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Why Did You Come Here? to Fall in Love, Have Your Hearts Broken and Be Ruined Forever? Exploring Liberation theology and its Contributions to Life and Faith in the First World

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**“Why did you come here? To fall in love,
have your hearts broken and be ruined
forever?”**

Exploring Liberation Theology and its Contributions to Life and Faith in the First World

A thesis submitted to
The Regis College
Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

Christian V. Ghincea
Honors Thesis
May 2012

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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INTRODUCTION

A Simple Start: The Path to Liberation

It would be reasonable to first explain why I am drawn to this subject of liberation theology. The last four years at Regis have been a period of significant personal growth, a time that has challenged me to be increasingly open to new ideas. Undoubtedly, the most difficult moments were those when new ideas came into conflict with my previously established thoughts. Ideas had to be synthesized, formed and reformulated, discarded and reintegrated. I realized early on that my greatest desire was to reconcile dichotomies as I pressed upon the paradoxical. But before I get too carried away with such abstractions, I will speak concretely.

I grew up Catholic and always viewed my faith as one of the most foundational elements of my identity. As I moved through the different stages of my development as a Catholic Christian, I was encouraged to focus on my relationship with God, to be contemplative and spiritual. There was also a distinct sense of needing to be obedient both to God and to the Church as an institution. The assumption was of course that the will of the Church was merely an extension of God's will and that to question the Church was to pit myself against the collective wisdom of the community and God. I wanted to be a good Catholic and subscribe to everything I was taught, but the lessons of history and the realities of our world complicate matters. Suffice it to say that it was important

for me to know that it is okay to question and to push, and to believe that in doing so, my faith will be strengthened. I cannot express enough gratitude to my Jesuit education for teaching me that.

At Regis, I had often heard the term “liberation theology” thrown around, but my understanding of it was shallow. I knew that it was a controversial movement within the Catholic Church; I knew that it had something to do with social justice; and I vaguely associated it with Latin America. I did not begin to seriously entertain the subject until my junior year when I lived in Romero House and was asked to reflect on how I can integrate the notion of social justice into my life. I was introduced to the Latin American context from which liberation theology originated and during winter break, my roommates and I traveled to El Salvador and Guatemala to learn about the violence and injustice staining their history and to live in solidarity with the poor. This was the turning point. In El Salvador, I witnessed the reverberations of the country’s civil war and heard about how the United States gave military funding to an oppressive regime controlled by the country’s elite, in the name of fighting communism. I met with people whose lives were forever altered by the suffering caused by institutionalized violence. I was pressed to put politics and ideology aside and see the experiences of these people from a deeply human perspective: through the eyes of a woman whose father was assassinated for advocating human rights, a mother whose son was butchered by a death squad, a guerrilla who rose above the fear of dying to fight for a better life, a priest who knew death was the price of seeking justice. These were just some of the stories that came as a cold shower and I had to open my eyes and recognize the pervasive and systemic injustice in

the world, and then to ask, why? What is my role? How can I work for justice? How can my faith inspire justice? Suddenly, understanding liberation theology became crucial to informing my faith and granting me a deeper awareness of our world's needs.

In this thesis, I wish to explore the principles of liberation theology (specifically Latin American), the challenges it posed to the Catholic Church (and conversely, the response of the Catholic Church), and an evaluation of how it can meet the demands of our present. First, however, I must recognize that liberation theology emerged from a unique context of suffering and injustice as a means to address those urgent problems. Therefore, I would like to diverge and share with you the history of El Salvador's Civil War, as I came to understand it, so that I may present you with the historical framework from which I began my journey and provide an idea of the kind circumstances that gave rise to liberation theology. Then I will follow with a close analysis of the developments in the Catholic Church, through the conclusions of Vatican II and the Councils of Latin American Bishops, to survey how these laid a theological foundation for liberation theology. After that, I will delve into the main concepts of liberation theology, beginning with Gustavo Gutierrez's contributions, followed by the voices of Moltmann, Sobrino, Ellacuría, and Schillebeeckx among others.

PROLOGUE

El Salvador's Civil War: Violence, Justice, and Meaning

A Personal Perspective

“Why did you come here? To fall in love, have your hearts broken and be ruined forever?” These were the words with which Dean Brackley, S.J. of the University of Central America greeted our delegation¹. The words felt heavy, burdened by the memory of a people who will not soon forget the bloody Civil War that waged from 1979-1992 in El Salvador. Implicit in his words was also a challenge that we open our eyes to a reality of injustice that is overwhelmingly overlooked and misunderstood in the United States, and with that understanding know that we will never be able to look at the world in the same way.

Though nearly twenty years have passed since peace was finally negotiated in El Salvador, people carry the scars of the Civil War as if it had ended yesterday. It was a conflict that grew out of a long history of repression and violence, an experience that will always be ingrained in the identity of the Salvadoran people. But beyond the meaning it holds for those that lived through it, the Civil War in El Salvador should be considered piercingly relevant to every American, for the U.S. government's involvement in the conflict is indicative of greater trends in U.S. foreign policy (even the foreign policy of

¹ Earlier in 2011, my fellow Romero House students and I had embarked on a pilgrimage to El Salvador to learn about the people's history and their Civil War

first world countries). The United States government was deeply invested in the war, sending advisors and billions of dollars in military and economic aid to support the Salvadoran government's fight against the insurgency. In spite of this, however, the opposing forces were caught in a virtual stalemate (from a military standpoint) for the duration of the war. Recognizing that neither side would be able to defeat the other anytime in the near future, the conflict was ultimately resolved through negotiations.

This section will address the following questions: What were the socio-economic and political conditions that led to the conflict? What injustices were committed against civilians by both the government and the guerilla forces? What were the U.S.'s motivations for backing the Salvadoran government? What are the moral implications of this involvement (here we will consult philosophers John Stuart Mill and Kant)? Years of political and economic oppression of the majority of the Salvadoran people enforced by a military serving the country's oligarchy, compounded by fundamental changes in the Latin American Church during the sixties and seventies, led to the formation of popular organizations seeking systematic reforms; although these organizations initially pursued peaceful means, they were violently repressed by military and paramilitary forces, setting the stage for a violent insurrection with just cause. Furthermore, the Reagan administration deliberately misled and deceived the American public and Congress to justify a steady flow of military and economic aid to a Salvadoran government that was indiscriminately violating human rights; this severely complicates the case that the U.S. government had just cause to become involved as it did.

Historical Context

Violence has been the most pervasive characteristic of Salvadoran history – from the easily identifiable repression of government forces and vigilantes in the pay of the large landowners to more subtle violence of malnutrition, high infant mortality, illiteracy, and housing more fit for chickens than human beings.²

The roots of the socio-economic conditions in El Salvador during the twentieth century can be traced back to the early 1500s when the Spanish colonized Cuzcatlán, the land that is now called El Salvador. The ambitious Spanish colonists were eager to take advantage of cash crops such as cacao, indigo, and coffee for massive profits.³ While at first plantations were owned and operated by Indians, the Spaniards were in control of export and were therefore able to exert the most influence over the economy and accumulate the greatest amounts of wealth. A series of economic depressions combined with a system of tributes (a form of property tax) to the Spanish crown caused many natives to lose their land and allowed for property to be consolidated in the hands of fewer and fewer landowners.⁴ Over the years, laws and economic policies were established by the government that favored the large landowners and excluded small farmers from viably participating in the economy.⁵ By the twentieth century the indigenous population had largely been replaced by a Spanish-speaking peasant class living in extreme poverty. An analysis of the distribution of wealth in 1975 speaks to this reality:

El Salvador has the lowest per capita calorie intake of any Latin American country; in the countryside, 73 percent of the children suffer from

² Montgomery xii

³ Montgomery 33-39

⁴ Montgomery 35

⁵ Montgomery 45

malnutrition; 60 of every 1,000 infants die; more than a quarter million families (39 percent of the rural population) live in one-room dwellings; and only 37 percent of families have access to potable water.⁶

The political system was an instrument of the oligarchy that had formed since the colonial period. In fact, until the 1930's the government was run by members of the large landowning families. Peasants and workers' organizations were completely excluded from participating in the government. The military was the means of maintaining control and suppressing any resistance by the peasant class, for El Salvador had experienced many indigenous and peasant revolts, all consequences of economic injustice. 1932 was a particularly transformative year in Salvadoran politics. Realizing that they had no chance of exercising any form of self-determination in the current government, peasants rose up in a popular Marxist insurrection led by Farabundo Martí in January of that year. They were disorganized and seriously uncoordinated. The uprising was quickly squelched by the military and was followed by the massacre of 30,000 peasants. Anyone who had the appearance of an Indian was targeted.⁷ This became known as *La Matanza: The Slaughter*.

After the revolt, President Maximiliano Martínez began to consolidate and centralize his governmental power by replacing all civilians with military officers. From then on, peasant organizations were banned and labor unions, though not illegal, were officially considered subversive instruments of the left. This marked the beginning of new period in the history El Salvador's government. From 1932-1979, El Salvador experienced six nearly identical cycles of power change. Each cycle started with

⁶ Montgomery 31

⁷ Montgomery 52

extremely conservative military control of the country, which gave rise to increasing dissatisfaction with the government among the people; aware that this discontent may lead to popular insurrection, progressive factions within the army would stage a coup d'état promising to pass sweeping reforms. Any changes were stunted by the country's oligarchy, leading to a re-emergence of conservative leadership.⁸ Given that this trend seemed to conveniently repeat itself, what changed in 1979? To answer this question, we must turn to the role of the Church in the lives of the Salvadoran people.

Empowering Faith: The New Latin American Church

Many critics of the Catholic Church in Latin America point to its history of being intimately connected to and supportive of the ruling elite. By preaching that the people must accept the cross of suffering as God's will and focusing only on the fruits of life after death, the Church was not just complacent in the face of systemic injustice, but rather perpetuated it; Marx had a point when he referred to it as the "opiate of the masses."⁹ After Vatican Council II and the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín in 1968, however, the role of the Church took on a fundamentally different dimension. Vatican Council II reintegrated the notion of being the "Pilgrim People of God" to the Church's image, asserting that while it is certainly concerned with the spiritual, it is also a living breathing body interacting with this world. This suggested that the Church's pastoral activity should also focus on the realities of the world. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council shifted its historical emphasis on hierarchy and position to a

⁸ Montgomery 57

⁹ Brown 45

more egalitarian perspective stressing the importance of solidarity and collaboration.¹⁰ The conference of Medellín evaluated the developments of Vatican II and considered how to best apply them to the Latin American Church. The bishops at Medellín were aware that central to the experience of the Latin American peoples is a history and reality of violence:

The violence we are talking about is the violence that a minority of privileged people has waged against the vast majority of deprived people. It is the violence of hunger, helplessness, and underdevelopment. It is the violence of persecution, oppression, and neglect. It is the violence of organized prostitution of illegal but flourishing slavery, and of social, economic, and intellectual discrimination.¹¹

Working within this unique context of Latin America, the bishops were able to make two significant extrapolations. First, they emphasized a preferential option for the poor and second, they began to look at the condition of the Latin American people through the lens of liberation, i.e., from all the different forms of violence to which they were subjected. This second point crystallizes the importance of a preferential option for the poor, since it is the poor who are consistently suffering the most injustice.¹² And it is in response to the plight of the poor that we most need to evaluate the dynamic ways in which liberation theology might address the pressing needs of our day.

Putting their words into practice, the bishops strongly encouraged the formation of Christian based communities (CEB's). Though there was no specific mold for these CEB's and their leadership ranged from members of the clergy to lay people, they were a venue for community members to gather, read scripture, and reflect on the Bible within

¹⁰ Levine 8-9

¹¹ Brown 44

¹² Levine 11

the context of their lives. During the early 1970's these groups spread like wildfire in El Salvador, as did the message of liberation. People became aware of their inherent dignity as human beings and realized that

The message is a radical break with the past: that it is not God's will that people be poor; that they are equal before God to the large *hacienda* owner down the road; that they have a basic human right to organize in order to begin taking control of their own lives; and that throughout human history God has been a God of justice who has always acted on behalf of the poor and oppressed.¹³

And organize they did. The 1970's saw the resurgence of popular organizations in El Salvador as the people were empowered to express themselves politically.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the government reacted by violently repressing any dissent. Yet with shocking audacity, the government now began targeting the Church, viewing it as the most influential source of subversive thought.¹⁵ In 1980 Monseñor Rivera y Damas stated, "The Church is persecuted because she tells the truth that shakes up the powerful."¹⁶ The government's acts of injustice merely legitimated the cause of Salvadoran people.

