

CHURCH OF THE POOR: THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

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DESPITE A QUARTER century's unremitting attention to the Church's mission in a world marked by both dehumanizing oppression and courageous struggles for liberation, Gustavo Gutiérrez has not to date set forth a comprehensive theology of the Church. At the same time, the Church functions in nearly all his writings as a paramount source, locus, hermeneutical principle, and chief beneficiary of Gutiérrez's theological reflection.¹ High acclaim and sharp criticism together underscore the weight of the Peruvian theologian's contribution to the postconciliar ecclesiological debate.² Yet because critics and support-

¹ His first full-length book, *La pastoral en la Iglesia en América Latina* (Montevideo: MIEC-JECI, 1968), re-edited as *Líneas pastorales de la Iglesia en América Latina: Análisis teológico* (Lima: CEP, 1970), argued for a new ecclesial praxis in Latin America in the postconciliar period. A recent work, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991; Spanish, 1989), completed amid Peru's mounting crisis of the late 1980s, offers a "hermeneutic of hope" as a resource for the Church to draw upon in the period ahead (189). The most important texts for a study of Gutiérrez's ecclesiology include his classic *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th anniversary edition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988; Spanish, 1971); "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith," chap. 4 in *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983; Spanish, 1979); "La Iglesia de los pobres: perspectiva bíblica," *Pastoral andina* 30 (1980) 13–32; "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People," in Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); "Por el camino de la pobreza," *Servir—teología y pastoral* 20 (1984) 247–97; "Vaticano II y la Iglesia latinoamericana," *Páginas* 70 (1985) separata; *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990; Spanish, 1986); "Significado y alcance de Medellín," in Mons. José Dammert et al., *Irrupción y caminar de la Iglesia de los pobres: Presencia de Medellín* (Lima: IBC-Rímac and CEP, 1989); and "Una agenda: La IV Conferencia de Santo Domingo," *Páginas* 119 (1993) 11–19. Rich with ecclesiological implications as well is his masterful study of Bartolomé de las Casas, *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo: El pensamiento de Bartolomé de las Casas* (Lima: IBC-Rímac and CEP, 1992; the English edition *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* is due from Orbis in 1993).

² For criticism, see Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988). Any doubt that Gutiérrez's work is a principal object of concern in this book is dispelled by Ratzinger's article "Política y salvación: Acerca de la relación de la fe, lo racional y lo irracional en la llamada teología de la liberación," *Tierra Nueva* 60 (1987) 38–51, in which he treats many of the same points with explicit reference to Gutiérrez. For examples of widespread acclaim, see Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds., *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of*

ers alike commonly misunderstand, or ignore altogether, the historical matrix, the true theological foundation, and the practical consequences of Gutiérrez's vision of the "Church of the poor,"³ his radical challenge to the entire Church, to "liberal" and "conservative" Catholics alike, goes effectively unanswered.⁴

The present article will attempt to set forth the main lines of Gutiérrez's ecclesiology by employing the framework of his well-known reinterpretation of salvation as a threefold process of liberation. Within this structure special attention will be paid to the crucial, but often neglected, areas mentioned above: the vast social phenomenon known in Latin America as the "popular movement" and its relationship to the utopian imagination; God's preferential love for the poor and the ecclesial shift from moral exhortation to solidarity; and the "uncentering" of the Church and the internal restructuring required of it by the convergence (not identity) of evangelization and conscientization. Signs of the times such as the fall of state socialism, the hegemony of capitalism, the rise of fundamentalist sects in Latin America, and restorationist Catholicism's hold on Rome lead some to predict the end for liberation theology and the irrelevance of the Church of the poor. In Gutiérrez's view, however, the adequacy, and therefore future, of an ecclesiology consonant with the biblical witness must be judged by the relationship it establishes between the community of Jesus' disciples and God's specially chosen ones, the poor of the world.

THE CHURCH AND THE THREEFOLD PROCESS OF LIBERATION

The ecclesiology proposed by Gutiérrez coheres closely with his best-known theological contribution: the reinterpretation of salvation as a single yet complex process of historical liberation which encompasses

Gustavo Gutiérrez (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989). For a summary of the postconciliar ecclesiological debate and the location of liberation theology within it, see Avery Dulles, S.J., "A Half Century of Ecclesiology," *TS* 50 (1989) 419-42.

³ This summary formula, employed by Gutiérrez with increasing frequency in recent works, appears in *Truth* 158, 165-68, 169-71; "Expanding the View," the Introduction to the revised edition of *Theology of Liberation* xxvi, xli-xliii; "Significado y alcance" 65, 66, 71; and *God of Life* 23, 182-89, esp. 188. The notion itself, bearing Gutiérrez's imprint, was already present, of course, at Medellín, which called for a "truly poor, missionary, and paschal" Church ("Youth" 15) committed to "solidarity with the poor . . . [which] means that we make ours their problems and their struggles" ("Poverty" 10).

⁴ Recent examples include the erroneous analysis of Princeton University political scientist Paul E. Sigmund in *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?* (New York: Oxford University, 1990) as well as the more serious but overly irenic evaluation by University of Detroit philosopher Arthur F. McGovern in *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward An Assessment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

the totality of human existence, i.e. the whole person and all persons.⁵ The gospel proclaims a God whose love, freely given, frees human beings to love (Galatians 5:1, 13). The appropriate human response to God's self-communication—love—itself requires the freedom made possible by God's love.⁶ Freedom, then, grounds the "mysterious meeting" of divine and human persons in a communion of love.⁷ Such freedom becomes historically concrete in three distinct but profoundly interrelated ways: the creation of a just and humane socioeconomic and political order, the emancipation of human consciousness from self-concern to solidarity with others, and our redemption from sin for a communion of love. If theology is properly understood as critical reflection on the praxis of Christians committed to the struggle for human liberation, as Gutiérrez suggests,⁸ then an outline of Gutiérrez's ecclesiology may be drawn by determining the Church's relationship to each of the three levels, or meanings, of liberation which together make up the single process of human salvation.

While the strength of his soteriological model, indeed its whole point, lies in the unity he claims for the threefold process of liberation, Gutiérrez is careful to distinguish the three levels as well. He rejects both a causal and a chronological relationship among them. But he also seeks to avoid a false identification and an equally false juxtaposition. While a direct (immediate) relationship would open the door to politico-religious messianism, denying any meaningful relationship allows for an idealistic, privatized faith ready to accommodate itself opportunistically to the status quo.

Gutiérrez's attempt to establish a proper relationship between faith and political activity, a classical problem for theology, has not convinced his critics.⁹ Theoretical objections to his soteriology, it should be

⁵ *Theology of Liberation* 22–25. More recent formulations are found in *Truth* 127–41 and "Expanding the View" xxxviii–xl.

⁶ *Truth* 105–6. See also Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, Part 3, "Free to Love" (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984; Spanish, 1983). Gutiérrez notes the failure of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to spell out the ultimate purpose of liberation in its second Instruction, *Libertatis conscientia* (*Origins* 15 [1986] 713–28; see *Truth* 139).

⁷ Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987; Spanish, 1986) 67.

⁸ See *Theology of Liberation* 3–12, and more recent formulations in *Truth* 2–8, 11–13, 53–84, 88–105; "Expanding the View" xxviii–xxxvi; *God of Life* xi–xviii.

