

## Chapter 18

### *ETHICS OF CULTURE AND ECOLOGY*

#### 18.1 STATE OF THE QUESTION

The twin questions of ecology and culture as material for ethical reflection present a set of problems partly transcending the prevailing division of the capitalist and socialist worlds.

Humankind appeared on our tiny planet more than three million years ago (although *Homo sapiens* has been in the picture only in the last two hundred thousand years). In the course of the intervening ages, the human being has progressed from the condition of an altogether rare, land-locked species, having neither wings to fly nor fins to swim, to rule over all the earth. We have domesticated, systematically consume, and preserve in our zoos or tolerate in our "natural" parks (which, being parks, are not natural), practically every species of brute animal.

We read in the newspapers every day that the European forests are dying, that birds can no longer migrate, that the fish of the Mediterranean and of other waterways in industrial countries are perishing, that environmental pollution in Mexico City has reached deadly levels, that a lethal gas has escaped in India, that contamination from a nuclear accident poses a threat to human life in the cities for hundreds of miles around. Our gigantic technological and scientific miracles turn against us, and our lives hang in the balance. Further: as we know, a self-styled universal culture is dominating and extinguishing autochthonous cultures, ethnic groups, tribes, and peripheral nations-whole peoples, as in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Along with nature, the cultural diversity of humanity is disappearing from the globe.

We read in holy scripture:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ... "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." ...God looked at everything he had made, and he found it *very good* [Gen. 1:1-3,26,31].

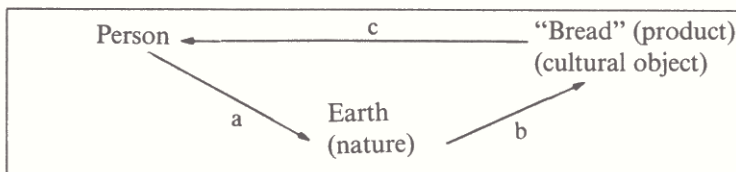
When God created all things, everything was "very good." What have we done with God's creation today, then? And what have we done with the entire cultural production of humanity before us?

## 18.2 PERSON, NATURE, PRODUCT: POIESIS

We have seen (1.2) that *praxis* is the person-to-person relationship: it is a "practical" relationship, an action between two human beings. In passing, we have briefly observed that *poiesis* is something else again: the person-to-nature-to-product relationship. *Work*-the relationship of person-to-nature-to-product-is a "productive," manufacturing relationship, the relationship precisely of work (11), in virtue of its third term: the product. The work relationship is a triple relationship, then, with each term determining different questions (see Diagram 12).

Diagram 12

The Threefold Work Relationship



The person-to-nature relationship can be one of mere "abiding," the locus of our "abode"-a relationship of passivity, admiration, and knowledge alone. This will be our theoretical, contemplative culture (arrow a). Only when the person-to-nature relationship becomes a work relationship-a relationship of the transformation of nature through human activity-is the relationship extended to a term constituting a human, cultural, no longer merely "natural," product. Now we have a technological, productive culture (arrow b). The movement from nature to product is a productive, technological process, implemented in our day by science. The distribution or consumption of the product (arrow c), for its part, is the moment of the "subjectification" of what human beings have in part objectified. This movement represents not objective culture (which would be material or symbolic cultural objects), but modes of consumption, of use, of satisfaction-subjective culture or customs, from culinary pleasure to the joy of the religious or spiritual.

Morality and ethics (3.2) both form part of this relational triangle, each with its own practical determination of it. Because relationships with nature and product are mediated by or addressed to *other persons*, they always have a *practical*-a moral or an ethical-status. The ecological question (nature precisely as our *oikia*, as humanity's "house and home"), and the cultural question (the "cultivation" of the earth), are human, practical questions, then.

### 18.3 "MOTHER EARTH"

From the time of the ancient Inca *Pachamama* in Peru, the *Cuahtlicue* of the Aztecs in Mexico, or for that matter the Roman *Terra Mater*, the *earth* has always been regarded by agricultural peoples, colonial planters, even nomads, as the mother of life, nourishment, and fertility. The earth is the radical, organic soil *where* one lives and *whence* one lives. From her motherly bosom spring the Andean potato, Central American corn, and wheat and grapes for the bread and wine of the Mediterranean.

In its natural fertility, the earth is the material origin of basic wealth-the origin of primordial, primary "use value." Without so-called natural things, human beings would be unable to perform any work at all. All work in the last analysis is the trans-formation-changing the *form*-of the matter born of earth.

Passively then-the earth as landscape, as the place where we eat, dress, and dwell, the boundless horizon, nature rustic, wild, and chaotic-the earth is the nature that touches our skin, the place where we make our *dwelling*, our *ecology*. This is the origin of the dialectic of person and cosmos, the phenomenon of nature as *habitat*.

From this earth, then, we gather wood, for we have discovered fire: wood is warmth now, and safety, and light. In this earth we find a cave, and it is our house. We find a large stone there, and it will be our door. We find the fruits of the earth, and they become our nourishment. Here are the animals, whose shepherds we shall one day be, herding them to replace our protein or to clothe ourselves with their hide. Nourishing, welcoming, protecting, motherly earth! Earth, lovely nature, splendor of dawns and sunsets, beauty of mountain streams, of the singing of the nightingales, of the terrible, bounding sea! Earth, mother of the sweet-smelling rose.

#### 18.4 DESTROYING THE EARTH

Sin is the destruction of the work created by God. God's most perfect deed is the human person. But the earth, too, is the work of God. Its destruction is the annihilation of the locus of human history, of humanity, of the incarnation, and hence the gravest of ethical misdeeds.

The earth was once a garden, a Paradise. Today it is one great refuse heap. What species has done this? The human. No longer do we rest on the bosom of our *Terra Mater* in love and respect. No longer is she our "Sister Earth," as she was once upon a time for Saint Francis of Assisi. "Brother Sun," for his part, is hard to find in Mexico City, decked in his mantle of smog.

The earth, as sheer material, as purely exploitable, unlimitedly destructible, as a source of income, as a cause of a growth in the profit rate, or even in the rate of mere production, is now but another aspect of the human *dominative* act. This change of attitude toward the person-to-nature relationship, culminating in the industrial revolution, now issues in the delusions of today's national state regarding the "promise" of transnational capital. The hotbed of this entire phenomenon is an aggressive society that destroys natural ecology, a society for which the corruption of nature is an intrinsic

aspect of the process of its domination of human beings, the poor, the subjected classes, the peripheral countries.

The transnational corporations locate their most contaminating industries, and exercise the least safety precautions, precisely in the underdeveloped countries. Factory waste kills the fauna and flora of the oceans, pollutes the atmosphere with asphyxiating gases, and wipes out the natural producers of oxygen (such as our forests, or ocean algae). The developed countries rob the periphery even of its oxygen! After all, they consume more than they produce. The Club of Rome announces the extinction of non-renewable resources, and the response is an augmentation of the contamination. The gigantic ecological collapse looms. The time draws near when, as if by an act of cosmic vengeance, nature will exterminate the species *homo* from the face of the planet. Inextricably intertwined with the sin of economic and political injustice, the sin of human domination, is the very death of nature. And yet, as we know, "the one who grasps for the sword, dies by the sword."

But the growth of the profit rate will hear no reasons. It would rather *extinguish life* than see its own death, the death of capital.

## 18.5 ECOLOGY AND LIBERATION

Nuclear war (15.5) and the death of the natural life of our planet would appear to be foretold in the Book of Revelation (6:1-8; 9:13-21). At any rate a like cataclysm is surely the work of the Beast (2.10; 12.10). Still, it is the poor who must bear the brunt of it.

Nature-the earth, its biosphere, its atmosphere, its waters-lies mortally wounded. Nor does the gangrene creep over it in an even process. Rather the process is organic: the center will offer more resistance to the crisis, whereas the periphery, the poor nations, will be the first to die. The crisis is a world crisis, but responsibility for it lies with the politicians of a military-industrial complex that destroys nature. The persons responsible are those in authority in the developed powers of the center, which with 30 percent of the world's population contaminate more than 90 percent of the earth.

