

LIBERATION ECCLESIOLOGY: PRAXIS, THEORY, PRAXIS

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THIS ARTICLE explores the relationship between the Church's self-understanding and the way it acts in a given social context. The underlying methodological assumption, borrowed from the sociology of knowledge, is that there is a dialectical relationship between any theoretical knowledge (theology, in this instance) and the sociocultural context of that knowledge. A body of knowledge is both a product of the lived experience of a community and a factor in determining that lived experience. Liberation ecclesiology is a good example of a theology that has been produced out of a definite social context with the conscious intent to bring about a more just social order and a more authentic church within it. The context is in a dialectical relationship with the theology.

This dialectical process has several phases, however, and develops over time. A new social and religious context gives rise to new directions in theological reflection. This reflection clarifies and illuminates many of the religious dimensions of the experience, casts them in a theoretical framework, and relates them to elements of the tradition. In turn, the reflection once it becomes systematized feeds back on the religious and social context and frequently acts as a legitimizing or clarifying element for further development of the experience itself. As the religious and social contexts continue to evolve, further implications emerge both for norms and structures of the Church as well as for theological knowledge. Another moment of reflection sometimes occurs at this point when theologians or the magisterium attempt to refine or even rule out certain elements that are perceived as threatening the integrity of the Church or its tradition.¹

The theology of liberation itself has come out of a social and religious

¹ The experience of the Church since Vatican II is a clear example of this process. To think of only one area, the opening initiated by the 1964 Decree on Ecumenism led to various actions such as intercommunion and sharing of pulpits, which the Vatican has been very hesitant to allow. For an over-all account of this experience, see Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Runaway Church: Post-Conciliar Growth or Decline* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

context in Latin America of the 1960's. That presented a serious challenge to traditional church structures. As theologians and magisterium began to reflect on this new social and religious context with a different ecclesiological perspective and develop fresh pastoral guidelines for action, many priests, religious, and lay leaders throughout the continent in the late 1960's and the early 1970's adapted a range of novel strategies legitimizing their actions on the basis of this new body of theological and pastoral literature. Currently, however, many of the bishops of Latin America are reacting rather critically to some of the implications for ecclesiology which they have seen emerging in the actions of these leaders in their respective local churches. They have not condemned outright an ecclesiology based on the theology of liberation, but they are setting down some specific interpretations and clarifications of it which will affect the next stage of its development at the practical level.²

In this paper we shall trace this dialectical process, beginning with the social and religious context that gave rise to the theology of liberation in Latin America. Then, examining the ecclesiology articulated in this theological perspective, we shall analyze the new structural and behavioral components for the Church that this theology legitimated. To focus on some manageable empirical data, we shall concentrate on the experience, over the past fifteen years, of the Chilean Church which has had to come to terms at the practical level with several of the consequences of liberation ecclesiology and clarify their meaning for itself and for the universal Church. Finally, we will elucidate some of the more important implications of liberation ecclesiology for the next

² For example, the document presented to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 1974 by the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) acknowledged the "aspirations for liberation" throughout the continent but placed a heavy emphasis on the spiritual aspects of this phenomenon. The document warned against a "superficial politicization of the faith," the danger of an "easy enthusiasm for Marxist socialism," and the "temptation to violence," all of which were prominent, claimed the bishops, among younger sectors of the Church in Latin America. There was little mention of action on behalf of justice or of the prophetic role of the Church in the process of liberation. Cf. Eduardo Pironio, "Relación sobre la evangelización del mundo de este tiempo en América Latina," *Medellín* 1 (1975) 107-15. Translated and reprinted in *Catholic Mind*, March 1975, pp. 34-44. This spiritual emphasis given to liberation by the Latin American bishops is a reaction to what they consider has been too heavy a social definition of the requirements of faith as articulated and practiced by priests, nuns, and lay leaders in many Latin American countries in the late 1960's and early 1970's. It is also reflective of a new and rather repressive social context emerging on the continent wherein authoritarian military regimes are highly suspicious and critical of Church programs using liberation-theology language and techniques to raise social consciousness. Both developments have influenced the recent shift of tone in many Latin American episcopal documents away from the more prophetic emphases of their 1968 Medellín pronouncements.

stage of the dialectical process as well as for theological method in general.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

The theology-of-liberation literature itself was conditioned both by the social upheaval and turmoil that characterized Latin America at the end of the 1960's and by the search within the Church to respond more authentically to the hope and agony that this rapid change involved.

By the late 60's the social context of the Latin American world had changed dramatically from what it had been at the beginning of the decade. In the early 1960's the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration, and the rise of reformist democratic movements in several countries of the continent—notably in Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, and Colombia—all signaled a new era of hope for peaceful but steady economic and social reform in Latin America. By the end of the 1960's, however, much of this optimism in the possibility of democratic reform was on the wane. Reformist efforts in Brazil and Peru by civilian governments had been curtailed by military interventions, and in other countries where they had not yet been started (Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay) they were pre-empted by military coups. In Chile, where the Christian Democratic administration had been the "showcase" of the Alliance for Progress in Latin America and had received more per capita U.S. foreign aid than all other Latin nations combined, the reform efforts had not produced the results as quickly as expected, and many student groups and young intellectuals in the country were turning to Marxist analysis and movements as solutions to what they considered a stagnant economy, chronic maldistribution of income, and a lack of genuine participation of the urban and rural poor in public decision-making. Hence the reactionary positions of those on the Right were stimulating a corresponding increase of interest in radical solutions offered by the Left among the most idealistic elements in Latin American society.

The religious context of the continent was also undergoing significant transformation as a result of the rapidly changing social and economic situation and was stimulated as well by events occurring both in the universal Church and within Latin America itself. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council had urged all Catholics to scrutinize "the signs of the times" and share in the agonies of modern man so as to make the gospel credible to the people of our day, especially to the suffering and oppressed. They had described the Church as the sacrament of mankind's unity, consciously pointing to the Spirit's actions, which go far beyond the institutional framework of the Church itself.³ Hence the

³ *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 1 and 4; *Lumen gentium*, no. 1 (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. [New York: America Press, 1966] pp. 199-201, 15).

ecclesiological principles of Vatican II were clearly oriented to service of the world and its struggles for justice and dignity.

Furthermore, the major social encyclicals of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, *Pacem in terris* (1963) and *Populorum progressio* (1967), broke away from earlier papal emphases on corporatist solutions to social problems and moved cautiously towards more socialist proposals such as the need for increased state planning and public ownership of key national resources, limitations on private property (which was not to be treated as an absolute), more equitable distribution of world resources to favor the developing nations, and the right to use violence under certain repressive situations.

In Latin America itself many Christians were no longer seeking Christian solutions to social and economic problems but were joining forces with secular elites and Marxists to find more just solutions to societal problems and thereby rediscover the meaning of Christian symbols from within a revolutionary praxis. The Colombian priest Camillo Torres, who put aside his sacramental ministry and joined in the guerrilla movement in order to establish the structural conditions of justice necessary to make celebration of Eucharist and true reconciliation possible, epitomizes the growing disillusionment with Christian reformist strategies and the preference for "blurred boundaries" between Church and world which later became the normative model in liberation ecclesiology.

Much of this frustration and exploration on the part of Latin American Catholics culminated at the Second General Conference of Latin American bishops held at Medellín, Colombia, in August 1968, when 150 bishops from every country on the continent met to discuss the response of the Church to the new challenges presented in the 1960's. Drawing upon some of the new structural emphases in the encyclicals of Popes John and Paul, as well as upon neo-Marxist categories current in the literature generated by Latin American social scientists in the late 1960's, the bishops denounced the "institutionalized violence" of the *status quo* and placed responsibility for injustice squarely on those with the "greater share of wealth, culture, and power" who "jealously retain their privileges," thus "provoking 'explosive revolutions of despair.'" They demanded "urgent and profoundly renovating transformations" in their respective societies and in the world economic order.⁴

As a fitting Church response to this social and economic crisis, the bishops proposed a new strategy for evangelization which clearly paralleled the ecclesiological principles later to be incorporated into the

⁴ Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), *The Church in the Present Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council 2* (Bogotá: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970) 78-79.

theology-of-liberation literature. They placed in the forefront of pastoral priorities the necessity for Church leaders to "awaken in individuals and communities . . . a living awareness of justice." To achieve this, the Church should promote "small basic communities" so as to evangelize the marginal poor more effectively. The Church was also to stimulate a more heightened "political consciousness" among the faithful, and through its educational ministry of conscientization urge Christians "to consider their participation in the political life of the nation as a matter of conscience." The pastoral scope of Church activities was also to include encouraging the "efforts of the people to create and develop their own grass-roots organizations for the redress and consolidation of their rights and the search for justice."⁵

Finally, the bishops took upon themselves as pastors of the Church the duty to "defend the rights of the poor and oppressed . . . urging . . . governments and upper classes to eliminate anything which might destroy social peace: injustice, inertia, venality, insensibility." Each national episcopal conference was to take effective steps to present "the Church as a catalyst in the temporal realm in an authentic attitude of service."⁶

Hence the theology-of-liberation literature emerged in the context of a rapidly polarizing social and economic situation in Latin America where democratic processes were breaking down, the economic gap between rich and poor was widening, and extremist political movements on the Right and the Left were gaining in prominence. It was also part of an over-all response in Rome and in Latin America to identify the Church more profoundly with the problems of the poor, to develop new pastoral strategies serving both spiritual and social needs of the people, and to make the Church an effective prophetic force against chronic injustices and repressive regimes.

ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

For our purpose it is not necessary to give a general introduction to liberation theology or a complete survey of all the theologians who might fall under that umbrella label.⁷ It will suffice to examine the

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 66, 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 67.

⁷ For such general background in English, cf. José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), and Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, tr. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976), both of which contain good bibliographies; Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, eds., *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith* (=Concilium 96; New York: Herder and Herder, 1974); more briefly, Phillip E. Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 34 (1973) 357-95.

ecclesiology of two of the better-known and most representative of the liberation theologians, Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez.

Segundo's starting point for theological reflection on the Church is the "fact" that the Church is and always will be a *particular* community which nonetheless has also made claims to *universal* significance. This particularization or limitation of the Church is the result of its incarnation, its situation in time and space. Christ himself limited the Church forever.⁸ Hence we should not expect that the Church will ever become universal in terms of numbers or that eventually all mankind will "enter the Church." What kind of universality, then, can this limited, particular Church have? Segundo's response is that man was not made for the Church (to enter and be saved); the Church was made for man. "This entity which is a specific and particular reality within mankind must have been created for humanity, that is, in line with a divine plan as vast as humanity itself. This is the case, not the opposite. Humanity was not created to enter a particular reality which it overflows at every turn."⁹ The Church is part of humanity, not some entity over against humanity.

If the universal function of the Church is not to funnel as many persons as possible into itself, what is it? And if the Church is part of humanity, what distinguishes members of this community from other humans? Segundo points out two lines of thought stemming from the New Testament. The first, epitomized by Mk 16:15-16 (Vulgate), suggests that salvation is attained by entering the Church through faith and baptism and remaining in the Church to the end. In this view, the function of the Church is to "preach the gospel to the whole world," to be the bearer of the word of salvation and the minister of the sacraments to as many persons as possible. The universality of the Church is seen in terms of geographical distribution and numbers.

The other line of thought originates with Mt 25:31-46, where the General Judgment is described. Here salvation depends on man's behavior toward others: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and lonely, caring for the "least of my brethren." Such deeds can be performed by all men without a conscious awareness of their significance for "eternal life." Indeed, Segundo points out the element of general surprise in the Gospel narrative: "Lord, when did we feed you?" This line of thought would seem to diminish the particularity of the Church, since all persons are to be judged by the same criteria and all are capable of the deeds and attitudes necessary for salvation.

Segundo's resolution of these two lines is to say that the Christian is

⁸ Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *The Community Called Church*, tr. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) pp. 4-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

distinguished by the fact that he will *not be surprised* by the criteria of judgment. "For if he is a believer, he is so precisely because he has accepted the revelation of this universal plan which culminates in the last judgment. The Christian is he *who already knows*. This, undoubtedly, is what distinguishes and defines him."¹⁰ Thus the Church is the community of those who know the universal plan of salvation, possesses the "secret of what is happening in human history." Or again, the Church is the consciousness of humanity – that part of humanity which is fully aware of what is taking place in it.¹¹

The Church's universal significance, then, is not to be the sole channel of grace (through faith and sacraments) for all. It does not have a monopoly on the means of grace and salvation for which all are destined. Rather it is to do the works of love in the world, to be in the service of humanity but do so consciously, with full awareness of the significance of these actions. The Christian community is to make manifest to the rest of humanity with whom it makes its way the mystery of God's plan of salvation for all. The Church is essentially a sign, "placed here precisely and exclusively to pass on to men a certain signification, i.e., a message, something that is to be grasped, comprehended, and incorporated to a greater or lesser degree into the fashioning of history and the world."¹²

This message, for Segundo, is the message of the Johannine corpus: God is love, and His life in us is what enables us also to love. Christians know this, and it is the function of the Church to show that such love is possible. Hence the Church *is* necessary for salvation, but not in the sense that one must be a member of the visible Christian community to achieve one's individual salvation. Indeed, for Segundo, membership in the Church is such a risk that for some their individual salvation might be more easily attained if they were not members. The Church is necessary in the same way that, in Teilhard's vision, consciousness in the human phylum is necessary for it to take control and direct the evolutionary process.

Membership in the Church is not mandatory for salvation but may be confined to those who can accept the risk and obligations that the essence and function of the Church require. Instead of minimizing the requirements for membership so as to include as many as possible, we may have to recognize that only a small number can successfully carry out the Church's mission as sign.

. . . the Church only aids the salvation of those who belong to her when their membership corresponds with the function that the Church is called upon to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

exercise with regard to the rest of the human race. In other words, membership in the ecclesial community saves people when it is shouldered as a new and more profound responsibility. And this fact is simply the ultimate consequence of something we already know: that the Church is an undreamed of possibility for love.¹³

This "assumption of responsibility for others constitutes those who assume it into a type of aristocracy" which necessarily separates them from the others, the "masses." This has led to the charge of "elitism," and Segundo admits to this if one can rid this label of its pejorative connotations. He believes that Christianity was never meant to be a "religion of the masses," and that when it became such in the West, the responsibilities of all Christians were watered down and the more demanding aspects of Jesus' teaching were confined to a few "spiritual people" who lived apart from the world. Thus was born the distinction between the commandments and the evangelical counsels. In Segundo's view, all Christians, not just a subsociety within the Church, are called to a life of a complete self-giving. "Jesus certainly did not present a pastoral program for the masses in his teaching."¹⁴

This sign-bearing function is to be carried out not by unilateral proclamation of the message but by engaging in dialogue with the rest of humanity, in solidarity with all men—pursuing the truth, not simply dispensing it. The Christian does not have all the answers to concrete questions; he "must be prepared to recognize the signs of the times," to analyze contemporary happenings in relation to God's plan that paves the way for this saving dialogue.¹⁵ This means that the Christian must be open to and engage in analysis of the political, economic, and cultural situation in which the Church is to function as a sign. The Church has something to learn from the world as well as something to contribute. "In dialogue, mutual service means that both contribute truth."¹⁶ For Segundo, the world gives the Church "a sense of urgency and deep relevance" it never had before, and "a wondrous and terrifying presence of Christ, one that is far more suitable for the universe than his continuing physical presence on earth . . . Why? Because it represents the deepening universalization and recapitulation of the Word made incarnate in our history."¹⁷ In response, the Church is called upon to "adopt a deeper moral attitude," a morality that is creative, progressive, and social, directed toward building the human community, rather than a moral attitude preoccupied with "wanting to know how we (individually) will be judged."¹⁸ All our actions and attitudes should be concerned with the other person's salvation, not our own.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

The Church's doctrines should not be an obstacle to this dialogue, because they are open-ended and by their very structure admit of being questioned.

Between doctrine and doctrine dialogue would be impossible. But the Christian, as the servant of God's activity in the world, must by virtue of his doctrine go beyond doctrine and intellectual formulations. He overcomes the initial clash between two fundamentally different mentalities by having "radical confidence" in the perennial activity of God's love in men.¹⁹

By this he means that Christian revelation never wholly determines a man's concrete actions. "There will always be an irreducible element that comes from the Christian's experience in history, which he shares with other human beings." Hence the attitude of the Christian is one of "sincere searching," not that of passing judgment from a superior point of view.²⁰

By way of summary, Segundo contrasts his understanding of the Church in relation to the world with that expressed in Leo XIII's *Immortale Dei*, where the Church is seen as a supernatural society, complete and juridically perfect, that passes judgment on the world, whose value is received from something outside itself, where the Church is related to the world on the analogy of soul and body, the latter existing only for the good of the former. By contrast, Segundo says:

A church which dialogues and works with the rest of mankind is a church that knows she is part of humanity; a church that knows she is the conscious portion of the deeper mystery that is being worked out in every human life, and in all of humanity taken together in its process of historical becoming. A church that dialogues is a church that knows she is, by definition, in the service of humanity.²¹

It should be clear that Segundo is presenting an ecclesiology in stark contrast to one he has seen operative in the recent past in Latin America. That Church saw itself as the "society of the saved," whose primary responsibility was to protect the faith of its members and to increase its numbers. To do this, it set itself over against the world and erected barriers to prevent "leakage." Its relations with the civil society in which it existed were determined by these goals: to oppose anything that would weaken its own institutional structures and to promote whatever was in keeping with its doctrines and morals. In consequence, the Church tended to align itself with the power structures that could promote its own welfare and engaged in compromises when necessary to achieve these ends. Segundo does not simplistically accuse the Church

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

of siding with dictators and the ruling classes for the sake of power or financial support. His position "accuses the Church of being indifferent to the political program of persons and parties, of being concerned solely about maintaining the dominion of Christian civil institutions in the sphere of public interests."²² This attitude, making the Church an end rather than a means, Segundo rejects.