Another Coup and Civil War

On October 15, 1979, the Salvadoran government underwent yet another coup d'état. Progressives among the military officers known as the Young Military ousted President Romero in an attempt to salvage the government of a country on the brink of revolution. They established a junta made up of two military officers (Colonel Mojano

¹³ Montgomery 104

¹⁴ Armstrong 74-75

¹⁵ Armstrong 89-90

¹⁶ Armstrong 177

and Colonel Gutierrez) and three civilian members. They intended to pass massive reforms in the country including agrarian reform that would consist of land redistribution.¹⁷ It was a genuine attempt at resolving the mounting tension in the country through peaceful means, but it was to be short-lived. Colonel Gutierrez betrayed the junta and its goals, and consolidated military power into his own hands, rendering the junta impotent at initiating any real changes in the country. By January 4, 1980, every member of the original junta except for Colonel Gutierrez had resigned.¹⁸ Indeed, what is sadly ironic about the coup is that the human rights violations which its original members had intended on ending, increased dramatically with the establishment of the new government. This was to be the bloodiest period of the Civil War.

On October 10, 1980, the distinct revolutionary organizations operating in El Salvador joined together in a coalition calling themselves the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). This was the force that would combat the government's military for the duration of the Civil War. The following is an excerpt from the revolutionary front's platform:

This revolution is therefore popular, democratic, and antioligarchic, and seeks to conquer true and effective national independence. Only the revolutionary victory will halt the criminal repression and make it possible for the people to enjoy the peace that today they lack, a solid peace based on freedom, social justice, and national independence.¹⁹

There was little doubt that the revolutionary front was popular, for it was the culmination of the Salvadoran people's discontent. It was also the last resort for a

¹⁷ Montgomery 14-15

¹⁸ Montgomery 23

¹⁹ Gettleman 122

voiceless people. The nature of the FMLN—a coalition of different popular organizations with diverse ideological backgrounds—supported the claim that it was in fact democratic, since it required constant dialogue and debate to function as a unified body. It is nevertheless reasonable to ask the question whether the front’s violent insurrection was just. As stated by the French Declaration of the Rights of Man from 1789, “When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is, for the people and for each sector of the population, the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties.”²⁰ So, according to this standard, the insurrection was not only just in its cause, but also the Salvadoran people’s duty driven by the injustices continuing to be committed by the government. In 1981, France and Mexico recognized the FMLN as a belligerent government, representative of the Salvadoran population. This gave the movement credibility on the international stage.²¹

The FMLN mounted its first offensive in January of 1981, calling it the “final offensive,” hoping it would defeat the military and overthrow the government. Although it did not achieve this specific objective, it was an effective military campaign that established a strong rearguard against attack by government troops and rooted the guerrillas in the countryside from where they would fight the war for the years to come.²² In December of that year, the government launched its first large counter-offensive into the Morazán region of the country, employing a “hammer and anvil” strategy. Its goal was to trap the guerrilla forces between the army’s advance and the Honduran border;

²⁰ Wiener 221

²¹ Armstrong 197-198

²² Byrne 80

Colonel Monterrosa was also personally invested in finding and killing the rebels in charge of Radio Venceremos, the radio station of the revolutionary front that had been on air for over a year. The rebels however, having a great familiarity with the landscape, were able to evade the offensive with virtually no confrontations.²³ The only thing the government troops were able to successfully achieve was the systematic massacre of thousands of non-combatants in the countryside.

One of the most notorious cases of human rights violations, widely considered to be representative of the governments war against its people, occurred in the village of El Mozote during the offensive. Troops of the Atlacatl Battalion under Colonel Monterrosa entered into town and proceeded to murder every single member of the community. First, the men were rounded up, marched to the edge of the town and executed. Next, the soldiers separated the older women from the younger ones and executed them as well. The young women they took up into the hills and raped them repeatedly before killing them. And finally for the children, the soldiers employed a number of different methods such as hanging, decapitation, and even throwing them in the air to be impaled by bayonets. The last of the children were locked in the chapel and burned alive.²⁴

As the Civil War ran its course, neither side was able win any decisive victory. The rebels entrenched themselves for the long haul, opting to weaken the government through economic sabotage and isolated attacks. The government forces sought to uproot the guerrillas through multiple offensives, but were ultimately unsuccessful. By the end of the 1980's the country was utterly exhausted, both economically and emotionally. The

²³ Montgomery 181-182

²⁴ Danner 62-102

changing political climate in 1989 led to the termination of U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government, making it very apparent that a negotiated settlement would be the best option at that point. Internationally mediated negotiations then began and were finally settled in 1992.

U.S. Involvement

Undoubtedly, one of the most influential factors in shaping the course of the Civil War was the United States' involvement in the conflict. By the end of the war, the U.S. had sent approximately \$6 billion in aid (both military and economic) to the Salvadoran government and its armed forces, as well as military advisors to help combat the insurgency.²⁵ The U.S. is further responsible by having provided military training at the School of the Americas. According to the United Nations Truth Commission Report on El Salvador (1993), a vast majority of the human rights violations during the Civil War were committed by government military forces or paramilitary groups protected by the government. Of the over sixty military officers that were cited in this report, more than two thirds had been trained at the School of the Americas (including leaders of the Atlacatl Battalion).²⁶ The facts described in the report are compelling and deeply troubling. Why did the U.S. get involved? Why did the U.S. continue to aid a Salvadoran government guilty of heinously violating human rights? Despite the glaring moral implications of injustice, can U.S. involvement be considered just?

²⁵ Cale 37

²⁶ Nelson-Pallmeyer 32-33

The Reagan administration's official position was that intervention in the conflict was in the interest of national security, arguing that the revolution was directly instigated, organized, and supplied/financed by foreign Communist powers. In a 1981 report given to members of NATO, Secretary of State Alexander Haig described the situation in El Salvador:

A well-orchestrated international Communist campaign designed to transform the Salvadoran crisis from the internal conflict to an increasingly internationalized confrontation is under way. With Cuban coordination, the Soviet bloc, Vietnam, Ethiopia and radical Arabs are furnishing at least several hundred tons of military equipment to the Salvadoran leftist insurgents.²⁷

Haig's briefing was based on evidence summarized in a document known as the White Paper, which was meant to gain the support of Congress and the American people to continue the flow of aid to the Salvadoran government. The claims outlined in Haig's statement situated the Salvadoran Civil War in the much more internationally pertinent context of the Cold War. They burdened the United States with the responsibility of not just resolving a civil war, but balancing the struggle between east and west, communism and democracy, injustice and justice, on a world-scale. Without getting too carried away with such rhetoric, it is important to note how powerful these words truly were in the period of the Cold War. The myth of this conflict dichotomized the world into very distinct theaters of right and wrong. It is understandable that, if considered through the lens of the Cold War, it would be easy to disregard certain injustices committed against Salvadorans in the name of defeating a far greater evil, communism. Unfortunately, the White Paper was incapable of withstanding scrutiny.

²⁷ Gettleman 217

Analysis of the document suggests that conclusions linking the Salvadoran insurgency to a larger communist conspiracy were unfounded and that even evidence proving certain communist countries' commitment to providing military aid (in the form of arms) was circumstantial. In addition to claims about the insurgency, the White Paper argued that the incumbent government established after the 1979 coup garnered the favor of the Salvadoran people, evidenced by a lack of anti-government protests. This is misleading in a couple of ways. First of all, the lack of public protest was more likely due to a dramatic increase in government sanctioned killings (both by military and paramilitary forces). Second, it was well known that the revolutionary front (FMLN) was a pluralistic coalition of popular organizations coming from a diverse background of ideologies.²⁸

Having pointed out some weaknesses in the Reagan administration's evidence, it is fair to ask whether the administration was deliberately misleading, knowing that it could not otherwise gain support for an unjust cause, or if Reagan himself was the victim of the rhetoric of his time. Without a doubt, it would be reasonable to gravitate to the former, but the influence of the latter is interesting to consider, for misperceptions certainly play a role on the field of international politics. A Nicaraguan Social Christian leader elucidates the complexity of labeling Right-versus-Left:

If by left we understand the struggle for social justice, the great battle for the social and economic redemption of the people, the incorporation of workers and peasants into the mainstream of culture and civilization, then undoubtedly we are leftists. If, however, by left is understood historical materialism, communist totalitarianism, and the suppression of liberty, then in no way are we leftists. If by right is understood the conservation of

²⁸ Gettleman 242-253

the spiritual values of civilization, the historical legacy of humanity, and the dignity and liberty of man, then there can be no doubt that we are rightists. But if by right we understand the conservation of an economic order based on the exploitation of man by man, on social injustice, we energetically refuse the name of rightists.²⁹

So maybe Reagan and his advisors did not understand the context of the Salvadoran insurgency and were thus prone to make misguided assumptions, that the uprising was a manifestation of Soviet-style communism spreading its tentacles across the globe. Nevertheless, the fact that the administration misled Congress and the American public is inexcusable.

That being said, can U.S. involvement yet be considered just in terms of intervention? John Stuart Mill would hold that, in the case of civil wars, foreign powers should maintain strict neutrality:

Of two things one: the interference in the case supposed either turns the balance, or it does not. In the latter event, it misses its aim; in the former, it gives the superiority to the side which would not have been uppermost without it and establishes a sovereign or a form of government, which that nation, if left to itself, would not have chosen.³⁰

Mill's statement reflects the belief that a country should have the right to self-determination. Michael Walzer would complicate this perspective by adding that if some foreign power were to intervene in such a conflict, it would be just for another power to also become involved and re-balance the conflict.³¹ Considering these concepts, the justness of the United States' involvement is contingent on whether or not the insurgency

²⁹ Gettleman 95

³⁰ Walzer 96-97

³¹ Walzer 97

was aided by foreign communist powers before the U.S. became involved. The history of the Civil War shows that this was not the case.

To be fair, by the mid-1980's, the guerrillas were receiving regular shipments of arms sent by other communist countries, to be smuggled across the border, but that was after many years of U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government. It can therefore be concluded that the United States' participation in the Salvadoran conflict was in fact unjust, not only because it was aiding a government responsible for countless human rights violations, but because it imposed an imbalance of power on the Civil War.

Bringing Kant into the conversation would refocus questions of justice on the individuals who were affected by the Civil War by emphasizing their inherent worth as people; each individual should always be treated as an end and never as a means to some other end. This illuminates another dimension of the injustice of the United States' involvement. By viewing its role in the conflict as a means to preventing the proliferation of communism in the western hemisphere, the U.S. treated the Salvadoran people as a means to its own political end (though unsuccessfully). The suffering perpetuated by a prolonged civil war was the tragic consequence, a consequence that continues to call for the engagement with the justice promised by liberation theology.

While it may be relevant to discuss the global significance of the conflict (what were the stakes on the world stage), such a conversation would fail to grasp the impact of the war on the individual. The people of El Salvador endured a tremendous amount of pain and loss, yet have had to move forward as a nation after the war; a nation scarred, but alive. How do individuals draw meaning from their experience of violence? How do

they proceed after so much senseless death? These are difficult questions, but are necessary to answer if the Salvadorans are to find healing as a people.

Finding Meaning in Suffering

More than 75,000 people died violently during the Civil War. A quarter of the nation's population became refugees, displaced from their homes.³² For a country of five million, these numbers are staggering. But they are just numbers. Numbers cannot bear true witness to the human experience of the war.

Of course, statistics can be useful in describing certain realities. For example, of the cases of human rights violations documented by the U.N. Truth Commission Report, over 85% were carried out by agents of the state or agents supported by the state.³³ This statistic communicates that that the Salvadoran government was responsible for the vast majority of injustices committed against civilians, but it does not describe the nature of the violence. It does not tell the story of how the guerrillas would execute certain mayors and judges to achieve the greatest political impact, or that they would kidnap civilian members of the upper class and hold them for ransom. Nor does it paint the grotesque picture of indiscriminate government killing. Statistics have no eyes and no emotions.

