

NOTES FOR A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

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TO GET at the theological meaning of liberation, we first have to define our terms. That will make up the first part of this article. It will permit us to emphasize that in these pages we are particularly sensitive to the critical function of theology regarding the Church's presence and activity in the world. The principal fact about that presence today, especially in underdeveloped countries, is the participation by Christians in the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society in which men can live in dignity and be masters of their own destinies. We think that the word "development" does not well express those profound aspirations. "Liberation" seems more exact and richer in overtones; besides, it opens up a more fertile field for theological reflection.

The situation of Latin America, the only continent of underdeveloped and oppressed peoples who are in a majority Christians, is particularly interesting for us. An effort to describe and interpret the Church's ways of being present there will enable us to pose the fundamental question upon which we can then turn our theological reflection. That will make up the second part of this article.

This will permit us to see that asking the theological meaning of liberation is really asking the meaning of Christianity itself and the Church's mission. There used to be a time when the Church answered problems by calmly appealing to its doctrinal and vital reserves. Today, however, the gravity and scope of the process we call liberation is such that Christian belief and the Church itself are called radically in question. They are asked what right they have to address the mighty human task now before us. A few paragraphs will allow us to outline that problem, or rather to state, without attempting to answer them, the new questions.

DEFINITIONS

To approach this question properly, we should explain precisely what we mean by "theology" and by "liberation."

Theology

Theological reflection is inherent in the life of faith and the life of the Church. However, the focus of theological study has varied down through the history of the Church. That evolution has been accelerated in recent years.

Through the Church's history, theology has carried out various functions. Two stand out in particular. In the first centuries, what we today call theology was closely allied to the spiritual life. Primarily it dealt with a meditation on the Bible, geared toward spiritual progress. From the twelfth century on, theology began to be a science. The Aristotelian categories made it possible to speak of theology as a "subordinate science." This notion of science is ambiguous and does not satisfy the modern mind. But the essential in the work of St. Thomas is that theology is the fruit of the meeting between faith and reason. Perhaps we do better, then, to speak of a rational knowledge. In résumé, theology is necessarily spiritual and rational knowledge. These two elements are permanent and indispensable functions of all theological reflection.

Another function of theology has slowly developed and been accepted in recent years: theology as a critical reflection on the Church's pastoral action.

The renewed stress on charity as center of the Christian life has brought us to see faith more biblically, as a commitment to God and neighbor. In this perspective the understanding of faith is likewise seen to be the understanding of a commitment, an attitude, a posture toward life, in the light of the revealed Word.

At the same time, the very life of the Church has become a *locus theologicus*. This was clear in the so-called "new theology," and has frequently been emphasized since then. God's word, which assembles us, is incarnated in the community of faith totally devoted to the service of all men.

Something similar happened with what has been called since Pope John and Vatican II a theology of the signs of the times. Let us not forget that the signs of the times are not only a call to intellectual analysis. They are, above all, a demand for action, for commitment, for service of others. "Scrutinizing" the signs of the times takes in both elements (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 44).

All these factors have brought us to rediscover and make explicit theology's function as a critical reflection on the Church's presence and activity in the world, in the light of revelation. By its preaching of the gospel message, by its sacraments, by the charity of its members, the Church announces and accepts the gift of the kingdom of God into the heart of human history. The Church is effective charity, it is action, it is commitment to the service of men.

Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. First comes the commitment to charity, to service. Theology comes "later." It is second. The Church's pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is rather a

reflection on it. Theology should find the Spirit present in it, inspiring the actions of the Christian community. The life of the Church will be for it a *locus theologicus*.

Reflecting on the Church's presence and activity in the world means being open to the world, listening to the questions asked in it, being attentive to the successive stages of its historical growth.¹ This task is indispensable. Reflection in the light of faith should always accompany the Church's pastoral efforts. Theology, by relativizing all its undertakings, keeps the Church from settling down into what is only provisory. Theology, by harking back to the sources of revelation, will guide action, setting it into a broader context, thus contributing to keep it from falling into activism and immediatism.

As reflection on the Church's activity, theology is a progressive and, in a certain sense, variable understanding. If the commitment of the Christian community takes on different forms down through history, the understanding that accompanies that commitment will constantly take a fresh look at it—and may then take surprising initiatives.

Theology, therefore, as a critical reflection on the Church's presence and action in the world, in the light of faith, not only complements the other two functions of theology (wisdom and rational knowledge) but even presupposes them.

Development or Liberation?

Today's world is going through a profound sociocultural transformation. Modern man has also become fully aware of the economic basis for that transformation. In the poor countries, where the immense majority of the world's population lives, the struggle for social change is being made with great urgency and is starting to become violent.