Before turning to Gutiérrez, I should like to point out that Segundo is primarily concerned with the local Church as distinguished from the Church universal. He wants to restore the Church to its character "as a congregation of many 'base communities' (i.e., grass-roots communities at the local level)" small enough to permit brotherly personal relations with real giving and real sharing.²³ He is acutely aware of the pluralistic nature of contemporary society and endorses a plurality of modes of being and celebrating the gospel. It is the function of the magisterium and the hierarchy to "harmonize them into a unity that respects diversity within the framework of one faith, one baptism, and one Church."²⁴

Three years after Segundo's first volume on the Church, Gutiérrez published his major work, *A Theology of Liberation*.²⁵ His style is more academic than Segundo's, but his ecclesiology is very similar. His fundamental question is the "classic question of the relation between faith and human existence, between faith and social reality, between faith and political action, or in other words, between the Kingdom of God and the building up of the world."²⁶ Gutiérrez says that in the history of Christianity there have been three basic responses to this question. The first is "the Christendom mentality," in which temporal realities lack autonomy and "the plan for the Kingdom of God has no room for a profane, historical plan." In this view the Church is the exclusive depository of salvation and her work is directed to her own benefit. This mentality, he believes, still persists in large sectors of the Church.

The second response is the "New Christendom" (epitomized by the work of Jacques Maritain), in which the Church is still "the center of the work of salvation," but the task of creating a just society, a society inspired by Christian principles, is recognized as a proper function of Christians, especially the laity. Evolving from this position was the third response, the "distinction of planes" model. In this view a clear distinction is drawn between Church and world, and the autonomy of

²² *Ibid.* p. 94.

²³ Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *The Sacraments Today*, tr. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974) p. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, S.J., *A Theology of Liberation*, tr. and ed. Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the temporal sphere is asserted. The Church should not interfere in temporal matters except through moral teaching, and it "has two missions: evangelization and the inspiration of the temporal sphere." The Church is an "order apart"—the order of salvation and holiness in the world. Gutiérrez asserts that this view is, by and large, the one that dominates the documents of Vatican II, though there are insights in *Gaudium et spes* and *Lumen gentium* that transcend a "rigid distinction of planes."²⁷

Gutiérrez believes that these other insights provide the basis for another approach to the relation of the Church and the world. In reaction to the distinction (which in effect became a separation) between temporal and spiritual, profane and sacred, and, most fundamentally, natural and supernatural, there has been a "rediscovery of the single convocation to salvation" which reaffirms the possibility of the presence of grace in all people, be they conscious of it or not. At the same time, there has been a reaffirmation of the *integral* vocation to salvation, giving "religious value in a completely new way to the action of man in history, Christian and non-Christian alike."²⁸

Like Segundo, Gutiérrez emphasizes the universal salvific will of God and sees the process of salvation as something intrahistorical. Salvation "is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation—the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves—is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ. . . ." ²⁹ Hence the mission of the Church is determined more by the political context of the society in which it exists concretely than by "intra-ecclesiastical problems." There is a solidarity of the Church with the world, and the frontiers between the two are fluid in both directions. Salvation history is not something apart from human history; it is "the very heart of human history." "Salvation," then, embraces all men and the whole man; "the liberating action of Christ is at the heart of the historical current of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history."³⁰

There is an intimate relationship between salvation (or liberation) from sin and the liberation of man throughout history and on the political level. "One is not present without the others, but they are distinct; they are all part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process, but they are to be found at different levels." Gutiérrez does not collapse political liberation or the work of humanizing man's social situation into the coming of the kingdom of God, as is sometimes suggested.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater fulfillment of man. Liberation is a precondition for the new society, but this is not all it is. While liberation is implemented in liberating historical events, it also denounces their limitations and ambiguities, proclaims their fulfillment, and impels them effectively towards total communion. This is not an identification. Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of oppression and the exploitation of man by man without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift.³¹

This integral relationship between liberation from sin and political, social, and economic liberation has obvious consequences for the self-understanding of the Church and its mission.

The fundamental change in the Church's self-understanding that follows from the above is that already voiced by Segundo: "an 'uncentering' of the Church, for the Church must cease considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation and orient itself towards a new and radical service of people."³² The Church does not exist for itself but "for others." Its function is to be a sign, a sacrament of salvation, for all men, not only for those within its visible institutional structure. "Through the people who explicitly accept his Word, the Lord reveals the world to itself. He rescues it from anonymity and enables it to know the ultimate meaning of its historical future and the value of every human act." Like Segundo, Gutiérrez quotes Teilhard's phrase that the Church is the "reflectively Christified portion of the world." It is not "non-world" but the conscious part of the world that "knows" the plan of salvation for all men. It is the Church's function to manifest this possibility of communion among men and of men with God in its life and actions. To celebrate this kind of communion in the Eucharist without a "real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice" would be an empty action.³³ The Church must necessarily play a role in the historical context in which it finds itself. In Latin America at the present, Gutiérrez says, this means taking a clear position for social justice and against the established order. The Church's position is never neutral; any "claim to noninvolvement in politics . . . is nothing but a subterfuge to keep things as they are."³⁴

The Church cannot ignore or cover over the division that exists in society and within itself. The unity of the Church is a mythical notion, not a factual description. Unity is something to be sought, not something already given. "The unity of the Church is not truly achieved

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 256 ff., for a brief historical survey of how this "ecclesiocentrism" developed.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

without the unity of the world. In a radically divided world, the function of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the profound causes of the division among men" and thus to become an authentic sign of that hoped-for unity among men.³⁵

In summary, then, the main characteristics of the ecclesiology of liberation theology are (1) the affirmation of the universal salvific will, (2) the consequent "uncentering" of the Church in the work of salvation-liberation, (3) understanding the Church as the reflectively conscious part of humanity, whose function is to be a sign to the rest of humanity, (4) the specification of this function always in terms of the concrete historical realities in which the Church finds itself, and hence (5) the necessity for an analysis of the society's socio-political-economic situation. In the case of present-day Latin America, the liberation theologians find the Marxist analysis most helpful and they take the "class struggle" as a fact.

The biblical symbols most used to interpret this situation are the Exodus (God as liberator of the Jewish people as a people, not just as individuals, and in history, not just in the "world to come") and the eschatological promises—a society of peace and justice to be achieved through suffering and service. Christ is seen as liberating mankind on a deeper level, but not without political consequences. "The liberation which Jesus offers is universal and integral; it transcends national boundaries, attacks the foundation of injustice and exploitation, and eliminates politico-religious confusions, without therefore being limited to a purely 'spiritual' plane."³⁶ Sin is understood as an intrahistorical reality which manifests itself in social structures as well as on the more personal level.

It is interesting to note what symbols and topics from more traditional ecclesiological tracts are *not* employed. There is no mention, for example, of the "bark of Peter," "the keys of the kingdom," "the Good Shepherd," or of "mother Church." There is no discussion of papal primacy, hierarchical structure, apostolic succession, collegiality, or the "marks of the Church" (except the unity of the Church as mythical).

The implications of the ecclesiology of Segundo and Gutiérrez for the structure and strategy of the Church are more specific than the documents of Vatican II, papal encyclicals, or even the statements of Medellín. These documents had gone some distance toward legitimating the Church's direct involvement with the problems of the poor and their struggle against oppression, but Segundo and Gutiérrez go beyond this general level of pastoral orientation and set down rather specific ecclesiastical structural and strategic procedures that they consider neces-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228, and Berryman, *art. cit.*, pp. 388-89.

sary to make a Church response to the Latin American situation credible and effective. They see at least three structural and behavioral changes as essential if the Church is to live up to the spirit of Vatican II and Medellín:

1) The social base of the Church must be reoriented to serve more effectively the needs of the poor. Previous Church alliances with the state and upper-class elites must cease and the primary pastoral focus must be concentrated on the marginal sectors of society through the creation of small base communities that take into account all the religious and social needs of these people.

2) The hierarchy must take a stand against the established order and publicly and continually denounce specific forms of economic exploitation and violations of the rights and dignity of the poor.

3) The Church both at the official level of the hierarchy as well as in the pastoral activities at the local level cannot avoid taking political positions, and it must actively engage in political movements so as to prepare the social conditions for genuine Christian reconciliation. Marxist method and analysis provide the best available instruments and strategies to accomplish this and should not be excluded as an option for Christians.

As a way of analyzing the practical implications for Church and society which these ecclesiological components involve, we would like to present the experiences of the Chilean Church over the past fifteen years as a concrete case in which these three key aspects were realized in varying degrees at different levels of that Church. The Chilean Church, due to its particular history and internal character as well as the societal forces with which it has been interacting since 1960, offers a rich experience by which to judge the consequences of attempting to incorporate these dimensions into a contemporary national church in a developing society.

THE CHILEAN CHURCH: TOWARDS A NEW ECCLESIOLOGY

Penetrating the Culture of the Poor

The Chilean Catholic Church has frequently been characterized as the most progressive national church in Latin America for the range of transformation that has occurred in its pastoral efforts to identify with the problems of the poor over the past several decades.

The Chilean Church was the only one in Latin American to achieve a relatively smooth separation from the state, worked out in terms mutually acceptable to both bishops and political leaders in 1925. This separation also made it possible for the Church to extract itself from a century-old alliance with the Conservative party, which long had acted

as the spokesman for the Church and defender of its privileges in society. This freedom from partisan political commitments allowed the Church over the next three decades to train cadres of young laity in Catholic Action programs imbued with a sense of social consciousness and the need for structural reform in society. Many of these lay men and women went into political life out of religious conviction and formed the Chilean Christian Democratic party, whose ideology and programs were founded on social teachings of Leo XIII and Pius XI. By the late 1950's this party was gaining in prestige and power in society; simultaneously within the Church many of the priests who had also been trained as students in Catholic Action programs were coming into positions of influence and some were consecrated bishops in this era. Thus, by the early 1960's there was a nucleus of Catholic laity attempting to apply the social doctrine of the Church in politics, and a group of priests and bishops committed to a corresponding renewal in the Church to orient it towards the problems of the poor.

