

*THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
ON LIBERATION*

Hegel, the German philosopher, once said that the reading of the daily newspaper was the prayer of modern man. His observation was a profoundly theological one. If a person opens up his newspaper and comprehends God's revelation in the concrete course of salvation history, then he really is praying; for it is in concrete history that God reveals himself. But the truly important news may not be in the headlines; it may be buried away on the fourth or sixth page of the newspaper. Faith has to discern where the important news, the concrete revelation, truly is.

Today we must develop the habit and attitude of trying to discern the import of daily happenings in the light of faith. We must come to realize that day-to-day history is the *one and only place* where God reveals himself to us. We have been accustomed to interiorize the faith, to think that God reveals himself within the soul of the individual. That viewpoint may well reflect the influence of Neoplatonism on early Christianity. God reveals himself before our eyes-in our neighbor and in history. That is the privileged place of divine revelation, for God reveals himself in our neighbor and in the poor.

THE RISE OF LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

Today we can indeed talk about a "Latin American" theology, a theology which contemplates our own peculiar reality here. I should like to mention a few factors in the rise of that theology, which did not take place all at once.

CELAM (the Latin American Episcopal Conference) certainly had a great deal to do with it. In the process of coordinating activities in all the countries of Latin America, it brought home to us the fact that we are part of a broad socio-cultural grouping. It thus helped us to look for solutions on the continental level.

The first steps involved sociological descriptions, such as those done by FERES (International Federation for Studies in Religious Sociology). They were under the direction of the Belgian priest, Francois Houtart. Then came economic studies from the Center for Economic and Social Development in Latin America, and other social studies by ILADES (Instituto Latinoamericano de Doctrina y Estudios Sociales). All these efforts helped to point up our sociological structures and their distinctiveness, but as yet theology had not truly entered the picture.

Thanks to CELAM, various institutes developed: for catechetics (ICLA), pastoral activity (IPLA), and liturgy. To provide information to the participants, these efforts started with certain common guidelines and tried to apply them to the overall Latin American situation. As time went on, something new developed out of this. In the beginning the best theology came from people who had studied in Europe and who more or less reiterated the European thinking of people like Karl Rahner and Yves Congar. It was found, however, that this thinking could not be applied directly to the concrete situation in Latin America. Some sort of a gap existed.

Slowly there dawned the realization that we Latin Ameri-

cans were the victims of cultural oppression. Our thinking was dependent on, and conditioned by, the thinking of people in a very different cultural situation. We could not in fact simply mimic the thinking of European theologians. We would have to start with our concrete situation in daily life and reflect on it theologically. It was this realization that helped to produce a truly Latin American approach to theology.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned Methol Ferré and his criticism of some of Cardinal Suenens' ideas. Suenens had voiced his own criticism of certain points in the papal encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Ferré criticized Suenens in turn because the Cardinal's ideas represented and defended the viewpoint of the economically affluent and culturally dominant nations. Ferré noted the fact that every theology implies some sort of politics, and that Suenens was, wittingly or unwittingly, defending the politics of the advanced nations. We Latin Americans, however, were much more interested in the universal aspect of the Roman Church than in the dominating viewpoint of certain nations within the Roman Church. Let us explore this whole notion of political conditioning a bit.

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICS ON THEOLOGY AND LIBERATION

Methol Ferré and Salazar Bondy have helped us to realize that we must do our thinking within a basic context of oppression. Hence we must also ponder this very situation of oppression itself. We are forced to look at the overall situation from the bottom of the heap, as it were, and hence our way of liberating ourselves from the present situation will differ from the approach of people in the dominant countries. The affluent societies have one road to take, we have another road to take. And only people within our concrete situation can truly describe the process involved.

It is precisely at this stage of awareness that a distinctively Latin American theology appeared on the scene. It could not appear before people recognized the socio-political conditioning that weighed down upon the Church and the theologian in Latin America.