⁹ Critics of Gutiérrez's theology of salvation would do well to note the complex methodology by which he arrives at such a view. His formulation rests on a threefold epistemology which integrates social-scientific analysis, the "utopian imagination," and faith respectively. He first outlined this method, which grounds the three levels of liberation, in the early 1960s. See *Líneas pastorales* 9–10. This threefold approach not

noted, frequently spring from ecclesiological concerns, especially the fear of turning the Church into a political party.¹⁰ Gutiérrez attributes some objections to the “inertia” of those stuck in the more usual bipolar schema who fail to recognize his addition of a third, mediating term between faith and politics, which he calls “utopia.”¹¹ In Gutiérrez’s view, God’s saving activity (third level) alone *unifies* the threefold liberation process, and thus grounds authentically Christian political praxis (first level). But it is the “humblest” (second) level¹²—utopia—which correctly and fruitfully *mediates* the relationship of political praxis and redemption from sin.¹³ A grasp of the utopian level not only expands our understanding of the liberation process in history; it also allows us to see how the political praxis of liberation deepens our understanding of Christian faith.¹⁴ Gutiérrez in no way disputes the soteriological priority of God’s saving activity; he does assert the epistemological significance of utopia.

For Gutiérrez, utopia refers to “a personal transformation by which we live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of ser-

only characterizes nearly all of Gutiérrez’s own work but also the central insights of Medellín (“Introduction” nos. 4–6; “Justice” no. 4; and “Peace” no. 14; see *Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops: The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council 2: Conclusions* [Washington: USCC, 1973]) and Puebla (nos. 321–29, in J. Eagleson and P. Sharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979]). For a careful treatment of the function of social scientific analysis in theological investigation, see *Truth* 53–84.

¹⁰ Legitimate ecclesiological concerns may give rise to illegitimate simplifications of Gutiérrez’s views. See, e.g., “Observaciones sobre la teología de la liberación de Gustavo Gutiérrez,” addressed by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the bishops of Peru in 1984. The “Observaciones” and Gutiérrez’s lengthy response are found in “El debate Ratzinger-Gutiérrez,” *Misión abierta* 1 (1985) 31–76.

¹¹ “Expanding the View” xl. “Inertia” may be overly generous, however, for the difficulty would seem to lie not only in the originality and complexity of his proposal but also in the challenge utopia poses to theological, ecclesiastical, and political establishments. In *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* Ratzinger’s objections include “mythical hope” which drives people to the “politics of enslavement” (148), the flight from morality to utopia and belief in the possibility of a perfect world (207–8), impatience with human and social imperfection, and the synthesis of fanatical theological expectations (eschatology) and historical exactitude (utopia) (244). “In the theology of liberation theology’s only contribution is to link irrational aims and reasons with political argumentation so that exact but irrational political action is prescribed. There is no real connection between the promise and its means” (244). In ruling out the “connection” proposed by Gutiérrez with the middle term “utopia,” Ratzinger empties Christian hope of all meaning.

¹² “Expanding the View” xl.

¹³ *Truth* 135.

¹⁴ See the introduction “Mirar lejos” to the revised Spanish edition of *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (Lima: CEP, 1988) 50. The Orbis translation wrongly states that the second level “helps us understand better the process [of liberation] in the light of faith.” See “Expanding the View” xl.

vitude."¹⁵ The transformation he has in mind is the movement from fear, resignation, and isolation to trust, initiative, and solidarity. It is this movement which makes possible "a real encounter among persons in the midst of a society without social inequalities."¹⁶ Such a shift is brought about by persons themselves, i.e. it is "human self-creation."¹⁷ To critics who charge him with promoting a dangerous and irrational illusion,¹⁸ or even Pelagianism,¹⁹ Gutiérrez points to the lives of Peru's poor who, though formerly "absent from history," are now becoming "active agents of their own destiny,"²⁰ despite old and new forms of oppression. Haltingly but surely, such "new" persons have initiated a "different history"²¹ and begun to create a qualitatively different kind of society based on solidarity rather than the "radical individualism" characteristic of the modern West.²²

The possibility of a "new society" and of "new persons" who will build it is rooted in the profound human aspiration for freedom, i.e. in hope. Gutiérrez underlines both the dynamic creativity and the eminently pragmatic character of hope. The utopian imagination relentlessly searches out what is *possible* in even apparently hopeless situations.²³ Hope therefore urges political commitment but in turn "humanizes" politics by relativizing all partial realizations of the dream. Hope renders all personal conversions incomplete and structural changes ambiguous.²⁴

But how is utopia related to Christian faith, i.e. to the third level of liberation? For Gutiérrez, Jesus Christ embodies the ultimate truth which sets humankind free: the truth of love. Only the grace of Christ can reach the root of divisions within and among persons, namely sin.

¹⁵ "Expanding the View" xxxviii. Gutiérrez's view of utopia and its mediating role reflects not only his reading in political philosophy, the human sciences, and Latin American literature but also his personal knowledge of the complexity of the world of the poor. His most complete treatment of utopia is found in *Theology of Liberation* 135-40. Though recent formulations employ less abstract language, he has not altered earlier positions. See, e.g., *Truth* 135, and *God of Life* 143.

¹⁶ *Theology of Liberation* 138-39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁸ See Ratzinger, "Política y salvación" 46-48, and Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics* 147-48, 207-8, 211, 240-48.

¹⁹ "El debate" 34.

²⁰ "Expanding the View" xxi.

²¹ For the biblical basis of Gutiérrez's interpretation of the popular movement, see *God of Life* 182-86.

²² *Truth* 111.

²³ The common North Atlantic view of Latin American revolutionaries from Fidel Castro to Nicaragua's Sandinistas as impractical idealists is simple fiction, whatever the real failings of these revolutionaries might be. Gutiérrez frequently contrasts realistic hope with idealistic optimism.

²⁴ *Truth* 131-35.

As a "turning in of individuals on themselves which manifests itself in a multifaceted withdrawal from others,"²⁵ sin is a "personal, free act by which we refuse to accept the gift of God's love."²⁶ The God of the covenant redeems sinners most especially by *forgiving* (and forgetting; cf. Jer 31:34) their self-centeredness. Sinners accept this gift in a decision to make amends and not to sin again. God redeems the lives of the victims of sin through a love which affirms their worth and empowers them to go forward. Only such a love, forgiving repentant sinners and rejuvenating those sinned against, can heal broken relationships and open a path to a future unlike the past. Love always creates new life.²⁷ To have faith is to entrust one's very life to the God who promises to make a new future possible. But it is hope which motivates the believer to seek what is promised. In short, the yearnings of the human heart (hope) give rise to courageous acts of trust (faith) and find fulfillment in loving communion with God and with others.²⁸

Let us turn to Gutiérrez's discussion of the Church which always begins with its mission to proclaim the gospel in the world. An analysis which integrates social science, the utopian imagination, and faith discloses a threefold reality within which the Church must carry out its evangelizing task: oppression, the fight for liberation, and redemptive love. An ecclesiology adequate to this complex reality, as we shall see, promotes a Church which "defends life," "walks with" those who fight for freedom, and itself becomes the "Church of the poor."²⁹

Defender la Vida: Ecclesial Form of Faith

Wherever sociopolitical repression, economic exploitation, cultural marginalization, and/or sexual oppression result in premature and unjust death of any kind,³⁰ the Church's fidelity to the God of life is verified above all in its social praxis. To affirm the resurrection in a world of death means, as Gutiérrez specifies, "to give bread to the poor, to help organize the people, to fight for their rights, to look after the health of the marginalized, to preach the gospel, to teach catechism, to forgive one's brothers and sisters, to celebrate the eucharist, to pray, to give up one's own life."³¹ These tasks are neither interchangeable nor optional for those who preach the reign of life.

²⁵ *Theology of Liberation* 85.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 226 n. 101.

²⁷ *God of Life* 33-40.

²⁸ *Theology of Liberation* 139.

²⁹ The three rubrics proposed here derive from the discourse of base communities, pastoral agents, and the episcopacy of the Peruvian Church in recent years.

³⁰ In Peru real, physical death predominates: for years now about 40% of all Peruvians have died before the age of five.

³¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Dios de la vida," *Christus* 556 (1982) 54.

Does such a "defense of life," particularly the life of the poor,³² open the way to the politicization or secularization of the Church? Gutiérrez, for one, believes that "sensitivity to the *rights* of the poor brings us closer to the God of life."³³ Indifference to God, characteristic of secularized Western societies, goes hand-in-hand with aloofness from the poor in both theory and practice.³⁴ Further, the mission to preach and enact the "permanent ethical requirements of the kingdom of life"³⁵ not only commits the Church to sociopolitical transformation on the side of the poor but also challenges the adequacy of every political program which attempts such transformation.³⁶ At the same time, by taking up the struggle for justice Christians may join others committed to the poor who are "honestly sensitive to the Christian dimension" of their lives.³⁷ We must also note the unity achieved by Christians of diverse denominations rooted in solidarity with the poor.³⁸ Finally, a firm commitment to the defense of the poor has enhanced the Church's credibility among outsiders and prevented many Christians committed to justice from leaving the Church.³⁹

³² *Power of the Poor* 86–87, 211–12. The point is not new, but it bears repeating: exclusive attention to formal human rights, such as universal suffrage or freedom of speech, often fails to perceive that a "restricted democracy," as Gutiérrez calls that of Peru, allows the middle and upper classes to enjoy democratic rights while continuing to exploit the poor masses. Great socioeconomic inequality makes a genuinely democratic society impossible.

³³ *Truth* 115 (emphasis added). The difference between claiming rights (because from God) and asking for charity is not clearly reflected in recent Roman documents; see *Truth* 110–16.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 115.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 153.

³⁶ For Gutiérrez's treatment of this issue, see *Theology of Liberation* 150–56; *Power of the Poor* 88, 210–12; and *Truth* 63–67, 129–32, 141–55. As Peru's current crisis demonstrates, Christians who take concrete steps to side with the poor face opposition, sometimes violent, from all who want to ignore, manipulate, exploit, or eliminate the poor, whether of the Right or the Left.

³⁷ *Truth* 116. Examples of fruitful cooperation abound in such countries as Chile, Brazil, Peru, and especially Nicaragua. Contrasting experiences between parties of the Left and a church unconcerned about the poor (e.g. in Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba) are instructive. See Giulio Girardi, *Faith and Revolution in Nicaragua: Convergence and Contradictions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

³⁸ *Theology of Liberation* 161. For an analysis of the current situation, see Pablo Richard, "La teología de la liberación en la nueva coyuntura: Temas y desafíos nuevos para la década de los noventa," *Pasos* 34 (1991) 1–8.

³⁹ Gutiérrez has long been concerned about those whose "participation in the process of liberation causes a wearying, anguished, long, and unbearable dichotomy between their life of faith and their revolutionary commitment" (*Theology of Liberation* 74). This painful experience is well known to North American Catholics engaged in the struggle to affirm the human rights of the poor, women, homosexual persons, African- and Native-Americans, and many others in both Church and society. Gutiérrez urges the

Nevertheless, were none of the aforementioned pastoral, theological, ecumenical, and strategic benefits to accrue,⁴⁰ fidelity to the God of life would, of course, still bind the Church of Christ to the defense of the poor.

Acompañar al Pueblo: Ecclesial Form of Utopian Hope

Gutiérrez remains convinced that the most significant sign of the times in Latin America is the "irruption" of historically insignificant persons ("scarcely aware they are human beings at all"⁴¹) in efforts to free themselves from a fatalistic resignation to their lot and, as a people, to take destiny into their own hands.⁴² It is important to remember that for most of the past five centuries the Church itself legitimated the exclusion of the poor from a share of power in society through indifference or worse, despite their status as baptized believers.⁴³ In the *movimiento popular* of today Gutiérrez sees the early stages of a psychosocial and cultural revolution rooted in "new" persons, a qualitatively new society, and a genuine shift in the course of world history.

It is imperative to avoid exaggeration or restriction of the scope of Gutiérrez's claims about "radical" change, "new" persons, and a "revolutionary" era. What Gutiérrez is pointing to is, in fact, not dissimilar, nor indeed, unrelated to shifts which have *already* occurred in Western history. In his view the final transition in 18th-century Europe from feudalism to modernity (prepared for by, among other

Church, and particularly its theologians, "not to accuse [such Christians] of confusing the kingdom with revolution, only because they take the latter seriously" but "to search out theological responses to the problems which arise in the life of a Christian who has chosen for the oppressed and against the oppressors" (ibid.).

⁴⁰ Critics of Gutiérrez seldom allude to these benefits.

⁴¹ *Power of the Poor* 50.

⁴² Setbacks due to the internal fragmentation and outright repression of the popular movement over a quarter century have not changed Gutiérrez's view; see *Theology of Liberation* xiv; *Power of the Poor* 75–6; "Irruption of the Poor" 108; "Expanding the View" xx; and *God of Life* 84–91.

⁴³ Gutiérrez offers a theological interpretation of this checkered ecclesial history in *En busca de los pobres*. See also Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Jeffrey Klaiber, *La Iglesia en el Perú: Su historia social desde la Independencia* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1988); Sabine MacCormack, "The Heart Has Its Reasons: Predicaments of Missionary Christianity in Early Colonial Peru," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65 (1985) 443–66; Pablo Nguyen Thai Hop et al., *Evangelización y teología en el Perú: Luces y sombras en el siglo XVI* (Lima: IBC-Rímac and CEP, 1991); and Catalina Romero, *Iglesia en el Perú: Compromiso y renovación (1958–1984)* (Lima: IBC-Rímac, 1987).

events, the advent of bourgeois society, science and technology, the Protestant Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution) constitutes a "new era of history" made possible by a "new consciousness [which] made new persons."⁴⁴ He notes that Europeans at the time were acutely aware of the shift. The rise of the *novum* in history to which Gutiérrez points is at once radical and not without precedent.

Gutiérrez has repeatedly insisted that Latin America's base Christian communities, the theology of liberation, and the Church of the poor could not have been born, nor can they be understood, apart from the popular movement.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, theological friends and foes alike seldom demonstrate any awareness, much less firsthand knowledge, of the phenomenon.⁴⁶ In North America theological attention and commitment to organized social movements remain rare.⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, by contrast, begins with such historical phenomena. Certainly no adequate evaluation of his notion of utopian hope and its place in ecclesiology can ignore the popular movement or his interpretation of it.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Power of the Poor* 49; see also 48–50, 171–85; *Theology of Liberation* 18–20; and *Truth* 106–16.

⁴⁵ *Power of the Poor* 191; "Irruption of the Poor"; *Truth* 8–11; "Expanding the View" xx–xxi, xxxiii.

⁴⁶ The social scientific literature on the popular movement in Latin America is vast. Among the best recent studies of the movement in Peru are Teresa Tovar, *Velasquismo y movimiento popular: Otra historia prohibida* (Lima: DESCO, 1985); Eduardo Ballón, ed., *Movimientos sociales y crisis: El caso peruano* (Lima: DESCO, 1986); and José Matos Mar, *Desborde popular y crisis del Estado: El nuevo rostro del Perú en la década de 1980* (Lima: IEP, 1984). See as well two issues of *Páginas* devoted to the popular movement, nos. 94 (1988) and 111 (1991).

⁴⁷ Themes of recent conventions of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society demonstrate the point. For example, at the 1991 C.T.S.A. meeting in Atlanta there was little discussion of African-American Christianity or the civil rights movement, and in 1992 at Pittsburgh just one panel was devoted to a discussion of the labor movement. Even Mark Kline Taylor's forthright discussion of sexism, heterorealism, classism, and racism in *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) makes little of the history of organized feminist, gay and lesbian, labor, and black movements. "Resistance" here seems to be the work of individuals with raised consciousness. The transformation of individual and group consciousness which occurs in a movement for liberation frequently goes unnoticed by North American theologians. Yet such movements are not lacking in our history. See, e.g., Martin Luther King's classic account of the Montgomery bus boycott in *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper, 1958).

