

## Gustavo Gutiérrez

Roberto S. Goizueta

**A Theology of Liberation: From Lima to Medellín**

Few contemporary theologians have influenced the whole range of theological disciplines as has the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is often referred to as the “father” of liberation theology. In his classic work *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez set forth “not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology” (Gutiérrez 1973: 15). Thus, what is most distinctive about liberation theology – and what has come to influence every area of theological and religious studies, from constructive theology to biblical studies – is the theological method which Gutiérrez articulated systematically in that groundbreaking volume. Gutiérrez’ theological method rests upon two foundational theses: (1) God loves all persons equally and gratuitously; (2) God loves the poor preferentially.

These insights derived not only from Gutiérrez’ reflection upon the scriptures and Christian tradition but also from his own lived experience, which continues to inform his writing to this day. As a child growing up in Peru, he knew the pain of both poverty and physical illness, having been bedridden by osteomyelitis during his teenage years. It was during these years that he began to read extensively, developing a special interest in the relationship between his Christian faith and social justice. It is thus helpful to bear in mind the influence that these early, deeply personal experiences with human suffering has had in the development of Gutiérrez’ unusual ability to empathize with and truly “know” the character of human suffering, from the inside.

Initially, these early experiences with illness generated an interest in medicine and medical studies, which Gutiérrez hoped to pursue further by enrolling at the University of San Marcos in Lima, with the intention of eventually entering the field of psychiatry. Only three years into his studies, however, he decided to leave the university in order to enter seminary studies for the Archdiocese of Lima. He

was soon sent to Europe for further studies, receiving a master’s degree in philosophy and psychology from the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium (1955) and a master’s degree in theology from the Theological Faculty of Lyon in France (1959). Ironically, Gutiérrez did not receive a doctorate in theology until 1985, when Lyon granted him the degree on the basis of his published work and his work’s impact on the field of theology.

In 1959 Gutiérrez was ordained and returned from Europe to a teaching position at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. The following decade was a formative period for him. The university context made it possible for him to further develop his interest in the thought of such seminal figures as Camus, Marx, and, especially, José Carlos Mariátegui, José María Arguedas, and Cesar Vallejo. As great Peruvian literary figures these last two, particularly, would continue to inspire Gutiérrez’ work for many years to come. In his social analysis, Gutiérrez was influenced by Mariátegui’s call for the development of a specifically Latin American socialism. Beyond these intellectual influences, however, Gutiérrez found inspiration and intellectual enrichment in his pastoral work as the advisor to the National Union of Catholic Students. The Union was part of the Catholic Action movement. Basing itself in Catholic social teaching, this lay student movement was extremely influential in creating a social consciousness among young Catholic leaders throughout Latin America. As would be the case throughout his life, therefore, Gutiérrez’ theology was intimately bound to his ministry as a priest.

The early 1960s were marked by two events that would also prove crucial for the Peruvian theologian’s personal and intellectual development: the Second Vatican Council and the rise of popular social movements throughout Latin America. Together, these events helped forge the historical context which would give rise to liberation theology. At the time, the outlines of a “theology of liberation” were already being adumbrated in a continent-wide conversation involving a number of Latin American theologians, most trained in Europe but recently returned to accompany their people in the growing movements for social justice. In a series of meetings, these intellectuals sought explicitly to relate their Christian faith, especially as this had been articulated at Vatican II, to the struggle for justice in Latin America. In his 1968 *La pastoral en la Iglesia en América Latina*, Gutiérrez addressed this issue directly. In July of that same year, during a speech to fellow priests at the National Office of Social Research in Chimbote, Peru, Gutiérrez called for the development of a “theology of liberation,” the first time the term had been used in a public forum.