Seeing the conflict through the eyes of the people who were there is essential to understanding the war experience. Salvadoran reporter Mario Rodriguez tells the story of a brutality beyond comprehension:

³² Byrne 210

³³ Wood 8

In villages, cantons, estates and factories, I saw the hideously mutilated bodies of peasants and workers; more than of few of them had their chopped-off genitals stuck in their mouths, their eyes and tongues torn out and their faces and fingers burned by muriatic acid. Others had been beheaded and the heads placed on view for the local population.³⁴

Scenes like this were commonplace during the war. The government's tactic was to instill maximum terror in the civilian population and eradicate dissent. Father Gallagher recalls the landscape after a massacre of refugees near the Honduran border (at least 600 were killed): "There were so many vultures picking at the bodies that it looked like a black carpet."³⁵ Another witness, a woman, explains how members of the military would butcher people: "The army would cut people up and put soap and coffee in their stomachs as a mocking. They would slit the stomach of a pregnant woman and take the child out, as if they were taking eggs out of an iguana. That is what I saw. That is what I have to say."³⁶ The depictions are horrific, as if they were scenes from a world of monsters. It is hard to understand how humans could do such hideous things to each other, but they are the reality of El Salvador's Civil War.

What meaning can possibly be drawn from these experiences? Perhaps a good place to start would be to consider the Civil War within the greater narrative of Salvadoran history, rather than as an isolated incident. This would allow the people to reflect on their suffering in the context of hundreds of years of systemic oppression. By doing so, they would understand the suffering of the war as the necessary cost for freeing themselves from the chains of what had been for so long an inescapable fate. Though

³⁴ Rodriguez 3

³⁵ Gettleman 148

³⁶ Gettleman 151

being rooted in the historical perspective of the oppression can in no way mitigate the suffering, it gives it purpose and therefore might make it endurable. Another fundamental way the Salvadorans gain perspective is through their identity as a Christian people.

The wounded found along the way were actually an entire crucified people, not just an individual. For this reason, mercy took a certain shape in history and was not reduced to mere benevolent feelings or occasional help. It took the shape of justice... and liberation.³⁷

Their common faith and the hope offered by liberation theology allowed them to share the burden of suffering and empowered them to become the agents of their own lives. Moreover, they realized that they were directly sharing in Christ's suffering by striving for a more just future in El Salvador. "This understanding of and identification with Jesus' fate structures the way Salvadoran Catholics interpret their experiences of violence... their religious tradition places this repression in a transcendent framework."³⁸ There was a certain solace in knowing that every single time someone was martyred or died during the war (as senseless as it would seem otherwise), Christ was being crucified over and over beside them in the ultimate act of solidarity. Arguably, a spiritual interpretation of the people's experiences during the war had the greatest potential of lending meaning to their suffering and giving them the strength to go on.

New Beginnings

Indeed, El Salvador's Civil War was a defining period in the country's history. It was the direct consequence of a long history of political and economic oppression, and

³⁷ Sobrino 200

³⁸ Peterson 122

marked the culmination of a people's struggle for liberation and justice. The costs of the war were tremendous, forever changing the nation's character. For Americans, this conflict should sharpen our consciousness and prudence of how we conduct foreign policy. We should recognize that regardless of intentions, our actions may increase suffering and injustice around the world rather than alleviating them. The last twenty years have been a period of healing and recovery for the Salvadoran people. There is much work still to be done, but they are an optimistic people with a promise of a bright future. Let us hope that the lessons taught by their history will always remind us to strive for justice in the world. And as we begin to explore liberation theology, let us consider how its principles can aid us in this pursuit.

CHAPTER 1

Vatican II and the Latin American Councils

A Living Church

Over the course of long and rich history of the Church, bishops and theologians have met in twenty-one Catholic Ecumenical Councils to discuss and adapt to the most pressing needs of their time. In October of 1962 over 2,500 Council Fathers came together in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to evaluate the role of the Church in the modern world. In effect, the changes implemented were some of the most visibly transformative in the entire history of the Church. Masses could now be said in languages other than Latin, the Church committed to pursuing the unification of all Christian churches, it integrated an explicit focus on directly addressing the world's problems, and most importantly (especially as it concerns the inspiration of liberation theology), it radically renewed its vision of pastoral care.

The former divisions between clergy and laity faded as, “this community [of Church leaders] realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”³⁹ Intrinsically thus, the Church as a body has been and continues to be on a journey with humanity. The togetherness implied by this journey rejects the far more isolationist attitude that characterized much of the institution's history; the Church must

³⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 1

then be in solidarity with even with the lowliest of the world community, for, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of... especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”⁴⁰ This meant that the Church would have to pay particular attention to the conditions of the suffering and pursue their alleviation. In doing so, the question immediately emerged: How best to do so?

Above all, humanity’s final purpose is entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the ultimate good; however, the following offers an interesting dimension to this pursuit: “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness.”⁴¹ While this surely refers to an inner freedom attained by detaching oneself from the burdens of concupiscence, personal sin, etc., it can also very tangibly mean freedom from social, political, or economic oppression. Before concentrating on the external obstructions to freedom, in reference to the internal barriers, it is fair to conclude, as do the Council Fathers, that, “freedom is damaged by sin.” So sin is the dirty word here. But this is no surprise. It follows though, that external obstructions to freedom are similarly caused by the sin of others.

When the structure of affairs [social order] is flawed by the consequences of sin, man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.⁴²

This introduces the idea of structural sin, which plays an integral role in defining the parameters of liberation theology later on. Furthermore, it begs the question, how will

⁴⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, 1

⁴¹ *Gaudium et spes*, 17

⁴² *Gaudium et spes*, 25

the Church act ‘strenuously’ to overcome this form of sin? Unfortunately, the question is not a simple one and the answer cannot be easy.

Any conversation about sin inevitably leads back to God’s creation of man and woman and their subsequent fall from grace. And since we assume oppressive structural problems are themselves due to humanity’s tendency toward sin, solving such problems is heavily burdened by a long history of human sinfulness. Granted, the council does not propose we face this alone. As a community of faith, we believe that we will be aided by grace. In fact, it is only through grace that progress can be made. In this context, the Church suggests that,

To satisfy the demands of justice and equity, strenuous efforts must be made... to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are connected with individual and social discrimination.⁴³

In very practical terms, we have a responsibility to strive for interpersonal, social, and economic equity. This is a very radical message, but it is rooted in the Gospel. We often forget that Christ’s message was similarly radical: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.”⁴⁴

One of the major emphases of Vatican II was on expanding the role of the laity in the life of the Church. Let us then further consider the council’s perspective on laity, political-economic-social life, and the relationship between these and the Church. “The laity fulfill their mission specifically in the temporal order in matters related to the

⁴³ *Gaudium et spes*, 66

⁴⁴ Matt. 19:24

building up of history, ordering them according the plan of God.”⁴⁵ It appears that the laity must take responsibility in the social and political realms to pursue a future that is informed by their faith. Two interesting points arise here, that can be tied to themes that will further be explored in the following chapter. First of all, “the building up of history highlights a belief in the linear nature of time, and by extension, emphasizes the significance of the laity’s role. If humankind is moving progressively through history, then each person must take responsibility and ownership of his/her role and participate in the unfolding narrative of history. Secondly, if the building up of history is ordered according to God’s plan, then it must be inspired by the end goal, which is communion of all people to God – salvation. Thus, both *faith* in God’s promise and *hope* that it shall be fulfilled, are foundational in the laity’s mission. Conversely, this quote brings up two points of tension that will have to be explored extensively if the “building up of history” is to be understood fully; namely, what does the plan of God manifested in history look like—whom shall we trust to define it—and what should a productive relationship between church hierarchy and laity look like. Interestingly, answering the latter question helps illuminate the former. “Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one.”⁴⁶ The Church hierarchy is considered to do the work of the apostles, who were themselves directly responsible for the continuation of Christ’s mission on earth.⁴⁷ It is

⁴⁵ *Lumen gentium* 31

⁴⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 42

⁴⁷ *Lumen Gentium Ch. III*

assumed that authority has been divinely granted Church leaders, originally by Christ to Peter, and handed down ever since.

However, Vatican II clarifies that for the hierarchy to properly fulfill its role as a spiritual leader of the people, it must remain strictly within its boundaries of responsibility and competence:

It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails, that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the Church, and a clear distinction between the tasks which Christians undertake, individually or as a group, on their own responsibility as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and the activities which, in union with their pastors, they carry out in the name of the Church. The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.⁴⁸

The first matter of importance here is that the Church must remain independent of any political association, so that it may equally serve the entirety of God's human community without being compromised by a political ideology. Yet, the Church cannot remain completely disconnected from the political, for as the spiritual guide of its flock, it must inform the "Christian conscience" of the laity, which in turn, guides political action. It is this crucial tension that highlights the central challenge posed by liberation theology – we saw in the unfolding of El Salvador's Civil War that faith played an important role in the catalysis of the people's uprising, by giving them hope and a greater awareness of their intrinsic dignity as human beings. That being said, there is a clear distinction between the role of the laity and that of the hierarchy: the laity "fulfill their mission... in the temporal order," whereas the Church hierarchy is responsible for spreading the

⁴⁸ *Gaudium et spes*, 76

message of Christ, God's promise of salvation, evangelizing to the ends of the earth is the work of a higher order.

Modern man is on the road to a more thorough development of his own personality, and to a growing discovery and vindication of his own rights. Since it has been entrusted to the Church to reveal the mystery of God, Who is the ultimate goal of man, she opens up to man at the same time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself. The Church truly knows that only God, Whom she serves, meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer.⁴⁹

Once more, *Gaudium et spes* is tremendously revealing of the Church's newly defined understanding of humanity's place in history. "Modern man is on the road to a more thorough development." Aside from the assumption of a linear history, there is the assumption that humanity is progressing and maturing in character. The validity of this assumption can be debated extensively, but the core of the debate can be connected to what is *proper* temporal hope (another theme that will be explored in later chapters); by the same token, how much potential is there for the development of the human personality or is it fair to assume that it can develop at all? Nevertheless, the Church sees itself as being part of this process, though not in an explicitly political way. Rather, it has been entrusted to "reveal the mystery of God... the meaning of his [humanity's] own existence". Answering the question whether or not human progress is actually possible turns out to be irrelevant when considering the Church's role in this world, because its mission, by default, entrenches it in the process or struggle for human development.

Returning briefly to politics:

⁴⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 41

It is clear, therefore, that the political community and public authority are founded on human nature and hence belong to the order designed by God, even though the choice of a political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of citizens. It follows also that political authority, both in the community as such and in the representative bodies of the state, must always be exercised within the limits of the moral order and directed toward the common good—with a dynamic concept of that good—according to the juridical order legitimately established or due to be established.⁵⁰

A couple of points of interest should be highlighted. Political authority *must* be “exercised within... the moral order and directed toward the common good”. Since as the excerpt says, the political realm is founded on human nature, it is inherently flawed, yet it must seek to remain within the moral order. Above, we noted that part of the Church’s role is to inform the Christian conscience, so there must be an active communication between the politically oriented laity and the Church so that the political realm is always pointed in the direction of the common good. The second item of note: the political common good is described as “a dynamic concept of that good”. This phrasing is extremely peculiar and noteworthy, because it admits fallibility, that the ‘good’ cannot be fully known at any time, and it requires a willingness or flexibility to change. Thus, the political community is always critical of the shortcomings of the present, while constantly imaginative about the good that can be worked for towards the future. This dynamic means of defining the common good becomes very influential in the development of liberation theology.

Indeed, the Second Vatican Council represents one of the most dramatic shifts in the history of the Catholic Church, but it was just a start. The work done by the council

⁵⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, 74

was primarily situated within the social and economic context of the European/Western world. Though the condition of the third world was not intentionally neglected, neither was it specifically addressed. Vatican II laid the foundation that was to be the catalyst for the emergence of liberation thought. Inspired by Vatican II's achievements, the bishops of Latin America met soon after in 1968 to discuss the unique needs of the Latin American Church. What followed was a remarkable reinterpretation of salvation in terms of very tangible liberation. At the second ecumenical council of Latin American bishops at Medellin, the bishops detailed the roles of the laity and the religious”

- We recommend with special urgency the creation of apostolic teams or lay movements within functional structures in which the process of liberation and humanization of the society to which they belong is elaborated and decided.” These should work in “close cooperation with the hierarchy.⁵¹
- In the economic and social order, however, and especially in the political order, where a variety of concrete choices is offered, the priest, as priest, should not directly concern himself with decisions or leadership, nor with the structuring of solutions.⁵²

As in Vatican II documents, it is implied above that the movement toward a better future is a collaborative and dynamic process, and that it is dependent on the circumstances of the present. It is also clear that the role of the priest is separate and does not include the enumeration of specific solutions. Rather it is a role of empowerment and pastoral care, because it is priests that should illuminate the spiritual dimension of the laity and therefore center its focus on God's plan. By consequence then, the laity holds a fundamental responsibility in matters concerning the social, political, and economic realms.

