

**THE SOTERIOLOGY OF GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ:  
COMMUNAL DIMENSIONS OF SALVATION**

by

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## ABSTRACT

### The Soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez Communal Dimensions of Salvation

by Joyce Mary Nora Murray

Studies of Gustavo Gutiérrez's reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation usually focus on his conceptualization of salvation as an integrated process of liberation. Critics have commonly claimed that he simply equates salvation and liberation. It is my thesis that Gutiérrez interprets salvation ultimately as communion with God and one another in history and beyond it. In his vision, liberative communities among the poor and marginalized are primary subjects of salvation; they are loci of salvation, places of transformative action where communion is experienced historically in anticipation of full eschatological communion.

Chapter one situates the soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez within contemporary soteriology and explores its distinctiveness within Latin American liberation soteriology.

Chapter two demonstrates that historical community serves as the basis of reflection for Gutiérrez's soteriology. From his perspective in the late 1960s and 1970s, I review the perimeters of the reality of massive socially structured evil, popular liberation movements, and base Christian communities. I then identify four central soteriological principles which emerge from Gutiérrez's experience.

Chapter three moves into the centre of the debate concerning Gutiérrez's notion of salvation. I argue that Gutiérrez finally conceives of salvation as communion, and sin as breach of communion. I explore his vision of base ecclesial communities as covenantal communities which anticipate final communion with God and one another in their search for integral liberation.

Chapter four investigates the theological foundations of Gutiérrez's soteriological vision. As he explores foundational theological categories from within the soteriological framework of liberation for communion, Gutiérrez gains a renewed understanding of the nature of God as gratuitous love, the identity and mission of Christ as liberator and reconciler, spirituality as a communal journey of contemplation in liberative praxis, and the church of the poor as sacrament of communion.

The concluding chapter reflects on implications of Gutiérrez's communal vision of salvation beyond Latin America. I illustrate its wider relevance by examining the import of Gutiérrez's central soteriological principles for Canadian Christian churches and Roman Catholic religious orders, two communities committed to salvation in the Canadian context.

Woven throughout the dissertation is the soteriological perspective of Latin American feminist theologians.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My advisor, Lee Cormie, has made a major contribution to this dissertation. For his unerring critical sense, his profound understanding of Latin American liberation theology, his commitment to the marginalized, and the hope which sustains him and nourishes many others in the face of massive social injustice, I am most grateful. I appreciate, also, the guidance and encouragement of Ellen Leonard, my committee chairperson during the preparatory academic years. Finally, I am grateful to the members of my religious congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peterborough, who have supported me financially and have always encouraged me to seek "the more" in the field of education.

## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....   | 1  |
| PART ONE<br>PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGY |    |
| CHAPTER ONE: GUTIERREZ'S SOTERIOLOGY SITUATED .....            | 15 |
| I. Latin American Liberation Soteriology .....                 | 18 |
| II. The Soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez .....                 | 24 |
| A. Salvation in History .....                                  | 25 |
| B. Community as the Primary Subject<br>of Salvation .....      | 29 |
| C. The Political Dimension of Salvation .....                  | 34 |
| Conclusion .....   | 39 |
| PART TWO<br>FROM BROKEN TO HEALING COMMUNITY                   |    |
| CHAPTER TWO: LIBERATION IN COMMUNITY .....                     | 40 |
| I. Historical Roots .....                                      | 41 |
| A. The Reality .....   | 43 |
| B. Popular Movements .....                                     | 52 |
| C. Base Ecclesial Communities .....                            | 56 |
| II. Central Soteriological Principles .....                    | 59 |
| A. A Communal Praxis of Liberation .....                       | 60 |
| B. The Poor as Agents of Transformation .....                  | 64 |
| C. Solidarity as Liberating Social Praxis .....                | 68 |
| D. Gratuitous Love .....                                       | 73 |
| Conclusion .....   | 75 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER THREE: LIBERATION FOR COMMUNITY .....                        | 82  |
| I. Salvation as Communion .....                                      | 83  |
| II. Sin as Breach of Communion .....                                 | 89  |
| III. Covenantal Community Already and Not Yet .....                  | 97  |
| A. A Just Society .....  | 101 |
| B. Forgers of a New Humanity .....                                   | 105 |
| C. A Community Liberated from Sin and<br>Admitted to Communion ..... | 110 |
| Conclusion .....   | 114 |