The changes represented by Vatican II, the Latin American popular movements, and the nascent theology of liberation gained institutional visibility and “official” endorsement at the Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, which took place in Medellín, Colombia, in the fall of 1968. Here, the bishops explicitly set for themselves the task of implementing the vision of Vatican II in the specific context of the Latin American church. If the Vatican II had challenged the church to look to the “signs of the times” as the locus of God’s self-revelation and, thus, the context in which the church must live out its

evangelizing mission, the Latin American bishops would accept the challenge of discerning the signs of the times in Latin America and, on that basis, propose a practical, pastoral agenda for the Latin American church.

As the bishops' official theological consultant, Gutiérrez was intimately involved in the Medellín deliberations. The imprint of his thought and spirit is palpable in the final document issued by the bishops. Though the actual phrase "preferential option for the poor" would not be used by the Latin American bishops until their next general conference, in Puebla, Mexico, 11 years later, the final document of Medellín lays out with unmistakable clarity the necessity of such an option. The church, insisted the bishops, must become not only a church *for* the poor, and not only a church *with* the poor; it must become a church *of* the poor.

### A New Way to Do Theology: The Preferential Option for the Poor

The first systematic articulation of a liberation theology, grounded in a preferential option for the poor, was set forth in Gutiérrez' *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1971 (English translation 1973). Here Gutiérrez argued that all theology should be a "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word" (Gutiérrez 1973: 13). Theology must be grounded in the concrete, lived faith of the Christian people – the vast majority of whom are poor, in Latin America and indeed throughout the world. And by definition, as Christian that praxis must be illuminated by the Word of God, which will challenge and transform our historical action. Consequently, the relationship between Christian praxis and theological reflection forms a "hermeneutical circle."

Gutiérrez contends that, when read from the perspective of this Christian praxis, that is, from a solidarity with the struggling poor in Latin America, the scriptures reveal a God whose love is universal and gratuitous, on the one hand, and preferentially in solidarity with the poor, on the other. These twin theses appear to be contradictory. However, when understood within the context of a "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word," the two theses will be seen as, in fact, mutually implicit. The universality of God's love *implies* God's preferential love for the poor.

To say that God's love is universal is not to say that it is neutral. Indeed, the universality of God's love precludes an "objective," "neutral" God. If God's love is not an ahistorical abstraction but is made manifest in history, and if, moreover, that history is characterized by persistent social conflict wherein the majority of human beings are systematically exploited and denied their dignity by a powerful minority, a neutral God would be one whose very refusal to "take sides" would, de facto, serve the interests of the powerful minority. If God's love does not actively work to transform the unjust status quo, then God's "neutrality" (disguised as "equal love for all people") can only legitimize the injustice.

At the same time, Gutiérrez has always insisted that the option for the poor is "preferential," not "exclusive." That is, we are called to love the poor first because only by doing so can we truly love *all* people. An authentic love for the oppressor must be one born from the conviction that, in a situation of oppression, both the oppressor and the victim are dehumanized. Gutiérrez, however, is not suggesting that the poor, as individuals, are "better" persons than the powerful. The option for the poor is an option to place ourselves in a particular social location, to view reality from a particular perspective: the perspective of the poor, the outcast, the marginalized. We are called to do so, not because the poor are better or more moral than the powerful, but because the God revealed in the scriptures is a God who chooses to be revealed preferentially among the outcasts of society, a God who chooses the poor to be the bearers of the Good News, a God crucified alongside the crucified victims of history. The preferential option for the poor is, above all, a *theological* option: we must opt for the poor because God opts for the poor. The rationale lies not in the poor themselves but in God; not in who the poor are but in who God is.

Consequently, argues Gutiérrez, the poor themselves are called to make a preferential option for the poor. The poor too can be seduced by privilege and power; those without power can come to believe that their liberation will be achieved only when they themselves acquire power and wealth. The poor themselves, then, are called to place themselves on the side of the poor, not to abandon their own communities by "opting" for the values of power, wealth, and violence.