The term "development" does not seem to express well the yearning of contemporary men for more human living conditions. A basic problem is: the notion of development is not univocal; a considerable number of definitions are given. Instead of looking at them one by one, let us see the perspectives they start from.

First, development can be taken in a purely economic sense, as synonymous with *economic growth*. In that case, a country's development will be measured, e.g., by comparing its GNP or its per capita income with those of some country assumed to have achieved a high level of development. This yardstick can be improved on and made more sophisticated, but the basic presumption will be that development is primarily an increase of wealth. Those who speak this way, explicitly at

¹ Y. Congar, *Situation et tâches présentes de la théologie* (Paris, 1967) p. 72.

least, are few today.² Such a yardstick is used rather to contrast with other, more integral norms. One may still ask, however, if all the norms do not retain something of the capitalist concept of development.

The inadequacies of the purely economic yardstick have popularized another, more important and frequent today, which looks on development as a *global social process*, with economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. This strategy of development, keeping in view all these aspects, permits a people to make global progress and also avoid certain dangerous pitfalls.

Seeing development as a global social process involves, of necessity, ethical values, and that implies ultimately a concept of what man is. A detailed explicitation of such a *humanist perspective* in development takes time and extends, without contradicting it, the point of view just presented. Fr. L. J. Lebreton strove constantly in that direction. For him, developmental economics is "the discipline covering the passage from a less human to a more human phase." The same notion is contained in that other definition of development: "having more in order to be more."³ This humanistic view places the notion of development in a broader context: a historical vision, in which humanity takes charge of its own destiny. But that involves a change of perspective, which we prefer to call "liberation." That is what we shall try to explain in the following paragraphs.

In recent decades the term "development" has been used to express the aspirations of the poor nations. Of late, however, the term has seemed weak. In fact, today the term conveys a pejorative connotation, especially in Latin America.

There has been much discussion recently of development, of aid to the poor countries; there has even been an effort to weave a mystique around those words. Attempts to produce development in the 1950's aroused hopes. But because they did not hit the roots of the evil, they failed, and have led to deception, confusion, and frustration.

One of the most important causes of this situation is the fact that development, in its strictly economic, modernizing sense, was advanced by international agencies backed by the groups that control the world economy. The changes proposed avoided sedulously, therefore, attacking the powerful international economic interests and those of their natural allies: the national oligarchies. What is more, in many

² This manner of speaking is found in the well-known work of W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966).

³ Recall how Karl Marx refers the abolition of private property to the "to be" and not to the "to have" of man. See also the "to have" of the "total man" of H. LeFebvre and R. Garaudy.

cases the alleged changes were only new and concealed ways to increase the power of the mighty economic groups.

Here is where conflict enters the picture. Development should attack the causes of our plight, and among the central ones is the economic, social, political, and cultural dependence of some peoples on others. The word "liberation," therefore, is more accurate and conveys better the human side of the problem.

Once we call the poor countries oppressed and dominated, the word "liberation" is appropriate. But there is also another, much more global and profound view of humanity's historical advance. Man begins to see himself as a creative subject; he seizes more and more the reins of his own destiny, directing it toward a society where he will be free of every kind of slavery.⁴ Looking on history as the process of *man's emancipation* places the question of development in a broader context, a deeper and even a more radical one. This approach expresses better the aspiration of the poor peoples, who consider themselves primarily as oppressed. Thus the term "development" seems rather antiseptic, inaccurately applying to a tragic, tense reality. What is at stake, then, is a dynamic and historical concept of man as looking toward his future, doing things today to shape his tomorrow.⁵

This topic and this language are beginning to appear in certain actions of the magisterium. One isolated text of *The Development of Peoples*, e.g., speaks of "building a world where every man, regardless of race, religion, or nationality, can live a fully human life, free of the servitude that comes from other men and from the incompletely mastered world about him." The notion is more forcibly expressed in the *Message of Fifteen Bishops of the Third World*, published in reply to *The Development of Peoples*. The topic of liberation comes up frequently, almost as the leitmotif of the document, in another text of greater importance because of its doctrinal authority: in the *Medellín Guidelines*.

Liberation, therefore, seems to express better both the hopes of oppressed peoples and the fulness of a view in which man is seen not as a passive element, but as agent of history. More profoundly, to see history as a process of man's liberation places the issue of desired social changes in a dynamic context. It also permits us to understand better the age we live in. Finally, the term "development" clouds up somewhat the theological issues latent in the process. To speak of liberation,

⁴ This is the profound meaning of Hegel's dialectic Master-Slave.

⁵ See the inspiring three-volume work of Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt/Main, 1959), as well as Harvey Cox's preface to the English translation of Bloch, *Man on His Own* (New York, 1970).

on the other hand, is to hint at the biblical sources that illuminate man's presence and actions in history: the liberation from sin by Christ our Redeemer and the bringing of new life.