⁴⁸ The first sentence of *Theology of Liberation* states that Gutiérrez's theology will be based "on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America" (xiii). His interpreta-

Only by "journeying amid a people"⁴⁹ on the road to freedom can the Church grasp the nature, extent, and significance of the revolution in progress. Furthermore, only as part of the *pueblo* (the poor) can the Church effectively accomplish its evangelizing mission, that is, can it be the Church. Finally, and the point is decisive, genuine respect by Christians for the integrity, aims, and methods of both faith and political praxis, as well as the establishment of a proper relationship between them, is possible only if the Church risks situating itself within the history of the struggle for human emancipation. Attempts to ensure the uniqueness of Christian identity at a safe distance from that history only guarantee its decay and eventual loss.

Though science and faith both disclose dimensions of the popular movement not visible from other vantage points, "utopian rationality" enjoys methodological priority in penetrating the complex phenomenon. Three elements characterize utopian thought in Peru's intellectual tradition: a focus on the future, passionate love for the people (the poor), and the search for a meaningful unity within the complexity and constant flux of the popular movement.⁵⁰ First, while science tends to fix its gaze on the past and present, and thus on the history of oppression, utopian inquiry—i.e. one rooted in hope—ventures into the future by attending to the roles of freedom, imagination, creativity, and initiative in history. This means, in part, *believing* (in a different future) *in order to see* (its possibility). Second, in praxeological commitment, long espoused by liberation theologians as a methodological *sine qua non*, the object of study becomes an object of love.⁵¹ Love for those who suffer may disclose possibilities for a qualitatively different future, even as the present grows worse.⁵² Finally, only a progressive

tion of the popular movement informs the entire book but is presented explicitly in chap. 6, "The Process of Liberation in Latin America," and chap. 7, "The Church in the Process of Liberation." Later essays on the subject date from the mid-1970s and include "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith" (1974), "Theology from the Underside of History" (1977), and "The Historical Power of the Poor" (1978). All are found in *Power of the Poor*. More recent writings, especially on the Church, invariably refer to the popular movement, or more generally the process of liberation, e.g. "Irruption of the Poor"; *We Drink* 9–12; *Truth* 7–11, 59, 110–16.

⁴⁹ *God of Life* xii.

⁵⁰ I rely here on the exposition of these hermeneutical principles by Víctor Méndez in *Hacerse responsables de la esperanza: Una mirada sobre el Perú hacia la mitad de los años ochenta* (Lima: IBC-Rímac, 1986) and Tovar, *Velasquismo*. For an important representative of this tradition and a significant influence on Gutiérrez, see the works of José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930).

⁵¹ "Expanding the View" xxx–xxx; *Truth* 100.

⁵² The opposition between increased suffering and objectively worsening conditions, on the one hand, and hope for the future, on the other, pervades Gutiérrez's writings but

synthesis can discern a profound unity amid the bewildering multiplicity of behaviors (e.g. resistance, negotiation, insurgency), forms of organization (e.g. labor unions, ad hoc defense committees, women's groups, food cooperatives, base Christian communities), and interests (e.g. political, material, ethnic, cultural, geographic, gender) found in the grassroots movement.

Many rightly take Gutiérrez as an expert on the complex world of the poor.⁵³ Direct knowledge refined by serious study makes possible an accurate appraisal, without romanticism or simplification, of the world of the oppressed, their struggle for life and liberation, and the gains they have made.⁵⁴ It is true that poverty destroys individuals, families, and entire peoples; yet Gutiérrez also notes among the poor "a human depth and toughness that are a promise of life" revealed in their distinctive patterns of life, thought, love, prayer, faith, and hope.⁵⁵ The poor of Latin America certainly share the racism, individualism, and machismo of the dominant culture. Poverty promotes a host of escapisms, including fatalism and passivity, self-denigration, idealism and imitation, and social climbing. Meanwhile, middle-class culture, inculcated by powerful media, promotes the values of individualism, self-interest, idealism, consumerism, and homogeneity, all hostile in the final analysis to the interests of the poor.

By contrast, the popular movement, taken as a whole and against great odds, promotes a culture rooted in collective, communitarian, concrete, personalist, and creative values.⁵⁶ Empirical analysis reveals that the dispersed masses have begun to act as a *pueblo organizado*, to the dismay of those who benefit from the violence of institutionalized

reaches a point of maximum tension in his discussions of solitude and the dark night of injustice (*We Drink* 129–31), the suffering of the innocent (*On Job*), and fidelity to the God of life in a world of death (*God of Life*).

⁵³ The immediate context of Gutiérrez's scholarship is the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas-Rímac in Lima (founded by Gutiérrez) whose interdisciplinary team of researchers frequently focuses its studies on the culture of the poor. It is, of course, not insignificant that Gutiérrez himself is mestizo, was born into a poor family, and, as a priest of the archdiocese of Lima, is pastor of a poor parish there.

⁵⁴ Critics and supporters alike frequently fail to appreciate the complexity which Gutiérrez emphasizes, e.g., in *Power of the Poor*; see also "Irruption of the Poor"; *We Drink*; *Truth* 9–11, 149–52; "Expanding the View" xx–xxv, xxix–xxxiii; *God of Life* 165–66.

⁵⁵ "Expanding the View" xxi–xxii. On the "toughness" and reserves of dignity and humanity of the poor as the basis for a utopian project, see Francisco Chamberlain, S.J., "La fuente de la utopía: Actitudes fundantes en la vida cotidiana del pueblo pobre," *Páginas* 111 (1991) 51–60.

⁵⁶ For a clear presentation of the complexity of the world of the poor, see Miguel Azcueta, *Apuntes sobre comunicación y educación popular* (Villa El Salvador, Lima: Centro de Comunicación Popular, 1986).

injustice as well as those who have unleashed the violence of terrorism. The poor become a "people" through acts of solidarity, the expansion of concerns beyond local and immediate needs, astonishing creativity, the acceptance of pluralism within the movement itself, and, of course, through real gains and their partial institutionalization. Empirically verifiable shifts in the behavior of the poor, such as the transition from the language of favors to that of rights, signal a deeper transformation in individual and collective identity. As a "school of solidarity" for the last half century, the popular movement engenders pride in personal uniqueness, equality among diverse persons, loyalty to "others," commitment to participatory democracy, and devotion to an ethic of life. To make these claims is not to overlook the countervailing power of poverty and repression to impede the popular movement and give rise to antipopular behavior. Violent resistance to the violence of injustice has also marked Peru's history up to the present.

Though the Church must respect the autonomy proper to utopian liberation (understood as the creation of historical protagonists and a new culture), the mission to evangelize propels the Church to search for the link between this complex process and the ethical demands of the reign of God.⁵⁷ The ecclesial project of evangelization and secular projects to liberate human consciousness, though not identical, converge in efforts of the poor to secure their dignity. We see this convergence when poor and believing people discover their own voice, speak out, learn their history, claim what is rightfully theirs, protest attacks on their human rights, reject a caste system, and transform a society of institutionalized violence.⁵⁸ If the incapacity to understand their situation long exacerbated the suffering of the poor, their new knowledge empowers them to become protagonists in history.⁵⁹

Because a profound communion with the world requires both humble listening and bold proclamation of the gospel by the Church (*Gaudium et spes* no. 3), the Church's unique identity as "humanity itself attentive to the Word"⁶⁰ depends on the same two activities.⁶¹ As one

⁵⁷ *Truth* 141.

