

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSITAS GREGORIANA

**The Interpretive Task of the Local Church  
in the Relationship  
between Text and Context  
in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez**

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in the Relationship  
between Text and Context  
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*A thesis presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for a Licentiate degree  
in the Faculty of Theology*

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## INTRODUCTION

A Liberation theologian is not the first person one would imagine being praised by a bishop. Recent reports of a rift between CELAM and CLAR<sup>1</sup> and publicity over Latin American theologians being summoned to Rome have indicated a certain tension between theologians and the Church hierarchy. However Gustavo Gutiérrez is an exceptional theologian and Pedro Casaldáliga is no ordinary bishop. So it is not surprising that Casaldáliga has written a poem entitled: "Gustavo Gutiérrez."

Guiña chistes y chismes escolásticos,  
cortando,  
con el aire de su nariz incaica,  
el miedo y la tristeza  
de todo un Continente.

Cojeando, bajito, va muy alto y muy lejos...

La pelada testuz de un adivino  
-roca del Machu-Pichu, morada del Misterio-  
corona su cabaza luminosa.

(Perú

-Costa del Mar, menos pacífico,  
que debería ser vaivén hermano.  
-Sierra del Viento nuestro en flautas libres.  
-Selva a las puertas de la Amazonía,  
conquista de codicia y de masacre,  
Oriente del Mañana de los pobres).

Ronca palabra de maestro antiguo,  
suelta en sabias cascadas, Tiempo adentro,  
recogiendo las rocas de la Muerte,  
fecundando los valles de la Vida.

«Suma» criolla de Liberación.

Exegeta de Marx,  
críticamente  
sabe afeitarse al viejo  
la dialéctica barba,  
respetándole el rostro  
de profeta del Lucro y de la Historia.

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<sup>1</sup>CELAM: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano  
CLAR: Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos

Testigo fiel del Verbo y de los hombres,  
lleva su corazón en punto alerta  
con la Hora de América Amerindia.  
Agudo curtidor de odres nuevos  
para el antiguo Vino.  
Asesor de las células cristianas  
que hacen nueva la Iglesia,  
desda la base, al soplo del Espíritu.

Tomasito de América Latina  
(con el perdón de la cansada Europa,  
con la segura complacencia hermana  
de Tomás, el de Aquino).<sup>2</sup>

The poem says eloquently much that I want to include in these introductory pages. It describes a man from Peru: a nation bordering on the Pacific, but hardly a peaceful country, for the people have been conquered through greed and violence. This man has critiqued the situation, or as Bishop Casaldàliga puts it, "he has shaved the dialectical beard of Marx, while respecting the face of the prophet of profit and history." His heart is close to the Amerindian people, so he can be a "skillful tanner of new wineskins for the old wine" of their traditions. He has accompanied the small Christian communities that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit renew the Church from below. Though hardly impressive in a physical sense, this small man has greatly influenced the life of a whole continent. In his theology he has gathered the elements of death in society and formed from them a theology of life--an indigenous "Summa" of liberation. So the poet honors Gustavo Gutiérrez as the "little Thomas" of Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Pedro Casaldàliga, *Todavía Estas Palabras*, (Estella, España: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1990), 74-5.

<sup>3</sup>For biographical details about Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Peruvian context, I have found the following works particularly helpful. Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). Curt Cadorette, *From the Heart of the People* (Oak Park, Illinois: Meyer-Stone

How Gustavo Gutiérrez brings these diverse elements together is the question behind this thesis. Poverty and greed, life and death, social analysis and historical consciousness, people's traditions and the Christian tradition, Christian communities and the Holy Spirit, are topics that recur in his writings. Taken individually these themes are familiar, but Gutiérrez interprets them together theologically in a way that is new.

The classical view of the relation between text and context is seen in terms of tradition and culture. With such a view it follows that inculturation is the translation of the content of the universal Christian tradition into a particular context. With some approaches, various methods of analysis are employed to study the cultural context so that the Christian text can become rooted in the particular culture. When the truth is uncertain one refers to the magisterium or *ecclesia docens* for its interpretation. Recently some theologians, including liberation theologians, have proposed an alternative to the classical view. They point out that tradition also has a context, so theology must always be an interpretation. These theologians refer to a third factor, besides culture and tradition: the local church, comprising *pastorum et fidelium*. They say that the understanding of the interpreter is what gives meaning to the text. So in its interpretive role, the local community forms an integral part of the content of the truth of faith.

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Books, 1988). Also some articles in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.) *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

My concern is to investigate how Gustavo Gutiérrez fits into this way of doing theology. How does he see the Christian text and its content and the relation between them? Who is the local church for Gutiérrez and how does he see its interpretive task?

But why liberation theology? My initial interest was in the area of inculturation and contextualization. Could it be that this theology coming out of Latin America is an example of a contextualized theology? As I learn more about liberation theology I have come to see that it is not limited to its context but has a global significance. In his reference in the poem to Thomas Aquinas, Casaldáliga begs the pardon of "tired Europe." Though Europe is steeped in theological tradition, it is Latin America and the cultures of the so-called Third World that have been producing much that is new and challenging in theology since the Second Vatican Council. Karl Rahner said that the Council was the "Church's first official self-actualization as a world Church."<sup>4</sup> There the process began "in a relatively initial and diffident way."<sup>5</sup> Liberation theology has played an important part in the post-Conciliar developments in the life of the world Church. The name came to be used at Chimbote, Peru, a few months before the meeting at Medellín (1968) where the bishops sought to interpret the Council for the Latin American context. At Medellín and at Puebla (1979) liberation theology helped set

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<sup>4</sup>Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 717.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 718.

in motion a creative review of the Council from the perspective of the poor. The worldwide effect of this form of theology is only now being acknowledged. Franco Marton is of the opinion that the influence of liberation theology is reflected in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in the stress on the unity between human development and the life of God in every person.<sup>6</sup>

Next year will be the five hundredth anniversary of what some regard as the "discovery" of the Americas by people from Europe. In fact, America was "discovered" some 20,000 years earlier by people venturing across the Bering Straits. The reference in the poem to the "roca del Machu-Pichu," the sacred center of the Inca people, is symbolic of the many cultures that developed throughout the American continent. About 19,500 years later they were invaded by Europeans. Some protested at the oppression of the conquistadores. Bartolomé Las Casas, for example, opposed his fellow countrymen and took the side of the Amerindians. McAfee Brown says "It would be fair to describe him as 'the first liberation theologian,' unless that honor should be reserved for Jesús de Nazarét."<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, who has been instrumental in the contemporary rediscovery of Las Casas, may be called the father of modern day liberation theology.

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<sup>6</sup>Franco Marton, "Chi osa parlare di Teologia della Liberazione"? *Missione Oggi*, anno XIII, no.3 (Marzo 1991), 36-38. He says, "La *Sollicitudo rei socialis* senza la Teologia della liberazione sarebbe stata un'enciclica diversa de quella che ora abbiamo" (p. 36).

<sup>7</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 2.

In his own work Gutiérrez shows what it means for a theologian to accompany the people who are the subject of his theology. His scholarly efforts take him far from Peru, but it would be wrong to think of him isolated in an academic setting. When at home he lives and works in one of Lima's oldest working class districts and there he has "learned to think with one eye on the gospel and one eye on the painful reality" he shares with these people.<sup>8</sup> He acknowledges that it is the poor; the world's anonymous, who, by "drinking" from their "own wells," have discovered a new way of acting in the world for the purpose of changing it. It is from this context and from the experience of these people that liberation theology has been born.

In the first chapter I will outline some of the principal ideas in Gutiérrez's approach. The three themes chosen are ones that he focuses on in the introduction to the new edition of his book *A Theology of Liberation*.

In the second chapter I will consider the three principal factors in the hermeneutical circle: context, text and interpreter, and describe how these are presented in Gutiérrez's theology.

In the third chapter I will show how these three factors are linked together in a dynamic relationship and how this involves interpretation by the Christian community.

In the fourth and last chapter I will evaluate some of the implications of Gutiérrez way of doing theology. This part

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<sup>8</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London, SCM Press, 1984), foreword by Henri Nouwen, xv.

will treat some of the issues that have made Gustavo Gutiérrez controversial, but they are also issues through which he is stimulating us to think again about how we can talk about God in our world today.

## CHAPTER 1

### SOME OF THE MAIN IDEAS IN GUTIERREZ'S THEOLOGY

In February 1988 Gustavo Gutiérrez's book *A Theology of Liberation*<sup>1</sup> appeared in a new edition. The book remains essentially the same but includes a lengthy new introduction.<sup>2</sup> In this introduction Gutiérrez reviews the development of liberation theology and expands on several themes he feels are of particular importance for liberation theology today. The themes he considers "basic" to liberation theology are: the viewpoint of the poor, theological work, and the proclamation of the kingdom of life. Gutiérrez's intention in the introduction is to show how faith reinterprets such themes in the context of a new epoch in the history of Latin America. In this chapter I will use the themes as a framework for outlining some of the principal ideas in Gutiérrez's approach. In 1985 Gutiérrez was awarded a doctorate in theology from the Catholic Institute of Lyons. Where appropriate I will also refer to the published text of his defense as it appears in his book *The Truth Shall Make You Free*.<sup>3</sup> This too is a helpful summary of his recent thinking.

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<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, revised ed., trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>The main change in the text is in the section "Faith and Social Conflict" (pp. 156-161). This replaces "Christian Fellowship and Class Struggle" in the first edition.

<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 2-28.



## The Poor

The aspiration of the poor for liberation is one of the principal signs of the times for the church to examine in the light of the gospel. Previously the poor have been treated as though they were absent from history. However, more recently there has been an "irruption of the poor" in which they have begun to express their sufferings, plans and hopes. Gutiérrez says that liberation theology is "an expression of the right of the poor to think out their own faith."<sup>4</sup>

Poverty means having to live in the face of premature and unjust death. It is a physical death, to which a cultural death is added because it destroys all that gives a people unity and strength. The poor are "non-persons" living on the "underside of history." The institutionalized violence of poverty and the inhuman situation of racial and cultural minorities throughout the world are a challenge not only to the pastoral care and commitment of Christian churches but also to theological reflection. Poverty is opposed to the reign of life that Jesus proclaimed. How then can we interpret this reality in the light of Christian revelation?

Gutiérrez refers to the Medellín document "Poverty of the Church" to show three meanings of the term poverty. First, the term can mean *material poverty* or lack of the necessities of human life. In this sense poverty is degrading and something to be avoided. Secondly, poverty can mean *spiritual poverty*, often understood as an attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world and the readiness to do God's will.

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<sup>4</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxi.

Thirdly, it can mean *solidarity* with the poor, along with the protest against the conditions under which they suffer. Solidarity implies a prophetic option for the poor which is rooted in the love of God and demanded by God's love. Such a commitment to the poor means

entering into their universe . . . and living in it. It means regarding it no longer as a place of work but as a place of residence. It means not going into this world for a few hours in order to bear witness to the gospel, but rather emerging from it each morning to proclaim the good news to every human being.<sup>5</sup>

In many of his writings Gustavo Gutiérrez has argued for the God of the poor.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to *A Theology of Liberation* he summarizes his thought as follows,

The entire bible, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, mirrors God's predilection for the weak and abused of human history. This preference brings out the gratuitous or unmerited character of God's love. The same revelation is given in the evangelical Beatitudes, for they tell us with the utmost simplicity that God's predilection for the poor, the hungry, and the suffering is based on God's unmerited goodness to us.<sup>7</sup>

He stresses that such an option is not exclusive. Along with God's predilection for the lowest ones, we must maintain the universality of God's love. The poor are first, though not the only ones, not because they are better than others, but because in God's eyes "the last are first."

In order to be a sign of the kingdom the Church cannot remain indifferent in a world marked by massive poverty and death. The Church must be poor and promote the liberation of

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<sup>5</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>See for example, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London: SCM Press, 1983). Also, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: SCM Press, 1984), 122-127.

<sup>7</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxvii.

the poor, especially through the base-level ecclesial communities which are "a manifestation of the presence of the church of the poor in Latin America."<sup>8</sup> The challenge is to live a hope-filled and joyous faith, and a love that "creates solidarity with the oppressed and their hopes and struggles, with a view to their complete liberation."<sup>9</sup> The viewpoint of the poor and the experience of church, especially in the base-level communities, challenges the whole Church to conversion and calls for new forms of theological reflection. How this occurs will become clearer as I describe Gutiérrez's way of doing theology.

### **Theological Work**

Liberation theology has emerged out of the experience of church in the base-level ecclesial communities.<sup>10</sup> Gutiérrez points out that liberation theology is explicable only when seen in close conjunction with the life and commitment of such communities. For a long time theology in Latin America "simply echoed the theology developed in Europe."<sup>11</sup> This is unsatisfactory because Latin America is far removed from the intellectual and cultural context of European theology. In

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., xli.

<sup>9</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 9.

<sup>10</sup>Gutiérrez explicitly opposes those who would "say that theological thinking on liberation originated in the middle classes and that only years later did it open itself to the experience of the Poor themselves". *Liberation*, xxx.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., xxviii.

such a situation theology too easily becomes abstract or meaningless.

Realizing that a meaningful theology in Latin America must take the sociohistorical context seriously, liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez have pointed to the need to consider the identity of the people who are the subject of theology, and also to appreciate the way in which people live their faith. Whereas in Europe theology tries to be sensitive to the challenge posed by unbelievers, in Latin America the dialogue partners are the poor who are *non-persons*. Furthermore, liberation theology employs a method whereby reflection is the *second act* for doing theology, the *first act* being a people's way of being Christian.

What does it mean to be christian? Gutierrez describes it as following Jesus in commitment and prayer. His opening words in the book *We Drink from Our Own Wells* are: "A Christian is defined as a follower of Jesus, and reflection on the experience of following constitutes the central theme of any solid theology."<sup>12</sup> Following Jesus demands conversion and a real commitment to solidarity or being with the poor. If there is no sharing of the life of the poor, "then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals."<sup>13</sup> Concern for the material needs of the poor is important. But such action must have an element of contemplation or encounter with God at the heart of the work of

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<sup>12</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 1. In his conclusion to the same book (p. 136), he adds, "Reflection on the mystery of God (for that is what a theology is) is possible only in the context of the following of Jesus. Only when one is walking according to the Spirit can one think and proclaim the gratuitous love of the Father for every human being."

<sup>13</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxi.

love.<sup>14</sup> This contemplative dimension involves a radical self-giving in a sense of gratuitousness which is really a form of prayer.<sup>15</sup> So theological work demands first, a way of being Christian, or a spirituality. Gutiérrez writes,

It is from this rich experience of the following of Jesus that liberation theology emerges; the following constitutes the practice--at once commitment and prayer--on which liberation theology reflects<sup>16</sup>

It is a spirituality of the *anawim*,<sup>17</sup> of a people in their passage through solitude and danger.<sup>18</sup> In liberation theology talk about God presupposes and demands such a spirituality. Being part of people's lives, sharing their concerns and their faith, are a way (*óδοσ*) of being Christian. This is the first requirement for theology. Thus Gutiérrez says, "in the final analysis the method for talking of God is supplied by our spirituality."<sup>19</sup>

The second stage of theological work is critical reflection in which the community seeks to read the praxis of lived faith in the light of God's Word.<sup>20</sup> The deposit of faith alive in the church thus acts as a criterion for judging

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<sup>14</sup>Gutiérrez explains, "It is not "my body" but "the body of the poor person"--the weak and languishing body of the poor--that has made the material a part of a spiritual outlook. The goal is to liberate that body from the forces of death, and this liberation entails a walking according to the Spirit who is life." *Drink*, 103.

<sup>15</sup>Gutiérrez gives the example of Mary in her Magnificat. *Liberation*, xxx, and, *Drink*, 111.

<sup>16</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxii.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>18</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 137.

<sup>19</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxii.

<sup>20</sup>Gutiérrez defines liberation theology as "a critical reflection on the word of God received in the church." *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

whether concrete forms of Christian commitment accord with God's will as found in revelation. Gutiérrez insists that the starting point for theological reflection is lived faith.<sup>21</sup> Lived faith is inseparable from concrete conditions, so theological reflection must take those conditions into account and address questions that arise out of this context. How is it possible to tell the poor, who are forced to live in conditions that embody a denial of love, that God loves them? Referring to a Peruvian city buffeted by poverty and violence he asks, is it possible to do theology "while Ayacucho lasts"?<sup>22</sup>

Gutiérrez uses language to illustrate how theology will be different in diverse situations. Theology is a language for communicating God. But every language has a number of dialects so,

Our theological language is subject to the same rule; it takes its coloring from our peoples, cultures, and racial groupings, and yet we use it in our attempt to proclaim the universality of God's love.<sup>23</sup>

Faith, which is based on the particularity of the incarnation, sinks its roots in particular given situations. But "any theology is discourse about a universal message."<sup>24</sup> There is

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<sup>21</sup>In *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (p. 6) he refers to "a turning of the word into life and concrete action." This is a good description of Christian praxis.

<sup>22</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxiv. In note 24, p. 177, he explains that Ayacucho means "corner of the dead" in the Quechua language. Ayacucho is a city in Peru well known for poverty and violence.

<sup>23</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxv. He adds, "This accent may not be to the liking of those who until now have regarded themselves the proprietors of theology and are not conscious of their own accent (to which, of course, they have every right) when they speak of God."

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, xxxvi.

the dialogue between faith and culture that requires a process of interpretation. This is the basic circle of all hermeneutics: from history to faith, from faith to history, from the human being to God and from God to the human person.<sup>25</sup> Theology that is engaged in historical realities with specific times and places contributes to the discovery of the meaning of historical events with the purpose of making Christian commitment more radical and clear. This theology is a form of knowledge "shot through with the 'savoured' experience first of God but then also of the people and culture to which we belong."<sup>26</sup> Concerning theological reflection Gutiérrez writes,

. . . the challenge we face in Latin America is to find a language about God that grows out of the situation created by the unjust poverty in which the broad masses live (despised races, exploited social classes, marginalized cultures, discrimination against women). . . . It is in this context of sufferings and joys, uncertainties and certainties, generous commitments and ambiguities, that our understanding of the faith must be continually renewed.<sup>27</sup>

### **Proclamation of the Kingdom of Life**

The realization that life and not death has the final say about history is good news, transforming the lives of people in Latin America. Gutiérrez speaks of this good news in terms of liberation. There are two sources for this term. There is the message at the heart of biblical revelation, of God who

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<sup>25</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 4.

<sup>26</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxv.

<sup>27</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 16.

acts in history to save people from servitude. Also there is the profound longing of people to be free of oppression.

Gutiérrez distinguishes three dimensions of liberation. First, there is liberation from social situations and structures of oppression and marginalization. Such situations which may be political, economic or cultural, force people to live in inhuman conditions contrary to full personhood. Second, there is personal liberation "by which we live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude."<sup>28</sup> This is a liberation from the power of fate and the sense that one can do nothing about one's situation in life. The third level of liberation is from sin. This goes to the very source of social injustice and other forms of human oppression, reconciling us with God and our fellow human beings.

In treating the three dimensions of integral liberation Gutiérrez stresses that they are interdependent and should be considered together. The second dimension is particularly important as a mediator between the political and religious levels, otherwise there is too easily a juxtaposition that impoverishes both. The second level unites both dimensions at the human level. A unified view is important because it fits with the understanding of history as profoundly one. Gutiérrez says that human history "is the location of our encounter with God, in Christ."<sup>29</sup> The growth of the kingdom is a process that takes place in history through liberation.

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<sup>28</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxvii.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.



However, the two must not be identified. Liberation destroys the roots of oppression and exploitation and in this way points toward the fullness of the kingdom. Liberative actions may be called saving events because they lead to the growth of the kingdom. However, complete salvation is a gift of total communion unlimited by the ambiguities of history.<sup>30</sup>

The task of the church is to evangelize in a way that promotes integral liberation. By being poor, missionary and paschal, the church can be a sign of the kingdom of life. It can be a sign to the poor in the base-level ecclesial communities. The church's missionary task is being taken up by the poor themselves as they in turn challenge the church to conversion. Martyrdom and struggle in the face of difficulty and opposition are signs of how present day followers of Jesus are prepared to follow him even to their death, thus bearing witness to their faith in the resurrection of the Lord.

