

THE VOICE OF THE POOR IN THE CHURCH

There are many ways to talk about "voices in the Church." This afternoon I have been asked to talk in this panel about new voices in the Church. I don't know how really "new" this voice will be. But, in any case, I wish to understand "voice" as theological voice. Consequently, I will not speak directly about the situation of the Church in Latin America or about the situation of the Latin American people. I will try, rather, to speak of the theological efforts in the conflictual situation in Latin America.

I would like to start with a question: Is it possible and useful to do theology in a poor world? What is the meaning of theological reflections in a poor world? What is the meaning of theological reflections from the situation of poverty, misery, hunger, exploitation? Can doing theology, e.g., reflecting about the living God, make sense when human beings are "dying before their time," in the phrase of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish missionary of the sixteenth century? Does it make sense to do theology?

Many people in our own countries answer "no" because, they say, we do not have time for that. We need social action or political commitment, or economic studies. Afterwards, we shall see; but for now theology is not our concern. People in other countries also answer "no" because, they say to us (as some Latin Americans do also), "your theology is not theology." Notice that these people are not saying that they disagree with our theology; no, they are saying that our theology is not theology.

Others, more politely, ask us to speak about our countries, the poverty and problems of our people. They are interested in hearing about these issues, implying that theology is not our concern; we have, they seem to say, other concerns and perhaps other abilities. Their conclusion seems to be that theology is a sophisticated academic project for themselves only, not for Latin American people.

To be honest, in the beginning of our theological reflection in Latin America we did not ask whether it is possible to do theology in our situation. We began spontaneously and with good will. But now, a few years later, this is our question too. Or, more precisely, we ask: Is it possible to continue doing theology?

My own answer is "yes." But I wish to point out that I consider this question an important one: it is not merely rhetorical; it is a true question. I would like to make a few remarks about the present reasons for my answer, about the conditions and consequences of doing theology in our context.

1. *An oppressed and believing people's right to think.* An oppressed and believing people have a right to think. And doing theology is participating in this right to think—a right to think one's faith in the Lord, a right to think one's liberating experiences. This right also in-

cludes the right to reappropriate the faith—the faith which is constantly ripped away from the oppressed people—in order to turn it into an intellectual justification of the situation of domination. Thinking the faith also includes the right to reappropriate the Bible, which is usually read from the point of view of the dominators. It is, finally, the right to reappropriate one's own theological reflection.

In this light, doing theology from the perspective of an oppressed and believing people is one part of their right to liberation. Because, we must not forget, reflection is also an historical power; it is a way of holding power in history. And this is a right, I believe, in the perspective in which we are working, which our people demand more and more. This is the reason, it seems to me, why the wish spreads, the wish to interpret, to think, to become conscious of one's faith and one's situation. In this perspective, doing theology is an expression of the rights of the poor. (In this connection, more and more in Latin America we prefer to speak of the rights of the poor, not of human rights. That is to say, we do not wish to speak of rights in the liberal and bourgeois sense, but in terms more biblical, and more conflictual, too, it is true.)

2. *Verification of Theology.* Sometimes people say to us: "Look, in order to stop speaking in generalities we would like to know what in the present situation is the concrete, actual impact of liberation theology?" "Don't you go around keeping score?" "What is its impact?" It seems a good question, and it hits us right in the guts. However, the question is not as good as it seems. It is good, however, if we break it down into two questions. Then it has some sense. The two questions are: What is the situation of the liberation process in Latin America today? What is the impact of the Gospel in Latin America today? Now, if we ask what liberation theology brings to these questions, we are asking for its impact. The prior question implies that liberation theology is a new religion; and this is not so.

When the question about the impact of liberation theology is broken down into these two questions, then it really is an authentic, incisive and creative question. But the questions are not, strictly speaking, theological questions. And consequently the answers are not theological either. I cannot answer these questions here; I can only point to what is at stake in them. How are we doing on the point of the liberation process, the grassroots classes, liberation praxis? How are we doing on the point of the presence of the Gospel? Is liberation theology at the service of the liberation process and of the preaching of the Gospel? This is where it verifies itself. It is not a matter of whether or not people know liberation theology; that is not important. What is important is the liberation of oppressed people and the announcement of the Gospel from among the poor.

3. *The death of the theologian.* My third point has a slightly aggressive content.

In some places people speak a lot about the death of theology. If they want, they can rub out theology; that does not interest me. But what

concerns and interests me more is the death of the theologian. That interests me much more than the death of theology. Very often doing away with theology is a way of making it live. This is a point which everyone understands. But killing the theologian, the death of a theologian, is another thing.

This death can be understood in two ways. First, I would like to say that I am not speaking in a figurative sense, but in a real sense. The prophets, John, Paul, Jesus himself, were theologians and they were killed for being theologians, for announcing and interpreting the word of God.

