

## THEOLOGY FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POOR

*The following text is a transcription from the talk delivered by Father Gutiérrez at the 1992 Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

In my country, Peru, we are facing an extremely difficult moment, but it seems to me it is important, in spite of problems and difficulties, to share our reflections with all our friends who belong to other contexts, for together we are a Christian community. Although my country is far from you geographically, we are human beings: Christians and people struggling for life and survival. Many there are inspired by our common commitment to faith and hope. It is therefore very important for me to come here and to speak to you about theology from the experience of the poor, who are our brothers and sisters.

The theme of your convention is the relationship between theology and experience. It is an old and classic issue in the Church; although the setting is new, the question is a traditional one. Why is the experience of the poor relevant in the Church? I am not sure that ten or twenty years ago this question would have been raised in your discussions. As a theologian, I know that many theologians would prefer to speak about contemporary experience in general terms, but not about and of the poor. But the experience of the poor is relevant because we have gained a new consciousness of our history and a new understanding of human ecology.

Still, why is the experience of the poor important to our understanding of faith? I would like to present some reflections on this topic.

### COHERENCE BETWEEN ORTHODOXY AND ORTHOPRAXY

The task of Christians and the task of the Church, the Christian community, is to witness to the faith of the Gospels. To be Christian is to believe in Jesus Christ and to give witness to his resurrection. Here we must become accustomed not only to speaking about orthodoxy—the right opinion, but also of right behavior, authentic witness. Faith in Jesus Christ and witness to his resurrection are two aspects of Christian existence. Theology is the hermeneutic of the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Some claim that the theology of liberation puts the accent upon orthopraxis at the expense of orthodoxy. This view is incorrect. Theology, liberation theology included, requires these two aspects for the acquisition of truth. But theology is concerned with putting truth into practice, living the truth of the Gospel.

Theology thus understood helps Christians to live coherent lives, and to act according to their faith and to believe according to their witness. The Letter of

James describes the person who is *dipsuchos*, being of two minds, having two hearts, two suits, two hats. The big danger for Christians is to be *dipsuchos*, to separate knowledge of faith and the practice of faith in daily life. Theology helps to correlate words and actions at the same time. We theologians must be sensitive to new factors, new challenges from history, which can provide a split between the unity of faith and witness, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

But is it not enough to say that theology must not separate orthodoxy and orthopraxis. We must be very concrete. Poverty in the world today is a factor which can push some Christians to separate faith and witness. Yet if we truly believe in Jesus Christ and his message we have to assume a very different posture in the face of poverty if we wish to be coherent. This point was clearly seen by Pope John XXIII. Calling to the Second Vatican Council, he said the question for the Church was how to say "your kingdom come." Pope John spoke about the presence of the Church in different milieus, in different worlds. He announced that in order really to say to the world, "your kingdom come," the Church was called to a new openness to the world, especially the world of modernity, and to the Christian ecumenical world.

A month before the Council, Pope John had presented a further challenge: the Church must be present in the world of the poor. In a very short sentence, but a very rich one at the same time, he said that the Church must be the Church of everyone, and especially the Church of the poor. (In Italian, the pope said, that in addition to this challenge, he had another *punto luminoso*, lightning point. But it is impossible to find the first point!) It is very enriching to read Pope John, for he always underlines his important ideas. And clearly important for him was that the Church must be the Church of everyone, especially the Church of the poor. If the Church of everyone is to be faithful to the biblical message that the love of God is the center of our faith, then the Church must be clear about the universality of the love of God announced in the Gospel—a love which not only includes the poor, but places them first.

If the Church wishes to speak about the necessity of being committed to the poor, we must understand that the "Church of everyone" is not a self-appellation, but is rather an expression of the universal scope of the Church's commitment to the Gospel, where the poor come first. The poor must be first in the kingdom—not the only ones—but first. If I say first, it means I have in mind a second and a third. It is a relative expression. Being first means that they are first in our commitment, but as Christians we must be sensitive, open to all persons, poor or not, but especially the little ones in history.

This point was present in the call to the Church from the Second Vatican Council to adopt an openness to the world. To some, this meant the concrete modern world, your world, an European world, and not exactly the world of the poor. But the world of the Church is not only the modern world; the Church is also present in the various poor countries of the world.

