"The Signs of the Times": The Changing Faces of Liberation Theology

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Jesus seguia en casa cortando la madera . . .
Observando a las gentes sufriendo miseria . . .
Sentia a veces ganas, estaba a la espera . . .
De salir por el mundo, por ciudades y aldeas,
Y llevar a los hombres la esperanza mas nueva (Erdozain & Arbeloa: 146).

Jesus continued in his house cutting wood, . . .
Observing the people suffering in misery. . . .
He had the urge, he waited for the moment . . .
To go out to the world, into cities and towns,
And take to all mankind the message of a new promised land.

Liberation theology, briefly considered, was a tendency that grew to the proportions of a movement in the 1960s and 1970s, that primarily involving the Catholic Church and primarily played itself out in Latin America, to modify liturgy, spiritual practice, and ecumenical activity toward greater social relevance and on behalf of society's more marginalized groups. Today, an impartial observer of events over the past half-century would not be faulted for wondering, "How was it that the deliberations of the conservative, spiritual minds at the head of the Catholic Church led to the emergence of those politically potent and socially disruptive doctrines?" Subsequent church leaders must have asked themselves the same painful question, because the record is clear that, in spite of a near absence of public pronouncements, since about the middle of the 1970s, they have systematically silenced or removed from their ranks the most salient of liberation voices. The inner history of those developments —that is, the thoughts, reactions, and deliberations taking place at the highest of church levels— might never be told given the Vatican's prohibitions against public disclosure. Yet, the external evidence is plentiful. The following paragraphs focus on events over the past 50 years in tracing the emergence, and then retrenchment, of liberation theology within the Catholic Church of Latin America.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the special council of Catholic Church leaders, known popularly as Vatican II, set into motion the reforms and reorientations that would give birth to liberation theology. The most important document emerging from those deliberations, *Gaudium et Spes* (*Wikipedia*, 2013), in English translation, *Joy and Hope*, provided an overview of the Church's teachings about society, especially in reference to economics, poverty, social justice, and ecumenism.* It urged church leaders to better respond to "the signs of the times," that is, the social and political contexts in which the religious faithful lived. This message was particularly significant for the different countries of Latin America. In essence, priests and bishops were being invited to leave behind their traditional alliance with social and economic privilege and to reach out to the Catholic majorities who were powerless to escape the marginal conditions of everyday life. A first step was to restructure aspects of liturgy and

religious practice in order to invite *active* participation from previously *passive* followers. A second step was to invite pastoral agents to become more involved in the social and communitarian aspects of their parishioners' lives.

Undoubtedly, Pope John XXIII and the council of bishops, in issuing *Gaudium et Spes*, were responding at least in part to the general sense of optimism across the world. Latin American countries, in particular, were experiencing record rates in productivity, and people everywhere were enjoying a rising standard of living (Arellano). Yet, while these indicators generated ambitious hopes, unchanged was the backdrop of endemic poverty. Also, the region continued to suffer from very high demographic increases and the unsettling migration of rural peoples to urban areas. Social transformations were inevitable, but to whose benefit? The widespread impetus for change was fueled by the divergent promises of the Marxist-inspired Cuban Revolution, under the charismatic Comandante Fidel Castro, and the capitalist-inspired Alliance for Progress, under the equally charismatic U.S. president, John F. Kennedy. In Rome, the pronouncements of Pope John XXIII and the council of bishops echoed not only Kennedy's call for peaceful change, but also his alarm over Communist advances in the hemisphere.

At the conclusion of the Vatican council, the Latin American bishops felt a new sense of empowerment. Over the past decade, there had been an ever increasing number of priests under the bishops' charge who advocated a more activist role for the Church in the poorest of the hemisphere's parishes. Now, the bishops had the theoretical and doctrinal blueprint to move ahead. In their 1968 CELAM conference in Medellin, Colombia, they took inspiration from the ideas of Vatican II and the concerns of priests, nuns, and laity across the continent who supported the struggles of the poor. They denounced as "structural sins" those social and political institutions that perpetuated injustice. Furthermore, they defined channels whereby the church, at the grass-roots level, could help empower the faithful in their daily strivings. As a result of this meeting, the church was urged to adopt a "preferential option for the poor" (Allen, 2007, p.1). **