That industrial center will never decree a reduction in its own profit growth-perhaps not even in its production growth. This would mean the end of a system whose very essence is inscribed in the parameters of an irrationally accelerated growth rate. Or will some

technological miracle regenerate the destroyed ecological balance? It is scarcely likely. Rescue, if there is to be rescue, may well arrive by other routes. Is a new attitude toward the relationship between the human being and nature still an option for a capitalism in its current stage of development? Will not poorer, less destructive, less consumer-oriented, more economical, more patient, more popular models of the relationship between the human being and nature, models more respectful of the earth, now appear only among peoples whose degree of technological contradiction has not attained the level at which we find it in developed central capitalism? Will not a breach with the destructive system be realized only when person-to-person relationships are redefined? Once peripheral peoples are liberated, will they not have an effect on the North-South relationship, and the person-to-nature relationship as well?

## 18.6 CULTURE

The theology of culture is a chapter of the theology of work (which we have examined in chap. 11), and both are constitutive parts of our theology of liberation:

When with the work of their hands or with the assistance of technical resources human beings cultivate the earth that it may produce fruits and come to be the worthy dwelling place of all the human family ...they personally accomplish the very plan of God [*Gaudium et Spes*, 57].

The Bible calls the fruit of toil "bread," suggesting a eucharistic sacramentality, satisfaction as nourishment, and the essence of human culture (see 1.6,4.9,6.7,6.8,6.10). Culture is first of all agriculture: the cultivation of the earth as the "working" of nature. Work is the very substance of culture, its ultimate essence, its basic determination, in the sense that its very being, as *actualization* of the human being, is a *way of producing human life*. Work is the self-production, the creation, of human life. Before being objects, indeed before being "modes of consumption" of these cultural objects, culture is a *way of working*.

On the one side, culture is *material poiesis* or production of objects, the productive technique (technology, art), as well as the

systematic totality of the instruments of work or of objects produced. This is material culture. The work-earth-bread relationship, then (creative human action, nature, product), is the essential material level of culture: the eucharistic "bread."

On the other side, culture is *symbolic poiesis* or production, the spiritual expression of material production. Any material cultural object is a *symbol* as well, and a symbol must always bespeak a relationship to the material (be it only to the basic need to eat, to enjoy sexual love, and so on-the profoundly *fleshly* dimensions of human existence and thus the most symbolic dimensions of all).

The symbolic totality of a people is that people's spiritual culture. The dialectical synthesis of culture is constituted in the life modes or lifestyles (the *ethos*) that make up the totality not only of production of material, symbolic objects, but of the mode of consumption lived by the community in the unity of history as well-the totality of the community's attitudes toward its values (the values emerging from a generative "nucleus" of meaning for a given concrete human group).

It is in this sense that the incarnate Son "has spoken according to the culture proper to different ages" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 58a). "But at the same time the church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation. ...It can enter into communion with various cultural modes" (ibid.).

## 18.7 CULTURAL DOMINATION

Sin on the level of culture, of which the church itself cannot be exonerated, having de facto identified itself over the course of so many centuries with Western culture alone (the phenomenon of *Christendom*), is the domination of one culture by another.

Culture, especially African and Asian, comes in for a great deal of discussion in contemporary theology. The issue is surely a crucial one. But we must discard a certain theological "populism" (13.8)-an "ethnotheology" of sorts, which claims to work exclusively from the level of culture, ignoring the political and economic spheres altogether, and understanding "culture" only in the "symbolic" sense of popular culture. We may not thus allow ourselves to forget the contradiction prevailing among the *plurality of existing cultures*. Latin American or African "culture" is not one but *many*, and contradictory, with hegemonic cultures dominating others in a

structure of sin.

At least from the sixteenth century onward, Spanish and Portuguese culture, and later English, French, and Dutch, and finally North American (18.8), engulfed the peripheral cultures by conquest and colonization. Aztec, Inca, Bantu, East Indian, Chinese, and other cultures were dominated and annihilated, or relegated to the supposed status of barbarism, savagery, and bestiality. Their gods were demons, we heard, their symbols sorcery, their traditions ignorance and falsehood, their dances indecency and immorality.

The modern European Christendoms, Catholic and Protestant alike, proclaimed to the human history of the Third World the witness of an obliteration of alien cultures, the annihilation of the neighbor, of the other, in the name of Christianity. The scandal is universal, and the day of judgment, sentence, and reparation yet to dawn. But there are other sorts of cultural sin as well—some of them more recent (18.8), others in the national order (18.9).

## 18.8 TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE

An invisible, forgotten *cultural domination* accompanied the expansion of the transnationals (chap. 15) in the period beginning in 1945. A self-styled "universal culture"—the Coca Cola culture, with its blue jeans and other "modern necessities"—is penetrating the Third World in all its breadth and depth. Both the "needs" and the means of their satisfaction are exported to the Third World, whose peoples, in all but total helplessness, contemplate not only the domination of their states, their armies, and their economies, but the destruction of their cultural objects, their customs, their symbols, the very meaning of their life. The destruction is a *spiritual* one. "The advent of urban-industrial civilization also entails problems on the ideological level, threatening the very roots of our culture" (*Puebla Final Document*, 418).

It is only too clear that a *bourgeois culture* of the dominating classes in the peripheral countries establishes an organic connection with this pretended universal culture, in order to seize control of education, the media, the organisms of scientific and technological research, and the universities. The "universal culture" is the "new Enlightenment" of those who regard themselves as "cultivated" because they are familiar with mechanisms imported from the



European and North American cultures and superficially implanted in peripheral countries. In the nineteenth century these were the liberals in Latin America. In the twentieth they are the developmentalists.

The church itself is profoundly involved in this whole problematic, not only by reason of its worldwide presence, but because the churches of the central countries of capitalism are hegemonic within Catholicism and Protestantism, and transmit willy-nilly the guidelines and models of their cultures of origin. Thus a cultural domination frequently employs the church itself as its tool and instrument.

### 18.9 POPULAR CULTURE, RESISTANCE, AND CULTURAL CREATION

The authentic national culture of a dependent, peripheral country is now split into two opposing factions. It bears on its bosom the mark of cultural domination. The culture of the elite dominates the culture of the masses (whom it controls), dominates the culture of the oppressed classes (whom it rejects), and finds itself in continual tension with the "*popular* culture."

The popular culture (for the authentic meaning of "people" see 8.5-10), basically structured around daily *work* (as "productive work" in the laboring and rural class; as "unproductive" work from the viewpoint of capital, in the ethnic groups, tribes, marginal groups, and other sectors that preserve their "outsideness"-8.7), is the nucleus of the people's practice of the centuries-old resistance to oppressors. With their songs, their dances, their living piety, their "underground economy" (their own consumption or production, invisible to the capitalist economy), their communal solidarity, their system of feeding themselves, and so on, they continue to do today what they have done for hundreds of years-bypass the oppressor's "universal culture."

But in the regime of oppression under which the peoples of the peripheral countries suffer, the popular culture must camouflage itself. It does so in its crafts, in its folklore, on the level of a despised, subordinate culture. Only in cases in which a people has managed to organize and is producing a praxis of liberation (8.10) does the popular culture turn creative, as with the popular national cultural

revolution of today's Nicaragua. The church of the poor (9.3), the base church communities-along with the prophets and saints who bind themselves to the poor with bonds of identity-have identified with this "culture-creating" process, animating it, vitalizing it, and integrating it into the liturgy , into the celebration of the word and the rite of the eucharistic memorial. Thus a cultural and economic synthesis is effectuated, and "bread" becomes a cultural object, to be experienced in the light of the word (a cultural symbol) and consumed in justice. Now the *community* (1.5) celebrates, in its culture, the fruit of its work in behalf of life.