### **Conclusion**

The themes considered above are those which Gutiérrez felt were necessary to emphasize fifteen years after first publishing his first book: *A Theology of Liberation*. He concludes his comments by addressing the issue of the continuity and discontinuity of liberation theology with the church's tradition. This is particularly relevant to my theme. Gutiérrez quotes from John XXIII in his opening speech to the Second Vatican Council. "It is not that the Gospel has

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<sup>30</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 16.

changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better."<sup>31</sup> Liberation theology seeks to preach the Gospel which began with the apostolic tradition. Its power and importance "are due to the continuity that leads it to sink its roots deep in scripture, tradition, and magisterium."<sup>32</sup> However in the face of a changing world our understanding has changed and liberation theology is a "new stage" in theological reflection.<sup>33</sup> Its freshness derives from the changing circumstances of history which are the signs of the times through which we interpret the voice of the Lord. From this perspective the challenges and changes in Latin America are "heavy with promise." With the guidance of the Spirit, the experience of people and their reflections in these concrete situations become a source for a new evangelization, beginning with the poorest. This requires an interpretation of the signs of the times and a renewed commitment in love.

In the next chapter I will investigate three elements which are necessary to understand how Gutiérrez's theology can offer something new in a changing world while maintaining continuity with church tradition. This is possible because he offers not so much a new theme for theological reflection as a new way of doing theology.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xlv.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, xlv.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, xlv.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXPLANATION OF KEY TERMS

#### Introduction

The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* gives an account of God's revelation and how this mystery has been transmitted until the present time. We read that the apostles handed on what they received either directly from Christ or from the prompting of the Holy Spirit (*Dei Verbum* 7). Through the assistance of the same Holy Spirit the Church in its doctrine, life and worship perpetuates and hands on to every generation "all that she is and all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum* 8). This *traditio* or handing down comprises sacred Tradition and holy Scripture which form a single sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church (*Dei Verbum* 10). Since Scripture expresses the Word in a human manner it must be read and interpreted "with the help of the Holy Spirit by means of whom it was written" (*Dei Verbum* 12).

Through the centuries people of faith have sought to understand how divine revelation could be interpreted so as to be meaningful in their own time and their own circumstances. We have come to realize that a mere translation of content or an adaptation of elements of faith is inadequate. Sacred writings from the memory of the Church need to be studied in their origins and in their socio-historical context. More-

over, we must consider the text and its context in relation to any new context in which the revelation is received. However a mere consideration of a dialectical relation between text and context is not sufficient because it does not occur in a vacuum but in a lived context. So we need to consider a third element, along with text and context, that is the role of the community or the interpreter, the subject of the interpreting process.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine these three elements of the hermeneutical circle and show how they appear in the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

### Context

All theology is contextual and needs to be interpreted in relation to its original context. The importance of the socio-historical context has been noted in some recent church pronouncements. In *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith admits to cultural conditioning when it says,

Difficulties arise also from the historical condition that affects the expression of Revelation. With regard to this historical condition, it must first be observed that the meaning of the pronouncements of faith depend partly upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances. Moreover, it sometimes happens that some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of

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<sup>1</sup>Robert J. Schreiter describes it as the interrelationship between gospel, church and culture. *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 25.

faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression.<sup>2</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes this cultural conditioning in the link between faith and culture. He says that all talk about God "uses human words that have a particular historical and cultural setting. All references to revelation must use this mediation and with its help disclose the meaning of the Lord's living word and its demands upon the period through which we are passing."<sup>3</sup>

In Gutiérrez's theology the context is not simply a factor to be isolated or eliminated. The context has a christological basis and forms an essential relationship with the truth. One must search for Christ active within the context rather than bringing in Christ from the outside. It means beginning with the context,<sup>4</sup> and looking for the signs of the times within that context. It acknowledges the saving activity of God in our own concrete historical reality.<sup>5</sup> This is the only valid place in which theology can be done in a world marked by massive oppression and suffering.

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<sup>2</sup>*Mysterium Ecclesiae* in *The Christian Faith*, eds. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, revised ed. (London: Collins, 1988), 60. In his commentary on this document, Karl Rahner has said, "If there can be dogmatic formulas at all with historically conditioned concepts, then there is no theological difficulty in admitting this for all theological statements." *The Tablet*, (London) 20 October 1973, p.1005.

<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 89.

<sup>4</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: SCM Press, 1984), 88.

<sup>5</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink* xiv.

What is the context of Gutiérrez's theology? I will distinguish two aspects: the sociopolitical and the historical-cultural contexts.

### **Sociopolitical context**

Gutiérrez works and lives in Rimac, one of Lima's oldest *barriadas* or working-class districts. There he sees the lot of people faced daily with poverty and injustice. Nearly 60 percent of the people have no stable employment. Some have jobs in factories of multinational corporations, but often after 90 days, those who work in these factories are dismissed because employers are not required by law to pay social security, health insurance, or retirement benefits to workers employed less than three months. The result is frustration, and failed dreams often turn into self-hatred and violence.<sup>6</sup>

The economic context reflects an economy geared toward debt repayment rather than its own needs. The debt is felt most by the poor. Yet the country is rich in resources. Peruvians call themselves *mendigos sentados en una banca de oro* (beggars sitting on a golden pew.)<sup>7</sup> But the capitalistic economy is more than an economic system. It is a *socio-economic* system that shapes the way people relate to the State and to one another. Those who cannot buy and sell are not socially equal in the system. They become lesser beings with lesser

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<sup>6</sup>I have found two works by Curt Cadorette helpful for providing information about the Peruvian context. *From the Heart of the People* (Oak Park, Illinois: Meyer Stone, 1988), and "Peru and the Mystery of Liberation: The Nexus and Logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology," in *The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 49-58.

<sup>7</sup>Curt Cadorette, *From the Heart*, 13.

freedoms. "The vast Latin American majorities are dispossessed and therefore compelled to live as strangers in their own land."<sup>8</sup> The State easily becomes an organ of exploitation for guaranteeing the smooth running of an economic system.

Gutiérrez says,

The state does not parachute in from another planet. We must take account of the economic and social interests lying behind political power. For example, if we fail to grasp the role of the multinational corporations and the current structure of international capitalism, we shall scarcely be in a position to understand the political systems that have implanted themselves in Latin America in response to popular movements during recent years.<sup>9</sup>

In the Peruvian context, therefore, the poor have come to be seen as a threat to nation stability, undermining the status quo which the military and the dominant economic sector feel they need to defend at all costs. The military believe they must defend the country from all internal threats of a political nature like Marxism and anarchy while the rich are convinced they must defend the country from all internal threats of a social nature like equality and freedom of choice. As a result, the oppressed are becoming increasingly aware that the so-called freedoms of modern economic systems are but "more refined forms of exploitation of the very poorest--the wretched of the earth."<sup>10</sup>

The Church is in an ambiguous position in the face of such a situation. On the one hand, the church has traditionally sought the support of the established order and of eco-

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<sup>8</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink* 11.

<sup>9</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London, SCM Press, 1983), 217, note 47.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 186.

nomically powerful groups to assure what it believed to be an opportunity to preach the Gospel peacefully.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand some members of the church are today beginning to make options that place them in a subversive relationship with respect to the existing social order. In the face of a situation of poverty and injustice, the church has begun to take on a new presence in Latin America. Bishops have begun to fulfill a role of prophetic denunciation, issuing a call for "conscientizing evangelization". There are moves to become a poor church and to search for more just internal structures.<sup>12</sup> Led by the bishops at Medellín, the church is seeking solidarity with the poor in its desire to bring about a more just order. However this has caused profound divisions in the church since most of its members continue to be linked to the established order. Under these circumstances,

Life in the contemporary Christian community becomes particularly difficult and conflictual. Participation in the Eucharist, for example, as it is celebrated today appears to many to be an action which, for want of the support of an authentic community, becomes an exercise in make-believe."<sup>13</sup>

Gutiérrez sees two ways of analyzing what is happening.

Functionalism leads to theories of "development" which tend to support the status quo. An alternative approach supported by Gutiérrez is based on "dependency" theory.<sup>14</sup> This theory

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<sup>11</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* revised ed., trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 58.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 68-70.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>14</sup>Recently Gutiérrez has qualified his support for the dependency theory because it does not account sufficiently for causes within a country itself. *Liberation*, xxiv.



sees the capitalist system itself as the root cause of poverty, especially when there is not enough capital to "trickle down" to the general population. Dependency theory refers to the "center" and the "periphery" in the world market. Being on the periphery, Peru has been dependent since the time of the Conquest and its resources have always been a source of riches for foreigners.

### **Historical-Cultural Context**

Another significant aspect of the context in which Gutiérrez does theology is the historical-cultural dimension. Here Gutiérrez makes use of his own personal experience as a student of history and as a Peruvian. He has also been influenced by the writings of Peruvians like José María Arguedas and José Carlos Mariátegui. Curt Cadorette goes so far as to say that Gutiérrez's theology "cannot be understood apart from the persons who surround him, those in Lima and those who have shaped his spiritual and intellectual horizons."<sup>15</sup> A very influential person is José María Arguedas: anthropologist, novelist and poet. Cadorette claims that "the relationship between the thought of Arguedas and Gutiérrez is basic to understanding the evolution of the latter's theology."<sup>16</sup> A *Theology of Liberation* was dedicated to Arguedas. Both he and Gutiérrez are passionately concerned about *peruanidad* or the self-identity of their people and the suffering that mars Peruvian history. The agnostic Arguedas wrote novels with

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<sup>15</sup>Curt Cadorette, "Peru and the Mystery," 52.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

theological themes, and the priest Gutiérrez wrote theology shaped by the daily experience of the poor. Together "the whole quest of *peruanidad* was reframed and concretized as it had never been before."<sup>17</sup>

Another cultural element is what Mariátegui has called the "religious factor" in the life and history of the people of Peru. Popular piety is one of its expressions, but it is not the only one. Often the "religious factor," has been and still is today, an unfortunate a stumbling block hindering the perception of their oppression situation. Much popular piety still reflects the dominant ideology.<sup>18</sup> When controlled by those in power, religion produces a sacralization of the established order. The status quo is seen as consonant with the divine will. Religion becomes socially decontextualized and reproduces the prevailing unjust order rather than changing it. So Gutiérrez tries to understand religion contextually--part of a larger social matrix. To do this he tries to understand the people along with their context and their history. He believes that to the extent that the poor become aware of their real place and the causes of oppression, their culture, language and religiosity have great potential for becoming powerful symbols and sources of opposition.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>18</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor* , 97

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 213.

Gutiérrez calls for a "rereading" or "rewriting" of history because till now it was written "by a white hand".<sup>20</sup> It needs to be recast in terms of the cultural values and beliefs of the oppressed. In other words, it needs to be remade from the bottom up.<sup>21</sup> Rewriting history from the bottom up implies coming to terms with the humanity and creativity of the poor. Theologically speaking, it means that the lives of the poor speak of God present in history. Gutiérrez says that for liberation to be authentic it must be undertaken by the people themselves and so must stem from values proper to these people. These values are complex: they can help people find autonomy, or they can help perpetuate the exploitation of the poor. The challenge is to find a way whereby the poor can better understand the complex nature of their own culture and beliefs. They can then affirm what is liberating in them and reject what is oppressive.<sup>22</sup> Hence the need for social analysis. Through social analysis people begin to perceive their place in society, and history. Through social analysis, culture and religion assume a more dynamic and challenging role in people's lives instead of merely being channels for the ideology of the powerful.

### **Context and Theology**

The themes of suffering and hope recur throughout Gutiérrez's writings. For example the suffering of the inno-

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<sup>20</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez and Richard Shaull, *Liberation and Change*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 92.

<sup>21</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 91.

cent is the basic topic of his book *On Job*. In political and sociological terms he uses concepts like ideology and utopia. In theological terms he uses words like sin and salvation. The situation in Latin America can be characterized as a "situation of sin."<sup>23</sup> To say that sin destroys life and hope is not to speak metaphorically but to state a fact about the present situation. Sin is exploitation, and premature death. Gutiérrez is convinced that only a spirituality that joins the experience of oppression with a firm belief in the power of faith will be able to bring about any real social change. The poor must be convinced of their own personal worth, their need of a stronger faith in themselves, and the presence of God in their lives.<sup>24</sup> Thus "the poor want more than economic equality. They want to affirm their own values, history, and future. In Gutiérrez's terms, they are struggling for "integral liberation".<sup>25</sup> In his theology Gutiérrez attempts to describe God's struggle to liberate the poor and the oppressed; to give them life, despite the context of death.

Writing about the cultural conditioning of the language of faith, J. Severino Croatto has said that "Any discourse purporting to 'say something to someone about something' presupposes the contextual closure that renders it intelligible. Otherwise it is not a message. There are no universal

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<sup>23</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 31 (1970): 352.

<sup>24</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 91.

<sup>25</sup>Curt Cadorette, *From the Heart*, 27.

languages."<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez is well aware of this. Theology he says, "must take as its springboard the experiences and questions of those who hear the Word of God, as well as the mental categories that they use in trying to understand their experiences of life."<sup>27</sup> Theology "must be reshaped to coincide with the "cultural universe" of the poor. He further states that any theology

not located in the context of an experience of faith is in danger of turning into a kind of religious metaphysics or a wheel that turns in the air without making the cart advance. Theological reflection takes on its full meaning only within the church and in the service of the life of the church and its action in the world.<sup>28</sup>

Gutiérrez's theology is then a reappropriation of faith shaped by the experience of being Christian in the situation of Latin America today.

### Text

I use the term *text* as it is employed in recent developments in semiotics where it can mean any sign or system of signs that conveys a message.<sup>29</sup> Texts may use different modes of expression: oral (e.g., song), gesture (e.g., drama) or graphic (e.g., art). A common form of text is the written form such as sacred writings. Here I use the term in a sense broader than a written text, for the Christian text includes not only what is written but also the memory of the Church's

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<sup>26</sup>J. Severino Croatto, "Biblical Hermeneutics in the Theologies of Liberation," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds. Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 164.

<sup>27</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 89.

<sup>28</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 38.

<sup>29</sup>Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 61.

interpretation of divine revelation. *Dei Verbum 10* refers to Tradition and Scripture which make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, and the Magisterium which is its servant. I will describe these elements of the Christian text in greater detail in the sections which follow.

## **Revelation**

*Dei Verbum 1* uses the metaphor of speech to describe revelation which is the self disclosure of the mystery of the love of God. God 'addresses,' and 'invites', but the metaphor is not able to express the full meaning of the mystery. Revelation also unfolds in what God has *done*. The link between word and deed is seen most clearly in the event/person of Jesus Christ who is both the Word, and the fullest expression of what God has done (*Dei Verbum 1*). The Word made flesh is both a testimony to God's self-revelation and an interpretation of that mystery. Our access to the divine revelation is through faith which presumes the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes these two elements of word and deed. However, often when using the term Word, he is not referring to the pre-existent Word, but rather to the 'Gospel' which the Lord came to bring.<sup>30</sup> This Word/Gospel is both the foundation and the meaning of all human existence. Gutiérrez says that God was revealed in salvific events before being revealed in the Word. Moreover, God continues to be revealed in salvific events even in our day. Thus Gutiérrez is not

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<sup>30</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 139-140.

supportive of the idea of the closure of revelation with the end of the Apostolic period. God continues to reveal Godself and, in fact is saying something new in our day in the liberation of the person who is poor.<sup>31</sup> As another Latin-American theologian has expressed it, "In the suffering of the poor we are assisting at a new God-event."<sup>32</sup>

For Gutiérrez the basic question concerning revelation has to do with the relation between salvation and human liberation in history. Biblical faith is faith in a God who reveals Godself through historical events from the beginning of creation.<sup>33</sup> God revealed Godself on a mountain. At other times the place of encounter was the tent and the Ark that accompanied the people of Israel. Later the presence of God was linked to the Holy of Holies in the temple. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ God came to pitch his tent among us (John 1,14), and human history truly became the location of our encounter with God in Christ. He writes, "Since the Incarnation, humanity, every human being, history, is the living temple of God. The 'pro-fane,' that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists."<sup>34</sup>

Gutiérrez rejects the 'distinction of planes' model of the relation between faith and human existence. History is one and participating in the process of liberation is itself a salvific work. We encounter God in the commitment to the

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<sup>31</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 7.

<sup>32</sup>Severino Croatto, "Biblical Hermeneutics", 163.

<sup>33</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 86-7.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

historical process of humankind. We discover God in "the sacrament of our neighbor."<sup>35</sup> The discovery is not simply a matter of knowing, but one brought about through concrete actions. Gutiérrez uses the example of the Beatitudes to illustrate his point. The Beatitudes are less a revelation about the poor than a revelation about God.<sup>36</sup> They tell us about God's kingdom and about God as the defender, protector and liberator of the poor. Then, derivatively, the Beatitudes tell us something as well about the poor and their privileged role in God's kingdom.

We also encounter God's revelation in *the signs of the times*. It is the responsibility of every Christian, especially pastors and theologians, to "hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word."<sup>37</sup> For Gutiérrez the principal sign of the times is the new presence of those who in the past were always absent from our history and who longed for liberation. This requires a critical discernment to understand in the light given by faith, the challenges and possibilities presented in these current realities.

In our time God is challenging people to solidarity, reflection and martyrdom in a "new epoch in the history of Latin America."<sup>38</sup> It is a *καιρος*, a moment of heightened revelation both of God and of new ways of being faithful to

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>36</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 95.

<sup>37</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 7.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., xx.



the word of God.<sup>39</sup> Through theological reflection we can come to understand these contemporary happenings not as isolated events, but as God's revelation in history and of God's judgment on it.<sup>40</sup> It is in this framework that the revelation event of Jesus Christ is situated--in continuity with the revelation of God in history, but also as something new. In Jesus God became poor. In Jesus we meet God. In historical events and in the establishment of the kingdom, we come to understand the full revelation of his promise.

Gutiérrez prefers to focus on these historical events as a starting point for theological reflection. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. It is for this reason that Gutiérrez says, "Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it [theological reflection] must start with facts and questions derived from the world and its history."<sup>41</sup> Only then, by pointing to the sources of revelation, will reflection put these facts and questions into a proper perspective.<sup>42</sup>

This is a dynamic conception of God's revelation in history. Reflection is not to concentrate on the past as "the caboose of the present." It is "pregnant with the future" in its eschatological hope. Past and future are brought together

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<sup>39</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 8.

<sup>40</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 4.

<sup>41</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 9-10.

<sup>42</sup>This is the reverse of *ideology* which "rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesiastical order." Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 10.

to penetrate the movement of history into the present. Gutiérrez brings these elements together when he writes that reflecting "means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of History, who irreversibly committed himself to the present moment of humankind to carry it to its fulfillment."<sup>43</sup>

### **Tradition**

In its doctrine, life and worship the church perpetuates and hands on from one generation to another all that she is and all that she believes.<sup>44</sup> As Karl Rahner has pointed out, this *traditio* or handing down has its deepest meaning and reality not so much in the transmission of propositions but in that *παράδοσις* in which the Son of God became man. This saving event moves towards us through spacio-temporal reality from this particular point in time and place.<sup>45</sup> The original receiver of the self-tradition of Jesus Christ in his word and action was the Apostolic church and what was heard, celebrated and believed by the Apostolic community is the standard which must be handed on. One can speak of the church handing on what it is and what it believes because tradition provides a source of identity and a means of continuity. To understand

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>44</sup>*Dei Verbum*, 8.

<sup>45</sup>Karl Rahner, "Scripture and Tradition" *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longmans Todd, 1982), 100.

"who we are" we must note the changes that occur through time.<sup>46</sup> For each successive generation to reappropriate and reinterpret tradition it needs to encounter new experiences, for otherwise it will not remain faithful to its origins.

There have been various ways of referring to the "truth" which is handed down. It has been called the Gospel, Tradition, the saving reality of Jesus Christ,<sup>47</sup> and the sacred deposit.<sup>48</sup> Whichever expression we use, we do not encounter it in naked form. It always requires interpretation to discern the Tradition within the traditions, and here the apostolic writings are an indispensable reference.

Gustavo Gutiérrez claims that the theology of liberation has its roots sunk deep in Christian tradition, but he rejects a doctrinal understanding of tradition and any "obsessive" emphasis on orthodoxy "which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or debatable interpretation."<sup>49</sup> His theology contrasts with the sort of theology "tied to tradition but less related to living and urgent issues."<sup>50</sup> Tradition is not the starting point for his thinking, rather a reference point, an orientation, an aid to put current thinking and pastoral activity into a wider context and a proper perspective.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 105-6.

<sup>47</sup>Gerald O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), 210.

<sup>48</sup>*Dei verbum*, 10.

