

Liberation Theology and the Gospel of Peace

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When there is justice, there is peace. If there is no justice, there is no peace. Peace is the product of the order desired by God, but which human beings have to succeed in attaining as a great good within society.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

On the evening of March 24, 1980, in the tiny Central American country of El Salvador, a hired gunman stole into the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital during the celebration of the Eucharist and fired a fatal bullet into the heart of the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. In the eyes of many, Romero was a prophet whose ringing denunciations of injustice and vigorous defense of the poor placed him at odds with the right-wing ruling elites and led him to a martyr's death. Others, however, saw him as a well-intentioned but misguided dupe who fell under the spell of leftists fighting to overthrow the Salvadoran government.

Woven through these various interpretations of Romero's legacy one finds frequent references to a movement called "liberation theology". It, too, has garnered a wide range of assessments. Its enemies claim that it endorses violent revolution under the guise of redressing social injustices. As such, they conclude, it represents a (communist) wolf in (religious) sheep's clothing. By contrast, advocates insist that it embodies the values of Jesus; its ethical and apocalyptic sense of urgency reflects, they argue, the earliest spirit of Christianity.

A full analysis of these conflicting interpretations exceeds the limits of this essay. However, noting them provides a fruitful context for addressing two questions relevant to the dialogue initiated by *Methodists United for Peace with Justice*. What is liberation theology? What might it offer to Christians interested in pursuing peace with justice? I address these questions with the witness of Archbishop Romero in view.

Vatican II and Medellín

The phrase "liberation theology" came into vogue in the 1970s to describe a religiously-based social movement and a corresponding theological style that emerged in the Catholic Church in Latin America. However, it should be noted that liberation theology is neither a strictly Roman Catholic nor an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. Indeed, liberation *theologies* (emphasis on the plural) have emerged in various parts of the world and within a number of Christian denominations. They manifest striking similarities with one another and with various other contemporary theological approaches, including political, contextual, and feminist theologies.

In the middle of the 20th century there occurred two seminal ecclesial synods that set the stage for the development of liberation theology in Catholic circles: Vatican II and Medellín.

The Second Vatican Council met in four sessions between 1962 and 1965. It concluded its deliberations with a remarkable document, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). Among other things, that document called the whole church to the tasks "of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel." In response to that call, national and international conferences of bishops met to examine "the signs of the times" embedded in their own histories in order to decide how best to implement the Council's decrees.

Accordingly, the bishops of Latin America gathered in Medellín, Colombia, for two weeks in 1968. Among the documents produced at this ground-breaking meeting, one of the most important focuses on peace. Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops at Medellín proclaim:

Peace is, above all, a work of justice. It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which persons can fulfill themselves as human beings, where their dignity is respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed; an order where persons are not objects but agents of their own history.

The imperatives to read the signs of the time and to pursue peace as a work of justice are the founding insights of liberation theology. But just what is liberation theology?

Two Key Terms: Theology and Liberation

In the first place, the phrase "liberation theology" designates a particular approach to the reflective discipline of *theology*. It involves thinking about the contents of Christian faith in the light of Christian revelation. It springs from the fertile soil of scripture, especially the narratives of the liberating God recorded in Exodus, the passionate prophetic tradition of Israel, and above all the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his proclamation of the reign of God. However, the phrase "liberation theology" is also used to designate a broad *social movement* characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities (grass-roots churches) and the preferential option for the poor. This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities.

It is worth noting that many religious, political and cultural leaders associated with the liberation theology movement (people like Archbishop Romero) are not professional academic theologians. But while liberation theology values the importance of critical scholarship, it does not limit the category of "theologian" to university professors and scholar-monks. All Christians who reflect on and respond to the call to live a liberating, evangelical faith are in some sense "theologians".

As a way of doing theology, the qualifier "liberation" distinguishes this method from other theological approaches in two essential ways. First, as an intellectual discipline, liberation theology takes the active faith of Christians as its point of departure. Ignacio Ellacuría makes this

point in a complex passage that offers an excellent working definition of liberation theology.

The theology of liberation understands itself as a *reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling God's Reign*. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world.... It is, thus, a theology that begins with historical acts and seeks to lead to historical acts, and therefore it is not satisfied with being a purely interpretive reflection; it is nourished by faithful belief in the presence of God within history, an operative presence that, although it must be grasped in grateful faith, remains a historical action.