#### 18.10 CULTURE AND POPULAR PASTORAL PRACTICE

The evangelization of the people is implemented in the culture of that people (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18ff.). "Faith, and consequently the church, are sown and grow in the culturally diversified piety of the people" (Medellín, *Popular Pastoral Ministry*, 5). Indeed, popular culture is the locus of the life, the realization, and the growth of the faith of the people. The Catholic Church, like the Protestant churches, because implanted principally in central countries (which determines the control and exercise of pastoral work), has difficulty in living the Christian life *from within*, living the Christian life as a popular cultural religious life. This is evident in Africa and Asia, where a diversity of races, languages, and even religions and autochthonous cultures, still vigorous and full of life, presents an obstacle to a facile domination by European culture by way of Christianity. But in Latin America this domination passes almost unperceived. In every one of our countries, the churches believe that a Creole culture will of course "understand" the oppressed. But the cultural chasm-dualistic residue of a succession of dominations, beginning with colonial Christendom-is immense. A Creole elite controls the hierarchical structures. But these structures are out of contact with the Christian people. A people can be evangelized only by a people, from within its own popular culture. Where the evangelizing process of liberation is concerned, therefore, it is essential that "the people evangelize the people" from within the popular church *community* itself, in the identity of its own culture. The fate of the church, both in Latin America and in the peripheral world of Africa and Asia, hangs in the balance.

I am not suggesting that our assertions concerning the church have been accepted by the revolutionary movements. However, these movements are making great strides in the reformulation of the question of the culture and religion of the Latin American people as an important aspect of the motivation of the revolutionary changes of which we stand in need today.

## CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, the question of work determines the double relationship "person-earth" (ecology) and "person-bread" (culture). The destruction of nature and the annihilation of the culture of the poor go hand in hand. Both are the fruit of sin-the sin of the domination exercised by the "rich," or sinners, over the "poor," or the dominated Job of the Bible (2.2). We destroy the land we live in. And we destroy the cultures of the dominated, in their dignity, in their beauty, in their splendid multiplicity as so many varieties of "lilies of the field." After all, the Idol is a god of death, and hates life (2.8, 3.5, 12.10).

Thus the poor are dominated and exploited by sin-as workers (chap. 11-12), as impoverished nation (13), as wage-earners of the poor nation (14)-as the tortured and annihilated victims of the arms of empire, sucked dry by debts they have neither contracted nor profited from but that they must pay with their blood (chap. 15), violated from time immemorial and accused of violence whenever, with full right and in all justice, they defend the innocent (chap. 16). When they manage, in rare instances, to defeat this historical regime of injustice, then they must begin the struggle for greater participation in the management of production, for greater freedom and democracy (chap. 17), all over again. When all is said and done, these *peoples*, these poor, these dominated classes-rendered just because they are dominated, dominated by sin-are the agent of the reign of heaven (5.8). The people of God does not surrender. It resists. And knows how to celebrate.

## Chapter 19

### *THE GOSPEL AND THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH*

#### 19.1 STATE OF THE QUESTION

In order to examine the questions posed by the relationship between the gospel and the social teaching of the church, we shall have to distinguish various levels of generality, value, and authority. To this purpose let us examine one of the papal documents of the church's social teaching:

Confronted with situations this diverse, we find it difficult to pronounce an isolated word, or to propose a situation of universal value. ...It is incumbent on the Christian communities objectively to analyze the actual situation of their country, explain it in the light of the changeless word of the gospel, deduce principles of reflection, norms of judgement, and guidelines for action according to the social teachings of the church such as they have been developed in the course of history. ...It behooves these Christian communities to discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and in communion with the responsible bishops, in dialogue with their other Christian brethren and all persons of good will, the options and commitments that it will be suitable to assume in order to realize social, political, and economic transformations it regards as urgent. ...Before all else, Christians shall have to renew their confidence in the power and originality of the demands the gospel. ...The social teaching of the church ...does not intervene to confirm with its authority any given

established structure It develops by way of mature reflection ...*under the impulse* of the gospel ...by the disinterested will to service and attention to the very poorest [*Octogesima Adveniens*, 4,42].

This lengthy citation will guide our reflection. Not surprisingly, it establishes the ethic of the gospel as the supreme norm of the whole of the social teaching of the church. For our own part, then, let us recall the basic illumination, the foundational horizon, of a community ethics of liberation:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory , escorted by all the angels of heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. ...The king will say to those on his right: "Come. you have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me. ...As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" [Matt. 25:31-40].

These absolutely primary gospel principles are the *light by which* the social teaching of the church develops the *demands* of "intermediate-level" social moral principles, a level neither concrete (for to make the concrete application is the responsibility of the Christian community) nor absolutely primary (which is the function of the gospel). Further, as we shall see, the social teaching of the church will be situated within an "established, prevailing *morality*" (3.6-7).

## 19.2 FROM RERUM NOVARUM (1891) TO QUADRAGESIMO ANNO (1931)

May 15, 1891, the date of the publication of Leo XIII's celebrated encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, marked the end of an era. Never again would Catholicism be inextricably intermeshed with feudalism and monarchy. Inadvertently, however, Catholicism now adopted the principles of capitalism, despite the stirrings of internal criticism

against it. "Capital" was now accepted as an independent co-principle with work, endowed with its own rights against the latter (*Rerum Novarum*, 1). The private ownership of capital was approved. As for "those who are without property," the encyclical proclaims that they are to "make up for that with work" (ibid., 6). Socialism was condemned. The reason given was that it denied "private property to be most conformable to human nature" (ibid., 8). Class differences were "natural" (ibid., 13), and the "height of evil" was to pretend that one class was the other's enemy, "as if the difference between rich and poor were not established by nature" (ibid., 14). To be sure, a just wage was demanded: the wealthy were not "to seek their profit in the poverty of others," for this was "permitted neither by divine law nor by human" (ibid.). However, the encyclical promptly retracted this condemnation of profit, this anathematization of the exploitation of surplus value (see 12.3-5), for it was utterly oblivious of the actual *origin* of profit. The encyclical is an enormous step forward in Christian social awareness. But this step is taken entirely within the purview of capitalist *morality* (3.2). Granted, capitalism is also powerfully criticized in the document.

In 1931, socialism was once more condemned in essence, whereas capitalism was criticized from within a basic acceptance of it:

Inasmuch as the present system rests principally on capital and labor, one must know and put into practice the principles of right reason or Christian social philosophy on capital and labor and their mutual coordination [*Quadragesimo Anno*, 110].

Thus the "true social teaching of the church" (ibid., 20) criticizes capitalism and proposes reforms, but accepts its principal theses. Socialism, for its part, is criticized absolutely.

### 19.3 FROM MATER ET MAGISTRA (1961) TO OCTOGESIMA ADVENIENS (1971)

The social teaching of the church has condemned Nazism and Fascism, oblivious of the fact that these distortions of the extreme right are simply capitalism pursued to its ultimate consequences. The

church's condemnation of socialism was unqualified at that time. Only after the Second World War, during the years from 1945 onward, while still approving of capital and its right to profit, the church began to insist that a wage, as just recompense for work performed, "permit [the worker] to maintain a genuine human level of life" (*Mater et Magistra*, 71)-not understanding that if the wage were actually to recompense "the effective contribution of each laborer to economic production" (ibid.), there would be no profit or surplus value. However, we now see the church beginning gingerly to distance itself from capitalism in the matter of ownership (ibid., 104-19), especially in the area of North-South relationships:

Perhaps the *greatest* problem of our day is the one bearing on the relationships that ought to obtain between economically developed nations and nations still economically developing [ibid., 157].

It is likewise necessary that economically advanced nations exercise special care to avoid the temptation to lend assistance to poor countries with the intention of orientating their political situation to their own advantage and thus realizing their plans for world hegemony [ibid., 171].

The spirit of *Pacem in Terris* (1963), the encyclical addressed "to all persons of good will," opened new perspectives. The Second Vatican Council was in session. *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) now recalled that "the interior liberation produced by the spirit of evangelical poverty makes us more sensitive to and better capable of understanding the human phenomena linked to economic factors" (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 51). John XXIII's "church of the poor" was forging ahead. *Populorum Progressio* (1967) proposed a whole new program for development, and went back to Pius XI's theme of the "international imperialism of money" (ibid., 26)-a theme that was to be resumed at Medellín (*Medellín Document on Peace, etc.*). *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) was a genuine, and genuinely new, theological treatise on the fundamental social question.

