

Towards a Clarification of Terms

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Theology by the people? This is not just an interrogation, it is a challenge, a questioning, and almost a utopia. Can the people make or produce theology? Who are the people? Is it possible to have a theology produced by the people themselves?

In this short introduction, I do not pretend to answer these questions. Rather, I will leave them open for debate.

Theology? Which theology are we talking about? Academic, scientific theology produced by the intellectuals of the profession? It seems that theology has been nothing but that: the work of specialists and the task of intellectuals. In this sense it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the people themselves to produce theology. Surely, we must understand it in a more profound way so that it can be an object of popular reflection as such.

People? In English, the word "people" is not the same as the German "Volk", the French "peuple" or the Spanish "pueblo". "People" can mean "persons", a "multitude", "lay persons" (the non-specialists in something). I would like to give it a particular meaning, the strongest one: "pueblo de los pobres", i.e. poor people, but even more so, oppressed, exploited, suffering people.

Even with the meaning of oppressed, the poor, "pueblo" has been interpreted by some as a social class: the industrial or rural workers, etc. That is to say, those who have salaries. However, "pueblo" is much more than oppressed classes, especially those in the peripheral, dependent nations of the third world. "Pueblo" certainly includes the oppressed classes, but it also includes many other social elements: ethnic groups

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with their own language, race and religion; tribes; marginal groups which are not even a "class", simply because they have not achieved a salaried position within a weak capitalism. Therefore, strictly speaking, "pueblo" is the *social block* of the oppressed of a nation. From this, firstly, we cannot identify "pueblo" with a "nation" or "people". When someone says "the people of India", we must distinguish between its *populist* meaning (all of the nation) and its *popular* meaning (the social block of the oppressed).

We wish to speak of theology "by the people", with the meaning of theological work by the "social block of the oppressed" in the nations of our present world, but very especially the "social block of the oppressed" from the exploited, peripheral nations of the third world. Here "poor people" is a suffering reality that cries aloud to heaven as in the time of Moses.

A new beginning

But there are other questions. Is theology the same if it is *from* the people, *for* the people, *in* the people or *by* the people? Certainly all of these particles have different epistemological meanings.

When the professional theologians realized that their theology was indifferent to the poor people, they wished to "come closer" to the people and began a reflection "from" the people. The theme was discovered by the theologian from the reality of the people. We could say that the theologian's "theme" came out of the reality of the people; they were pertinent and real problems.

Later another step was taken: a pedagogical and didactic system was created. They went on to theological "extension" -audiovisuals, comics, simple writings for quick consumption, with drawings. The "for" indicated who it was destined for .

Soon the professional theologian discovered that no matter what, he or she lacked experience, the popular experience. So some decided to go to the people and become a part of the poor people. In that closeness new dimensions were understood which they had never imagined before.

Anyhow, all of these attempts came forth from the theologian or theology (or the more "cultured" elements of the churches or their structures) *towards* the poor people to evangelize them, they would say.

We believe that the expression "by the poor people" indicates something very different, a breaking with the very subject of theology and a new beginning.

"By" indicates a productive cause, the very origin of the discussion. It

does not mean that it is the starting point of a reflection *by* the theologian or the object, or the receiver or the medium through which it takes place. It has to do with the fact that poor people are the very origin of the theological discussions; so that the role of the theologian is reinterpreted as an "organic intellectual" , or that very people who are poor. The change of subject means that in as much as the professional theologian is the subject of theological production, this now passes on to the people themselves. The first question is: Is this possible? Is it theology that is thus produced? If it is theology, what of professional, academic and scientific theology?

If "theology by the poor people" exists, this should always be a reflection. First, reflection about the Christian *praxis* of those very poor people. It is the concrete, historical, suffering praxis which is the object of this reflection, which as a second act makes the first act explicit: the praxis of the people. In Latin America, theology produced by the grassroots groups in the basic Christian community comes out of the praxis, from the experience of the very community.

The community (koinonia) itself and its praxis, then, are prerequisites for this theological reflection. Praxis is not only action; it is basically a relationship: a relationship of person-to-person. To be together in a community is the fundamental praxis that anticipates the kingdom of God. To gather together in God's name is the originating experience. Later many other types of praxis follow which are concrete, historical, from "breaking the bread" to helping the most needy and working for the cause of justice.

But to reflect on their own Christian praxis, the grassroots communities, the poor people must "recuperate" the word of God, the Bible, which has been "kidnapped" by the dominant structures of the churches and also by the theologians. This "recuperation" or recovery of the word, this "kidnapping" of the "kidnapped" Bible is the originating act and the condition that makes possible a "theology *by* the people". To recover or "counter-kidnap" the Bible means that the people themselves begin to create their exegesis, their interpretation, from their own viewpoint, from their spiritual experience of the kingdom, from their sufferings, but equally from their millennial "wisdom" (not necessarily uninfected by alienation- and thus we would have to discuss the prophetic criteria that the people themselves use to discern what they have of wheat and chaff among themselves).

Second, once the Bible has been recovered -which is a way of "knowing" the scripture in a new way -people must begin to know how

to use the word in their community. It is not infrequently said that "masses who are silent and learn, as students, are the people: they are passive, do not express themselves. They do not have a voice..." But in community people begin to speak, to express themselves, to think out aloud. They also recover "their" word which, made fertile by the word of God, begins the long journey of what will become a "theology by the people".