Other problems faced the regional bishops. In many countries there were whole dioceses with insufficient pastoral agencies. They witnessed the "loss of popular allegiance" when the personal and spiritual needs of a growing number of parishioners could only be treated in an impersonal manner by the limited number of priests available (Newhouser, 1989, p.237). Enthusiastically, they found one solution in Vatican II's call for a new and expanded role of the laity. A second remedy was to enlist the missionary services of European and North American priests, nuns, and lay activists. To this same end, the bishops attempted to personalize church relations by subdividing overly large dioceses and creating new urban parishes. More important, church leaders promoted the active participation of their parishioners by making available thousands of Bibles in Spanish and Portuguese; by promoting the formation of small groups so that the faithful could hone literacy skills by reading and critically reflecting upon Biblical passages; and by empowering the laity to accept new responsibilities in administrative, pastoral, and ceremonial functions. All this was in response to the general perception that the church had to accept its faithful not as mere obedient followers, but rather as *active* participants in their own faith journey. Modern day believers, they came to realize, increasingly desired a church that resembled a shared community, and more and more rejected a hierarchical, patriarchic, elitist structure.

Another significant motivation–generally downplayed by church officials—for the Vatican II reforms and the subsequent spread of progressive practices and beliefs across Latin America, was the very high rate of Catholics converting to Protestantism (Newhouser, 1989, p.237). Diverse factors account for this: the Protestant Bible in the vernacular, a more accessible leadership, the positive image of an upwardly mobile people, its known successes in helping individuals resolve problems such as broken families and alcoholism, and its participatory, musical, and aesthetic forms of worship. Indeed, many of the Vatican II reforms bear a high resemblance to practices integral to Protestant devotion.

By the middle of the 1970s, the "new" Latin American Church in many areas was experiencing humble successes in its attempts to intercede on behalf of previously excluded groups. The spread of progressive doctrines associated with liberation theology accompanied the rapid spread of base Christian communities—here I will call them CEBs for their Spanish name, *comunidades eclesiales de base* (later known also as *grupos de refleccion*). Clerical and lay leaders realized that the CEB was the ideal instrument for the church to realize the *Gaudium et Spes* promise of empowering the poor to alleviate their marginal economic situations and confront repression. The CEBs offered to the faithful the opportunity to develop literacy skills and to know the Bible in the vernacular. From this, it was a logical step for the participants to study their own social reality; this, in turn, led them to act as a group in seeking improvements. In many instances, this involved petitioning local agencies for needed services; in other moments, this led to angry protests against injustices perpetuated by those in power. In 1978 Archbishop Oscar Romero, in El Salvador, affirmed the importance of CEBs in a pastoral letter, "The Church and the Popular Organizations" (Romero, 1985, p.178). While affirming people's right to organize, he cautioned church-sanctioned groups from participating in revolutionary activities.

Although the existence of CEBs predated Vatican II, the next two decades saw the rapid spread of CEBs all across Latin America. While CEBs varied widely, they generally shared the following characteristics:

First, they were almost always created by pastoral agents—bishops, priests, nuns, and lay workers trained by the church (Cleary, 1985, p.114)— and, as such, enjoyed enduring ties to the larger institution. There were exceptions (Bruneau & Hewitt, 1989, p.41). In general, theologians and social scientists commissioned by the church produced their written materials, and pastoral agents regularly visited the different groups in the capacity of promoters. The strong liberation orientation in the national churches of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, and Brazil accounted for the spread of CEBs; conversely, where the church did not provide pastoral agents, then CEBs did not prosper.

Second, the "base" qualifier identifies the predominant population grouping: these were community groups uniting urban workers, but mainly rural, populations, most of whom were of humble means. They were relatively small groups of 15-25 members, generally women, who met regularly in homes, a local parish, or in a neighborhood meeting hall.

Third, their group discussions had the general goal of *concientizacion*. That is to say, participants might read an Old Testament passage about Israeli suffering or oppression, critically analyze it, and then compare the Biblical setting with aspects of their own lived experiences.

And fourth, when it came to actions taken, these groups had predominantly religious objectives; they were less politically motivated than what many critics claimed. However, it is also true that many times the individuals meeting for religious refection later took upon themselves other goals, such as the promotion of work cooperatives, self-help projects, or political action to obtain needed municipal services.