The key point is that liberation theology not only *reflects* on the meaning of Christian faith but facilitates *action* in response to the demands of faith. As such it participates in the mystery to which the Christian faith points: God's liberating actions on behalf of suffering human beings. From this theological perspective, Christian faith *is* a faith that *does* justice. Thus, liberation theologians often describe their approach as "reflection on praxis", that is, theological reflection on the specific practices or actions that spring from and embody the living faith.

Second, besides qualifying liberation theology's method, the term "liberation" draws specific attention to the central Christian motif of *salvation*. It reminds us that God desires to deliver his people from slavery and suffering (see Ex 3.7). It underscores Jesus' self-understanding as one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives (Lk 4.18). Its manner of preaching insists that salvation cannot be regarded simply as one theme among others in the bible. Rather, salvation is the central unifying symbol used by the biblical authors to speak about who God is and what God is doing in history on behalf of his people.

Liberation theology is critical of all domesticated forms of Christianity that render the vivid biblical understandings of salvation abstract or remove them from the heart of Christian life. In its criticism of other theological interpretations of faith, *a theology of liberation* thus simultaneously promotes *the liberation of theology*, a point captured by the titles of two of its classic texts. Finally, because Christian faith encounters God first and foremost in history and as the God of history, liberation theology emphasizes that God's salvation is a salvation *in and of* history, not a rescue *from* history.

Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor

Liberation theology is reflection *on* the meaning of faith *from* the practice of faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the God whose salvation is revealed *in* history as nothing less than the concrete and ultimate salvation *of* history. For this reason, liberation theology emerged in the context of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the *irruption of the poor*, the awakening of vast numbers of people to the awareness that their condition of poverty and misery is not the product of "nature", much less God's will.

The scandal of oppressive poverty is the product of human choices and human sinfulness. Liberation theology recovers the evangelical insight that God wills the liberation of all people from situations that dehumanize them. God desires to bring about a new heaven and a new earth founded on peace, social harmony, and justice in place of the violence, selfishness and oppression that currently reign in our world.

Liberation theology makes a *preferential option for the poor* in line with the scandalous evangelical preference for the poor found in the New Testament: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." (Lk 6.20,24).

This option affects both the interpretation and practice of Christian faith. Its interpretive logic facilitates proclamation of the true Gospel. If we wish to hear the Gospel as Jesus wanted it to be heard, we must listen from the place where he proclaimed it and in solidarity with those to whom he gave it first as their "good news". Its practical impulse shapes Christian ethics around a fundamental solidarity with the hungry and the despised. It actively seeks to be neighbor to all those who have fallen into the hands of robbers (Lk 10.30-37), that is, the more than two billion people in our world who live close to death. In the words of Jon Sobrino, liberation theology seeks to recover the Christian community's identity as a *Samaritan church*: a church "de-centered by mercy", a church that begins "to *think itself* from without, from *along the road*, where the wounded neighbor lies."

Pursuing Peace with Justice

In February of 1980, just weeks before he fell to an assassin's bullet, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote an open letter to the president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. He wrote as a pastor to a fellow Christian committed to defending human rights. In it, he said:

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisers to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence." If this information from the newspapers is correct, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights.

Archbishop Romero's letter to President Carter did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor does it presume that peace is the mere absence of war. Rather, 'the peace in which we believe is the fruit of justice.' Peacemaking constitutively involves the conversion of structures of injustice and repression. It cooperates with God's grace to transform situations marred by a fundamental and blatant disregard for basic human rights. In these presuppositions Romero aligns himself with the interpretation of the faith put forth by liberation theologians and Catholic social teaching. The Christian faith acts to promote justice and to overcome injustice. It involves itself in the world so as not to abandon the world to the enemies of God. It seeks peace with justice, recognizing that

"peace is not found, it is built," and insisting that the "Christian is the artisan of peace."

Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter failed to heed the archbishop's plea, and his successors positively ignored it. The United States poured over 5 billion dollars of military aid into El Salvador during the decade following Romero's assassination, a decade in which over 75,000 Salvadorans were killed. Most of the victims were killed by the Salvadoran Army trained and funded by the U.S. Most of the victims were civilians, and many of these were tortured, mutilated, and massacred.

