

ON THE STRUCTURAL AND PERSONAL DIMENSIONS
OF LIBERATION:
REFLECTIONS ON THE RATZINGER DOCUMENT

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The Ratzinger Instruction, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation,'" is perhaps the most authoritative and stimulating discussion of Liberation Theology that has come from Rome. It has provided a central focus for the continuing debate, both theologically and politically, between the church hierarchy and the liberation theologians.

When the Instruction was released a few weeks after its promulgation, a cloud of suspicion drew both theological support and ideologically-oriented criticisms from various quarters of the Christian church. Such divergent responses seemed to represent a confused assessment of Liberation Theology rather than an honest, objective, judgment on the part of the many commentators in their attempts to understand fully the true intention of the Instruction. It may well be, as Father Lambino observed, that "emotional biases rather than objective reason have been allowed to guide one's reading of the Instruction" (Lambino, 1986:40).

With this in mind, I hope to be able to present a balanced reflection and will therefore limit my discussion to the structural and personal dimensions of liberation, which I feel are at the core of the the Ratzinger Instruction.

A Recognition of Validity

As an initial step, let me state the document's reaffirmation of the theology of liberation as a critical theological reflection of churches involved in the struggle against injustice, exploitation, and oppression. In general, the Instruction carries no blanket condemnation of Liberation Theology, an unwelcome surprise for more conservative readers, allergic to that term 'liberation.' Instead, we find an expressed acceptance of the phrase 'theology of liberation,' affirming its theological validity: "In itself, the expression 'theology of liberation' is a thoroughly valid term: it designates a theological reflection centered on the biblical theme of liberation and freedom, and on the urgency of its practical realization" (Instruction: 55). This is a clear recognition on the part of the conservative German prefect of the Sacred Congregation that there can never be a non-liberative theology. Moreover, that liberation is a legitimate concern of the Church is equally reflected in the very first sentence of the introduction to the document, which states that 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and force for liberation.'

Contrary to some interpretations, however, the initial acceptance of Liberation Theology does not necessarily imply that the Instruction presents no condemnation at all. There is a recognition here of the varieties of Liberation Theology and that it is more accurate to speak of the 'theologies' of liberation. Certain forms, that, in the judgment of the Sacred Congregation, tend to deviate from the Christian understanding of liberation are strongly criticized. The Instruction does reject liberation rhetoric with more pronounced ideological and political tendencies. The fact is that a greater portion of the Instruction is devoted to the criticism and eventual rejection of the alleged radical attempt to blend Marxist ideology with Christian spirituality in the struggle for the liberation of the poor. This is clearly expressed in the section on 'Marxist Analysis' and others, though the intention is 'to draw...attention...to deviation and risk of deviation damaging to the faith and Christian living...' as a consequence of 'insufficiently critical' appropriation of Marxist thought (Instruction: 55).

As implicitly expressed, then, the affirmation of validity is limited only to the theme of liberation and some particular forms of Liberation Theology (perhaps among the moderates) that are careful in identifying secular strategy and ideology with the ethics of Christ. Unfortunately, though, the Instruction does not address itself much to the more moderate types of Liberation Theology, so that rejection of the extreme or radical forms can easily be misinterpreted to mean rejection of all.

But included here is fair warning to opponents not to capitalize on the questionable forms of Liberation Theology, especially for those who seek "to respond generously and with an authentic evangelical spirit to the 'preferential option for the poor.'" In the words of the document: "the warning ... must not be taken as some kind of approval, even indirect, of those who keep the poor in misery, who profit from that misery, who notice it while doing nothing about it" (Instruction: 83). Indeed, 'this warning...should not...serve as an excuse...in the face of human misery and injustice.' Such is the positive spirit of the Vatican Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

On the Question of Liberation

There is much theological controversy about what the term liberation specifically refers to. Is this the same as salvation in the spiritual sense of the Christian understanding of liberation? Or is this just the more important part of the whole process of salvation? Does it mean that freedom from structural oppression is identical with liberation from sin?

It is important to note that Christians with a significant orientation in Liberation Theology prefer the term 'liberation' to 'salvation' because the latter seems to eschatologize Christian religiosity and implies other-worldly concern. Salvation does not, therefore, help in understanding the concrete problems of the poor. From the perspective of Liberation Theology, the issue of liberation is intimately linked with the question of poverty and

oppression. The idea of "liberative praxis," accordingly, must take priority over mere intellectual understanding of liberation, especially as a matter of strategy. The ultimate goal of liberation is freedom from economic poverty and socio-political oppression.