These activities were accompanied by important doctrinal changes. The new generation of theologians steered the church to an understanding of "faith" that involved more than just a spiritual relationship between God and the believer; now, it involved a commitment to social justice and human rights. Before, faith practice was largely passive and theoretical; now, it required participants to expend their energies to change or improve society. That is to say, social and political involvement was held to be a legitimate, indeed, necessary, expression of religious faith (Katra, 1987, p.587). God, the liberation theologians preached, worked not only in the human heart, but also realized His purposes through history. Salvation for humankind was now seen in both its individual and collective dimensions.

By the middle of the 1970s, the promoters of liberation theology were facing a dramatically changed situation

across Latin America. Gone was the widespread optimism that had previously prevailed. The fledging democracies that had emerged a decade earlier were in crisis. Leaders in church and society were losing faith in the ability of democratic regimes to resolve crucial social and economic problems. In academic circles, a new realism—or cynicism—now prevailed in the form of "dependency" theories that linked Latin America's longstanding oppression to powerful international forces at the center of a world capitalist system. Before, benign, and perhaps naïve, Latin American church and civil leaders had encouraged poor people to organize as a peaceful means of obtaining improvements in workplace and living conditions. Few significant gains had been realized. Now, entrenched power elites began to react. The latter saw popular mobilizations at best as disruptive and, at worst, as destabilizing for the existing social order. Repressive acts followed, and the "new" church became a target, along with the poor's labor and community organizations. Repressive elites viewed CEBs as yet one more source of unrest. In Brazil, the military denounced the clergy for "provoking a wave of unrest in the whole region through their erroneous interpretations of the encyclicals. . . . The priests of the Northwest are not practicing religion, but politics" (*Time Magazine,* 1976, p.72).

By about 1975, repressive military dictatorships had replaced democratic regimes in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Haiti, and several Central American countries. In addition, there were selective acts of repression in Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru, and Ecuador. In Chile, Cardinal Silva and church leaders issued a statement expressing alarm about "the fearful and all-powerful police state" that threatened to impose itself "without opposition in our Latin America" (*Time Magazine,* 1976, p.79).

In this new context of political oppression it is understandable that "liberation" theories and practices evolved. In the national churches of countries experiencing the most obscene forms of authoritarianism—Brazil, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Peru—church militants reacted to the imprisonment, torture and even murder of priests, and in some cases, nuns. There were several instances of brave church officials taking a public stand against state repression. A few bishops and many priests believed that their pact with God required them to become the voice for the voiceless. At times, they made this decision at terrible risk. One team of researchers affirms that, in this dark chapter of Latin America's history, when the region's bishops embraced a "preferential option for the poor" they, in essence, were offering the church to the exploited masses as a substitute for the now prohibited political and social organizations (Bruneau & Hewitt, 1989, p.40).

It is interesting to note that in several countries where political authoritarianism was not so severe the national churches remained relatively conservative: Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela. A semblance of democracy during the preceding period meant the continued existence of channels whereby radicalized, dissatisfied elements became integrated into the relatively stable political order. That being said, it must also be noted that dictatorship or political authoritarianism was not a necessary causal agent for the emergence of the progressive church. Argentina is the most dramatic example of this, but the same can be said for Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay, where the church generally supported authoritarian and repressive regimes.

These last observations should lead an informed observer to an important thesis: it is difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about the "Latin American Church." One may talk of shared hemispheric tendencies, but only after acknowledging the vast differences existing between the progressive church of Brazil, at one extreme, and the conservative church of Colombia, on the other. It therefore follows that it is also difficult to generalize about "liberation" beliefs and practices, being that the church's activities during this period varied considerably from country to country. Indeed, within several countries—Mexico and Nicaragua are a good examples—it even became common to differentiate between the "liberation" advocacies of a few bishops and the "traditional" or "conservative" advocacies of others.

With the advent of the 1980s, Latin America saw the retrenchment of liberation practices and beliefs. Papal authorities in Rome became alarmed about how the "idealistic" Vatican II invitation for the Church to "reach

out" to the world had evolved into practices of social and political activism. They disapproved of the blurring of religious and secular pursuits in the advocacies and activities of those priests most fervently embracing "liberation" ideals. Most of all, they were taken aback by the severity of repression launched against the church in some countries—they had the very real fear that in those regions the church could disappear as a social and religious institution.