⁵⁸ In North America the failure of white Christians in the 18th century to pacify black slaves by Christianizing them reveals the difficulty of separating evangelization and the emancipation of human consciousness. The link between gospel, consciousness, and political activity is central to African-American history, and thus black theology, though it is still largely ignored by white North American theology.

⁵⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Para afirmar la democracia," in Julio Cotler, ed., *Para afirmar la democracia* (Lima: IEP, 1987) 178.

⁶⁰ *Theology of Liberation* 147.

⁶¹ *Truth* 141–42. Gutiérrez notes that Schillebeeckx, Congar, and Moltmann all acknowledge a critical and utopian role for the Church in society (see "Por el camino de la

with, yet distinct from, the world, the Church knows the power of fear to paralyze the human imagination, make people acquiesce in their oppression, and blind oppressors to the evil of their ways.⁶² Yet within history's outcasts a deep-seated will to be free remains alive, despite appearances to the contrary. The response of the poor to a "conscientizing evangelization" demonstrates that evangelization and conscientization reinforce each other, and both take place in the poor themselves. Those who today fight for sociopolitical transformation and a true cultural revolution are the same people who, in God's preferential love, first receive the mission to proclaim (by enacting) the liberating content of Jesus' message. Because "development of the people's political awareness and its Christian awareness go hand in hand, . . . political radicalism and gospel radicalism converge in a mighty embrace of mutual strength and support."⁶³

Gutiérrez thus assigns two distinct roles in history to the insignificant of the world: from the margin of history they mount a practical challenge, at first silently but eventually with loud cries (Puebla no. 89), to the legitimacy of the margin itself; and from the center of God's love the same people invite all, at first hesitantly but then boldly, to know the God of Life.⁶⁴ A new culture founded on human solidarity will not come from the privileged of society but from those whose fight for life subverts privilege itself. Those who fear the incarnation of God's love at the margin of history cannot make a faithful proclamation of the gospel; those who in their flesh have passed with Jesus from death to new life will be the first to do so. In countless Christian assemblies across Latin America gathered for prayer, study, protest, celebration, and simple human communion, Gutiérrez sees the course of history being changed and the Church's mission being accomplished.⁶⁵ For the

pobreza" 262-66). He goes further, however, in stressing the concrete repercussions that evangelization has on history's march beginning now (see *Truth* 145). For its part *Libertatis conscientia* says the Church "takes great care to maintain clearly and firmly both the unity and the distinction between evangelization and human promotion; unity, because it seeks the good of the whole person; distinction, because these two tasks enter in different ways into its mission" (no. 64).

⁶² *Power of the Poor* 29, 97.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 98-99.

⁶⁴ Christian Duquoc has clarified the special role of history's victims in his important study *Libération et progrès: Un dialogue théologique entre l'Amérique latine et l'Europe* (Paris: Cerf, 1987).

⁶⁵ "To the extent that the Church creates spaces of freedom and participation, of respect and dialogue, of committed love and mutual forgiveness, of defense and protection of life, it is gestating a new people, a new creature, the leaven which, when cast into the world, will go on making the new creation sprout forth" (*God of Life* 105; translation corrected to show that the "leaven" refers to the new people, not the Church per se). Gutiérrez notes in particular the Church's contribution to a new understanding of power

Church to "walk according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4) it must "walk with the people."⁶⁶ In the bosom of the *pueblo* the Church of Christ, the Church of the poor, is coming to birth.

Does the universal Church today recognize the utopian project as consistent with God's salvific plan and therefore promote it as integral to the Church's mission in history? Only belief in the liberating power of the gospel makes such perception possible. Lacking such faith, Christians will either remain on the sidelines of history, fearful for their distinctive identity, or they will abandon their religious tradition as irrelevant to the great human movements of our time. A radical conviction stands behind the creative, efficacious, and nonreductive engagement of Christians with the world of today, namely, the belief that the message proclaimed by Jesus and entrusted to his disciples not only exhorts people to freedom but in fact *empowers* them to take up the struggle to unshackle human beings from all that enslaves them.

Iglesia de los Pobres: Ecclesial Form of God's Love

The central axis of Gutiérrez's entire theology is the gratuitous yet demanding,⁶⁷ universal yet preferential, love of God. This same twin dialectic grounds the Church of the poor. The meaning of God's preferential love for the poor, among the most significant contributions of the Latin American Church to contemporary theology, remains misunderstood in many quarters. Its ecclesiological consequences also go largely unnoticed.

Three aspects of Gutiérrez's understanding of the preferential option are ecclesiologicaly significant. First, to accept God's forgiveness of sin requires making God's preferential love for the poor our own. Second, authentic conversion of the Church—its members and its structures—takes place through solidarity with the outcasts of the world.

among the people: "To the extent that the ecclesial community begets new persons thanks to a different kind of interrelationship—that is, to the real participation of all and to the respect for the life and freedom of the weakest that it promotes in its own midst—it creates a new style of human community marked by radically different ways of experiencing and understanding power" (ibid. 107).

⁶⁶ On the occasion of John Paul II's visit to Peru in 1985, Víctor and Irene Chero, destitute squatters on the outskirts of Lima, framed this unity in simple terms for the Pope: "From the outset we have journeyed with the Church and in the Church, and the Church has journeyed in us and with us" (*God of Life* xii).

⁶⁷ "The grace of God is a gift, but it also sets a task. The process by which we are saved includes both the gratuitous initiative of God and the free response of human beings. Our acceptance of the gift of adoptive filiation must find expression in the building of authentic brotherhood and sisterhood in history" (*Truth* 140).

Third, in Latin America's base Christian communities⁶⁸ the poor have "irrupted" into the Church, and the Church has taken root in the world of the poor. Gutiérrez sees the CEBs as instruments for the effective evangelization of their members, the larger Church itself, and, most importantly, the world of the poor.

1. *Forgiveness of sin and God's preferential love.* In Gutiérrez's view the Bible makes care for despised, abused, and insignificant human beings the clearest sign of God's presence in history.⁶⁹ For Christians the mystery of a Love which both condemns and forgives the mistreatment of human beings confronts us on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus.⁷⁰ The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen gentium* no. 48) insofar as it incarnates God's special love for the "scum of society."⁷¹ The Church reflects God's judgment and mercy by gathering the scorned of the world, condemning their marginalization, and proclaiming a universal human communion. Redemption from that which divides, marginalizes, oppresses, and destroys human beings—namely, sin—requires the construction of a Church of the "sinned against." True to its historical roots, a Church of the poor effectively signifies the victory of God's forgiving and redeeming grace.⁷² The Church of the poor makes visible the power of love over sin and death.

The logic of the preferential option, as articulated by Gutiérrez, moves beyond preconiliar and conciliar approaches to the dialectic of the gratuity and exigence of love. When the gift of God's reign is dualistically severed from human responsibility for the earthly city and then joined to an authoritarian theology of God, human works retain but one meaning: proof of our willingness to obey God's commandments. Though the language of moral exhortation characteristic of the Second Vatican Council marks an advance beyond such distortions, it nevertheless retains an extrinsicist notion of authority.⁷³ Re-

⁶⁸ In Spanish, *comunidades eclesiales de base*; hereafter CEBs.

⁶⁹ See Chapter V, "The God Who Comes," in *God of Life* 69–91 (especially 75, 78–80, 84–87) and 115. See also Norbert F. Lohfink, S.J., *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley, Calif.: BIBAL, 1987).

⁷⁰ Gutiérrez treats the complexity of the biblical God who is both "Judge" and "Defender" in *On Job* 56–66 (summarized in *God of Life* 156–58).

⁷¹ *God of Life* 115.

⁷² I am indebted to Jorge Alvarez Calderón for clarifying the link in question here.