The late 1950's and early 1960's also provided an added stimulus for Church leaders to take the world of the poor more seriously. Both Protestantism and Marxism were making significant inroads in rural and urban poor communities. By 1960 approximately 10% of the population identified itself as Protestant—the highest percentage in any Latin American country—and the Communist and Socialist parties were joining in a coalition to mobilize workers and peasants for electoral gains. Various Church-sponsored surveys of religious practice conducted at this time revealed that only about 5% of the working class attended Sunday Mass and that their formal contact with the Church was insufficient to evangelize them effectively or to keep them from succumbing to Marxist influence.

To meet this challenge, the Chilean hierarchy with the help of teams of priest and lay social scientists inaugurated a process of pastoral planning in 1961. By 1964 the process had resulted in the outlines of an over-all strategy of decentralization of parochial structures and more effective use of lay personnel in local campaigns of catechesis and evangelization.³⁷

The intense electoral campaign in 1964 between Christian Democratic candidate Eduardo Frei and the Marxist-Socialist Salvador Allende drained away a significant amount of the Church's attention from pastoral renewal. Many lay leaders left pastoral and social-action programs sponsored by the Church to work for Frei's victory and afterwards entered his administration to continue their efforts of social

³⁷ For a description of the general goals and strategies decided upon by the Chilean bishops in the mid-1960's as a result of this planning process, see "Pastoral Plan of the Chilean Episcopate," *Pro mundi vita* (Brussels), 1964, no. 1, pp. 1-18.

reform. For the next several years Catholic apostolic programs, even parochial structures and personnel, tended to be closely tied to the Christian Democratic party, at least in sympathy, and most young Catholic laity concentrated their attention on politics, not on internal Church reform.

By the late 1960's, however, the hierarchy, realizing the dangers for the pastoral mission of the Church should it continue to rely on the success of the Christian Democratic party alone to implement Christian principles and reforms in society, renewed their efforts to deepen the structures of the Church at the local level, particularly in poor neighborhoods. Beginning in 1968 and continuing for the next five years, the bishops in their semiannual meetings elaborated a series of guidelines for the formation of base communities at the neighborhood level of parishes and through them to implement a number of training programs for lay leaders, including catechesis, Bible study, prayer groups, and social-welfare activities. These communities were to be small, relatively homogeneous and stable, oriented toward preaching the Word and celebrating Eucharist, linked with other parochial and diocesan structures, and characterized by an atmosphere of service to the larger community in which they were located.³⁸ The thrust of these new communities was to bring the gospel and the Church's sacramental life into closer association with the whole range of human experiences and problems of those who previously had only nominal contact with the institutional Church.

Although the Chilean Church has gone farther than any other church in Latin America (except perhaps for Brazil) in decentralizing parochial structures and placing laity in leadership positions in these base communities, it has encountered serious difficulties in making these communities vital centers of social and religious life for the poor. The spirituality of the vast numbers of urban workers and peasants (who constitute approximately two thirds of the Chilean population) is not ecclesially oriented and is still characterized by various types of popular Catholicism involving a mixture of magic, syncretism, and private devotion to the saints. This phenomenon of popular religion among baptized Catholics in Latin America began in colonial times and has continued to the present due to the fact that the Church throughout the continent never had sufficient numbers of priests and religious to complete the work of evangelization and catechesis once baptism was conferred. The current ratio of priests to total Catholic population in Chile, for example, is one priest for every 4,500 baptized faithful; in poor areas of large cities the average is about one priest for

³⁸ La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *Orientaciones pastorales 2: Comunidades de base* (Santiago: Tipografía San Pablo, 1969) pp. 8-9.

every 8,000 Catholics. By contrast, in the United States the ratio is one to 800.

Furthermore, the type of popular religion that prevails among the majority of the Chilean poor does not depend directly on the institutional Church nor is it affected quickly by changes in the Church structures. It possesses a dynamic and a tradition which is relatively independent of parish life, except for major feasts of patron saints of villages, when processions to shrines will occur. This spirituality tends to be private and not conducive to the integration of a social consciousness as a central part of its religious experience.³⁹

Efforts to penetrate this world of popular religion and stimulate a more biblical and communitarian spirituality — which are essential components of the new orientation for Vatican II, the Medellín pastoral guidelines, as well as of liberation ecclesiology in the late 1960's and early 1970's — did not meet with easy and quick success in Chile. In very few dioceses did these communities begin to function systematically; they reached only a very small percentage of the members of parishes.

Ironically, now that Chile is governed by a military junta, opposing the whole orientation proposed in the theology of liberation and the revolutionary praxis it involves, the small base communities have begun to grow (particularly in urban poor neighborhoods) and are taking on a religious and social significance they did not have before. The repressive policies of the government, along with rising unemployment, hunger, and malnutrition among children, have made these *comunidades eclesiales de base* important focal points for many of the urban poor. All other forms of social participation — unions, political parties, social clubs — either have been dismantled or are under heavy surveillance and control by the military. Bible-study circles, prayer groups, catechetical meetings, and Sunday Mass are the only opportunities for the poor to meet openly with their friends under relatively safe circumstances.

In addition to the strictly religious ministry in these communities, linked to them is a whole panoply of social programs to meet the

³⁹ For an analysis of the origins and development of Latin American popular religiosity since colonial times, see Enrique Dussel, *Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina* (2nd ed.; Barcelona: Editorial Nova Terra, 1972) pp. 84–88; A. Büntig *et al.*, *Catolicismo popular* (Quito: Instituto Pastoral Latinoamericano, 1969). The obstacles which contemporary popular piety presents for implementing a theology-of-liberation spirituality among the poor are treated in depth in two critical essays: Felipe Berryman, "Popular Catholicism in Latin America," *Cross Currents* 21 (1971) 284–301; Claudio Perani, "Popular Religiosity Is Wary of Social Change," *LADOC*, no. 58 (May 1975) pp. 31–37 (tr. from *Cadernos do CEAS* (Salvador, Brazil), March-April 1974). For a critical but sympathetic analysis of contemporary popular religiosity in Chile, see José M. Arevas, S.J., "Religiosidad popular: En torno a un encuentro," *Mensaje* (Santiago) 23, no. 226 (Jan.-Feb. 1974) 47–49.

material needs of the people: soup kitchens, unemployment centers, health centers, and tutoring programs. International Church money helps to finance the activities of these communities, but they are designed and operated by the lay leaders at the neighborhood level. In addition to these activities at the grass-roots level of the Church, the majority of the twenty-three dioceses throughout the country have set aside offices and personnel to take care of the legal, economic, and social problems of prisoners and their families.⁴⁰

There is no doubt, therefore, that the Chilean Church is starting to identify with the total culture of the poor and to forge structures at various levels that will serve as catalysts to link personal and traditional spirituality with human solidarity and social commitment. For the first time in Chilean history the poor are beginning to identify with the structures of the Church and consider them no longer oriented to the rich.⁴¹

Formidable problems, however, face the Church as it continues to adapt itself to the needs of the suffering. This stance has made the Church suspect in the eyes of the ruling military junta as well as in the perspective of upper-class Catholics. Both groups see the Church as betraying them and fostering subversion by allowing its local structures to be used by those who definitely are in opposition to the government.

⁴⁰ This service was originally established on a national level by the Chilean Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez in October 1973, a month after the military coup. It was named the Committee of Co-operation for Peace and was cosponsored by all major religious denominations in Chile. It was financed by international church money, receiving approximately one million dollars annually during the two years of its operations from the World Council of Churches and from the national Catholic episcopal conferences in North America and Western Europe. The Cardinal, however, under heavy government pressure in late 1975, disbanded the Committee for its activities in assisting political fugitives and for allegedly employing former Marxists in its operations. It has been replaced by a new program at the diocesan level of the Catholic Church throughout the country. Called the Vicariate of Solidarity, it continues the same services to prisoners and their families under another name, with some change of personnel and with continued outside financial support.

⁴¹ Interviews conducted in Chile by Brian Smith between April and November 1975, with all 30 active bishops, 72 parish priests, and 33 women religious engaged in direct pastoral work throughout the country, and with 51 lay men and women leaders in small base communities mainly from Santiago, indicated some changes in the traditional patterns of popular religiosity among the urban and rural poor. Only four of the bishops felt that the theology of liberation as articulated by Segundo, Gutiérrez, and others accurately reflected the religious consciousness of the majority of the poor in Chile. More than 1/3 of the priests, 2/5 of the nuns, and nearly 3/5 of the lay leaders interviewed, however, believed that a spirituality based on the theology of liberation offered a valid image of the faith experience of the Latin American poor. Many of them also felt the theology of liberation focus was useful in the pastoral programs of their parishes and local communities, though dangerous to speak about openly due to the current repressive nature of the Chilean regime.

