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Alex Wald

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

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ALL FOR JESUS, JESUS FOR ALL:  
A REFOCUSED THEOLOGY ON THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST

Alex Wald

Winner of the 2015 *Obsculta* Undergraduate Essay Competition

*Abstract - Both Benedict XVI and John Paul II were forming their faith when they witnessed the great atrocities committed by the communist Soviet Union, and both held strong aversions to liberation theology which shares several essential ideas with Marxism. In Pope Francis' side of the world, liberation theology came to be viewed in a completely opposite light. There, it was popularized as a God-blessed revolution against oppressive dictatorships. Pope Francis has an opportunity to enrich the Church's mission with the gains made by Latin American liberation theologians.*

At countless points in the four gospels, Jesus berates rich men for accumulating wealth while their brothers and sisters have nothing to eat. Perhaps the best example of this comes in Mark 10, when a youthful man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. After declaring that he has kept all Ten Commandments since he was a boy, Jesus responds by saying, "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come, follow me.”<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, this is a teaching that the most holy of canonized saints have all strived to uphold. It is interesting however, to analyze the history of the church through that passage of the Bible. Despite an unyielding verbal dedication to equality, five of the six countries with the highest number of Catholics<sup>2</sup> rate in the bottom third for income inequality.<sup>3</sup> Two thousand years after Jesus Christ preached of equality and compassion for the poor, we live in a world that features more inequality and poverty than existed when Jesus walked this earth. This extreme poverty combined with the Church’s gargantuan sphere of influence suggests that, at least in practice, reducing poverty has been a secondary goal to the Vatican.

Liberation Theology attempts to reverse that short-coming of the Church by making a life of action that concretely reduces real evil equally as important as a life full of prayer and reflection. Up until now, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have declined to adopt the Theology of Liberation because they saw it as a limitation to the Church’s mission of establishing the Kingdom of God here on earth. However, both aforementioned pontiffs read the doctrines of Gustavo Guterrez and Leonardo Boff with tinted glasses. Now, with his almost 50 years of experience with the positive effects that Liberation Theology has had in Latin America, Pope Francis should integrate Liberation Theology’s Ecclesiology, Christology and Eschatology into the Church’s mission as a way to expand the positive impact the Catholic Church can have in the world.

To understand why the Church rejected Liberation Theology despite its potential to impede human rights violations in Latin America, it must first be clear why it has op-

posed Liberation Theology in the past. Pope John Paul II ruled the papal throne throughout most of the Liberation Theology moment. Polish by birth, John Paul II made a name for himself by fighting against communist control of Poland by the Soviet Union. After experiencing firsthand the travesties committed by Stalin's Soviet Union, John Paul II understandably maintained a polarized view of communism and Christianity. It comes as no surprise that the association of Jesus with Karl Marx appalled him. Under his 28-year reign as the Holy See, the Vatican firmly rejected Liberation Theology.

Under John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI served as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was in this position that he became the brainchild of most of the church doctrine that directly pertains to Liberation Theology. Ratzinger's primary objections to Liberation Theology came from its Marxist similarities as well as a Christology he saw as limiting to the Christ figure.

First among Ratzinger's objections were the parallels easily drawn between Liberation Theology and Communism. Ratzinger thought Marxism was too radical in that it depicts a black-and-white history that shuts out more comprehensive interpretations of society. A black-and-white view of history creates an "Us" and a "Them," which is often a precursor to class warfare. This causes both Marxists and Liberation Theologians to act prematurely, presupposing that revolution, even violent revolution, is the solution to ending poverty before taking the time to accurately diagnose the societal problem. It is clear through his writings that he sees Marxism and Catholicism as opposing ideals, and cannot envision a scenario in which their ideas could overlap.