PART THREE  
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction .....  | 121 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: SOTERIOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE<br>MIDST OF A PEOPLE .....       | 124 |
| I. God: Mystery Revealed in Salvation History .....                               | 124 |
| A. A God of Gratuitous Love in Solidarity<br>with the Poor .....                  | 129 |
| B. Christ the Liberator: Irruption into<br>History of God's Gratuitous Love ..... | 135 |
| II. A Fundamentally Communal Spirituality .....                                   | 142 |
| A. A Collective Walking in the Spirit .....                                       | 144 |
| B. Contemplation: A Communal Experience<br>of God's Gratuitous Love .....         | 150 |
| C. Liberating Action: Creating Communion<br>in History .....                      | 153 |
| III. Church of the Poor: Sacrament of Communion .....                             | 156 |
| A. Church of the Poor .....   | 157 |
| B. Sacrament of Communion .....   | 161 |
| Conclusion .....  | 164 |

PART FOUR  
IMPLICATIONS BEYOND LATIN AMERICA

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER FIVE: GUTIERREZ'S SOTERIOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES REVISITED ..... | 172 |
| I. Review and Summary .....   | 172 |
| II. Implications Beyond Latin America .....                         | 177 |
| A. The Canadian Context .....                                       | 178 |
| B. Implications for Canadian Christian Churches .....               | 182 |
| C. Implications for Roman Catholic Religious Orders .....           | 189 |
| Conclusion .....  | 197 |
| CONCLUSION .....  | 201 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....  | 205 |

## INTRODUCTION

I first met Gustavo Gutiérrez in July 1985 when I took a course from him at Boston College. Though I do so more profoundly after intensive study, even at that time I could echo Christian Duquoc's comment at Gutiérrez's doctoral defence in Lyon on May 29, 1985: "In all honesty I may say that rarely have I come upon works that, like yours, raise so many personal questions."<sup>1</sup> A convergence of soteriological concerns becomes apparent as I articulate some of these questions.

I live in a late twentieth century world in social crisis. Inhuman misery marks the life of vast numbers as signs of social disintegration abound in the increasing political, economic and social exclusion of the wide majority both within nations and globally. In the end, such exclusion means death in various forms. In Canada, the gap between rich and poor widens and governments at all levels increasingly target social spending in the universal drive to reduce the deficit. Behind the faceless statistics live--and die--individual human beings. I think of María whom I met during a visit to Itacoatiara in the Amazonian jungle. A young mother of five children, one of whom is physically challenged,

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<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990), 19. This is a slightly revised edition of *La verdad los hará libres: confrontaciones* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1986).



she had moved into the city with her husband so that he could find work to support his family. In their native village further up the Amazon, he could fish for food but had no paying job; now, however, they had neither food nor work, and their dignity and self-worth were being eroded daily as their living conditions deteriorated and family worries increased. I am reminded also of Pauline, a sole-support mother in Peterborough, who threw a few belongings into two garbage bags one night and fled with her two children from an abusive husband. While the local house for battered women sheltered her temporarily, it took her several months of searching to find a decent, affordable apartment partly because landlords refused to rent to a mother on social assistance. Like so many other sole-support mothers who exist below the poverty line, she faces rebuilding her life and that of her children in poverty and on the margins of society. The fate of these two women is not, however, simply individual for they represent whole groupings of alienated human beings.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Latin American liberation theologians sought to describe and analyze their own reality, a reality paralleled in many ways in other countries of the majority world. The Latin American bishops at Medellín termed it "institutionalized violence" (Document "Peace," #16) which Gustavo Gutiérrez catalogued as

the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant

mortality, those who simply 'disappear' or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of peoples who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind, and the corpse-filled common graves of Ayacucho.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, liberation theologians around the world are broadening their social analysis and decrying a worsened social situation within a "new world order." The internationalization of capital and triumph of neoconservative/neoliberal orthodoxy which followed the fall of the Berlin wall and collapse of socialism as lived out in Eastern bloc countries have meant growing poverty and alienation, especially in majority world countries but also within minority world countries. Pablo Richard speaks, in fact, of a "new world disorder" which brings in its wake a real threat of death for inhabitants of countries no longer even exploited but simply ignored.<sup>3</sup> In theological terms, we are faced with a situation of social sin and, given the massive control of centres of power, hope is being extinguished among the poor and marginalized as well as among those in solidarity with them. Lee Cormie makes the stark point that "the global triumph of neoconservative/neoliberal orthodoxy has involved the marginalization of every expression

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<sup>2</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987, originally published in 1985), 102.