<sup>49</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 8.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

At the root of his idea of tradition is his understanding of truth. Tradition is not a series of "truths" which have been established once and for all. Such an understanding he says is static and in the long run sterile. Rather the point of reference must be "the Truth which is also the Way."<sup>52</sup>

He explains his position in his book *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. There he contrasts the meaning in traditional philosophy of Greek origin with the Biblical conception of truth. According to Greek philosophy, truth is the conformity between any given thing and the idea we construct of it. In contrast the Semitic understanding of truth reflects the world of the interpersonal where what happens is as important as what is. While in Greek philosophy truth is a relation between things and concepts, in the bible it is more a relation between promise and fulfillment. It is a relation between persons rather than concepts.<sup>53</sup>

Gutiérrez writes repeatedly that the truth that makes us free is Jesus Christ<sup>54</sup> and that any reflection on the truths of Christianity must begin with him who is the truth.<sup>55</sup> Jesus proclaims a truth that must be put into practice. Thus "doing the truth" means "accepting the light--that is, Christ and his word, and therefore doing deeds that are in accord with

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>53</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 95, note 30. He refers to Walter Kaspar who observes that "the distinctive thing about the biblical message is that this truth, this value which must be verified, is understood not as *epiphanaia* or manifestation but as an *epaggelia* or promise."

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 88.

God."<sup>56</sup> This does not mean that faith is reduced to work; rather it must be translated into deeds or it will become a dead faith.

At this point Gutiérrez introduces the theme of orthopraxis. The emphasis on doing the truth is not meant to deny orthodoxy or the proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. There has to be both a fidelity to the deposit of faith on one hand, and a loyalty to the historical moment on the other.<sup>57</sup> The challenge is to appreciate both; to "preserve the circular relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis and the nourishment of each by the other."<sup>58</sup> "Practice is the locus of verification of our faith in the God who liberates by establishing justice and right in favor of the poor."<sup>59</sup> The ultimate criterion is revealed truth accepted in faith. Liberating praxis in turn ensures that the Christian truth and the faith of the Church are faithful to history and are being translated into practice. One can learn more about revealed truth, because the deposit of faith is a living deposit stimulating behavior that is faithful to the Lord's will and calling for its proclamation.<sup>60</sup> In fact, "Christian truths need to be lived if they are to be stated correctly and in a more than superficial

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<sup>56</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez. *Truth*, 98.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 104

<sup>59</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 17.

<sup>60</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 102.

way."<sup>61</sup> The source for the life of faith is the scriptures as they live on in tradition,<sup>62</sup> but there must always be the mediation of human words and actions which make the message intelligible within any particular culture. So for Gutiérrez, the truth that is also the way for the following of Jesus and for putting the truth into practice is tradition as interpreted in a particular historical and cultural setting.

### **Scripture**

In *Dei Verbum* we read how sacred tradition and holy scripture are closely joined and connected (*Dei Verbum* 9) and form a single deposit of the word of God. (*Dei Verbum* 10) They come from the same source and tend towards the same end. Scripture is said to be the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But scripture alone is not sufficient as a base for the certainty about revealed truth, and tradition "must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence." (*Dei Verbum* 9)

Karl Rahner who has studied the close relationship between scripture and tradition says that scripture is a mode of tradition in which the saving event of Jesus Christ is received and handed on in the church. As a written text it is also an objectification of the tradition. But one can never exhaust the meaning of the event of the revelation of God, for it cannot be reduced without remainder to mere words. So scripture is a part of a handing on of a living faith and it

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 89.

is that faith that validates its claim to truth. Scripture is an interpretation of an event in the light of faith and it is in the scriptures that "the apostolic Church interprets itself for later ages."<sup>63</sup>

Gutiérrez stresses this point of scripture as an interpretation. In the scriptures we read about what the Apostolic church believed and lived. In the light of the same faith in Jesus Christ we interpret the scriptures for our situation as God's word for us. God's word in turn helps define who we are. "The Church", he says, "is humanity itself attentive to the Word."<sup>64</sup> Gutiérrez accepts scripture as the Word of God for us and is not arguing about its origins or composition. His principal point is a hermeneutical one. We bring who we are to our reading of scripture and this influences the way we read the bible and the way the bible "reads us." We come to the scriptures with our own questions and in turn the scriptures question or challenge us. But for the scriptures to challenge us, there must be a commitment. We must read scripture "in the context of a committed, active, militant Christian life."<sup>65</sup>

There is another aspect of hermeneutics which Gutiérrez calls a *close* and a *distant* reading of scripture. A close reading means interpreting scripture in the light of the present context so that one discovers that the Word of God is close to us. A distant reading means that we study the bibli-

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<sup>63</sup>Karl Rahner, "Scripture and Tradition," 102.

<sup>64</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 147.

<sup>65</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 48.

cal texts "in their context and penetrate their meaning with all the help that the life of the church supplies down the centuries."<sup>66</sup> Thus scripture is read in terms of the context of the living tradition of the church. Close and distant readings together form part of a hermeneutical process. Gutiérrez has run into some controversy when he says that the poor have an advantage in interpreting scripture because their context now is similar to the context in which the scriptures were written. So the poor can grasp the meaning of the biblical passages more fully. I will refer to this argument in a later section.

Gutiérrez' treatment of the Beatitudes provides an example of the way he uses scripture as a source of living faith.<sup>67</sup> He takes the passage from Matthew 5,3 "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" and asks what this means. His method is to look first at the distant meaning of the term spirit, and then to use this in a close reading of the term in a way that people can identify with it and appropriate it for themselves. First he considers the meaning of spirit in the Old Testament: as a vital force, or the dynamic part of a human being. He studies similar usages to see how the term might be used in a figurative sense similar to the way "lofty in Spirit" (Prov 16,18) means "haughty," and "erring in Spirit" (Is 29,24) means one who has gone astray. He concludes that "poor in Spirit" refers to spiritual childhood, or those who know they are sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 160ff.



their fellow human beings. Then employing different methods of modern biblical criticism he looks at the Beatitudes in their context (Sermon on the Mount), in their complementary relationship with other biblical passages (Luke 6,20). He also considers the structure (two sets of four beatitudes, each set ending with justice in relation to the gift of the kingdom of God). He concludes that justice is required of those who desire to be spiritual children of God or disciples. Jesus' preaching begins in the Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes, and ends with the teaching on the Last Judgement (Matt 25). The latter text helps illustrate the life-giving task of the disciple (giving food to the hungry etc.). The theological point is that the Beatitudes are a revelation of the God of justice and that the spiritual childhood of discipleship is a condition for hearing this revelation.<sup>68</sup> Discipleship flows from the realization of the grace of God's love and mercy that we have received. The intention is not simply to make a theological point, but to relate the distant reading of scripture to the context of the hearers so that it may be appropriated. The poor are confronted with the mystery that God loves them not because they are good, but because they are poor. They can be disciples, and their community can be a church of the Beatitudes.

Gutiérrez's treatment of the Beatitudes illustrates how he employs scripture not as proof texts but by relating it to the context of the hearers. Reading the scripture in both a distant and a close way enables us to be present the message

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<sup>68</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 141.

so that it can be both a source of faith and a challenge to it. In a summary statement about the theology of liberation Gutiérrez says, "To be Christian is to accept and to live--in solidarity, in faith, hope, and charity--the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our encounter with that Word give to the historical becoming of humankind or the way toward total communion."<sup>69</sup> In other words, being Christian involves a commitment, in solidarity with the poor, nourished by the Word read in the light of faith in Jesus Christ, in hope in a God who has spoken in history, and who becomes visible in our present-day communities in acts of love. Thus the scriptures become God's word for us today.

### **Magisterium**

The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* declares that the task for an authentic interpretation of the Word of God has been entrusted to the voice of the Church's *magisterium* (*Dei Verbum* 10). With the assistance of the Holy Spirit the magisterium devoutly hears, religiously keeps and faithfully explains the word. Tradition, scripture and the church's magisterium are "so closely connected and associated together that one does not subsist without the other two" (*Dei Verbum* 10). There are different aspects of the magisterium. The term may refer to the teaching office of the church as exercised by the bishops or to the magisterium as object: as official church teaching.

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<sup>69</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 32.

When Gutiérrez says that liberation theology has its roots "deep in scripture, tradition, and the magisterium,"<sup>70</sup> he is referring to magisterium as object. He sometimes supports his argument with teaching from the extraordinary magisterium such as church councils, and the ordinary magisterium such as papal encyclicals, synods of bishops and letters of the pope. He frequently refers to documents from the conference of Latin American Bishops held at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979).<sup>71</sup>

What authority does Gutiérrez give to this teaching magisterium and how does he see its relationship to the authority of scripture? It is clear that he accepts the teaching from early councils such as Calcedon as definitive.<sup>72</sup> However the contemporary magisterium is not so immutable. One reason is that there are varying situations and conditions in different parts of the world. Writing in 1971 from the Latin American experience of the church, Gutiérrez says, "As regards doctrinal authority and impact, the most important text . . . is, of course, that of the Episcopal Conference of Medellín."<sup>73</sup> This implies that there are other texts less important. These he says, "can be ordered around it [Medellín]."<sup>74</sup> Such texts are important because without them

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., xliv.

<sup>71</sup>Gutiérrez had some influence on the formation of the documents of Medellín and Puebla. Ref. Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutierrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 23 and 38.

<sup>72</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxix.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 63. He notes that in time "the Medellín texts will be obsolete." Ibid., 73.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 63.

it would not be possible to grasp accurately the process which led to Medellín or the repercussions flowing from it. He suggests that these "other" texts from the Latin American Church are of "varying . . . degrees of authority,"<sup>75</sup> and derive their authority either from the way they are related to more authoritative documents, or have authority in themselves because they "express the sentiments of large sectors of the people of God."<sup>76</sup>

On the level of the people of God, Gutiérrez puts more emphasis on the authority of the scriptures and of the Holy Spirit working in the Christian community. At this level people must know how to "drink from their own well."<sup>77</sup> The water from this well rises from the experience of being church.

There are several factors influencing Gutiérrez's view of the magisterium. These include his attitude to history, to orthodoxy, and to the prophetic function of theology in the church.

In my conclusion to chapter 1, and in the previous sections on revelation and tradition I touched on Gutiérrez view of history. Theology discovers truth within a socio-historical situation, so truth is not absolute, and dogma must be understood with reference to the historical question that gave rise to it. Today in Latin America the question is where to find life in the face of death and how to discover God in a

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>77</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 5.

situation of poverty and injustice which is the experience of the majority of people there.

The contemporary Christian experience is conditioned culturally, socially and politically according to the historical situation peculiar to each church. In this situation there needs to be a pluralism of opinion rather than universalized authoritarian teaching.<sup>78</sup> Gutiérrez says that the goal today must be unity rather than uniformity and an ecclesial communion that permits "a richly diversified expression to the truth proclaimed by the Only Son."<sup>79</sup>

When the maintenance of authority is a priority, cohesiveness and continuity of the tradition will be emphasized leading to a stress on orthodoxy. As I have shown in the previous section, Gutiérrez sees tradition not so much as a deposit of truths to be handed on, as a truth that must be put into practice. He says that any obsessive emphasis on orthodoxy is nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition. In those Christians "who have committed themselves to the Latin American revolutionary process . . . there is a greater understanding of the faith, greater faith, greater fidelity to the Lord than the 'orthodox' doctrine of reputable Christian circles. Such doctrine is supported by authority . . ., but it is so static and devitalized that it is not even strong enough

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<sup>78</sup>This point is expressed by Karl Rahner in "Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Creed in the Church," *Theological Investigations XI*, translated by D. Bourke. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 3-23.

<sup>79</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxvi.

to abandon the Gospel. It is the Gospel which is disowning it."<sup>80</sup>

So liberation theology serves a prophetic function in the church. Rather than reproducing official teaching it is an effort to interpret the signs of the times for today. People must be challenged by the ideas of the gospel and his concern is to bring out the relationship between that challenge and the historical situation.<sup>81</sup> In this light people will be enabled to have a different reading of basic gospel themes, and they will be able to become aware of "what the Lord has to say to us in the context of our own history."<sup>82</sup>

Gutiérrez uses the magisterial teaching of the church, especially teachings of the Bishops Conference of Latin America. Also the scriptural tradition remains as the *norma normans*, but his emphasis is not so much on continuity with the past, as it is an act of interpretation for the future in the light of faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Interpreter**

If we are to give importance to the Christian faith as seen in scripture, tradition and church teaching then we must consider the subjects of that faith: church. In *Lumen Gentium* we read that the Church is realized in local churches, and also that it is in the distinctive social and cultural condi-

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<sup>80</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 117.

<sup>81</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 4.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 3

tions of local churches that the Church's catholicity is concretely realized.<sup>83</sup>

The one and universal church is represented and active in the particular churches. It comes to be in and out of them (*Lumen Gentium* 23). Thus the church is not universal like a corporation which has a central office and branches in different parts of the world. Nor is it a federation where a number of parts fitted together make a whole, like the countries of Europe making a united Europe. Rather in every local church the full reality of what is called "church" is realized. "The Church universal comes to be out of the mutual reception and communion of local Churches."<sup>84</sup>

The local churches are "constituted after the model of the universal Church" (*Lumen Gentium* 23). This does not mean that these churches are the result of the division of a universal church anterior to them. As de Lubac says, "A universal Church, prior to or alleged to exist in herself, apart from all the particular churches, is only *un etre de raison*."<sup>85</sup> The universality of the church is not based on uniformity or geographical extension. Rather it is in the

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<sup>83</sup>Vatican II was not consistent in its use of the term "local". Sometimes the term "particular" church designates a diocese, although it is also used to refer to groupings of Churches into "rites" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 2-4). "Local Church" is used of dioceses (*Ad Gentes* 19, 27) and of patriarchal Churches (*Lumen Gentium* 23). In one passage, "particular" and "local" are both used, without distinction, to refer to dioceses in Eastern rites (*Unitatis redintegratio* 14). Confer Joseph A. Komonchak, *Towards a Theology of the Local Church*, FABC Papers, no.42. 1986.

<sup>84</sup>Joseph Komonchak, *Local Church*, 17.

<sup>85</sup>Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 208.

churches unified in common effort, all proceeding from a prior, particular, concrete church, that of Jerusalem.<sup>86</sup>

So there are two moments of church. There is the "objective" moment or when one generation of church passes to the next, and there is the "subjective" moment, the words spoken and things done in historical situations. Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes both moments of being church: the Church which has handed on the Gospel to us through history from apostolic times, and the local church which seeks the meaning of the Gospel today in a life committed to the struggle for justice. I will focus on the latter aspect: the role of the local church in the life of faith and as interpreter of the *tradita* or Christian text. I will consider it in three main points: first, the local church as a community of faith; second, the local church and the right to think; third, the local church in its relation to the universal church.

### **Local Church as a Community of Faith**

Gustavo Gutiérrez understands "faith" not as a series of truths, but as a commitment or a "particular posture toward life,"<sup>87</sup> which is an attitude of faith and solidarity. Any discourse on faith takes its bearings from the life of a particular Christian community.<sup>88</sup> So he says,

An understanding of the faith that does not start from the way the gospel is lived in today's church, especially by the poor in the form of basic ecclesial communities,

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid. Cited in Komonchak, *Local Church*, 18.

<sup>87</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 6.

<sup>88</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 37.



will be leaving aside a fundamental datum of our faith -- namely, the life of the church as a *locus theologicus*.<sup>89</sup> So faith has its roots in the particularity of a given situation<sup>90</sup> and is expressed in the community called church<sup>91</sup>, the people of God living in history.<sup>92</sup> Following Jesus is a "collective adventure"<sup>93</sup> and a "community quest for the Lord".<sup>94</sup>

Gutiérrez seldom uses the term "local church" but uses various terms referring to the church in a particular situation.<sup>95</sup> He often refers to the "ecclesial community"<sup>96</sup> or to "base-level ecclesial communities" which are "a manifestation of the presence of the church of the poor in Latin America."<sup>97</sup> At other times he refers in a wider sense to the "Latin American Church"<sup>98</sup> or the church in a particular country, such as "the church of Guatemala".<sup>99</sup> In each case he is referring to a manifestation of faith in the church in a particular situation in human history. Gutiérrez insists that

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<sup>89</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 90.

<sup>90</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxvi.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>93</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 89.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>95</sup>One example where he does use the term is in *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 169, where he refers to experiments by local churches, Christian communities, and religious families.

<sup>96</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 29.

<sup>97</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xli.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez *Drink*, 101. Once he refers to the Lord knocking at the door of the "ecclesial community that lives in Latin America." *Drink*, 136.

theological reflection must come from this particular experience of church: a "faith that is lived and shared in the communion of the church."<sup>100</sup> Hence the importance of the local church for discerning the truth of faith and for "re-reading" faith in the light of the present."<sup>101</sup>

### **The Local Church and the Right to Think**

Theological reflection in the local church need not be an "echo of the old world"<sup>102</sup> or an exercise in "parroting the theology of the dominators."<sup>103</sup> Rather theology should be looked upon "as an expression of the right to think on the part of the 'wretched of the earth'".<sup>104</sup> Such reflection is both a right and a duty for people who are poor and Christian. This is a consequence of the starting point of liberation theology: the faith as it is lived by the poor who are fighting for their liberation and their dignity as human beings.<sup>105</sup>

Affirming that the poor have a right to think comes from an even more fundamental right: the human right to be or to exist.<sup>106</sup> This is a legitimate claim by the victims of his-

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<sup>100</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 102.

<sup>101</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 6.

<sup>102</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 216, note 13 quoting Hegel.

<sup>103</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 91.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>105</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective: Finding Our Way to Talk about God," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 228.

<sup>106</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 101.

tory: a race "dying before their time". They have the right to be agents of their own becoming, their own liberation, rather than being thought *for* as is more often the case. "Their will to exist finds expression in and through their claim to the right to think their own thoughts, to ponder in their own terms the reality of their faith in a liberating God."<sup>107</sup> So it is also a right to speak up and to tell about its faith and its hope.<sup>108</sup> It is the right of the oppressed people themselves "to freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society and in the heart of the People of God"<sup>109</sup> It is a right to "repossess" the Bible and thus to "prevent the private proprietors of the world's goods from being the private proprietors of the word of the Lord as well."<sup>110</sup>

Naturally such sentiments generate opposition from some traditional centers of theology. However Gutiérrez points out that all theology is contextual. Modern "progressive" theology comes out of the history of the revolutions of eighteenth century Europe and the situation of unbelief in the modern bourgeois world. The theology of liberation comes from a different point of departure. It begins not with the problem of the modern bourgeois human being, but from the underside of history and the experience of the poor and the dispossessed.

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<sup>107</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections," 228-9.

<sup>108</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 90.

<sup>109</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 174.

<sup>110</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 101.

Progressive theology "is a situated theology."<sup>111</sup> "What structure is not?" asks Gutiérrez.<sup>112</sup> Structures of thought and hence theology, are incomprehensible if divorced from the historical processes of their social and cultural world.

Liberation theology has a different locus, a different method and a different agent in its theological work.<sup>113</sup> The committed involvement of Christians is the locus for theological reflection. It is the local church fighting against the situation of dependency preventing it from developing its peculiar gifts. It is the local church struggling to overcome the colonial mentality and a theology elaborated "by theologians living in other regions and under different historical conditions."<sup>114</sup>

The method begins with Christian living because the reflection of faith must be deeply rooted in the Christian community. The starting point is the faith as it is lived by the poor who are fighting for their liberation and dignity as human beings. The movement is from life of the community to theological reflection rather than the opposite. God has pitched his tent in the heart of human history and reflection

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<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>112</sup>"Every theology asks itself the meaning of the word of God for its contemporaries, at a certain moment of history. Any attempts we make to answer this question will be made in function of our culture, in function of the problems faced by the men and women of our time. From within this cultural universe, we reformulate the message of the gospel and the church, for our contemporaries and for ourselves." Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 56.

<sup>113</sup>A helpful source in this matter is, Anthony J. Russell, "Theology in Context and 'The Right to Think' in Three Contemporary Theologians: Gutiérrez, Dussel and Boff." *Pacifica* 2 (1989): 282-322.

<sup>114</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 216. note 14.

on faith arises out of the historically and culturally based experience of faith, not from without.

The primary agents of this process "are the poor themselves and the communities in which they share their faith in a liberating God."<sup>115</sup> This means rethinking who has the right to be a theologian. "In the broadest and most basic sense every Christian is a theologian" says Gutiérrez.<sup>116</sup> This is an ecclesial task, but one is a theologian insofar as one is linked to the life and commitments of a Christian community. Theological reflection involves committed Christians learning in a new way how to talk about God.

