

## THE CHALLENGES OF MEDELLIN (1968) AND PUEBLA (1979)

The discussion in the workshop at first centered on historical perspectives. The second general conference of the Catholic bishops of Latin America was held at Medellin, Colombia in 1968. Its purpose was to explore the implications of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) for the Latin American continent and, in doing so, the Medellin conference served to launch liberation theology (whose existence had preceded the conference) into mainstream Catholic thinking. The death of Pope John Paul I in 1978 was the major factor in causing the postponement of the third general conference of the Latin American hierarchy until 1979 when it was held in Puebla, Mexico with Pope John Paul II in attendance.

In the interval between the conferences the full impact for church and society of positions adopted at Medellin became clear. Liberation theology, as critical reflection on praxis in the light of faith, was denounced and attacked by some religious leaders and by elites in the economic and political spheres both in Latin America and in North America. The praxis endorsed by Medellin included struggle for fulfillment of basic human needs, for jobs, food, clothing, shelter, education, health-care, trade unions and for participation in decision-making in all areas that affect people's lives. Conditions in which basic human rights—both civil liberties and socio-economic rights—were denied to the masses, were denounced as social sin. Structures of oppression and injustice were unmasked and denounced in the name of the Gospel. And in the ensuing interplay between faith and public policy *developmentalist* theories and policies were rejected because they left existing political, economic, land-ownership and trade-related structures intact to the benefit of the wealthy and powerful and at the expense of the poor and powerless. Instead, what was opted for is best described as *liberation*, i.e., persons at all levels—including personal, social, national—becoming the subjects of their own history and controlling their own resources and political and economic destinies as collaborators and not as the passive objects of other people's decisions and quest for ever-increasing profit.

Persecution, being "disappeared," imprisonment, torture, murder/martyrdom, denunciation-as-communists, were the fate of many lay Catholics and of numbers of clergy and religious including bishops who identified with the struggle of the impoverished for justice. In the years after Medellin it became clear that choosing the cause of the poor represented changing sides. Religion, it became clear, is inescapably political: either it supports the interests of the rulers and the powerful and enslaves the poor or it seeks the liberation of the poor and the conversion of their exploiters whose excessive wealth and extremely privileged life styles are called in question in the process. Puebla, despite its hesitations and ambiguities, continued the thrust of Medellin. It articulated the *preferential option*

*for the poor* as a task for the church in Latin America and for the universal church in full awareness of the radical implications of this axiom for the church and for global politics and economics.

In discussion of the contribution made by black theology of liberation, it was pointed out that Blacks have lived liberation theology in the United States for over 300 years. Black theologians, James Cone in particular, initially were critical of Latin American theologians for their failure to include racism as an oppression and consequently for their failure to address cultural as well as economic and political factors in social analysis.

Feminist theology of liberation which often followed secular feminist thinking critiqued the Latin theologians (and sometimes the Black theologians) for not addressing patriarchy and sexist oppression. Feminist theology challenges not merely sexist language, but it calls for reformulation of dogmas in inclusive categories and it calls for admission of women to all church ministries as full, co-equal members.

Theologies of liberation today are found in Africa, Asia, Korea as well as in the Americas.

In considering the implications of theologies of liberation for the United States, attention focused on the offensive engaged in by the Reagan Administration for the past eight years and on the absence of protest on the part of United States theologians to the murderous United States policy being pursued especially in Central America. The proxy warfare being carried out in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua is bound up with maintenance of economic interests and with savage repression of socially transformative movements.

Nicaragua was cited in evidence of the measures resorted to in suppressing what was considered a dangerous model of redistribution of wealth and social resources from the wealthy and powerful to the poor. At precisely the time that the Administration in Washington was transferring wealth from the poor to the wealthy through taxation policies and especially through increased militarization of the economy, the example of Nicaragua doing the opposite could not be allowed to stand. Ultimately, it was argued in the workshop, the danger of social transformation was not only its implications for Latin America but for the United States itself. Statistics indicate that 30 million persons in the United States are poor with close to another 30 million near poor or one paycheck loss away from welfare. Twenty million persons in the United States are hungry for a few days each month. Up to 3 million are homeless, 6 million are still unemployed. An underclass, mainly Black and Hispanic, is to be found in the ghettos of major United States cities. Unemployed and unemployable, many men especially are involved in drug trafficking and provide the ever-increasing population of prisons which continue to be a national disgrace for their abuse and wastage of human lives. Great disappointment was expressed in the workshop at the failure of the CTSA over the past twenty years to address these issues continuously and consistently from a United States liberationist perspective. The failure of the United States bishops in their letter on the economy to address the logic of the capitalist system, itself intrinsically connected with militarism and the so-called low-intensity conflict in Central America which has taken hundreds of thousands of lives in the last decade, was cited.

The participants agreed that the theologies of liberation present an inescapable challenge to the CTSA. Adding a few extra workshops—on race, class, sex—to the annual meeting is not the answer. Why? Because these workshops would be regarded as peripheral and partial. They would leave untouched the dominant theology with its color-blindness and its pro-capitalist assumptions and ideology. All theology must be re-thought and reformulated in full consideration of our privileged status and of the pervasiveness of oppressions based on race, class and sex in which we participate.

Considerable discussion was devoted to the need to be in solidarity with the powerless and the marginalized. Research, study and teaching guided by the "perspective from below" can be valid forms of liberationist struggle. However, it was felt that theory developed in isolation from the victims of society is always in danger of becoming an ideology of the powerful. It was contended by many that there is no substitute for presence, as listeners and learners, with the poor in their struggle.

We must know the dynamics of oppression in the world in which we do theology if we are to speak the truth to the powerful and if we are to *do* the truth in a transformative way. The hope was expressed that dialogue with Latin, Black and Feminist theologies of liberation would be promoted annually by the CTSA and that a more modest environment be found for our deliberations. After all, it was pointed out, Sheraton hotels charge \$100.00 per person per night and the chain is controlled by ITT.

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