Only with *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), however, did the church distinguish the various types of socialism:

Among socialism's various forms of expression, as are the

generous aspiration and the quest for a more just society ... distinctions must be drawn to guide concrete options. ... This outlook will enable Christians to consider the degree of commitment possible along these [socialist] paths, preserving the values, in particular, of freedom, responsibility, and openness to the spiritual, which guarantee integral human development [*Octogesima Adveniens*, 31].

A bridge had been built. A new age would dawn in Latin America. The historic initiatives of Medellín (1968) would not have to be in vain.

#### 19.4 LABOREM EXERCENS (1981)

Surely a central place in the history of the social teaching of the church must be assigned to *Laborem Exercens*. This encyclical moves to a head-on criticism of capitalism-capitalism in its very essence- and approves of socialism in principle. Now it is socialism that comes in for particular criticisms and a call for internal reform. The orientation conferred on the social teaching of the church in 1891 has been reversed. If the earlier "key" was private property, now "human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the entire social question" (*Laborem Exercens*, 3). The basic thesis of the document's criticism of the essence of capitalism is enunciated in terms of "the principle of the priority of *labor* over *capital* " (ibid., 12):

This principle directly concerns the process of production: In this process labor is always a *primary efficient cause*, while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere instrument or *instrumental cause* [ibid.].

Further consideration of this question should confirm our conviction of the priority of human labor over what in the course of time we have grown accustomed to calling capital [ibid.].

We must emphasize and give prominence to human primacy in the production process, the primacy of humankind over things. Everything contained in the concept of capital in the strict sense is only a collection of things [ibid., 13].



The social teaching of the church no longer held that work can be set in confrontation with capital or detached from it as an independent factor or aspect on the very level of production itself. *Rerum Novarum* had held: "Neither capital can subsist without labor, nor labor without capital" (no. 14). Now we are taught instead:

This consistent image, in which the principle of the primacy of person over things is strictly preserved, was broken up in human thought. The break occurred in such a way that labor was separated from capital and set in opposition to it, and capital was set in opposition to labor, as though they were two impersonal forces, two production factors juxtaposed in the same "economistic" perspective [*Laborem Exercens*, 13].

All capital is work. The creative source of wealth, of all wealth or value, is work (11.5, 12.6), not capital. On the other hand, as we have seen (17.6), John Paul II basically accepts socialism: "In consideration of human labor and of common access to the goods meant for humankind, one cannot exclude the *socialization*, in suitable conditions, of certain means of production" (*Laborem Exercens*, 14). But now there is more: socialism is criticized internally. Instead of being criticized from without, as before, it is corrected from within, as I indicated in 17.6-8:

We can speak of socializing only when the subject character of society is ensured, that is to say, when on the basis of their work all persons are fully entitled to consider themselves part-owners of the great workbench at which they are working with everyone else [*Laborem Exercens*, 14].

If it is to be rational and fruitful, any socialization of the means of production must ...ensure that in this kind of system also persons can preserve their awareness of working "for themselves" [ibid., 15].

As we see, it is no longer a matter of a critique from without. Socialism is now being criticized *from within socialism itself*, which is accepted in its real, specific, actual existence. The critique of

socialism is a moral demand for reform. The critique of capitalism is ethical, radical, and total.

### 19.5 ETHICAL DEMANDS OF THE GOSPEL

The "social teaching" or "social doctrine" of the church is unanimous in its insistence that the norms or directives the hierarchy proposes to the individual "Christian community" are inspired by, and emanate from, the gospel. In other words the social teaching of the church is not the gospel. Its level is one of inferior value, less importance. This at once poses a problem. What need is there of a "social teaching"? After all, we have the gospel, and the demands of that gospel are on a higher level. What is the relationship between the gospel and the social teaching of the church, and again between this pair and the individual "Christian community"?

For the sake of more clarity, the various levels of generality, as well as the various agents involved in this question, in the terminology of *Octogesima Adveniens*, 4 and 42, are sketched in Diagram 13.

The gospel abides as the fundamental horizon, the ultimate ethical reference, of all Christian praxis, that of the social magisterium of the church as well as that of the ethical conscience of the saints and prophets. In reality the only infallible, absolute, really Christian, "once and for all" (*hapax*) "social teaching" is the gospel.

The gospel will always be the Christian utopia (see chaps. 4 and 5):

The Spirit of the Lord, which animates the person renewed in Christ, continually overturns the horizons where the human intelligence so frequently desires to remain, moved by an overeagerness for security. A certain energy totally invades us, thrusting us to transcend every system, every ideology [*Octogesima Adveniens*, 37].

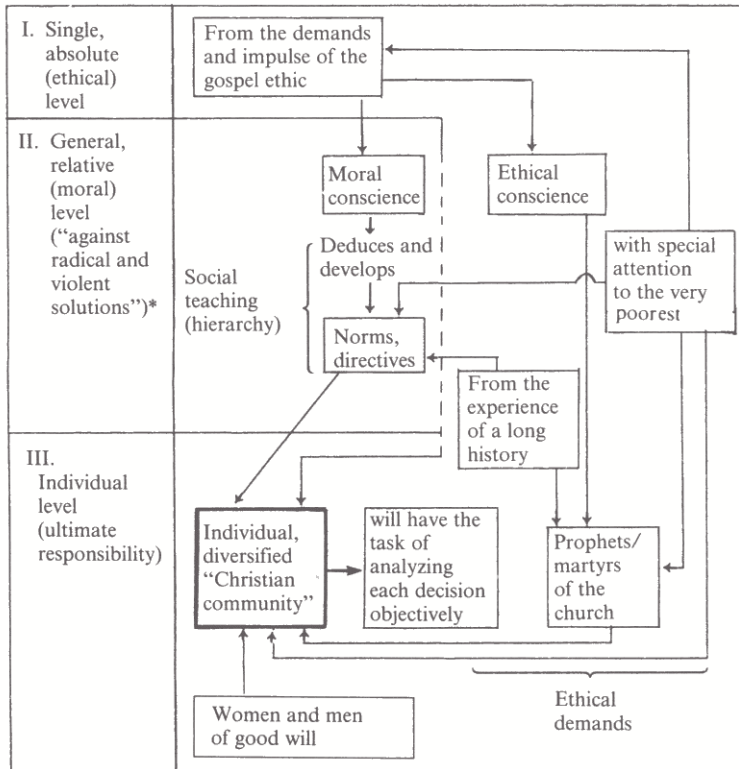
This creative impulse is the force of the gospel itself.

### 19.6 STATUS OF THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

We shall have a better sense of the question if we recall some of the texts of the teaching of the popes. By and large this teaching recommends acceptance, albeit critical, of the prevailing order of

Diagram 13

The Gospel, the Social Teaching of the Church, and the Christian Community



\* Octogesima Adveniens, 3

things. *Rerum Novarum* advises: "The best thing to do is to see human things *as they are* and at the same time to seek, by other means, as we have said, the opportune alleviation of evils" (no.13).

Apparently a mere *moral but critical* conscience would apply the gospel demands (19.5) and thus arrive at specific (that is, on a level of lesser abstraction and generality) norms, teachings, and directives for the Christian community: "It is the church that draws from the Gospel those teachings in virtue of which the conflict can be resolved completely, or at least palliated and thereby made more bearable" (ibid., 12).

Thus "let those who ...lack the goods of fortune learn from the church that poverty is no shame in the eyes of God" (ibid., 17). Today this would sound to some ears like a theology of resignation.

It would appear that *Quadragesimo Anno* adopted a "third alternative," inasmuch as it enjoins us from "flying either to liberalism or to socialism for assistance" (ibid., 10). It is true that the encyclical is enunciating general moral principles. But these must never be interpreted as specific socio-economic or political projects. Hence the ambiguity of their status. The social teaching of the church proposes we rise above "the battle between opposing *classes*" (ibid., 81), but we are not told *how* to rise above domination of one class by another. (Indeed, the document fails to show this domination to be a constitutive, structural aspect of the classes themselves) Finally, we are dealing with "a reform adjusted to the *principles* of reason and *capable* of leading the economy to a right and wholesome order" (ibid., 136). But the means cannot be determined from the social teaching of the church.

