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Letter to Parish Priest on Liberation Theology.

Dear Parish Priest,

14 April 1990

I've chosen to continue my support of Liberation Theology. This letter contains much of my reasoning for this decision. Having read Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary on liberation theology I feel it is of the utmost importance to illustrate Liberation Theology's history as I see it from my status as a poor Catholic, here in Nicaragua.

Here in Nicaragua Liberation Theology has, from its inception, fought to free the people from the rule of dictators. Shortly after Liberation Theology took hold of our nation's people the Pope saw that it had to be contained and so he appointed new bishops. To further contain Liberation Theology the Pope saw fit to reestablish the Church's teaching authority within its hierarchy.

On a broader scale Liberation Theology is the child of religion in Latin America, though other parts of the world played small roles in its inception, it was Latin America that played the largest role. It developed out of the social and economic conditions in Latin America that themselves had arisen from the military dictatorships controlling many countries ("national secured states" may be a better term) after populism failed in 1959. Liberation Theology emerged during the time that the Church promoted solid stances on democracy and human rights through Vatican II (1962-1965). Vatican II (and the newly appointed bishops) restructured

education and pedagogy to try and combat both pre-Vatican II thought and Liberation Theology. In a nutshell Liberation Theology speaks from the consciousness of the poor, of people like me, and expresses our belief that human dictators are the source of our oppression, and not God.

That being said I must go into much more detail on exactly where Liberation Theology emerged. It was Gustavo Gutierrez whose article *Notes for a Theology of Liberation* published in 1970 tied all the strands of what he called “Liberation Theology” together. Let me now take you on a brief tour of Gutierrez’s basic ideas that built Liberation Theology.

The first section of Gutierrez’s article defines “Theology” as a science that examines religion. Theology is a critical reflection on pastoral action. To be a good theologian you must be out in the world acting for good. Theology is not simply thinking about God, but also a reflection on your actions. You need to do both to do theology according to Gutierrez. These two movements (thought and action) form a dialectical relationship where one informs the other. Theology is therefore praxis.

Gutierrez goes on to define “Liberation” as release from oppression. Brazilian educators created a pedagogy for raising consciences of the poor, one that Gutierrez defined as one of liberation. Being liberated would mean that the basic needs of my people (the poor) would be met. In essence Gutierrez talked about liberation from sin as being more than a personal claim, but liberation also from the sinful structures that oppress people. Liberation foreshadows the coming of the kingdom of God. Gutierrez preferred to talk about “liberation” instead of “developmentalism”.

The difference is that liberation changes the deeper, institutional, issues instead of just ones on the surface.

Gutierrez denounces capitalism as what brought Latin America into poverty. He states that capitalism is a sin and that Latin America cannot develop within capitalism. Why? The answer lies within dependency theory. This theory, developed by an Argentinian economist, says that wealthy nations (not just individuals as is commonly thought) need poorer nations to gain wealth in the international capitalist system.

Gutierrez talks about what he calls a situation of sin. One way of describing this idea is by saying it is similar, if not the same as, institutional violence. Essentially a situation of sin is a system where the rich exploit the poor. The system itself is more sinful than the deed. This is in contrast to the old idea that sin is only an individual choice.

Salvation is a transformation of people's lives and liberty for all, according to Gutierrez. It encapsulates getting rid of the sin we're born into, and embraces the whole person. Common thought prior to Liberation Theology places salvation as coming after death. Gutierrez suggests that salvation instead starts here on Earth, but is only fully realized after death. To truly achieve salvation you must fight for a just world where no social injustice exists. Salvation is not simply trying to be good in this world individually, but helping to create a more just society.

These ideas of Liberation Theology that Gutierrez made known and tied together gained a large following as many of us, the poor especially, adopted them. Yet at the same time there were many people that fought (and continue to fight)

against Liberation Theology. This resistance was partly due to the fact that it questioned the centers of power in Europe and US. But the resistance also came with the use of Marxist terms in the discourses of Liberation Theology. This is the definition of Liberation Theology that I'll be working with as I discuss my current feelings toward Liberation Theology after reading Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary on it.

Next I should say that since the text used in Liberation Theology Masses is full of language of Christ of the poor, it has shaped me to become a firm believer in Liberation Theology. Here are a few examples from Misa Campesina. The entrance hymn of this Mass has lines like "God of the poor" and "human and simple God". Is this not what we poor Nicaraguans are? The *Kyrie* asks Christ to "identify with us" and to "be in solidarity" with us. We are poor and so was Jesus. The *Creed* is the very textual basis of our faith, so having sayings like "Christ the worker" and "You are resurrected in each arm that is raised to defend the people from exploitative rule" show that Liberation Theology is truly meant for myself and my community and not the rich Nicaraguans that think they have a right to oppress us.