⁵¹ CELAM II: 10-13,16

⁵² CELAM II: 11-19

“From the depths of the countries that make up Latin America a cry is rising to heaven, growing louder and more alarming all the time. It is the cry of a suffering people who demand justice, freedom, and respect for the basic rights of human beings and peoples.”⁵³ Contained within their conclusions, both at Medellin and at Puebla, the bishops included a thorough criticism of the current state of affairs and extrapolated how the laity should act to fulfill their role as members of the Church and address the important issues of the time. Indeed, the councils viewed the frightful “conditions of underdevelopment dramatized by the imposing phenomena of marginality, alienation, and poverty,”⁵⁴ as a direct impediment to the pursuit of the Church’s mission of evangelization: “Our mission to bring God to human beings, and human beings to God, also entails the task of fashioning a more fraternal society here.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, they recognized that the laity’s overwhelming disengagement from these matters compounded the existing problems and failed to meaningfully seek solutions.

Large segments of the Latin American laity have not taken full cognizance of their membership in the Church. Their lives reveal an inconsistency between the faith they claim to profess and practice on the one hand and the real-life involvement they assume in society on the other hand. This divorce between faith and life is aggravated by secularism and by a system that gives priority to possessing more over being more.⁵⁶

There are a number of factors at work here. The Church hierarchy and priests must take responsibility for the laity’s lack of “cognizance” and act in an educative capacity in such a way that the laity may begin to more fully understand its own function in society and the Church. It is also valid to point out that for many years in Latin

⁵³ CELAM III: 87

⁵⁴ CELAM II: 10-2

⁵⁵ CELAM III: 90

⁵⁶ CELAM III: 783

America, certain members of the hierarchy discouraged commitments to social, political, or economic transformation and encouraged lay people to focus their gaze on God's eternal promise. Moreover, oppressive political conditions deterred people from actively participating in the political sphere, as demonstrated by El Salvador's history. However, Vatican II marked a paradigm shift in how the Church and the laity positioned themselves within the modern world, which inspired the Latin American bishops' adjustment in perspective. "Lay people are not to flee from temporal realities in order to seek God. They are to remain present and active amid those realities, and there find the Lord."⁵⁷ Thus, the nature of the Christian lay person was redefined (or its definition refined) with the understanding that an active spiritual life also demands the active transformation of present realities, within which God may also be found. Finally, the bishops brought up the negative impact of a secular society. Much of Latin American economics was dominated by liberal capitalism, which was characterized by the idolatry of wealth (like the rest of Western society), contributing heavily to the disconnect between the laity and its mission of transforming society. It is then implied that prior to the laity's full engagement in social transformation, individuals must first be themselves transformed in heart and mind. This reemphasizes the necessity that the laity not just be educated, but also fed spiritually (or converted) so that their mission may be a natural movement of their hearts and minds.

⁵⁷ CELAM III: 797

Unfortunately it is much easier to describe the laity's mission in broad terms than it is to define the particulars of how it is to move forward; the bishops recognized this reality:

A fact of particular seriousness is the insufficient effort invested in discerning the causes and conditionings of social reality, particularly with regard to the means and instruments for transforming society. This is needed to shed light on the activity of Christians if they are to avoid uncritical assimilation of ideologies on the one hand or a spirituality of evasion on the other. This also enables them to go beyond mere denunciation and find courses of action.⁵⁸

Once again, a few items must be unraveled. First off, “discerning the causes” of the structural injustices or inadequacies is paramount. Then the question of what mechanisms or “instruments” the laity should employ is extremely important for the practical fulfillment of societal transformation; for individuals may certainly acknowledge flaws in the current state of affairs, but without suitable means to action, they are likely to remain inactive. The process of discernment should also extend critically and suspiciously to ideologies – we will see this tension more clearly as liberation theology seeks to position itself within the political realm. Generally speaking, social, political, and economic solutions are manifested in the form of ideology, which, “In themselves have a tendency to absolutize the interests they uphold, the vision they propose, and the strategy they promote. In such a case, they really become ‘lay religions’. People take refuge in ideology as an ultimate explanation of everything.”⁵⁹ It may be relevant therefore to refer back to *Gaudium et spes*, which suggested that political transformation should be based on “a dynamic concept of the common good.” In a sense,

⁵⁸ CELAM III: 826

⁵⁹ CELAM III: 535-536

a dynamic mindset is antithetical to ideology because it refuses to fall into the trap of stagnation. The bishops also suggest that appropriate discernment will lead away from evasion to engagement and from denunciation to action.

“In undertaking this commitment they [the laity] will always accept enlightenment from the faith and guidance from the Gospel and from the social doctrine of the Church; but they will also be guided by intelligence and aptitude geared toward effective action.”⁶⁰ Here the bishops imply that the discernment process is multifaceted in that the laity must not only be informed by the teachings of the Church, but must also employ their own faculties as well.

In reference to mechanisms, how is it that the laity should organize and act as a unified body? The bishops suggest base-level Ecclesial Communities (CEBs). Essentially these are groups of lay people that meet regularly to grow in their understanding of scripture and faith, and to discuss the relevant problems of their time. Individual CEBs have the potential to act collaboratively with other CEBs, swelling to form powerful popular movements (this proved to be an incredibly effective mechanism of action in El Salvador, which eventually led to an effective popular uprising, as we saw in the Prologue).

United in a CEB (base-level Ecclesial Communities) and nurturing their adherence to Christ, Christians strive for a more evangelical way of life amid the people, work together to challenge the egotistical and consumeristic roots of society, and make explicit their vocation to communion with God and fellow humans. Thus they offer a valid and worthwhile point of departure for building up a new society, ‘the civilization of love.’⁶¹

⁶⁰ CELAM III: 793

⁶¹ CELAM III: 642

Really, CEBs are a beautiful way to initiate the transformative process, because in their formation, they act on practical terms without extending expectations beyond the reasonable. They address the alienation and disconnectedness of society by rejecting it and choosing to emphasize community instead. They mitigate the separation of faith and social life by discerning faith in a social context. “The CEBs embody the Church’s preferential love for the common people. In them, their religiosity is expressed, valued, and purified; and they are given a concrete opportunity to share in the task of the Church and to work committedly for the transformation of the world.”⁶² The Latin American bishops contend that role of the laity may be understood and fulfilled through these CEBs. This is a tremendous development for the Church! Not only did Vatican II reevaluate the Church’s relationship with the realities of the world and admit a linear nature of time, but the Latin American council made concrete suggestions of how active transformation of the world may be achieved, while caring for the spiritual needs of the people. We will see in the following chapter on Gustavo Gutierrez’s liberation theology that the themes developed by these councils allowed Gutierrez to make very clear distinctions about humanity’s role in the story of God’s creation and salvation, and conceive a new way of utilizing hope in the transformation of the present.

⁶² CELAM III: 643

CHAPTER 2

Gustavo Gutierrez's Liberation Theology: Creation, Salvation, and Hope

The Second Vatican Council recognized the necessity of reinterpreting the role of the church in the modern world and the conclusions of the body were of themselves revolutionary in their admissions, but they were merely the first step in tackling the roots of injustice. Following Vatican II, the bishops of Latin America met to discern their task of reinvigorating the Church within their unique context. They realized that an overwhelming majority of the people in Latin America were living in staggering poverty and were completely voiceless, incapable of challenging the system that oppressed them. If the Church was to stay true to its salvific mission, it would have to stand in solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed of society, and work to transform reality. For as theologian Fr. Virgilio Elizondo affirms, “The cries of the poor are the deepest expression of a humanity in search of the God of life.”⁶³ Their muted cries would no longer be kept silent; they would no longer be voiceless; theirs would be a cry that shook the foundations upon which they stood.

The aforementioned councils created a framework that inspired Latin American theologians to shape a theology that would address the conditions of their region – this became known as liberation theology. Dominican priest Gustavo Gutierrez was the first

⁶³ Elizondo 109

to coin the term. His experiences working in the most impoverished regions of Peru convinced him that systemic injustice on a global scale was largely responsible for the suffering of the poor. He began to recognize that the so-called *development* they were being subjected to by Western nations was nothing more than veiled exploitation. “The poor countries are becoming ever more clearly aware that their underdevelopment is only the by-product of the development of other countries, because of the kind of relationship which exists between the rich and the poor countries.”⁶⁴ In fact, the reason that they were trapped in economic destitution was a direct result of the legacy of imperialism and the policies of modern countries towards them. Suddenly there was certain clarity. If Latin America was to pursue its own economic well being and truly *develop* as a region, it would invariably have to *liberate* itself from the unjust exploitative structure imposed by the developed world.

This relationship of exploitation of the Latin American third world by developed countries, as we saw in the Prologue, made clear to Gutierrez that the poor (or needy) are not only to be the subject of liberation, but also the agents of positive change. Very practically speaking, it is the poor and the marginalized that feel the most urgent relevance of the need for change. “They see the process of transformation as a quest to satisfy the most fundamental human aspirations – liberty, dignity, the possibility of personal fulfillment for all.”⁶⁵ This pins them to the historical narrative of God’s creation and salvation. If we are to extrapolate the notions of a preferential option for the poor and the need for economic and political liberation, we can see how they very directly

⁶⁴ Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* 17

⁶⁵ Gutierrez 13

influence Gutierrez's theological work, which provides a wealth of insights about themes such as creation, salvation, and Christian hope, themes that are essential to understanding liberation theology and its challenge to present realities. Before we are to delve into his interpretation of scripture, we should recognize that Gutierrez has a very significant way of perceiving humanity's role in history, which resonates with Vatican II.

Vatican II reflected the belief that people have the capacity to improve their state of being and that the future can be made better than our present; that the human race is not stagnant, but has an overarching purpose and is participating in the narrative of God's story. The Catholic Church was very keen to incorporate the notion of progress in its assessment of the modern world (the word 'progress' appears 32 times in *Gaudium et spes*). The concept of progress, taken to its logical end, would lead us to a future that is just and equitable for all; but this possibility appears contradicted by the doctrine of original sin. Even if we were able to conceive a perfectly just system and then implement it, would it not, shortly thereafter, be compromised by human sin? We will discuss this further when we speak to Gutierrez's vision of utopia, which demands that we be in a constant state of progress.

Turning to his scriptural roots: Gutierrez's understanding of creation and salvation, both individually and in relationship to one-another is heavily based on scripture. Of course, creation can be understood in the sense as presented in Genesis (God created the Earth, all the plants and animals inhabiting it, and last but not least, humankind). However, creation is to be understood, "not as a stage previous to salvation, but as a part of the salvific process... God did not create only in the beginning; he also

had an end in mind.”⁶⁶ Gutierrez expands the meaning of creation with the idea that, “history is one” – here we can see the influence of a progressive vision of history. He argues that the literal act of creation was the only the initiation (though not the fulfillment) of a greater act and purpose: salvation. “Salvation – the communion of human beings with God and among themselves – is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ.”⁶⁷ This statement provides a couple of important clues to the relationship between creation and salvation that must be unpacked. First of all, since God is one, God is simultaneously Creator and Savior through Christ. This allows Gutierrez to make the assertion that creation and salvation are inextricably linked, because they originate from the same God.⁶⁸ Furthermore, creation is presented as a dynamic *process* rather than a single event in history. This suggests that we are continuing to witness the unfolding of creation. So we may connect this dynamic process to the dynamic nature of the common good in the political sphere, as described by Vatican II. Thus, our efforts of transforming the world are an active participation in God’s creation. And finally, salvation requires people to grow in relationship with each other and actively transform their reality such that, in doing so, they may also grow closer to Christ. These nuances add an incredible amount of complexity to what creation and salvation imply.

So what does this mean for Gutierrez’s theology? Well, it means *everything*, but that would be too brief. We must first recognize that the history of humanity is a narrative

⁶⁶ Gutierrez 87

⁶⁷ Gutierrez 85

⁶⁸ Gutierrez 87

in which God has played a liberating role, because this will lend greater significance to the role we have to play. To qualify this, Gutierrez refers extensively to Exodus and the life of Christ. Exodus reveals God's desire to liberate the people of Israel from tangible external oppression and Christ represents the fulfillment of God's salvation, by liberating humanity from the internal and external oppression of sin. This establishes the scriptural foundation for Gutierrez's liberation theology. By understanding salvation in the context of humanity's historical narrative, Gutierrez sees human destiny as one of very tangible liberation. This is our call as a people of God, inevitably fusing a political dimension to liberation.