In affirming the right to think, Gutiérrez affirms the right of the local church to assert its own personality,<sup>117</sup> and to insist on its right to use categories other than those of the First World. It does not reject the theology from Europe or North America, but it seeks to enter into dialogue with it as respectful partners, always remembering to keep the meaning and potential of reflection on faith alive, and always demanding that one keep one's feet "solidly planted on the earth that gives theology its life."<sup>118</sup>

### **The Local Church and Universal Church**

*Lumen Gentium* 23 states, on the one hand, the local church is formed on the model of the universal church and, on

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<sup>115</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections," 220.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>117</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 77.

<sup>118</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 105.

the other, that the universal church arises in and out of the local churches. The first phrase assigns priority to the universal church and the second locates it in the local churches. Likewise, Gutiérrez hopes that the theology of liberation in Latin America will make a genuine contribution to the enrichment of the universal church while at the same time sinking deep roots into a continent in revolution.<sup>119</sup> This desire for universality is not an afterthought but something present from the very beginning in the emphasis on particularity and universality in liberation theology itself. Gutiérrez takes pains to explain how this particularity and universality may be seen in the particularity of the church of the poor and in the universality of the love of God. Both are necessary: the mystical language of love and the prophetic language of liberation.<sup>120</sup> There is no contradiction in preaching that God loves all people, but at the same time has a predilection for the least.<sup>121</sup> Christian poverty which is an expression of love (universal) is solidarity with the poor (particular) and a protest against poverty.<sup>122</sup> Though it has its roots in the particularity of a given situation, liberation theology is discourse about a universal message and so is a question and a challenge to all.

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<sup>119</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 77.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 173. Elsewhere he says that the church finds its full identity as a sign of the reign of God to which all human beings are called but in which the lowly and the unimportant have a privileged place. Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xlii.

<sup>122</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 170.

This universal message leads Gutiérrez to see the church "uncentered" in human history.<sup>123</sup> From a theological perspective, the recognition of the universally operative will of God for human salvation has led to the conclusion that the saving grace of God's Spirit must be mediated by other means than historic Christianity. So the reign of God must extend beyond the borders of the Church. This means an ecclesiology that is not ecclesiocentric. The center is God and God's Spirit and the church has a special relationship to the working of the Spirit through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In some circles there is a tendency to identify the universal church with the local church of Rome, so that relations between local and universal church are seen as the relationship between "periphery" and "center". Gutiérrez rejects such a Euro-centric model of church and emphasizes the freedom and the responsibility of the local church in its own self-realization. The local church is the place in which and through which the universal church comes to be. It is understandable that this may cause tensions. Komonchak says, "the effort to inculturate the Gospel in the social and cultural matrices of local Churches does cause problems in mutual understanding for which a uniform, Euro-centric Church is ill prepared."<sup>124</sup> Gutiérrez uses a linguistic example to illustrate his point. An authentic universality does not consist precisely in the same language, but rather in achieving a full

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<sup>123</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 143.

<sup>124</sup>Joseph Komonchak, *Local Church*, 40.

understanding within the setting of each language.<sup>125</sup> So the goal is not uniformity, but a profound unity, a communion or *koinonia*. "One element of this Christian *koinonia* . . . is the understanding that the various forms of theology exist within a profound ecclesial communion and give a richly diversified expression to the truth proclaimed by the Only Son."<sup>126</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

In this second chapter I have outlined three key elements in the scheme I have proposed for studying the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. Beginning with the context I illustrated how it is the starting point for reflection because that is where one finds the signs of the times and the saving activity of God in history. The sociopolitical context in Peru means that a majority of the people live in a situation of poverty and dependence, so this is where theology must be done. The church however is in an ambiguous position because for a long time it has sought the support of the established order, but since Medellín it has made efforts to be in solidarity with the poor. The historical-cultural context supports a situation where the status quo is seen as the will of God. In this context, Gutiérrez calls for a rewriting of history in a way that takes seriously the humanity and creativity of the poor. This means a struggle for integral liberation that affirms their values, their history, and their future. This is only

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<sup>125</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxvi.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.* xxxvi.



possible if the poor can have faith in themselves and in God who gives life in the face of death.

The Christian text refers first to scripture but also to the memory of the church's interpretation of divine revelation in the Word, and this self-revelation of God continues to this day, especially in the liberation of the poor. So Gutiérrez focuses on questions derived from the contemporary world because human history is the location of our encounter with God. In the light of the Word of the Lord of history, we may see liberation as a salvific work. The apostolic writings are indispensable references, but they must be reinterpreted to discern the Tradition within the traditions. The challenge is to find the relationship between fidelity to the deposit of faith and to the historical moment. In scripture the Hebrew people and the Apostolic church interpreted themselves for later ages. In that "distant" context it is a source for our life of faith, but we also need a "close" reading of scripture, interpreting it for our situation as God's word for us. In this way scripture "reads us" in the sense that it questions and challenges those who read it in the context of a committed Christian life. At the national level, magisterial teaching, especially that of the Bishops Conferences of Latin America, provides continuity with Church tradition. However, Gutiérrez's emphasis is on the authority of scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit active at the level of Christian communities where "from their own wells" people drink from the experience of being church.

Gutiérrez applies his interest in the concrete and the particular to the local church. Faith has its roots in the particularity of a given situation in the community called church. He insists that theological reflection must come from this experience of church. One may theologize inasmuch as one is linked to the life and commitments of a living christian community. The theologian looks for a new way to talk about God in relation to the problems and questions of men and women in their moment of history. In the particularity of the church of the poor, liberation theology is discourse about the universal message of God's love and so is a challenge to the universal church. The *ecclesia communis* is enriched by the unity of diversified expressions of the Gospel in the local churches.

These three elements are important for understanding how Gutiérrez sees the task of the local church in interpreting the relationship between text and context. The context, text and interpreter form the three principal points to be considered in the interpretive process. Liberation theology is critical reflection on the word of God received in the church.<sup>127</sup> It is rooted in the situation of the poor and oppressed yet shares the values of faith hope and love that inspire the praxis of all Christians. It exists in a synchronic union with the forms of theology in different contemporary contexts, and in diachronic union with the teaching of the Apostolic community.

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<sup>127</sup>Ibid., xxxiii.

In the next chapter I will show how the three elements described are in a dynamic relationship as the interpretation of the deposit of faith alive in the local church today.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE TASK OF INTERPRETATION

How are we to find a way of speaking about God? This question recurs in different ways throughout Gutiérrez's works. Essentially it is a hermeneutical one. He is searching for a language for speaking of the mystery of God in a changing world marked by poverty and injustice. In his book *On Job*<sup>1</sup> he expresses this in a more poetic way: "How is it possible to arouse María Angola to enthusiasm and bring to the suffering the memory and joy of the risen Christ"?<sup>2</sup> María Angola is the cathedral bell ("made of gold and Amerindian blood") known for its penetrating and mournful sound. He responds saying that before speaking about God we must encounter God in silence: in contemplation and commitment. The relationship between silence and speech, committed Christian life and reflection is the dynamic relationship comprising the "first" and "second" acts of the theological process. He describes the cycle as follows:

The incarnation of the Son of God is the basis for the hermeneutical circle: from human being to God and from God to human being, from history to faith and from faith to history, from human words to the word of the Lord and from the word of the Lord to human words, from love of our brothers and sisters to love of the Father and from love of the Father to love of our brothers and sisters,

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<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, xvi.

from human justice to the holiness of God and from the holiness of God to human justice.<sup>3</sup>

How this cycle functions as a hermeneutical cycle of faith and understanding is the subject of this chapter. After a brief historical explanation I will outline Gutiérrez's approach, illustrated by his essay "The Truth Shall Make You Free" and his book *On Job*.

### **Theoretical Background**

The question Gutiérrez asks about how to speak of God is as old as theology itself. Is it not the question faced by the authors of scripture? Since Apostolic times the Fathers, Councils, and thoughtful Christian people have sought ways to make theological language intelligible in their own situation.

### **Developments in Hermeneutics**

With the post-Enlightenment growth in historical consciousness came the realization of the historical nature of religious truth, including revealed truth. Theology reaches the truth of statements of faith not in some abstract state but within a historical perspective. So emphasis was put on historical-critical studies. However, Existentialist scholars have reacted against a historicism that looks for the truth of Christianity identified with the content of earlier texts. They have stressed the historicity of personal decision and interpretive knowledge inseparable from the self-interpretation of the subjects themselves. Claude Geffré points out that this movement has itself been held captive by the Kantian

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<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 4.

problem whereby the order of facts (object of science) and that of meaning (object of ethics or metaphysics) are kept separate.<sup>4</sup> New forms of hermeneutics have been developed that look for the meaning of a text while respecting its link with history.

### **Paul Ricoeur and Hermeneutics**

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur has tried to develop an approach to hermeneutics that goes beyond the opposition between facts and meaning; explanation (*erklären*) and understanding (*verstehen*). Geffré puts it as follows, "Ricoeur . . . is trying to go beyond the dilemma between being at a distance linked to the objectivity of the text and being close or belonging linked to historical understanding."<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur treats the text as a work that mediates the truth that is to be understood. The "world of the text" enables it to mediate the relationship between distance and belonging. Through objectivization in writing a text acquires a life of its own independent of the author's intention. It can be appropriated in a different context from the one in which it was produced. The "thing" or "world of the text" is the world that the text develops ahead of itself. I cannot summarize the whole of

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<sup>4</sup>Claude Geffré, *The Risk of Interpretation*, trans. David Smith (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 13. He says, "The result has been that a disastrous distinction has been made between the task of the exegete and historian and that of the hermeneutist and theologian. The first seeks the meaning of the event in the light of its historical context, while the second tries to give contemporary interpretation to the meaning of that past event for us today."

<sup>5</sup>Claude Geffré, *Risk*, 35.

Ricoeur's interesting work<sup>6</sup> but I want to acknowledge his contribution to the renewed understanding of the hermeneutic of a text and his attempt to reconcile the explanation of the structure of a text and the understanding of the author's intention--two aspects often polarized in previous works on hermeneutics.

### **Severino Croatto and Biblical Hermeneutics**

The Latin American scholar Severino Croatto has brought many of the insights from Paul Ricoeur into the world of liberation theology.<sup>7</sup> "The Theological act," writes Croatto, "is a convergence of the theologian's praxis (or the praxis of his or her concrete historical context) and the font, or fonts, of revelation."<sup>8</sup> Croatto says that meaning is not something in the text (e.g., the intention of the author) that scholars can discover. If this were the case, all interpretations would be erroneous but one, and then the decision as to which one was true would come from an external "authority." Rather, it is possible to make interpretive readings of a text (phenomenological, historical, sociological, psychological, literary, theological, and so on) because of a surplus-of-

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<sup>6</sup>For instance, Ricoeur's criticism of structuralism and the process of moving from understanding to explanation and from explanation to comprehension. One enters the "hermeneutical circle" of believing and understanding. The circle escapes being a vicious one of self-confirmation because of the criteria of falsifiability in the conflict of competing interpretations.

<sup>7</sup>He acknowledges that the latest hermeneutical studies of Paul Ricoeur "are of great help in understanding the hermeneutical process." "Biblical Hermeneutics in the Theologies of Liberation," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 144.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

meaning of a text. Moreover because every reading of a text is done from a context no longer that of the first addressees of the text, the reader naturally selects a way of reading the text that corresponds to his or her own context.<sup>9</sup> What becomes particularly relevant is not the "context-backward"--the historical context--of the text, but the "context forward"--the context intimated by the text as a meaningful message for the life of the community that receives it. Croatto's principal point is that Tradition is a living interpretation intimately bound up with praxis.<sup>10</sup> A text has some form of experience or "event" as its point of departure.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Bible, before it was "God's word," it was "God's event."<sup>12</sup> The text-meaning becomes meaningful today in a process of "recontextualization." But in this process the praxis of the reader has a profound effect.<sup>13</sup> This is what happened in the formation of the New Testament as a rereading

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<sup>9</sup>Croatto gives an example of the risk of the decontextualization carried out by a later rereading of a text. 1 Corinthians 14,33b-35 was written by Paul to the Greek church. "Paul may not have considered it opportune to negate without further ado a cultural practice doubtless based on the Orphic-Platonic worldview that idealized maleness and disparaged femaleness. But then the text was universalized. What could have been purely circumstantial was now raised to the status of doctrine." Ibid., 166.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>11</sup>"This event may be a state of oppression, a process of liberation, a salvific event, or one of so many other occurrences in the experience of a people, a community, or an individual." Ibid., 150.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 151

<sup>13</sup>He gives the example of how a critical rereading of a text is not extracting pure meaning "from" a text as a diver might come up out of the sea with coral in his hand. First one has to "get into" the text oneself with questions gathered on a new horizon of experience. Reading is a "production" not simply the recovery of something pre-existing in the text. Ibid., 157-8.



of the Old in the life of the first Christian community.<sup>14</sup> Likewise today the praxis of faith in a context of oppression/liberation has something to contribute to the meaning of the Bible in its recontextualization.<sup>15</sup> The bible is a faith reading of paradigmatic events of an unfinished salvation history. In the liberation of the poor we are assisting at a new God-event. The participation in this event has a profound influence in grasping the depth of the biblical tradition going back to the event-word that is the origin of the very message of the bible.

Gustavo Gutiérrez has developed his own interpretive theology and hermeneutics of the Bible and is within the same tradition as Ricoeur and Croatto.<sup>16</sup> He has adopted Ricoeur's language of closeness to and distance from the text in his rereading of the Bible, as I have already described in chapter II in the section on Scripture. Also he benefits from Ricoeur's work on the relation between explanation and understanding in the hermeneutical circle. Croatto's contribution is in emphasizing the importance of praxis, which is the key to understanding how Gutiérrez reinterprets the hermeneutical

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<sup>14</sup>"The Christian event expresses--as a new hermeneutic key--the central salvific message of the Old Testament, in which the center of gravity is the liberation of the poor and the oppressed." Ibid., 167.

<sup>15</sup>Croatto warns, "Theology from the standpoint of the oppressed and the poor will be troublesome. It will be conflictual. It will invite repression. It will be disqualified as theology because it will stress human praxis (and therefore must be "anthropology"), or because it will be "worldly" and accord a value to human history. Then it will be accused of being subversive, because it will subvert traditional values." Ibid., 163.

<sup>16</sup>Gutiérrez refers to Ricoeur in his writings. I have not seen any reference to Croatto, but they have been colleagues at conferences. For example, they have both contributed to the Fifth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in New Delhi in 1981, the results of which are published in the volume *Irruption of the Third World*.

circle in the cycle of committed Christian life and reflection in the light of the Word of God.

### **Theology as Interpretation: Claude Geffré**

A theologian whom Gutiérrez has acknowledged explicitly is the French theologian Claude Geffré.<sup>17</sup> Geffré writes of the "risk of interpretation" in being faithful to the Christian tradition in a non-Christian age. He says that theology is always interpretive, meaning it uses inadequate signifiers when it tries to talk about God. However, the historical objectivity of theology is the founding events of Christianity. So one of the distinctive features of theological verification is the practice of comparing new expressions of faith with the earlier language of revelation concerned with those founding events and with the various interpretive languages found in tradition.<sup>18</sup> The texts recording the founding events (and their rereading by the Church) become revealing for us as we overcome (but not eliminate) the cultural distance separating us from the texts we have resituated in the historical context within which they were produced.<sup>19</sup> He gives three distinctive features of that truth sought by theology as interpretation.

First, theological knowledge does not have a complex of conceptual truths as its object. The truth with which the

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<sup>17</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Marx n'est pas la Bible," *Actualité Religieuse*, 15 Octobre 1990: 27.

<sup>18</sup>Claude Geffré, *Risk*, 59.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

theologian is concerned is the mystery of the self-revelation of God. This is of the order of confessed truth or testimony --a testimony written in Scripture.

Secondly, our possession of the truths of faith is always historical and therefore relative. Statements of faith are as true today as they were yesterday, but our correct understanding of them depends on our appreciation of the questions that gave rise to them. "Christian truth is therefore not an unvarying datum that is handed on from century to century in the form of a fixed deposit. It is rather a permanent coming that is exposed to the risk of history and the interpretive freedom of the Church under the impulse of the Spirit."<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, the truth of faith is "a way" that has to be followed. The possibility of interpreting a text is determined by the community of interpretation. So the hermeneutical field for the theologian is the Church as the subject of faith.<sup>21</sup> The norm of the truth of revelation is to be found in the "reciprocal correlation" between the fundamental experience of the New Testament and the collective experience of the Church today.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 62. Geffré adds, "It is not enough to go on speaking . . . about an unchanging datum and a variable cultural register. . . . We have rather to speak of a connection of connections. According to the different historical situations in the Church there is a production of a new connection between the Christian message and the newness of the semantic connections. It is the theologian's responsibility to make manifest the discontinuous continuity of the Christian tradition which is always creating new historical figures in response to the permanent coming of the original truth that was revealed in Jesus Christ."

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 64. In an earlier section (p. 40) Geffré puts it as follows: "There is a basic homology between the biblical statements and their socio-cultural context and then the discourse of faith which has to be held today in its relationship with our present cultural situation."

## Gustavo Gutiérrez and Interpretation

The theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez lies within this tradition of theology as an interpretation. As an illustration I will compare his ideas with the three characteristics given by Geffré in the previous section.

First, Gutiérrez says explicitly that "the truth that makes us free is the Lord himself."<sup>23</sup> This truth is found in liberating praxis which testifies to God's gratuitous love. The norm for this praxis is the testimony of the Apostolic community as found in the New Testament.

Secondly, Gutiérrez repeatedly points out the influence of historical factors on our understanding of theological truth. He says,

Theology is, of course, first of all an understanding illumined by faith, and its ultimate criteria of truth are derived from the "deposit of faith." But our thinking as human beings is always affected by the world in which we live and by the questions that the world puts to us; this means that our theological thinking must relate to the facts as lived in and by the church in the historical phase through which it is passing.<sup>24</sup>

This applies equally to liberation theology. Liberation theology, like any other is "only a new generation's new awareness of its faith in ecclesial communion, at a given moment of history."<sup>25</sup>

Thirdly, Gutiérrez stresses how we reinterpret the Bible from the viewpoint of our own world--from our personal experi-

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>24</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 114.

<sup>25</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London: SCM Press, 1983), 201.

ence as believers and as church.<sup>26</sup> The life of the Church is the *locus theologicus*. The manner of life of the first Christian community was given a particular and original name: "The Way", and similarly today the fundamental condition is conversion and commitment in faith to a Christian way of thinking and acting.<sup>27</sup> The life of faith is not only the starting point of theological reflection but also its point of arrival. There is thus a circular relationship between faith and understanding.<sup>28</sup>

In the classical hermeneutical circle one believes in order to understand. Ricoeur has interpreted it in terms of explanation and understanding, by which one comes to a second naiveté. Gutiérrez brings the two together in his understanding of the hermeneutical circle as praxis and reflection. Believing is the first act: lived faith or praxis. Understanding is the second act: critical reflection which includes discourse about God.

One might ask what is special about Gutiérrez's approach. What characterizes his approach is his starting point, his key hermeneutical principle, and his notion of who does theology.

Gutiérrez starts "from below" which is characteristic of theologies using an inductive methodology. *Gaudium et Spes*, for example, employs a similar approach. However, Gutiérrez contributes to a new understanding of theology "from below" by his starting from the concrete situation of the poor and the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 6.

oppressed. Below means "from the underside of history", from the perspective of "exploited classes, condemned ethnic groups, and marginalized cultures."<sup>29</sup> The starting point for reflection is the lived faith experience of such people.<sup>30</sup>

Gutiérrez says that Jesus Christ is the hermeneutical principle for all understanding of faith. While true, to make it more meaningful, this statement needs to be refined in terms of the *incarnation* of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. Another way of understanding this is in terms of history. Just as the human and the divine are united in Christ, distinct but not separate, so there is one deep *unity* in history. Salvation in Christ gives meaning to history and elevates it to new levels. The affirmation of One history gives religious value in a new way to human action in history, and our participation in the liberation process may be seen as a salvific work. I will treat this key hermeneutical principle of One history in a later part of this chapter and in chapter four.

A third characteristic of Gutiérrez's theology is its subject, the local church. Theology as interpretation involves bringing questions from the contemporary situation into dialogue with Christian sources so that they may challenge and illuminate that experience. But it makes a difference who asks the questions and who is the agent in this process. As

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<sup>29</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 233.