A further question remains, however: just who are "the poor"? What do we mean by the term "poverty"? The Gospels, suggests Gutiérrez, reveal three distinct, though inseparable, notions, or forms of poverty: (1) material poverty, (2) spiritual poverty, and (3) voluntary poverty as protest (Gutiérrez 1973: 287–306). The first understanding of poverty is the most visible: this is economic poverty, the poverty that afflicts the poor to whom Luke's beatitudes are addressed ("Blessed are you poor . . ."; Luke 6: 20–3). The second, spiritual poverty, is what characterizes the "poor in spirit" to whom Matthew's beatitudes are addressed (Matt. 5: 3–12). Gutiérrez understands the poor in spirit as those persons whose lives demonstrate a profound sense of their radical dependence on God. Spiritual poverty is the recognition that our lives, and indeed all creation, is in God's hands; such poverty of spirit thus generates a profound trust and confidence in divine providence.

In his discussion of this second notion of poverty, Gutiérrez warns against a particular *misinterpretation* of "spiritual poverty" that has been propounded by many first world Christians over the years and that has – not surprisingly – served their own material, economic interests. First World exegetes and other Christians in privileged situations have often identified spiritual poverty with psychological or emotional "detachment" from one's material wealth. By thus *separating* the notions of spiritual and material poverty, wealthy Christians have been able to rationalize, or legitimate their wealth: one is allowed to be wealthy as long as one remains emotionally "detached" from one's possessions. What matters, then, is simply one's "attitude" toward one's possessions.

Such a premature "spiritualization" of the biblical texts ignores, however, the intrinsic connection between material and spiritual poverty: it is difficult, if not impossible, to be truly "detached" from one's material wealth as long as one remains wealthy in the face of so much poverty. Gutiérrez thus contends that Luke's and Matthew's beatitudes have to be read together; "the poor" cannot be understood apart from "the poor in spirit," and vice versa. A genuine spiritual poverty will necessarily manifest itself in a life of material simplicity. Nevertheless, material poverty in and of itself does not guarantee spiritual poverty; one can be materially poor and yet remain captive to the desire for material security and privilege.

This intrinsic connection between material and spiritual poverty is exemplified, above all, in a third notion of poverty, what Gutiérrez calls "poverty as protest." Here, a person voluntarily becomes poor, divesting him/herself of worldly power and privilege, in order to enter into solidarity with the poor. Out of compassion for the poor, a person thereby accepts the risks and vulnerability of poverty as a protest against the evil of poverty, as a way of witnessing to a radically different way of life. The person who thus becomes one with the poor becomes, like the poor themselves, a mirror that reveals to a society its injustices. And, since most persons and societies do not like to have their worldviews, assumptions, values, and self-image questioned, the person who thus holds up a mirror to society is likely to suffer ostracism and persecution – again, like the poor themselves.

The paradigmatic Christian symbol of this notion of "poverty as protest" is of course the Crucified Christ himself: "Though he was in the form of God, . . . he emptied himself and took the form of a slave" (Phil. 2: 6–7). Material and spiritual poverty are united in the act of divine kenosis: Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father (poverty of spirit) leads him to enter into solidarity with the outcasts of his society (material poverty), thereby incurring the wrath of the political and religious leaders. These then crucify the innocent victim, whose tortured body on the cross reveals to the whole world its own profound sinfulness ("Truly, this was the Son of God!": Matt. 27: 54).

Like his theology as a whole, Gutiérrez' threefold understanding of poverty is rooted in a holistic worldview that refuses to separate the spiritual from the material but, instead, sees these as distinct, though intrinsically interrelated, dimensions of one historical process. That holistic worldview is the linchpin of Gutiérrez' theology, from his method to his theological anthropology. If one cannot understand the preferential option for the poor, the foundation of his method, without appreciating his integral cosmovision, neither can one understand the very notion of "liberation" without such an appreciation.