Most alarming were the unfolding events in Central America. The church in El Salvador, which became deeply divided between the liberal wing, that favored the Leftist insurgency, and the conservatives, that had been aligned traditionally with the social elite. Monseignor Romero's short tenure as Archbishop, although tragic in its demise, spread liberation beliefs and practices to even the highest levels of the church hierarchy. But the oligarchy, realizing the significance of the invigorated threat offered by the liberation church, increased its repressive measures and sought the means for annihilating this popular program through the murder of dozens of church officials (Caceres, p.125). Even more serious was the obscene repression against the progressive church in Guatemala, with the martyrdom of priests, nuns, and lay workers; the forced exile of the Maryknoll and Jesuit orders; the official support for rival Protestant groups; and the de facto disappearance of pastoral agents from some regions.

The implantation of progressive tendencies in other regions caused different, but less severe, problems. One observer reported that in Tepotzlan, Mexico, parishioners walked out of a mass, because they were dissatisfied with the largely political orientation of the priest's homily. Similar events occurred in a parish of Pullman, Washington, where the liberation-inspired priest became demoralized when a vocal segment of his congregation questioned the utility or relevance of the political orientation that he was attempting to imbue through his homilies (Katra, 1994, p.220).

A similarly negative reaction occurred in Tlayacapan, Mexico. The priest, having been appointed by the progressive bishop, attempted to do away with the cults of the saints by eliminating side altars, limiting the role of incense and ritualistic objects such as crowns of cypress, and restricting the role of drinking and dancing in the religious festivals. Unfortunately, these initiatives alienated the community, which later succeeded in having the priest recalled (Ingham, 1989, p.51).

The above paragraphs are evidence that many of the changes brought about by liberation practitioners evoked negative reactions not only from without, but also from within, the church itself. That is to say, there are many cases in which doctrinal modifications, having been pursued with excessive zeal, failed to inspire the imagination and loyalty of Catholic intellectuals, professionals, and leaders in business and trade. Many of these did not take to heart the ideas emanating from the bishops' conclaves in Medellin or Puebla, and opposed the actions by their churches and governments that were aimed at benefiting the underprivileged masses (Ugalde, p.131).

This crisis within the church paralleled dramatic changes over the past decade in Latin American society. A serious economic crisis brought to an end the rising expectations for peaceful change. Previously, ideas of "social-democratic Keynesianism" had predominated in governmental circles, which preached the state's role in triggering a type of prosperity that would benefit the masses. With the economic downturn, government after government found itself struggling under the burden of astronomical foreign debt (Taylor, p.1169). Forced to follow sometimes draconian measures dictated by North Hemisphere governments and the International Monetary Fund, Latin American governments privatized industries and utilities, laid off workers, reduced retirement benefits and medical services, and eliminated sometimes important regulatory agencies. In short, few, if any, countries found themselves in the position of providing state services to improve the plight of the poor. Given this reality, it became counterproductive for liberation theorists to continue advocating governmental intervention.

This crisis of the state was shortly followed by the crisis in Marxism. One has to understand that, from its beginnings in the 1960s, important liberation theology proponents had flirted in some degree with the different Marxisms. In Brazil, Archbishop Helder Camara, was known to his opponents as a "bandido marxista" for statements such as this: "When I fed the poor they called me a saint; when I asked why the poor existed they called me a communist" (Camara, 2008). Also important in the early years was the Colombian priest Camilo Torres, whose moral and spiritual convictions led to his death in 1966 fighting with leftist guerrillas against his government. In the 1970s, Catholic priests Miguel D'Escoto and Ernesto Cardenal served as cabinet members for the Marxist government of Nicaragua. Then, in 1985, Brazilian priest Frei Betto published a book in which Cuba's Fidel Castro emphasized the convergences between liberation and Communist thought. That was not all. In theoretical writings Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez and American Robert McCaffee Brown posited direct associations between Marxism and liberation theology.