The recovery of the double word permits the exercise of thinking from the faith, from the Bible, from praxis. But which praxis? It cannot be a praxis that promotes alienation, a praxis that repeats the system which oppresses it, a praxis which through domination has introduced itself into the people. It deals with a praxis of liberation, i.e. when the people stand up, when they protest, when they struggle for their rights, for participation, for democracy, for justice. When reflection of faith on a popular praxis of liberation occurs, the people *create* theology, produce a new theology which becomes transformed into prophecy.

Examples

Near Esteli in northern Nicaragua, I once had a conversation with friends and with communities. We were surprised by their repeated and creative use of certain books which were somewhat forgotten within theological tradition, especially Ezra and Nehemiah. After the Babylonian captivity (read Somoza and dependent capitalism), the basic Christian communities in the northern part of the country had the double function of the captives liberated by Cyrus (the Sandinistas?). First, it was necessary to reconstruct the "walls", the "walls" of Jerusalem. The wall was an instrument of war, of defensive war, that impeded the return of the previous dominators to oppress Judah. In the same manner, the basic Christian communities of northern Nicaragua were constructing their "wall" against the "counter-revolutionaries" who were attacking their northern border. To protect the northern border was to construct "Jerusalem's wall". A theological reading, reflection from the grassroots, discourse in faith which is at once coherent, historical, political and prophetic.

But at the same time the liberated captives constructed the temple in Jerusalem. And those Christians, gathered in their Christian community with the consciousness that it was there that they were building the Christian Temple with living stones.

In other Nicaraguan communities, on the other hand, they would read the stories from Exodus, but not pay such close attention to Moses' acts

and the people of God up to the Red Sea; those were the struggles against the Pharaoh (who for them is Somoza). Now, in the desert, with Egypt behind them, but still with forty years before them to get to the "promised land," it was the time of temptation to idolatry. Did not Aaron worship an idol? Are there not by chance important ecclesiastical persons within Nicaragua who would like to return to Egypt? The poor people do not fear reconciliation and from their "concrete and millennial wisdom" "understand" the real and present meaning of the scriptures in a way that is impossible for a biblical "book worm". Do not those who are well want to return to Egypt? Some say that they went to Miami; they have left the desert, they could not "withstand" the sufferings, they did not like the "manna". And thus, the community rereads Exodus line by line, in the desert, to produce theology (from which the professional theologians will be able to drink abundantly if they decide to become "disciples" of the poor people).

In a basic Christian community in Brazil the Christians once again reread the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was assaulted by thieves who left him by the side of the road half dead. Two men go by and do not help him. Finally comes the Samaritan, who helps him. All of this is well known. The grassroots theological reflection, however, proceeds in a novel, creative way which breaks with tradition. They ask themselves: Who is that poor man, robbed and wounded? The professional theologian would have responded (looking upon the other as himself): "The poor; Jesus who identifies himself with those who are hungry ." But the people respond in another way: "It is us!" The poor, robbed, half dead is the people themselves. A break with the subject, a change of perspective!

And who are the robbers? They are those who take our land from us, those who rob us by increasing the prices of food, the military which torture and assassinate us. ...And who is the priest who first went by? He is like those "priests" or "ministers" who talk a lot but do little for us. The man who came by next is like the politicians who promise a lot, but do not fulfill their word. And who is the Samaritan? He is like Monsignor Oscar Romero who really was on the side of the people, like Monsignor Casaldaliga, like those who help us with our cooperative. But the "theology by the people" has not finished its theological discourse. And they ask: "What must we do in the face of this?" And they reflect: "It is necessary for us to walk along the road like that man who was headed towards Jericho. We need to go to our work, to our home. We cannot cease to use the road. What will we do?" And they conclude: "That traveller was assaulted because he was going alone, he was just one

person, that is why the bandits could assault him and leave him half-dead. Many of us must go along, many together, we must go well organized. That is, we must organize ourselves and do all things in community, together, so that what happened to that traveller will not happen to us."

A new possibility

Once the people have recovered the word of God, they make it their own. They do not become tied down to the pure exegesis of the scientist who only wants to know the content of the text "at that time". On the contrary, the people, with much more wisdom, appropriate the word, place it as a light for how the kingdom is "today" and have no epistemological problems in "continuing" the discourse of the same parable of Jesus *here and now*.

Not only has the subject been changed, but the discourse has been prolonged. Innovation, production, theological and spiritual creativity. What is this discourse? Is it theology? What is certain is that "theology *by the poor people*" is a new possibility for theology, it is a new theological age, it is a new hermeneutics, a new interpretation.

And scientific theology? Because it is such, does it disappear? Not at all. Scientific theology must now define its articulation with popular-theological production, if this latter is a reflection from a community which is the subject of a liberation praxis.

I recognize I have raised more questions than I have answered. But there are still more questions. How is that popular theology expressed? What are its instruments: the oral word, music, theatre, painting, dance. ..? How does this theology transmit its contents to the members of the community?

What is certain is that the basic Christian communities are *the place* of production, expression, communication, and it is not easy for the professional theologian to adjust to it if he or she has not been willing to listen to it and learn from it.

"Theology *by the people*" is carried on by the oppressed people, by the poor, by the suffering. It is a theology which reflects in a popular way the praxis, the experience of the people, who become the *subject* of theological production and not the object of theological *extensions* which do not belong to them (even though these foreign theologies come to them in a populist way).

"Theology *by the people*" is a challenge, a threat, a possibility, perhaps a utopia, but no matter what, a necessity.