### An Integral Liberation

If the key to Gutiérrez' method is the option for the poor, the content of his theology is centered on the notion of "liberation." (Note, again, that Gutiérrez

never claims that the *content* of his "theology of liberation" is dramatically new; on the contrary, the call to liberation has always been at the very heart of the Christian kerygma.) That notion must also be viewed integrally, without separating its various dimensions. According to Gutiérrez, liberation should also be understood as encompassing three distinct though inseparable dimensions: (1) political liberation, (2) psychological, or anthropological liberation, and (3) liberation from sin (Gutiérrez 1973: 21–42). At its first level, liberation involves the transformation of social structures. At a deeper, second level, liberation entails an interior, psychological transformation through which the poor person comes to affirm his/her historical agency. Accustomed to seeing him/herself as merely a passive object of history, acted upon by historical forces and serving the interests of the powerful elites, the poor person now becomes an authentic historical agent, capable of exercising his/her rights and responsibilities as an actor, an authentic subject. Finally, at the deepest, third level, liberation is identified with salvation itself, that liberation from sin effected through the crucified and risen Christ.

Gutiérrez repeatedly underscores the fact that the three dimensions, while theoretically distinct, are always, in practice, intrinsically connected aspects of one, single liberative process. The third, deepest level remains qualitatively different, however, in that its realization is completely dependent on God's activity; salvation is pure gift. While we can and must work for social and personal transformation, the deepest and fullest realization of these is brought about through God's gratuitous love in the person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, that love is always made concrete in history; so, insofar as we help transform history in accord with God's will, we simultaneously open ourselves to and encounter God's grace in history.

Gutiérrez' understanding of liberation is accompanied by a correspondingly holistic, integral notion of sin. On the one hand, human effort alone can never uproot sin at its deepest level. On the other hand, sin is never merely "spiritual" but always manifests itself concretely in the lives of individual persons and in social structures that facilitate and foster sinful behavior. If sin can be defined as the rupture of communion with other persons and God, that rupture is objectified in and mediated by the entire web of structures, organizations, and institutions within which we live out our relationships with others and with God. Those structures may foster values and behavior that impede communion (for example, by implicitly or explicitly fostering violence, conflict, greed, etc.) or they may foster values and behavior that facilitate communion (for example, by rewarding cooperation, compassion, service, etc.). In other words, the human struggle for communion and against sin always reflects the fact that the person is intrinsically a *social* being who is intrinsically connected to others and to God.

### A Spirituality of Liberation

Alongside the demands for action in solidarity with the poor, however, the preferential option for the poor also demands a profound spirituality as an essential

aspect of any liberating action. At its core, Gutiérrez' theology of liberation is, in fact, a spirituality. He developed his spirituality more fully and explicitly in the books *We Drink from Our Own Wells* and *On Job*. In the former, Gutiérrez outlined a spirituality grounded in a preferential option for the poor and, therefore, drawing on the rich resources of the lived faith of the poor. Such a spirituality would reject any separation between the life of prayer and sociohistorical action; contemplation and action are two sides of the same coin. If, as we have discussed above, one cannot understand the universality and gratuity of God's love apart from God's preferential love for the poor, neither can one's prayer, or "spiritual life," be understood accurately apart from a social praxis that makes credible in history God's love for all persons.

At the very heart of what Gutiérrez has called the "culture of the poor" one finds the expressly spiritual practices, symbols, and narratives which embody a lived faith: "From gratuitousness also comes the language of symbols. . . . In their religious celebrations, whether at especially important moments or in the circumstances of everyday life, the poor turn to the Lord with the trustfulness and spontaneity of a child who speaks to its father and tells him of its suffering and hopes" (Gutiérrez 1984: 111–12). This fact reveals an important dimension of the preferential option for the poor, one which Gutiérrez himself emphasizes, but one too often missed by critics of liberation theologies: the option for the poor necessarily implies an option for the *lived faith* of the poor, an option for the *spirituality* of the poor. To opt for the poor is necessarily to pray as the poor pray, and to pray to the God to whom the poor pray. If, as Gutiérrez avers, at the center of the worldview of the poor is an unshakeable belief that "God first loved us" and that "everything starts from" that belief, then all human praxis becomes, at bottom, an act of worship, an act of prayer . . . and every act of prayer becomes a sociopolitical act. In the absence of such a practical spirituality, lived in response to God's love for us, any putative option for the poor cannot engender true solidarity or empathy. "It is not possible to do theology in Latin America," writes Gutiérrez, "without taking into account the situation of the most downtrodden of history; this means in turn that at some point the theologian must cry out, as Jesus did, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Gutiérrez 1993: 101).