In résumé, then, there are three levels of meaning to the term "liberation": the political liberation of oppressed peoples and social classes; man's liberation in the course of history; and liberation from sin as condition of a life of communion of all men with the Lord.

THE OPTION FACING THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH

We have seen that one of theology's functions is to be a critical reflection on the Church's pastoral activity. The flow of history reveals unsuspected aspects of revelation, and the role of Christians in that history constitutes, we have said, a real *locus theologicus*. In this regard it may help to recall, on broad lines, the option or choice that important sectors of the Church are making in the only continent with a majority of its people Christian. Crucial and difficult problems connected with liberation face the Latin American Church.

The Process of Liberation in Latin America

After many years of genuine ignorance of what was going on, and after a brief moment of induced and artificial optimism, Latin America is now acquiring at least a partial, but more global and structural understanding of its situation. The most important change in the understanding of Latin America's reality lies in the fact that it is not a mere description, prescinding from the deep causes; rather, it gives particular attention to those causes and examines them in a historical perspective.

The decade of the 1950's was marked in Latin America by a great optimism in the possibilities of achieving economic development. The hope was based on a favorable historical moment and was theoretically expressed in a number of masterly economic studies. The developmental models popular in those years were the ones proposed by international agencies.⁶

For them, however, to develop meant imitating the processes followed by the more developed societies. The ideal imitated was the "modern society" or the "industrialized society." This approach was supposed to solve all the problems the underdeveloped countries were experiencing because they were "traditional societies." Thus underdeveloped countries were thought of as in some "prior stage" to that of the developed ones and as having to go through, more or less, the same

⁶ For an exposition and critique of this attitude, cf. F. Cardoso and E. Falleto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América latina* (Santiago de Chile, 1967).

historical experience they did in their progress to becoming modern societies. The result was some timid and, as later seen, misdirected efforts at change, which merely consolidated the existing economic system.⁷

In the 1960's a new attitude emerged. The developmental model has not produced the promised fruits. A pessimistic diagnostic has now replaced the former optimistic one.⁸ Today we see clearly that the proposed model was an improper one. It was an abstract model, an ahistorical one, which kept us from seeing the complexity of the problem and the inevitably contradictory aspects of the proposed solution. The process of underdevelopment should be studied in historical perspective, i.e., contrasting it with the development of the great capitalist countries in whose sphere Latin America is situated.

Underdevelopment, as a global social fact, can be seen as the historical subproduct of the development of other countries.⁹ The dynamics of capitalistic economics lead simultaneously to the creation of greater wealth for fewer, and of greater poverty for more. Our national oligarchies, teamed up in complicity with these centers of power, perpetuate, for their own benefit and through various subterfuges, a situation of domination within each country.¹⁰ And the inequality between developed and underdeveloped countries is worse if we turn to the cultural point of view. The poor, dominated countries keep getting farther and farther behind. If things go on this way, we will soon be able to speak of two human groups, two kinds of men.¹¹

All these studies lead us to conclude that Latin America cannot develop within the capitalistic system.

Labeling Latin America an oppressed and dominated continent brings us naturally to speak of liberation and to start acting accordingly. Indeed, this is a word that reveals a new conviction of Latin Americans.

The failure of the efforts at reform has accentuated this attitude. Today the most "conscientized" groups agree that there will be a true development for Latin America only through liberation from the domi-

⁷ Cf. Theotonius Dos Santos, *El nuevo carácter de la dependencia* (Santiago de Chile, 1968).

⁸ Cf. Felipe Herrera, "Viabilidad de una comunidad latinoamericana," in *Estudios internacionales* (Santiago de Chile), April, 1967.

⁹ This point has been well studied in its historical genesis by D. Sunkel, *El marco histórico del proceso de desarrollo y de subdesarrollo* (Santiago de Chile, 1967).

¹⁰ Cf. G. Arroyo, "Pensamiento latinoamericano sobre subdesarrollo y dependencia externa: Revisión bibliográfica," *Mensaje* 173 (Oct., 1968) 516-20.

¹¹ Cf. A. Salazar Bondy, "La cultura de la dominación," in *Perú problema* (Lima, 1968).

nation by capitalist countries. That implies, of course, a showdown with their natural allies: our national oligarchies. Latin America will never get out of its plight except by a profound transformation, a social revolution that will radically change the conditions it lives in at present. Today, a more or less Marxist inspiration prevails among those groups and individuals who are raising the banner of the continent's liberation. And for many in our continent, this liberation will have to pass, sooner or later, through paths of violence. Indeed, we recognize that the armed struggle began some years ago. It is hard to weigh its possibilities in terms of political effectiveness. The reverses it has suffered have obliged it to rethink its program, but it would be naive to think that the armed struggle is over.