We may safely conclude, then, that the social teaching of the church remains on a level of *generality*, and addresses to the Christian community the *advice* of the magisterium. The social teaching of the church is *fallible*, and relative-midway between the absolute level of the gospel and the concrete order of the responsibility of Christian praxis.

## 19.7 THE PROPHETIC FUNCTION

The social teaching of the church is an element of the ordinary magisterium, transmitting norms and directives for concrete Christian praxis in the fashion of an authoritative "counsel," from a point

of departure in the experience of the church's long history and with special attention to the very poorest. It is not the only *ecclesial reference* possible, however, when one is concerned to make a Christian decision in full awareness of one's individual historical responsibilities. The prophets, the martyrs, and the heroes ("persons of good will") are also essential referential features of the taking of a concrete historical decision.

Basing their choices on the demands of the gospel itself-and adopting more radical attitudes in exceptional times-the prophets of Christian history, thanks to their *ethical conscience* (4.2), have performed an exemplary, critical, ethical praxis (3.2). Without renouncing the social teaching of the church, it has served to complement it at certain serious, special times, perhaps such as those in which we are living in Latin America today:

We stand on the threshold of a *new historical age* on our continent, an age pregnant with a yearning for total emancipation, for liberation from all servitude, for personal maturation and collective integration. We feel the first pangs of the painful birth of a new civilization [Medellín, *Introduction*].

At such crucial moments, when the norms and directives of *normal* eras can no longer alleviate a people's pain or make it more bearable, the prophets call us down new pathways, some of which actually run counter to the social teaching of the church. But as we have observed, that teaching is not infallible: it issues from the ordinary, fallible magisterium of the church.

Latin America is part of the Third World. Its population is sunk in the mire of oppression and poverty. The social teaching of the church, which has been elaborated mainly in a context of developed countries like the European, frequently fails to respond to the *actual situations* of Latin America. "It is difficult ...to pronounce an isolated word" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 4). Prophets fill the void.

#### 19.8 ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The third level (the first being that of the gospel, the second that of the social teaching of the church) is the specific historical, "situated"

level. The third level is that of responsibility for practical decisions. This responsibility falls to the *Christian community*. Accordingly, it is incumbent on the Christian community to analyze, objectively, the political and economic reality confronting it. The Christian community, in the light of the gospel, in conformity with the social teaching of the church (when possible), with attention to the counsel of its shepherds, and allowing itself to be guided by its prophets as well-where it must be able to discern true prophets from false-will ultimately have to refer to its own ethical conscience and its own historical community. No one can decide for the Christian community, or supply for any shortcomings that may appear in its political praxis.

By "Christian community" I mean the local church under the authority of the episcopal college (of the nation or continent): a diocese, a parish, a movement, or indeed an ecclesial community. No orthodoxy can supply for *orthopraxis* (20.7). By "orthopraxis" I mean the correct activity engaged in by the *community* as Christian-after compliance with the requirements for an adequate decision-in any given situation. The social teaching of the church could not have indicated what a Christian community ought to have done in Cuba in 1959, in Nicaragua in 1979, or in Brazil in 1988. It is the *community* itself that must *take charge* of (respond in the presence of) its own existence, always keeping in mind its charge of service of the "very poorest." The right to this act of *prudence* (*prudentialia, phronesis*) is an inalienable one.

True, the hierarchical church bears the responsibility of a "discernment of spirits"-a judgment as to the appropriateness or timeliness of an action. By no means, however, will the charisms of the creation of the most urgent and innovative (revolutionary) solutions of social problems originate necessarily or even frequently with the ministry of the magisterium. The creation of such solutions is the proper function of the actual *Christian community* and its prophets.

## 19.9 EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

The ethical demands of the gospel cannot "evolve." These demands are valid for all ages and situations. This is an absolute, yet definite,

principle (7.7-7.9). However, "the social teaching of the church accompanies us on this quest with all its dynamism. ...It develops through the intermediary of mature reflection, in contact with changing situations in this world" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 42).

The social teaching of the church, then, does evolve. It is relative to changing situations. Thus at certain moments it will be "ahead" of the average critical consciousness in the Christian community. At other moments it will coincide with this awareness, this conscience, and confirm it in its decisions. But it may also happen that, in comparison with the conscience of the prophets of a new age, the social teaching of the church may be somewhat "behind," at least with respect to certain social phenomena in certain parts of the world and among certain sectors of society. The social teaching of the church is itself aware of this:

To be sure, very many are the various situations in which, willy-nilly, Christians find themselves committed, depending on the region, to socio-political systems and cultures [*Octogesima Adveniens*, 3].

We must face facts. Intraecclesial tensions over divergent socio-political, moral, or ethical commitments are a reality. They are impossible to suppress. But at the same time the existence of such tensions is a sign of the historical vitality of the church.

*Rerum Novarum* was ahead of contemporaneous Christian praxis by comparison with the *average* level of consciousness in the church community at the end of the nineteenth century, just as *Laborem Exercens* was ahead of the petit bourgeois Christian conscience of Europe or the United States in the early 1980s. This is not to assert that *Laborem Exercens* was on a par with the ethico-prophetic conscience of the many Christians who have had to suffer persecution in order to respond to the "dynamism of the Christian faith, [which] thus triumphs over the petty calculations of selfishness" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 37).

#### 19.10 THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH AND COMMUNAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

I should like to make one further point concerning the relationship

between the social teaching of the church and the communitarian ethical theology of liberation. Some, with very good reason, oppose the existence of a social teaching that would pretend to replace the gospel or the responsibility of the Christian community. But consequently they oppose the existence of the social teaching of the church altogether. Others, as we know, labor precisely under the illusion that this teaching (frequently interpreted according to the criteria of a reformist, petit bourgeois capitalism) gives Christians *all* the criteria, norms, or directives needed for specific action. Christians need only comply with this teaching, we are told. They may then rest assured that their praxis will be without imperfection, error, or deviation. Both positions are erroneous.

We have a gospel, whose force and validity as ultimate reference abides (19.5), and the changing, relative social teaching of the church will never be able to supplant it. On a more concrete level, we have an ecclesial social teaching, but one of such generality that it is simply incapable of replacing a considered, personal, responsible analysis on the part of the Christian community. We also have the example of the behavior of the prophets, the saints, the martyrs, and the heroes. They too are a secure reference for Christian action. But we have a fourth reference, as well: communitarian ethical theology—which, once more, will in no way supply for the Christian community's ongoing, specific examination of conscience.

The reflection that constitutes a communitarian ethical theology will always be "second act" with respect to praxis. That theology *follows upon* Christian praxis, both ecclesial and communitarian or personal. It is this praxis that guarantees and endorses that theology, enabling it to proceed along its course with clarity and lucidity, and thereby reproduce, in community fashion, its own praxis as well. The theological *theory* of praxis opens tactical and strategic perspectives. Community ethical theology is neither the gospel, nor the social teaching of the church, nor the community examination of conscience, nor the community's actual decision. Rather it "rationalizes" the structure of all of these, correctly situating the problematic of the moment. Above all, it will leave the door open for new popular Christian community practices whenever profound, even (in extreme cases) revolutionary, changes are called for.



## CONCLUSIONS

Beginning in 1891, the church has gradually developed a "social teaching." This teaching, theorized by the "Roman school" in such a way that its theoretical scope has been limited, has kept account of church tradition. The great social encyclicals have erected the crucial milestones. These documents have proceeded, gradually, from an acceptance of capitalism (together with an intemal critique demanding certain reforms) and a total rejection of socialism (on the grounds of an ideological or moral critique initially), to a rejection of capitalism in *Laborem Exercens* (together with the proposal of ways for a Christian nevertheless to live under such a regime) and an acceptance of socialism (along with a demand for full participation in work at all levels of bureaucratized and planned society). On the one hand, this "evolution" teaches us that the gospel, and only the gospel, is Christianity's ethical absolute, and that no social teaching can replace it. It also demonstrates that the social teaching of the church cannot be in force at certain "times of emergency," when radical changes leave the Christian community with full responsibility for its ultimate decisions. In other situations this social teaching indeed plays the role of an authoritative "counsel" on the part of the ordinary, fallible magisterium.