Sociohistorical praxis, then, must not be understood as merely political action. Contemplation, prayer, and worship are themselves essential aspects of praxis. Indeed, in his later writings Gutiérrez is reluctant to talk about a "relationship" between contemplation and action as if these were two different realities. Rather, contemplation is itself an intrinsic dimension of all truly Christian praxis. When this intrinsic connection between action and contemplation is lived out, the option for the poor will be seen as encompassing not only a political dimension but spiritual and affective dimensions as well. The option for the poor will then be lived out as a *response* to God's gratuitous love, which is the "spiritual" source of that option. Likewise, solidarity with the poor will be seen to encompass not only expressly political action but also all those activities through which communion with each other and God is lived out, for example

friendship, celebration, domestic life, liturgy. Indeed, in his later writings Gutiérrez places an ever greater stress on the importance of friendship as central to the struggle for justice; the most fundamental form of solidarity is that friendship with individual, flesh-and-blood human persons without which "the poor" too easily become reduced to a mere abstraction.

This emphasis on the contemplative, affective dimension of praxis and the option for the poor is nowhere more evident in Gutiérrez' writings than in his book *On Job*. The question posed in this extended reflection on the Book of Job is: "How can one speak of a loving God in the midst of innocent suffering?" Job is here a Christ-figure, a prototype and model for the believer committed to doing God's will. Gutiérrez invites us to accompany Job as he struggles with both Satan and God, having his faith challenged at every turn in the face of the calamities that befall him, a good man, and that are thus seemingly so unjust. Can Job continue to believe even when he receives no reward for his faith, indeed, even when he experiences nothing but affliction and humiliation before the God whom he loves? Is a genuinely "disinterested" faith possible? Or, having felt himself abandoned by God, will Job in turn himself abandon the God to whom he had previously been so faithful?

Job's response to these questions, concludes Gutiérrez, emerges only insofar as Job refuses to surrender either his conviction of his own innocence (and, therefore, the injustice of his afflictions) or his faith in God, even when, prefiguring the cries of the crucified Jesus on Golgotha, that very faith compels Job to cry out to a silent God, "My God, my God, why . . . ?" In his "dark night of the soul" Job experiences, first, the utter mystery that is God and, therefore, the foolishness of all human attempts to "make sense" of God's unfathomable love for us; and, second, a solidarity with and compassion for all those other persons who, like Job himself, live daily in the midst of death and affliction. The only (relatively) adequate response to the questions posed at the outset of the story, then, is not to be found in tomes of theology or elegantly spun theodicies, but in *silence*, in the silent praxis of compassion born of the contemplative, worshipful encounter with a God who is mystery. According to Gutiérrez, that mystery is revealed precisely at the point where the prophetic language of justice meets the silence of contemplative worship, at the point where the revolutionary and the mystic become one.

The connection between worship and justice is also central to another of Gutiérrez' key works, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*. The turning point of this major work of historical and theological scholarship is, again, the conversion that the protagonist undergoes when he experiences in his own life the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor, that is, the inseparability of contemplation and action as two intrinsically related dimensions of Christian faith. Yet again, we find ourselves confronted here by the same twin themes to which Gutiérrez repeatedly returns throughout the corpus of his writing: the universality and gratuity of God's love (before which we are reduced to silent contemplation), and God's preferential love for the poor (which demands our own solidarity with the poor).