There is in this view of liberation an expressed priority on the political dimension of religiosity over other aspects of Christian practice. The Instruction here provides much-needed support for Liberation Theology, though with critical cautions. It calls for social commitment when it says, "more than ever, it is important that numerous Christians whose faith is clear and who are committed to live the Christian life in its fullness, to become involved in the struggle for justice, freedom, and human dignity.." recognizing, of course, that such a struggle involves political questioning of the status quo (Instruction: 56).

While this social spirit of biblical witness, in an effort to humanize this cruel world, is welcome, the Ratzinger Instruction seems to put overwhelming emphasis on the personal dimension of liberation. It asserts that the source of moral evil in the structure lies "in the hearts of man" and that "structures, whether they are good or bad' are the result of man's action and are consequently more than 'causes" (Instruction:61). True liberation, therefore, does not come from the change of structures, no matter how radical, but from inner conversion of individuals.

In this view of liberation, primary importance is clearly attached to the spiritual dimension of the liberative process. Defining "Liberation" as "first and foremost, liberation from the radical slavery of sin" completely attacks the Liberation Theology tendency to incorporate the radical politics of structural transformation into the church without the benefit of Christian spirituality. This warning is by no means negligible, for the tendency to deviate (as in the case of a violent strategy) from the Christian understanding of liberation is seen as a real temptation for both the clergy and the lay people, especially those obsessed with secular hope in humanistic politics. Liberation from the oppressive power structure does not necessarily imply liberation from sin, or the "creation of the new man." Thus, the warning to Liberation Theology against the inversion of morality and 'structures, an error which is 'steeped in a materialistic anthropology which is incompatible with the dignity of mankind' (Instruction:85).

The Politics of Liberation

No theologians and liberation practitioners in their right minds would accept the accusations of one-sidedness or reductionism. And it would seem unfair to pass judgment on all forms of Liberation Theology. But it is perhaps safe to say that the tendency to read the gospel with the eye of a politician trained in Marxist rhetoric has often characterized such theology. For the Instruction, the objection to the politics of Liberation Theology lies

especially in the Marxist reading of the gospel. The Ratzinger Instruction devoted four sections to criticism of the alliance with Marxism.

Marxism is important to Liberation Theology. At the center of the liberation political concern is the controversial phase, "preferential option for the poor," a phase that the Vatican fears may, in the actual process of the liberation struggle, replace the more religious phase "salvation by faith alone." But the Vatican has itself emphatically affirmed its pastoral commitment to the poor in the conferences of Latin America Bishops at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). The church has definitely taken the side of the oppressed.

If both Vatican and Liberation Theology have recognized the centrality of the option for the poor, then what seems to be the problem? If the poor must be liberated from their miserable condition, then unjust structural forces must be changed. This process carries with it ideological and political options. It is impossible to carry on the process of liberation without questioning political power or the sources of social evil and the ideology that support and maintain them. For Liberation Theology, the struggle for the transformation of structures requires sociological analysis. It is in this search to understand the dynamics of social stratification that many are attracted to Marxist class analysis of society; many believe that the Marxist structural analysis provides what Paul Ricoeur calls the "hermeneutic of suspicion," that is, the interpretation which can uncover the hidden levels of social contradiction in the structural dimension of human existence.

With significant reliance on sociological interpretations coupled with Marxist ideological presuppositions about the nature of social relations, it is possible for theology to be at the service of sociology rather than being the interpretative norm of social reality. And this is a dangerous possibility from a Christian perspective because it tends to rob the liberative mission of the church of its spiritual content. It is not without justification that the authors of the Ratzinger Instruction suspect a replacement of the language of faith with Marxist rhetoric, such as the translation of Christian love to a participation in the 'class struggle' on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

Thus, the Instruction draws attention to the possible deviation from church teaching of liberation theologians and church workers as a warning not to underestimate the psychological impact and control of Marxism on 'liberative praxis.' It is important to be reminded, however, that Marxism draws much of its psychological power from secular hope for a new society where man's tendency to evil will be transcended by the social structuring of his life.

The recognition that there exists an inherent relationship between structure and ideology and its politics leads the authors of the Ratzinger Instructions to reject the idea that Marxist structural analysis can be separated from its world-view and from the eventual strategy of revolutionary violence. The Instruction maintains that 'the ideological principles

come prior to the study of social reality and are presupposed in it. Thus no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible' (Instruction:70).