Let me give you a concrete example of what I am talking about. Herbert Marcuse lives in an affluent society. When he proposes ways to escape from the knotty problems of society, he does so from within the context of an affluent society. People in his affluent society consume too much and destroy too much of the goods of this world. They need a certain asceticism, and they must balance their excessive pragmatism with the spirit of playfulness. The "hippie" is the typical rebel in the affluent society. Challenging this society, the hippie refuses to bathe or to dress up or to work. And since others eat too much, the hippie gives little or no thought to food. Such a challenge would make little sense in our society. Here we must find ways to make sure that everyone can eat enough to sustain life. In short, our problems are different and therefore we must take different paths towards their solution.

Latin America is the only post-Christendom socio-cultural group among the underdeveloped nations. The other underdeveloped areas are very distinct from us in their culture, so their process of liberation will also differ from ours. Our process of liberation will differ from that which must take place in affluent societies and from that which must take place in other underdeveloped societies. But perhaps all these different processes will converge at some point in the future and help to form a new humanity.

In the meantime the Latin American Church has an important and complex role to play both in the history of the universal Church and in the history of humankind as a whole. We now realize that if we do not ponder the great process of liberation, then our theology will remain floating on thin air and never touch upon serious concrete ques-

tions. Our new theology is not wholly new, of course. It is actually a rethinking of all our past theology in terms of an eschatological goal. Just as our past mirrors Hebrew bondage in Egypt, so our future goal is the eschatological kingdom. And our present is the journey through the liberating desert of history. The ongoing life of the Church as a process of liberation is an essential tenet in Christian dogma. It is embodied in the notion of "passover" or "pasch," and the life of the Church is a paschal one.

We must realize that we are involved in a passage through history towards liberation. But we must also remember that concrete liberation in history is not the ultimate, final stage either. We do seek the "new man" in history, but this concrete goal is not to be identified with the kingdom of God. Some day we may have to demythologize the notion of the "new man" too, lest it oppress us and prevent us from continually moving ahead in the process of liberation.

THEOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Now I should like to reflect on some dialectical categories that are involved in liberation theology. The term "dialectical" should be emphasized, because it points up a difference with older ways of thinking. Much of Christian scholastic thinking was "substantialist" in nature. In other words, it centered around the notion of "substance," and then talked about it as the substratum of "accidents" which concretized and individualized a given substance. By contrast, "dialectical" thinking focuses on the relationship between two things. The dialectical approach is profoundly Christian. Consider the mystery of the Trinity, for example. We talk about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Such terms as "Father" and "Son" would be meaningless without each other. "Son" implies a "Father," and "Father" implies a "child." We cannot ponder the Trinity without using some sort of dialectical thinking.

I should like to stress that the notion of liberation is very concrete. It cannot and should not be used in some abstract sense that deprives it of all meaning. The term "liberation" is a very Christian one, deriving from the Hebrew notion in the Old Testament. God told Moses to "liberate" his people from Egypt. This notion of liberation came down through Christianity to such thinkers as Hegel and Marx, and it was then passed along to many of today's liberation fronts. Christians often translate it into such terms as "salvation" and "redemption," but behind all these notions lies the dialectic of oppression and exodus. If we turn liberation into some abstract sort of salvation, then the term loses all meaning.

If we want to use the term "liberation" in a meaningful way, we must be cognizant of the concrete oppression that weighs down upon us. We must realize that sin and its power is oppressing us and forcing us to live in a situation of injustice. Starting from that awareness, we can begin the process—the *concrete* process—of liberation. It is not some vague, abstract risk we take. It is a very concrete risk, analogous to the risk which Christians took in the Roman empire when they denied the divinity of the emperor. When we take cognizance of the oppression under which we labor and proclaim its existence, we face the risk of torture and even death. We cannot continue to live tranquilly within the established order, for that established order is grounded on sin and unjust domination.