Ratzinger's second main rejection of Liberation Theology is that its Christology historicizes and politicizes the Christ event, flattening the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Liberation Theologians pit Jesus as a political revolutionary, he says, a God who came to earth to overthrow the current government. As Ratzinger writes in his *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, "The mistake here is not in bringing attention to a political dimension of the readings of Scripture, but in making of this one dimension the principal or exclusive component. This leads to a reductionist reading of the Bible," Ratzinger later furthers this argument by saying, "Theological criteria for truth are thus relativized and subordinated to the imperatives of the class struggle."<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger believes that Liberation Theology would be a limiting position for the Catholic Church because it would sacrifice Christ's divine significance in order to make him a primarily political figure. In turn, all other aspects of the Bible are left behind, including the central concepts of prayer and faith. In essence, Liberation Theology errs in that it reduces the importance of a belief in Christ. It is no longer important that people believe in Christ, it is only important that they follow his political revolution.

In these criticisms, both Benedict XVI and John Paul II were defending their faith from ideas they thought would create limits on the significance of Jesus and Christianity. However, Liberation Theology, in the style of Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, would truly expand the scope of Christianity and help put into action its goal of reducing inequality and poverty. Through its emphasis on an adherence to Jesus' mission of service to the poor, Liberation Theology

more strictly articulates the need to truly live out what Jesus declared was his greatest commandment: “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul” and “love thy neighbor as thyself.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that prayer and reflection are important in order to have a relationship with Jesus, but Jesus also makes it clear that love for the community is no less important than an individual relationship with God. Liberation Theology brings a balance to this over-individualized faith phenomena by instituting action-prayer praxis. This idea of praxis effectively states that a good Catholic must act to bring about the Kingdom of God, and then subsequently reflect on the goodness and effectiveness of that action. In this way, Liberation Theology solidifies the community dimension of the Catholic Church. It hopes to inspire people to more concretely orientate their lives towards making the Kingdom of God a reality here on earth. Liberation theology accomplishes this through a more balanced ecclesiology, Christology and eschatology.

One arena in which Liberation Theology improves upon current theology, is through its challenge of the Church’s current hierarchy. Current Church structure is a highly centralized bureaucracy where approximately 5,100 unelected bishops<sup>6</sup> make the majority of decisions that pertain to the rest of the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics.<sup>7</sup> This bureaucracy was in accordance with modern human thought at the time the Church was established. At that time, the feudal system was thought to be the superior form of governance. Leaders were selected by God and ruled with divine authority as God’s handpicked stewards of the earth.

Fast forward two thousand years, and one finds a Church that has failed to take advantage of progress in political thought. In the 21st century, it is clear to any historian

the stark standard of living inequality that was generated by the Feudal system. As Liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff states in his critique of the Church, “Leaders are chosen within the strict confines of those who hold ecclesial power. They are imposed on local communities, thrusting to the margins the vast majority of the laity who often possess greater professional, intellectual, and even theological qualifications.”<sup>8</sup> The laity is the most expansive body of the living church, yet they are powerless in the decision-making power of the church. Women, who constitute 600 million Catholics,<sup>9</sup> are especially marginalized by this system. Despite this, Boff calls our attention to the fact that, “[women] are juridically considered to be incapable of almost any leadership function, rarely present in secretariats, commissions, and sacred congregations.”<sup>10</sup> The goal of Boff in these statements is not to give up and do away with the powerful tradition of the Vatican, but rather to incorporate these lost voices and recognize that the Church itself can move forward and bring about the Kingdom of God if, and only if, they truly become the Church of the entire people of God.

This claim in fact, is very similar to the vision Pope Francis has already embodied with his call for Catholics to look to the periphery of society rather than the center. The Church has a unique position in society in that it is arguably the world’s oldest standing institution and has inarguably played host to some of the world’s greatest thinkers. However, it has done so in spite of a bureaucracy that passes the microphone between only a small fraction of its members. By creating a more democratic system of power, and allowing greater participation by the laity, the Church could begin to serve the members of the Church

that lie in the peripheries of its power structure, as well as opening up its doctrines to more powerful thinkers and different perspectives.