⁷³ As Gutiérrez has pointed out, the question of world poverty, raised by Pope John XXIII but largely treated by the Council as an economic, not a theological problem, resulted in the creation of a commission in the Vatican bureaucracy. It has fallen to the Church of Latin America to present poverty as an all-encompassing challenge to the entire life of the Church. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology from the Experience of the Poor," in *CTSA Proceedings* 47 (1992) 27–8.

cent Roman pronouncements portray the preferential option primarily as a moral obligation of Christians and only secondarily, if at all, as descriptive of God's love.⁷⁴

For Gutiérrez, humanity's redemption in Christ from sin passes through God's preferential love for the victims of sin in history. God's option precedes the Church's and is binding upon believers. Yet in the final analysis the disciples are told to "love one another" not because Jesus orders them to do so but because, in Jesus' words, "I have loved you" (John 13:34). Love for God begins with *gratitude* for the gift of life (and for the new life made possible through divine forgiveness); from within such gratitude arises the desire to give life to others, especially those in distress.⁷⁵

2. *Solidarity with the poor and ecclesial conversion.* The Church's decision to accept God's love by placing the poor and their world in the center of its life and mission is theocentric; it is also the fruit of the Church's own conversion. The refusal to build the Church around, and for, the poor constitutes "a contradiction of the very essence of the ecclesial community"⁷⁶ and a rejection of God's will "to place [the poor] at the center of the history of the Church."⁷⁷ To obstruct the "messianic inversion" which makes the last first and the first last, is to repeat the sin of the religious establishment of ancient Israel and become "foreign" to God's chosen people.⁷⁸

God's preferential option gives "epistemological priority"⁷⁹ to the struggle of the poor for life and dignity. This means adopting the *viewpoint*, or standpoint, of the poor, not necessarily their *views*.⁸⁰ How will

⁷⁴ See *Libertatis conscientia* nos. 66–70, esp. 68, and the papal encyclicals *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 42 (*Origins* 17 [1988] 641–60) and *Centesimus annus* no. 57 (*Origins* 21 [1991] 1–24).

⁷⁵ Stephen J. Pope finds that Gutiérrez's language "suggests that partiality of care found in neighbor-love is not commanded by God because it is good but rather good solely because commanded by God" ("Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *TS* 54 [1993] 261). Far from suggesting any "theological arbitrariness," Gutiérrez discovers a dialectical tension between gratuitousness and exigence: "There is nothing more demanding, nothing more productive of commitment in daily life, than the gratuitousness that has its source in the love of God" (*Truth* 51).

⁷⁶ *God of Life* 23.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 23, 104–8.

⁷⁹ The term is Roberto S. Goizueta's. See his lucid account of the preferential option in "The Church and Hispanics in the United States: From Empowerment to Solidarity," in Michael Downey, ed., *That They Might Live: Power, Empowerment, and Leadership in the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 160–75, at 163.

⁸⁰ The distinction is often overlooked or blurred in discussions of the preferential option. The principle pervades the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy. See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington: United

such priority shape the Church's own life, especially its structures? Gutiérrez has long urged radical change in the Church, but a transformation undertaken in function of the Church's mission in the world and not for the sake of the Church itself.⁸¹ The temptation to ecclesio-centrism may be as great for reformers as for those who uphold the status quo. "To seek anxiously after changes [in the Church] is to pose the question in terms of survival. But this is not the question. The point is not to survive, but to serve. The rest will be given."⁸² Such an uncentering of the Church causes some to doubt Gutiérrez's commitment to changing (read democratizing) ecclesiastical structures. For his part, Gutiérrez believes that "a Christian community *made up* of the least members of society, . . . the unimportant folk of history, and . . . committed to them" cannot help but dramatically change, i.e. democratize, the Church.⁸³

Is he right? Will opening the door to the world's outcasts and taking up residence in their midst effectively transform the Church itself? Middle-class people, including Christians, normally find the world of the poor an alien, even hostile environment. The arrival of poor people changes not only the neighborhood but the parish as well. This is because the poor (like the nonpoor) bring with them their culture, race, language, joy and suffering, and even their odor.⁸⁴ When critical consciousness leads poor people to fight for their rights, nonpoor Catholics may find them even more alien than "uppity" but middle-class feminists. A clash of outlooks and behaviors, and hence theologies, is inevitable. A Church seeking the Other now finds itself confronted with radically "other" human beings.

Authentic Christian conversion, always personal *and* communal, and mediated by the other, exacts a high price. Shaping the community's worship, pastoral care, outreach, and catechesis around the history, ongoing struggle, needs, and evangelizing potential of the outcasts—in fidelity to God—will bring disruption to the Church. Remembering who some of "the poor" are in North America makes the point: residents of our central cities, workers abandoned by corporate interests, the homeless, legal immigrants and illegal refugees, African- and Native-Americans, the elderly, and in a special way those who are female, homosexual, *and* members of any of these groups. A

States Catholic Conference, 1986), found in *Origins* 16 (1986) 409–55. See, e.g., the Introduction (no. 16) and chap. 2 (nos. 52, 85–92, esp. 87, 90–92).

⁸¹ See *Theology of Liberation* 62, 70, 147–48; *Power of the Poor* 30, 152, 156–57; "Expanding the View" xlv; *God of Life* 22–4, 104–8.

⁸² *Theology of Liberation* 148; he has not changed his mind (see *God of Life* 63).

⁸³ *God of Life* 105 (emphasis added). ⁸⁴ "Irruption of the Poor" 108.

Church in solidarity with the poor not only “gets its hands dirty”; it is a Church of “dirty,” despised people, and *for* them (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26–29). As such, the Church will receive the same treatment they do from society—marginalization, scorn, and even execution.⁸⁵

The question of justice for women sharpens the debate today over social and ecclesial transformation.⁸⁶ For Gutiérrez, the ecclesiastical disenfranchisement of women mirrors a “sick society,” contributes to the staying power of sexism, contradicts the gospel, and demands penance by the Church and commitment to the elimination of unjust structures maintained through inertia, narrow-mindedness, or power.⁸⁷ Women have played critical roles in CEBs through their “sensitivity to the suffering of others, their stubbornness in keeping commitments, [and] their realism in approaching situations.”⁸⁸ CEBs have in turn provided women “room . . . for developing their potentialities and charisms.”⁸⁹ Yet when the hard-won self-esteem and political savvy of women, especially poor women, confront patriarchal ecclesiastical structures which prohibit their leadership and obstruct further personal and collective development, they sometimes retire from active participation in CEBs in favor of explicitly political activity. On the other hand, achievement of full ecclesiastical rights by women or other

⁸⁵ Let us be clear: Jesuits in El Salvador and women militants in Chile, like civil rights workers in Mississippi, labor organizers in Chicago, and gay activists in San Francisco, have been killed not because they had a special love for the poor but because they used their gifts to promote the radical social transformation of their countries in favor of powerless people and in opposition to historical privileges defended to the death by elites.

⁸⁶ Gutiérrez acknowledges his debt to the women’s movement and to feminist theological scholarship in “Expanding the View” xx, xxii–xxiii, and xxxvi. At the same time his writings from the very beginning reflect his awareness (perhaps greater than that of most other male Latin American theologians) of the oppression of women. See the first sentence of the original Spanish edition of *Theology of Liberation*. In the 1960s, as advisor to the Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos, he led yearly seminars of several days to UNEC delegates from all over Peru. The topic in 1964 was “Women in the Bible.” See Cecilia Tovar, “UNEC: Cincuenta años de camino,” *Páginas* 111 (1991) 87–97, at 92.