Everywhere mainstream priests and nuns accepted aspects of Marxist thought as central to liberation doctrine. First, Marxism's underlying conception of class conflict came to be seen as a useful conceptual tool for comprehending the status of the poor within society. Many church theorists therefore posited that conflict was an integral part of social life. As such, the Medellin conference's condemnation of "institutionalized violence" was language similar to the Marxist condemnation of the class exploitation at the heart of capitalism. Second, church leaders joined Marxists in denouncing Latin America's right-wing dictators, in addition to their North American supporters and the capitalist system uniting them (Kline, 1990, p.1169). Third, there was a shared ethos of commitment in Marx's advocacy of workers' rights and liberation theology's preferential option for the poor. Fourth, both camps emphasized praxis that went beyond contemplation: Marx had written, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world . . . the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx, 1972, p.109). Similarly, for the new generation of liberation practitioners, praxis on behalf of justice was held as the highest of ethical values. Fifth, in both camps there was an emphasis on the benefits of living and acting in community—the etymological root of communism. Sixth, the supporters of both embraced a semblance of "just war" against their enemies. Liberationists found in Luke 4:18 a strong Biblical definition for their struggle: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Marx could not have said it better. Seventh, practitioners of both came together with their moral, ascetic stance: both criticized usury and the materialistic consequences of capitalism. And eighth—most important of all—both Marx and the Bible projected a utopian vision that because the world's evil was man-made it could be overcome. Both projected a vision of "A new heaven and a new earth" in which the poor would be exalted. Both Marx and Paul of Tarsus offered to their followers the hope of a better world in the here and the now.

In the dichotomous world of the Cold War, to assume an anti-capitalist, anti-U.S.A. politics almost necessarily implied favor for Marxism, socialism, or communism, and for their maximum defenders, the Soviet Union—and its usually subservient New World ally, Cuba. For the charismatic new pope, John Paul II (1978 to 2005), who had spent his youth combating Soviet tyranny in occupied Poland, the Marxist leanings of many liberation activists was anathema: he understood clearly that in the church under his charge Marxism or communism simply had no place. That being said, no informed person ever doubted his commitment to maintain the post-Vatican II church's commitment to the poor. Understandably, many observers viewed ambiguities in the Polish pope's advocacies. In his September 1984 visit to Canada, he attacked the "imperialistic monopoly" as one of the causes of poverty in some regions. In his important meeting with Peruvian bishops a month later, he condemned interpretations of society based on the "class struggle," and he attacked the association of church doctrine with Marxism. At the same time, however, he reaffirmed the duty of Christians everywhere to defend the interests of the impoverished (Burrsma, 1985, p.1A).

Under the leadership of Pope John Paul II and his right-hand assistant, Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XXVI), the church in Rome began to react against those priests and sisters who, in sharing the sufferings of

Latin America's poor, emphasized the affinities between Marxist and liberation doctrines. During the Puebla Bishops' Conference of 1979, the Pope urged the Latin American clergy to be "priests, not social workers or political leaders or functionaries of temporal power" (John Paul II, 1979, p.329). In 1982, he instructed the members of the Jesuit order to stop their Marxist flirtation and placed his personal representative at the head of the order. He mandated that priests renounce political positions—especially those serving in the Nicaraguan Sandinista government—and ordered them to end the "*concientizacion*" work a la Paulo Freire with the poor (*The Christian Century*, 1989, p.403). He censored bishops Pedro Casaldaliga (Brazil) and Raymond Hunthausen (Western USA), and imposed limits on the deliberations of national bishops' conferences. He imposed sanctions against radical theologians Leonardo Boff (Brazil), Charles Curran (USA), and Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru). He supported conservative movements such as Opus Dei. In general, the national churches demonstrating the most progressive tendencies during the previous two decades—Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Peru—were brought back into line with Vatican orthodoxy (Mainwaring, 1990, p.144).

During the 1980s, these actions by the Pope antagonized liberation activists throughout the hemisphere. But in retrospect, even his most stalwart opponents have to grant him credit: the Pope's stubborn opposition to the church's social and political activism placed it in a strong position to weather the next decade's earth-shaking events in the European theatre. Nobody better than the Pope anticipated what was to transpire: the 1987 beginnings of perestroika for a Soviet economy in crisis; the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall; the 1990 election of Mijail Gorbachov; and the 1991 implosion that signaled the definitive breakup of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. In short, all this signaled the end of the Cold War; the near-universal recognition of communism's bankruptcy as an economic and social system; and—consequently—the discrediting of many facets of Marxist thought.