Let me now take you through Ratzinger's letter as a way to express my concerns (and by extension the concerns of the Nicaraguan poor as a whole population) about some of the statements he makes, and why I'm continuing my support of Liberation Theology.

Right at the start Ratzinger states "liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin". For we who are poor, liberation from sin simply isn't experienced as so pressing a need, personally, as liberation from the political

institutions that oppress us is. Ratzinger states that when faced with the urgency of problems like ours we may unilaterally emphasize the liberation from servitude of an earthly kind, but what he doesn't see is how much that servitude itself is a barrier to the liberation from sin for us.

When Ratzinger states that the warning the rest of his letter consists of isn't disavowal of this branch of Catholicism he effectively loses the audience of many of my peers who hardly want to listen to Church authorities anyways. Yet his letter is also no excuse for some of the abusive actions certain people might take in the name of Liberation Theology. The theology itself does not need an excuse, but there are people who abuse its goals in the name of liberation.

Ratzinger frames liberation as a solid Christian theme. He states accurately how this led into the formation of Liberation Theology. His comment that the Christian commitment to justice is the second component of this theme, the first part being a special concern for the poor, is entirely accurate. He goes on to ground liberation with textual evidence from the Old and New Testaments.

Ratzinger's many comments on the ways in which Liberation Theology is rooted in the Bible, particularly his statements about the Exodus as the main biblical stories Liberation Theology is built off of, are the most important to discuss here. What is most of note about the Exodus is that it is the story of Israel's people escaping from slavery in Egypt. This liberation from Egypt that Moses led isn't that different from the liberation we speak of when talking about Liberation Theology. Both are liberations from political systems of oppression. So what is all this fuss about Liberation Theology then, Cardinal Ratzinger? If the very base of God's own

people came out of Egypt through liberation, why are you taking aim at Liberation Theology, even if you state you aren't meaning to deter those of us who practice it? You erode your credibility with us poor by making connections like that to the very heart of our shared biblical story, and then telling us that Liberation Theology is wrong to talk about political oppression.

Besides the more traditional Catholic theological foundations, Liberation Theology draws on Marxist ideas to further elaborate its claims and justify some of its ideas. Ratzinger argues that the reasoning behind this move is that liberation requires effective action. In turn effective action presupposes a scientific analysis, and Marxism provides that analysis and foundation for Liberation Theology. He recalls for us how Marxist theory, at its core, denies the human person and in doing so pushes against the ideals of Catholicism. Though that may be true, we use Marxist ideas within Liberation Theology to clarify our goals and to seek out a relationship with the political bodies that won't tolerate connections to traditional religions.

In concluding his letter Ratzinger makes it clear that deviating from the faith explicitly laid out in the creeds will be the creation of something else that will provoke new types of slavery. This would seem to say that just by nature of creating Liberation Theology we have gotten ourselves enslaved further rather than liberated at all. But we must remember that Ratzinger isn't looking at enslavement by oppressing institutions, but rather enslavement by sin. Therefore these last words of his letter, the very taste he'll leave in our mouths, won't deter us from practicing Liberation Theology because it doesn't acknowledge the liberation we are

seeking. Also, what makes him think that our use of Liberation Theology “deviates from the faith laid out in the creeds”?

These samples from Ratzinger’s letter ought to be enough for me to have elaborated why in the long run this letter will not stop me from supporting Liberation Theology. I’ve spent months contemplating my response to this letter, and ultimately will stick to my current faith allegiances. That being said, unlike with some of my peers, the comments Ratzinger made will not lower my respect for him as an authority for the wider Catholic Church.

The history of Liberation Theology here in Nicaragua has enough ties to the welfare of us poor that it alone would be enough to cement my practice of it. But as Cardinal Ratzinger is a Cardinal in the Church hierarchy, his words demand our attention. Therefore, even though I don’t agree with all of his comments I made it a point to read the whole letter in an attempt to see Liberation Theology through his eyes.

To conclude my own response to you, I will just express my hope that you’ll accept this reasoning and forgive its potential flaws. After a few months of staying away from full-blown Liberation Theology to ponder my stance you can count me back in starting with this very weekend.

Sincerely,

Poor Nicaraguan Catholic

Bibliography

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