## Chapter 20

### *LIBERATION ETHICS AS FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY*

#### 20.1 STATE OF THE QUESTION

None of the intramural debates of the theology of liberation have contributed much to its *systemization*. Liberation theology is not a chapter of theology. It is a way of doing *all* of theology. And this particular way is visible not only in its point of departure (first praxis, then theory), in its epistemological mediations (the importance of the social sciences), in its original organic links (with the church of the poor, the base ecclesial communities), and in the topics it regards as most important or relevant. This particular way of doing theology is visible also, and by no means least of all, in the *order* in which its questions are situated-in other words, in the systemization of its theological tractates. This is not the place for a comprehensive treatment of the problematic. I shall merely touch on its first point. I shall examine the question of the starting point of all theology-fundamental theology-in a context of the theology of liberation.

Holy scripture teaches us:

Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see. Because of faith the men of old were approved by God. ...By faith Abel offered God a sacrifice greater than Cain's. ...By faith Noah, warned about things not yet seen, revered God and built an ark. ...By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage; he went forth,

moreover, not knowing where he was going. ...By faith Isaac invoked for Jacob and Esau blessings that were still to be.

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph. ...By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after his birth. ...By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the king's wrath. ...Others were tortured and would not receive deliverance. ...Still others endured mockery, scourging, even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawed in two, put to death at sword's point. ...The world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and on mountains, they dwelt in caves and in holes of the earth. ...All of these were approved because of their faith [Heb. 11:1-39].

Indeed there is neither theology, nor any other Christian praxis, without faith. But faith itself is the subject of a constitutive relationship to praxis, to action, to the effective realization of the reign of God. Here we are at the very source of the Christian experience, the very origin of theology.

## 20.2 WHAT IS FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY?

From the time of the bourgeois industrial revolution, in the eighteenth century, theology has had to defend itself against the critical attack of "reason." Faith, says "reason," is irrational and religion is obscurantism. In response to this attack, a "fundamental theology" (*theologia fundamentalis*) appeared. This theology was concerned with "constituting the rationality of faith" (*rationabilitatem fidei*-S. Irigui, *Manuale Theologiae Dogmaticae*, 1: 11). What passed unnoticed was that de facto the "rationality" in question was bourgeois. Too much was unconsciously conceded to what was thought to be *apologetically* convincing. Fundamental theology was apologetics—a defense of faith, or at least of its possibility. Later, liberal European theology confronted a different challenge: how to be a Christian in a secular world. The secularization of society now required that theology initiate a self-justifying discourse for the ears of a world that, though bourgeois, was simply irreligious.

In the poor, peripheral countries today, the theology of liberation initiates its discourse in the face of still other challenges, still other

fundamental objections. Liberation theology must deal with a "radical critique of religion" as the "opium of the people," yes, but precisely in a situation of oppression, revolution, and liberation. The criticism is neither rational nor existential, as it has been in Europe. This time it originates with a political praxis. The religious superstructure, we hear, justifies domination. Religion is an ideology of oppression. It produces a false political conscience. It is of its very nature anti-revolutionary.

Theology must now adopt an original demarcation and definition. On the one hand, as a theology of liberation confronted with a theology of oppression it must now work from the relationship between praxis and theory rather than from that between reason and faith. At the same time, it must defend and demonstrate the possibility of a religion of liberation, and thus give an answer to the question: How is it possible to be Christian within a revolutionary process of essential structural change? (see 16.7).

### 20.3 HOW IS REVELATION POSSIBLE?

The first traditional question of fundamental theology was: How is revelation *possible*? (Sebastian Tromp opens his treatise with a chapter entitled, "De Possibilitate Revelationis," pp. 70ff.). Against illuminism, Schelling, for example, wrote in his *Philosophy of Revelation*: "Revelation is an authentic, special source of cognition" (6:398), which gives us not "an unfounded knowledge, but rather the best founded of all, as it alone contains that before which all transcendence to another term is impossible" (ibid.). Even for Kierkegaard the revealed is "absurd"-absurd to a ludicrously self-centered "reason." The absurd is actually "the real," says the Danish existentialist. In the first fundamental theology, then, the possibility of revelation was posited from a point of departure in (an anti-illuministic) reason or rationality. In the same fashion, the theology of a laissez-faire European thinking had to take account of atheism in order to defeat it and initiate theological discourse. We in the poor periphery of the world, however, confront not atheism (we have no atheists), but fetishists and idolaters (2.3, 12.10, 15.10). Our problem is not atheistic secularization, but the existence of various "idols." We are surrounded with fetishes, and we must know how to distinguish them all from the God of the poor.

The act of revealing is the challenge and call of the other, the call of totality, a challenge irrupting from beyond the world (4.2,5.2). The voice, the call, the word of the other (in Hebrew *dabar*; in Latin *verbum*) bursts in upon the world and turns it upside down, crying: "I am hungry!"

It is in the act of hearing the voice of the other (*ex auditu*, in Trent) that God's revelation is bestowed. But God can be revealed only *by what is other* than the system of sin, other than the "world" (3.3-3.6). God is revealed essentially *through* and *by way of* the poor. The poor constitute the *place* of the epiphany of God (especially since the moment of the revelation of God in "Jesus *poor*," as Charles de Foucauld loved to call him). To hear the voice of the poor *here and now* (see 5.9, 7.7, 7.10, 10.4) is the *sine qua non* of the actuality of God's revelation. The Bible can be interpreted only in the living tradition of the particular Christian community (*Puebla Final Document*, 373), only when it is read and contemplated from the "place of the poor," from the "perspective of the poor." For the theology of liberation, the crucial question is not the possible irrationality of a positive revelation, but the *impossibility* that God should be revealed to the rich, the impossibility that God should be manifested to those who dominate the poor, or be known by persons who, in the absence of an "ethical awareness" (4.2) on their part, are estranged from that particular, historical position that would have permitted them to hear the Word of God.

#### 20.4 HOW IS FAITH POSSIBLE?

The next question, for traditional fundamental theology, was the possibility of faith: *credibilitas* (Tromp, p. 15), or "the value of the motives for believing" (*credentibilitas*-Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Revelatione*, p. 1). Once more apologetics presented arguments that convinced the already converted and left unbelievers totally indifferent. For us in Latin America the question is very different.

As we know, for Thomas Aquinas the act of faith is "an assent (*assensus*) proceeding not from cognition but originating in the will" (*ex voluntate*; *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1). The essential question, then, is the "disposition (*dispositio*) of the believer" (*ibid.*)-that is, the *practical* conditions (which are of the "order of the will" for Thomas) of the possibility of the act of faith. To put it another way:

the fundamental challenge is to understand the character of one's *praxis* (1.2) with regard to the other, dominator or dominated: Is my *praxis* sinful or just? In order to *be able to believe*, one must first be an "atheist," an anti-fetishist, with respect to the idol constituted by the prevailing system (2.10, and, e.g., 12.10). Above all, one must be responsible for the poor (4.2)-that is, one must perform orthopraxy (20.7) in which it will be possible to *believe in the voice* of the poor who cry out to me: "I am hungry!"-so that I feel myself called upon, challenged, turned head over heels, converted, like the Samaritan. (In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus, as a trained Jewish theologian, gives us to know the hermeneutic *categories* of his theology. In the case of Jesus' theology, and only in the case of that theology, are theology and revelation *identical*.)

## 20.5 THE STARTING POINT OF THEOLOGY

If what I have said has any meaning, we now understand that the theological discourse upon *praxis*-and not only upon the essence or basic structure of *praxis*, but most emphatically upon the particular situation in which that *praxis* transpires-*is first theology*-primary or fundamental theology. The theology of *praxis* is the *whence* of the theologian's doing or producing of second theology. Theology is theory, yes. But the theologian is a concrete, historical, "situated" subject (situated in a class-8.4; in a sex; in a nation-13.6). All of these determinations contribute to the constitution of the *praxis* out of which *theological theory* arises.