<sup>30</sup>Gutiérrez and the Latin American liberation theologians are not alone in this regard. For example, Edward Schillebeeckx insists on the priority of human experiences for doing theology. (*Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 5 and 15.) Claude Geffré is in many respects sympathetic to Gutiérrez's approach, yet unlike Gutiérrez, Church tradition or the deposit of faith handed down since apostolic times remains as Geffré's starting point. See Claude Geffré, *Risk*, 50, 67.

outlined in the previous chapter in the section on the Poor and the Right to Think, for Gutiérrez the primary agents are the poor themselves and the communities in which they share their faith.

### **Gustavo Gutiérrez's Use of Interpretation**

I will illustrate how Gutiérrez undertakes the task of theological interpretation by using examples from his essay "The Truth Shall Make You Free," and from his book *On Job*.

#### **The Truth Shall Make You Free**

The essay "The Truth Shall Make You Free" is divided into three sections. The first section entitled: "Truth and Theology" is concerned with belief in the truth and putting that belief into practice. The point is that there must be a relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis in which each nourishes the other. Christian truths need to be lived if they are to be stated correctly and in a more than superficial way. I have already discussed this issue in the section on Tradition in the previous chapter.

In the second part entitled "The Way of Liberation," Gutiérrez illustrates how he applies his theory relating orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The first act of theological reflection is lived faith. The question is how we interpret the situation within which we live. Here he dialogues with the 1989 Instruction *Libertatis Conscientia*.<sup>31</sup> The Instruction begins with a discussion and critique of the European movement

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<sup>31</sup>The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis Conscientia*. English translation, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation," *Origins* 15:44 (April 17, 1986): 714-727.

toward the various freedoms characteristic of the modern age. However, liberation theology in Latin America has little to do directly with the "secularizing thrust of a 'bourgeois christianity'" that emerges as a result of centuries of development in Europe. He says, "We are convinced that liberation thinking starts from a social, cultural and religious situation differing from that of Europe and that this situation offers unparalleled historical possibilities that we must explore and develop."<sup>32</sup> I detect a note of irony when Gutiérrez writes, "*Libertatis Conscientia* is accurate when it says that 'a new phase in the history of freedom is opening before us' (no. 24). In this phase, interpretations of the past are as important as the possibilities and special features of the present."<sup>33</sup> In other words, if interpretations (plural) are important, then it is crucial to have an interpretation that truly is appropriate and not one brought in from outside. Any attempt to equate the movement for modern freedoms and the process of liberation is "not only historically inaccurate" but also "a serious mistake." In fact, the situation in Latin America is the unfortunate result of developments of individualism in Europe. Radical individualism has led to the present situation in poor countries, hence the term "underside of history." The poor in Latin America are living the undesirable consequences of the history of modern freedoms. So the liberation of the poor is in direct contrast to the movement

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<sup>32</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 115.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.



for modern freedoms. Gutiérrez adds that *Libertatis Conscientia* "does not appear to perceive this sufficiently."<sup>34</sup>

The difference in interpretation between Gutiérrez and the Instruction illustrates the importance of the medium of the human sciences for understanding history and the present human and social situation. Human aspirations include liberation from exterior pressures so, "the description that these sciences give of a situation, their analysis of its causes, the trends and searches for solutions that they propose--all these are important to us in theology to the extent that they involve human problems and challenges to evangelization."<sup>35</sup> Persons likewise seek interior liberation in an individual and intimate dimension. Hence, the importance of psychology and anthropology. From the perspective of human anthropology it is freedom that makes human existence specifically human. Freedom as a dynamic and existential concept points to a reality that only exists insofar as it is exercised and actualized.<sup>36</sup> The presence of the social sciences in theology does not imply an undue submission of theological reflection to an outside discipline. Theology critically accepts the contribution of the human sciences and then appeals to its own sources.

Having established his understanding of the point of departure of theology being done in Latin America and other

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup>Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 6.

areas of the poor world, Gutiérrez begins the transition to the second act of the theological process: the interpretation of Christian praxis in the light of God's word. History and salvation are inseparably linked together. Grace and nature, God's call and our response are located within a single Christo-finalized history. Within history Jesus became flesh to save us from all forms of enslavement and we are called to communion with God and with our fellow human beings. Liberation theology portrays this in terms of humanization and the building of a just society. Humanization means a movement towards greater human freedom, the essence of what it means to be human. A free society is characterized by peace, justice and love.<sup>37</sup> To build a just society and thus to work for human freedom is a salvific work. Though historical liberating events are salvific events contributing to the growth of the kingdom, they are neither *the* coming of the kingdom nor the *all* of salvation.<sup>38</sup> The complete encounter with the Lord will mark an end to history. Now it is God's gratuitous will that humanity in its historical course should experience life.<sup>39</sup> This integral view of the unity of history and of the liberating intervention of God in history deeply influences the way we talk about God. In a world "come of age" which takes seriously the transformation of human self-understanding

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<sup>37</sup>Gutiérrez stresses that, "The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the kingdom and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities." *A Theology of Liberation*, 96-7.

<sup>38</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 146, (quoting *A Theology of Liberation*, 104).

<sup>39</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 121.

brought about by secularization, Bonhoeffer's question is particularly relevant: "How can we speak of God in this adult world"?<sup>40</sup>

At this point Gutiérrez appeals to Scripture and the magisterium. The exodus of the Jewish people was a social and political liberation, but when we link it to the covenant we see the full religious meaning of the movement. So the event of the exodus is paradigmatic for biblical faith<sup>41</sup> and the deeper meaning of the event--the liberating intervention of God--is permanently valid. Also in *Populorum Progressio* 21, Paul VI illustrates how human history is a complex unity in the explanation of integral human development. This encyclical has helped establish the distinction between the three levels of a single process of liberation. This distinction has appeared in Medellín's document on *Justice*, in which the bishops acknowledge the social significance of liberation in Christ. Gutiérrez concludes,

The Bible and the magisterium are at one in showing us a perspective, forestalling dangers, and, above all, reminding us how all embracing is God's free and gratuitous will that the human race in its historical course should experience life.<sup>42</sup>

So the cycle of praxis and reflection continues. With insights from scripture and the magisterium Gutiérrez returns to the task of liberation and asks how these three levels of integral liberation apply to the situation of the poor in Latin America. He calls the three levels: liberation, freedom

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<sup>40</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 42.

<sup>41</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 119.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

and communion. The first is the social level: liberation from the inhuman state of affairs that is the principal cause of poverty. This means a society based on a proper social understanding rather than on modern individualism.<sup>43</sup> The second is the personal level in which human freedom plays a key role. A change of social structures may help to bring about personal change, but does not automatically bring it about. Persons seek liberation from interior as well as exterior pressures. This is true personal freedom for all, not freedom for some and not for others as results from the individualist viewpoint. Liberation at this level means a "new human being" characterized by interior freedom. The third is the inter-relational level: liberation from sin for communion with God and for human fellowship. While not forgetting that sin is a personal free act, Gutiérrez, in his interpretation emphasizes the social dimension of sin "chiefly because this perspective, based on the faith, enables us to understand better what has happened and is still happening in Latin America."<sup>44</sup> Sin is the negation of love. So communion is a freedom not as an end in itself but for love and service.

Gutiérrez stresses that these three dimensions form part of a single process. "In Latin America we cannot truly love our fellow human beings, and hence God, unless we commit ourselves on the personal level, and in many cases on the structural level as well."<sup>45</sup> He calls this the Chalcedonian

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 139, quoting Puebla no. 327.

Principle: unity without confusion. The challenge is to maintain the distinctions that allow us to understand the various levels of gratuitousness, while at the same time preserving the profound unity of salvation.

In the third part of the essay, entitled "The Liberating Mission of the Church" Gutiérrez addresses the role of the Ecclesial community in liberation in the contemporary world, particularly in Latin America.

He describes the role of the Ecclesial community in interpreting the gospel message of the love of God in the context of the poor. Crucial to this interpretation is his understanding of the deposit of faith as something that "lives on in the church, where it stimulates types of behavior that are faithful to the Lord's will, calls for its proclamation, and provides criteria for discernment in relation to the world in which the church finds itself."<sup>46</sup> Behavior and proclamation both come out of the living deposit of faith. This is the mission of the church to proclaim the saving truth and to bear witness to the total human liberation brought about by Christ.<sup>47</sup>

The understanding of the church's task in this proclamation and witness comes out of a "new reading" of the Bible. The church is the sign of universal salvation, but it must also be a visible sign of the presence of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God cannot be understood apart from the preference Christ shows for the poor as he reveals the Father's

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 141.

universal love. So there is a tension between preference and universality in the Christian message. The church shares in this tension. It must proclaim the universality of God's love and also be a church of the poor. Gutiérrez says that this has been "subject to various and at times disputed interpretations."<sup>48</sup> This is usually due to people interpreting the church's task only in terms of social teaching. He says that a correct interpretation is a theological one that sees the poor in the light of Christ and his reign.<sup>49</sup> Gutiérrez explains this as follows:

The God proclaimed by Jesus Christ is a God whose call is universal and directed to every human being, but *at the same time* a God who has a preferential love for the poor and the dispossessed. The dialectic of universality and particularity is a key to understanding the Christian message and the God who is revealed in it.<sup>50</sup>

So if the church is to be a universal sacrament of salvation in a world characterized by poverty, it must be a church of the poor. Then the expression of God's love becomes solidarity with the poor against poverty.

Discourse about God must have its basis in a life of commitment to the poor and in solidarity with efforts to achieve freedom from the injustice that poverty embodies. The discourse has two languages. There is the mystical language

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., *Truth*, 164.

<sup>49</sup>Gutiérrez writes, "This identification of Christ with the poor (see Mt. 25:31-46) is a principal theme in reflection on the church of the poor. This was the very heart of John XXIII's insight ("the church is, and wants to be"), as developed by Cardinal Lercaro. It is important to call attention to this point because there is a tendency to see the whole issue as a "social problem" and to think that one has grasped the full significance of poverty for the church when one is concerned about social issues." *Truth*, 171.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 166.

about God's presence and God's gratuitous love and also prophetic language about God the liberator who rebels against the unjust death of the poor. "The combination of these two languages will enable us to proclaim the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ."<sup>51</sup> Discourse about God in mystical and prophetic language will be discussed further in the following section on Job.

Seeking to talk about God in word and action is what Gutiérrez means when he says that "our methodology is our spirituality."<sup>52</sup> Reflection on the mystery of God is possible only in the very context of following Jesus. The task of liberation theology is one carried out "while daily sharing the life of a people who are experiencing an especially harsh situation."<sup>53</sup> It is not an activity performed by solitary individuals. He says, "Theology is always an activity carried on in the ecclesial community."<sup>54</sup>

So the agent of this theology is the Christian community. Guided by the Spirit, it seeks to find a way to "talk about God" in its actions and its words. The locus for liberation theology is the committed involvement of Christian people in their mission of proclaiming and witnessing to the kingdom of life. The method is found in the ongoing cycle of reflection and action. McAfee Brown points out that, in fact, theology

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 172.

<sup>52</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: SCM Press, 1984), 136. In other words, discourse on faith is a second stage in relation to the life of faith itself.

<sup>53</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 174.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

is a *second* reflection as "critical reflection on 'reflection and action.'"<sup>55</sup> This second reflection is from a theological perspective--that is, in the light of the word of God.

### **On Job**

One of Gutiérrez's most extended reflections on the Word of God is his book *On Job*, a book dedicated "to the people of Ayacucho who, like Job, suffer unjustly and cry out to the God of life." This work illustrates Gutiérrez's approach both to biblical and theological interpretation. His biblical hermeneutics may be seen in his approach of bringing concerns to scripture and reading scripture in their light. He asks the question, "How are we to talk about God"? More specifically he asks, "How are we to talk about God from within a specific situation--namely, the suffering of the innocent."<sup>56</sup> His aim is to link the Christian life and the word of God. With this in mind, "not only is it legitimate in principle to read the Bible from the standpoint of our deepest and most pressing concerns, . . . it is also true that the Bible reads us and speaks to us."<sup>57</sup> We must be open to hear God speaking to us through the living word of God. With this attitude, our "reading of scripture as members of the church always yields something new and unexpected."

*On Job* is a theological reflection that follows Gutiérrez's method of theological interpretation and illustrates the

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<sup>55</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 76.

<sup>56</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Job*, xviii.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, xvii



way he identifies theological methodology and spirituality as a way of living the experience of faith.<sup>58</sup> The book of Job "and its present day variation" points to a way of living the faith today, raises questions, and looks to the word of God for illumination and response.

Gutiérrez makes two points about the relation of theological interpretation and revelation. The first point concerns the relationship between revelation and gratuitousness. Jesus thanks God for hiding the truth from the wise and understanding and for revealing it to babes (Matt 11,25-26). Here he is going against the accepted religious interpretation of those who were the primary addressees of God's word. The criterion is one of need, not merit or moral disposition. God reaches out in love to the simple and unimportant and gives them preference. This is an important presupposition for Gutiérrez's interpretation of the book of Job.

The second point concerns his way of speaking about God. "We must first establish ourselves on the terrain of spirituality and practice; only subsequently is it possible to formulate discourse on God in an authentic and respectful way. Theology done without the mediation of contemplation and practice does not meet the requirements of the God of the Bible."<sup>59</sup> Contemplation and practice together make up the stage of silence before God. Theology will then be speech enriched by silence. "This reflective discourse will in turn feed the silence of contemplation and practice, and give it

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<sup>58</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 103.

<sup>59</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Job*, xiii.

new dimensions."<sup>60</sup> So by means of the hermeneutical circle the theological process continues. He illustrates this process in his interpretation of the book of Job.

Gustavo raises four key questions being asked of theology that seeks a critical reflection on praxis in the context of Latin America and of other places throughout the world where the situation is the same. They are:

1. How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression.?
2. How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly?
3. How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent?
4. What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?<sup>61</sup>

The suffering of the innocent and the questions it leads them to ask are key problems for theology and Gustavo tries to meet this challenge in his theological work.

In his interpretation of the book of Job he makes the distinction between 'evil of guilt' and 'evil of misfortune.' The suffering of the innocent is an example of the latter. Job, who identifies as a person suffering from undeserved misfortune raises the question of how it is possible to be faithful in the midst of this unjust suffering. Thus Job's

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., xiv.

journey is of particular interest in our suffering world today. The 'wager' in Job is not an intellectual wager addressed to nonbelievers, as was Pascal's. Rather it is a wager addressed to non-persons whose "locale is not a library, but a garbage dump."<sup>62</sup>

As mentioned above, Gutiérrez points to two ways of talking about God. One is the language of prophecy. This is a language that talks about God on the basis of commitment to the poor: from the experience of suffering and injustice. It is a language about God who loves in a special way the disinherited and the exploited of human history. Solidarity with the lot of the marginalized and suffering adds weight to the question about the relationship between a just God and the suffering of the innocent. But this kind of talk about God is inadequate. "Gropingly, and resisting false images he [Job] looks insatiably for a deeper insight into divine justice and an unlimited encounter with the God in whom he believes and hopes."<sup>63</sup>

The second way of talking about God is the language of contemplation. While his friends continue to talk about God, Job addresses himself to God. He comes to realize that God's free and gratuitous love cannot be imprisoned in theological concepts. God is free to love indiscriminately in working for justice. Gutiérrez says that this relationship between justice and gratuitousness "is the key to the interpretation of

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<sup>62</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 79.

<sup>63</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Job*, 49.

the book of Job."<sup>64</sup> Job comes to the conviction that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. Only when we have come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully into the presence of the God of faith.<sup>65</sup> God's love operates in a world not of cause and effect, but of freedom and gratuitousness. In this second stage the issue is not to discover gratuitousness and forget about the demands of justice; rather it is to situate justice within the framework of God's gratuitous love. Only in the perspective of the latter is it possible to understand God's predilection for the poor.<sup>66</sup> The language of an encounter with the love of God is the language of mysticism.

To talk about God these two languages must become one. Gutiérrez says, "Mystical language expresses the gratuitousness of God's love; prophetic language expresses the demands this love makes. The followers of Jesus and the community they form--the church--live in the space created by this gratuitousness and these demands. Both languages are necessary and therefore inseparable."<sup>67</sup> Commitment reveals its ultimate meaning in terms of God's love yet without the prophetic dimension the language of contemplation is in danger of having no grip on the history in which God acts. Gutiérrez says that both languages arise among the poor of Latin America as in Job, out of the suffering and the hopes of the innocent.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 95.

Talk that uses both "calls all human beings together 'as a church' via the privileged choice of the weak and despised of human history."<sup>68</sup> In these languages the author of Job directs us towards the gratuitousness of the Father's love that will be the heart of the proclamation and witness of Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup>

So in answer to the question, How are we to talk about God among the suffering of the innocent? Gutiérrez responds that we can talk about the power of God which is at the same time weakness: the language of the cross which is a synthesis of the prophetic and the contemplative. The message of the cross is communion in suffering and in hope, in the abandonment of loneliness and in trusting self-surrender. If we take seriously the suffering of the innocent and live the mystery of the cross amid that suffering, we will be able to speak out of their hope.

When history's 'losers'--persons like Job--follow in the steps of Jesus, they are seeing to it that the Lord wins his wager. The risks accepted in talking about God with the suffering of the innocent in view are great. But, again like Job, we cannot keep quiet; we must humbly allow the cry of Jesus on the cross to echo through history and nourish our theological efforts.<sup>70</sup>

This is not an exercise in proof-texting, rather the text of Job is considered as containing a revelation for us today. Through the scriptural text Gutiérrez shows how it reveals a God of justice characterized by gratuitous love. The way to do theology--to talk about God--is found in the ongoing cycle

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 103.

of committed Christian life or praxis and reflection in the light of the Word of God.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Gustavo Gutiérrez's method of theological interpretation challenges accepted forms of theology based on dogmatic statements or on speculative knowledge removed from the faith experience of the Christian community. He has helped us rediscover an important dimension especially relevant to our contemporary world: the faith experience of the poor and the oppressed. Furthermore, by interpreting the hermeneutical circle in terms of committed faith (believing) and critical reflection (understanding) he has opened a new way for orthopraxis to dialogue with orthodoxy. This is no superficial change, but a different way of doing theology.

The abandonment of the "Distinction of Planes" model of the church-world relationship<sup>71</sup> in favor of a notion of the unity of history is the key to understanding his theological hermeneutic. There is no pure nature separated from grace and there never has been. There is a single vocation to salvation that values the whole of human history in Christian terms. This notion gives religious value in a new way to human action in history, Christian and non-Christian alike. So social liberation, personal freedom, and freedom from sin for communion with God and for human fellowship are all part of a

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<sup>71</sup>The Distinction of Planes model of the church-world relationship makes a clear differentiation between the church and the world within the unity of God's plan. In this model the church is not responsible for the temporal order. Rather it has two missions: to evangelize and to inspire the temporal sphere.

single complex process that finds its deepest meaning and its fullest realization in the saving event of Christ.

This integral idea of history influences the way we are to think about Revelation. History is one. God continues to reveal Godself and, in fact, is saying something new in our day in the liberation of the person who is poor. Our time is a *καιρος* or moment of heightened revelation both of God and of new ways of being faithful to the word of God. Revelation recorded in scripture was a God-event before it became God's word. Similarly, a committed life of Christian praxis in the context of oppression and liberation allows us to see revelation anew today. In assisting at a new God-event in the liberation of the suffering innocent, we can grasp in a new way the significance of the event-word that is the message of the Bible. Scripture is already an interpretation in the light of faith. Revelation becomes meaningful in our contemporary world in that same faith that receives it. It is not so much scientific method or historical criticism that makes revelation accessible to us today, but faith as interpretive knowledge and the experience of following Jesus Christ in commitment and prayer.

This is the starting point or the "first act" of doing theology. One begins with human concerns that emerge from a lived faith experience. In the first example I gave from Gutiérrez's essay "The Truth Shall Make You Free," he shows how the experience of the poor in Latin America is radically different from that of people in Europe. The poor are living the undesirable consequences of modern individualism in death-

dealing conditions euphemistically called "living conditions." All people search for freedom but in a situation where people are "non-persons"; they search for the freedom to be human, which is liberation, which is life. In the second example, from the book *On Job*, Gutiérrez finds in the situation of the poor the questions that he puts to the scriptural text; questions concerning justice for the suffering innocent; questions concerning divine retribution and the interpretation of misfortune as God's punishment for moral wrongdoing. His initial theological silence allows him to hear the questions from Christian praxis that "talk about God" seeks to answer.