Why is Christ's life significant? Identifying with Jesus and his sacrifice is central to the Latin American story and to liberation theology. To begin with, Christ strengthens a preferential option for the poor. Christ is present in the suffering – "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."⁶⁹ When we say Christ redeemed sin, it is not some abstract notion – he bore the burden of all of humanity's sin, beaten and pierced so we could be saved. It was the weight of our personal sin that he bore and it was the weight of the unjust structures we have erected, rooted in that sin. Some would make the criticism that Christ's message was actually not politically motivated at all and that he was specifically concerned with individual salvation in the eternal sense. To an extent, this is true, but for him, personal faith was never isolated from community. "Jesus turned to the great prophetic tradition and taught that worship is authentic only when it is based on profound personal dispositions, on the

⁶⁹ Matt. 25:40

creation of true fellowship, and on real commitment of others, especially the most needy.”⁷⁰ Gutierrez asserts that true faith leads to deeper communion with others and therefore plays a liberating role.

Sin is the root of injustice, which ultimately separates people from one-another, preventing them from living in true fellowship; and if we accept that Christ came to redeem us from that very root of injustice to establish a new future of human fellowship, relying on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament (God’s prophets called for justice, a living, breathing justice in action.), it follows that faith demands a political orientation as well. “His testimony and his message acquire this political dimension precisely because of the radicalness of their salvific character: to preach the universal love of the Father is inevitably to go against all injustice, privilege, oppression, or narrow nationalism.”⁷¹

Discussing politics in the context of the institutional church has many historical implications that muddle present clarity in what is to be the role of the Church in politics today. But as we saw in the previous chapter, Vatican II established a number of guidelines that elucidate the distinction between the roles the laity and the ordained. The Catholic Church is to be a spiritual guide of the people, focused on its salvific message, without being directly engaged in the political. On the other hand, the laity is to be intimately involved in political matters, and be inspired by faith in doing so. Nevertheless, Gutierrez points out that historically, this was not always the case. “For them [traditional theologians] the eschatological tendency expressed the wish for a

⁷⁰ Gutierrez 132

⁷¹ Gutierrez 135

disengagement of the Christian faith from the powers of this world; the basis for this was a lack of interest in terrestrial realities and a historical pessimism which discouraged any attempt at great tasks.”⁷² Once again, we can see how a unified view of history would challenge worldly disengagement. Gutierrez argues that it is not enough to will justice on a personal level if we are to stay true to Christ’s message of building fellowship. As a modern Church, we must remember that there is a social dimension and responsibility demanded by our faith. Faith cannot remain in the realm of the private mind. Here, the role of religion and the Church must be redefined as it concerns the political sphere, in that the Church can no longer be mixed with it as it was in the old order. But the Church and the body of religious must concern themselves with the message and thus cannot ignore the social dimension of God’s call. “This will lead the Church to become an *‘institution of social criticism.’* Its critical mission will be defined as a service to the history of freedom, or more precisely, as a service to human liberation.”⁷³ This shows Gutierrez’s historical optimism and brings us to the importance of hope in his theology of liberation.

Hope brings much to the table. For Gutierrez, hope is an essential aspect of faith and it is intrinsic to the political realm if it is to be inspired by faith. We must not only desire change because we thirst for justice, but also because we hope for a better future. It is ingrained in the new Western paradigm of a progressing time. We believe the future holds something better.

⁷² Gutierrez 122

⁷³ Gutierrez 128

To hope does not mean to know the future, but rather to be open, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to accepting it as a gift. But this gift is accepted in the negation of injustice, in the protest against trampled human rights, and in the struggle for peace and fellowship. Thus hope fulfills a mobilizing and liberating function in history.⁷⁴

Gutierrez contends that therefore, we should proceed with a utopian mindset – one that seeks to improve the current state of being; denounce that which is corrupt and rotten, and act towards a more just alternative, situated in the context of history and verified in praxis. But he also cautions against falling into the trap of ideology, for it is a prison that prevents true progress. We must have the intellectual flexibility to constantly evaluate and reformulate. With this in mind, he claims, “When that which is ‘yet-not-conscious’ becomes a conscious act, it is no longer a state of mind; it assumes a concrete utopic function, mobilizing human action in history. Hope thus emerges as the key to human existence oriented towards the future, because it transforms the present.”⁷⁵

Gutierrez looks at the world and humanity, and sees it as being at a critical point in its evolution. As product of the historical context sketched in the prologue, he sees suffering and injustice, and interprets the Christian faith within this reality. He sees the Church as an institution and body that must spread God’s message of liberation, as the human race rushes into the future. “The Kingdom is realized in a society of fellowship and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all persons with God. The political is grafted into the eternal.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Gutierrez 125

⁷⁵ Gutierrez 123

⁷⁶ Gutierrez 135

CHAPTER 3

Thoughts on Hope and Utopia and a *Theology of Hope*

I ended the last chapter on Gutierrez with the quotation: “The Kingdom is realized in a society of fellowship and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all persons with God. The political is grafted into the eternal.”⁷⁷ However, I did not follow with the necessary unpacking of its meaning. There are a couple of points of tension that must be acknowledged. First of all, Gutierrez suggests that the Kingdom is an attainable goal that can be achieved by reaching “a society of fellowship and justice.” The question is whether this is in fact plausible given the sinful nature of humanity. If it is not possible (as Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, contends in his criticism of liberation theology – we will visit this later on), then the assumption runs the risk of quickly entering into the folly of human pride. A second tension revealed by Gutierrez’s statement is what is to be humanity’s object of hope. Here, the delineation is made between hope in the eternal vs. hope in the temporal, though it seems that, for Gutierrez, this is more of a gradient than a dichotomy. Finally, Gutierrez explicitly brings politics into the conversation. He implies that a building up of the Kingdom (whether or not we believe that it can be tangibly achieved on earth)

⁷⁷ Gutierrez 135

necessitates political transformation, which of course is sensitive ground when it comes to the Church's role, though Chapter 1 provided some insight in this regard.

To expand on Gutierrez's understanding of hope: "The hope which overcomes death must be rooted in the heart of historical praxis; if this hope does not take shape in the present to lead it forward, it will be only an evasion, a futuristic illusion."⁷⁸ In this statement, his view of hope as a gradient is made clearer and indicates why it might also be controversial. He claims that hope in salvation, "which overcomes death," cannot exist independent of a temporal hope, "rooted in... historical praxis." An apparent criticism of this view would be to say that we should hope in salvation in spite of the realities of this world, a reality of sin. Yet, for Gutierrez, salvation begins with the here and now.

We may turn to Ignacio Ellacuría's⁷⁹ interpretation of the crucifixion to shed light on this discussion. "Every process in history is a creation of the future and not merely a renewal of the past. The fallen human is not restored, but rather the new human is built up; that new human is built up in the resurrection of one who has struggled from death against sin."⁸⁰ As with Gutierrez's writings, we immediately see the importance of a progressive view of history, with Christ's resurrection situated within that context. This is significant, because while the resurrection was redemptive⁸¹ in nature, that redemption is oriented into the future, which demands an active participation in the process of building

⁷⁸ Gutierrez 124

⁷⁹ Ignacio Ellacuría was a Spanish Jesuit priest, social activist, and influential liberation theologian who worked at the University of Central America in El Salvador. He was one of the Jesuits to be murdered at the University on November 16, 1989.

⁸⁰ Ellacuría 261 – from "The Crucified People" in *Systematic Theology*

⁸¹ Redemption, by definition, is a recovery of something that was lost in the past

up. Thus, the relationship between salvation and praxis is co-dependent, and therefore, hope in one compels hope in the other.

Ellacuría continues by explaining, “Jesus followed a particular direction in history not because he was seeking a redemptive death, but rather because that was what truly proclaiming the Reign of God demanded.”⁸² His distinction about the praxis of Jesus’ life makes an interesting point about how we should view the resurrection. Christ’s specific mission in life was not to be crucified. Rather the way in which he lived his life, his actions and his message, that were themselves a proclamation of God’s Kingdom. It was this message, fully embodied in history that led to his redeeming death. It follows then, that Christ’s life was part of the salvific act. Therefore, the crucifixion and resurrection cannot be understood in the entirety of their meaning without first reflecting on the historical praxis of his life. With this in mind, Gutierrez’s understanding of hope can be better appreciated. For Jesus, praxis and resurrection were part of the same continuum, so then hope in salvation must be rooted in historical praxis and vice versa.

Hope manifested in history is utopia. I briefly discussed utopia in the chapter on Gutierrez. It is an important term, but it also has many different connotations. Consequently, it is difficult to talk about without getting tied up in misunderstanding. But even putting political/historical interpretations aside, proper utopia requires a delicate balance in how one understands hope, between present and future.

Consulting the chapter “Hope, Utopia, Resurrection” by the Brazilian theologian João Batista Libânio, S.J.: “Utopia says no to the present and points toward a future

⁸² Ellacuría 264

within history. Hope says yes to the absolute future, already present, which comes to meet every human being but is always future in the sense that it is never totally achieved and known.”⁸³ The first recognition here is that utopia deals strictly with the temporal and is thus, inevitably limited in its nature. This makes utopia a process, a movement towards an unattainable goal. Nevertheless, it is in relationship to hope of the eternal because it is inspired by that spirit of seeking the ultimate good.

“This human character of creating utopias as a spur to political activity, attempting to change things, would remain an enigma, lacking its true meaning, unless theological hope revealed its true origin and final destiny.”⁸⁴ So utopia is driven and informed by hope, if it is to be guided in the right direction. Assuming that the Kingdom, which is the center of theological hope and the proper goal of utopia, cannot be achieved, utopia must remain in constant motion. The moment it becomes stagnant, it loses its function and becomes ideology. It might be useful then to redefine utopia as a mindset rather than an end. As such, utopia assumes the role of hope manifested in history. To put it in more tangible terms, given that hope in historical praxis leads into hope of salvation, and salvation, as a reaching communion with God, implies the elimination of sin, utopia should practically seek to eliminate sin. In the case of the socioeconomic/political order (which is the target of utopian transformation), this sin is structural.

As Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was strongly critical of liberation theology on a number of points addressed above; namely, a focus on the alleviation of structural sin, a necessity of the utopian

⁸³ Libânio 282 – from “Hope, Utopia, Resurrection” in *Systematic Theology*

⁸⁴ Libânio 289

mindset, and an emphasis on temporal hope. It has been argued that Ratzinger's *Instruction on Certain Aspects of "The Theology of Liberation"* (ICATL) and *Instruction on Christian of Freedom and Liberation* (ICFL) were a reclamation by the Church of the important theological aspects of liberation, while eliminating the radical elements.

“The acute need for radical reforms of the structures which conceal poverty and which are themselves forms of violence, should not let us lose sight of the fact that the source of injustice is in the hearts of men.”⁸⁵ In Ratzinger's understanding, liberation theologians overemphasized the need to target structural sin at the expense of the pastoral care of the individual and was uncomfortable with the explicitly activist political engagement demanded by liberation theologians – the results of which were seen in El Salvador. He shifts the focus back on the individual as the source of all injustice. For me, this seems like a matter of nuance, because I believe both individual and structural sin must be addressed. Structural sin should be equally considered because the violence it does to persons exacerbates the state of individual sin in our world. And if we think back to our discussion of Vatican II, the Church admitted that structural exists as an obstruction to human freedom, so great efforts should be made to eliminate such injustice.

But Ratzinger maintained his concerns: “It would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation, which would very soon be revealed as nothing more than an illusion and a cause of new forms of slavery. Those who in this way surrender to the ideologies of the world and to the

⁸⁵ ICATL, Ch. 11:8

alleged necessity of violence are no longer being faithful to hope.”⁸⁶ Ratzinger was probably most critical of the utopian mindset proposed by theologians like Gutierrez. This is likely due both to the fact that the word ‘utopia’ has many different connotations and because the Latin American liberation movement was closely related (sometimes unfairly) to a plurality of ideologies and methodologies. Such concerns are reflected in his thoughts above. However, if we refer back to the definition of true utopia, as described earlier, Gutierrez and Libânio would also be concerned by deviations into ideology or new forms of slavery.

