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Contemporary Issues in Liberation Ethics

Cover Page Footnote

This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on March 25, 1993 as the sixth annual Bishop Walter W. Curtis Lecture.

ADA MARIA ISASI-DIAZ

*Contemporary Issues in Liberation Ethics **

There are many who think that Latin American liberation theology belongs to the past, that it has lost luster as a theology and momentum as a movement. But the fact is that as long as the overwhelming majority of people in Latin America are poor and oppressed, Latin American liberation theology will be an influential discourse. Furthermore, because of the influence that Latin American liberation theology has had on theologies arising from oppressed people throughout the world, I believe Latin American liberation theology is an enterprise that will always be an intrinsic element of Christian theology.

In this lecture I will present several of the key concepts, themes, and issues of Latin American liberation ethics. Concretely, I will examine the understanding of praxis and the role it plays. Then I will look at the discipline of moral theology within Latin American liberation theology. Third, I will analyze Latin American liberation ethics' criterion for morality, which is the preferential option for the poor. Fourth, I will explain how the preferential option for the poor is made concrete in solidarity. Lastly, I will briefly outline the future tasks of Latin American liberation ethics.

Praxis

At the heart of all liberation theologies is precisely the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed group from which each of these theologies rises. Though at times it may not be specifically pointed out and though at times an objectifying language does creep into some writings, most liberation theologians and other liberation activists claim, or at least recognize, that liberation is a personal, self-actualizing struggle which each one must accept as one's own responsibility. This struggle will last during one's whole life.

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Personal responsibility for one's liberation is one of the elements at

the core of moral agency. Liberation theologies insist that the poor and the oppressed must struggle to be agents – subjects – of their own history. They must move away from being mere objects acted upon by the oppressors.

“Struggle” and “agency” do not exist apart from praxis. Praxis is a dominant theme in Latin American liberation theology and it provides the key for investigating and talking about how this theology deals with ethics and with the concept of moral agency. This is why we start here by examining praxis. Latin American liberation theology has made it clear from its beginning that it is concerned not with presenting new themes for theological reflection but with offering a new way of doing theology.¹

Latin American liberation theology is “a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.”² For Latin American liberation theologians,³ praxis is a dialectical process that involves both ethics and theology. The process respects the self-identity of moral theology while avoiding an unproductive split between moral and systematic theology. In this respect Latin American liberation moral theology follows in the tradition of the Fathers of the Church and of Scholastic theology, both of which did not know of rigid separations within the field of theology.⁴

What is to be understood by praxis as it is used in Latin American liberation theology? Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his first and now classic volume on liberation theology, roots his understanding of historical praxis⁵ in four sources. First, he grounds it in the theology of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, a theology of the “signs of the times.” Second, Gutiérrez notes the philosophical contribution of Maurice Blondel, who at the end of the last century was trying to move from “an empty and fruitless spirituality and attempting to make philosophical speculation more concrete and alive, [by presenting] it as a critical reflection of action.”⁶ Third, Gutierrez presents Marxist thought as another factor in his use of “praxis”:

. . . it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and the action of man in history.⁷

Finally, Gutiérrez adds an eschatological dimension to his use of "historical praxis." He understands the opening to the future which is intrinsic to any eschatological understanding as requiring a political task that will result in the transformation of the world.

Despite some variation in usage during the last thirty years, when used in Latin American liberation theology "praxis" refers to a conscious human action, a political action, which seeks to change oppressive economic-socio-cultural structures. This political action is a liberative action which requires a historical project – that is, a project that, while questioning an established order, has its own scientific and technical strategies. In short, because praxis is liberative action, praxis requires human agency, intentionality, and political commitment to change an infrastructure, taking into consideration its relationship to the suprastructures.⁸ In praxis there is a coming together of knowing and doing: "Life is already praxis, that is why in the praxis is included, in a condensed form, all of reality."⁹ But in order to understand completely the meaning of "praxis" in Latin American liberation theology, one has to go beyond definitions and descriptions and look at the goal of praxis: liberation.

In May of 1985 Gustavo Gutiérrez defended his doctoral dissertation at the Theological Faculty of the Catholic University of Lyon, France. As part of his defense he presented the main points of his theological work. One of these points was a succinct explanation of "liberation":

In the process of liberation we can distinguish three dimensions or levels: social, political, economical liberation; human liberation in its different aspects; and liberation from sin. It has to do with a process which is in the long run one, but it is not monolithic; it is necessary to distinguish in it diverse dimensions that cannot be confused. Neither separation, nor confusion, nor verticalism, nor horizontalism.¹⁰

Gutiérrez here is concerned with showing the right relationship in the process of liberation between God's free and gratuitous initiative and the "relative autonomy" of human history. He uses Chalcedon's

language about the relationship between the two natures in Christ to show the relationship between liberation and salvation. This relationship, according to Gutiérrez, is one of "unity without confusion, distinction without separation. This is what in theology of liberation is called total liberation in Christ."¹¹

Latin American Liberation Ethics

Once we point to the centrality of praxis in Latin American liberation theology, one can then turn to consider Latin American liberation ethics *per se*.