The book *Las Casas* treats, of course, the life and thought of the great Spanish missionary and theologian Bartolomé de Las Casas. This is, in some sense, Gutiérrez' "magnum opus," having occupied him, off and on, over the course of 25 years. Known as the "Defender of the Indians," Las Casas' prophetic criticism of Spanish violence against the indigenous peoples of America was made possible only by his conversion from an *encomendero*, or slaveowner, to one who made his own preferential option for the poor. And his conversion took place precisely at the point where his life of prayer encountered his life in the political realm.

The intrinsic connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxis has never been exemplified as clearly as in Las Casas' conversion, while he was preparing to celebrate the eucharistic liturgy on Pentecost, 1514. Reflecting on the scripture readings for the day, he came upon the following words in the Book of Sirach (34: 18–22):

Tainted his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods! / Mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor. / The Most High approves not the gifts of the godless. / [Nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sin.] / Like the man who slays a son in his father's presence / is he who offers sacrifice from the possessions of the poor. / The bread of charity is life itself for the needy, / he who withholds it is a person of blood. / He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living; / he sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages. (Gutiérrez 1993: 47)

As he read them, Las Casas saw himself mirrored in and challenged by those words: he was preparing to offer to God bread and wine produced by his own Indian slaves. What was thus ostensibly an act of Christian worship was, in fact, an act of idolatry; he was purporting to worship the God of Jesus Christ while, in reality, worshipping a god of violence and destruction, a god who accepted the fruit of exploited human labor. While condemning the Amerindians for their practice of human sacrifice, he himself – along with the rest of the Spaniards – had been sacrificing human blood, sweat, and tears in the form of bread and wine. As Las Casas insisted repeatedly in the wake of his conversion, that *metanoia* implied not only a different way of living but, in so doing, it also implied belief in and worship of a radically different God from the "god" to whom he had previously been offering the Mass. Conversely, any worship conducted in the absence of a solidarity with the poor can only be idolatry.

As the methodological key to Gutiérrez' theology, the preferential option for the poor becomes not only a privileged criterion of Christian orthopraxis (correct practice), calling us to live our faith; it is, more fundamentally, a privileged criterion of orthodoxy itself (correct worship, or *doxa*), calling us to believe in and worship a God who is revealed on the cross, among the crucified peoples of history. Unless we place ourselves alongside the poor, unless we look at reality through their eyes, we are unable to see, recognize, or worship the God who walks with the poor. Conversely, if we lack such a practical solidarity with the poor, the "god" in whom we believe and whom we worship will necessarily be a false god, an idol of our own making.

At the same time, I think we misread Gutiérrez' understanding of the option for the poor if we interpret it as *reducing* Christian faith to such a practical option. It bears repeating that throughout his writings Gutiérrez insists that the warrants for a preferential option for the poor are, above all, *theocentric*: "the ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's *agapeic love*" (Gutiérrez 1987: 94, emphasis in original). Our praxis of solidarity with the poor is not *itself* the foundation of Christian faith; rather, that praxis is a *response* to God's own initiative, a response to God's own gratuitous revelation in our world and in our own lives. "'God first loved us' (1 John 4: 19)," writes Gutiérrez, "[e]verything starts from there. The gift of God's love is the source of our being and puts its impress on our lives . . . The other is our way for reaching God, but our relationship with God is a precondition for encounter and true communion with the other" (Gutiérrez 1984: 109–12). Before we can "opt for" God or others, God has already opted for us; we can opt for the poor in a preferential way *because* God has already opted for the poor preferentially. And because the God who has chosen and loved us gratuitously is revealed in scripture, in tradition, and in history as a God who has chosen and loved the poor preferentially, we are compelled and empowered to love the poor preferentially. "The ultimate basis of God's preference for the poor," avers Gutiérrez, "is to be found in God's own goodness and not in any analysis of society or in human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be" (Gutiérrez 1987: xiii).