The hierarchy is concerned about the possibility of a schism from these opposing tendencies and wants at all costs to preserve the formal unity of the Church. The Church is also heavily dependent on the state for subsidies to Catholic education, which it could not maintain (especially in poor areas) without public support.⁴²

There are also fundamental theological issues at stake, involving the Church's universal mission to serve all people and its desire to avoid sectarian tendencies within its structures based upon class interest. These concerns act as constraints on its identification with the poor to the exclusion of others. In 1971, during the Marxist government, the bishops publicly reiterated the theme enunciated in *Lumen gentium* that the Church is a "sign of the universal love of Jesus Christ" for all. They emphasized that although the Church gives "special preference" and "pastoral priority" to the poor, "in no case does this mean an identification of Christ with only one social class," since the Church knows that the "frontiers between good and evil are not drawn between one social class and another but are located in the depth of each human heart."⁴³

Hence advances have been made in the Chilean Church recently toward closer involvement in the world of the poor and the formation of new communities in their neighborhoods. In a repressive social context the religious as well as the social significance of such structures is even more crucial than in democratic societies and in turn is gradually transforming the character of the Church as well as the spirituality of the poor. This process of transformation, however, is only beginning and various social and economic pressures on the Church as well as pastoral preoccupations of its leaders to avoid irreparable internal divisions keep it from incorporating fully the component of liberation ecclesiology which urges identification of the Church's structures with the struggles of the oppressed.

Prophetic Role of Church Leaders

The second characteristic implicit in the liberation-theology model for the Church as articulated by Segundo and Gutiérrez is the responsibil-

⁴² Although the Chilean Church has been separated from the state since 1925, the Constitution provides for public support for Catholic primary, secondary, and higher education. According to the present arrangement, for each student enrolled in a Catholic institution the state pays the school a percentage (currently 50%) of what it estimates the cost to be to educate the same student in a public school. Hence Catholic schools as well as branches of the Catholic University located throughout the country are heavily subsidized by the government.

⁴³ La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *Evangelio, política y socialismos*, in *Documentos del episcopado: Chile, 1970-1973*, ed. Carlos Oviedo Cavada (Santiago: Ediciones Mundo, 1974) p. 66.

ity of the leadership to denounce publicly and specifically all forms of injustice and oppression connected with the established order. Again, the Chilean Church offers some concrete experience by which to evaluate the possibilities for bishops to exercise their prophetic responsibility under different circumstances in a society characterized by chronic injustice. In addition to major efforts of pastoral renewal to serve the needs of the poor more effectively, the Chilean hierarchy have had to adapt the Church to three very different political regimes since 1964: a reformist Christian Democratic government (1964-70), a Marxist-socialist coalition administration (1970-73), and an authoritarian military regime since September 1973.

In 1962, two years before the Christian Democrats won the presidency and began a series of major structural reforms, the Chilean bishops issued two significant pastoral letters, which received international attention since they were the first of their kind in modern Latin America. Both addressed themselves frankly to problems of social justice, one urging major industrial and administrative reforms in government, finance, and business, the other focusing on problems of the peasantry and calling for a thorough land-reform program.⁴⁴ The bishops stated bluntly that justice was more basic and crucial than charity in the context of Chile's chronic social problems and that "to love one's neighbor implies a serious responsibility for economic development."⁴⁵ The two documents were a strong moral legitimation for an emerging consensus among middle and low-income sectors of the population on the need for thorough economic and social reforms and helped galvanize Catholic support for the Christian Democratic party, which was proposing changes along the lines outlined by the hierarchy.⁴⁶

In the late 1960's, at the end of the Christian Democratic administration, the bishops as a group again played an important prophetic role in society. By 1969 it was clear that the Marxists might win the presidency in a close three-man race the next year. There were public signs of unrest among the military and strong rumors began to circulate about

⁴⁴ La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *El deber social y política en la hora presente* (Santiago: Secretariado General del Episcopado de Chile, 1962). La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *La Iglesia y el problema del campesinado chileno* (Santiago: Secretariado General del Episcopado de Chile, 1962).

⁴⁵ La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *El deber social y política en la hora presente*, par. 14-17.

⁴⁶ Analysis of public-opinion-survey data from the capital city of Santiago (where one third of the national population lives), collected just prior to the presidential election of September 1964 by the private research firm Centro de Opinión Pública, indicated that two thirds or more of those Catholics who regularly or occasionally attended Mass knew that the Church supported social change and themselves were in favor of structural reforms. Furthermore, 70% or more of those who attended Mass at least once a month (from every social class) supported the Christian Democratic candidate Eduardo Frei,

the imminence of a military coup to forestall a Marxist electoral victory. These were met with sporadic urban guerrilla violence by Leftists, who began to prepare for civil war with the reactionary forces of the Right. The bishops again took a definitive public position against both extremes and condemned efforts by both groups to subvert the "profoundly human value of a democratic community."⁴⁷ The crisis passed and in the electoral campaign which ensued the hierarchy maintained a position of neutrality and subsequently accepted the outcome of the election, which resulted in a victory for Salvador Allende, the first Marxist to win a free presidential election in a Western country.

During the three years of Allende's Marxist regime the bishops maintained correct if not cordial relations with the government without a major confrontation. They did not, however, fail to speak out critically from time to time on what they considered dangers to the moral and social fabric of society inherent in a transition to Marxist socialism. They denounced class hatred, violence, and a hardening of ideological positions that prevented the dialogue, mutual respect, and compromise needed for effective public policy. Occasionally individual bishops or groups of bishops criticized specific abuses or goals of the government such as corruption, manipulation of law, and proposals to nationalize private education.⁴⁸ To the very end of the Marxist period the hierarchy not only had the freedom to exercise public criticism but were given wide coverage in the media when they did so and at times were able to act as a calming force in a rapidly polarizing society.

When the military finally did engineer a coup in late 1973 and inaugurated a campaign to "eradicate Marxism" by suppressing all political parties and trade unions, by imposing heavy censorship on the

who was opposed by the Marxist Salvador Allende in a two-man race. For a presentation and analysis of the relationship between religious practice, social class, and political preference in Chile in the 1960's and early 1970's, see Brian H. Smith, S.J., *The Catholic Church and Political Change in Chile, 1960-1975* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Political Science, Yale University, 1977).

⁴⁷ "Declaración episcopal sobre la situación actual del país," *Revista católica* (Santiago) 69 (1969) 5860-62.

⁴⁸ When the Allende government announced a plan in February 1973 to incorporate a unifying ideology in all public and private schools so as to inculcate a socialist mentality among the young, the bishops took a strong public position against this proposal and in defense of religious and social pluralism in education. See La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *El momento actual de educación en Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones Mundo, 1973). The government subsequently tabled the resolution to avoid an open confrontation with the Church and with sectors of the military who also opposed it. On other occasions as well the hierarchy spoke out against what they considered to be abuses of power either by the regime or by its opponents. See *Solo con amor se es capaz de construir un país*, Carta pastoral de los obispos de la provincia eclesiástica de Santiago, June 1, 1973; reprinted in Oviedo Cavada, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-68.

media, and by dealing with those with leftist tendencies through massive arrests, torture, and summary executions, the Church was the only institution with sufficient independence to criticize the abuses of power. However, the exercise of this prophetic function by the bishops in a repressive context has been much more cautious and ambiguous than under the three previous governments.

Only once in nearly three years since the coup transpired have the bishops as a group criticized specific abuses of the military. In April 1974 they issued a short declaration criticizing the government for violating human rights, creating a climate of insecurity and terror, and perpetrating arbitrary detention, interrogations "with physical or moral constraints," and distortions of the judicial system.⁴⁹ This occurred seven months after the military seized power; since then the Episcopal Conference has been silent regarding these concrete abuses, even though the Church's own Committee of Peace and several visiting teams of international observers have documented evidence that the practices are continuing. In the only major pastoral letter (September 1975) issued by the hierarchy since the coup, the bishops took a rather conciliatory position toward the military, thanked them for saving the country from Marxism, and spoke only in general terms about the dangers of exaggerated nationalism and the need for more social participation by the people.⁵⁰

What the Chilean experience highlights in these different contexts is that the exercise of the prophetic role by leaders of the Church is weaker and less consistent under authoritarian regimes that present themselves as Christian but do not favor open criticism of their policies than it is under democratically elected secular governments that must (whether they like it or not) take seriously public opposition to their

⁴⁹ El Comité Permanente del Episcopado Chileno, *La reconciliación en Chile*; reprinted in *Mensaje* (Santiago) 23 (1974) 196-98.

⁵⁰ El Comité Permanente del Episcopado Chileno, *Evangelio y paz* (Santiago: Ediciones Mundo, 1975). There are several reasons for this caution and silence on the part of the Chilean bishops under the present military regime. In the above-mentioned interviews with all of them during 1975, Brian Smith found that the overwhelming majority (27 out of 30) felt that more public criticism of the government by the Church would be counterproductive. Several observed that it could lead to a persecution of priests and laity at the local level and a curtailment of the pastoral activities of the Church, and might precipitate cutting off of economic aid by foreign governments to Chile. A few remarked that the government will not listen to public criticism of its policies. The bishops, therefore, prefer to pursue private contacts with military authorities in order to influence policy and obtain clemency for individuals being persecuted. Some of the hierarchy indicated that unlike the previous Marxist regime this administration is based upon Christian principles and that its motives are honest despite some sporadic abuses of power. One half of the priests, 2/3 of the laity, and over 4/5 of the nuns interviewed, however, did not share these judgments of the bishops and preferred clearer and more consistent public denunciations of injustice by the hierarchy such as occurred under the two previous governments.

programs by all major sectors of society. The inconsistency in the Chilean hierarchy's position now in relation to what it was during the previous two governments is due partly to their unwillingness to precipitate a conflict which would split the Church and provoke more suffering for the short run, partly to their failure to see that, despite the Christian symbols used by the military junta and its willingness to receive private criticism by the bishops, its sustained repressive strategies present a threat even more dangerous both to society and to the integrity of the Church than the challenge of the previous Marxist regime, whose ideology was opposed to some Catholic teachings but which did not have the power to carry out all its plans. A combination of pastoral, strategic, and human factors places serious hindrances on a forthright prophetic position by bishops under the current authoritarian regime in Chile.

