

Liberation theology articulates cry of the poor

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- An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.

- A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.

- A critique of the activities of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.

Unlike older forms of theology in the church, liberation theology looks at life as people are actually living it and asks the question: "Of what relevance is Christianity to this situation?"

Traditionally, Catholic theology usually looked at life the other way around, asking how a believer should live the life he seems to have been allotted in light of eternal concepts, according to Marvin Mich, associate professor of Christian ethics at St. Bernard's Institute.

To illustrate his point, Mich noted that St. Paul called upon slave owners to treat their slaves as "brothers."

But the liberation theologian would question why the slave owner had a slave in the first place, he said.

"The situation is sinful," a liberation theologian would conclude. "It is not God's will that people live in dependency. Naming the situation is to call individuals to turn away from sin," Mich added.

Hence, Mich and other observers said, poor people looking at their oppression can turn to Scripture for inspiration to free themselves.

All of a sudden, for example, Exodus is no longer the story of an ancient prophet named Moses answering a God named Yahweh to lead a long-persecuted people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Exodus now becomes the movement of people here and now trying to listen to God's call to break free of their own bondage.

Such thinking was the breath of fresh air that blew through the Latin American Church in 1968, when its bishops met for their second general conference in Medellin, Columbia, according to those who remember that fateful year.

It was in Medellin that the Catholic hierarchy decisively broke with Latin America's military and economic elites whose oppressive rule the church had indirectly and directly supported for decades. The bishops did an about-face and abandoned their nations' wealthy elites to throw in their lot with the majority poor.

Indeed, Father Edward Cleary, OP, visiting professor of religious studies at Yale University, and a liberation theology expert, told the *Catholic Courier* he felt liberation theology perfectly embodied Vatican II's call for an "updating" of how the church presented its teaching.

"The liberation methodology is a great method for doing what Pope John XXIII was talking about," he said. "The 'option for the poor' looked at the reality of Latin America," and it said 'God didn't want this to happen.'"

Despite a split in the Latin American hierarchy between "progressives" favoring the Medellin approach and "conservatives" opposing the sharp break with the past, 11 years after Medellin in Puebla, Mexico, the bishops emphasized once again their "preferential option for the poor."

Nonetheless, the overthrow of right-wing dictator Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua that year — combined with the beginnings of civil war in El Salvador — created enormous tension between proponents and opponents of liberation theology.

In particular, the outcome of the Nicaraguan revolution divided Catholics throughout Latin America because



both clerics and lay persons were eventually found supporting or opposing the leftist Sandinistas who ruled the country throughout most of the 1980s.

The pope's 1983 visit to Nicaragua was marked by controversy. Obviously no friend of Marxism because of experience in Soviet-dominated Poland, the pope appeared to ally himself with opponents of the Sandinistas through his public actions.

But many supporters of liberation theology contended that Catholics could be Sandinistas also, and that such concepts as land reform and redistribution of wealth were not incompatible with Christianity.

Indeed, thousands of Christians formed Christian Base Communities, which looked to scriptural readings for inspiration to take charge of their lives. CBCs often supported reform of the land ownership system, or promoted unionism, drawing the wrath of the powers that be.

Such beliefs and such action meant that the 1980s proved to be a rough time for liberation theologians and their followers. Thousands of Christian religious and lay persons who lived in such countries as El Salvador and Guatemala were killed or imprisoned for acting on their beliefs.

Liberation theologians came under attack by such church leaders as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For example, Leonardo Boff, a noted liberation theologian from Brazil, left the Catholic priesthood earlier this year. Boff had been disciplined in 1985 by the Vatican for his writings on the church.

At the same time, however, Pope John Paul II has often embraced some of the tone employed by liberation theologians critiquing the capitalistic structures that trap millions of Latin America's poor.

In his opening remarks before the Santo Domingo conference, the pope reiterated the church's "firm and irrevocable" preferential option for the poor. But he added that this option must not exclude other classes.

"The world cannot feel calm and satisfied given the chaotic and disconcerting situation before our eyes," he said, citing wealthy nations and individuals each day getting wealthier, alongside "a multitude of persons submerged in poverty, victims of hunger and illness, lacking dignified housing, sanitary services and access to culture."

Liberation theologians must be ins-

pired by church teachings, and the church cannot become a tool of an ideology or political current, he said.