We must remember, however, that in this process of liberation there is, explicitly or implicitly, an added thrust. Achieving the liberation of the continent means more than just overcoming economic, social, and political dependence. It also means seeing that humanity is marching toward a society in which man will be free of every servitude and master of his own destiny.¹²

The Church in the Liberation Process

The Latin American Church has lived, and still does, largely in a ghetto state. Thus the Church has had to seek support from the established powers and the economically powerful groups, in order to carry out its task and, at times, face its enemies. But for some time now, we have been witnessing a mighty effort to end that ghetto situation and shake off the ambiguous protection offered by the upholders of the unjust order our continent lives in.

The pastoral goal of setting up a "new Christianity" has brought about a political commitment by many Christians to create a more just society. The lay apostolic movements, in particular those of youth, have given their best leaders in years gone by to the political parties of Social Christian inspiration. Today, however, the apostolic youth movements have gone more radical in their political stance. In most Latin American countries the militants no longer gravitate toward the Social Christian parties, or if they do, they become their more radical wing. The increasingly more revolutionary political postures of Christian groups frequently lead the lay apostolic movements into conflict with the hierarchy, open the question of where they fit into the Church, and cause serious conscience problems for them. In many cases the

¹² Starting with this educational field, the most creative and fertile along this line in Latin America are the experiences and works of P. Freire, which are an effort to build a "pedagogy of the oppressed."

laymen's interest in social revolution is gradually displacing their interest in the kingdom.

Clearer notions about the continent's tragic plight, sharp breaks provoked by the political polarization, the trend toward more active participation in the Church's life as urged by the Council and Medellín—all of these have made the clergy (including religious) one of the most dynamic and restless segments of the Latin American Church. In many countries groups of priests have organized to channel and accentuate the growing restlessness. They call for radical changes in the Church's presence and activity. These activities, and other factors, have in a number of cases led to frictions with local bishops and nuncios. It seems probable that, unless radical changes take place, these conflicts will multiply and get even worse in coming years. Many priests, as well, feel bound in conscience to engage actively in the field of politics. And it happens frequently today in Latin America that priests are labeled "subversives." Many of them are watched or sought by the police. Others are in jail, are exiled, or are even assassinated by anticommunist terrorists.

These new and serious problems facing the Latin American Church cause conflicts, and many bishops are ill prepared to cope with them. Yet there is a gradual awakening to the social overtones of the Church's presence and a rediscovery of their prophetic role. Bishops in the more impoverished and exploited areas have most vehemently denounced the injustices they witness. But as soon as they point out the profound causes behind these evils, they collide with the great economic and political blocs of their countries. Inevitably they are accused of intruding into matters that do not pertain to them and called Marxists. Often it is Catholic conservatives who most readily make those charges.

These activities have led to manifestoes expressing them and developing theologico-pastoral bases for them. In the past two years we have seen a flurry of public statements: from lay movements, groups of priests and bishops, and entire episcopates. A constant refrain in these statements is the admission of the Church's solidarity with Latin America's plight. The Church refuses to disregard that plight, seeking instead to accept its responsibility to correct the injustices.¹³ The poverty, injustice, and exploitation of man by fellow man in Latin America is often called "institutionalized violence." Theologically, that phe-

¹³ Cf. "Mensaje a los pueblos de América latina," in *Documentación de Medellín* (for this Latin America Bishops' Conference in Colombia, Aug.-Sept., 1968, see Renato Poblete, "Conferencia del CELAM en Medellín," *Mensaje* 173 [Oct., 1968] 495-500; also *Informations catholiques internationales* 321 [Oct. 1, 1968] 7-10, 21-25); also the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, Jan., 1969.

nomenon is called a "situation of sin."¹⁴ The reality so described is more and more obviously the result of a *situation of dependence*, i.e., the centers where decisions are made are located outside our continent—a fact that keeps our countries in a condition of neocolonialism.¹⁵

In all these statements, from a variety of sources inside the Latin American Church, the term "development" is gradually being displaced by the term "liberation."¹⁶ The word and the idea behind it express the desire to get rid of the condition of dependence, but even more than that they underline the desire of the oppressed peoples to seize the reins of their own destiny and shake free from the present servitude, as a symbol of the freedom from sin provided by Christ.¹⁷ This liberation will only be achieved by a thorough change of structures. The term "social revolution" is heard more and more—and ever more openly.¹⁸

Problems

This situation questions, among other things, the Church of Latin America in respect to her actual community, in the meaning of her mission, in her social status, in her fidelity to the gospel. Thus new problems are planted and unsuspected perspectives are opened.