Political Role of the Church amid Class Conflict

The third aspect of a liberation ecclesiology—and the most controversial, given the range of opinion on this issue at various levels of the Church—is the contention that the Church can have no neutral political position in the struggle for justice and that elements of Marxist analysis provide a useful method and strategy to make a political commitment by the Church effective.

During the years of the Allende government in Chile, when 40% or more of the population were voting for the Left and many Christians actively participated in the coalition government while others made efforts to synthesize Marxist ideology with a Christian perspective, the Chilean Church had to face several of the theoretical and practical implications of what a possible Christian-Marxist rapprochement entails and what the public role of the Church can be in a highly politicized society.

In May 1971, eight months after the election of Allende and the same month Pope Paul wrote *Octogesima adveniens*, in which he acknowledged that not all the levels of Marxism were equally dangerous, the Chilean bishops issued a major pronouncement in which they attempted to come to terms with the particular brand of Marxism prevalent in their society. In this document, *Gospel, Politics, and Various Brands of Socialism*, they set down some guiding principles on the nature of the Church's stance in the political realm and the possibility of Christian cooperation with a Marxist-dominated movement.

The bishops emphasized that the Church is not bound to support any political or economic system or party but rather encourages "Christians to struggle for those socioeconomic structures which make more effective all the gospel values of personal and social liberation, justice, and

love." They admitted that there are various possibilities for implementing these values even in different types of socialist regimes.⁵¹

The hierarchy stressed, however, how important it was for the official Church to maintain a public position independent of all political parties and movements. Concretely, this meant that official representatives of the Church—bishops, priests, deacons, as well as religious and lay personnel in positions of pastoral responsibility—could not publicly identify with a party.⁵²

Such neutrality in partisan politics by its official spokesmen, claimed the bishops, not only enables the Church to perform its primary pastoral mission but in itself can be a positive contribution to secular society. Individual Christians are then free to enter any party of their choice, offering a critical voice from within in the light of gospel values. With such political pluralism in the Church, the gospel can provide for Christians a common bond and goal "more powerful than the differences which separate them on other levels" and thus inspire Christian citizens to "respect and listen to those in other parties without making an absolute of their own political option." The Church under such circumstances, at the official level and in the lives of its individual members, can offer a "unique service of great importance for the moment in which we live: a service of unity and of dialogue."⁵³

On the possibility of a rapprochement with Marxism, the bishops expressed concern because historically Marxism has been identified in many other societies with authoritarianism and the concentration of power in the hands of the state. They admitted, however, that Chile might be different because of the "democratic maturity of its people," the presence of Christian principles and values at the heart of Chilean society, and an "openness and critical spirit among Chilean Marxists regarding their own system."⁵⁴

The hierarchy, therefore, did not forbid Christians to participate in Marxist parties or movements but offered guidelines for judging which specific political and economic system maximizes Christian humanist values. The bishops laid out three criteria for making a mature political option:

- 1) A Christian must choose that model or political party which has the greatest possibilities for opening a passageway in the history of Chile at this moment to the liberating force of the resurrection of Christ. (2) The person must intensify his or her gospel commitment so as to be able to critique and re-evaluate permanently the political option that has been chosen. (3) Each person must

⁵¹ La Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, *Evangelio, política y socialismos*, in Oviedo Cavada, *op. cit.*, pp. 67, 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

know the risks which a particular political option will entail and assume this commitment only if the good to be achieved outweighs the evil that could occur, and if the person has the capacity of overcoming the dangers involved.⁵⁵

The bishops concluded the document by announcing that the Chilean Church was ready to co-operate with the Marxist government in two ways: by supporting all that is liberating in this process of a transition to socialism, and by opposing all that enslaves man.⁵⁶

These 1971 positions of the Chilean hierarchy were far more flexible and conciliatory regarding Marxism than those of other national episcopal conferences in various parts of the world which have had to face Marxist regimes. While not ruling out Christian-Marxist co-operation and while offering general Church endorsement for the goals of the regime that would promote the common good, the bishops were careful not to legitimize any specific form of socialism or strategy to achieve it. They also clearly ruled out a partisan political stance by the official Church in order that it might play an independent, critical role in society and provide a bond of unity and a moral framework in which all political programs and strategies could be evaluated. Given the context of Chilean politics at this time and the previous close association of the Church with the Christian Democratic party and its leaders, this document seemed a step forward and offered hope for dialogue and co-operation between Church and state. It stopped short, however, of incorporating the emphasis implicit in liberation ecclesiology that political neutrality by the official Church is impossible and that class struggle must be endorsed.

At the same time that the Chilean bishops were preparing *Gospel, Politics, and Various Brands of Socialism*, a group of eighty priests, mainly from apostolates in working-class neighborhoods of Santiago, were culminating several months of reflection on the implications of the Medellín documents for the Chilean Church in the light of the recent election of a socialist coalition government. In late-April 1971 they issued a pronouncement calling for re-evaluation of the Church's role in Chile's transition to socialism:

As Christians, we do not see any incompatibility between Christianity and socialism. . . . The fact is that socialism offers new hope that man can be more complete and hence more evangelical, i.e., more conformed to Jesus Christ, who came to liberate us from any and every sort of bondage. . . .

Hence we support the measures aimed at social appropriation of the means of production, e.g., the nationalization of mineral resources, the socialization of banks and monopoly industries, the expansion and acceleration of agrarian reform, and so forth. . . .

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Obviously enough, this will provoke strong resistance from those who will be deprived of their special privileges. Hence the mobilization of the people is absolutely necessary. With some concern we note that this mobilization has not been achieved as had been hoped. . . .

We must recognize and admit that not everything being done is necessarily positive and effective. But at the same time we insist that criticism should be formulated from within the revolutionary process, not from outside it.

It is a time full of risk, but also a time full of hope. We priests, like each and every Christian, must do what we can to make our own modest contribution. That is why we have come together to reflect and to prepare ourselves in this workshop on the participation of Christians in the implementation of socialism.⁵⁷

These priests were far more positive in their support for socialism than the bishops were prepared to be and were giving public legitimation to specific steps outlined by the newly-elected socialist regime to achieve it. They were also denying that anyone could offer useful criticism of the process from outside the struggle—something which the bishops felt was dangerous and counterproductive, especially for the contribution they hoped the Church could offer in this critical period.

Even before the final draft of *Gospel, Politics, and Various Brands of Socialism*, the hierarchy reacted with a public criticism of the position taken by the Eighty. They expressed their esteem for these priests and for their obvious commitment to the poor, but warned that in no case should a priest give to a political option "the moral backing that stems from his character as a priest." To do so, they argued, would entail a return to an "outdated clericalism" and a threat to "the unity of the Christian people with their pastors."⁵⁸ A month later their pastoral letter outlined in more detail their reservations about identification of the official Church with a specific economic or political strategy and the need for a prudent but flexible approach to Marxism.

The public warning to the Eighty, along with the pastoral letter, did not deter these priests from continuing to forge closer ties with those working to implement socialism in Chile. Later in 1971 they formed a new movement, Christians for Socialism, which included several priests and lay leaders from other countries in Latin America. In December 1971 they announced that a regional meeting of Latin American Christians for Socialism from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia would be held in Santiago the following April to provide an opportunity for theological reflection and the exchange of experiences among

⁵⁷ "Declaration of the 80," *Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America*, ed. John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975) pp. 3-6.

⁵⁸ "Declaration of the Bishops of Chile," in Eagleson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

those Christians who had opted for socialism as a precondition to a just and humane society and for a revolutionary process to achieve it. The Chilean hierarchy did not forbid the priests to sponsor such a meeting, but they wrote other national episcopal conferences in Latin America expressing disapproval of what they considered to be a partisan political commitment by the priests and informing their brother bishops that Christians for Socialism had not sought approval for the meeting from the Chilean episcopate.

The international congress of Christians for Socialism took place in Santiago in late-April 1972 and attracted over four hundred priests and laity from Latin America and several observers from Europe and the United States. At the end of the week-long exchange the participants issued a document of consensus which spelled out in greater detail the basic position outlined by the Eighty a year before on the necessity of socialism, the need to concretize one's Christian faith commitment within the revolutionary process, and the need for priests to make a political commitment.