Although current Vatican doctrine may state equality as a goal, Liberation Theology makes equality one of its utmost priorities. The central unit of Liberation Theology makes this commitment to equality obvious. Ecclesial base communities are the center of Liberation Theology, and are essential to make the Church available to small rural communities. These ecclesial base communities are typically small community parishes, often too small to have a priest, in which the Bible is studied communally and used to interpret present-day community challenges. Filipino Cardinal Orlando Quevado, who was recently appointed by Pope Francis, affirmed this in his speech last year after being appointed Cardinal. "The idea of leadership that is shared, not just a dictate from above, but collaborative, consultative -- what is called participatory church -- is being built in the basic ecclesial communities," said Quevado.<sup>11</sup> These ecclesial base communities are threatening to the power of the Vatican in that they take the Christian faith and put part of the interpretation in the hands of the people outside of the Church's hierarchy. However, decentralization is a necessary step if we are to create a church that is simultaneously both unified and relevant to people on the peripheries of society.

In addition to leveling the distribution of power, the Theology of Liberation focuses on a renewed vision of the eschaton of Catholic theology. Liberation Theology recognize that, not only is it possible for people to begin to achieve the Kingdom of God in their lives here on earth, but that



doing so is central to the Catholic identity. Because Jesus wasn't so kind as to leave behind a list of what the Kingdom of God would look like, the characteristics of this Kingdom must be derived from his actions while he was here on earth. Following Jesus' policy of dining with sinners and serving the poor, the Kingdom of God on earth must logically follow that mission by focusing on a preferential option for the poor and eliminating oppression.

Because it has this earthly final end of the divine plan in mind, a Church mission that takes advantage of Liberation Theology could better continue the mission of Jesus Christ. The focus is first on eliminating injustice and oppression and second on reflection and prayer. Jesus was made a martyr for his denunciation of the oppressors and socioeconomic conditions of his time. It is logical then, that his mission must have been historical, social, and economic. There would have been no reason to kill him if his message were purely focused on the transcendental or the individual. Societies make martyrs out of radicals, not meditators.

This political interpretation allows the Church greater freedom to follow Jesus' mission because it recognizes that Jesus had a mission on earth, and that part of his mission was to chart a new path for human history. In his *Christology in the Theology of Liberation* Julio Lois claims, "The social location is an important point of reference for an explanation of the difference of so many different images of Christ, with their various functions and distinct Christologies."<sup>12</sup> That is, every Christology is limited by the social and ecclesial locus of the theologian. The Church must recognize this limitation by integrating thoughts from multiple social and historical locations into its one comprehensive understanding. Liberation

Theology adds a unique perspective in that it comes from the social and ecclesial locus of the poor and the oppressed. After a two thousand year history in which the Vatican became one of the richest institutions in the history of the world, this is a social location that is under-represented in the Church's Theology.

Critics such as Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II have said that this new political Christology takes Jesus and reduces him to a political figure. Liberation Theology however, tries only to recognize that Jesus' mission did in fact have a political nature that cannot be ignored if we desire to continue Jesus' mission. Boff states, "Politics has to do with the Kingdom of God because it has to do with Justice, a messianic good."<sup>13</sup> The Puebla Bishops Synod of 1971 added that, "The necessity for the Church's presence in the political arena flows from the very core of Christian faith."<sup>14</sup> Due to its mission to bring about the Kingdom of God, the Catholic Church cannot remain apolitical. In fact, the parallels with Jesus' admonishment of the Pharisees and the Puebla Bishop's Synod's denouncement of the world economic system are striking. At the time of the gospels, the Pharisees were exploiting the poor by making them pay taxes to the church. While those people struggled to pay taxes, the Pharisees lived lavish lifestyles off their tax dollars. To remain apolitical in today's world economy is morally similar to staying implicit to the Pharisees exploitation of the poor.

To continue his call to action, Jesus states in Mt 25:45, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."<sup>15</sup> Two thousand years after that statement, the world features more people in poverty and more income inequality than existed when Jesus walked this

this earth. The UN Millennium Project states that more than one billion people live on less than one dollar a day.<sup>16</sup> The same report states six million people die every year from diseases that would be easily preventable if basic medical technology were better distributed.<sup>17</sup> What the Church has not done for those people living in poverty and dying of treatable diseases, it has not done for Christ.