1) Active participation in the process of liberation is far from being a fact in all of the Latin American Christian community. The bulk of the Church remains tied in various ways (conscious or unconscious) to the established order. The worst of it is that among the Christians of Latin America not only are there different political options within the framework of a free exchange of ideas; rather, the polarization of the options and the hardening of the situation have put some Christians among the oppressed and others among the persecutors, some among the tortured and others among those who torture. From this results a serious and radical confrontation. In the liberation process the Latin American Church is found strongly divided. In these conditions, life in the center of the Christian community becomes particularly diffi-

¹⁴ Cf. "Paz" in *Medellín*; also "Mensaje de los obispos del tercer mundo" (tr. in *Catholic Mind* 66, no. 1219 [Jan., 1968] 37-46: "A Message to the People of the Third World by Fifteen Bishops"); also "América latina, continente de violencia" (letter signed by a thousand priests).

¹⁵ Cf. "Paz" in *Medellín*; also *Conclusiones de Itapoa*, May, 1968.

¹⁶ Cf. H. Borrat, "El gran impulso," *Vispera*, Oct., 1968.

¹⁷ See most of the documents of *Medellín*; also the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, Jan., 1969.

¹⁸ Cf. the address of Cardinal Landázuri at the University of Notre Dame in 1966; the 1968 Declaration of Peruvian Priests; the 1968 Letter of Bolivian Priests; the second Encuentro de Golconda, 1968.

cult and conflictive. Participation in the Eucharistic celebration, for example, in its present-day form is seen by many as an act which lacks support in the real human community; it takes on fictitious appearances.

It will be impossible in the future not to face the problems which emerge from such a division between Christians. The lyric call for the union of all Christians, without taking into account the deep causes of the present situation and the real conditions for construction of society together, is nothing but an evasion. We are on the way to a new conception of unity and communion in the Church. This does not involve a fact acquired once and for all, but something always in process, something achieved with valor and liberty of spirit, with the price, at times, of painful severances.

2) In the Latin American world, where the Christian community should live and rejoice, its eschatological hope is that of social revolution, where violence is present in different ways. Its mission is before it. The choices which (with the limits already indicated) the Church is making are confronting her more and more with the dilemma which she presently is living on the continent: reform or revolution. Faced with this polarization, can the ecclesiastical authority stay on the level of generalized declarations? But can it go further without leaving that which is normally considered as its specific mission?

For the Latin American Church to be *in* the world without being *of* the world means concretely and more clearly to be in the system but not of the system. It is evident, in effect, that only a break with the unjust present order and a frank commitment to a new society will make believable to the men of Latin America the message of love of which the Christian community is carrier. This demand should lead to a profound revision of the way it preaches the Word. The so-called "political theology" which assigns to the Church a socio-critical function with a basis in its eschatological hope is an interesting line of thought, especially in Latin America, where the exercising of that function (in practice already initiated) has enormous repercussions.

3) Another problem, closely related to the previous, is hotly debated: Should the Church use its social weight in favor of a social transformation in Latin America? There are those who are scandalized at hearing of a Church dedicated to necessary and urgent changes. They fear that after having been tied to one ruling order, the Church will simply commit herself to another. They also fear that this effort may terminate in a noisy failure: the Latin American episcopate does not have a unanimous position and does not have the necessary means to orient all Christians to one line of social advancement.

One cannot deny the reality of this risk. But the social influence of the Church is a fact; and to do nothing in favor of the oppressed of Latin America is to act against them. On the other hand, the best way for the Church to break her ties with the present order (and thus lose that ambiguous social prestige) is to denounce the fundamental injustices on which it is based. To discern what action is appropriate for the Latin American Church, it is necessary to keep in mind her historical and social co-ordinates. Not to do this is to move on the level of an abstract and "historic" theology—perhaps more subtly, a theology which is more careful not to repeat past errors than to see the originality of the present situation and to commit itself to the future.

4) The Latin American Christian community finds itself on a poor continent. But the image which she herself offers, taken globally, is not that of a poor Church. This is accurately reflected by the final document of Medellín, and whoever is interested can verify the image by consulting the middle-class Latin American. In the projection of this image, without doubt, prejudices and generalizations intervene, but no one can deny its basic validity. We often confuse what is "necessary" with a comfortable installation in this world, the liberty to preach the gospel with the protection of the powerful groups, the instruments of service with the means of power.

THE OUTLOOK

Our next step must be to go back to the question raised earlier and suggest certain answers that we find in modern-day theological reflection—or better, suggest certain tasks. Continuing the method we hinted at in the first part of this essay, we will keep as our backdrop in this discussion the praxis of the Christian community, especially in Latin America. The point to remember is this: the scope and importance of the process of liberation are such that to ask its meaning is to ask the meaning of Christianity itself, and the mission of the Church in the world. These are the root questions explicitly or implicitly behind the involvement of Christians in the fight against injustice. Only this approach will allow us to see with new eyes what liberation means in the light of faith.