While this issue of "separation of parts" seems debatable, the Vatican finds some support from theologians and participant observers of Christian-Marxist dialogue in Europe such as P. Hebblethwaite, who said that, "while it may be theoretically possible to separate Marxism as 'analysis' from Marxism as total 'ideology,' this is not a distinction which operates in practice" (Hebblethwaite, 1977:103). Indeed, Marxist sociology is never neutral, as Protestant liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino admits (Bonino, 1976:122). It is the logical instrument of a critical philosophy whose goal is not just "to understand the world, but to change it." For those with a very significant dependence on Marxist sociology for understanding conflict situations in society, this is truly a real warning.

Conclusion

The Ratzinger Instruction is primarily directed, though not limited, to Latin American Liberation Theology, as this theology seeks to relate constructively to the problems of injustice, poverty, and oppression in that part of the world. A strikingly parallel situation exists in other Third World nations, and especially in the Philippines. On this basis, we can point to three basic concerns of the Instruction that may relate to our situation of crisis: the call to active involvement; the question of structural analysis; and the question of revolutionary violence as a liberation strategy.

The commitment to the liberation of the poor and the oppressed is an important feature clearly expressed in the Instruction. Its call to Christian duty says that, "more than ever, it is important that...Christians...become involved in the struggle for justice, freedom, and human dignity..., for the church intends to condemn abuses, injustice and attacks against freedom whenever they occur and whoever commits them" (Instruction:56). This and the unprecedented condemnation of the church are recognition of a sinful situation that can no longer be tolerated. The struggle must continue for the "defense and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially the poor."

The phrase, "especially the poor" should remind us of the miserable condition of more than half of our Filipino people who live below the poverty line. To be fair, Liberation Theology 'deserves credit for restoring to a place of honor the great texts of the prophets and of the gospel in defense of the poor' (Instruction:78). With Father Bacani, I would say that the 'preferential option for the poor' constitutes" one of the most important features of the Instruction for the Philippine setting" (Bacani, 1986:118).

The struggle for liberation of the poor can begin with the search for the root causes of poverty, and the structural approach to understanding social reality has been justified by

the fact that we are living in a capitalistic system of economy. So for many, the Marxist concept of class interest and conflict is relevant to our problem. Whether or not Marxism must be totally accepted or whether only some Marxist elements should serve to clarify our problem, I am not quite certain. But not rarely the structural understanding of social reality, though it provides an activist and liberative stance, tends to focus the locus of social conflict and human problems on the socio-political dimension of sin, thereby ignoring the "personal- metaphysical dimension of evil." Moreover, in the actual struggle for transformation of structure, there is a real danger of this understanding becoming more ideological. This is the difficulty, from a theological perspective, of the so-called structural approach.

To some social analysts the emphasis on culture, especially on the value system and its relation to institutions and structures, appears to be the more realistic approach to the problem of the human dimension of liberation. This 'cultural-historical type of analysis' (Cullen, 1985:102) calls for a radical rejection of values such as "*kanya-kanya* mentality, a lack of concern for the common good, the 'get rich-quick' attitude, a certain fatalism that contributes as powerfully as structural forces to our problems" (Bacani, 1986:121).

The second difficulty takes us to the last consideration: the question of violence as a revolutionary strategy. It has been argued that violence leads to more violence. This observation is not without empirical evidence. We can pose with Father Lambino: 'The Gospel teaches you to be ready to die for your neighbor. But how does this square with your readiness rather to kill for the sake of your fellow men? How realistic is your hope of containing violence once it has been unleashed?' (Lambino, 1985:103). To be sure, the Instruction rejects the use of violence. It says, 'the systematic and deliberate recourse to blind violence, no matter from which side it comes, must be condemned' (Instruction:85). In terms of the hope for liberation, where justice and peace shall reign, the Ratzinger Instruction calls this 'a fatal illusion.' This is because the 'overthrow by means of revolutionary violence of structures which generate violence is not *ipso facto* the beginning of a just regime' (Instruction:86).

But how about violence as the last resort? This question may fall under St. Augustine's fourth century theory of the just war, where swords and spears can limit destruction of lives. But with machine guns and sophisticated weapons of all types, the just violence theory may not at all be just. Thus, it is not difficult to understand why the last resort argument is held suspect by committed Christians. For some, like Bishop Claver, "there is no 'last resort.'"

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