Another problem with remaining apolitical in today's world is that by remaining apolitical, the Church makes an implicit statement of approval with the current socioeconomic landscape. Stefano Zamangi is a professor of Economics at the University of Bologna and a member of the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences. In a presentation to a conference of all religious orders last year he eloquently stated, "If individually we behave in a good way but institutionally we do bad things, we are not good Christians. If I am good but the rules of the game are perverted, I will cause evil things."<sup>18</sup> By remaining silent on the ineffectiveness of the capitalist system to reduce poverty, the church allows extreme poverty and the exploitation of workers to self-perpetuate. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis expressed a desire to move away from the Church's implicitness in an unjust world economic system, stating, "Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills."<sup>19</sup> Key in that statement was the recognition that extreme poverty is a human rights violation, and it is the mission of the Church in the world to stand against such violations of human dignity.

Understood through these concepts of Christology, Eschatology, and Ecclesiology, the Church must accept Liberation Theology as a part of its doctrine if it is to truly bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. Creating a preferential option for the poor is not a philosophical concept that only those in the Vatican must worry about. It is a very real and radical concept that faces every single member of the Church, religious and lay. Through its adoption of Liberation Theology the Church can empower these poor and oppressed people to make their own change, starting with ecclesial base communities. It can also reduce oppression from the other end, entering the hearts and minds of those who hold authority and encouraging them to abolish structures of sin. None have summed up this concept more simply and eloquently than Lois who, in his article "The Christology of the Theology of Liberation," wrote, "We must follow Jesus in order to know Jesus."<sup>20</sup> Through Liberation Theology, the Church will take a huge step towards understanding the mystery of Christ on a deeper level, made possible only by continuing his mission of the liberation of oppressed peoples. Let the Church leave no doubt about it: the tolerance of poverty and inequality are in direct contrast to Catholic ideals and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Mk 10:17-25 (NAB).

<sup>2</sup> “The Global Catholic Population,” Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project, last modified February 12, 2013, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population>.

<sup>3</sup> Country Comparison: The Distribution of Family Income – Gini Index,” United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), accessed March 8, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Church, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1973), 516.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 12: 30-31 (NAB).

<sup>6</sup> Carol Glatz, “Vatican Says Number of Catholics, Priests, Bishops Worldwide Increased Catholic News,” *Catholic News Service* (March 12, 2012), accessed March 14, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> “The Global Catholic Population,” Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project, last modified February 12, 2013, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population>.

<sup>8</sup> Leanoardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroads 1981), 115.

<sup>9</sup> “The Global Catholic Population,” Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project, last modified February 12, 2013, accessed March 11, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Boff, “Church: Charism and Power,” 121.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, “New Philippines Cardinal Calls for Church to Turn toward Poor” *National Catholic Reporter* (February 24, 2014), accessed March 8, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/global/new-philippines-cardinal-calls-church-turn-toward-poor>.

<sup>12</sup> Julio Lois, “Christology in the Theology of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 170.

<sup>13</sup> Boff, “Church: Charism and Power,” 111.

<sup>14</sup> Philip S. Land, Pedro Arrupe, Juan Alfaro, Mary Linscott, and Barbara Ward. *Justice in the World: Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1972), 516.

<sup>15</sup> Mt 25:45 (NAB).

<sup>16</sup> “Fast Facts: The Faces of Poverty,” UN Millennium Project Resources, last modified 2006, Accessed March 12, 2015. [http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/fastfacts\\_e.htm](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/fastfacts_e.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, “Vatican Office Calls Religious Sisters, Priests to Live Poorly, Reject Capitalism,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 10, 2014, Accessed March 11, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-office-calls-religious-sisters-priests-live-poorly-reject-capitalism>.

<sup>19</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), English trans. (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), sec. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Lois, “Christology in the Theology of Liberation,” 178.