Latin American liberation ethics is

an attempt to reflect critically on a concrete aspect of social behavior (praxis) as an expression of values which emerge in destabilizing and deconstructive social situations, which show a strongly dysfunctional character in respect to the established order precisely because it attempts to substitute a new order of social liberation significance for it.¹²

Liberation ethics has the task of analyzing and evaluating critically the immanent morality of the socio-political process of liberation. The morality of liberative praxis is immanent in so far as the praxis of liberation is a "humanizing process perceived as a 'categorical imperative' and not as an arbitrary occupation which is merely technical and, therefore, optional."¹³ One of the main purposes of the critique of liberation ethics is to make explicit the values and aspirations of those involved in liberative praxis so that they can indeed be agents of the process of transformation in which they are engaged.¹⁴

One of the characteristics of Latin American liberation ethics is to search for new ways of being committed to the reign of God, to search for historically effective ways to change oppressive realities. Liberation ethics also has to help sustain and deepen such commitment, starting with that of theologians themselves.¹⁵ In order to do so, Latin American liberation moral theology has to have the following characteristics:¹⁶

1. An indicative/imperative motivation that understands Christian praxis as a historical response to God's invitation. This response is not a matter of blind submission but rather a responsible and dangerous acceptance of the Gospel, dangerous because it clashes with the interests of the powerful.
2. A non-judicial Spirit-centered morality, for it is the Spirit who calls to conversion (sanctifies), guides moral discernment in concrete situations, and strengthens one to be involved in moral praxis.
3. A conversion-centered morality concerned with making a positive, relevant, and radical contribution, rather than a morality of sin that is mostly concerned with prohibiting and condemning.
4. A morality of the person who is interested in self-liberation from different slaveries and interested in self-actualization.
5. A de-privatization of moral themes as well as moral discourse.
6. A morality of the person-in-situation dealing with moral attitudes that have to do with concrete Christian praxis instead of an abstract analysis of good and bad acts.
7. A morality of the person-in-society, which has to be in dialogue with the social sciences in order to be able to underline the importance of social structures for the individual person.
8. A morality with specific embodiments of universal moral Christian values according to the Latin American reality.

These three last characteristics can be furthered amplified by saying that Latin American liberation (*una moral situada*) is a morality done from a place. "Place" here refers to both a geographic connotation as well as to the hermeneutical standpoint from which theology is done. This place, this standpoint is threefold:

- a. from the underside of history and of the world; from the perspective of the poor, of the conquered, of the invaded countries, of the dependent countries with no capacity for deciding for themselves;
- b. from the periphery of society and of the cities where the poor and the victims of all different kinds of oppression live;
- c. "from the majority of an oppressed and believing people, like the Latin American people, who managed to include their own condition in a theological reflection that is vigorous and theirs."¹⁷

The insistence in specifying that the starting point for liberation ethics is the real situation of misery in which the majority of people of the continent live leads us to the third part of our presentation which is about "the ethical-theological category of the preferential option for the poor."¹⁸ Such an option finds expression in an ongoing solidarity which becomes the verifying element of Christian ethics both at the level of practice and at the level of systematic formulation. The preferential option for the poor is a way of concretizing the fundamental option for Christians of love (charity) and justice.¹⁹

Latin American liberation theology proposes the preferential option for the poor as the criterion of morality. Because it is the criterion, unless one understands what it refers to and the demands that the option for the poor makes on Christians, there is no possibility of understanding Latin American liberation ethics and theology.

Preferential Option for the Poor

The term "preferential option for the poor" appears in the "Message to the Peoples of Latin America," written by the Latin American bishops during the 1979 Puebla Conference. There the bishops took up once again the position they had taken at Medellín ten years earlier when they "adopted a clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor." For the bishops a preferential option for the poor has to happen within the context of a conversion that they believe the whole Church needs to have. This preferential option is aimed at the "integral liberation" of

the poor. The bishops also made clear that the preferential option for the poor is not an exclusive option.