One situation that the Pope could not reverse, however, was the accelerated abandonment of church members to Protestant groups. Since the days of Vatican II, the numbers of Protestants in Latin America had jumped from 15 to 40 million participants. Guatemala was the first country in the region with a majority of protestant evangelicals, and several other countries were on route to achieve the same by the year 2000—Mexico and Brazil heading the list. Evangelical growth was startling in almost all of Latin America: Evangelical churches experienced an even faster rate of growth than what Protestantism had experienced during the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe (Stoll, 1990, p.48).

If the loss of Catholic practitioners to Protestant sects can be viewed as a compelling cause for the church hierarchy to choose progressive alternatives in the 1960s and 1970s, one has to admit that the implementation of those practices had hardly affected the flight of disgruntled believers to Protestant folds. Indeed, worthy of special note is the fact that the greatest Protestant gains were precisely in those regions or countries where, in the previous two decades, the progressive Catholic church had thrived: Central America, Brazil, and Peru (Nunez & Taylor, 1991, p.179).

The church's political involvement necessarily changed given these profound transformations in the political and ideological landscapes. The late 1980s saw the overthrow of repressive regimes across—especially—southern South America—and a tenuous transition to democracy. This means that new channels appeared or reappeared for the inclusion of marginalized groups. Political parties, labor unions, and human rights organizations now assumed many of the functions previously served by the church in darker hours. No longer did the downtrodden seek in its religious leaders a "voice of the powerless." Moderates in the church reckoned that, given this new reality, it was time for the church to return to its previously spiritual function and leave aside political involvement and social activism. This was the message from Frei Betto, one of Brazil's most radicalized spokesmen: "The church cannot attempt to substitute for political parties, unions, neighborhood associations, which are mechanisms specific to the political struggle. . . . Asking the base communities to also become the union movement, a grass-roots party organization, or a social center is a mistake" (Mainwaring, 1990, p.154).

By the beginning of the 1990s, the radicalized wing of the church had been significantly altered: almost all of the overtly leftist theologians, bishops, and archbishops across North, Central, and South America had either retired or had been silenced. Much of this had been done without a significant amount of fanfare or adverse publicity. But it was unmistakable that, in country after country, new church leaders were eschewing social and political involvement in favor of pastoral services. This being said, in public utterances the church's representatives on all levels of the hierarchy continued to voice their—now more vague—concern for the poor.

Information is sketchy with regard to the status of the grass-roots church in the different countries at the beginning of the 1990s. In Brazil, the same number of CEBs—some 60-80,000—were still functioning, but with fewer participants and a much higher turnover rate. Indeed, there are many indications that dissatisfaction was widespread: a Brazilian ecumenical center found that Catholic base community members were joining Pentecostal churches in large numbers(Cook, 1990, p.1176). It is undisputable that in previous decades, the CEBs had played a central role in the participants' search for new values of participation, initiative, and mutual respect (Hewett, 1990, pp.141, 146). Now, their activism primarily had the goal of neighborhood improvement (examples: the paving of streets, provision of better health facilities, and improved public transportation). More important were their activities in forming values and spurring motivation. They excelled in developing in many of their participants a spirit of "enlightened self-interest" and a higher awareness of political rights and duties (Hewett, 1990, p.140).

This is hardly the image of leftist agitation against the status quo, that had predominated in the previous twenty years of militant liberation theology (the image of being "troublesome, indeed dangerous to stability and order") (Krischke, 1991, p.189). On the contrary, survey research indicated the relatively conservative political beliefs held by a majority of Brazil's CEB members. In comparison to non-practicing counterparts, they were more likely to support traditional church teachings on family matters and were less likely to support labor strikes. The surprising conclusions to one study suggest that post-Vatican II innovations appear to have had minimal impact on the beliefs and actions of those closest to the church; that the church had been unable to cultivate a mass following of committed progressives, even among its closest adherents; that it had had a limited impact on society as a whole with regard to its preferential option for the poor (Bruneau & Hewitt, 1989, pp.59, 60).