The Faith and the New Man

What ultimately brings Christians to participate in liberating oppressed peoples is the conviction that the gospel message is radically incompatible with an unjust, alienated society. They see clearly that they cannot be authentic Christians unless they act. But what they are to do to achieve this just world calls for great effort and imagination.

Theology, as a critical reflection in the light of faith on the presence

of Christians in this world, ought to help us find our answer. It ought to verify the faith, hope, and charity contained in our zeal. But it ought also correct possible deviations and omissions in our Christian living that the demands of political action, however nobly inspired, may make us fall into.¹⁹ This too is a task for critical reflection.

In addition to the struggle against misery, injustice, and exploitation, what we seek is the *creation of a new man*. This aspiration questions and challenges our Christian faith. What that faith can say about itself enables us to see its relation with the yearning of men who fight to emancipate other men and themselves. What does that struggle, that creation, mean in the light of faith? What does this decision mean for man? What is the meaning of newness in history, or turning toward the future? Three questions, and three roads for theological reflection to follow. But primarily, three tasks.

Liberation and Salvation

What is the connection between salvation and the process of man's emancipation in the course of history? To answer this without staying in generalities would take a more searching study into what we mean by salvation than we can here afford. It is one of modern-day theology's lacunae.²⁰ We do not seem to have drawn all the conclusions latent in the rediscovery of the truth of universal salvation. This is a bigger question than merely asking if one can be saved outside the visible Church. To talk of the presence of grace, accepted or rejected, in all men implies also forming a Christian judgment on the very roots of human actions. It makes it impossible to talk about a profane world; for human existence is ultimately nothing but a yes or a no to the Lord.

There are not, then, two histories, one profane and one sacred, juxtaposed or interrelated, but a single human progress, irreversibly exalted by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces every dimension of human existence. Two great biblical themes illustrate this view: the relation between creation and salvation, and the eschatological promises.

In the Bible, *creation* is presented not as a stage previous to the work of salvation, but as the first salvific action: "God chose us before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:3). It is part of the process of salvation, of God's self-communication. The religious experience of Israel is essen-

¹⁹ Karl Rahner (*La risposta dei teologi* [Brescia, 1969] 71) speaks of the not too remote possibility that the Church might give a "univocal no" to certain tendencies or interpretations of Christianity.

²⁰ Cf. P. Smulders, "La Iglesia como sacramento de salvación," in *La Iglesia del Vaticano II* 1 (1966) 379.

tially history, but that history is merely a prolongation of the creative act. Hence the Psalms sing of God simultaneously as Creator and Saviour (cf. Ps 135, 136, 74, 93, 95). God, who made a cosmos out of a chaos, is the same who acts in salvation history. The work of Christ is seen as a re-creation and narrated for us in a context of creation (Jn 1). Creation and salvation thus have a Christological meaning: in Him everything was created and saved (cf. Col 1:15-20).

So when we say that man realizes himself by continuing the act of creation through work, we are saying that he thereby places himself in the interior of salvation history. Mastering the earth, as Genesis bids him do, is a work of salvation, meant to produce its plenitude. To work, to transform this world, is to save. The Bible reveals the profound meaning of that effort. Building the temporal city is not a mere step in "humanizing," in "pre-evangelizing," as theologians used to say a few years back. Rather, it means participating fully in the salvific process that affects the whole man.

A second great biblical theme brings us to similar conclusions. This is the theme of *eschatological promises*, i.e., the events that herald and accompany the eschatological era. This is not a once-mentioned theme; rather, like the first one, it occurs repeatedly all through the Bible. It is vividly present in the history of Israel and hence deserves a place in the present progress of the people of God.

The prophets spoke of a kingdom of peace. But peace supposes the establishment of justice (Is 32:17), defense of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressor, a life without fear of being enslaved. A poorly understood spirituality has often led us to forget the human message, the power to change unjust social structures, that the eschatological promises contain—which does not mean, of course, that they contain nothing but social implications. The end of misery and exploitation will indicate that the kingdom has come; it will be here, according to Isaiah, when nobody "builds so that another may dwell, or plants so that another may eat," and when each one "enjoys the work of his hands" (65:22). To fight for a just world where there will be no oppression or slavery or forced work will be a sign of the coming of the kingdom. Kingdom and social injustice are incompatible. In Christ "all God's promises have their fulfilment" (2 Cor 1:20; cf. also Is 29:18-19; Mt 11:5; Lv 25:10; Lk 4:16-21).

The lesson to be drawn from these two biblical themes is clear: *salvation embraces the whole man*. The struggle for a just society fits fully and rightfully into salvation history. That conclusion is emphasized in *The Development of Peoples* (21), where it is said that "integral development" (viz., salvation) of man extends, without discontinuity, from

the possession of what he needs to communion with the Lord, the fullness of the salvific work.