In their final statement the bishops at Puebla gave three reasons for this preferential option for the poor. First, they said, the church has to imitate Christ, who when he lived among us chose to be poor. The bishops see the God becoming human as a sign of that option of Christ, and they see Jesus' passion as death as a particularly poignant sign of that option. Second, the bishops consider poverty to dim and defile the image and likeness of God in human beings. They say, "that is why the poor are the first ones to whom Jesus' mission is directed, and why the evangelization of the poor is the supreme sign and proof of his mission." Third, the bishops indicate that as Mary proclaims in her Magnificat, "God's salvation has to do with justice for the poor."

The bishops synthesize their argument by quoting from John Paul II, who while in Mexico at the time of the Puebla Conference said in an address in a very poor area, "I have earnestly desired this meeting because I feel solidarity with you, and because you, being poor, have a right to my special concern and attention. I will tell you the reason: the Pope loves you because you are God's favorites."²⁰

Two things need to be noticed here. First, this preferential option is not exclusionary. It clearly says that the poor are to be the main concern of the church but it does not say that the poor are the only concern of the church. Second, the bishops make explicit that the preferential option for the poor is regardless of "the moral or personal situation in which they [the poor] find themselves."²¹

In other words, the preferential option for the poor does not rest on their being morally better, or more innocent, or purer in their motives. The preferential option is because the poor can see and understand what the rich and privileged cannot because power and richness are self-protective and, therefore, distort reality. The poor have no vested interest in maintaining their present situation. It is that the poor,

pierced by suffering and full of hope are able, in their struggles, to conceive another reality. Because the poor suffer the weight of alienation, they can conceive a hope-filled project and they can provide dynamism to a new way of organizing human life

*for all.*²²

How is this option for the poor concretized? What is the behavior that indicates that there has been and is an option for the poor? The word that expresses that behavior, that describes that behavior, is solidarity.

Solidarity

Solidarity is not a matter of agreeing with, of being supportive of, of liking, or of being inspired by the poor. Though all of these might be part of solidarity, solidarity goes beyond all of them. Solidarity has to do with understanding the interconnections among issues and the cohesiveness that needs to exist among the communities of struggle.

Solidarity is the union arising from common responsibilities and interests of classes, of peoples, of different groups of peoples. Solidarity has to do with community of interests, feelings, purpose, and action. Solidarity is a way of establishing and an expression of social cohesion.

The true meaning of solidarity can best be understood if it is broken down into its two main interdependent elements: mutuality and praxis. In solidarity, mutuality and praxis are inexorably bound; they have a dialogic, circular relation in which one is always understood in view of the other. It is also important to understand that as elements of solidarity, mutuality and praxis are not abstractions. They are grounded in the historical situation; their specificity is defined by the socio-economic-political circumstances of the people involved. Here we are talking about solidarity of the non-poor with the poor, so we are saying that solidarity is defined by the socio-economic-political circumstances of the poor.

There is much to explain in all of this. First, let us clarify who the poor are in the phrase "a preferential option for the *poor*." The poor and the oppressed in this context "always imply collective and social conflict."²³ The poor and the oppressed are those who are marginalized, whose participation in the sociopolitical life is severely restricted or totally negated. The poor are living persons whose struggle for survival constitutes their way of life. "Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others,

not to know that you are being exploited, not to know you are a person.²⁴ The poor and the oppressed suffer from very specific forms of oppression: sexism, racism, classism.²⁵

The element of solidarity that needs to be clarified is mutuality: How is mutuality established between the poor and the non-poor? Mutuality between the oppressed and the oppressor also starts with a process of becoming aware. To become aware does not stop with individual illumination but necessarily moves to establish dialogue and mutuality with the oppressed.²⁶ The first word in this dialogue is uttered by the oppressed. The oppressors who are willing to listen and to be questioned by the oppressed begin to cease being oppressors: they become "friends" of the oppressed.²⁷ This word spoken by the oppressed is "at times silent, at times muzzled; it is the face of the poor . . . of oppressed people who suffer violence."²⁸ This word is often spoken through demonstrations, boycotts, and even revolution. This word imposes itself "ethically, by a kind of categorical imperative, which is well determined and concrete, which the 'friend' as 'friend' listens to freely. This word . . . appeals to the 'friend's' domination and possession of the world and even of the other, and questions the desire for wealth and power."²⁹

This word uttered by the oppressed divests those who allow themselves to be questioned by it of whatever they have totally appropriated. This word carries in its very weakness the power to judge the desire for wealth and power. It also is able to signify effectively the real possibility of liberation for those oppressors who allow themselves to be questioned. The leap the oppressors must take in order to be questioned is also made possible by the efficacious word uttered by the oppressed. The word uttered by the oppressed carries the real possibility of this qualitative jump and can be the liberating force which pushes the "friends" to take the leap that will put them in touch with the oppressed. This word also makes it possible for the "friends" to question and judge the oppressive structures which they support and from which they benefit, and to become co-creators with the oppressed of new liberating structures.