“The most radical liberation, which is liberation from sin and death, is the liberation accomplished by the Death and Resurrection of Christ.”⁸⁷ When it comes to the hope promised by liberation theology, Ratzinger felt that temporal hope in material liberation overshadowed the hope of the eternal. And it is fair to assert that hope in salvation is the ultimate hope of Christian people, but later in the document, he added the following:

This hope [eschatological] does not weaken commitment to the progress of the earthly city, but rather gives it meaning and strength. It is of course important to make a careful distinction between earthly progress and the growth of the Kingdom, which do not belong to the same order. Nonetheless, this distinction is not a separation; for man's vocation to eternal life does not suppress but confirms his task of using the energies and means which he has received from the Creator for developing his temporal life.⁸⁸

We must fully invest ourselves in the hope of Christ’s salvation, but mediate our earthly hopes to that which is reasonable. So once again, the issue of hope seems to be a

⁸⁶ICFL 98

⁸⁷ICFL 22

⁸⁸ICFL 60

matter of nuance rather than fundamental theological divergence. This is interesting to me, considering how controversial liberation theology has been over the years. Of course, this very much appeals to my desire to bridge dichotomies or, when possible, alleviate false ones. Though not within the scope of this work, I would be curious to investigate to what extent the Church's reaction against liberation theology was born of cultural and contextual differences that led to misunderstandings.

Hope has become a central consideration in what I feel is at the heart of liberation theology and therefore deserves a great deal of attention. When discussing the notion of Christian hope, there is the distinct tension between eschatological hope—that which deals with the promise of the end of times—and a temporal hope in that which can be achieved on earth. I am tempted to view this tension as a continuum in which proper temporal hope is dependent on eschatological hope. The important word here is *proper* and truth be told, a thorough expansion of what *proper* temporal hope implies might alleviate much of this tension. I also mentioned briefly (though this might merit some further explanation) that the poor and the marginalized feel the most urgent need for change and thus, are likely to be central in the fulfillment of a utopic function in our world. What is interesting about their position is that it is their suffering demands hope for change.

This brings us back to the former question and poses the challenge: Can suffering be eliminated? To be fair, probably not, but what is most compelling about the relationship of the poor and hope is that suffering acts as the catalyst and liberation theology as the means to transformation. Would it then be too audacious to ask: Is suffering not only an inevitable reality of human life, but also an inspiration toward

temporal hope? This feels like a stumbling block, a paradox, which I find myself straddling – idealistic at times and cynically realistic at others. It may be useful to learn from the gradient that lies between temporal and eschatological hope (recognizing that they do not belong to the same order⁸⁹) and realize that while a complete elimination of suffering is not attainable in this world, such a reality should not preclude an effort to find tangible ways of reducing suffering.

In his work *Theology of Hope*, German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann extensively addresses hope and suffering⁹⁰:

To believe does in fact mean to cross and transcend bounds, to be engaged in an exodus. Yet this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities. Death is real death, and decay is putrefying decay. Guilt remains guilt and suffering remains, even for the believer, a cry to which there is no ready-made answer. Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind.⁹¹

Here, Moltmann brings clarity to the limits of hope inspired by faith and may help to elucidate what *proper* temporal hope must look like. At the beginning of the quote, he acknowledges that faith does indeed act to liberate the believer—“transcend bounds”—which affirms that a dynamic utopian mindset is appropriate within the context of faith. Yet, he is also careful to assert that such hope cannot escape the boundaries of reality.⁹²

This can be related back to the earlier discussion of Christ’s life. Though the entirety of Christ’s life was part of God’s greater salvific act, he lived a life that was fully human,

⁸⁹ Refer back to Cardinal Ratzinger’s quote earlier in the chapter

⁹⁰ As a side note, when Moltmann refers to utopia, his working definition is that of a stagnant, artificially imposed sense – like Marxism. This is in contrast to the understanding of utopia as a dynamic mindset as was discussed previously.

⁹¹ Moltmann 19

⁹² I am not sure how Cardinal Ratzinger reacted to Moltmann’s work, but it seems that Moltmann’s perspective accounts for Ratzinger’s concerns.

experiencing all “the unpleasant realities” that none of us can escape. Similarly, in seeking the salvation granted us by God, neither can we avoid the guilt, suffering, nor death that are a part of this life.

“Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God... Faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith.”⁹³ So what has been promised by God, what do we believe by faith? Undoubtedly, the central point of God’s promise is salvation, namely, entrance into the eternal Kingdom; and this was made possible by Christ’s redemptive death. But can we say that salvation is equally participatory? Gutierrez argued earlier that, yes. Because creation and salvation are part of the same narrative thread, and we find ourselves bound to God’s narrative, by the nature of our position, we are participating in the process of its unfolding. If this is so, the hope built upon the foundation of faith in God’s promise should constantly seek salvation, which we earlier defined as humanity’s complete communion with God; that is the ultimate goal. Implied also, is humanity’s communion with itself, which can be tangibly pursued in the here and now.

“Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it.”⁹⁴ Thus, hope in Christ fundamentally changes the human perspective in such a way that the brokenness of this world becomes obvious and unsatisfying – we “begin to suffer under it.” This hope connects us to our deepest thirst for fulfillment and leads us to communion, contradicting the present reality. Once again,

⁹³ Moltmann 20

⁹⁴ Moltmann 21

we see the relationship between eternal and temporal hope: Hope in Christ's salvation ignites hope in transforming the present as well. To be clear, this movement occurs within the individual, who may only begin to redeem his/her tiny piece of this world – the *proper* object of temporal hope. Though at first, this seems severely limited in scope, Moltmann continues, "Hope alone is to be called 'realistic,' because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. It does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change."⁹⁵ It is refreshing to hear hope referred to as "realistic" because it belongs to that which is *proper*. So if we combine the implications of these last two quotations, we can conclude that the extent of change possible is contingent on the number of people that share in the same hope. In theory then, the *properness* our temporal hope is only limited by the amount of people participating in that hope.

"Can there be such a thing as harmony and contemporaneity on man's part in the moment of today, unless hope reconciles him with what is non-contemporaneous and disharmonious?"⁹⁶ A challenge to Moltmann's theology of hope is whether or not hope removes us from the present and thrusts us into our thoughts of the future⁹⁷. Moltmann contends the opposite however. We cannot be truly happy in the present, unless our understanding of the present is informed by the hope in changing that which is presently broken. Thus, hope brings us happiness in the present, rather than cheating us of it.

⁹⁵ Moltmann 25

⁹⁶ Moltmann 31

⁹⁷ Moltmann 26

“[Hope] constantly provokes and produces thinking of an anticipatory kind in love to man and the world, in order to give shape to the newly dawning possibilities in the light of the promised future, in order as far as possible to create here the best that is possible, because what is promised is within the bounds of possibility.”⁹⁸ We may begin to note that Moltmann’s notion of hope echoes Gutierrez’s idea of hope cultivating a utopian mindset. Hope is a feeling that actively “provokes and produces thinking of an anticipatory kind.” This is precisely how Gutierrez defines his understanding of utopia. It demands a very keen awareness of the present to inspire positive change for the future.

For our knowledge and comprehension of reality, and our reflections on it, that means at least this: that in the medium of hope our theological concepts become not judgments which nail reality down to what it is, but anticipations which show reality its prospects and its future possibilities.⁹⁹

So we see in this quote too the concept emphasized that hope exists along a continuum that connects theological matters to those that concern the temporal. Hope is the essential virtue of liberation theology that connects our current place within God’s narrative to the end goal of salvation. Hope reconciles the dichotomy between the temporal and the eternal, because it brings them closer together. And so, in recognizing the widespread injustice that exists in the world and knowing that God calls us to participate in the story of creation, as the future continues to be created (the old renewed and rebuilt), we are compelled to be inspired by hope in God’s promise and utopically transform our reality. This is the dynamic of liberation theology.

⁹⁸ Moltmann 34-35

⁹⁹ Moltmann 35-36

CHAPTER 4

Solidarity with the Poor and the Radical Praxis of Jesus' Life

The past few chapters have allowed us to gain a better understanding of how liberation theology is inspired by faith to engage in a transformative movement toward a more just future and the Latin American bishops suggested the mechanism of CEBs through which small communities can share in faith and support one-another in seeking change and the alleviation of injustice. Now, I would like to discuss a concept that I may have mentioned before, but have not thoroughly addressed, a concept that rests at the core of liberation theology: the centrality of the poor and their experience. Jon Sobrino would reformulate this to: *No Salvation Outside the Poor*. As a man living in the first world, I cannot help but be both unsettled and compelled by this notion; and I would venture that it should move anyone who is accustomed to abundance to think more deeply about the current order of reality. Indeed, “Intelligence ‘has not been given to help people evade their real commitments, but to take on themselves the burden of things as they really are and with all that they really demand.’”¹⁰⁰ So let us then employ our intelligence to recognize our commitments and understand what they demand. The title of Sobrino’s book implies that there is something *essential* – something essentially human – about the collective experience of the poor that is absent in our world of abundance, that living in

¹⁰⁰ Sobrino *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 2 - Ellacuría

our “civilization of wealth” we remain hidden to and deny that reality. “In our time, said Ellacuría, the third world offers light to enable the first world to see itself as it truly is, which is an important element of salvation.”¹⁰¹ What follows, if we are to see ourselves as we truly are, is that we must be self-critical; herein lays the first great difficulty – and if we are courageous enough to be critical, can we find the strength to accept the criticism and be inspired to transform reality? This might be another reason liberation theology remains controversial, because it is constantly in the process of transformation. But I should not be hasty and focus on transformation yet, for *seeing* is the first step and it is a formidable impediment. Sobrino elaborates on how Ellacuría’s understood the illuminative function of the third world: “A crucified people is like an inverted mirror in which the first world, on seeing itself disfigured, comes to know itself in its truth, which it otherwise seeks to hide by every means possible. The reality of the crucified peoples appears also by means of copro-analysis: the feces show what the first world produces, its state of health and its truth.”¹⁰² First, I will make a side note to describe what is meant by “crucified people”:

“The language of ‘people’ and ‘peoples’ is laced with death, not natural but historical death, which takes the form of crucifixion, assassination, the active historical deprivation of life, whether slowly or quickly. That death, caused by injustice, is accompanied by cruelty, contempt, and also concealment.”¹⁰³ This term is commonly used among liberation theologians and refers specifically to the poor that suffer

¹⁰¹ Sobrino 5

¹⁰² Sobrino 60

¹⁰³ Sobrino 4

intolerably at the hands of humanity's sin. The language intentionally alludes to Christ's death on the cross, because the poor's experience of suffering, neglect, and injustice is seen as analogous to Christ's. It also suggests that the poor experience a special sort of solidarity with Jesus – that their suffering brings them closer to God. We saw this in the experiences of the Salvadoran people during the Civil War – they were crucified by the violence and oppression of their government, yet they were able to find meaning in those experiences by being in solidarity with Christ. Finally, the experience of the “crucified people” is distinctly historical, in that it has been perpetuated by humans.

So then a crucified people are a reflection of human cause. Seeing the condition of the third world should be an immediate accusation. I don't mean to over-generalize, simply to dramatize the question – what is our part or how are we responsible for the reality lived by the poor? And if we are honest with ourselves – which will most likely demand the restructuring of our individualistic/materialistic societal priorities – we may begin to realize that our self-righteousness and sense of entitlement are the products of a myth that veils reality, nothing more than justification for our sins. The second analogy Ellacuría used is particularly graphic. The condition of the third world is crafted from the excrement of the first world.

Sobrino (in conversation with Ellacuría) contends that there is something inherently wrong with the “civilization of wealth” that characterizes the first world:

Regarding spirit and values, this civilization is fundamentally oriented—and offers a spirit that clearly leads—to dehumanization. It is the civilization of the individual, of success, of the selfish good life. And the spirit is suffocated even more when the West that produced it understands itself not only as an achievement of talent and noble effort—which are very real in part, accompanied by a secular, gigantic historical depredation—but

as the fruit of a kind of predestination similar to the age-old religious self-understanding of chosen peoples.¹⁰⁴

Sobrino's assessment is severe—the civilization of wealth is dehumanizing—and the implication is troubling. It follows that, the current path of first world society leads directly away from solidarity and fraternity, which are the goals of a society guided by the Christian faith. Even more, the Western world's belief in "manifest destiny" (as we would refer to it in the United States) reflects an immense arrogance and a complete disconnection from a human centered path. Sobrino follows Ellacuría's thinking in concluding that we must seek to replace our current paradigm of making material wealth the ultimate end of our lives with one that roots us in community and solidarity. Ellacuría suggested how such a society may begin to take shape – with the poor at the forefront of transformation; he named the alternative to our current paradigm the "civilization of poverty."

