

7.22.2020 Midweek Meditation, Week 6
Galatians 5:6; Matthew 25:31-46; (Series verse: Gal. 3:28)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie
(Leonardo & Clodovis Boff)

“To the Least of These”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Though Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez is usually credited as the origin of the term “liberation theology” with his book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), the slender volume co-authored by Brazilian brothers, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, is a classic introduction written from the Latin American context. The field of liberation theology, not without its critics, has had far-reaching influence beyond Latin America upon theologies in the USA, Africa, Asia, Great Britain, upon feminist and womanist theologians, and many others. Because liberation theology has developed so broadly across the globe in the past fifty years, and because many theologians use this term, it is very difficult to speak about them as one group. Rather, *theologies* of liberation have emerged out of varied contexts in which the history of colonialism and its effects have continued to exert themselves through systemic forms of discrimination, oppression, poverty, and racism.

I first encountered liberation theology without even knowing its name. In the late 1970s at the Jesuit boy’s high school I attended, we supported Jesuit mission work in Peru, sponsored mission trips to Lima, and learned about social justice. The living motto of the school was to be “men for others,” a phrase that was penned by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (1907-1991), Superior General of the Society of the Jesuits, in 1973 and later modified by him as “men and women for others.”

Years later as I was preparing to teach a Japanese language seminary course, I returned to Latin American church history and the 1968 Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America that met in Medellín, Columbia (known as the “Medellín conference”). There, the gathered bishops focused on the poor and oppressed of Latin America stating, “the social situation demands an efficacious presence of the Church that goes beyond the promotion of personal holiness by preaching and the sacraments.” The bishops stated that the church should make a “preferential option for the poor.” Though synonymous with Medellín, this phrase was originally penned in a 1968 letter by Fr. Arrupe, and later used at Medellín. Early in its usage this phrase “preferential option for the poor” referred to the biblical witness of God seeking justice and liberation for the enslaved, oppressed, the poor - those living on the margins.

Growing up on the south and north sides of Chicago, I saw poverty and affluence, racism and privilege, the margins and the inner circle. As a young person I was surrounded by the sight of homelessness, social division, and racial disparity, but was also raised by parents who modeled a caring Protestant form of the social gospel. As a young person, through church life and Jesuit schooling, I began to build a framework that saw the Christian faith not as simply a spiritual and private matter of the heart, but as “faith active in love” (Gal. 5:6).

One of the great blessings of theologies of liberation has come in the observation that all theologies are developed and written within a dialogue between faith, God’s living word in scripture, and the contextual circumstances of history. In the context of the Americas in which I was raised, successive waves of the colonial enterprise began during the era of European voyages of discovery in the 15th century, through which forms of colonialism reached every continent, in the forms of the colonized, the enslaved, and as structures and systems to maintain this authority.

In the period after the Second World War, movements against colonialism and an emerging postcolonial discourse grew around the globe, especially in Latin America, Africa, Asia and North America. Under colonial rule, the colonized and oppressed had often been silenced and without voice.

Theological liberation came to offer hope that the historically silenced would be able to give theological voice *to their faith* through new readings of scripture and history.

In the case of Latin American church history, medieval missionary and colonializing powers of the Roman Catholic Iberian monarchies sailed to the Americas and Asia. In the Americas, Spain established the *encomienda* system which systematically enslaved indigenous people in the New World. Roman Catholic priests like Bartholomé de las Casas, Antonio de Valdivieso, and Cristóbal de Pedraza remonstrated, worked against, and wrote to Rome protesting the inhumane treatment of indigenous people by Iberian settlers (*encomenderos*). In 1537 Pope Paul III, wrote with regard to these indigenous people, “They are not to be robbed of their freedom or personal property. They, who possess the power to accept faith and reach salvation, should not be enslaved, but rather by word and example, led to faith.” (Denzinger, in *Pastorale officium*, translated from Japanese). This resulted in Emperor Charles V issuing *New Laws*, which sought to protect indigenous people.

Though space does not allow here for a full treatment of this period, after the decline of Spain and Portugal and the movement to emancipate former colonies (1810-onward), the church remained a conservative force, while new governments sought many of the absolutist powers that the Iberian colonial powers had possessed. Ideas of revolution and independence from France and the United States flowed into Latin America during the nineteenth century, with the result that political and economic power resided not with the poor or the masses, but with the established classes, descendants of earlier *encomenderos* immigrants who sought to establish governments to protect their power.

In an effort to build a bridge between the church and the world, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) took an open, dialogical and ecumenical stance allowing it to respond to the needs of the modern world. Liturgical, theological, biblical and pastoral renewal led to the Medellín conference in 1968, eventually flowing into the Jesuit education I received as a young person. I remain grateful to Fr. Arrupe and the language of “men and women for others” and the “preferential option for the poor” because they prepared me to hear, in today’s context, Jesus’ words: “‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Liberation goes both ways, those who have been on the margins are liberated to speak and witness to the God who became poor and whose history is on the side of the oppressed. Liberation is also for those with wealth and power to see that God has liberated them from the sins of history allowing systemic oppression to be uncovered and changed. The grace of Christ liberates all people from the enslavement to sin, so that freed we can truly live as “men and women for others.” We have been blessed and freed from sin so that we might joyfully live for the “least of these.” In doing so, we all become “men and women for others” each using their voices, hands and gifts to the glory of God. Amen.