The "friends" answer the initial word uttered by the oppressed not only by questioning their own lives but also by responding to the oppressed. This response is born of the critical consciousness of those who allowed themselves to be critiqued and who take responsibility

for their own consciousness. This response therefore becomes a word and an action which helps the oppressed in their process of conscientization. The response of the "friends" is one of the enabling forces which help the oppressed to become agents of their own history. This response of the "friends" enables the oppressed to rid themselves of the oppressor they carry within themselves. This moves the oppressed away from seeking vengeance, from wanting to exchange places with the oppressors. This response of the "friends" enables the oppressed to understand that they must not seek to participate in oppressive structures but rather to change radically those structures.

Future Tasks of Latin American Liberation Ethics

I will bring this lecture to a close by looking at some of the critiques of Latin American liberation ethics, since they indicate what should be the future tasks of this theological and moral enterprise.

For Latin American liberation moral theologians themselves the most notable deficiency of their discipline/praxis is the limited incorporation of philosophy and metaphysics and the absence of anthropology as part of the basis for the theological and moral reflection. "This is what explains, in regards to content, the fact that the basic moral categories for the ethical normative discourse (moral judgment, norm, law) are unexplored by liberation ethics."³⁰ This deficiency could well be the result of the way Latin American liberation theologians have conceptualized their theological enterprise. If instead of attempting to read traditional theological understandings from the perspective of the poor and in view of the struggle of the poor for liberation, they had started with religious understandings and practices of the people, they could not have left out of their theology anthropological considerations. But Latin American liberation ethics has not supported the autonomy of an ethics grounded in principles and in criteria which spring from the religious understandings and practices, from that popular religiosity prevalent among the masses of the poor in Latin America, which so differs from official Christianity. Latin American liberation moral theologians have failed to see that a liberation ethics grounded in popular religiosity distances itself from the ethics of official

Christianity, which has been used to legitimate the dominant class. They have failed to see that if they couple the use of social analysis with the study and acceptance of popular religiosity as a reservoir of moral wisdom they can indeed construct a new moral criterion.³¹

Latin American liberation moral theologians have also criticized the relationship of their field with liberation theology. Some have felt that liberation theology has "usurped" the functions of liberation ethics.³² Others see liberation theology as nothing but part of ethics. From outside comes the critique that Latin American liberation theology has "consciously repudiated" ethics.³³ Others less belligerent prefer to talk about a dearth of materials in the field of liberation ethics.³⁴

There are hundreds of articles on the subject of liberation ethics, but this last criticism may refer to the fact that there are only a few book-length writings on liberation moral theology and ethics.³⁵ This criticism, then, may stem from the perception that articles cannot carry the scholarly burden that books can. But writing short articles instead of longer books may well be grounded in methodological considerations. Articles, instead of lengthy books, may be better vehicles for communicating a theology that has at its very center the precarious lives of the poor and the oppressed.

Though undoubtedly this critique of liberation ethics should be taken seriously, some of its points spring from trying to fit Latin American liberation ethics into the mold of traditional theological ethics. For example, to insist that for the sake of attaining its proper epistemological status Latin American liberation ethics should distinguish between "religious symbols with ethical content" and "intramundane ethical reasoning" fails to take into account the fact that religion is one of the central axes of Latin American culture.³⁶ For liberation ethics, historical factors are not separated from religious "symbols with ethical content," but rather historical factors are mediations of the "religious symbols with ethical content."³⁷

Another point of this critique is that Latin American liberation ethics needs to "widen the angle of vision so as to take in all the problems of human existence." But for ethics to be a liberative praxis, exactly the contrary is needed: "it has to go to the nucleus of the specific problems of the people, especially to the socio-political and economic problems."³⁸

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While taking full account of the critique of Latin American liberation ethics that exists, one needs to understand that underlying the critique there seems to be a desire to domesticate liberation ethics instead of understanding it as a possible *savage discourse*, capable of changing the methodology and even the epistemological structure of the discipline of ethics.

I believe that much remains to be done in Latin American liberation ethics, but if Latin American liberation ethics is to remain true to its genius, its future development will take its cues not from the traditional academic understandings and categories of moral theology but rather from its criterion, option for the poor, and from its commitment, to be mainly and foremost about orthopraxis, the just way of being, of acting, which is, after all, what all morality is about.

Notes

¹Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 15.

²Gutiérrez, p. 13.