In the "second act" of doing theology Gutiérrez seeks to reflect critically on the praxis of lived faith in the light of God's word. There is a dialogue from history to faith and faith to history (lived experience), from human beings to God and from God (and God's Revelation) to human beings. In the first example he shows how God's Revelation in the Exodus event and in the mission of Jesus Christ provides a new way of thinking about human freedom in terms of liberation, personal freedom and communion. This is the mission of the Ecclesial community to proclaim the kingdom of life. If the Church in its action and its words is to be a visible sign of this message in a world characterized by poverty, it must be a church of the poor. In the second example, Gutiérrez shows how an ancient bible text can speak to us and challenge us today. Job had at first been concerned with his own suffering and the injustice that he felt had been done to him. But the doctrine of retribution did not seem to apply to him. Then he



sees that he is not alone in this. Others too are innocent yet suffer. So he realized that he must enter into solidarity with them. Job begins to free himself from an ethic centered on personal reward and to pass to one focused on the needs of one's neighbor. This point is particularly relevant for the suffering in today's world and provides a basis for one way of talking about God: the language of prophecy.

But Job still has to account for the way injustice seems opposed to the love of God. Using the book of Job, Gutiérrez shows how justice and love are not opposed. The fact that injustice exists shows how God respects human freedom. God is prepared to be weak and to invite us to collaborate in creating justice in our world. God's freedom is found in gratuitous love. Our human freedom means we are free to complain and rebel but ultimately like Job, to change our mind about dust and ashes and to decide to act in justice that is in accord with God's love. This is the basis for talking about God in the language of contemplation. Gutiérrez says,

We need a language rooted in the unjust poverty that surrounds that [sic] vast majorities, but also nurtured by the faith and hope of a people struggling for its liberation. We need a language that is both contemplative and prophetic: contemplative because it ponders a God who is love; prophetic because it talks about a liberator God who rejects the situation of injustice in which the poor live, and also the structural causes of that situation. As was the case in the book of Job, both idioms arise in Third World countries out of the suffering and hope of innocent victims.<sup>72</sup>

As church it is possible to bridge the historical distance between us and the original event of Jesus Christ be-

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<sup>72</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective: Finding Our Way to Talk about God," *Irruption of the Third World*, 232.

cause of Tradition. The deposit of faith handed down in Tradition is a source of identity and a means of continuity for the Christian community today. As a testimony to the event of Jesus Christ, scripture is not a text that immediately surrenders its full meaning to us. But we interpret the scriptural text within the same tradition in which it was formed. There may be many possible interpretations in different times and circumstances, but the living tradition, the subject of which is the interpreting community, ensures a continuity of meaning and identity overcoming the discontinuities that occur through time and cultural distance.

This view lends itself to a self-regulation of faith by the local church in communion with the universal church as a living body in which all members are called to play their part under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A magisterium that ensures a rule of faith by means of juridical authority must be seen as existing within and not contrary to this view of church. The validity of interpretations must be measured, not so much by an intangible content expressed in propositions handed down through the centuries, but through the lasting relationship between God and humankind established in Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. As Gutiérrez writes,

If "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13) and will lead us to complete freedom, the freedom from everything that hinders us from fulfilling ourselves as human beings and offspring of God and the freedom to love and to enter into communion with God and with others. It will lead us along the path of liberation because "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 117.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN EVALUATION OF SOME IMPLICATIONS OF GUTIERREZ'S THEOLOGY

In this chapter I will critically review some aspects of Gutiérrez's theology as described in the previous chapters and then identify some implications pertaining to our understanding of pluriformity in theology, models of church, and the role of theologians. In the review I will focus on two central issues of the current debate dealing with the value and validity of liberation theology. The first issue concerns biblical hermeneutics. Is it true that Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians are reading into the word of God a meaning which it does not contain? The second issue concerns the wider subject of the theological and philosophical presuppositions behind Gutiérrez's insistence on the unity of history. Is it true that such a view fails to recognize the transcendent nature of the human person? Furthermore, does such a view make the distinction between progress and the growth of the kingdom? These are two of the principal issues behind warnings in the two Vatican Instructions: *Libertatis Nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Libertatis Nuntius*. English translation, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation," *Origins* 14:13 (Sept 13, 1984), 193. *Libertatis Conscientia*. English translation, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation," *Origins* 15:44 (April 17, 1986), 714-728. "Between the two documents there exists an organic relationship. They are to be read in the light of each other" (*Libertatis Conscientia* 2).

## Rereading the Word

The Instruction *Libertatis Nuntius* accuses the "theologies of liberation" of uncritically accepting "rationalist exegesis" that puts the "Jesus of history" and the "Jesus of faith" in opposition (X.8). Moreover, it warns against a reductionist rereading of the bible that makes one (political) dimension of scripture the exclusive component (X.5). An authentic theology of liberation, it warns, "will be one which is rooted in the word of God, correctly interpreted" (VI.7). The warning appears again in *Libertatis Conscientia* 70.

A theological reflection developed from a particular experience can constitute a very positive contribution, inasmuch as it makes possible a highlighting of aspects of the word of God, the richness of which had not yet been fully grasped. But in order that this reflection may be truly a reading of the Scripture and not a projection onto the word of God of a meaning which it does not contain, the theologian will be careful to interpret the experience from which he begins in the light of the experience of the church herself."

It is clear that this is an implicit reference to the practice in the theology of liberation of contextualized reflection: reflecting *from*, rather than reflecting *on* scripture.

The root of the difficulty lies in different ways of approaching scripture. It is the difference between a historical-critical approach to scripture and more recent methods that build on the insights characteristic of the social sciences, and philosophical hermeneutics such as that of Gadamer or Ricoeur. Sandra

Schneiders points out that the difference is an epistemological one. Since the Middle Ages there has been a progressive movement away from the idea that knowledge is the reproduction in the knower of an independent "object" toward

the idea that understanding is a dialogical process of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of a hermeneutical approach to the text is one of the more recent developments in this movement.

The primary difference between the interpretive approach to texts and the classical approach in biblical criticism lies in the understanding of what the text is. For the latter, the text is a repository of stable content that has a meaning independent of the interpreter and it is the work of the scholar to uncover that meaning. In contrast, the interpretive hermeneutic views the text as a mediation of meaning, and the reader's task is not to find out what the author was trying to say so much as to understand what the text actually says. In other words, the meaning of a text is not contained in the text independently of the interpreter. The understanding of the reader is what gives meaning to the text.<sup>3</sup> So a text can have many meanings, all of which may be "true."<sup>4</sup> This presents a methodological problem. How is one to prevent every interpreter from reading into the text his or her own interests? Hence the cautionary statement in *Libertatis*

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<sup>2</sup>Sandra Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies* 39,4 (December 1978), 729.

<sup>3</sup>Schneiders gives the example (from Gadamer) of a musical text. She says, "The text functions like a musical composition, which cannot be rendered except by genuine fidelity to the score, but which will be rendered differently by each artist. . . . The understanding of the reader is . . . constitutive (although not exclusively so) of the meaning of the text, as the interpretation of the artist is constitutive of the music. The score by itself is a normative possibility of meaning. It must be actualized by the interpreter." "Faith, Hermeneutics and the Literal Sense of Scripture," 731-2.

<sup>4</sup>This does not mean, of course, that a text can have any meaning that one chooses. The Scriptural interpretation remains always under the judgment of the text and of the faith tradition of the Church.

*Conscientia* about projecting onto the word of God meanings that it does not contain.

Gutiérrez's interpretive approach is evident in the way he tries to engage the question behind the biblical text. Behind the text is a question which evoked it and that question may challenge the contemporary reader through the text. He says, "The scriptures are not a passive store of answers to our questions. We indeed read the Bible, but we can also say that the Bible 'reads us.' In many instances, our very questions will be reformulated."<sup>5</sup> In the previous chapter, I studied at length his response to the question: How can we talk of God in the face of the suffering of the innocent? Gutiérrez allows himself to be engaged by the question and to make it his own. The question then becomes: If we talk of God in terms of justice and gratuitousness, what are the implications for us?<sup>6</sup> In his book *On Job*, Gutiérrez replies that we must be prepared to live the mystery of the cross amid suffering. From the hope of the suffering innocent we will be able to speak of the power of God which is at the same time weakness. Other responses are possible, but this is a valid response to the reading of the text. The writers of *Libertatis Nuntius* and *Libertatis Conscientia* point out that there is a danger of incorrect interpretation when we are not primarily concerned

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<sup>5</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 34.

<sup>6</sup>Sandra Schneiders says, "We must engage the text's questions so as to illuminate our world with its insights and allow our new questions about the same subject matter to extract from the text the riches which are grounded in the author's intention but which can only emerge in a later event of meaning." "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture." *Horizons* 8,1 (1981), 37.

with historical data but with proclaiming one's own faith convictions to a faith community and the plurality of valid responses that this implies.<sup>7</sup>

In his reply to *Libertatis Conscientia*, Gutiérrez refers to characteristics of the Semitic mentality behind formulations of biblical truth. It is inappropriate to try to discover the mind of the Semitic author using categories of truth from the Greek world and Western philosophy. "Truth in the scriptures is a relation not between things and concepts but between promise and fulfillment."<sup>8</sup> So there is an essential theological and philosophical dimension to the study of scriptural truth. The task of theological reflection today is to discern the fulfillment of the promise in the light of faith that is lived and shared in the communion of the Church. The experience of the Church both past and present is essential. Christian truths need to be lived if they are to be stated correctly and in a more than superficial way.<sup>9</sup> By incorporating the experience of lived faith in our reading of the Scripture, the scriptural text will in turn enlighten our way in our journey toward the fulfillment of the promise. The challenge to theology is to preserve the circular relationship

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<sup>7</sup>Schneiders says that an openness to a plurality of valid responses is not new. "Patristic, and especially medieval exegesis with its interpretive theory of the plurality of levels of meaning in the text, were quite sensitive to the very problem Gadamer raises. However, the medievals did not have the same scientific capacity to recover the original meaning of the text that we do." "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 37.

<sup>8</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 94.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

between orthodoxy and orthopraxis: between right thinking and right practice and the nourishment of each by the other.<sup>10</sup>

Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo claims the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis in liberation theology reintroduces the hermeneutical circle to the world of academic theology that has worked with a hermeneutical arc rather than a circle. Academic theology infers its responses from an atemporal perspective and applies these responses to the situation. In contrast, liberation theology begins with the situation, puts questions to revelation, and finds responses to illumine the situation, thus completing the circle. In this way, according to Segundo, the theology of liberation is bringing about a "liberation of theology."<sup>11</sup>

While it is true that liberation theology is opening up new possibilities in theology today, these developments are not confined solely to liberation theology. The whole interpretive approach to scripture and tradition is revealing ways for ordinary Christians to correctly interpret scripture.

Sandra Schneiders observes,

If . . . the literal meaning of the text is seen to be its religious meaning actualized in innumerable ways and at varying depths throughout Christian history as the faith-structured consciousness of the believer dialogues with the revealing God through the mediation of the inspired text, then it is available in varying degrees of fullness to all believers. The role of the exegete becomes the servant of the understanding of the community.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Rosino Gibellini, *The Liberation Theology Debate*, trans. John Bowden (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 11.

<sup>12</sup>Sandra Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," 735.



It is possible for any normal member of the Christian faith community to grasp at least the basic meaning of the biblical text. This is a source of hope for Gutiérrez who sees in the development of base-level ecclesial communities a manifestation of church, with roots deep in scripture. In this way liberation theology brings the gospel closer to the poor and the poor closer to the gospel. This is the "circular relationship" in the spirituality developing in these communities. He says, "Our experiences in the framework of commitment to the poor and the oppressed of Latin America are sending us back to the fundamental ideas of the gospels . . . . These experiences are suggesting new approaches and raising new questions."<sup>13</sup>

### Unity of History

An issue raised in both *Libertatis Nuntius* and *Libertatis Conscientia* is the relation between human progress and Christian salvation. This is an important and complex theological issue, one that must be faced in any honest appreciation of Gutiérrez's theology. It is a presupposition that underlies much of the previous discussion on the Christian text and its context, and especially affects our understanding of the role of the church community today.

In *Libertatis Nuntius* we read that liberation theology reflects a "historicist immanentism" in its claim that there is only one history. "Thus there is a tendency to identify

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<sup>13</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 93. He quotes from a homily of John Paul II at Salvador, Bahia, "In varying concrete situations it rereads these texts and scrutinizes the message they contain, in the desire of discovering a new application for them." *Drink* 160, note 6.

the kingdom of God and its growth with the human liberation movement and to make history itself the subject of its own development" (IX.3). As a consequence the virtues of faith, hope and charity become emptied of their theological reality (IX.5). This is a secularization of the kingdom of God and its absorption into the immanence of human history (X.6).<sup>14</sup>

The Instruction *Libertatis Conscientia* makes an indirect reference to Marxist communism in which new forms of servitude have "ignored the transcendental vocation of the human person and attributed to man a purely earthly destiny" (13). Further on in the document, referring to the kingdom of God ("here below" [sic] (58)), it is pointed out that we must make a careful distinction between "earthly progress and the growth of the kingdom which do not belong to the same order" (60). We must be aware not only of the unity but also of the distinction between evangelization and human promotion. The Church's mission must never be reduced to the promotion of justice (64), or to a "purely earthly plan of liberation" (98). Behind these warnings is the fear that a tendency towards historicist immanentism is trying to integrate theology with an analysis of history that is essentially Marxist, (VII.9) or at least with theories about the freedom of human-kind that tend towards atheism by their own logic (27).

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<sup>14</sup>The words of Paul VI cited in the Conclusion to *Libertatis Nuntius* are an illustration of what Gutiérrez calls the "Two Planes Theory," that draws a clear distinction between the Church and the world. "We profess our faith that the kingdom of God, begun here *below* in the church of Christ, *is not of this world*, whose form is passing away, and that *its own growth cannot be confused with the progress of civilization, of science, of human technology*, but that it consists in knowing ever more deeply the unfathomable riches of Christ, . . ." (Italics added).

These warnings demonstrate either a radical difference of opinion between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and liberation theology or a gross misrepresentation of the latter. How does Gustavo Gutiérrez respond to these warnings?

In response to *Libertatis Nuntius*, Gutiérrez says that "liberation cannot be reduced to its sociopolitical dimensions, no matter how important they are."<sup>15</sup> Liberation in Christ is, above all, liberation from the fundamental root of social injustice: sin. He adds, "I can say in conscience that the excesses referred to in the *Instruction* are not found in what I have written."<sup>16</sup> In his response to *Libertatis Conscientia*, Gutiérrez explains his position in greater detail. While stressing the unity of history, he insists that this does not mean that we may not make distinctions needed to avoid confusion. One must distinguish between nature and grace. If there were no distinction, then one could not show the close link between them. The distinction is a theoretical one and does not refer to two juxtaposed "orders": a history of nature and another history of grace. Our history is one because "He [God the Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1,4).<sup>17</sup> This "before" does not indicate a chronological precedence, but a precedence of meaning and finality. So we live in "a 'Christo-finalized'

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<sup>15</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "In Reply to the Vatican 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation.'" *LADOC* XV,3 (January/February 1985), 5.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 125.

history."<sup>18</sup> Salvation begins with history which thus becomes a way to a fullness that lies beyond it.<sup>19</sup> He gives the example of the Exodus. The event of the Exodus is within history, but the *deeper meaning* goes beyond history.<sup>20</sup> The sociopolitical movement in history was the saving event, but the ultimate meaning lies in the liberating intervention of God which is permanently valid.<sup>21</sup> A similar notion applies to human fulfillment. He says that we become fully human, not by *reducing* God's gifts (of faith, hope and charity) to a purely human level, but through elevation to the "order of grace." I note that Gutiérrez reintroduces the term "order" here. He admits that a major difficulty is in finding the right categories to think through and express adequately this question of grace and God's action in history.<sup>22</sup> Gutiérrez further explains, "The truth is, we are dealing here with a theological question that is open to discussion and still not worked through completely."<sup>23</sup> While this is true, it remains that Gustavo Gutiérrez and others in liberation theology need to further develop a theology of grace and history. Since it is a much debated question today, it is not enough to presume

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<sup>18</sup>Gutiérrez is quoting *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 86, and referring to *Gaudium et Spes* 45.

<sup>19</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 105.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>22</sup>He notes that this is a live issue in contemporary theology and not the private possession of liberation theology. He cites the names of scholars like Yves de Montcheuil, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Juan Alfaro and others. *Truth*, 124.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

that their starting point is clearly understood and accepted. While the debate continues and while the categories remain inadequate, there will be recurrent accusations and demands for clarification.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to the two Vatican Instructions considered above, the International Theological Commission (CTI) met to study the phenomenon of liberation theology with a sub-committee presided over by Karl Lehmann. A document from the sub-committee entitled "Human Development and Christian Salvation" provides a report on their investigations. They recognize that "the unifying connection and the difference in the relationship between human development and Christian salvation in their existential shape indeed demand further serious research."<sup>25</sup> The document acknowledges a certain harmony between eschatological salvation and the human effort to build a better world. However the emphasis is on the distinction between them. In its perfection eschatological fulfillment takes away existential history, and the kingdom of God "utterly transcends all the possibilities of earthly fulfillment." They conclude that we have here two lasting principles, one of unity and the other of discontinuity which "cannot be dis-

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<sup>24</sup>Juan Luis Segundo provides an interesting perspective on the debate in his book, *Theology and the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985). He says that the theology of *Libertatis Nuntius* is a "very precise theology in which the religious and the secular are opposed to the point of seeming to exclude a revelation of God whose glory is, according to Irenaeus . . . humanized man (p. 64). It is a "different" theological interpretation, based on "a kind of textbook Platonism" (p. 28), where the invisible is the root of reality--the realm of causes, which is opposed to the visible where the consequences flourish. Segundo says that talking in terms of "sin" (invisible) is missing the point because it is using a "religious" language to answer a secular question that "begs for answers of the same order" (p. 29).

<sup>25</sup>*International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents, 1969-1985*, ed. Rev. Michael Sharkey (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 157.

solved and ought not to be removed. . . . The relationship between God's Kingdom and history cannot be described as either a monism or a dualism, and so from the very nature of this relationship we have to hold its definition in abeyance."<sup>26</sup>

Roger Haight, in his book *An Alternative Vision*, points out how the question of human development and salvation must be taken in the broader theological context of the action of grace and God's Spirit. Grace overcomes the determinism and obstacles to freedom and directs freedom towards its exercise in the word and history. God's Spirit does not draw human freedom out of the world, but draws it into history and society towards the liberation of others.<sup>27</sup> Thus the effects of the liberating action of the Spirit in human existence is seen in the effects of grace in history in a collective history of liberation. This theory of the action of grace is not based on an extrinsicist notion whereby grace is laid on top of the order of creation or nature. Rather grace is embedded in the order of creation as its deepest intention, dynamism and goal.<sup>28</sup> Grace, while distinct from our created nature, is intrinsic to human existence as an always present offer of God's self.<sup>29</sup> So salvation is not a transformation of a rei-

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>27</sup>Roger Haight is basing his comments mostly on the works of Juan Luis Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition*, and Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace. An Alternative Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>29</sup> Much of this depends on Karl Rahner's theory of the *supernatural existential*.

fied human nature that occurred all at once and was completed in a single past event. Rather salvation is an ongoing process that is existential and historical. There is one human history, not two. It is a single history characterized by both sin and grace at the same time.

This view of the action of grace provides a basis for a Christian spirituality of the way to live as a Christian. A significant contribution of liberation theology is the way it applies this theory. The logic of history is not part of a prefabricated plan of a predetermined providence being unfolded. Rather history's meaning is created for us by ourselves as we move out of the past into the future. Hence the importance of praxis as "behavior that is a participation in this movement of history; it is a praxis or behavior or struggle to increase freedom in society."<sup>30</sup>

This is the response of liberation theology to the question of where to enter the hermeneutical circle: at the point of faith or the point of praxis. Entry is through praxis because Christian salvation in history cannot be separated from its actuality and the actuality is apparent in praxis.

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<sup>30</sup>Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision*, 41.

## Pluriformity or Relativism

Can there be legitimate pluriformity in theology and doctrine?<sup>31</sup> An answer to this question is implied in Gutiérrez's insistence on starting from the praxis of committed faith. Christian praxis is where one gives meaning to the Christian message and where that message is verified. Once one begins to take seriously the particularity of definite situations one becomes open to the variety of unique experiences in the local church.

