

Beulah Heights University

Liberation Theology

A Paper Submitted to
Professor Dr. Percy Johnson
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of
ATh 620 Introduction to Global Chaplaincy

by

Julio Bitencourt

Atlanta, Georgia

March 2019

To understand a 'spirituality of liberation' therefore, we must first try to understand the core of the theology of liberation for they are closely linked. Liberation theology has been a major theological event in Latin America; it has aroused interest and had an effect upon the rest of the Church. It has also aroused controversy. Not all the so-called 'liberation theologians' think alike. To some extent 'liberation theology' has become an ambiguous term, which needs to be explained whenever it is used. I shall not enter into distinctions and controversies; they would not serve our purpose. I would rather go to the heart of the matter, and work from what is substantial and widely accepted in liberation theology (as, for example in the Puebla documents), because it is also from this core of liberation theology that we are able to recognize an emerging spirituality. Sound Christian mysticism does not come out of controversy or provisory statements. If we come to the core of liberation theology, we find ourselves facing a way of doing theology that is at the same time both new and very traditional. It is traditional if we consider its themes and statements in isolation; it is original in that the theology is formulated from within the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and the experience of evangelizing the poor supports its theological thinking. This perspective and experience must be borne in mind when we consider a spirituality of liberation.

First of all, Christian practice makes a crucial contribution to theological reflection. In this instance the practice in question is that of Christian compassion--commitment, out of charity, to the service of the poor and oppressed. This practice has theological significance (drawn from the parables of the Last Judgment and the Good Samaritan, amongst others), which is expressed in Christian practice and spirituality. In this sense liberation theology is a 'pastoral theology' (its aim is a proper evangelization that takes into account the historical situation) and also a 'spiritual theology' where Christian practice and compassion can become the source of a genuine experience of God. Liberation theology is chiefly concerned with the biblical-theological meaning of the 'poor' as the oppressed and needy ones. It aims at

developing the theological reasoning behind the option for the poor in Christian tradition, and in today's Church. This means focusing upon the meaning of the poor in the bible and in Jesus's life and mission, and upon the privileged place of the poor in the Church and in the announcement of the kingdom of God. It is not entirely true to say that liberation theology has developed a new catholic Christology, but in certain respects it brings Christology up to date when it emphasizes the social and cultural consequences of Jesus's message and practice. The fundamentals of his mission are retained: the dimensions of eschatological salvation, conversion, the call to communion with the Father and with all our neighbors. But liberation theology would claim that Jesus's own radical liberation, by which he saves from sin and death and gives eternal and abundant life, should be integral to authentic human experience here on earth; we should live free from social sins and servitudes, and establish communion and fraternity in anticipation in this world. In responding to the pastoral needs of Latin America, a balance has to be achieved between a 'pietistic' private Christology (and spirituality), and an appreciation of the attitude of Jesus towards the poor, outcasts, the rich, the powerful; the compassion and commitment with which he offered integral humanization.

Liberation theology is important to the Church's mission. It is an attempt to answer the crucial question of how to evangelize, how to transmit the Christian experience in a society dehumanized by injustice. It is an attempt to preach the gospel in a way that frees people, and to preach the coming of the kingdom and the human growth of the poor and oppressed. And in the process it generates those Christian attitudes, motivations and values which permit Christians to cope with this synthesis and these challenges. These values, attitudes and motivations are what we call spirituality. If this theological perspective is valuable in Latin America, it is also valuable in the rest of the Church, especially in those areas of the world with similar social problems and cultural contexts.