The pope said Latin American poverty is aggravated by "inflation, sometimes uncontrollable," dropping prices of raw materials produced in the region and unemployment, as well as the "intolerable weight of the international debt which has tremendous social consequences."

The pope's words echoed new agreement among church officials since the end of communism in Europe. Liberation theologian Enrique Dussel has stated the fall of the Soviet Union has created a new consensus among Latin American bishops and theologians on the basic social problems facing the region.

Author of *The Church in Latin America: 1492-1992*, soon to be released by Orbis Books, Dussel said with the "fall of the Soviet Union and Marxism," it had become clear throughout Latin America that a chief "cause of misery" in the region is the way capitalism is practiced there.

Bolgen Vargas, a native of the Dominican Republic, also noted that although Marxism may have been discredited as a solution to poverty by the end of communist rule in Europe in the late 1980s and early '90s, Latin American liberation theology will continue to thrive into the next century.

Vargas accompanied a group of professionals, activists, and six students from Rochester's Aquinas Institute in August of this year to Nicaragua. The group drove tons of supplies such as medicines, shoes, clothing to distribute to the people.



Vargas emphasized that the enormous poverty suffered by millions of Latin Americans will continue to fuel the intellectual fires first stoked by liberation theologians in the late 1960s.

"Just because the Berlin Wall came down does not mean that liberation theology will come down because the foundation wasn't Marxism — the foundation was the reality in Latin America," he said.

EDITORS' NOTE: This article contains information from *Catholic News Service* reports.

Obituaries

Sister Mary Hermana Stempel, SSND, at 82; taught at St. Boniface and St. Michael schools

Sister Mary Hermana Stempel, SSND, a former teacher at two parish schools in the Rochester diocese, died on Friday, Oct. 16, 1992, at Norwalk Hospital in Norwalk, Conn. after a long illness. She was 82.

Sister Mary Hermana was born July 25, 1910 in Bridgeport, Conn. She became a professed School Sister of Notre Dame in 1930.

She taught from 1939-42 at St. Boniface School in Rochester. Sister Mary Hermana later taught from 1953-55 at St. Michael's School in Rochester.

During her 36-year teaching career,

Sister Stempel also served at nine other schools in New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Connecticut. In 1962 she moved to the Lourdes Health Care Center at the SSND motherhouse in Wilton, Conn., where she lived until her death.

A Mass of the Resurrection was celebrated on Oct. 20 at the motherhouse. Interment was at St. Mary's Cemetery, Bethel, Conn.

Donations in memory of Sister Mary Hermana Stempel can be made to the SSND Development Fund, 345 Belden Hill Road, Wilton, Conn., 06897.

Brian Bourke, critic, Blessed Trinity graduate

AUBURN — A Mass of Christian Burial for Brian G. Bourke, a graduate of Blessed Trinity School who worked as a music critic for the *Syracuse Herald-Journal* and the *Herald American*, was celebrated on Friday, Sept. 18, 1992, at St. Alphonsus Church, 95 E. Genesee St.

Mr. Bourke, 30, died Sept. 15, 1992, after he was struck by a van as he rode his bicycle 16 miles north of Altoona, Pa. The critic and avid cyclist was en route to Nashville, Tenn.

An Auburn native, he graduated from Blessed Trinity School in 1975. Mr. Bourke earned a bachelor's degree from St. Bonaventure University in 1983.

For the past seven years Mr. Bourke had worked as a music critic in Syracuse, where he became known for helping many area musicians gain attention.

In an editorial in the Sept. 17,

1992 *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, he was described as "an architect of the local music scene."

Mr. Bourke was predeceased in 1977 by his father, Norman F. Bourke, former dean of Auburn's Cayuga Community College.

He is survived by his mother, Susan Powers Bourke, secretary at Blessed Trinity School for the past 20 years; a brother, Christopher L. Bourke, of Auburn; a sister, Margaret Roce Bourke, of Manlius, N.Y.; a niece and nephew, Caitlin Rose Bourke and Rory Lee Bourke, both of Auburn; as well as aunts, uncles and cousins.

Contributions in Mr. Bourke's memory may be made to the Blessed Trinity School Memorial Fund, the Norman F. Bourke Memorial Scholarship Fund at Cayuga Community College in Auburn, or the Syracuse Area Music Award, c/o the Landmark Theater in Syracuse.