Many people make much of law and order. But one must consider what type of order is involved. If the established order is grounded on domination of other human beings, then it should not be respected. To obey laws that are part of such an order is to commit sin. There are times when the legal order turns into an established immorality, when few legal actions are morally good. Within the context of an unjust totality, illegal actions may be good. They may go beyond the injustice of the established order and contribute

to the process of authentic human liberation. Liberative action may be illegal in one sense just as the Hebrew exodus was illegal in the eyes of the Egyptian pharaoh. In another sense, however, it may be supremely right. It may accord with the justice of a new order that will truly serve the needs of the Other instead of suppressing those needs as the old order does.

THE DIALECTICAL CATEGORIES OF DOMINATOR AND DOMINATED

In liberation theology, then, the first dialectic is that between the established totality and the Other. Within that basic framework lies the dialectic between the dominator and the dominated, between the oppressor and the oppressed. To truly tackle this dialectic, however, we must comprehend the dialectic in terms of our concrete everyday life. Who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed in my concrete situation? If I am one of the oppressed, how exactly does the established order exercise its domination over me and others?

The word "domination" derives from the Latin word *dominus*, which means "lord" or "master." If someone is master over another human being and treats that other as a slave, it means that he has reified this human being. He has taken a free Other and reduced him to his tool; the Other is merely an instrument which he uses to achieve what he wants. It is this reality which underlies the oppression of the oppressed, and it is the one and only sin. To oppress a free human being is to kill him insofar as he is (or was) free: it is to turn him into a dead, lifeless instrument of one's own plans and designs. "Not to kill" the Other is to allow him to be free. That is precisely what love is-allowing the Other to be free and alive as a human being. And if someone truly loves the Other in this way, then he truly loves God as well.

When the oppressor slays the Other as a free human

being, he stands alone and proclaims his own divinity. He becomes an idolater and an atheist. The overcoming of the oppressor-oppressed dialectic presupposes a conversion in the oppressor. This conversion, however, is qualitatively distinct from the process of liberation itself, and the liberation process is the more important element here. When one party rises up and exerts dominion over another person, forcing that other person to accept his totality, it is he who exercises power. In the actual process of exodus and liberation, however, it is the person who is liberating himself that displays more power and vitality. Thanks to the liberative efforts of the person who had been oppressed, the oppressor can then undergo a conversion without being slain in turn.

This means that our people in Latin America must liberate themselves, or else liberation will never come. Women must liberate themselves, or else they will never be liberated. No one enmeshed in sin can do justice. Only the person who is suffering from injustice can do justice. The process of liberation itself is the only thing which will make it possible for the oppressor to undergo a real conversion. Hence only the underdeveloped nations of the world can enable the affluent nations to discover a new, more human model of human life and existence. Our role in the future is an interesting and important one.

THE DIALECTICAL INTERPLAY OF ELITE AND MASSES

The dialectic between elite and masses is of another sort. In Latin America, for example, we have oppressors and oppressed. But many elite groups are themselves dominated by foreign powers. So the domestic dominator may in turn be dominated by foreign oppressors. In short, there are different grades and stages of oppression in the whole dialectic of elite and masses.

The elite is some small oligarchic group. The masses is the large group which suffers from the domination of some elite. But our domestic elite is in turn dominated by some foreign elite in the United States or Russia. The foreign elite is autocratic, self-appointed, and bureaucratic. There is no one over it, and it is not democratic by any means. This foreign elite dominates our domestic elite, and the latter in turn dominates our people here.

We can describe all this in terms of the Gospel message. At the top we have Pontius Pilate, the oppressor representing the Roman emperor. Below him is Herod, the native ruler and oppressor under Pilate. Then we have the common people, of which Jesus was one. Our Creed tells us that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate" We often do not advert to the fact that there is a note of oppression recorded in the Creed itself, but it is there. The reigning elite could not allow the liberation of the people, for that would end their domination. Sin does not permit people to work justice.