³It is important to know that not all of them were born in Latin America. This might be an important factor in understanding how their theology relates to the experience of the poor in Latin America.

⁴Antonio Moser, "Ciencias Sociales y Teología Moral," *Páginas*, 94 (Diciembre, 1988), p. 92.

⁵Most of the time Gutiérrez uses an adjective, either "social" or "historical," when talking about praxis. Miguez points this out and concludes that Gutiérrez uses them as synonyms with different emphasis: while 'historical praxis' underlines the aspect of the future project which is present now, 'social praxis' has to do more with the dimension of structural struggle." Xose Miguez, *La Teología de la liberación y su método* (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1976), p. 47.

⁶Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 9.

⁷Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 9.

⁸Miguez, *La Teología*, p. 49. This is taken primarily from Miguez, but I believe it fairly represents widespread usage in Latin American liberation theology.

⁹Leonardo Boff, "Qué es hacer teología desde América Latina?" in *Liberación y Cautiverio*. Encuentro Latinoamericano de Teología (México,

1975), p. 144.

¹⁰Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La verdad los hará libres* (Lima, Perú: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1986), p. 25. Gutiérrez's reference at the end of this quotation is to the final document of the Latin American Bishops' Meeting in Puebla in 1979. See Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America – Conclusions* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979), pp. 82-84.

¹¹*Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America – Conclusions*, p. 26.

¹²Gilberto Giménez, "De la doctrina social de la iglesia a la ética de liberación," in *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana*, ed. Equipo Seladoc (Salamanca, España: Ediciones Sígueme, 1975), II, p. 57.

¹³Giménez, p. 58.

¹⁴Rubem Alves, "Some Thought on a Program for Ethics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXVI, No.2 (Winter, 1971), pp. 167, 169.

¹⁵The clearest articulation of this is to be found in what is usually called "an obscure publication." See Grupo de Investigación, "Teología de la Praxis," *Sólo los cristianos militantes pueden ser teólogos de la liberación*, Documento #9 (1977), pp. 4-32, y Documento #10 (1977), pp. 3-37.

¹⁶This is a simplified form of a list found in Tony Misfud, *Moral de discernimiento – hacia una moral liberadora* (Santiago de Chile: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación, 1984), pp. 66-69. I realize that this translation lacks clarity but so does the original Spanish version. However, taken within the context of this article, I believe the meaning is clear.

¹⁷Francisco Moreno Rejón, *Teología Moral desde los pobres. La Moral en la reflexión teológica desde América Latina* (Madrid: PS Editorial, 1986), p. 100.

¹⁸Rejón, pp. 110-11.

¹⁹Rejón, pp. 113-15.

²⁰*Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America – Conclusions*, pp. 177-80.

²¹*Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America – Conclusions*, p. 179.

²²José Míguez Bonino, "Nuevas Tendencias en Teología," *Pasos* (1985), p. 22.

²³Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 140.

²⁴Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 289.

²⁵For a more complete treatment of this topic, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz,

``Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies From the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engle (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 31-40.

²⁶I have based this treatment of mutuality on Juan Carlos Scannone, *Teología de la Liberación y Praxis Popular* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1976), pp. 133-86.

²⁷Scannone uses the word ``brother." I have used ``friend" in translating this term into English in order to avoid using a gender-specific word.

²⁸Scannone, p. 164.

²⁹Scannone, p. 164. In translating I have used inclusive language not present in the original Spanish.

³⁰Moreno Rejón, *Teología Moral*, p. 155.

³¹Juan Luis González Martínez, ``La ética popular y su autonomía relativa" *Allpauchis* Año 20, No.31 (Primer semestre, 1988), 147-57.

³²Gimenez, ``De la `doctrina social de la iglesia' a la etica," pp. 45-46.

³³Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 209.

³⁴Marciano Vidal, ``Is Morality Based on Autonomy Compatible with the Ethics of Liberation?," in *The Ethics of Liberation – The Liberation of Ethics*, ed. Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Pohier, Concilium 172 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1984), p. 82.

³⁷The bibliographical work of Moreno Rejón, a Spaniard who works in Peru in close association with Gustavo Gutierrez, is notable in this area. See Francisco Moreno Rejón, ``Información bibliográfica sobre la moral fundamental desde América Latina" *Moralía*, 7 (1985), 213-31; also ``Bibliografía latinoamericana sobre moral fundamental (1984-1986)," *Moralía*, 9 (1987), 157-64.

³⁶See Aurora Lapidra, ``Religiosidad popular y mujer andina," in *El Rostro Femenino de la Teología* (Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1986), p. 49.

³⁷Marciano Vidal, p. 84.

³⁸Moser, ``Ciencias sociales," p. 93.