Some critics accuse liberation theology of rereading history and tradition from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed to the exclusion of other points of view. Behind warnings about reading into the Bible what it does not contain is the concern that any new reading of the Bible from a perspective of commitment to the poor means that "neutrality" is impossible, and implies a "bias" that blinds one to

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<sup>31</sup>It is important to be precise with the use of the words *pluralism*, *plurality*, and *pluriformity*. In the book *Jesus Christ and His Spirit (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977)*, James Dupuis, referring to the principle: "Unity of faith, dogmatic pluralism," says, "'Pluralism,' as opposed to plurality, is used to indicate that divergences in the enunciation of the faith are not merely to be tolerated as an unavoidable fact, but to be welcomed on principle" (p. 61). The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops refers to the principle of "variety and pluriformity in unity" (C.2), saying, ". . . it is necessary to distinguish pluriformity from pure pluralism. When pluriformity is true richness and carries with it fullness, this is true catholicity. Pluralism of fundamentally opposed positions instead leads to dissolution, destruction and loss of identity." *Origins* 15:17 (December 19, 1985), p. 448. The recent document from the CTI, "On the Interpretation of Dogmas" refers to the 1972 commentary on "Unity of the faith and theological Pluralism" (in Italian in *Pluralismo* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1974)). In that commentary the principal concern is to preserve unity in the communion of the Church. It warns that "When Christian teaching is presented in a seriously ambiguous way . . . the Church has the right to identify the error as such as well as the duty to eliminate it. . . ." "A Christianity which would be downright incapable of saying what it is and what it is not or where its limits are would no longer have anything to say." Quoted from *Origins* 20:1 (May 17, 1990), 12-13. The issue is clearly that of pluriformity while preserving unity. Gustavo Gutiérrez does not enter explicitly into the debate on terminology. I will use the more neutral term *pluriformity* here, realizing that the issue of terminology and its significance is still being debated.



the full truth.<sup>32</sup> Some liberation theologians reply that neutrality is an illusion that allows theologians of the West to prevent the Bible from revealing its own subversive message. "Once we have established the possibility of different 'meanings' each as acceptable as any other, then Scripture cannot challenge the West," says José Miranda.<sup>33</sup>

Others accuse liberation theology of opening theology to a dialectic and relativistic conception of the truth that exposes us to arbitrary decision making. The *depositum fidei* "must be loyally preserved in its purity, without falling along the line of a dialectical process of history and in the direction of the primacy of praxis."<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand liberation theology is accused of a particularist bias, and on the other, of dogmatic relativism. Yet the issue behind these accusations concerns doctrinal and theological pluriformity and the recognition that the content of truth cannot be isolated from a certain perception of reality.

In recent years there has been a gradual change in the official Catholic Church attitude towards the influence of historical and cultural factors on our understanding of the truth. For example, *Ad Gentes* reveals new possibilities for the recognition of *cultural* pluralism within the unity of

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<sup>32</sup>Gutiérrez replies, "It is not possible to remain neutral in the face of poverty." *A Theology of Liberation*, revised edition, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 159.

<sup>33</sup>José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).

<sup>34</sup>"Reply to Leonardo Boff," *Origins* 14:42 (April 4, 1985), 686.

faith.<sup>35</sup> Recognition of theological and doctrinal pluriformity has not come as quickly. At the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII said, "the deposit of faith, that is the truths contained in it, are one thing, the manner of formulating these truths, while keeping the same sense and the same meaning is another."<sup>36</sup> This idea was later incorporated into *Gaudium et Spes* 62. In *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith acknowledged the possibility of historical conditioning in dogmatic formulas. It distinguished formulas which may change, from their meaning which "remains ever true and constant."<sup>37</sup>

More recently (1990), the CTI has published a document "On the Interpretation of Dogmas,"<sup>38</sup> which discusses how dogmas can be understood in the context of contemporary hermeneutical theology. The Commission sees a theoretical difference between the content of dogmas and their formulation, but points out how in practice no clear-cut separation can be made between the content and form of the statement (C.III.3).

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<sup>35</sup>"It is necessary that in each of the great socio-cultural regions, as they are called, theological investigation should be encouraged and the facts and words revealed by God, contained in sacred Scripture, and explained by the Fathers and the Magisterium of the Church, submitted to a new examination in the light of the tradition of the Universal Church. In this way it will be more clearly understood by what means the faith can be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people, and how their customs, concept of life and social structures can be reconciled with the standard proposed by divine revelation." *Ad Gentes* 22.

<sup>36</sup>AAS 54 (1962), 792.

<sup>37</sup>*Mysterium Ecclesiae* 160-162. Quoted from *The Christian Faith*. Revised edition. Eds. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (London: Collins, 1988), 60-61,

<sup>38</sup>International Theological Commission, "On the Interpretation of Dogmas," *Origins* 20:1 (May 17, 1990), 2-14.

Expressions of faith are not to be revised if one does not wish to lose sight of the "reality" manifest in them. So the truth of revelation nevertheless remains always the same "not only in its real substance (content), but also in its decisive linguistic formulations" (C.III.3). The Commission's main concern is that the unity and catholicity of faith be strengthened and promoted, "as a sign as well as an instrument of the unity and peace of the world" (C.III.6).

Not all would agree with the CTI findings. Some might argue to the contrary that the close link between content and formulation shows that relativism is unavoidable. In a reply to *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, Karl Rahner said that if there can ever be dogmatic formulations using historically conditioned terminology, then it is not difficult theologically to concede this to all theological statements. Whether this happens sometimes, or is really always so is a question of dogmatic and theological history with no essential theological relevance.<sup>39</sup>

The basic problem, as noted by the CTI, is how we can take seriously the hermeneutical circle between subject and object without falling into a relativism in which there are only interpretations of interpretations. Is there an absolute claim exerted by truth? Are there statements that can be affirmed or denied in all cultures and in all historical situations? The fundamental question is the relation between truth and history. Having pointed out the inadequacies of

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<sup>39</sup>Karl Rahner, "Mysterium Ecclesiae" *Theological Investigations XVII*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 150.

various types of hermeneutics such as positivist, anthropocentric, and cultural hermeneutics, the CTI proposes "metaphysical hermeneutics" as the way to the truth of reality itself. "It takes as a premise that truth reveals itself in and through human reason, so that the truth of reality itself shines in the light of human reason" (A.I.3). According to the CTI, this is the weakness of some forms of liberation theology that "shift the hermeneutical center from the truth of being . . . as a source of meaning to an element [socioeconomic reality] which is legitimate in itself but which is also specific and which is then made the center and criterion of the whole" (A.II.3). The problem also involves "the question regarding unity and pluriformity in the dogmatic interpretation of the truth and reality of revelation" (A.II.3).

As I have shown previously, Gustavo Gutiérrez does not agree that truth is the reserve of rationality. Most recent European theology has been a response to the challenge of the enlightenment, symbolized by Kant. From this perspective, liberation is seen as the freeing of reason from authoritarianism for rationality. In contrast, Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians orient themselves to the second moment of the Enlightenment, symbolized by Marx. Liberation is seen as the freeing of reality from suffering, and the basic intent is not rationality but transformation.<sup>40</sup> The problem for liberation theology is not the "death of God," but the death of humankind.

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<sup>40</sup>The distinction is made by Alfred Henneley, "Theological Method: The Southern Exposure," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977), 720.

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A possible solution is provided by the CTI when it says that the contemporary interpretation of dogmas is really a problem of theory and praxis (B.III.4), and must take place *in and through* the whole life of the Church (C.III.2). This is true in both a synchronic and diachronic sense. Church tradition can be interpreted in the life and the times in which it was formulated and according to the questions which it sought to answer. This is basically what liberation theologians are trying to do--to interpret the tradition from within the new life and times in which they live. However, they insist that one begin with the life and times of the contemporary experience of church. This requires a radical reinterpretation of that experience in order to mediate past and present and to mediate between the different cultural experiences today.

In its effort to do theology in and through the life of the church community, liberation theology raises questions about how church documents can be imprisoned in a Western frame of thinking. First world theologians, says Aloysius Pieris, tend to universalize and absolutize their paradigm, unmindful of its contextual particularity and ideological limitations.<sup>41</sup> Eminent theologians criticize liberation theology as coming from a particularized perspective, yet firmly believing that theirs is based on transcendent universal principles valid for all times and all situations. Turning the argument back onto the critics, Pieris says, "at the root

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<sup>41</sup>Aloysius Pieris, "Human Rights Language and Liberation Theology," in *The Future of Liberation Theology*, eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 299.

of the argument against liberation theology there is more ideology than theology at work."<sup>42</sup>

Gutiérrez too argues for the recognition of opinions from diverse perspectives. When he writes that the poor have a right to think, Gutiérrez is saying that the world has changed and it is a geographical anachronism to think of theologizing from the geopolitical center of the world. What is perceived from the "center" as a challenge to authority may be seen as a call for restructuring of the relationship between the "center" and the "periphery". In the spirit of emancipation, the churches of the Third World want to be partners in dialogue rather than obedient younger siblings.<sup>43</sup> From the liberation perspective it is the periphery (the poor) or what is happening on the periphery that is now the privileged place for theological understanding.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the CTI stress catholicity in unity. Liberation theologians claim that true catholicity is found in universal openness to particular situations.<sup>44</sup> The debate is both theological and

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 307.

<sup>43</sup>Francois Houtart, "Theoretical and Institutional Bases of the Opposition to Liberation Theology." In *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 270.

<sup>44</sup>This point receives support from Europe in a recent book by Edward Schillebeeckx. He says, "Sadly, the institutional church has had a tendency to universalize precisely its non-universal, historically inherited, particular features tied up with a particular culture and time, and to apply them uniformly to the whole of the Catholic world: in catechesis (think of the 'world catechism'), in liturgy and in church order, also in theology and until recently even in a uniform language (Latin). However, universality--which in Greek is 'catholicity'--means that the Christian faith is open (critically) to all, to every people and to every culture. . . . Now within the present context of grinding structural world poverty, the universal openness and universal challenge of the message of the gospel takes on a very specific social dimension and as it were a new context. I am inspired to say this above all by Latin American, Asian and African forms of liberation theology, and for a long time this has also been a theme of my own theological quest.

epistemological. Speculative knowledge and truth based on metaphysics is being called into question by a theology based on Christian praxis. The importance given to praxis as a *locus theologicus* involves a significant change in the understanding of theological method. As we begin to take seriously the practice that is peculiar to the local church insofar as it is conditioned by culture and specific historical movements, we may have to abandon the illusory ideal of a universal theology valid for all and continue to search for an acceptable pluriformity in theology and doctrine.<sup>45</sup>

### **Models of Church**

One of the reasons why there exist such different opinions is not only differences in philosophical presuppositions but also different perceptions of church and the role of the church community in the theological process. This leads to situations where people talk past each other.

It is possible to distinguish various "models" of church today.<sup>46</sup> Two common models are those of the church as institution and church as community.<sup>47</sup> The institutional model emphasizes continuity, unity and universality, while the community model emphasizes openness to change, diversity and particularity. While they are barely reconcilable, sufficient

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*Church: The Human Story of God*, (London, SCM Press, 1990), 169.

<sup>45</sup>This point is made by Claude Geffré, *The Risk of Interpretation* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1987), 266-268. He is referring to pluralism.

<sup>46</sup>Avery Dulles, *Models of Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

<sup>47</sup>John Fuellenbach, *Hermeneutics, Marxism and Liberation Theology* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1989), 133.



evidence can be found in the texts of the Second Vatican Council to support either or both of these models.<sup>48</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez's follows a community model of church.<sup>49</sup> He calls for a "new ecclesial consciousness" and a "redefinition of the task of the church in a world in which it is not only *present*, but of which it *forms a part*. The change from a church-centered viewpoint to one on service of others involves an "uncentering" of the Church. The goal of the Church's task is *communion*: with God and with others. The term for communion--*κοινωνία*--designates three realities: the common ownership of goods (Acts 2,44), the union of Christians with the Father (1 John 1,6), the Son (1 Cor 1,9), and with the Spirit (2 Cor 13,14), and the union of the faithful with Christ through the Eucharist (1 Cor 10,16).<sup>50</sup> Where he makes a distinctive contribution is in linking church as communion with the abolition of injustice. He says that the church as sacrament must be an efficacious sign of communion as "an intrahistorical reality."<sup>51</sup> In the situation of poverty and injustice today "communion with God and others presupposes the

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<sup>48</sup>Leonardo Boff, "Which Way for the Church," *The Tablet* (London, 1 Dec. 1990): 1566. Boff explains how the formation of conciliar texts is a matter of consensus, and minority views often appear in a text for the sake of unity. So it is possible to read pastoral texts in a dogmatic way, pointing to texts that were introduced by a minority group into a document drawn up by a progressive majority.

<sup>49</sup>This is a generalization because, for instance, the prophetic dimension is also important.

<sup>50</sup>Gutiérrez takes this definition of *koinonia* from Yves Congar, "Les biens temporels de l'Église d'après sa tradition théologique et canonique," in *Église et pauvreté*, 247-49.

<sup>51</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 147.

abolition of all injustice and exploitation.<sup>52</sup> Without a real commitment to a society of solidarity and justice "the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action."<sup>53</sup>

Recent church documents frequently refer to the church as communion. The 1974 Synod of bishops, devoted to the theme of evangelization, announced that "the universal Church is the communion of local churches, over which the Roman Church and its bishop presides as the principle of unity and the bond of universal charity."<sup>54</sup> The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops reflected further on the term, stating in their final report that "much was done by the Second Vatican Council so that the church as communion might be more clearly understood and concretely incorporated into life. What does the complex word *communion* mean? (II.C.1.)<sup>55</sup> They go on to define communion to show how the ecclesiology of communion is the foundation for a correct relationship between unity and pluriformity in the Church.

The discussion on the church as communion has created interest in several other related topics, namely, collegiality, subsidiarity, the theological status and jurisdiction of episcopal conferences and participation and co-responsibility

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>54</sup>Giovanni Caprile, *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi: Terza Assemblea Generale* (Roma: La Civiltà Cattolica, 1975), 939-940. Cited in Joseph A. Komonchak, "Subsidiarity in the Church: The State of the Question." *The Jurist* 48 (1988), 318.

<sup>55</sup>"The Final Report", *Origins* 15:27 (December 19, 1985), 448.

in the Church.<sup>56</sup> The debate is significant for this study because it raises the question of the status and autonomy of the "local church", decentralization in the Church, co-responsibility and the participation of church members at all levels. It is particularly relevant to the emerging basic communities. On this topic the Final Report of the 1985 Synod says, "Because the church is communion, the new "basic communities," if they truly live in unity with the Church, are a true expression of communion and a means for the construction of a more profound communion. They are the cause for great hope for the life of the Church (II.C.6).

Gustavo Gutiérrez would not agree that the basic communities are entirely "new." He sees it in terms of a return to the posture of the Church in the first centuries.<sup>57</sup> In their study of the signs of the times and in their reflective and critical response to specific situations, the basic ecclesial communities are trying to be faithful to the Gospel. Sometimes it appears that the Gospel is being announced in a way that "seems to border on submersion into the purely historical realm"<sup>58</sup> But in fact the Christian message is being

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<sup>56</sup>See "The Final Report" of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops: collegiality (C.4), episcopal conferences (C.5), participation and co-responsibility in the church (C.6). *Origins* 15:27 (December 19, 1985), 448-449. The report calls for a study of the theological "status" of episcopal conferences and also whether the principle of subsidiarity in use in human society can be applied to the church and to what degree and in what sense. Also the whole issue of *The Jurist* XLVIII (1988), with papers from a special colloquium on the nature and future of episcopal conferences held at Salamanca, Spain on Jan. 3-8, 1988. Also Peter Leisching, "Conferences of Bishops," *Concilium* 4 (1990) 79-87.

<sup>57</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 145. "What was spontaneously and intuitively expressed in the first centuries must manifest itself today in a more reflective and critical fashion."

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.

incarnated--not lost--in our here and now.<sup>59</sup> In these communities the truth of the Gospel is not simply a "text," but "a truth which must be done."<sup>60</sup> Through this Christian praxis the oppressed themselves become a "real presence" in the Church and agents of their own pastoral activity. Developments are rapid and unpredictable. In such changing circumstances it is difficult to establish specific guidelines. As Gutiérrez says, "Some chapters of theology can be written only afterwards."<sup>61</sup>

The incarnation of the Gospel at the level of the local church is significant for the transmission of tradition today. The CTI document "On the Interpretation of Dogma" points out how

The Tradition (*paradosis*) ultimately is the self-communication of God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit ever anew in the communion of the church. This living tradition has from the outset taken on manifold forms of individual traditions (*traditiones*) in the church. Its inexhaustible richness expresses itself through a great number of teachings, hymns, symbols, rites, disciplinary practices and institutions. The tradition also proves its fruitfulness through the fact that, in accord with the specific cultural situation, it inculturates itself in individual local churches (C.II.2).

This is acknowledged as part of the Spirit's leading the Church into truth as the faith takes form in the different traditions of the local churches.

Though he does not explicitly use the term, I think Gutiérrez is in accord with a theme that is being discussed in

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 155.

relation to the working of the Spirit in the Church today. The discussion concerns the *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium* in the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 12 tells us that the entire people of God have a share in the prophetic office of Christ and that with the assistance of the Holy Spirit there is growth in the Church in its understanding of the apostolic tradition (*Dei Verbum* 8).<sup>62</sup> The recent CTI document "On the Interpretation of Dogmas" refers to the "*consensus fidelium*" in which "God's people 'from the bishops to the last believing lay person' express their universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (C.II.4).<sup>63</sup> The same document states how the Gospel has not been handed down to the Church merely in the form of lifeless documents but written in the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit. In this way it is present in the communion of the church in the latter's teachings, its life and in the liturgy (C.II.1).

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<sup>62</sup>Another significant reference to these terms is in the theses of the CTI (1976) on the relationship between the magisterium and theology. In thesis 3 it is acknowledged that both magisterium and theologians should draw on what the Word of God has communicated to the Church "*e communi sensu fidelium*."

<sup>63</sup>In a prior section (C.II.1) the same document refers to the *sensus fidelium* as "that inner sense by which God's people under the guidance of the church's magisterium acknowledges, assents to and firmly adheres to *what* is proclaimed--and this is not as to the world of human beings but to God's own word." It seems to me that this interpretation of the term is quite different from the intention of Newman who brought the term into usage in recent times and to whom the document makes extensive reference in a later section. He used the term *sensus fidelium* in terms of the tradition being proclaimed and maintained by the "faithful" rather than by the episcopate during the Arian controversy. The faithfuls' "consensus" is an indication of the judgment of the church which is infallible because of the Holy Spirit working in the *sensus fidelium* in the depths of the church. John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Laity in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 77.

Inspired by the Spirit, we discover a "spirituality" or a definite way of living the Gospel.<sup>64</sup> In the Spirit we are set free and in the final analysis "to set free means to give life, and life signifies communion with God and with others."<sup>65</sup> This communion is a sign of the fullness of the kingdom of God. Walking in the Spirit means following Jesus in history, struggling for unity against the causes of division. "Reflection on the mystery of God (for that is what a theology is) is possible only in the context of the following of Jesus. Only when one is walking according to the Spirit can one think and proclaim the gratuitous love of the Father for every human being."<sup>66</sup> The universal level of church is not forgotten, nor the idea that the universal church is a communion of local churches and arises in and out of them. In union with the universal church and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the local church has the task of interpreting the Gospel in their situation and at their level so that universal Christian love may become a vital energy in the day-to-day lives of people. In this way the community called church "will be an authentic and effective sign of unity under the universal love of God."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Gutiérrez writes, "Spirituality, in the strict and profound sense of the word, is the dominion of the Spirit. If "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13) and will lead us to complete freedom, the freedom from everything that hinders us from fulfilling ourselves as human beings and offspring of God and the freedom to love and to enter into communion with God and with others." *Liberation*, 117.

<sup>65</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 15.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>67</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 161.

## The Role of the Theologian

Gustavo Gutiérrez is defending people's right to think their own thoughts and to ponder in their own terms the reality of their faith in a liberating God. The outcome is a shift in our approach to doing theology. According to Gutiérrez, "It must increasingly be linked up with the human and Christian experiences of our people, which in turn must be measured against the Bible, Church tradition, and contemporary theological awareness."<sup>68</sup> Personal effort is submerged in a "collective adventure" and in the broadest and most basic sense, every Christian is a theologian.<sup>69</sup> Is there a place for a professional theologian, and how does such a person relate to the Christian community?