Archbishop Romero's Approach to Peace

During the three years he served as Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero increasingly identified peacemaking as a constitutive aspect of his ministry. Precisely as a peacemaker, he vigorously defended those most exposed to repressive violence and abasement: the poor of the land, urban workers, the widows and orphans left behind by assassinations and repression. Concretely, he supported labor unions and farmers cooperatives. He promoted the right of the people to organize to address their basic human needs. He challenged those who denied this right. Finally, in his homilies and pastoral letters, he articulated the crucial link between the commitment to peacemaking and the preferential option for the poor. Romero carefully analyzed the violence besetting El Salvador, distinguishing among six different categories of violence.

(1) The primary form of violence is *institutionalized violence*. It appears in the business-as-usual of unjust economic and political systems where "the majority of men, women, and children... find themselves deprived of the necessities of life." The violence of poverty and political marginalization defines structural injustice and represents the true enemy and antonym of peace.

(2) *The repressive violence of the state* flows from institutionalized violence and is indeed its identical twin. Institutional violence deploys repressive state violence to smother the aspirations of the majority and to crush "any signs of protest against the injustices."

(3) As an almost inevitable consequence of repressive violence, *sedition or terrorist violence* erupts. This form seeks to organize itself into guerilla warfare in the mistaken belief that no other effective road to social change exists.

(4) Similarly, *spontaneous violence*, although often understandable, "is marked by desperation and improvisation, and so cannot be an effective way of securing rights or bringing just solutions to conflicts."

(5) *Violence in legitimate self-defense* differs from the first four in that it can be viewed as justifiable under certain conditions. This affirmation indicates that Romero is not a strict pacifist. Like the majority of Latin American liberation theologians, he utilizes the "just war" tradition as it is articulated in the social teachings of the Catholic Church to evaluate the repressive atmosphere fanning the flames of revolution in countries like El Salvador. At the same time, he draws on a strict interpretation of that tradition to criticize and "Christianize" the revolution.

(6) Romero's final category in his analysis of violence calls attention to *the power of*

nonviolence, what has sometimes been called "the violence of love."

In his second pastoral letter, "The Church, The Body of Christ in History", Romero speaks eloquently of this "nonviolent violence".

When there really is present a situation of permanent, structured injustice, then the situation itself is violent... [T]he church is aware that anything said in that situation, even something undoubtedly prompted by love, will sound violent. But the church cannot refrain from speaking out. It can in no way reject what Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm" (Mt 11.12). For there is the violence of the struggle against one's own selfishness, against the inertia of one's own existence -- more inclined, as it is, to dominate than to serve. And there is the violence with which one denounces what is wrong in a violent situation.

The witness of Archbishop Romero demonstrates that liberation theology does not seek to justify revolutionary violence. However, it does call attention to institutional violence and repressive state violence and, in line with the Gospel mandate, it actively seeks to overcome these originating forms of social violence. In effect, liberation theology attempts to redirect the Christian imagination and conscience so that believers can more readily recognize and admit the truth about violence in our world. In this, it maintains the traditional rigor and limits of the just war tradition in order to recover its usefulness in moral discernment. In contrast to the way powerful nations use the rhetoric of just war to advance their own ideological interests, liberation theology recovers the radicalness of the just war doctrine by rooting it in the evangelical preference for the poor, understanding by "the poor" those who literally have no other means to defend life.

Conclusion

Archbishop Romero's martyrdom at the hands of the violent provides us with his most radical and eloquent testimony to the Christian vision of peace. The peace that defends life unto death, does so from faith in the resurrection of the dead. It points to the hope that in God's reign, every tear will be wiped away (Rv 21.4) and all will enjoy abundant life (Jn 10.10). One of his most famous declarations, uttered spontaneously in an interview with a journalist just weeks before his actual martyrdom, announces this radical hope.

I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility. As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love, for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats are carried out, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be a reality. Let my death, if it is accepted by God, be for

my people's liberation and as a witness of hope in the future. You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never die.

Christian peacemaking finds its deepest roots here: the love of God that empowers trust in the promise of life. Likewise, this trust undergirds the most radical expression of authentic Christian peacemaking: a willingness to die for peace rather than an eagerness to kill for it. History teaches that to actively confront injustice usually provokes conflict. History's peacemakers teach that to do so nonviolently requires a love that is both willing and able to suffer the cost of the conflict. In our violent world, Romero's life gave dramatic witness to precisely this vital hope, this paradoxical faith, this suffering love. In so doing, he embodied the concrete aspirations and deepest truth of liberation theology.