Christ thus appears as the Saviour who, by liberating us from sin, liberates us from the very root of social injustice. The entire dynamism of human history, the struggle against all that depersonalizes man—social inequalities, misery, exploitation—have their origin, are sublimated, and reach their plenitude in the salvific work of Christ. The following two points confirm and qualify the conclusions of these paragraphs.

Meeting God in History

The purpose of Christians who participate in the process of liberation is, then, to *create a new man*. We have sought to answer the first question: What is the meaning of that struggle, that creation, in the light of faith? Perhaps we can now ask: What is the meaning of that decision for man?

In his political commitment, modern man is especially sensitive to basic human needs and tries to be of service to those suffering oppression and injustice. It is not enough to assert that love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor. We must also affirm that love of God is necessarily expressed through love of neighbor. Charity cannot exist in the abstract, outside our human scope for loving. Charity exists only incarnated in human love, raising it to its fulfilment. Loving neighbor is a necessary application of loving God; in fact, it is loving God.

"The Lord is the goal of human history." So says the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (45). We meet the Lord when we meet men. Siding with man is siding with the God of our Christian faith, with the God-man, with Christ. Today, someone has said, our neighbor is not only some individual man, but also whole peoples, especially those suffering misery and oppression.

Eschatology and Politics

Dedication to bringing about a just society and a new man supposes trust in the future. It is an act that is open to whatever comes. What is the meaning of this *newness*, seen in the light of faith?

Modern man's tendency to live in function of the morrow, to be turned toward the future, intrigued by what still has to happen, has often been pointed out. This characteristic of our day no doubt contributed to the rediscovery of the eschatological values contained in revelation. The Bible, but particularly the Old Testament, offers eschatology as the motor force of salvation history. It thus appears not as one of many elements in Christianity, but as the very key to understanding it.

The story of Exodus describes very well the Christian community's situation in history.

The new emphasis on eschatological values has brought about a renewal of the theology of hope. Christian life is essentially forward-looking. What distinguishes the Christian, Moltmann writes, "is not faith, nor charity, but hope." The Christian is, before all else, he who must answer for the hope that is in him (1 Pt 3:15).²¹

The eschatological vision becomes operative, and hope becomes creative, when they meet the social realities in today's world, thus producing what is termed "political theology."²² Metz suggests that this is a needed corrective for a theology that, under the influence of existentialism and personalism, had grown too individualistic. Political theology seeks to focus on the social dimensions of the biblical message. The Bible tells us not only of a *vocation* to communion with God but of a *convocation*. That fact ought to have an impact on the political behavior of Christians.

This conclusion is particularly appropriate in Latin America, where the Christian community is accepting more and more delicate and even radical political involvements. But some questions arise. Will political theology stop at analyzing the meaning of those involvements? Or will it go further and inspire a new political doctrine for the Church? In the latter case, how can we avoid a return to the familiar old problem of Christendom? Shall theology become a new "ideology"? The challenge will be to find a way between a Christian politics and an abstention. Very likely no solution can be found by hit-and-miss methods. Yet it is hard to work out in advance (as we used to believe we could) the precise norms that should govern the Church's conduct, which will probably have to be decided by the needs of the moment, with the lights the Church has at its disposition, and with a mighty effort to be true to the gospel. There are certain chapters of theology that can only be written afterwards.

In any event, if we can recapture a historical vision focusing on the future and animated by hope that Christ will bring about the fulness we wait for, we shall see in a fresh light the *new man* we are trying to create by our activity in the present. If we hope in Christ, we will believe in the historical adventure—which opens a vast field of possibilities to the Christian's action.

²¹ Cf. J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Munich, 1965).

²² Cf. J. B. Metz, "The Church's Social Function in the Light of a 'Political Theology,'" in *Concilium* 36 (New York, 1968) 2-18.

The Church's Mission

The Church as the visible community of faith is frequently challenged and questioned today. What we have seen about the meaning of Christianity situates in a new way the Church's mission in the world. Two points can help us here: the first concerns the meaning of the Church's mission; the second, an inescapable condition for carrying it out.

Humanity's Eschatological Awareness

The unqualified assertion of the universal possibility of salvation changes radically our way of conceiving the Church's mission in the world. This shift in perspective implies a "decentralizing" of the Church, which is no longer the exclusive place for salvation, and now turns toward a new, radical service of mankind.

If, as we saw above, the construction of a just society fits squarely into salvation history, then the Church must play a role in that establishment of a new order. Political theology makes the Church an "institution of social criticism."²³ This is a critique undertaken in function of its eschatological message, which will perform a liberating mission by pointing out the provisory nature of every historical situation and every human achievement.