They stated that the "real context for a living faith today is the history of oppression and of the struggle for liberation from this oppression." The only effective way to combat oppression and the international imperialism that causes it is to work for the establishment of socialism, since there is no "middle-ground position between capitalism and socialism."⁵⁹ They admitted that although some of the classic Marxist models of socialism have not been totally liberating, in the contemporary Latin American context both the "Cuban revolution and the Chilean transition toward socialism" are different and hopeful since they "propose a return to the wellsprings of Marxism and a criticism of traditional Marxist dogmatism."⁶⁰

They proposed that the specific nature of the Christian contribution to the process of establishing socialism is not something ready-made or prior to involvement in the struggle; rather the Christian "discovers the liberative power of God's love, of Christ's death and resurrection," from within the revolutionary praxis. The Christian's responsibility within the revolutionary process must take place at two levels: the ideological dimension and the political struggle. At the ideological level Christians must work to "identify and unmask" the "ideological justifications" by which Christian faith, theology, social doctrine, and Church organizations have been used to serve and legitimate the interests of the ruling classes. This requires a "scientific methodology and a real-life commitment to the poor" which will not imprison the faith in a new ideology or exploit it "as a tool for other political ends" but will "restore its pristine

⁵⁹ "Final Document of the Convention," in Eagleson, *op. cit.*, pp. 173, 165.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

evangelical dimension."⁶¹ At the political level, Christians must join only the "parties and organizations that are authentic instruments of the struggle of the working class." In the past, Christians have misunderstood the rationale proper to class struggle and have tried "to deduce their political approach from a certain kind of humanistic conception, e.g., the 'dignity of the human person,' 'liberty,' and so forth," which has only produced a "political naiveté, activism, and voluntarism."⁶²

Christian love, they asserted, can only bring about a transformation of society if it is "lived out in antagonism and confrontation," because the "intensification of the class struggle represents a new stage in the politico-ideological struggle, and it rules out any pretension to neutrality or apoliticism." To speak realistically about the unity of the Church, one must first unify humanity, which is the final stage of synthesis in class conflict. The revolutionary struggle actually "reveals the superficial unity of the Church" and is "fashioning the authentic unity of the Church of tomorrow."⁶³

Finally, they argued, priests and ministers who are making a commitment within the context of the working-class struggle are discovering a new dimension of their mission. This implies taking on a "political responsibility, which is required if they are to effectively display the love for the oppressed that is demanded by the gospel." This political mission can be concretized by priests in fulfilling their prophetic role of denouncing injustice but also by the formation of "specific organizations of their own" which "represent a positive contribution to the Latin American process of liberation."⁶⁴

The positions of Christians for Socialism as expressed in this final document of April 1972 were in dramatic contrast to the policies and guidelines espoused by the Chilean bishops. While the hierarchy had come to a cautious acceptance of certain types of socialism and Marxism at the theoretical level, the Christians for Socialism were going considerably further by identifying existing forms of socialism as normative (in Cuba and Chile) and by incorporating into Christian theological reflection key Marxist categories such as class struggle, the impossibility of a nonpartisan political position for any major social institution, and the obfuscating bourgeois character of concepts such as social unity, liberty, and individual freedom when used outside the context of revolutionary praxis. They also identified joining the parties of the Left as the only political strategy legitimate for a Christian concerned about justice for the poor.

Such diametrically opposed positions created serious obstacles for dialogue between the priests and the bishops and indicated a growing

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 170-71.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 170.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 165, 174.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

divergence of opinion on issues that the hierarchy had underscored as being doctrinally central. The bishops, however, did not react publicly as a body to the April 1972 conclusions of the Christians for Socialism; they preferred to avoid an open break which could have serious repercussions for the unity of the Chilean Church.

Through 1972 and early 1973 the Christians for Socialism movement in Chile established cells for reflection and action among clerics, religious, students, and intellectuals in several major Chilean cities, but had little formal contact with bishops. They set up a secretariat with offices in Santiago which issued monthly bulletins to over five hundred sympathizers throughout the country, the vast majority of whom were priests and nuns (mostly foreigners). These newsletters contained information on the activities of the various local chapters of Christians for Socialism in Chile as well as concrete suggestions on how to raise the consciousness of parishioners and link them more closely with the programs and strategies of the leftist parties.

On several occasions in 1972 and 1973 when the Chilean bishops as individuals or in groups publicly criticized certain policies of the Allende regime — e.g., the proposal to nationalize the private schools throughout the country — Christians for Socialism issued opposing statements to the media and in their bulletins supporting the administration. A few of their leaders also spoke of their organization as a quasi-official voice of the Church paralleling the hierarchy whose critical function was to provide a counterbalance to the bishops, whom they considered to be influenced by Christian Democratic sympathies in opposing Allende. Some of the priests in Christians for Socialism joined parties of the Left; others openly identified themselves with the positions espoused by groups committed to violent revolutionary activity such as the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR).

All these developments exacerbated tensions between Christians for Socialism and the hierarchy. In addition, by early 1973 the growing polarization in Chilean society was also aggravating long-standing tensions between leftist and rightist Catholics within parishes and other apostolic structures, and the bishops felt obliged to draw more distinct boundary lines for what could be accepted as orthodox Catholic social positions. In April 1973 the hierarchy decided to forbid participation of priests and religious in Christians for Socialism but delayed promulgation of the decision until a document could be prepared giving all the reasons for the condemnation. This statement was finally adopted and approved on September 13, two days after the military coup which overthrew the Allende government. The episcopal conference decided to delay publication of the document due to the dramatic change in the country and the suppression of all political movements, but the secre-

tary of the conference, Mons. Carlos Oviedo Cavada, released it to the public in mid-October and sent copies to the other national episcopal conferences in Latin America.

In this pastoral letter, *Christian Faith and Political Activity*, the bishops addressed themselves to what they considered to be the major doctrinal errors contained in the writings and pronouncements of Christians for Socialism during the previous two years in Chile. They began by acknowledging several positive elements they saw in the movement, such as the "critical re-examination" of Church structures so that she might "divest herself of special interests" and thus become "truly involved in the world of the manual laborer and the peasant," a sharp sensitivity to the "socio-economic factors that condition the moral and spiritual life," and a "vitalization of theology by bringing it into open contact with the historic problems of the present day." They admitted that many in Christians for Socialism "possess a solid spirit of faith and charity" and that the hierarchy wanted to "accept what is positive in the formulation and inquiries" of this group and "hear the voice of God speak through their anxious concerns."⁶⁵ The over-all thrust of the document, however, was extremely critical of the movement, and the remainder of the letter concentrated on what the bishops considered to be dangerous errors that the Church could not live with within her ranks.

As for locating Christian faith experience and liberation only in the context of revolutionary praxis, the bishops stated that the positions of Christians for Socialism were far too simplistic, since they reduced the dynamism of the gospel to the one dimension of the socio-economic realm. This limited "man's encounter with God and Christ to participation in a very specific revolutionary process," thus subordinating the work of evangelization to revolution or identifying it with political action. "Sin is not restricted to economic alienation nor to social injustice" and "Christian liberation stems from Christ's resurrection, not from social processes or struggle and not from human decisions."⁶⁶

In response to the use of Marxist method and categories in Christian theology, the bishops criticized Christians for Socialism for having uncritically "taken over wholesale the main features of the Marxist methodology," many of whose elements are clearly incompatible with central values in the gospel such as charity, reconciliation, peace, human liberty, and the autonomy of moral and spiritual virtues. The bishops emphatically denied that these values are merely "bourgeois ideologizations" and that the strategy of promoting class conflict can

⁶⁵ "Christian Faith and Political Activity: Declaration of the Chilean Bishops," in Eagleson, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-89, 223.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

serve to realize these virtues in any meaningful way.⁶⁷ "We do not believe that man can arrive at the 'reign of liberty' by exacerbating the conflict to the utmost."⁶⁸ They categorically ruled out the close connection between class struggle and the work of salvation as emphasized by the Christians for Socialism:

If the class struggle were the proper modality of the Church's salvific activity, then the Church would find itself diminished and set within narrower limits. . . . We, for our part, state categorically that the class struggle is not the specific means which Christ gave his Church to contribute to the ultimate triumph of justice in the world. . . .⁶⁹

As in *Gospel, Politics, and Various Brands of Socialism*, the bishops again stressed the importance and possibility of a neutral political position for the official Church, but they distinguished between "politics insofar as it underlies every social reality" and politics as "partisan activity." They admitted that the official Church enters into politics in the first sense of the term and tries to influence public policy by educating "its lay sons in a faith that does not lack a social dimension" and "insofar as its social teachings can and hopefully will be heeded by society." The Church, however, is not guilty of playing politics in the partisan sense of the term, since "it does not offer any political model" that is "properly its own" and because it eschews that mode of action which characterizes partisan political activity—the pursuit of power. The most significant political impact of the Church is indirect, inasmuch as its "aim is to renew human beings interiorly so that they may dedicate themselves to the struggle for social justice."⁷⁰

This indirect influence of the official Church on societal politics, stated the hierarchy, is perhaps most important during a time of extreme polarization. In such a period, when everything becomes political, "politics itself becomes insane, because it takes over areas of life that are not proper to it," thus destroying other autonomous roots and resources in the fabric of society. This produces "weariness of spirit, moral infirmity, degradation of mind and heart, failure in communication and the absence of God." In such moral and spiritual crisis the contribution of the Church to society can be very important, because it has the resources to touch the "human mind and conscience" in ways that economic and political analyses and strategies cannot. Through the fundamental unity of its members at a level that transcends all political differences the Church can help "to make the moral climate of the country more humane and serene."⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 190.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 199, 202.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 196, 224, 216.

Hence the bishops rejected the proposition of Christians for Socialism that unity in the Church is artificial and serves to obfuscate irreconcilable differences arising from class interests. The "promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church,"⁷² and this in turn offers an invaluable service to society, especially when the very fundamentals of its social fabric are under attack. This position on the contribution of the Church's unity to the common good had appeared in seminal form in *Gospel, Politics, and Various Brands of Socialism* in 1971, but was spelled out in more detail and given much greater emphasis by the hierarchy in *Christian Faith and Political Activity* in 1973, due to the tremendous polarization of the country that had developed in two years and the fact that many Chileans believed that the country was on the verge of civil war by late 1973.