Indeed, the Peruvian theologian warns against such distorted interpretations of the option for the poor:

A hasty and simplistic interpretation of the liberationist perspective has led some to affirm that its dominant, if not exclusive, themes are commitment, the social dimension of faith, the denunciation of injustices, and others of a similar nature. It is said that the liberationist impulse leaves little room for grasping the necessity of personal conversion as a condition for Christian life . . . Such an interpretation and criticism are simply caricatures. One need only have contact with the Christians in question to appreciate the complexity of their approach and the depth of their spiritual experience. (Gutiérrez 1984: 96)

The caricatures to which Gutiérrez refers quickly became widespread in the media, despite Gutiérrez' clear and consistent assertions that, in the words that appear on the very first page of *A Theology of Liberation*,

our purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken, nor to undertake a feverish search for security in the face of the radical challenges which confront the faith, nor to fashion a theology from which political action is "deduced". It is rather to let ourselves be judged by the Word of the Lord, to think through our faith, to strengthen our love, and to give reason for our hope from within a commitment which seeks to become more radical, total, and efficacious. It is to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by this commitment. (Gutiérrez 1973: ix)

What defines and makes Christian faith possible is not praxis as such but praxis as encountered by God's Word. And it is precisely a supreme confidence in God's gratuitous love for us, as that love is revealed in our lives and in God's Word, that above all characterizes the faith of the poor themselves. Over the years, Gutiérrez' writings have increasingly focused on the faith of the poor as a rich spiritual resource that has sometimes been overlooked in the struggle for justice; the seeds of liberation, which are fundamentally spiritual ("theocentric") are already present in the lived faith of the poor.

### Expanding the Vision: Critique and Dialogue

Much of the criticism of liberation theology in general and of Gutiérrez in particular, therefore, has been based less on a thorough knowledge of the literature than on the stereotypes perpetuated by the media. In the Second Introduction to the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez nevertheless acknowledged the importance of this criticism in helping him to clarify his ideas and to express them with greater precision. In this lengthy essay subtitled "Expanding the Vision" he questioned, for instance, an earlier liberationist tendency to accept uncritically the claims of certain social analytical models, specifically Marxist and dependency theories. All "sciences," he argued, are based upon presuppositions that themselves must be continually revised in the light of changing historical circumstances. No doubt the horrific violence suffered by the Peruvian poor at the hands of the Marxist Sendero Luminoso, all in the name of "the poor," had a profound impact on Gutiérrez' thinking in this regard. Likewise, he acknowledged that, in the early years, he was not always attentive enough to the connotations and implicit associations of certain terminology. So, for example, at various points the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation* substitutes the term "social conflict" for the more highly charged "class struggle," a term with a more clearly Marxist etymological history.

By virtue of their provenance, perhaps the most significant criticisms were those offered in the two Vatican documents on liberation theology, *Libertatis Nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986). Issued by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its head, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, these documents accused "certain" liberation theologians of reducing salvation to political liberation, and politics to Marxist class struggle. The second document, particularly, then proceeded to articulate what Ratzinger considered an authentically Christian theology of liberation. Here, liberation would be understood as rooted solely in and flowing from the salvific work of the Crucified and Risen Lord, as this has been communicated in the scriptures and Christian tradition.

While one might argue that some Latin American liberation theologians did come perilously close to such reductionism, and while Ratzinger's warning may very well have been appropriate, it should be clear from our foregoing discussion

that Gutiérrez himself could not be fairly accused of such reductionism. And, indeed, neither of the documents named specific theologians. In *The Truth Shall Make Your Free* (1990), Gutiérrez responded explicitly to the Vatican documents. He affirmed their Christocentric, integral understanding of human freedom while underscoring their prophetic denunciation of injustice in Latin America and their trenchant critique of modern Western individualism.