In spite of the efforts of many persons during the Council, in spite of the very beautiful intervention made by Cardinal Lercaro at the end of the first ses-

sion of the Council, the people of the Council were, for some reasons, not prepared to understand the full intention of Pope John's challenge. The Council did establish the Commission on Justice and Peace, and this commission has done a good job through the years. But even here, poverty is a question for a commission, and justice and peace do not constitute a global challenge to the Church.

Of course, we must avoid anachronistic judgments of the Council. The point of the challenge of John XXIII was not clear even to bishops and theologians coming from poor countries to the Council in the early sixties. For a long time, poverty was considered to be solely a socioeconomic issue. In the Church and its theology, poverty was approached from a spiritual point of view, in the discussion of poverty of spirit, and in the renewal of religious orders, all of which put the accent on poverty. These efforts were beautiful but not enough. If poverty is to be a global challenge to the Church, then that challenge is made not only to its spirituality, but also to its pastoral work, and to theology.

Let me tell you a little personal anecdote. I was in the Council working with the president of CELAM at that time. It was the end of the first session, and people were really happy. The documents of the Council were bearing the stamp of the best European theology; but another side of myself was not pleased. I held mixed feelings. The Council was very good for one aspect of my life, my theological side, but did it respond to my Latin American experience? It was a very painful moment for me. I appreciated very much the achievement of the Council, but at the same time felt some distance because the big challenges to the Latin-American Church were not present. I say this clearly now, but it was impossible for me to speak in this way then.

Even today, it is difficult for some to understand that poverty is not only a social economic issue, but a human challenge, a Christian challenge, a global challenge for the Church. Many things must change in the Church if we are to take this challenge seriously. We must ask how we can be committed to both faith and our witness if we are not taking seriously the inhuman situation, the situation of the majority of humanity! The question is how to be coherent, how to say to all the world, especially to the world of the poor: "Your kingdom come."

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POOR AS THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The experience of the poor is relevant to theology for a second reason. Let me begin with a quotation from one of the most important theologians of this century, Karl Barth. Barth said that according to the Bible, God takes always the side of the least ones, the little ones in history. This is not even coming from a liberation theologian; it is coming from Karl Barth, who is speaking about God. This is very interesting. When people have a very sharp sense of God, they are always very sensitive to the poor. When we speak of theology as the hermeneutic between faith and witness, faith and communication of faith (evangelization), taking the side of the poor is to take a way to God. The biblical image of God as one who takes the side of the poor is the experience of many believers. A ques-

tion often asked of God in the Bible is "Where are you?" In the face of suffering and oppression, people protested to God, "Where are you?" We Christians have somewhat forgotten this kind of prayer, because for many to protest against God is an expression not exactly of the absence of faith but, of a weak faith.

A Peruvian Indian from between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Guamda Poma, wrote about this kind of prayer. Seeing the suffering and oppression of his Indian people, he wrote a letter to the king of Spain. The king, of course, never received this letter, written by an Indian, for it was impossible to reach the king. In his letter he says, "Your people are oppressed. They are suffering. Where are you?" In the Bible people say God is love. Yet the main objection is to human suffering, especially when this human suffering is the result of injustice. "Where are you?" the people protest.

Although poverty has certainly a socioeconomic aspect, in the last analysis poverty means death. To be poor is to be familiar with death. It is very easy to see these things when we are working with poor persons. They speak with familiarity about death, the deaths of children or other persons, because it is so frequent. Certainly death is one aspect of human life, but I am speaking of early and unjust death. Poverty means physical death due to hunger, diseases and other factors. The poor are familiar with these other aspects of death. The deprivation of human rights is another form of death. When we fail to grant women full human rights, we are giving them over to another kind of death. But for Christians the central of message is life, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must announce that life over death is the last word in history. It is the center of our message.

The contrast between a reality marked by death and the necessity as Christians to announce life, is a very painful contrast, and at some moments a contradiction. Today in America we are talking about the "Quincentenary" of the arrival of Columbus to the Americas. We don't say what this event was; we don't have a good word to speak about the fact. But we know that in the sixteenth century there took place a great, immense destruction of Indian nations on the American continents. This destruction took place for many reasons, not only by European conquest, but also and above all by disease. It is very difficult to calculate the scope of the destruction that took place.