*Praxis* is the starting point of *all* theology, whether or not the theologian is aware of it. For example, Thomas Aquinas's patriarchal *praxis* produced an unconsciously sexist theology (indeed it may have been impossible for him to be aware of his sexism). And so Thomas attributed to Adam "being" (*esse*) and to Eve only the "matter" of the transmission of original sin: "Had Adam not sinned, but Eve had, their offspring would not have contracted original sin." In the same fashion, Thomas's feudal *praxis* resulted in a feudal theology, which admitted to membership in society only the feudal nobility (and not the serfs, who were under a "seigneurial right"-*jus dominativum*).

The organic nexus between *praxis and theory*, the fact of the "organic intellectual," is inevitable. (Even the conservative theolo-

gian, for example, is an organic intellectual-of the bourgeoisie.) The important thing is to be clearly aware of the character of one's praxis, of one's concrete situation, one's organic nexus with theory, and to make of this organic nexus the object of a first *explicit* theological reflection (8.10).

## 20.6 PRAXIS DETERMINES THEOLOGY

Thus we have a three-term relationship, whose terms are constituted by concrete historical praxis (HP), the theologian as subject (agent) of theology (ST), and the theological discourse itself (TD):

HP → ST → TD

Theologians performing their praxis only within a system of domination (3.2) would find themselves to be "determined" (always relatively) by that circumstance-in their lives, in society with other women and men, and in the interests they defend. Without their noticing it, their theology (TD), in the subject matter they select, in the manner in which they handle this subject matter, and even in their indifference to subject matter more urgent to the concerns of the oppressed and poor, would be a "theology of domination."

If, on the other hand, a theological praxis were to be communal-for example, as set forth in 4.6-then the action of the theologians would outstrip the exigencies of the prevailing system. This action would be not only praxis, but *diakonia*-service to the other as other, the action of the Samaritan. It would tend to transform the prevailing system. It would be an *ethical* action, and not merely a *moral* one (3.2). In this case the theology (TD) of the theologian (ST) would perform a "prophetic mission" (*Puebla Final Document*, 377, 267-8). It would be a theology of liberation, although this would not exempt it from the specific ideological limitations of any human production.

A praxis situated regionally or continentally, in a matrix determined by autochthonous language, customs, race, or religions, will generate African, Asian, and so on, theologies-which certain congregations of the Roman Curia oppose, but which the Second Vatican Council called for:

It is necessary that in each great socio-cultural territory theological reflection be promoted ...keeping account of the philosophy and wisdom of the peoples [*Ad Gentes*, 22].

In the same way, a praxis situated in the most advanced element of the civilizing task, most especially if it is performed among political groups who feel responsible for the organization of practical systems to serve the poor, will necessarily produce a theology that will avail itself of the tools of the most appropriate sciences and methods, even if this means being called Marxist-a judgment handed down by those who, for their part, support the interests of the dominant classes (the bourgeoisie in capitalist countries):

These difficulties [of harmonizing culture with Christian teaching] do not necessarily harm the life of faith. Indeed they can stimulate the mind to a more accurate and penetrating grasp of the faith. For recent studies and findings of science, history, and philosophy raise new questions that influence life and demand new theological investigations. ...

May the faithful, therefore, live in very close union with their contemporaries. Let them strive to understand perfectly their way of thinking and feeling, as expressed in their culture. Let them blend modern science and its theories and the understanding of the most recent discoveries with Christian morality and doctrine. Thus their religious practice and morality can keep pace with their scientific knowledge and with an ever advancing technology [*Gaudium et Spes*, 62].

This is precisely what the theology of liberation has done with respect to the social sciences and political movements in Latin America. Those who sit on judgment seats located in other cultural circumstances seem to have forgotten the directives of the council, as they condemn prophetic, missionary endeavors that meet the expectations of contemporary Latin Americans.

## 20.7 ORTHOPRAXY AND ORTHODOXY

As we see from all that has been said, "true teaching" (in Greek, *orthodoxia*) springs from and is determined by authentic, "true



praxis" (*orthopraxia*). Some may regard this proposition rather as a reversal of a proper order of things, or a renunciation of the magisterium, for example. It is nothing of the kind. It is a traditional, ancient position.

*Orthopraxia*, or true and proper acting, is an attribute of the church in its totality-the church as the universal people of God. If the church were to be mistaken in its action, it would no longer have a concrete point of reference for its teaching, so that its doctrine would now be mistaken as well. It is the *community*-the universal church, the local church, the base community-that holds forth the "orthopraxy" to be followed by the ultimate individual conscience.

The charism of the prophets springs from the "base," from the "grass roots," by the action of the Spirit, in response to the demands of concrete orthopraxy. The ecclesial ministry (including the episcopal) is not the source of this charism. The ecclesial ministry is competent to judge of its authenticity (*Lumen Gentium*, 12), while exercising caution not to "stifle the Spirit, but to test all and abide with the good." In the case of Miguel D'Escoto's fast, one hierarchical authority declared that all activity in the "legitimate religious area" could emanate only from hierarchical authority. This is to forget that it is the Spirit who promotes legitimate prophetic charisms among the people of God. The bishop and the pope are members, or *parts* of that people.

*Orthodoxy*-sound doctrine-is expressed on at least three levels. First (and this is the most important level because it is the daily one), orthodoxy is expressed in the particular judgments of Christians as members of the base community, where in their examination of conscience they correct their judgment-they draw their orthodoxy from the community orthopraxy. On a second level, orthodoxy is expressed by the magisterium (on many levels and in many qualities: from the advice of a priest to the pastoral practice of an episcopate to the *ex cathedra* infallibility of the pope or the decrees of the councils). This orthodoxy, the orthodoxy of the *people of God*, guides the church through history in response to the orthopraxis of the church *as a totality*. Obviously a pastor may warn his flock if it is wandering from the true way to the pasture. But this warning is an *internal*, ministerial function of the church.

On a third level, theology and theologians engage in a reflection on orthopraxy, in order to "explicitate" the relationship of the latter

with orthodoxy. (And I recall that "the unanimity of theologians is *proxima fidei*."-"very near" to being *de fide* or "of faith.") Theology is an expression *of* the church, *in* the church. It has its proper status there by reason of its twofold prophetic service: to orthopraxy to secure it, and to orthodoxy to render it explicit.

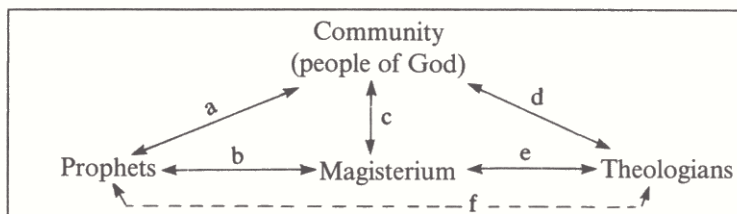
## 20.8 COMMUNITY, PROPHETS, THEOLOGIANS, AND THE MAGISTERIUM

Let me review the matter of the preceding section, in order to have a clearer picture of the various levels and their constitutive relationships (Diagram 14; see *Puebla Final Document*, 372-6).

It is the *community*, the people of God as a totality (*Lumen Gentium*, 9ff.), that receives, in its living *tradition*, the word of God (the Bible). It is this community that constitutes the place of both orthopraxy and orthodoxy. The community consists of "a people who would know God in truth and serve God in a holy manner" (ibid., 9). *Among* that people, and exercising a function of that people in its capacity as a messianic, prophetic community (ibid., 12), prophets are bestowed by the people on the people. The prophets are simply members of the people of God whom the Holy Spirit raises up without *necessarily* passing by way of ministerial functions (priest, bishop, pope, council). Arrow a (Diagram 14) indicates that the prophet arises *among, through, and for* the people of God: his or her orthopraxy (novel, creative right action, at times even revolutionary) may be shocking to some. But in the concrete it is only

Diagram 14

The Community and its Ministers



prudential, historical orthodoxy, which everyone will hold one day (including the magisterium). Of course (arrow b) it pertains to the magisterium to pass judgment upon the prophetic charism, but it is not its function to "stifle the Spirit" (ibid.).