"Let us begin with a clarification. Ellacuría obviously was not aiming for universal pauperization. He described the civilization of poverty in order to contrast it with the civilization of wealth. In a world sinfully shaped by the dynamic of capital and wealth, we need to develop an opposing dynamic that can salvifically overcome it."¹⁰⁵ So by extension, it may be said that the intention is not to renounce wealth entirely, but rather to look at the world through a different, more humanistic lens. The function of such a transformation would be to recognize the "sinful dynamic" of our current society, specifically that which prioritizes the aggregation of wealth above the integrity of the

¹⁰⁴ Sobrino 10

¹⁰⁵ Sobrino 14

human person, and orient ourselves in such a way that the exploitation and dehumanization of our human family is no longer inherently part of social structures and mechanisms. Now, this goal is idealistic at best and its feasibility is challenged by the evidence of history, but this does not diminish its importance. Sobrino says we must “salvifically overcome it”. This implies that the act of overcoming the current dynamic is not only inspired by faith, but also aligns itself along the path of God’s salvation. Such orientation demands hope and a utopic mindset and thus, Sobrino positions himself on the continuum between the hope for worldly salvation and eternal salvation.

The centrality of the poor in transforming society to a “civilization of poverty” is not just important because they are the victims of injustice, but also because they have the capacity to *see* the world as it truly is and must play a humanizing role in revealing that reality to those that are blinded by wealth. “We are dehumanized by going beyond the pale of truth – by concealment of the truth and proliferation of the lie, by silence in the face of scandalous inequality between rich and poor, by the dormant state of the rich – and also of the poor”¹⁰⁶ But the comfort of the West does not promote humanizing action, only continued dormancy. The victims are the source of unrest and should be the source of awakening. Furthermore, “It is in the third world, where prophesy and utopia seem necessarily to come together, where injustice and death reach intolerable levels, and where hope seems to be the quintessence of life.”¹⁰⁷ These might be the most significant elements contributed by the poor, the crucified peoples: hope and utopia. This is fundamental, because it suggests that the West may never be an immediate source of true

¹⁰⁶ Sobrino 40

¹⁰⁷ Sobrino 18

hope, for what is there left to hope for when all meaning is prescribed in the accrument of material wealth? The third world on the other hand, faced with a reality of suffering, clings to salvific hope which is the fountain that gives life meaning – the Salvadoran people are a good example of a people who clung to hope in the face of insurmountable oppression extended over a long history. It would be fair to criticize this point and argue that the poor are no better off morally than the affluent and that crime and corruption in third world countries is much more prevalent and apparent; and therefore, there is no reason to assume that the third world should be the source of a humanizing enlightenment and salvific hope, and conversely that the first world is not. I am no statistician, so I do not wish to debate numbers and I am not here to contrast moral worth – for every human has just as much capability to good or bad, regardless of origin. The difference between the third world and world of affluence lays in agency and responsibility. If in fact the Western world is widely responsible for the destitution in the third world, then the third world is indispensable to revealing that truth. Moreover, while all people hope – because it is our nature as humans to hope – the third world is almost inevitably more in tune with proper salvific hope than the Western world, because the reality of suffering demands it.

Creating a “civilization of poverty” requires that we learn about life’s meaning from the third world, that as a society, we learn to hope meaningfully and abandon our current paradigm of dehumanization. “The thesis of a civilization of poverty thus ‘rejects the accumulation of capital as the engine of history, and the possession-enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization; rather it makes the universal satisfaction of basic needs the principle of development, and the growth of shared solidarity the basis of

humanization.”¹⁰⁸ As mentioned before, the purpose is not to relinquish wealth or the developments that have been made in its pursuit (advancements in technology, innovation, etc.), or to condemn every aspect of the Western world, because I imagine a criticism of unjust economic practices and a wealth-accumulating mindset are inflammatory enough. The purpose is rather to reprioritize our focus: human beings must be that focus. So when we think about the development of third world countries, the process should not seek to exploit resources for the maximization of Western profit; instead, we should ask how those resources can be used to improve conditions and alleviate poverty. Economic exchanges should be fair, not thievery. As we begin to eliminate selfish/exploitative economic practices, we allow the third world to gain proper economic footing and meet the “basic needs” of people.¹⁰⁹ But this requires that we value the quality of all human life. Sobrino is suggesting a solidarity amongst people that goes beyond economic barriers:

Solidarity means poor people and non-poor people mutually bearing one another, giving ‘to each other’ and receiving ‘from each other’ the best that they have, in order to arrive at being ‘with one another.’ Often what is given and what is received are in quite different orders of reality: material aid and human acceptance, for example. And what the non-poor receive may be, as a humanizing reality, superior to what they give. This kind of solidarity goes beyond mere unilateral aid, with its intrinsic tendency toward imposition and domination.¹¹⁰

It is interesting that, for Sobrino, the roles of the poor and the non-poor are largely reversed – in the sense that the non-poor have significantly more to gain from the poor

¹⁰⁸ Sobrino 14

¹⁰⁹ I know I am being idealistic again, but I want to logically carry out what a civilization of poverty would begin to allow. If Western countries are no longer seeking to exploit weaker ones, then maybe we can imagine a world where war is also outdated... I know, dream on, but I’m dealing with the hypothetical here.

¹¹⁰ Sobrino 63

than the poor do from the non-poor. Granted, the poor can undoubtedly benefit from extensive economic development, but the meaning of their lives is not dependent on that material gain. On the other hand, Sobrino sees the civilization of wealth as the antithesis of the good life, morally corrupt, disconnected from humanity, and therefore lost to the path of God's salvation. In this regard, Sobrino believes the poor can contribute a much more fundamental truth (than the value of wealth) in their relationship to the non-poor: "A humanizing reality." Receiving an awareness of this reality requires that the non-poor assume an openness and a humility that is uncommon in the civilization of wealth. Yet, Sobrino is clear: the fulfillment of salvation involves the willing relationship between the non-poor and the poor.

The non-poor may also be necessary to make effective the salvation that comes from the poor. They can become prophetic figures who help the poor to recover and maintain confidence in themselves, to develop practices and to spread hope. When such figures do not appear, frustration may increase among the poor, but when they do appear, the community of the poor is empowered and creates an even greater ferment. These prophetic figures may come from among the poor but also from among the non-poor.¹¹¹

First, I should clarify (as does Sobrino in this quote) that the criticizing of our civilization of wealth is not meant to criminalize the wealthy or to suggest that they can play no part in salvation because they are wealthy. Rather, understanding and mindset are essential. Once the non-poor *see* reality for what it is (and are thus empathetically inclined to transform it), they become important parts of the mechanism of salvation. I would venture then to reformulate Sobrino's point and say that while salvific hope originates from the poor, perpetuating that hope and initiating worldly transformation

¹¹¹ Sobrino 68

necessitates the active participation of the non-poor¹¹². Ellacuría's enigmatic words capture the essence of this task:

The poor will save the world; they are already saving it, though not yet. Seeking salvation by some other road is a dogmatic and historical error. If this means to hope against all hope, it is most definitely a sure guarantee that all this will be attained some day. The poor continue to be the world's great reservoir of human hope and spirituality. – Ellacuría¹¹³

He seems to present us with a paradox. “They are already saving, though not yet.”

We may understand this paradox in the following way: Because the poor are the “reservoir of human hope,” they actively redeem or “save” their little piece of the world; yet the world is vast (as is the human landscape) and much remains to be transformed. And when they “hope against all hope,” it may seem that they seek what cannot be attained, but is this not the nature of salvific hope? Do we not foster such hope because Christ redeemed death? So do we by faith believe. So the poor will continue to redeem their little piece of the world, cultivating true hope, waiting for the rest of us to step forward and join them.

And indeed, it will be through a remarkable effort of solidarity by which we will be able to increase the scope of our world's redemption. It is humbling that as individuals, we are eager to be in control of our lives and that which surrounds us, to act as primary movers of change in the world, but we often feel powerless. The extent of evil in this world—immense structural sin, reinforced by individual sin—seems to diminish the influence of one human being to nothing, an indistinguishable blip in a world set in its

¹¹² I make this particular argument simply because, in the worldly sense, the non-poor yield power and must therefore work for positive transformation alongside the poor.

¹¹³ Sobrino 76

ways. In complete opposition to this painful sense of irrelevance, exists a human person's infinite capacity to hope, which overwhelms resignation to defeat and allows one to act redemptively on a limited scale. Once individuals sharing in such generous hope begin to gather together in communities, their ability to transform the world expands and gains legitimacy. It is for this reason that the two councils of Latin American Bishops (at Medellin and Puebla) suggested the formation of base-level Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) as a starting point for organizing people of faith. CEBs can connect among themselves, even on a global scale, and thus create a medium through which true solidarity may be achieved. This is the kind of solidarity where people form relationships and connect on a humanistic level, a kind of solidarity that rebuffs the disjointedness of this world and the abstractness of simply sending money to a 'good cause' in a foreign country.

If solidarity were no more than material aid, it would not be anything more than a magnified kind of almsgiving, where givers offer something they own without thereby feeling a deep-down personal commitment or without feeling any need to continue this aid. In authentic solidarity, the first effort to give aid commits a person at a deeper level than that of a mere giving and becomes an ongoing process, not a contribution.¹¹⁴

I doubt Sobrino is saying that there is no benefit to material aid and that almsgiving does not have its place, however, it is an act that is very detached from the people it is intended to serve. Giving money, in itself, is not going to reveal reality in such a way that the giver is moved engage the world in a more profound way and actively seek to transform it. Sometimes sending aid is nothing more than an ointment meant to

¹¹⁴ Sobrino 145-146 – from “Bearing with One Another in Faith: A Theological Analysis of Christian Solidarity” in *The Principle of Mercy*

soothe and reassure the donor's conscience that he/she has done his/her part. If we are committed to our faith and wish to overcome suffering and oppression, this is not enough. If we believe that as a Western world, we are largely responsible for the condition of the third world, then this is not enough. Material aid must be coupled with solidarity. The formation of relationships invests much more than dollars, because relationships imply responsibility and presence – “a deep-down personal commitment” that “becomes an ongoing process.” So solidarity assumes a similar dynamic as the utopic function. It is constantly evolving and growing, and it must be rooted in faith.

Once we seriously understand that to be a human being is to be co-responsible with other human beings and especially with the poorest, that to be church is to be co-responsible with other churches, especially the most persecuted, we then understand that to be a believer is to be co-responsible in and with the faith of others. Solidarity in the faith is not a routine and empty formula; it brings out how faith is made real, a ‘bearing with one another’ in the direction of the real of faith.¹¹⁵

Understanding reality and accepting responsibility, not in isolation, but as part of a human community (so co-responsibility), changes the landscape and the demands of one's own life. Ignorance is no longer an excuse for inaction. Sobrino asserts that by the very nature of our position¹¹⁶ within the human community, we bear co-responsibility with everyone, but most urgently with the poor and underprivileged. And if this solidarity is our duty as humans, how much more significant is it for us as a community of faith. By the direction of real faith, one feels compelled to participate in the establishment of the kingdom of God, which entails complete solidarity amongst people. Solidarity brings people together and completes their identity in faith. It is a difficult task that is not

¹¹⁵ Sobrino 169

¹¹⁶ Here I refer to our position of privilege and wealth in the Western world.

completely within our capacity to achieve. Grace must also catalyze and sustain the effort.

Let us be mindful, however, that this solidarity in faith is not made simply because one decides so with an act of will and in an idealist manner. This kind of solidarity, one that reaches the depths of faith, becomes real, when it starts out from the human solidarity of bearing with one another on the primary levels of life, where the death and life of human beings are at stake.¹¹⁷

So true solidarity cannot lie outside of faith and solidarity in faith can only come from a deep inner movement within a person – this seems slightly enigmatic, but it reminds me of the theology Martin Luther presented in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*. He argues that only by faith are we justified to God and that only through faith can we have the strength to follow God’s commandments and do good works.¹¹⁸ Sobrino understands solidarity in a similar fashion, because being in solidarity with the poor requires that we remain steadfast in the face of terrible adversity, “where the death and life of human beings are at stake.” So it should not be a surprise that we must rely on movements of grace to strengthen our faith, so that we may always have a reservoir to “hope against all hope.”