Theologians then began dealing with the question of the justification of the presence of so many European people in the Indian nations. Indeed, theologians were called upon to justify the presence of Europeans, and to justify the thinking which held that there are two kinds of human beings, those who were born serfs and those born masters. In this scheme, the Indians, of course, were the serfs, born inferior to the European masters. One theologian who held such views was Johannes Major. Many Spanish theologians were speaking in the same way; for them it was clear that from a Christian perspective Indians were inferior, because they were pagan people, infidel people.

Bartolomé de Las Casas saw the Indian from another perspective. He saw the Indian as above all a poor person according to the standard of the Gospel. Seeing the Indian as a poor person would enable him to understand their non-



Christian cultures and conditions. He was very clear: the Indian is above all poor. Precisely because he saw the relevance of the experience of the poor, and his approach was not that of the European professor of theology, Las Casas in general is not present in handbooks of the history of theology. If you take the history of theology, you will find Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Johannes Major, and many others in the sixteenth century, but never Las Casas, because he was not teaching in Europe.

But in Las Casas we have a new theological perspective. For example, he offered the sixteenth century a new way to understand religious freedom. In that time, the concept of religious freedom was different from what we would understand today to be religious freedom. The question posed then was whether a person was free or not to accept Christian faith. "Freedom to accept" is an idea that comes from St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas. They addressed the position that many held, that Christians are entitled to impose Christian faith on others, especially if they have the power to do so. These great theologians said that we cannot impose faith on anyone. This was an important answer, but not enough. Religious freedom denotes a choice to live according to one's position. According to Las Casas, not only must Christian faith not be imposed on anyone, but the Indians had the right to live according to their own religions. As poor people, they had the right, individually and as a nation, to defend their religious beliefs and practices.

In much theology, as at the Second Vatican Council, the question about religious freedom quickly moves to the question of salvation. This was a difficult point at the Council. For this reason, the schema on religious freedom resulted in a very cautious declaration. The discussion was ultimately steered by the minority, the conservative theologians. They invoked the classic doctrine of salvation, that outside of the Church there is no salvation. And for this reason, except for some lines written by Congar, the declaration is not exactly a theological document, but strictly juridical. Father John Courtney Murray and Msgr. Pavan basically wrote the text from a juridical point of view because theologically, the people of the Second Vatican Council were not prepared to deal with this issue.

Las Casas started his theology of salvation from another source: the fact that Indians were poor. His experience with the poor altered his theological perspective, and it developed. He attacked also the injustice of black slavery. He admitted that he was, in the beginning, unconscious of the intrinsic injustice of black slavery. And in his last years he said that even the Spaniards can be poor: white people are poor also.

We have here a question of method for Christian theology. The experience of the poor: a new theological perspective. For Las Casas, what was most important for his theology was his experience. At the same time, we certainly can find in Las Casas many limitations. It is impossible to ask too much of a person, or to ask Las Casas to be for us a liberation theologian. Indeed, to do so would be very arrogant of us. He was a genius, but not a liberation theologian

in the modern sense. To try to make him one is to invest the present with an importance it does not deserve, as if we are at the last moment in history. I have never called Las Casas a liberation theologian, because his world and his experiences were very different from ours today. More important than being a theologian, he was a Christian.

#### EXPERIENCE OF THE POOR AS A WAY TO GOD

My question at the beginning was whether the experience of the poor was relevant to theology. My first reason was that the experience of the poor was very helpful for the hermeneutic between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. I then discussed the methodological importance of the experience of the poor to the doing of theology, as illustrated by the example of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Now I would like to make a third point, about spirituality. To be committed to the poor is a way to go to the God of Jesus Christ. The spirituality of poverty is relevant to liberation theology, Hispanic theology, black theology, feminist theology, and other theologies. From the very beginning spirituality was important to the project of liberation theology. The main reason we are committed to the poor is because we believe in the God of Jesus Christ. For *this* reason we must be committed to the poor. We are committed not because the poor are good, but because God is good. This commitment is a theocentric option.