<sup>3</sup>Pablo Richard, "La teología de la liberación en la nueva coyuntura: Temas y desafíos nuevos para la década de los noventa," *Pasos* 34 (March/April 1991): 2-3.

of hope for global (all of society and the whole world system) renewal. It reflects the reassertion (re-imposition) of a history without salvation."<sup>4</sup>

As a human being and a Christian, how do I respond? How, specifically, do we give meaning today to the redemptive gospel imperative to love the poor and marginalized in a special way? As a Sister of St. Joseph, how do I engage effectively in our traditional mission of seeking unity and reconciliation in a divided society? Our first Sisters formed small communities and lived among those in need; how do we revitalize and refashion that original intuition to meet needs in the changing conditions of today? In the struggle to transform my local reality, I am involved in one of various communities of solidarity with the needy among us; how do we articulate theologically the salvation witnessed to in such community? How do we speak of God, a God of love and compassion, among unchurched sole-support families who live in poverty? As a social justice educator, I am confronted by a charity approach resistant to the demands of justice and structural change; how do we encourage the challenging of systems of oppression at the local level and beyond? How do we nurture real and lasting change in the lives of the marginalized in our midst? What, concretely, is our hope and

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<sup>4</sup>Lee Cormie, "Unfinished Revolutions in Latin American Liberation Theology," Paper presented at the Canadian Theological Society Annual Meeting, Learned Societies Conference, Calgary, Alberta, June 6, 1994, 42.

how do we witness to it? Behind such questions lie a deepening conviction concerning the importance of community and a growing awareness of the call to communities to announce and witness to salvation. Centred as it is on the communal dimensions of salvation, the soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez continues to provide a challenging matrix for development of my own reflection. It also sparks hope in me as I grasp more fully its practical implications for creative response in our present reality.

Gutiérrez's own soteriological reflection has of course also developed. Papers from a symposium on "Liberation and Development" organised by the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas in Lima in 1992, as well as other recent writings by Latin American theologians, make it clear that the agenda and methodology of Latin American liberation theology are undergoing profound renewal in light of significant shifts in the reality of multi-faceted oppression both at home and abroad. This deepening reflection and the rich legacy of so many martyrs are resulting in a revitalization which does not, however, invalidate original basic intuitions. As a case in point, in his evolving work Gustavo Gutiérrez continues to insist on the salvific significance of poor communities in history. In the process, he offers a soteriological vision whose thrust remains consistent even as emphases shift in response to the changing context.

### **A Soteriology Of Communion**

Studies of Gutiérrez's reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation usually focus on his conceptualization of salvation as an integrated process of liberation. Furthermore, critics have commonly claimed that he simply equates salvation and liberation. In fact, Gutiérrez does not reduce salvation to historical liberation. At the heart of the debate concerning Gutiérrez's interpretation of salvation is his adoption of the classical distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *for* in the larger context of God's love. James Nickoloff grasped the essential point when he observed that, rather than seeking freedom as an end in itself, every authentic process of liberation seeks communion.<sup>5</sup> However, since he, too, examined Gutiérrez's soteriology within the framework of a three-fold process of liberation, he did not pursue this line of thinking. The same may be said of Miguel Manzanera in his earlier comprehensive dissertation on salvation and liberation in the works of Gutiérrez.<sup>6</sup>

It is my thesis that Gustavo Gutiérrez interprets salvation ultimately as communion with God and one another in history and beyond it. In his vision, liberative communities among the poor and marginalized are *loci* of salvation, places

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<sup>5</sup>James B. Nickoloff, *The Church and Human Liberation* (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1989), 273.

<sup>6</sup>Miguel Manzanera, *Teología, Salvación y Liberación en la obra de Gustavo Gutiérrez: Exposición analítica, situación teórico-práctica y valoración crítica* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 1978).

of transformative action where communion is experienced historically in anticipation of full communion in the eschaton. Committed to historical transformation of their particular situations of oppression, these communities hear the revelation concerning a saving God who desires communion of all in God, and they begin to experience integral liberation; they are addressees and recipients of salvation. At the same time, through their communal praxis, solidarity, and gratuitous love, they help make salvation a reality in history as they engage in liberation for communion; they are agents of and witnesses to salvation. Liberative communities among the believing poor are sacraments of salvation in that they effect what they signify, that is, communion with God and one another.

Designed to fill a lacuna in scholarly research, the following study will explore the communal dimensions of Gutiérrez's soteriology within the interpretive framework of liberation in and for community. Chapter one seeks to clarify Gutiérrez's distinctive position in the area of contemporary soteriology. While sharing a common soteriological vision of salvation as integrally tied to the liberation of peoples, different Latin American liberation theologians have adopted different approaches. As we shall see, for instance, where Juan Luis Segundo focused on humanization and Ignacio Ellacuría emphasized the historical nature of salvation, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff have addressed epistemological

concerns in the elaboration of salvation in terms of liberation. It is Gustavo Gutiérrez, however, who has systematically erected the most comprehensive soteriological framework through an approach which is at once historical, communal, and political. His contribution has helped to revolutionize contemporary soteriology. Chapter two demonstrates that community--community concretized originally in the particular historical moment of Latin America in the late 1960s through to the early 1980s--serves as the basis of reflection for Gutiérrez's soteriology. From his perspective, I review the perimeters of the reality of massive socially structured evil, popular liberation movements, and base ecclesial communities. I then identify four central soteriological principles which emerge from Gutiérrez's experience: a communal praxis of liberation, the poor as agents of transformation, solidarity as liberative praxis, and gratuitous love. Chapter three moves into the centre of the debate concerning Gutiérrez's notion of salvation. I argue that Gutiérrez conceives of salvation, finally, as communion, and sin as breach of communion. I explore his vision of base ecclesial communities as covenantal communities which anticipate final communion with God and one another in their search for integral liberation. Chapter four investigates the theological foundations of Gutiérrez's soteriological vision fashioned in communal liberative praxis. As he explores foundational theological categories from within the