There is then a political situation incorporated into the death of Jesus. The relationship existing between human beings is a political one, and the person who fails to understand this will probably end up implementing or supporting the worst kind of politics-the politics imposed on people by the established order. We cannot simply say that we love our country. We must be dedicated to making our country one which works justice.

What is the function of the elite and of the masses in the process of liberation? Is all the rightness and wisdom to be found in the latter group? Some people think so, naively believing that the masses have the whole solution to any given problem. But if a given people is alienated for the most part, then the role of the masses may be a very dubious and equivocal one. Remember that the Hebrews fleeing from Egypt in the Sinai desert kept complaining about their lot. They kept telling Moses that they had been better off in

Egypt. Moses had *to fight against his own people*, because they did not want to continue in the demanding process of liberation. The point is that the masses of the people, weighed down by a long tradition of oppressive pedagogy, may not possess an authentic yearning for liberation-at least one that is explicit and clearly defined.

In the process of liberation there must be another elite, standing outside the process in a sense and teaching people what liberation truly is. This is the group that will practice what Paulo Freire calls the "pedagogy of liberation." This group will probably always be a minority. It will be embodied in such as Jesus, Moses, the prophets, the Church. The people in this group know that they must get out of the existing totality. They criticize the oppressing party and help to lead the oppressed towards authentic liberation. Hence they are distinct from both groups in some respects.

These basic categories help us to get beyond the simplistic dialectic of elite versus masses, wherein the latter group is all good. An elite is needed to look at the situation critically and see the proper role of the people in the process of liberation. Knowing this, it must then summon the people, the masses, to undertake the task. Instead of engaging in demagoguery, it must stand outside the masses to some extent and engage in liberative criticism of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

THE TEMPORAL DIALECTIC

Another dialectic involved here is the temporal dialectic, the dialectic interplay of past, present, and future. Some people, living in the present, think that the past was much better. In their homes they practically enshrine their memories of the good old days, and they try at all costs to conserve and even mimic the past. They believe in "pure tradition," which in fact is not living tradition at all but her "traditionalism." Religious doctrine, for example, is

something from the past that must be preserved wholly and integrally. Hans Urs von Balthasar has referred to such people as "integralists": i.e., people who want to hold on to past tradition in its entirety, just as it has come down to them. Such people tend to move towards the right and towards some abstract past.

Another group looks towards an equally abstract future. They deny and reject the past, feeling that history will really begin after the revolution. Like the rebellious adolescent, they wash their hands of their forefathers' misdeeds. They look forward to an impracticable and impossible utopia. Such is the attitude of many revolutionary leftists.

In Latin America we also find another strain: the progressivism of the liberal positivist. Many Christians must be included here, for they think that Christianity can carry out its mission while still remaining a component of the dominant elite. These people think they can be two-headed: Marxists in some respects, Christians in other respects; or bourgeois liberals in some respects, Christians in other respects. Both try to blot out any memory of the colonial past, and they rush headlong towards some totally abstract future.

Finally, I would include here the stance of those who take a populist view of the extreme sort. They live in an abstract present, accepting everything that happens without entertaining any plans or principles. Refusing to explore the present in the context of our past, they accept anything spectacular that happens; but they do so in a very superficial way. They thus fall prey to opportunism, and fail to advance a truly revolutionary program. The people, they say, possess the solution to every question. They feel no need to exercise liberative critical judgment on day-to-day events, and so they are swept along by the tide of events. I think that a truly realistic position must come from an integrated view of our history as a whole. We must be willing and able to shoulder the burden of our real past, so

that we can form a meaningful view of the present and formulate a meaningful plan for the future. It would not be simply a centrist position. It would be the pointed thrust of a prophetic vanguard.