After the Council we were right to stress dialogue with the world, with other Christian confessions, and even with other religions. But we find today in the Catholic Church people who say that we risk losing our identity as a Church if we speak too much about dialogue and the commitment to be open to other persons. But I fear that in this position we are courting another risk: to launch into a monologue and to try to speak about the Gospel without consciousness of the destiny of the people, forgetting the concrete situation of the persons whom we are addressing. One objection frequently heard in Christian churches is that the Church is not a social institution, and that it should not be so sensitive to poverty. Such people say that the Church has other goals, religious goals. To be close to the poor is only one aspect of the Church's work. Well, it depends. If you understand poverty as social reality, I agree. But if you think of poverty as the threat and the reality of an unjust and early death, then I do not agree. The issue is not whether the Church has other goals, other ends; the issue is whether the Church will announce life, announce the resurrection, be a witness of this definite love in history. And poverty is a big challenge today to this announcement.

In the context of the Latin American Church and Latin American theology, we use the expression, "preferential option for the poor." I have said some words about preference, in relation to universality. I have said some words about poverty. The preferential option for the poor is not only a question of pastoral strategy, even in the best sense. It is also a proposal of the Church living in Latin America to the universal Church. It is a way of affirming our identity as Christians and as Church. Historically speaking, to be Church, the family of the disciples of

Jesus Christ, is to make this option. This preferential option for the poor is the concrete way, historically speaking, to establish an identity for the Church; it is the way to be Church. The issue of identity is not only a matter of the affirmation of myself, but of the other disciples of Jesus Christ. To be the witness to the resurrection today is our identity as Church. In light of this preferential option for the poor, the last ones must be the first in the Christian community.

This is not only a Latin American question, or an issue only for the poor. It is a question for any Christian. The concrete way to make this option will certainly differ from one situation to another. For example, there are many poor persons in the United States. But at the same time the United States has an international responsibility. And for a Christian here the concrete way to make this preferential option for the poor will be different from the way people make the option in my country.

When we insist on the relevance of poverty to theology, we are not dealing only with social issues. Liberation theologians at this moment—again I speak at this moment only for myself and my friends—are not only concerned with social questions. We are concerned first of all with the Gospel. And one aspect of this, because it is our reality, and unfortunately, the reality of humanity, is the experience of the poor.

In this country, you have an expression, "minorities"—black people, Hispanic people, Asian people, and strangely, even women. But those who are called minorities in this country are in fact the great majority of humanity. We need to take this other perspective. But this is not easy. The main objection of Las Casas to Johannes Major was that it was impossible for Major to take the perspective of the poor. Las Casas said that if we were Indians our view about reality and about Christ would be different. It is a matter of evangelical conversion, to take up another way, to be Christian. And today, Christian churches in general are challenged to conversion, to take another way, to follow Jesus Christ by accepting the challenge of the poor. If we are not doing this, we can easily live in a dissociation between faith and witness.

Speaking about theology from the experience of the poor today is to speak about a new manner to study the relation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. In the concrete, if an unjust death for the great majority of humanity, even for many people in the United States, is not relevant to our Christian life, it is not relevant to our theology. The relevance of the experience of the poor is first a Christian question, a question for the Christian church. Only then does it become a theological question. And for what reason are we doing theology? Sometimes we need to ask very elementary questions. Trying to help Christians to be good Christians? That was the intention of the first centuries. The study of the *sacra pagina* was for this reason exactly, to help persons. At the beginning, theology was only a spiritual theology. It was a very beautiful intuition to link theology and spirituality. Above all, a spiritual theology is a theology helping persons to be faithful to the message of Jesus Christ. And to take this perspective of spirituality is very important.

Finally we must choose our way in this commitment, and find how to say to the world, "your kingdom come." We must learn how to say to the poor people, "God loves you." This is a central question for the life of the Church, for theology. I agree that there are many other questions facing theology. Thus, I don't like a vision of a rhetorical theology coming exclusively from the sectors of the oppressed—women, blacks, Hispanics, etc.—speaking only because they are oppressed. With this spirit of protest, these voices try to do theology.

To live with the poor is very important for me. But it is only one source of reflection. I come here because I am very committed to seeing you doing theology. To do theology is to have some knowledge of the tradition of the Church and the Bible, and of contemporary theology. Without some dialogue with other theologies we cannot do theology. And we must do a serious theology. It is important to be aware of the complexity of theological sources.

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