⁸⁷ *God of Life* 165–66. His most complete theological treatment of the oppression of women and their struggle for liberation is chap. 9, “Holy Is God’s Name,” in *God of Life* 164–86.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 166.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* The dramatic shifts in the consciousness and behavior of poor Latin American women often goes unrecognized in North Atlantic countries, even by feminist scholars. See the excellent study of poor Peruvian women by Carmen Lora, Cecilia Barnechea, and Fryné Santisteban, *Mujer: Víctima de opresión, portadora de liberación* (Lima: IBC-Rímac, 1985). CEBs have also been the locus of conscientization for nonpoor women such as Lora, Barnechea, and Santisteban and many other Christian women intellectuals in Peru.

marginalized groups does not guarantee a Church committed to social transformation.⁹⁰

Though a cultural revolution rooted in solidarity with the poor cannot by itself guarantee structural change in the Church or society, the presence of the poor does promote affective, intellectual, moral, socio-political, and religious conversions without which structural change is unlikely and meaningless. This explains Gutiérrez's special pastoral and scholarly devotion to cultural transformation and the creation of a new humanity, the second (utopian) level of liberation and the matrix of a new society and a new Church.

3. *CEBs, conscientization, and evangelization.* In CEBs the poor have "irrupted" in the Church and the Church has begun to take root in the world of the poor.⁹¹ Though widely recognized as effective instruments for the evangelization (i.e. the ongoing conversion) of their members, the Church itself, and the wider world of the poor, the CEBs have also provoked controversy. Called "a real hope for the Church" by Paul VI,⁹² and "one of the causes for joy and hope in the Church" (Puebla no. 96), they have also been considered potential sects undermining an authentically Catholic ecclesiology.⁹³ While some point to intraecclesiastical conflict between the CEBs and hierarchical authority, conflict with "the great ones of this world" is more common.⁹⁴ Why does Gutiérrez see them as "a major source of vitality" for the whole Church?⁹⁵

Fairness requires that we specify what Gutiérrez intends and does not intend by CEBs. Simply put, they are communities of believers who to some degree are simultaneously activists in the popular movement. CEBs include those who are not ecclesiastically disenfranchised but whose faith leads them to acts of solidarity with the poor.⁹⁶ In the CEBs personal and communal life is transformed through the complex interplay of political consciousness raising, Bible study, eucharistic celebration, and humane encounter. Gutiérrez considers such commu-

⁹⁰ Neglect of society's outcasts still characterizes not only mainstream churches but also denominations founded and constituted by oppressed groups themselves, e.g. some black, women's, and homosexual congregations.

⁹¹ *Truth* 8.

⁹² *Evangelii nuntiandi* 58.

⁹³ See Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) 213-17.

⁹⁴ "Significado y alcance de Medellín" 71.

⁹⁵ "Expanding the View" xli. Among the best Latin American analyses of the CEBs is the important volume of papers from the 1980 International Ecumenical Congress of Theology held in Sao Paulo, Torres and Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*. For a penetrating analysis from afar, see Duquoc, *Liberation et progres-sisme*.

⁹⁶ Gutiérrez acknowledges his own debt to CEBs in "Irruption of the Poor" 115. Many of his works are dedicated to priests and bishops who cast their lot with the poor.

nities neither extensions of the hierarchy nor merely the first stage in the process of evangelization.⁹⁷

In the CEBs evangelization and conscientization converge and reinforce each other while maintaining their own autonomy. Proclamation of the gospel should not be confused with the work of social analysis, organizing and sustaining communities of solidarity, and fostering new cultural values among the poor. Nevertheless, the message of God's love cannot help but shape efforts of the poor to comprehend their situation, overcome fear, and create communities within which "qualitatively different" people are coming to birth. Evangelization takes place within the very people whose awareness of their collective interests is growing.⁹⁸ Conscientization, of course, also happens outside the context of Christian faith, but in the CEBs believers explicitly link efforts to create a new humanity and new society to the message and person of Jesus Christ.⁹⁹

Some have charged the CEBs with an unvarnished identification of their social projects with the cause of Christ, i.e. with a simple political messianism.¹⁰⁰ What, it must be asked, serves as the critical norm of their praxis? The question is not easily answered by liberation theologians or anyone else, but it cannot be ignored. Latin America has seen not only the "disembodied" (politically naive) spiritualism typical of evangelical Protestantism and restorationist Catholicism, but also "idealistic" political parties of both Left and Right which ignore or scorn the religious faith of the poor.¹⁰¹ The convergence (again, not

⁹⁷ Ibid. 118.

⁹⁸ *Power of the Poor* 97–98.

⁹⁹ Whether political awareness and the gospel can be linked in the same way by middle-class Christians in the First World is debated. See Christine E. Gudorf, *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992) 20–7, who believes that the mythical approach to Scripture common to CEBs in Latin America is incompatible with the historical consciousness of most First World Christians. Her view, however, seems to overlook the experience of nonpoor members of CEBs in Latin America such as Gutiérrez. Roberto Goizueta suggests that it is possible for Hispanic-Americans to maintain an organic cosmology, including popular religiosity, and to resist the individualistic self-understanding of the dominant Anglo-American culture. Indeed, he believes true empowerment requires this. See "The Church and Hispanics in the United States" 167–75.

¹⁰⁰ See the charge by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that Gutiérrez combines a reductionist Marxism with Pelagianism to pervert the Church's mission and make it "a mobilizing factor at the service of the revolution" ("El debate" 35).

¹⁰¹ "Irruption of the Poor" 115. In the present agony of Peru Christians committed to social justice for the poor face opposition from all sides, including the business, political, and military establishments, terrorist guerrilla organizations, drug lords, evangelical churches, and conservative sectors of the Catholic Church. Despite reverses, both the popular movement and the CEBs continue to advance, in Gutiérrez's view; see "Expanding the View" xxix–xxx, and *God of Life* xii.

identity) of evangelization and conscientization opens the way to reductionisms of both a horizontalist and verticalist stripe.¹⁰²

In the work of Gutiérrez the norm of praxis is a triple fidelity: to the God of biblical revelation, to the universal Church, and to the poor of the world.¹⁰³ The heart of each of these distinct but ultimately convergent fidelities is the willingness to sacrifice one's own views, indeed one's very self, not for reasons of obedience but to give life to others. For disciples of Jesus the claims of external authority, personal advantage, even survival, must yield to this norm.¹⁰⁴ No doubt tensions readily arise among the three levels of fidelity, as recent history has shown. Critical scholarship questions a simple alliance between the Bible and liberative praxis;¹⁰⁵ the Church's magisterium may seek to obstruct contemporary liberation movements.¹⁰⁶ For his part, Gutiérrez wagers on the ultimate compatibility of biblical theology and church teaching with the cause of the poor.¹⁰⁷ Loyalty to God and to the Church is demonstrated by solidarity with the poor.¹⁰⁸

The compatibility of evangelization and conscientization is verified, finally, by what actually happens to those who make up the CEBs. In the base communities Gutiérrez believes that "the gratuitous gift of the kingdom is accepted [by the poor] *in their efforts* to free themselves

¹⁰² Despite critics' claims to the contrary, Gutiérrez has repeatedly addressed the theoretical and practical dangers of reductionisms for both social and ecclesial transformation. His foresight is evident in *Theology of Liberation* 150–56; *Power of the Poor* 68, 98–99, 148; *Truth* 141–42, 152–55; "Expanding the View" xxxviii–xl. *On Job* sets forth the two languages (prophetic and contemplative) necessary for avoiding the theological reductionism at issue here.

¹⁰³ This fidelity is reflected in the closing words of "Expanding the View": "My book is a love letter to God, to the Church, and to the people to which I belong" (xlvi; see also *Truth* 148, 153). In *Evangelii nuntiandi* Paul VI wrote, "This fidelity both to a message whose servants we are and to the people to whom we must transmit it living and intact is the central axis of evangelization" (no. 4).