Such a prophetic stance is the true one for Christian faith. The Christian prophet operates out of the authentic past of the Church, not to imitate that past but to open up wholly to the possibilities of the future. Merely static imitation of the past is heresy. If one simply repeats the past today, then he is not even repeating the same thing; for the world has changed and repetition of the "same" message means that one is actually propounding a "different" message today. The only way to proclaim the same message today is to enunciate it in a new way, for all the mutable elements of it have changed in the course of history; i.e., the addressee, the idiom, the import. Authentic tradition keeps opening up to an ever new world, proclaiming the ever new message of God to that world. God keeps on revealing himself, explicating what had been only implicit. Everything has been revealed and realized in Christ, to be sure, but in history we keep on growing and maturing in our understanding of that revelation as we move towards the parousia.

The mere repetition of a past formula is a lie. The only way to speak God's eternal truth is to reiterate it in fresh terms for every new age and generation. God's eternal truth has no past or present or future, but man's history does. In every age God reveals himself to the Church, and the Christians of that age must proclaim what God has revealed to them. If I am living here in Latin America in the twentieth century, then I must interpret and proclaim God's revelation from the historical context in which I live.

The person who merely apes the past is dead. He is entangled in a petrified traditionalism rather than immersed in the vital flow of tradition. Only the person who is truly alive can hear God's summons amid the concrete flow of daily history. People entangled in dead traditionalism

have always misinterpreted the prophets. They have never understood Jesus' remark: "Let the dead bury their dead. Come, follow me." To truly follow Jesus is to set out on the uncharted pathways of history. Life must keep opening up to the new and unexpected. Life is creativity and risk, moving into an uncertain future with all the enthusiasm of committed liberty. Life is journeying towards the cross on Golgotha, not staying behind in Jerusalem to commemorate the great events of the past. Life is passing critical judgment on events and the dominating influence of sin, and hence it cannot help but arouse the resentment of those who are wedded to the existing order of injustice.

The Church must be a prophetic community forging a critical, liberative ecclesiology. It must allow people to rethink every stage of its past history, as well as every stage of human history. Thus the economic situation and past history of the underdeveloped nations cannot be regarded as meaningless events in profane history. They must be seen as the result of human sinfulness. Theology has a role to play, therefore, because it can point out the sinfulness in political, economic, educational, and cultural structures.

CULTURAL DEPENDENCE AND LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, contains a foreword written by Jean Paul Sartre. In this foreword Sartre comments on the cultural subjugation of scholars and intellectuals who are born in underdeveloped countries and then educated in Europe. His whole foreword is a moving statement, describing how people from the Third World are taught to parrot the so-called "ideals" of Christian Europe. Since Europeans think that their ideals and ways are the best, they leave no room for native thinking in the countries which are culturally and economically dependent on them.

We are beginning to leave that stage here in Latin

America. Our theology is now cognizant of its own originality and of our own distinctive past. Our theology has a mission: to engage in liberative criticism. To do this, it must go back over the past and discover it again-with new, critical eyes. All this will be fleshed out in praxis, in concrete action which forwards the cause of liberation.

Some people must start the ball rolling by taking personal risks. They are the prophets who point the way to the future. Some unruly young nun, for example, may suddenly ask her community to consider a new course of action. She will be told that it has not been done before. Her proposal may greatly upset the community, but it may also contribute to the liberation of her sisters. Unfortunately, it often happens that such an unruly person is expelled from the community, even as the prophets of old were shunted aside and even killed by their people .

We must give thought to concrete praxis, for only such praxis can pave the way for authentic theology and for the possible development of a new *Summa*. Such a *Summa* may appear in the future, but it is also possible that systematic *Summas* are now a thing of the past. We have to keep the door open to all the unexpected events that will take place in the future, waiting for the parousia of Jesus in the poor.

Pristine Judaeo-Christian thought was critical and negative, in the sense that it stood in opposition to the sinfulness of the established order and left the door open to the future. In the future our own theology may have to be more like that: opposed to sinful structures and open to the Other, wherever that may lead it.