The Church's role, however, is not only to exercise a social critique, which would run the risk of being something excessively intellectual. The Church will stimulate and radicalize the dedication of Christians to history about them.²⁴ The Christian community, which professes a truth "that keeps working itself out," is called on to participate actively in constructing a just order. Here is a fact that theology dare not neglect, lest it incur the reproach, so often merited, that Christians undervalue all involvement in the world.

Thus we can justify the Church's "earthly" mission.²⁵ But this eschatological perspective also permits us to grasp in a clear and dynamic way the antitheses: temporal vs. spiritual, and Church vs. world. The Church, indeed, is the world itself living in history, as it proceeds toward the future promised by the Lord. As Teilhard de Chardin noted, the Church is the "reflexively Christified" part of humanity. That is

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, "Foi chrétienne et attente terrestre," in *L'Eglise dans le monde de ce temps* (1967) pp. 151-58.

²⁵ What it does not mean is that the Church be a simple social pressure group in history or a kind of "spiritual UNESCO," as Schillebeeckx has emphasized on several occasions.

what the Church celebrates in the Eucharist; so we can see the indissoluble bond between it and the efforts to create a just society (Mt 5:23-24).

In Latin America the Church must realize that it exists in a continent undergoing revolution, where violence is present in different ways. The "world" in which the Christian community is called on to live and celebrate its eschatological hope is one in social revolution. Its mission must be achieved keeping that in account. The Church has no alternative. Only a total break with the unjust order to which it is bound in a thousand conscious or unconscious ways, and a forthright commitment to a new society, will make men in Latin America believe the message of love it bears. The Church's critico-political function becomes doubly important in Latin America, where the ecclesial institution carries so much prestige. In consideration, then, of the Church's mission, concrete circumstances should affect not only pastoral attitudes but theological thought itself.

Poverty—in Solidarity and in Protest

For several years we have been hearing a growing call in the Church for an authentic witness of poverty. It is important, however, to grasp very precisely the point of this witness and to avoid sentimentalism (there has been trivial talk of the "eminent dignity of the poor in the Church"), as well as the fanciful project of making poverty into an ideal (which would be ironic indeed for those who undergo real misery).

In the Bible poverty, as deprivation of the basic needs for living, is considered an evil, something that degrades man and offends God; the words it uses in referring to the poor show this (cf. Is 10:2; Amos 2:6-7; 5:1-6; 2:1). On the other hand, spiritual poverty is not merely an interior indifference to the goods of this world, but an attitude of openness to God, of spiritual simplicity (Wis 2:3; Is 66:2; Ps 25, 34, 37, 149; Prv 22:4; 15:33; 18:2; Mt 5:3).

Christian poverty makes no sense, then, except as a promise to be one with those suffering misery, in order to point out the evil that it represents. No one should "idealize" poverty, but rather hold it aloft as an evil, cry out against it, and strive to eliminate it. Through such a spirit of solidarity we can alert the poor to the injustice of their situation. When Christ assumed the condition of poverty, He did so not to idealize it, but to show love and solidarity with men and to redeem them from sin. Christian poverty, an expression of love, makes us one with those who are poor and protests against their poverty.

Yet we must watch the use of that word. The term "poor" can seem vague and churchy, sentimental, even antiseptic. The "poor" man to-

day is the one who is oppressed, who is kept marginal to society, the proletariat or subproletariat struggling to get his most elemental rights. The solidarity and protest we are talking about have a real political overtone in today's world.

Making oneself one with the poor today can entail personal risk, even of one's life. That is what many Christians—and non-Christians—who are dedicated to the revolutionary cause are finding out. Thus new forms of living poverty, different from the usual "giving up the goods of this world," are being found.

Only by repudiating poverty and making itself poor in protest against it can the Church preach "spiritual poverty," i.e., an openness of man and the history he lives in to the future promised by God. Only in that way can it fulfil honestly, and with a good chance of being heard, the critico-social function that political theology assigns. For the Church of today, this is the test of the authenticity of its mission.

We will have to rethink, too, the wisdom of having the churches of wealthy countries help the churches of poor countries. Financial aid can be self-defeating as witness of the poverty they should show, unless it is properly envisaged. Besides, it could lull them into settling for reformist solutions and superficial social changes that in the long run will only prolong the misery and injustice. Such aid can also salve the conscience of Christians in the countries that control the world economy.

A final word. If theological reflection does not help us to vitalize the Church's action in the world, and to make our commitment to charity deeper and more radical, it will amount to very little. We will have to watch out that we do not fall into an intellectual self-satisfaction, a sort of triumphalism of clever "new" visions of Christianity. Adapting Pascal, we can say that all the political theology of hope, of liberation, of revolution, is not worth as much as one act of faith, hope, and charity leading to an active effort to liberate man from all that dehumanizes him and keeps him from living according to the Lord's will.