¹⁰⁴ Paulo Freire sees the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the oppressed as the mark of a true revolutionary (*Pedagogy for the Oppressed* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970] 127). He further treats revolutionary leadership at 46, 62, 84, and 169.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., the first chapter of Gudorf, *Victimization*.

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," *Origins* 16 (1986) 377–79, and the Congregation's recent "Observations on Legislative Proposals concerning Discrimination against Homosexual Persons," *Origins* 22 (1992) 175–77.

¹⁰⁷ It is important to recall that uncentering the Church, discussed above, is motivated by a theological analysis of poverty, not a post-Enlightenment rejection of authoritarianism.

¹⁰⁸ He notes the test of the Church's fidelity to Christ proposed by John Paul II in *Laborem exercens* no. 19, namely, its solidarity with workers' movements (see *Truth* 98).

from exploitation."¹⁰⁹ Gutiérrez shares Karl Rahner's conviction that only by experiencing oneself as a free subject responsible before God and by accepting this responsibility can one understand the direct, not inverse, proportion between radical dependence on God and genuine human autonomy.¹¹⁰ Gutiérrez notes the complexity which oppressed people who both believe in God and fight for their freedom present for theological reflection.¹¹¹ The "real meeting ground" between "the possibilities of a liberative faith" and the "capacity for social transformation" is the "concrete life of our people."¹¹² Though faith consciousness and political awareness do not typically develop synchronistically, the demands of real life have converged with those of the biblical message in the poor of Latin America.¹¹³ The Church of the poor has begun to recover an authentically Christian identity and to carry out the mission of liberating evangelization.

THE MYSTERY OF LIBERATING EVANGELIZATION

In the post-conciliar debate over the relationship between the Church's internal life and its mission *ad extra*, Gutiérrez leaves no doubt about his position: as sacrament of salvation the Church finds its ultimate purpose squarely outside itself.¹¹⁴ If, in the words of Paul VI,

¹⁰⁹ "Irruption of the Poor" 118 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 79. Gutiérrez joins Rahner in seeing such experience and acceptance at the heart of "contemplation in action" (see "Irruption" 115). He is heavily indebted to Ignatian spirituality, as *We Drink* demonstrates, and he described himself as "Ignatian" at Lyons (*Truth* 45). He also has acknowledged his debt to Rahner at many points. For Rahner's view of Gutiérrez's theology, see his 1984 letter to Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts of Lima in Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J., ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 351–52.

¹¹¹ He also sees the demanding epistemological precondition of personal conversion required of the theologian. Those who allege the irreconcilability in principle between human and divine subjectivity not only overlook Rahner's reformulation of the scholastic principle but display little knowledge of, or personal commitment to, CEBs (see, e.g., McCann, *Christian Realism* 184).

¹¹² "The Irruption of the Poor" 114 [my translation, based on the Spanish text of Gutiérrez's paper as published in *Páginas* 29 (1980) 3–13, at 8].

¹¹³ Gutiérrez rejects the claim by some that conscientization will be accompanied by secularization in Latin America as it has been in Europe; see "Expanding the View" xxxi. For corroboration, see Pablo Richard, "Década de los noventa: Una esperanza," *Pasos* 27 (1990) 5–6.

¹¹⁴ Avery Dulles, among others, takes exception to certain interpretations of Bonhoeffer's aphorism that "the Church is the Church only when it exists for others." He has argued forcefully that the Church's mission is above all to "become the Church" in *The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) esp. 1–27. Dulles warns against reducing the Church to "essentially a service

"[e]vangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity,"¹¹⁵ then the Church is "always provisional."¹¹⁶ In addition to the dialectics of love as gratuitous and exigent, universal and preferential, ecclesiology must take a third dialectic into account, namely, the tension between the Church's life *ad intra* and *ad extra*. With increasing precision Gutiérrez has used language which not only respects the integrity of each dialectic but also integrates the three into a coherent whole. It is fair to say that the formula "sacrament [or mystery] of liberating evangelization" summarizes his theology of the Church.¹¹⁷

The language of *mystērion* highlights God's fidelity to humanity,¹¹⁸ yet it also suggests the graced response of believers to God's self-revelation. That is, the category of sacrament encompasses both the gratuity and the exigence of grace. Acceptance of God's freely given love requires, of course, a universal love which begins with preference for the least. In the mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ a community is gathered and sent forth to enact the Christological, pneumatological, and eschatological truth of the "messianic inversion."¹¹⁹ The Church as sacrament, then, is "liberating" when it aims at the "radical change of values and situations,"¹²⁰ following the lead of the One who dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart, threw the rulers from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:51–53). In solidarity with the poor—that is, *in them*—the Church accepts God's call to be a messianic people (*Lumen gentium* no. 9).¹²¹ Finally, in fidelity to its mission to proclaim the good news the Church actualizes its true identity. It be-

organization" ("A Half Century of Ecclesiology" 437)—a development he and others decried in the "Hartford Appeal" of 1975 (*Origins* 4 [1975] 522–23).

¹¹⁵ *Evangelii nuntiandi* no. 14. This conviction pervades the apostolic exhortation (see nos. 13–15, 59–60, 66). In no. 59 the Pope recalls *Ad gentes* no. 35: "The whole Church is missionary, and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God." It is telling that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith nowhere mentions evangelization or the Church's mission in the list of ten criticisms of Gutiérrez, despite the fact that ecclesiological concerns are central; see "El debate" 33–35.

¹¹⁶ *Theology of Liberation* 147–48.

¹¹⁷ Gutiérrez first used the phrase in *Truth* 148, but what it signifies is present in earlier discussions of sacrament, mystery, and mission (see *Theology of Liberation* 145–48). The fruit of Medellín and subsequent Latin American theological efforts, it is today found with increasing frequency at all levels of Church discourse. See, e.g., Chap. 4, "The Liberating Mission of the Church" of *Libertatis conscientia*.

¹¹⁸ I thank Jorge Alvarez Calderón for clarification of this point.

¹¹⁹ The term is frequent in Gutiérrez's recent writings (see *God of Life* 88, 104, 107–8; the idea also appears at 57–58, 177, 182, 184).

¹²⁰ *God of Life* 182.

¹²¹ *Truth* 152.

comes the sacrament of liberation only by evangelizing—a task carried out from the margin of the world.

FROM FEAR OF THE CROSS TO HOPE OF RESURRECTION

The Church becomes the sacrament of God's saving grace in history by efficaciously incarnating faith, hope, and love. Fear, more than unbelief, is the enemy of faith.¹²² Fear destroys self-confidence and trust of others, including trust in God. Yet fear also restrains hope, causing the fearful to abandon their dreams in favor of an empty "realism." In the process the fearful also deny, albeit unwillingly, God's promises. Most importantly, they lose heart for the long, often painful, journey to freedom. Finally, fear impedes love (grace) and keeps the fearful at a "safe" distance from others, especially from their suffering. But such a distance is not safe; it begets isolation for both parties and nurtures indifference in the fearful. It inevitably destroys the possibility of communion. Fear, then, with its offspring, despair and indifference, threatens a Church called to set its course in faith, with hope, and by love. Jesus' deeds of love not infrequently have a verbal preface: "Do not be afraid."

The Church of the poor challenges Christians paralyzed by fear of the cross, isolated in the upper room, cut off from the joy of resurrection. The believing poor invite the fearful among us to venture forth with the disciples of Jesus and find courage and new life for ourselves by giving life to the condemned of the earth. Such a Church, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has helped us see, is not only a challenge for the future; it exists already as reality, born in the poor of Peru and in all the crucified people of history who claim for themselves the gifts of faith, hope, and love and, with these, the power to forge a human communion for all.

¹²² *God of Life* 173–9, 187.