It was mentioned in the previous chapter that a theological hope looks for the fulfillment of God’s promise and the establishment of the kingdom where there is fellowship, justice, and complete communion with God. Now, whether or not this kingdom will be founded on this earth is up for theological debate, which has not been the focus of this study. What is clear is that hope inspired by faith is also a driving force

¹¹⁷ Sobrino 169

¹¹⁸ Luther 280-282

in the transformation and sanctification of this world – it is this hope that is at the heart of the utopic mindset. But very tangibly, in practical terms, if we hope to emulate the kingdom of God in how we change our world, yet have never witnessed such a society, how do we move in the right direction? The answer is simple really: use the praxis of Jesus’ life as a guide. It is so simple it’s almost cliché (what would Jesus do?), but I think the life Jesus led and his purpose in coming is largely misunderstood, and is therefore worth exploring and understanding. For this we shall turn to a twentieth century Catholic theologian from Belgium, Edward Schillebeeckx.

Schillebeeckx argues that Jesus’ primary mission was to proclaim the kingdom of God to humankind: “For the whole of his life was marked by his message and praxis of the kingdom of God.”¹¹⁹ We know in broad terms that the kingdom of God “takes concrete form above all in justice and peaceful relationships among individuals and peoples” and that it represents “a changed new relationship (*metanoia*) of men and women to God, the tangible and visible side of which is a new type of liberating relationship among men and women”¹²⁰ and with the earth. But this is still somewhat abstract, so by Jesus’ words and example, we may get a glimpse of what the kingdom of God looks like when fully fulfilled. For example:

By both the parables of the kingdom of God and Jesus’ praxis of the kingdom of God it becomes clear how Jesus relativizes the human, sometimes hard-fought principle of justice. Jesus’ praxis and parables often offend our sense of justice even now... Jesus here wants to teach us that the rules for the praxis of the kingdom of god have nothing to do with the social rules in our societies; this is an alternative form of action. Jesus

¹¹⁹ Schillebeeckx 111

¹²⁰ Schillebeeckx 111-112

does not defend immoral or anarchical people, but he does go and stand alongside them.¹²¹

This presents an extraordinary challenge. Over the course of our history as humans, we have developed political systems, concepts of societal values and justice, and other constructs that have provided the framework for each subsequent society, yet we see by Jesus' example that these ideas have no place in the kingdom of God. Schillebeeckx says that Jesus' praxis "offends our sense of justice" and it is likely that all Christians can relate to this sentiment. There are many parables that do not seem to reflect 'fairness' as we understand it – the story of the prodigal son, or that of the workers in the field who were all compensated equally regardless of how long they worked. Such stories offend us because they are inconsistent with our notions of justice and what we believe to be God's justice. But can we really claim to understand God's nature?

To attempt to reconcile mercy and justice is to attempt to harmonize the irreconcilable. As a man, Jesus opts for mercy and gratuitousness, ruling out punitive sanctions on the oppressors and the evil. People seem unable to imagine that there is a generosity without any connotations or afterthoughts, and on the other hand that good and evil do not lie on the same level and that the consequences of evil therefore follow an internal logic of their own.¹²²

Jesus chose to act with "mercy and gratuitousness... generosity without connotation," but his actions were beyond our comprehension and they challenge our understanding of God's justice. Is it not possible that God's justice lies on a different plane than our own?¹²³ It is important to recognize the limitations of our reason and to admit that since our societies are pervaded by the consequences of human sin, maybe we

¹²¹ Schillebeeckx 117

¹²² Schillebeeckx 125

¹²³ Rhetorical question

do not have all the answers. Schillebeeckx even implies that the answers we do claim to have are misguided by a logic corrupted by evil. So because we remain incapable of thinking on a different plane, Jesus gave us an alternative, as difficult as that example is to accept.

Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God or at least lay the foundation for its formation through the praxis of his life, so that we may be redeemed and know how to live in true fellowship. Christ's purpose must be viewed within the greater context of God's salvific act (which began with creation and will be completed at the end of times)¹²⁴ so that it becomes clear that Christ came as a continuation of that salvific act to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Granted, the redemption of sin is part of that purpose, but Christ dying was not the *only* purpose, nor was it God's explicit doing.¹²⁵ Christ came to live by example and show the world a radical love that was unheard of, that still "offends" us. It was the challenge that the praxis of his life posed to the structures of society that then led to his crucifixion by human hands. Thus,

We may not isolate the death of Jesus from the context of his career, his message and his life's work; otherwise we are turning its redemptive significance into a myth, sometimes even a sadistic and bloody myth. As soon as we fail to take account of Jesus' message and the career which led to his death, we obscure the Christian tenor of the saving significance of this death. The death of Jesus is the historical expression of the unconditional nature of his proclamation and career, in the face of which the significance of the fatal consequences for his own life completely paled into insignificance. Jesus' death was a suffering through and for others as the unconditional validity of a praxis of doing good and opposing evil and suffering.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Refer to chapter on Gutierrez

¹²⁵ I mean this in the sense that Christ was crucified at the hands of humans

¹²⁶ Schillebeeckx 120

Schillebeeckx brings a whole new level of complexity to the typical theological conversation about Jesus' life and argues that redemption, and therefore salvation, cannot be understood independent of Christ's life and mission. It was the praxis of his life that was a tangible manifestation of the kingdom of God. It was that example that we are meant to follow if we seek to transform this world through faith, hope, and the utopic mindset. Schillebeeckx emphasizes that Jesus' death was not arbitrary, but rather bears its true significance in the recognition that it was a direct result of his life's praxis. It shows us that humanity was not ready and still may not be ready to embrace the kingdom of God, and why Jesus continues to be crucified in the experiences of the world's poor, suffering, and oppressed. We must therefore choose to take the crucified people down from the cross and live by Christ's example. Only in this way can we redeem this world and begin to form the kingdom of God on earth.

The fact that we continue to reject each-other and Jesus calls attention to why we must rely on grace to inspire solidarity and inform our understanding of how radical love takes shape on earth. In great humility, we must recognize our inability to escape sin and pray rather that the Spirit may flow through us, healing us within and allowing us to overflow with love. Sobrino hinted earlier (in tandem with Luther) that only through faith—and therefore grace—can we truly follow God's commandments, engage in solidarity, and participate in Christ's love. And the necessity of faith and grace may be expanded for the sustainment of hope; for the brokenness of this world can never be the source of redemptive love, nor can it inspire hope against all hope. Only faith in God's promise and the gift of grace can overcome the odds.

Sobrino (in tandem with Ellacuría) and Schillebeeckx have contributed a few more powerful themes to the conversation and challenge of liberation theology. We have previously discussed the importance of a progressive, linear understanding of time in establishing the necessity of human contribution to the advancement of society (alleviation of poverty, elimination of oppression and injustice, etc.). Closely related to that, viewing salvation as merely a continuation of a single unified act of creation, binds humanity to play a participatory role in the narrative of God's creation and salvation. The promise that salvation and the coming of the kingdom of God will ultimately be fulfilled inspires hope, not just for the eternal, but provides a glimpse of what can be transformed in the temporal. This hope leaves us dissatisfied with the shortcomings of the present and maintains the dynamism of the utopic mindset. We have also found that the properness of this hope is limited only by the amount of people willing to participate in it and so as we engage in community, we realize the significance of truly being in solidarity with one-another, especially with the poor and the suffering. If as a human community, we choose to engage one-another and bear in co-responsibility, then we find that we have placed ourselves along the path of liberation. In the process, we may realize that we can neither do this in isolation, nor without relying on the gifts of grace. And finally, as we continue to criticize the injustices of our day and seek to transform them, we will need to root ourselves in the radical praxis of Jesus' life, a praxis of radical love, radical mercy, and a radically different justice from our own, if we are to truly make progress toward a society of fellowship and goodness.

CONCLUSION

Am I Liberated?

When I wrote *A Simple Start* many months ago, I mentioned a number of reasons for my interest in liberation theology. Most directly, my interest peaked after my experiences in El Salvador and Guatemala with my roommates at the Romero House. The trip was powerful and eye-opening. I was exposed to poverty first-hand in a completely new way. I heard stories of violence and oppression (sustained by the influence and aid of Western countries) that were shaking. I could *see* this world's reality more clearly and I became passionately indignant at the injustice of that reality. I learned about liberation theology in this context and I learned that it was a movement that surfaced in the Catholic Church, at first, as a mechanism to work directly against the injustice that was so prevalent in Latin America.

I also mentioned that over the course of my time at Regis I have developed a desire to bridge dichotomies. My initial concern regarded the Catholic Church's severe reaction against liberation theology. An exploration of this tension suggested to me that the actual theological points of conflict were nothing more than matters of nuance rather than fundamental discrepancies (which is nothing new in the discipline of theology). I also discovered (though I could study this more extensively) that rhetorical and ideological associations made with liberation theology and people's movements in Latin

America weighed in heavily in the Church's judgment against liberation theology. More specifically: liberation theology was correlated to Marxist ideology and was therefore rejected in an unfair way.

Thus, I arrive at a dichotomy that is much more difficult to resolve: the disparity between the wealthy and the poor; the injustice perpetuated in the name of justice; the reality we live in. As I bring the pages of this thesis to a close, I realize that the central question for me is, how can my experiences and what I have learned about liberation theology illuminate my purpose and role in this world, given this reality?

Liberation theology has provided a wealth of themes and ideas that I hope will guide me in my journey, but I wish to express some of my concerns. Liberation theology was born within a context marked by oppression, poverty, and structural sin. Inevitably, bringing these realities into light in the Western world and acknowledging their existence poses a tremendous challenge to all whose eyes have been opened. The challenge is that we might abandon our passivity and actively seek to transform our reality in solidarity with the poor. Liberation theology suggests that this might be undertaken with a utopic mindset that is inspired by a theological hope. And here lies the difficulty. As Christians we essentially hope for the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, the bringing to fruition of God's promise of salvation. However, the reality of our broken world perpetually stands in opposition to this goal. Furthermore, when I ask how I might act to aid in the pursuit of the kingdom, I should recognize that I am inherently limited in my capacities by my very nature. And yet, neither of these apprehensions should paralyze me from acting, nor should they confine me to cynicism.

I reference an ancient Greek theologian, Gregory of Nyssa. He described virtue as in its essence being infinite. Thus, while every human is meant to pursue a virtuous life, no human (aside from Christ) will ever be able to fully achieve it because humanity is confined by many boundaries such as time, which prevent the attainment of the infinite. But this should not be discouraging. Rather, the value and goodness of a human life can better be measured by the quality of the *movement* towards virtue.¹²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa also provides an image to illustrate this point: Moses asked to look upon God, but only God's back was revealed to him; it was an invitation to follow the eternal one, even though he could not yet behold God in full glory.¹²⁸ This principle can be applied to the seeking of the kingdom of God. Whether or not it is within our power to ultimately achieve it is irrelevant. What is directly in our power is to initiate the movement towards it and liberation theology gives us some tools that will be incredibly useful in this regard. Gregory of Nyssa's point also resonates with the concept of maintaining a utopic mindset as was defined earlier in this work. The utopic function is not a static structure or ideology that maps perfection manifested on earth; instead, it is a dynamic way of thinking that views the world critically and applies a constantly evolving positive imagination to change it. The utopic mindset describes a perpetual motion driven by hope, which affirms that perfection is meant to be pursued, but not necessarily attained.

Having said that, I can extrapolate this idea and say that the worth of my life will ultimately be measured by the quality of my effort and not by a quantified judgment of how much positive change I was able to influence on a global scale. I know that I am

¹²⁷ Nyssa 30-31

¹²⁸ Nyssa 112

called to redeem my piece of the world and to tend to my garden, but sometimes this doesn't seem good enough. I want to live radically and love radically, and believe that in community we can forge a more beautiful and just world. I must therefore allow grace to work in my life, so that I may love beyond my capacity and partake in the unfolding story of God's creation and salvation – utopically and with great hope.

I must admit that I still remain troubled. Next year, I will begin my medical education and in many ways, will be binding myself to a system that I loathe so much. I simply cannot ignore the questions this world's injustices demand. Don't all people on earth deserve the same rights and opportunities to which I have been privileged? How can I stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and cry out for justice? As a doctor, I can choose to bring healing to those in most need and in my own way, bring the crucified people down from the cross, one person at a time. It is vital that I acknowledge that my life of privilege cannot and should not be considered independent of a global context, of the lives of the most marginalized peoples, and that in doing so I must accept the burden of responsibility, knowing that my actions can have a tremendous impact on the lives of others. This understanding calls me to a greater sense of compassion that flows beyond my immediate community and sees the humanity in everybody.

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