.

Christianity can no longer be dismissed as the opium of the people, nor can it be seen as merely fostering an attitude of critique: it has now become an active commitment to liberation. Faith challenges human reason and the historical progress of the powerful, but in the Third World it tackles the

problem of poverty, now seen as the result of oppression. Only from this starting point can the flag of liberation be raised.

The gospel is not aimed chiefly at "modern" men and women with their critical spirit, but first and foremost at "nonpersons," those whose basic dignity and rights are denied them. This leads to reflection in a spirit of prophecy and solidarity aimed at making nonpersons full human beings, and then new men and women, according to the design of the "new Adam," Jesus Christ.

Reflecting on the basis of practice, within the ambit of the vast efforts made by the poor and their allies, seeking inspiration in faith and the gospel for the commitment to fight against poverty and for the integral liberation of all persons and the whole person—that is what liberation theology means.

Christians who have been inspired by its principles and who live out its practices have chosen the harder way, exposing themselves to defamation, persecution, and even martyrdom. Many have been led by its insights and the practice of solidarity at its origins to a process of true conversion. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who had been conservative in his views, became a great advocate and defender of the poor when he stood over the dead body of Fr. Rutilio Grande, assassinated for his liberating commitment to the poor. The spilt blood of the martyr acted like a salve on his eyes, opening them to the urgency of the task of liberation. And he himself was to follow to a martyr's death in the same cause.

Commitment to the liberation of the millions of the oppressed of our world restores to the gospel the credibility it had at the beginning and at the great periods of holiness and prophetic witness in history. The God who pitied the down-trodden and the Christ who came to set prisoners free proclaim themselves with a new face and in a new image today. The eternal salvation they offer is mediated by the historical liberations that dignify the children of God and render credible the coming utopia of the kingdom of freedom, justice,

love, and peace, the kingdom of God in the midst of human-kind.

From all this, it follows that if we are to understand the theology of liberation, we must first understand and take an active part in the real and historical process of liberating the oppressed. In this field, more than in others, it is vital to move beyond a merely intellectual approach that is content with comprehending a theology through its purely theoretical aspects, by reading articles, attending conferences, and skimming through books. We have to work our way into a more biblical framework of reference, where "knowing" implies loving, letting oneself become involved body and soul, communing wholly—being committed, in a word—as the prophet Jeremiah says: "He used to examine the cases of poor and needy, then all went well. Is not that what it means to know me?—it is Yahweh who speaks" (Jer. 22:16). So the criticisms made of liberation theology by those who judge it on a purely conceptual level, devoid of any real commitment to the oppressed, must be seen as radically irrelevant. Liberation theology responds to such criticism with just one question: What part have *you* played in the effective and integral liberation of the oppressed?

Notes

1. The Latin American bishops' conference, CELAM, has held three General Conferences since the Second Vatican Council. The second, held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, can be considered the "official launching" of the theme of liberation. The third, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, with Pope John Paul II in attendance, developed in some ways, but also watered down, the conclusions reached at Medellín. Puebla produced its own "Final Document," published in England as *Puebla: Evangelization at Present and in the Future: Conclusions of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops*. Catholic Institute for International Relations (Slough, Berkshire: St. Paul Publications, 1979) and in the U.S.A. as *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*.

Ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).—TRANS.

2. The Portuguese word for “liberation” is *libertação*, which is composed of the root *liber*, “free,” and, by chance, the Portuguese word for “action,” *ação*. This coupling cannot be reproduced in English.—TRANS.

3. “Conscientization” was a term brought into general use by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his work with illiterate Brazilians, the basic learning unit was always linked with the social and political context of the learner, as distinguished from purely objective learning or indoctrination.—TRANS.

4. *Quilombos* were villages formed and inhabited by runaway slaves. *Reduções* were enclaves of relative freedom from colonial powers for baptized Latin Americans, especially Amerindians, supervised by religious orders, especially the Jesuits, in Paraguay and elsewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.—TRANS.

5. The Portuguese term *comunidade* (in Spanish, *comunidad*) *eclesial de base* is variously translated “base church community,” “basic Christian community,” “grass-roots community,” etc. They are small groups that come together for Bible study, liturgy, and social action, usually without a priest but with trained leaders. Smaller than parishes, they represent the “base” of society. They are the operational base of liberation theology in practice.—TRANS.