It is not surprising that the Vatican chose to engage directly, in official documents, the liberation theology movement. As one looks back upon the last third of the twentieth century, the theological insight that has arguably had the greatest impact on the life of the church is the notion that the God of Jesus Christ is revealed in a privileged, preferential way among the poor and marginalized peoples of our world – a notion at the very heart of the Gospel itself. There is not a single corner of the Christian world today that has not felt the impact of the renewed attention to that claim, whether as an impetus for conversion and transformation or as a challenge to established theological and ecclesial practices. Today, one cannot do Christian theology, or even think theologically, without in some way confronting the claims implicit in the preferential option for the poor. As Christianity evolves from a predominantly European religion to a religion whose adherents are predominantly found in the third world, those claims will only grow in their relevance and impact.

Latin American theologians of liberation have been accompanied in their struggles by theologians who, from within their own distinct contexts of marginalization, have been developing other theologies of liberation. Black theologians in the United States, for example, have emphasized the significance of race as a key factor in oppression and, therefore, as a distinct dimension of poverty. Feminist theologians throughout the world have called attention to the way in which gender interacts with economic class and race as a factor that deepens and intensifies the experience of oppression; among the poor, poor women are "doubly oppressed." Indeed, North American feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has challenged Gutiérrez to become more explicitly engaged in grassroots women's movements in Peru and to appropriate more systematically the insights of feminist theology (Ruether 1996: 28). In Europe, political theologians have analyzed the role of modern Western "bourgeois religion" in the rationalization of global injustice. Gutiérrez has been deeply involved in continuing conversations with these and other theologians who have invited him to expand his understanding of "liberation" by exposing his own theology to the insights derived from other contexts, such as the specific roles of racism and sexism as forms of oppression. While the preferential option for the poor remains at the methodological heart of all theologies of liberation, the understanding of that option continues to be enriched, deepened, and nuanced.

Gutiérrez has personally had a particularly important influence in the development of a US Latino theology. While US Hispanic theologians have been greatly influenced by Latin American liberation theology, Gutiérrez has encouraged them to remain true to their own particular context; to simply import Latin American liberation theology into the North American context – even if the US

Latino context – would be to commit the methodological error for which Latin American theologians had for so long been criticizing the Europeans. The experience of the US Latino community as a cultural minority, for instance, has revealed the particular salience of cultural forms of marginalization. At the same time, the experience of *mestizaje*, or racial-cultural mixture, and the popular religious practices of the poor have been retrieved methodologically as resources for liberation, mediators of God's self-revelation to the poor.

If liberation theology no longer makes the front pages of our newspapers, then, the reason is not that the issues that movement addresses have either disappeared or decreased in significance. On the contrary, global poverty, injustice, and exploitation remain as intransigent as ever, and their consequences as devastating. If the public visibility of liberation theology has diminished, this is, in large part, because the fundamental questions raised by liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez – questions once considered novel and controversial – are today unavoidable in any theological conversation that demands to be taken seriously by either the churches or the academy. And foremost among those questions is the one that Gutiérrez locates at the very heart of the theological enterprise:

Our task here is to find the words with which to talk about God in the midst of the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply "disappear" or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of peoples who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind, and the corpse-filled common graves of Ayacucho [a scene of civil strife in Peru]. (Gutiérrez 1996: 318)

In the wake of the bloodiest century in the history of humanity, and given the fact that much of that blood will be found on the hands of self-proclaimed "Christians," the victims of that history are today the theologian's principal interlocutors. And, thus, God's preferential solidarity with those victims is an inescapable challenge – *the* inescapable challenge – for Christian theology at the dawn of the twenty-first century. More specifically, the claim that, in the person of the crucified and risen Christ, God is preferentially identified with the victims of history transforms the preferential option for the poor from an ethical imperative into the privileged *locus theologicus* of all Christian theology. After such a claim has been explicitly made, no Christian theology can avoid it.

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