Week 5 midweek meditation readings:

(Excerpts) *Introducing Liberation Theology* by Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff

Liberation theology can be understood as the reflection in faith of the church that has taken to heart the “clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor (Puebla, §1134). It is for them, and with them, that the church seeks to act in a liberative manner. Such an option is neither self-interested nor political, as would be the option of the institutional church an emergent historical power - the popular classes taking an ever more dominant role in the conduct of affairs. No,

this option is made for intrinsic reasons, for reasons inherent in the Christian faith itself. Let us look at them one by one.

Theo-logical Motivation (on God's part)

The biblical God is fundamentally a living God, the author and sustainer of all life. Whenever persons see their lives threatened, they can count on the presence and power of God who comes to their aid in one form or another. God feels impelled to come to the help of the oppressed poor: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings...And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them" (Exod. 3:7, 9). The worship that is pleasing to God must be a "search for justice" and a turning to the needy and the oppressed (see Isa. 1:10-17; 58:6-7; Mark 7:6-13). By opting for the poor, the church imitates our Father who is heaven (Matt. 5:48).

Christological Motivation (on Christ's part)

Christ undeniably made a personal option for the poor and held them to be the main recipients of his message (see Luke 6:20, 7:21-22). They fulfill his law of love who, like the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), approach those who have fallen by the wayside, who make into neighbors those who are distant from them, and make neighbors into brothers and sisters. The followers of Christ make this option for the poor and needy the first and foremost way of expressing their faith in Christ in the context of widespread poverty in the world today.

Eschatological Motivation (from the Standpoint of the Last Judgment)

The gospel of Jesus is quite clear on this point: at the supreme moment of history, when our eternal salvation or damnation will be decided, what will count will be our attitude of acceptance or rejection of the poor (Matt. 25:31-46). The Supreme Judge stands by the side of anyone who is oppressed, seen as a sister or brother of Jesus: "I tell you solemnly, insofar as you did it to one of these least brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). Only, those who commune in his history with the poor and needy, who are Christ's sacraments, will commune definitively with Christ.

Apostolic Motivation (on the part of the Apostles)

From its earliest days the church showed concern for the poor. The Apostles and their followers held all things in common so that there would be no poor among them (see Acts 2 and 4). In proclaiming the gospel, the one thing they emphasized was that the poor should not be ignored: "The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do" (Gal. 2:10). As the greatest of the Greek fathers, St. John Chrysostom, put it, for the sake of the mission of the church, human kind was divided into pagan and Jews, but with reference to the poor there was no division made whatsoever, because they all belonged to the common mission of the church, as much as to that of Peter (to the Jews) as to that of Paul (to the pagans).

Ecclesiological Motivation (on the part of the Church)

Faced with the marginalization and impoverishment of the great majority of its members, the church in Latin America, moved by the motivations listed above and seized with a humanistic sense of compassion, has made a solemn "preferential option for the poor," defined at the Medellín conference in 1968 and ratified at Puebla in 1979, when the bishops reaffirmed "the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation (§1134).

Because of the suffering and the struggles of the poor, the church in its evangelization seeks to urge all Christians to live their faith in such a way that they also make it a factor for transforming society in

the direction of greater justice and fellowship. All need to make the option for the poor: the rich with generosity and no regard for reward, the poor for their fellow poor and those who are even poorer than they. [pages 43-46]

Living and true faith includes the practice of liberation. Faith is the original standpoint of all theology, including liberation theology. Through the act of faith we place our life, our pilgrimage through this world, and our death in God's hands. By the light of faith we see that divine reality penetrates every level of history and the world. As a way of life, faith enables us to discern the presence or negation of God in various human endeavors. It is living faith that provides a contemplative view of the world.

But faith also has to be true, the faith necessary for salvation. In the biblical tradition it is not enough for faith to be true in the terms in which it is expressed (orthodoxy); it is verified, made true, when it is informed by love, solidarity, hunger and thirst for justice. St. James teaches that "faith without good deeds is useless." And that believing in the one God is not enough, "for the demons have the same belief" (2:21, 20). Therefore, ortho-doxo has to be accompanied by ortho-praxis. Living and true faith enables us to hear the voice of the eschatological Judge in the cry of the oppressed: "I was hungry..." (Matt. 25:35). This same faith bids us give heed to that voice, resounding through an act of liberation: "and you gave me to eat." Without this liberating practice that appeases hunger, faith barely plants a seed, let alone produces fruit: not only would we be failing to love our sisters and brothers but we would be failing to love God too: "If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could love of God be living in him?" (1 John 3:17). Only the faith that leads on to love of God and love of others is the faith that saves, and therefore promotes integral liberation: "Our love is not to be just words and mere talk, but something real and active" (1 John 3:18). [pages 49-50]

Reading recommendation:

Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987.

Leonardo Boff (1938-) is Professor Emeritus of Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, and Ecology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. From 1972-1992, he was Professor of Theology at the Jesuit Institute for Philosophy and Theology in Petropolis. He earned a doctorate from the University of Munich (1970). In 1984 his theology brought him into conflict with Rome. Summoned by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he was silenced in 1985 for one year and prohibited from speaking publically and publishing. In a Latin American context where military regimes silenced their critics, being silenced by the Vatican caused no small amount of reaction within and outside of the church. Silenced a second time in 1992, he left the Franciscan order, continuing in the church as a layman. In 2001 he received the Right Livelihood Award. He has published more than 60 books.

Clodovis Boff (1944-) is a Servite (Servants of Mary) priest. Ordained in 1971, he is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná. He earned a doctorate from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. He is a younger brother of Leonardo Boff. Clodovis eventually split theologically with his brother over the methodology of liberation theology, arguing that it is the encounter with Christ that leads one in faith to an encounter with social reality. He argued that in liberation theology, Christianity had lost the transcendental experience and reality of Christ.