The magisterium itself, as a function of the hierarchy, is a ministerial service that the people of God *gives itself* from within (arrow c). The hierarchy is not *outside* or *above* the people of God. Not even a pope or a council is outside or above the people of God. The hierarchy is *within and among* that people. Its function is to "pasture and foster" that people (ibid., 18). The papacy and the council, for their part, are *internal* functions of the hierarchical ministry. Hence, primarily and per se, the infallibility of orthodoxy belongs to the church community as a totality-as "the infallibility that the divine Redeemer willed that the church should have" (ibid., 25).

Likewise, the theologian, and theological discourse (theology), always rest primarily on *church praxis* (arrow d). To call praxis a "first act" and theology a "second act," then, is merely to rehearse the most ancient and traditional teaching in this area. It is the people of God that invests its *theologians* with the charismatic function of explaining or "explicitating" the relationship of orthopraxy (the orthopraxy of the community and the prophets) to orthodoxy (the orthodoxy of sacred scripture, of dogmatic and theological tradition, of customs, doctrines of the extraordinary and ordinary magisterium, and so forth). The community confers this theoretical function upon the theologian from within, and for, itself.

Theologians, for their part, learn from the magisterium, respect it, and submit to its judgments (arrow e). But they find their inspiration very particularly in the orthopraxy of the prophets (arrow f), inasmuch as it is here that they discover the *new* paths along which many members of the community are already working their way, especially if such a path is political or even revolutionary. Theologians of liberation have been very careful to respond to all these demands, not only as individuals, but also and especially as a "theological *community*," inasmuch as, before all else, and as theologians, they are all members of a community of reflection.

## 20.9 THE POOR AND THE GOD OF THE POOR

The purpose of recalling all of this has been to prepare us to return to our original subject. A communal ethics of liberation is one that reflects upon, describes, clarifies, and explains the every existence of the poor, *here and now*, concretely and historically. Without a clear view of the poor as the launching pad of the whole of theological discourse, theologians will not be able to speak of the God of the poor-for, after all, one cannot know *a priori*, before the fact, who the poor are. This occasions a great many theological ambiguities. Many of those who call themselves theologians of liberation count the landholding oligarchies, or the national bourgeoisies, for example, among the "poor" of a peripheral nation. After all, we are told, a nation includes everyone, does it not? This theological "populism" (13.8, 8.5-7) springs from a confusion over theology's point of departure. Paradoxically, although God is the First, the Origin, the Infinite, the issue today is one of discernment of idols or fetishes that "pass themselves off as God," and the "true God." This true God is the God *of the poor*. The criterion of the discernment of the word of God is the *standpoint of the poor*. We take our place among the poor in order to hear revelation (20.3), in order to be able to create (20.4), in order to know whether a praxis is *orthopractic* (5.7-9). The poor are Christ *here and now*, and constitute the *route* to a discovery of and discourse upon God. Hence community ethics is the *fundamental theology* of the theology of liberation, as it explains the premises, the conditions *sine qua non*, of theological discourse as a totality.

In Latin America today (as in Africa, Asia, and in many respects even in Europe and the United States), the "poor" in the biblical sense (the object of sin, those exploited and murdered by sin) are the dominated (see chap. 2 and 3 in their entirety). Concretely and historically, they are workers (chap. 11), robbed of the work they perform (12.5). This is their most universal and abstract, their most essential, characterization. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia they are precisely the poor nations, sucked dry of their surplus life (13.7) *structurally*. They are the ones impoverished by the transnationals (14.5); those attacked by weapons and the arms race (15.10); those forced to repay loans irresponsibly contracted by others (15.6); those violated in the name of morality (16.8); workers denied their just rights in the name of total planning (17.7-10); the simple citizens of

the contemporary world who see their land and culture ecologically destroyed (chap. 18). All these indications, all these reflections on structure, situate for us the various more serious types of impoverishment, of being "the poor," on the community plane (there are many other ways to be poor), and thus situate for us the various types of sin, the *concrete* sins that make so many persons poor (2.5, 2.7).

To situate the poor-to describe their origin and the *concrete* modes of their appearance in our age-is the radical *conditio sine qua non* for the initiation of a theological (theoretical), critical, prophetic discourse on liberation. This, then, is *fundamental theology*, for it is the premise, the *a priori*, the prime *conditio sine qua non*, of all the rest of theology.

## 20.10 FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

For some years, beginning in 1968, liberation theology was almost exclusively *fundamental theology*. But this theology was fundamental in the sense understood in liberation theology itself, with the result that many on the outside understood nothing at all. Christology and ecclesiology came later, and only gradually. As for the history of the church, we must say (and this was as it should have been) that it not only kept pace with liberation theology, but actually preceded it, preparing the way for it even before entering into its constitution and cementing its very construction. My *Hipótesis para una historia de la Iglesia en América Latina* (1964; English translation, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), situated church praxis historically, and was itself fundamental theology.

Until 1974 nearly all of the writings of the theologians of liberation were in the area of fundamental theology. But liberation theology's fundamental theology is *community ethics*. This resulted in various confusions among commentators (not in authors). Some concluded that liberation theology was only "social moral theology"-a critical, novel *chapter*, but only a chapter, in moral theology. Others, by contrast, criticized it for sticking to general questions and not moving ahead on concrete topics in christology, ecclesiology, exegesis, and so on-not understanding that an edifice must be begun at its foundations, at its base, and that it must be solid.

This explains why political, economic, and social themes are so important in the theology of liberation. It was the *question of the dependency* of the poor, peripheral, underdeveloped countries that occasioned, around 1968, the explicit and irreversible initiation of the new discourse. But what was not understood (not even by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's 1984 "Instruction") is that, above and beyond its social or political treatment, and using the tools of science (as the council required), the theology of liberation was discovering *sin*, and not only sin in the abstract (which would appear to be the only level of religious sin recognized in the Vatican instruction), but *sin in the concrete* really existing sin, which the instruction is at pains to regard as "only" political, social, or economic sin, and *not* as religious, sin-whereas of course sin is always religious sin, as well, whatever else it may be besides).

Inasmuch as the "poor" constituted the hermeneutic point of departure, the locus *whence* the Christian praxis (the orthopraxy) of the community was initiated, the poor were the terminus *a quo* of the new discourse. But to this purpose it had to be known who the poor were, how one comes to be poor, what the structures of sin are that weigh upon the poor. To many these questions were "merely" social, political, or economic (depending on which hermeneutic tools were being used-in compliance with the demand of the council-for the discovery of *the concrete*). They were, however, *strictly theological questions*. Just as Thomas Aquinas had used Aristotelianism (at a time when it had been condemned by the church and the magisterium) as the scientific *instrument* of his elucidation of theological questions, so also the theologians of liberation, in order to build up their theological discourse, made use of the social sciences as practiced in Latin America to clarify, explain, and explicitate *the reality of the poor* as a general biblical category and -thanks precisely to the mediation of these social sciences-as a *concrete* reality.

But today the theology of liberation has to be more than fundamental theology. And over the course of the last decade and longer it has indeed begun to develop its specific theological tractates-although the systemization of these treatises remains to be discussed, and their level (in their criticalness and their consistency with the specific criteria of the theology of liberation) calls for future improvement. The *theological community* itself is the first to

recognize and acknowledge their weaknesses.

## CONCLUSIONS

On this, my final topic, which in a sense constitutes a compendium of this book, I am reminded that all theoretical reflection, all theology, *presupposes* a praxis that determines it (though not absolutely). Liberation theologians, too, are conditioned, and may never pretend to "absolute knowledge" or lay claim to irrefutable truth. Quite the contrary: in humility, in their militancy with their people, in their organic link with community organizations, in the service of their prophetic *ecclesial* function, they theologize as learners, from within the people of God. (We must not forget that theology is ecclesial, by its origin and by its finality-if by church we understand the people of God *in its totality* and not only the magisterium, which is an internal function of the people of God, and thus ultimately a function of the entire body of that people).

The task of the theology of liberation in this fundamental treatise on community ethics has been more negative than positive. It has charged itself more with the preliminary task of describing the *structures of sin* than with a consideration of the strategy and tactics of the people of God in liberation. First, we have had to discover the *poor*.