A somewhat more upbeat portrait circulated for the church in Chile. There, Catholic leaders had assumed a position of firm opposition to the Pinochet government in the early 1980s, had developed "passionate" ties with the poor, and was widely celebrated for its role in bringing about the restoration of democracy in 1988. The bishops of the country seemingly went along with the Pope in their public disapproval of three emphases of previous liberation practices: Marxist analysis, class warfare, and the idea of a "popular" church. That being said, there was widespread admiration for a few radical priests on account of their selfless apostolic commitment to the poor during the Allende years. Another indication of a thriving liberation church was the proliferation of CEBs. One observer called attention to the vitality of these smaller neighborhood groups, where participants shared in prayer and reflection of the gospels; with pastoral assistance they avoided the "liturgical sluggishness" of more established parishes (Torrens, 1989, p.269).

In the same time span—at the beginning of the 1990s—Mexico also demonstrated a mixed view, with grass-roots organizations served by 10,000 priests in 53 dioceses. In the first two decades after Vatican II, the country had its experience with left-leaning priests working in urban slums or impoverished peasant communities. But this type of social and political activism was disappearing. Progressive bishops such as Sergio Mendez Arceo (Cuernavaca) and Samuel Ruiz (Chiapas) had retired. Theirs had been minority voices within the country's Catholic hierarchy, nevertheless influential in the bishops' 1983-85 pastoral program, which took note of the failure of Mexico's economic model, the general mood of discontent, and the "unmeasured" concentration of power in the state (Riding, 1985, p.90). Many of these views were repeated in the pastoral letter of 1992 that denounced as immoral the neo-liberal economic reforms promoted by the president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Contrasting with this progressive image was the other, conservative, identity. A propos, the arch-conservative Catholic group, Opus Dei, continued to exercise considerable influence in business circles and with Mexico's leading oppositional party—the National Action Party (PAN)—which would soon win the presidency. In addition, lay organizations in different regions of the country continued their strident opposition to abortion and the government's family planning programs. In this light, many citizens continued to view the church as a committed right-wing force—that is to say, as a part of the frozen system that maintained the status quo.

Visitors to Nicaragua reported a less rosy picture: given the military conflict between defenders of the Sandinista government and the U.S.-sponsored Contras, the country as a whole remained highly conflicted, as did the church. Cardinal Obando y Bravo supported a return to a largely spiritual function, whereas a much smaller number of liberation priests, many of them foreigners, continued mixing ecumenical concerns with lessons about the evils of American capitalism (Wright, 1989, p.159).

At that time, different observers suggested reasons for liberation theology's crisis, in spite of its initial successes in the 1960s and 1970s. Heading the list were the internal church divisions in country after country that had resulted between its leaders, with their traditional links to the region's power elite, and the "new" church of the poor. Second, the avocation of radical social and political change by liberation priests and CEBs had provoked a fierce and violent reaction that undermined social stability and the church's predominant role. But there also existed other, more subtle problems. Given the generally closed nature of Latin American society, activism there by marginal groups rarely yielded positive results. For the lowest strata of society, rarely does either education or hard work help one get ahead. In other words, liberal myths were much less functional than in the United States or in other more open societies. Unfortunately, in only select instances had CEB militancy yielded possibilities for upward mobility (Cook, 1990, p.1178). On the contrary, militancy, in many instances, had proven physically dangerous for its participants; it had triggered violent retaliation by an oppressive opposition. Therefore, the CEBs' return to a more spiritual function was welcomed by many participants.

Not only that, but also there is much evidence that the liberation agenda of grass-roots politicization contradicted the ways many poor people made sense of their lives and have endured under stress. Perhaps, wrote one observer, by revealing the mechanisms of exploitation and encouraging the poor to insist on their rights, the militant church was, in essence, eschewing the protective shield that had previously surrounded religious activity (Stoll, 1990, p.45). Unfortunately, in most regions of the world, existing elites are so deeply entrenched that no amount of activism on the part of the poor can yield significant change. Given this reality, perhaps the end result of liberation's call to militancy was yet one more experience in failure and defeat. Perhaps the passive social role of the traditional church had taken this into account. Perhaps there was a value to its traditional role of offering to the poor a psychological escape and a more peaceful spiritual domain. Perhaps the perverse irony of liberation theology was that its advocates had only brought about the denial of that psychological balm to those who most needed it.