THE FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORIES

The fundamental categories are "totality" and "the Other." The structured totality may also be considered the "inside," whereas the Other would be the "outside." The "outside" is the Other in face-to-face encounter. It is in the

acceptance and interplay of "inside" and "outside" that we must live out our Christian mission.

Let me give some examples of this. A local parish would be the "inside," while the surrounding neighborhood would be the "outside." The community of clergy in a diocese would be the "inside," while the diocesan community of Christians would be the "outside." Our traditional, substantialistic definitions of the Church describe it as a "perfect" society. A perfect society is self-sufficient; it has an "inside" but no "outside" to it. In calling the Church a perfect society, we are erroneously anticipating the perfected kingdom of heaven.

The truth is very different. An essential notion in Judaeo-Christian theology is that every totality, every "inside," also has an "outside." Outside the Christian stands the non-Christian. Outside the Church stands the world in which it carries out its mission. And it does not carry out this mission *after* having attained inner perfection. The very nature of the Church is that it is an "inside" open to the "outside." The Church is a totality (institution) directed towards the Other (through prophecy). This is the basic criterion we must use in evaluating every organism in the Church. If we want to determine whether an ecclesial organism is functioning properly, we must ask ourselves how it is operating with respect to its "outside."

A good bishop, for example, may have real problems. But if he is willing to maintain dialogue with his "outside," he will probably be able to work out a solution that accords with the demands of love. As a historian I would say that most outright breaks between a bishop and his clergy indicate an absence of dialogical openness. If a clerical community or a religious order is not truly open to the world, then any attempts at renewal will end up in self-serving egotism and fail to advance their ecclesial mission. If a parish community of lay people rests content in the shell of its own inner life, without opening up to the larger community around it, then it has lost all sense of the prophetic

mission of Christianity. The very word "catholic" is a denial and rejection of all sectarianism. If some parish group concentrates wholly on the "saints" inside its confines, nourishing visions of its own heaven here on earth, then it is lost in hellish egotism.

The "outside," the Other, is of the eschatological essence of the Church. If we feel that we are already in the kingdom of heaven, then there will be no prophetic mission and no Church militant. If the parousia has already arrived for us, then there is no "outside" and no reason for prophecy. In truth, however, we live within ongoing history. The kingdom has begun, but it has not yet reached its consummation. The Church has a critical, liberative mission which is to destroy every self-enclosed totality-thereby opening it up to new possibilities of political, cultural, and religious organization.

The role of the Church is akin to that of Moses when he was confronted with the golden calf. The golden calf was an idol, the totalization of something relative into an Absolute. Like Moses, the Church is obliged to destroy such totalizations, moving mankind on towards the fullness of history. That is why the Church does have a very essential role to play in human history.

The Church benefits the people and entities it criticizes by making them more truly human. It thus gives them more real power by liberating them from their oppressive tendencies. If they use this power to dominate people rather than to serve them, then they commit sin. The Church must come along and criticize them again. We Christians, in a sense, are meant to be the locomotive of history. We are supposed to keep moving it ahead towards its final destination and consummation.

This basic attitude radically alters our human criteria. It is not a matter of first organizing our "inside" community completely and then going to the world "outside." We must be open to the Other outside from the very start. Instead of

worrying about my own personal perfection, I must open myself totally and frankly to the Other. Instead of repeatedly examining my conscience in a self-centered way, I must follow Jesus to the cross. As he said: "Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will preserve it" (Mark 8:35).

To truly carry out our mission, we must ask ourselves how we are serving our neighbors. If we worry about this task and let God take care of our own perfection, we shall advance in perfection even though we do not realize it. This is the heart of the "spiritual life," or rather, of the "Christian life," for man is not Spirit; rather, he shares in God's own Spirit. We are anointed by the Spirit to live the Christian life, to give ourselves generously to the Other as Other.