Today commitment in the struggles of the poor in many countries involves a risk of prison, torture, death. Announcing the Gospel in that situation involves a true risk. For them, reflecting about God's love for the poor is not a pacific task; denouncing the mystifications of the Christian message is always a challenge to the powerful.

There is a second way to understand the death of the theologian. It is reflected in a simple biblical quotation which we know well. It is the text from Corinthians: "Indeed, the language of the cross [the cross means death] for those who are lost turns out to be madness; however for those who are saved, for us, it is the power of God. For Scripture says: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, annihilate the intelligence of the intelligent" (1 Cor 1:18-19). The death of the theologian, then, may also be understood as the annihilation of the intelligence of the intelligent; it is the death of the theologian as an intellectual. There is a destruction of the intelligence of the intelligent which is not a destruction of intelligence altogether. It is the intelligence of the intelligent, the theologian disconnected from the life and the struggles of the poor, which is destroyed. I am not playing with paradoxes. This is a very profound idea in the Bible.

The madness of the cross is the madness of the intelligence of the intelligent. It really is madness; it is death for this type of intelligence. And in our theological perspective, a theology which does not pass through the madness of the cross, which does not go through this revelation to the simple, will not be an authentic reflection of faith. And this is also a death.

It is well known that, for liberation theology, theology is reflection, a second act. For if "practice is the basis of theory," as was said this morning, theology is a second act. Theologians need to be committed in praxis too. And this commitment means: *sometimes* risk of physical death; *always* the death of the intelligence of the intelligent. Thus, when a theologian is committed in the praxis of liberation, the first and fundamental theological step is at hand.

For this reason, our whole method supposes a lifestyle, a "spirituality." As Lee Cormie said this morning, our method is our spirituality. It is not only a technical theological method; it is rather a way to live as a person, as a Christian today with the poor. To understand liberation theology, it is important to grasp this point well.

SHARING LIFE

Theology from the situation of the poor is a theology of life. That is to say, it is a theology oriented to sharing life, life, human life, material and spiritual life according to an old distinction.

Some people say that we are too concerned with social, and political questions, with material needs, and that we forget, maybe, the transcendence of God, the spiritual and religious questions. The danger is always present. But I like the expression of Berdyaev: "If I am hungry, it is a material problem. But if another is hungry, it is a spiritual problem." This is paradoxical, but the meaning is clear. We have many, many "spiritual" problems in Latin America because there are many hungry people.

If another is hungry, it is a challenge not only for the social scientists and social activists; it is a challenge for Christian love. It is a challenge for theological reflection. Bartolomé de Las Casas, made a similar point in the sixteenth century: "It is better to be an infidel Indian who is alive than to be a Christian Indian who is dead." You may think that this is a very materialistic point of view, but frequently the announcement of the Gospel has this price, the deaths of many people. In fact, the deaths of the poor "before their time" is more and more our reality today as persons and as Christians. It is in this very real sense that the task of Christians, and consequently of theologians, in our context is sharing life.

If we are not able to speak about the real deaths of our people today we will not be able to speak about life and resurrection of Jesus Christ; we will not understand today what the Lord's resurrection means. I am thinking about the preparatory document for the upcoming conference of Latin American bishops at Puebla, for example. We live amidst oppression and repression, and behind this kind of situation there is always a theology of assassination, a theology of oppressors, the killers of Jesus in the poor today. But the drafters of this document were unable to speak about the real deaths today in our countries, and for that reason, it seems to me, the pages about the resurrection of Jesus Christ in this document are so inadequate.

In our starting point, then, we find the deaths of our people, but also the will to live. Liberation is life; to liberate is to give life. And thus sharing life, and not death, is at the present, it seems to me, a task for the churches and for our theological reflection. And in this context of oppression and death the struggles for liberation are finally, for me, the struggle for life. This is what we as Christians understand by sharing life—a communion of life which opposes itself to the dealing out of death to an oppressed and repressed people.

In conclusion, it seems to me that in this context theology is a hermeneutics of hope, an interpretation of hope, the hope of the poor, the hope in liberation. But we are conscious that our hope in the future is often contradicted by the present reality of many people. Our future is very conflictual, and consequently our hope too, and our theology too.

Theology as a hermeneutic of hope for the oppressed is a theology of life, and this theology of life is now our present theology. For some people this is our utopia. Bourgeois skepticism says very openly: Really, do you think that it is possible to change this structure? Not surprisingly, rich people in general are very skeptical about social changes, because they prefer to keep what they have already at present. And because they prefer to keep this, they have a conservative outlook; they seek to maintain the status quo.

We are not so sure about the possibility of another, really different society. But we are convinced about the non-necessity of the present society. This is different. About this point we are clear, and our hope starts from this analysis. Theology as a hermeneutics of hope of the oppressed is a theology of life.

Voices of the Church. A harmony of voices? Surely no; there is some disharmony present in the Church today. It is useful and necessary to be clear about that. Voices in dialogue? Perhaps yes; but for the moment I prefer to say voices in confrontation.

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