Approaching the dawn of the new century, liberation theology has survived, but in a much more modest form than before. Given Marxism's recent defeats, the new generation of liberation theorists now disavowed "Marxist reductionism" in favor of "communitarian participatory radicalism" (Sigmund, 1990, p.122). Supporting the swell of democratic regimes across the continent, many CEB participants have now accepted the principles of democratic liberalism and have critically sought their place within the reigning market system. Although not totally comfortable with the reigning economic and political forces associated with globalization and neo-liberalism, they admired how thousands upon thousands of previously marginal people were now enjoying a significantly higher standard of living. Leftist political leaders espousing some form of Marxism were now less visible—a fact reflected in the thought of a new generation of liberation theorists. In politics and religion those militants advocating an improvement in living conditions for the poor now defended the advantages of a "dialogue with liberalism;" activism to "nurture democracy;" and a fusion of their preferential option for the

poor with capitalist market efficiency. Many have realized the need for a new theological orientation based on the "spirituality of socially concerned democracy, whether capitalist or socialist in its economic form" (Taylor, pp.1169-70).

Another lesson learned, was that liberation praxis is necessarily "situational." That is to say, a CEB of mainstream practitioners in Tepoztlan would not thrive over time by continually comparing Old Testament suffering to the exploitation experienced by the poorest of indigenous populations in far-off Chiapas. Another example: how long would the interest of a small group of big-hearted, sincere CEB participants in La Crosse, Wisconsin, be maintained if they were to select human rights abuses in Guatemala as their main concern? Not long. The lesson learned is that the CEBs that prospered over time were those whose members lived in crisis, who reflected and acted according to their own specific situation.

Other voices were urging the new generation of liberation activists to eschew the utopian views, which formerly had been embraced by the Left, in favor of specific issues. McGovern simply stated, CEB activism had to yield positive, concrete results. Urging the poor to embrace a vague, general goal of "liberation" had been counterproductive (as cited in Kline, 1990, p.1169). Instead, needed now were survival strategies and explicit ethical norms for guiding the activism of a new generation of church militants.

Postscript

Avanzamos, peregrinos,
Con Jesus, nuestra esperanza.
El nos salva, El nos guia,
Con la luz de su palabra. . . .
Jesucristo, nuestro hermano,
Nos dara su eternidad (Martins: 300).

Pilgrims, we go forward,
With Jesus, our hope.
He will save us, He guides us,
With the light of His Word. . . .
Jesus, our brother,
He will give us His eternity.

It was the afternoon of March 12, 2013. In the Vatican assembly hall were 115 cardinals from all parts of the globe. Not present, however, was the de facto protagonist of that conclave: Pope Emeritus Benedict who, over the past 32 years—first, as Cardinal Ratzinger, the head advisor to Pope John Paul II, then as Pope—had played a major role in the selection of each and every one of the bishops who would now choose his successor as Holy See. Throughout those years, he had the reputation as one of the most stalwart opponents of liberation theology. He had personally orchestrated the removal or silencing of key liberation voices across the Americas, those who had invited Jesus "To go out into the world, into cities and towns, / And carry hope to all mankind of the new promised land." Now, one can imagine the Pope Emeritus silently celebrating his achievement: the presence of Jesus —again—had been reduced to "His word" of "hope;" and His promise to "save" the faithful in "His eternity" would no longer cause internal church divisions and undesirable turbulence in the social sphere.

*Pope John XXIII, in his last months of his life, provided the inspiration for *Gaudium et Spes*. It was drafted from the floor of the council, approved overwhelmingly, and then promulgated by the new Pope Paul VI on 7 December 1965. As is customary with Catholic documents, the title is taken from its incipit in Latin, here rendered in English translation: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."

**In the "Medellin Documents" of the CELAM (Conferencia General del Episcopal Latinoamericano) mention is made CEBs, of the need for church-sponsored "concientizacion," and of the urgency of pastoral activity on behalf of the poor (Medellin Documents). It was Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, in his 1971 book, *La teologia de la liberacion*, who popularized the term "preferential option for the poor".

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