Clearly for Gutiérrez, a prerequisite for doing theology is being a part of the locus for theological reflection, which is the struggle of the poor and the oppressed. "One is a theologian insofar as one is linked to the life and commitments of a Christian community. Only with such a community does one have a theological function to carry out."<sup>70</sup> Theology must be a response to real questions raised in the contemporary world and the Christian community living in it. Theological reflection will only be alive and demanding if we

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<sup>68</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective," 231.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

"keep our feet solidly planted on the earth that gives theology its life."<sup>71</sup>

I think Gutiérrez demonstrates the specialized role of the theologian in at least four ways: facilitator of critical consciousness in the Church, resource person pointing to the sources of revelation and history, person accompanying the community in its prophetic and contemplative task, and witness to an openness to the Spirit alive in the Christian community.

Gutiérrez defines theology as a *critical* reflection on the word of God received in the Church.<sup>72</sup> It is essential that the critical aspect be present or theology can easily become a form of ideology--promoting the interest of a particular community or local church.<sup>73</sup> For Gutiérrez, ideology is a type of social sin, and it is the task of the theologian to facilitate a critical consciousness that shows the convenient blindness of this form of sin for what it is. Utopia, on the other hand, is a vehicle of "creative imagination" that opens the way for "a praxis of love."<sup>74</sup> Gutiérrez characterizes the social life of Latin America as a struggle between ideological and utopian forces, or in more theological terms, between sin and salvation.

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<sup>71</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor*, 105.

<sup>72</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxiii.

<sup>73</sup>Gutiérrez gives the example of R. Bultman, saying that his theology was limited by bourgeois ideology. "His theology is oblivious to the oppression created by and for the very people who were the objects of his theological concern." "Liberation Theology and Progressivist Theology" in *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History*, eds. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 249.

<sup>74</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez and Richard Shaull, *Liberation and Change*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 85.



In facilitating a critical consciousness the theologian must show how to distinguish between the truth of dogmatic statements made in response to particular historical situations and the affirmation of faith contained in their formulation.<sup>75</sup> The spirit of criticism also means not giving the same value and the same authority to every church pronouncement. In this respect it is important to take seriously the principle of the "hierarchy of truths."<sup>76</sup>

A critical opinion may not be acceptable to all. Gutiérrez says that it is "not tranquil, peaceful task" and it can mean "danger for Christians who cultivate a theology from within grassroots Christian communities."<sup>77</sup> In the face of opposition and misunderstanding he counsels not to be critical in a way that closes our minds to what others have to tell us. In a spirit of dialogue we must

lend an ear, not only to the reflections of theologians, but also to the theologically articulated faith-experiences of the oppressed. Faced with the sufferings and hopes of the poor, whatever their race, sex, or culture may be, theologians can only listen respectfully. To do that is to pay attention to what God is trying to say to us, and that is the starting point of all theology.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, commenting on this task says, "In later times, however, on the basis of cultural developments Christians can be offered new possibilities of clarifying the same truth of faith through other categories which were not present earlier in culture, with equal fidelity to the gospel." He adds, "Not to see or even not to want to accept this possibility, basically perhaps because of a static concept of the truth, can result in tragic disruptions of communication between the teaching authority and theology." *Church*, 225.

<sup>76</sup>Stated in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11 (1964). Similarly the recent document "On the Interpretation of Dogma," refers to the usefulness of "theological notes" (B.II.3.) that are useful for learning the import and degree of binding force of doctrinal statements.

<sup>77</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 103.

<sup>78</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Reflections," 230.

The second aspect of the role of the theologian is to act as a resource person, pointing to sources of revelation and history. Gutiérrez says that this "calls for a painstaking knowledge of Scripture and careful correlation with both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology."<sup>79</sup> This is where the theologian must take a lead in the hermeneutical task of reconciling the faith handed down historically by the first witnesses and the need to understand and actualize that faith today. The theologian will try to help the community understand the tension between continuity and rupture that is always part of the Christian tradition.<sup>80</sup>

In a very real way Gutiérrez brings forth resources from the sociohistorical tradition of the "scourged Christs of the Indies." In his research he has brought to light treatises that "were ignored or suppressed" in the history of Latin America. In the history of the defense of the American Indians by Las Casas, Juan del Valle and others, he gives historical depth to the liberation theology of today.<sup>81</sup>

A third aspect of the role of the theologian is to accompany the community in their prophetic and contemplative task.<sup>82</sup> Solidarity with the poor is not exhausted in the

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>80</sup>This is referred to by Claude Geffré in *The Risk of Interpretation*, 69.

<sup>81</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and Progressivist Theology," 242-244. Also his book, *Dios o el oro en las Indias*.

<sup>82</sup>Jacques Dupuis identifies "accompagnamento" as the principal role of the professional theologian in the context of liberation theology. "Consiste nell'aiutare i poveri ad articolare per se stessi la loro riflessione su una pratica liberatrice alla luce della rivelazione." "Teologia della Liberazione," *Dizionario di Teologia Fondamentale*, diretto da René Latourelle e Rino Fisichella (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1990), 1282.

cause of justice. There is also the contemplative dimension that acknowledges the gratuitousness of God's love. This deep conviction emerges from the pages of Gutiérrez's book *On Job*. Frei Betto writes that the book on Job is a disguised autobiography of Gustavo Gutiérrez in his effort to find meaning in human suffering.<sup>83</sup> Gutiérrez has a vision of theology and the theologian that is much broader than that of being an extension of the Church's magisterium. The theologian is an "organic intellectual" with links to the Christian communities that live their faith by taking the task of liberation upon themselves.<sup>84</sup> Liberation theology is not written without getting one's hands dirty. Gutiérrez says that what is to be done away with is the intellectualizing of the intellectual who has no ties with the life and struggles of the poor. Presence in the "first act" of theology is a necessary precondition for reflection in the second.<sup>85</sup> The theological task begins in the pastoral practice of committed Christian communities. It begins with a way of being Christian and in this way the spirituality and the method of doing theology become one. "Faire de la théologie," says Gutiérrez, "c'est écrire une lettre d'amour à Dieu, à l'Eglise, au peuple auquel j'appartiens."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Frei Betto, "Gustavo Gutiérrez--A Friendly Profile," in *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 36.

<sup>84</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 103.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>"Gustavo Gutiérrez: Marx n'est pas la Bible." *Actualité Religieuse*, (15 Octobre 1990), 28.

The fourth aspect of the theologian's role is to be a witness of openness to the life of the Spirit in the Christian community.<sup>87</sup> It is the Spirit that leads us to truth and to freedom. "Only when one is walking according to the Spirit can one think and proclaim the gratuitous love of the Father for every human being."<sup>88</sup> In the recent Instruction "On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian" we read: "The acts of assent and submission to the Word entrusted to the Church under the guidance of the Magisterium are directed ultimately to Him and lead us into the realm of true freedom." (41) I think liberation theologians would prefer to see the phrase: "under the guidance of the Spirit" instead of the one about the Magisterium.<sup>89</sup> The Christian community is always subject to the epiclesis of the Spirit. So it is important to take the *sensus fidei* of all the members seriously. From this perspective the community has an interpretive role that forms an integral part of the content of the truth of faith. It is the *sensus fidei* alive in the Church that seeks to interpret their faith experience in search of the truth under the impulse of the Spirit. Thus the source of authority becomes the

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<sup>87</sup>This aspect has been discussed in a somewhat polemical way in Leonardo Boff's *Church: Charism and Power*, (London: SCM Press, 1985).

<sup>88</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Drink*, 136.

<sup>89</sup>In another part of the same Instruction we read, "The ultimate normative principle for such discernment [about philosophy and other disciplines] is revealed doctrine" (10). Gutiérrez says that the ultimate norm of judgement is from "revealed truth" (*Liberation xxxiv*). However he interprets this as the deposit of faith living in the Church where it rouses Christians to commitment in accordance with God's will. This is clearly more like a *regula fidei* identified with the Gospel rather than the Magisterium. Claude Geffré says, "Just as the Church and the kingdom of God are not identical, so too it is wrong to identify a dogmatic confession of faith with the Word of God." *The Risk of Interpretation*, 71.

self-regulation of the Church's faith whose ultimate source is Jesus Christ, his life and preaching.<sup>90</sup> Gutiérrez is convinced that it is the presence of the Spirit in the Church in the "new face" of a church that is poor, missionary, and paschal, and that the Church would betray that same Spirit if "hostilities of some among us" were to mean losing what has been gained in recent years by Latin American Christians and non-Christians."<sup>91</sup>

These various aspects of the role of the theologian are exemplified in Gutiérrez's own way of doing theology. Cardinal Arns recalls Gutiérrez's prophetic force as a young theologian at Medellín in 1968, and "the faithful, humble, even hidden, efforts of our theologian brother" at Puebla.<sup>92</sup> The Cardinal writes how, to the extent that we keep our distance from the suffering and struggle of the poor, we build up a particular image of God and a system of ideas that, in their certainty and assurance, are the projection of our own unjust and life-denying interests. However, Gutiérrez the theologian, starting with "the experience of nothing other than the absoluteness of the God of life," has shown how the vocation of theology as the century draws to a close is "to carry on looking for its strength in this experience of God whose

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<sup>90</sup>"It is clear . . . sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (*Dei Verbum* 10)

<sup>91</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xlv.

<sup>92</sup>"Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns" in *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 9.

presence is revealed in the process of the liberation of the great majority of the peoples of our Latin American countries."<sup>93</sup> I would broaden this beyond Latin America to refer to all people. For example, Archbishop Weakland of the United States wrote recently about how developments in Latin America have influenced North America. The Archbishop writes, "It seems to me that the theologians of liberation theology supplied the structural framework for the beginnings of black theology and feminist theology in the United States." He adds, "We are all discovering that 'catholicism' and 'universalism' are only now in their infancy. They are still to us theological concepts, not yet pastoral imperatives. Our liberation theologies must extend to all the people on this globe; our solidarity is with all."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup>Archbishop Rembert Weakland, "How Medellin and Puebla Influenced North America." *Origins* 18:44 (April 13, 1989), 759.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Liberation theology is in fact "a new stage" and, as such, strives to be in continuity with the teaching of the church. . . .its power and importance are due to a freshness or newness that derives from attention to the historical vicissitudes of our peoples, for these are authentic signs of the times through which the Lord continually speaks to us. At the same time, its power and importance are due to the continuity that leads it to sink its roots deep in scripture, tradition, and the magisterium.<sup>1</sup>

The above statement by Gustavo Gutiérrez summarizes much of what I have written in this work. While endeavoring to indicate elements that are new in his theology, I have also identified themes that ensure continuity with the Gospel as it has been revealed and as it is emerging in our history.

In the first chapter I outlined some principal ideas in Gutiérrez's theology. I identified three themes: the poor, theological method, and the proclamation of the kingdom. These themes are basic for understanding the uniqueness of liberation theology and how it seeks to respond to the challenge of being church in Latin America and other countries today. The aspirations of the poor are one of the principal signs of the times for the Church to examine in the light of

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<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, revised ed., trans. and eds. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xliv. He is commenting on the words of Pope John Paul II in a letter to the bishops of Brazil (April 1986) in which he said, "Liberation theology is not only timely but useful and necessary. It should be seen as a new stage, closely connected with earlier ones, in the theological reflection that began with the apostolic tradition and has continued in the great fathers and doctors, the ordinary and extraordinary exercise of the church's teaching office, and, more recently, the rich patrimony of the church's social teaching as set forth in documents from *Rerum Novarum* to *Laborem Exercens*."

the Gospel. Commitment to being with the poor is the basis of a spirituality that forms the first stage of any reflection on the liberating encounter with God in Christ and in our brothers and sisters.

In the second chapter I detailed how Gutiérrez sees the three principal elements in any interpretation of the faith today: culture, gospel and church, or, to put it in other terms: context, text and interpreter. The context is where we encounter the signs of the times and the saving activity of God in history. The text is the memory of the Church in scripture and tradition, of the experience of the self-revelation of God in history. The theological moment occurs in the search for new ways to talk about God in relation to the problems and questions of men and women today. The search is always linked to the life and commitments of the living Christian community. The challenge is for the local church to find the relationship between the particularity of the historical moment and fidelity to the deposit of faith in the memory of the universal church.

In the third chapter I showed how context, text and interpreter are linked in a dynamic relationship in the interpretation of the living deposit of faith, particularly at the level of the local church. Using examples from Gutiérrez's own interpretation of scripture and tradition I illustrated how he reinterprets the interpretation process, beginning with faith experience. The concrete experience of following Jesus Christ in commitment and prayer allows the ancient bible text to speak to us and challenge us today. In assisting at a new



God-event in the liberation of the suffering of the innocent, we are enabled to grasp in a new way the significance of the liberating event-word that is the message of the Bible. The church as Christian community forms an integral part of this process of interpretation. Guided by the Spirit, and in continuity with the apostolic tradition, the local Christian community seeks to interpret the Scriptural text within the same tradition in which it was formed. This ensures continuity while allowing for the discontinuity that is an inevitable part of the distance between the original event of Jesus Christ and our contemporary context.

In the fourth chapter I evaluated some of the implications of Gutiérrez's theology. First, does he read into the word of God a meaning that it does not contain? I argued that a response to this question depends on whether one sees scriptural hermeneutics from a classical historical-critical approach or from the point of view of interpretive hermeneutics. The latter allows for a pluriformity of true meanings of the text. Gutiérrez stresses the interpretive function of the circular relationship between orthopraxis and orthodoxy that forms an integral part of any valid interpretation of the meaning of the text.

Second, are Gutiérrez's philosophical presuppositions such that he fails to make a proper distinction between progress and the growth of the kingdom? I explained Gutiérrez's view that theoretically there must be a distinction between nature and grace, but that in practice the two occur together in our history. Salvation has begun in our history even

though its fullness lies beyond it. Moreover, through praxis, men and women exercise their responsibility in history for the growth of the kingdom as they actualize the freedom that is the message of the Gospel.

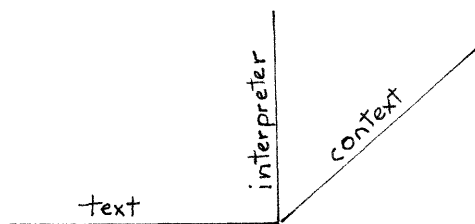
Third, does Gutiérrez's method of interpretation lead to unacceptable relativism? I explained how Gutiérrez does not seek an interpretation independently of the Church. What is new is the way he and other liberation theologians are interpreting tradition from within the contemporary experience of being church. They argue that such a particular perspective is a valid starting point and that true catholicity is found in universal openness to particular situations. Clearly starting from the praxis of committed faith implies theological pluriformity in the variety of experience of the local church. The open question is the place and method of verifying such pluriform expressions of faith. This is a hotly debated contemporary issue.

Fourth, I described two different models of church and showed how Gutiérrez supports a community model that emphasizes openness to change, diversity and particularity. Such a model views the Church as a communion of local churches, and this communion provides a foundation for a fitting relationship between unity and pluriformity in the Church. It is the Spirit, working in the local church community that ensures that the universal message of God's love becomes effective in people's lives according to their needs in particular situations.

Fifth, I showed how Gutiérrez in his own work as a theologian illustrates the role of the theologian in the local church as facilitator, resource person, one who accompanies, and as witness to the life of the Spirit in the Christian community.

All of the topics in the fourth chapter are issues being debated today. I have tried briefly to outline the main points on either side of the debate. While not being able to solve these weighty issues, I have tried to clarify Gutiérrez's opinion in regard to them.

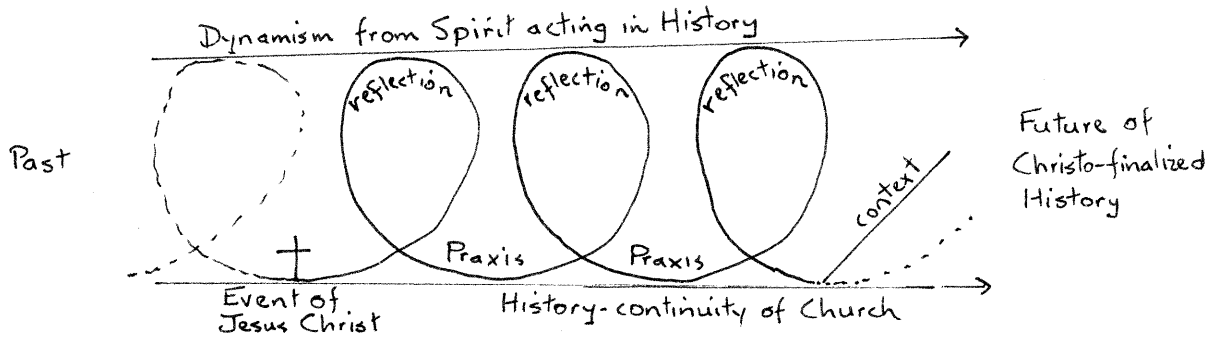
The understanding underlying my analysis of Gutiérrez's theology is that there are three principal dimensions in the interpretive process.



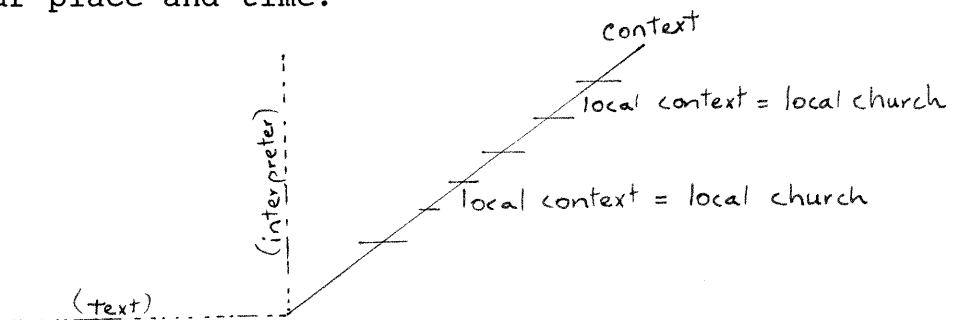
First, there is the context which provides the sociopolitical and historical-cultural environment for faith in thought and action. All theology needs to be interpreted in relation to the context in which it has been developed. Secondly there is the text or the data of Christian faith. This dimension includes scripture and tradition including the teaching (magisterium) of the Church. A third dimension is that of the interpreter who is the subject of faith. The Church as interpreter exists in a diachronic sense through time from its beginnings in the history of Judaism and the event of Jesus

Christ, and in a synchronic sense as the communion of local churches today.

The following image is my attempt to show how Gustavo Gutiérrez develops the three dimensions.



The theological process can best be represented by a spiral that moves continuously between the moments of praxis and reflection. The base, and starting point is Christian praxis, which is enriched by reflection that in turn challenges the community to further praxis. The dynamism for this movement is from the Spirit moving history towards its future in Christ. The continuity of the Church through history gives identity to the Church as it moves into the future. The depth dimension of the diagram, representing the context, shows how the Church is realized (synchronically) in the local church at any particular place and time.



Does this mean that liberation theology is a "local" or "contextualized" theology? There is no simple answer to this

question. It is a theology adapted to a particular context: the context of poverty and oppression. It is quite obviously different from much of the theology in Europe characterized by a neo-scholastic, personalist approach. Yet, I think liberation theology is more than a local theology, for it is challenging the whole of the theological world to re-examine its methods and its motives. Liberation theology warns that theology outside of the context of lived faith can easily become religious metaphysics: talking about a God without a world. In this sense liberation theology is an attempt to free theology from a false universalism. In a more positive sense the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez has a universal dimension in its response to the dimensions of human sin manifest everywhere in the oppression of human beings.

Nevertheless, such a universal dimension is not universally accepted. There was a time when from a European perspective, people in other materially less sophisticated cultures were considered less than human. Now we recognize the richness of cultural diversity. A logical consequence of this is to acknowledge and welcome the diverse contributions these different cultures can bring to the Christian life of faith including theological reflection. While a plurality of local cultures is seen as a fact and a communion of local churches is acknowledged as an aspect of the universal church, a true openness to local theology from different experiences of faith, with each contributing to the theology of the universal church, lies still in the future.

Liberation theology is challenging the Church to a greater openness to alternative points of view. Roger Haight says that liberation theology's response to this phenomenon "encompasses and unifies the problematic underlying both northern and southern theologies."<sup>2</sup> For this reason he calls it "an alternative vision." It is a valid alternative response that has universal and transcultural significance.

Gutiérrez himself says that his theology has universal significance because it springs from an experience that is both deeply human and deeply Christian. Thus "every theology is a question and a challenge for believers living in other human conditions."<sup>3</sup> So he concludes,

The goal then, is not uniformity but a profound unity, a communion or *koinonia*. One element in this Christian *koinonia* . . . is the understanding that the various forms of theology exist within a profound ecclesial communion and give a richly diversified expression to the truth proclaimed by the Only Son.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 42.

<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, xxxvi.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, xxxvi.

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