In the final part of the document the bishops addressed themselves specifically to the problem of unity within the Church and the reasons why they considered Christians for Socialism to be threatening that unity in a fundamental way. To preserve the essential unity of the Church, sectarian tendencies must be controlled and the Church must avoid the emergence of a "Church within the Church," of a sect "only marginally associated with the hierarchical ties of the ecclesial community." Christians for Socialism "come dangerously close to being just that," since their secretariat "exercises a kind of teaching function parallel to that of the bishops" and thus detracts from "the nature of the Church and its essential institutionality."⁷³

While the bishops admitted that other movements within the Chilean Church were guilty of a "utilization of the faith in the opposite direction," they did not consider them worthy of such extensive examination as Christians for Socialism. These tendencies on the Right are not as well organized, do not "have the same impact on public opinion," do not "entail militancy by priests and religious," do not "propound a distinct doctrine or vision of the Church," do not call "the fundamentals of the faith into question in the same way," and do not "oppose the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the same measure."⁷⁴

The bishops therefore concluded their rebuttal of Christians for Socialism with a stern disciplinary pronouncement: "For this reason, and in the light of what we have said above, we prohibit priests and religious from belonging to that organization, and also from carrying out the kinds of activity we have denounced in this document in any form whatsoever—institutional or individual, organized or unorganized."⁷⁵

The immediate practical effect of this condemnation in October 1973 was not significant, since many of the movement's leaders left Chile

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 214–15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

voluntarily or were exiled by the military government and no further overt activities have been possible for those who have remained in the country. The wider implications of this episode, however, as well as the Chilean hierarchy's reaction to it are very significant both for liberation ecclesiology and for pastoral strategies in other national churches throughout the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The Chilean Church's experience over the past fifteen years indicates that some of the major components of liberation ecclesiology are difficult to operationalize consistently, due to the long-standing traditions or institutional configurations of the Latin American Church as well as to apparent contradictions between these and values seen by the hierarchy as essential to doctrine: the unity of the Church, the primacy of the magisterium, and the political neutrality of the Church.

The theory of liberation ecclesiology as articulated by Gutiérrez emphasized that unity of the Church "is not truly achieved without the unity of the world" and that in a "radically divided world the function of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the profound causes of the division among men." When translated into the Chilean context by Christians for Socialism, this came to mean that acceptance and even promotion of class conflict was the most effective means for the Church to overcome social divisions and accomplish ultimately its own genuine unity. Although it was impossible for the Chilean Church not to reflect similar class divisions that characterized society as a whole, the hierarchy believed that official legitimization of class struggle as a pastoral method would destroy the possibility of the Church's pointing to a reality beyond contingent human conflict and witnessing to the ultimate possibility of unity among mankind.

Segundo describes the Church as "an undreamed possibility for love" which is called upon to "adopt a deeper moral attitude" than the world is capable of on its own power, a morality directed toward building human community. Once the Church breaks down into irrevocably divided factions, as does every other social institution in a society characterized by extreme class conflict, it is very difficult for it to maintain this moral stance and act as a credible sign of human unity. The very sign value of the Church as emphasized in liberation ecclesiology becomes opaque once the ecclesial community adopts means at odds with the end for which it strives. Although the unity of mankind is an eschatological hope to be accomplished only with the full coming of the kingdom, an essential purpose of the Church is to realize it at least partially in its lived experience in every age and social context.

The Chilean experience also illustrates that when a public challenge

is made to the primacy of the magisterium by those with pastoral responsibility and weight in local Christian communities and is sustained over a period of time, the hierarchy is likely to interpret the issue in terms of Church vs. sect and will take strong disciplinary action against those making the challenge to their authority. The thrust of liberation ecclesiology in theory is toward decentralization of authority in the Church, emphasizing greater autonomy for the local Church and its leaders. This is a much-needed emphasis in ecclesiology and in the direction legitimated by Vatican II and various synodal documents in recent years. If, however, the practical implementation of pluralism appears in a given context to promote sectarianism, the bishops will predictably react against it and place decided limits on the range of freedom for local communities and their leaders. For liberation ecclesiology to be successful at the practical level, the initiatives of the local ecclesial communities must be kept in healthy tensions with the more global perspective and responsibility of the hierarchy.

Another sensitive element in liberation ecclesiology which when operationalized in the Chilean context by Christians for Socialism caused severe tension was the argument that a politically neutral position is impossible for the Church. The highly-charged political atmosphere in Chile between 1970 and 1973 made it nearly impossible for any individual or social group to avoid taking a political position. The involvement in social problems by priests and lay leaders representing the Church (legitimized by liberation ecclesiology), however, along with the position by Christians for Socialism that no objective criticism of the revolutionary struggle could be made from outside the revolutionary process itself, made it almost impossible for these leaders to avoid identifying the Church with a contingent and partisan political position.

Regardless of the intent of many of those involved in Christians for Socialism and the careful distinction some of them made between involvement in a process and commitment to the specific parties directing that process, the public impression created by the movement as a whole was that Christian social responsibility was synonymous with supporting the leftist coalition of Allende. Once the Church appears to be identified with a political party, its role as moral critic on public issues is in danger of being neutralized and its own religious integrity vitiated.

On the other hand, the response of the Chilean hierarchy that the political effect of the Church is only indirect since it does not seek power but only tries to influence individuals and society as a whole in meeting their moral commitments seems too simplistic. The Church has a certain institutional weight, particularly in a nominally Catholic country such as Chile, and the association between the Church and the Christian Democratic party in Chile has been much more than indirect. The

positions staked out by the hierarchy in the early 1960's were very important factors in galvanizing Catholic support for the Christian Democrats in the 1964 election, and this was done consciously out of fear of a Marxist victory in that presidential election.

Much more frank exploration and discussion is needed by magisterium, theologians, and social scientists in order to clarify and measure the political impact of the Church as a corporate body with specific interests in society. The assertion, however, that leaders of the Church cannot help but take public partisan positions is equally simplistic—in fact, more dangerous in its implications for Church and society.

Finally, the Chilean case underscores the fact that traditions and structures of the Church are both a liability and an asset in the performance of its religious and moral roles in society. Customs and norms in an institution as old as the Church change slowly, and the implementation of new pastoral guidelines and the practical consequences of new ecclesiological perspectives meet with resistance and disinterest in large sectors of tradition-oriented Catholics. Furthermore, the hierarchy's preoccupation with protecting the institutional infrastructure of the Church has definitely hindered them from taking a more consistent and forthright prophetic position against the injustices of authoritarian regimes in contemporary Latin America. This is not only evident in the present Chilean Church but, as indicated in our introduction, this reluctance to speak out appears to be a general tendency among many Latin American bishops in the face of the upsurge of military governments throughout the continent in recent years.

The very presence and extent of Church structures in Latin America, however, with its vast network of parish communities, educational institutions, social programs, and media of communication, give it an institutional depth unparalleled at the moment on the continent. With the suppression or severe curtailment of other social organizations mediating between state power and the individual citizen, the Church has become the major focal point for the articulation of the needs of the oppressed and the defense of their rights and dignity. Without the network of its structures, not only would it be impossible for the Church to carry out its primary work of evangelization, but it could not integrate the process of evangelization into the whole range of human concerns that Vatican II, Medellín, and liberation theologians have been emphasizing as a pastoral priority meeting a desperate social need in contemporary Latin America.

Ironically, the very weight of ecclesiastical structures, which acts as a drawback against swift and consistent action, also offers the possibility of continuing the thrust of liberation ecclesiology among the people who are suffering. The staying power of the Church's structures at the local

and international levels has enabled the Chilean ecclesial communities to be signs of contradiction against repression and to blunt some of the injustices of the regime, while at the same time offering a context in which the religious consciousness of the poor can develop and be linked to a deeper social responsibility. The language of liberation ecclesiology may currently be suspect to bishops and military alike, but the development of its spirit is going on in local Christian communities struggling for survival, and the very persistence of Church structures is a condition which makes this possible. The next stage in the dialectic between liberation ecclesiology and the lived experience of the people will be the responsibility of the poor themselves: a deepening of the social implications of faith amid repression and a shaping of the local Church to make this effective.

Beyond the context of Latin America, perhaps one of the more interesting features of liberation ecclesiology is its methodology. Influenced by Paulo Freire, Segundo and Gutiérrez begin with the social situation in which the Church finds itself existentially. Instead of beginning with magisterial statements or documents from the tradition and coming to some essentialist understanding of the Church's nature, they begin with an analysis of the needs of the society, the political, economic, and cultural setting, and from this move to the structures and procedures the Church should follow in such a context. The Church is a function of the society, not some entity from another culture, time, or place.

The liberation theologians find the Marxist analysis a suitable one for their society. While that analysis may not be equally appropriate for North America, we could borrow from its method, making our theological starting point an analysis of our political, economic, and cultural setting, with the aid of the social sciences. Then we can begin to develop an ecclesiology of our own. This need not deny the international or universal character of the Church; it would merely give due recognition to regional differences. Pluralism in ecclesiology is no more unthinkable than pluralism in theology in general. A plurality of ecclesiologies may be mutually illuminating. It may be the function of liberation theology to nudge us in this direction.