soteriological framework of liberation for communion, Gutiérrez offers a renewed understanding of the nature of God as gratuitous love, the identity and mission of Christ as liberator and reconciler, spirituality as a communal journey of contemplation in liberative praxis, and the church of the poor as sacrament of communion. The concluding chapter reflects on implications of Gutiérrez's communal vision of salvation beyond Latin America. After a brief review and summary of the substance of my study, I illustrate the wider relevance of Gutiérrez's soteriology by examining its import for two communities committed to salvation in the Canadian context, that is, Canadian Christian churches and Roman Catholic religious orders.

### **Latin American Feminist Soteriological Insights**

To the list of soteriological concerns already noted, I wish to add a feminist one which has methodological implications for this dissertation. From a feminist liberationist stance, I affirm the importance of feminist experience and reflection for all the central topics of Christian faith, including soteriology. As a woman theologian for whom a feminist hermeneutic has become part of theological methodology, how then do I ensure that essential aspects of women's experiences and concerns inform my soteriology? Since this dissertation focuses on Latin America, I have chosen to consult representative Latin American feminist theologians



concerning their soteriological approach and its theological foundations. I have explored how their insights concerning a soteriology of communion converge with those of Gutiérrez and my own, and I have determined what criticisms and alternative proposals they offer. In general, while they affirm liberation theology as the framework for their soteriological reflection,<sup>7</sup> and some acknowledge Gutiérrez's particular awareness of the oppression/liberation of Latin American women,<sup>8</sup> they also criticize liberation theologians for their androcentric viewpoint as well as the absence of feminist analysis and perspectives in their reflection. As María Pilar Aquino has pointed out, merely including women in the general category of the poor hardly plumbs the depths of the triple oppression suffered by the majority of Latin American women. I share her view, also, that the failure to consider in any sustained way the concrete realities of women reinforces a

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<sup>7</sup>María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry For Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993, originally published in 1992), 191; Elsa Tamez, "Introduction: The Power of the Naked," trans. Jeltjé Aukema, in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, ed. Elsa Tamez (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987, originally published in 1986), 5; María Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," trans. Francis McDonagh, in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989), 480.

<sup>8</sup>Ana María Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 114; see also Elsa Tamez's interview of Gutiérrez in *Against Machismo*, trans. and ed. John Eagleson (Oak Park, Illinois: Meyer-Stone, 1987, originally published in 1986), 39-48.

certain tendency toward an excessively abstract discourse.<sup>9</sup> I have found the critique of Latin American feminist theologians to be true of Gutiérrez's soteriology of communion; he offers neither a specific analysis of the exclusion of women by dominant patriarchal and *machista* systems nor a sustained theological reflection on the unique nature of women's liberation in community. His exploration of the communal dimensions of salvation therefore lacks a vital and enriching dimension.

I agree with Aquino that broadening the field to include women's vision and speech is a way of criticizing and correcting the androcentric position of liberation theology.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Gutiérrez himself has affirmed that, to be faithful to its methodology, the theology of liberation must appropriate the oppression of women and incorporate a feminist theological perspective.<sup>11</sup> In this spirit, I will highlight in critical conclusions to each of the main sections of my detailed study of Gutiérrez's soteriology the soteriological concerns of a number of prominent Latin American feminist theologians. Their approach confirms my own, since they theologize within the framework of liberation theology and consider the femininist perspective an accent

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<sup>9</sup>Aquino, *Cry for Life*, 193.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>11</sup>Tamez, *Against Machismo*, 46.

rather than a polarization.<sup>12</sup>

The starting point of these Latin American feminist theologians is the oppression and liberation of poor women in particular; they choose as their principal hermeneutical perspective an option for poor women.<sup>13</sup> It is in this context that they reflect on Scripture and fundamental theological themes. They affirm a unifying and inclusive approach to life which shapes their methodological presuppositions, anthropological assumptions,<sup>14</sup> and the identifying characteristics of their theological activity.<sup>15</sup> For they ultimately seek the liberation of all in an egalitarian community which promotes the full humanity of

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<sup>12</sup>Consuelo del Prado, "I Sense God in Another Way," trans. Jeltke Aukema, in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 140. While this approach is that of most of the Latin American feminist theologians whom I consulted, some in the Latin American feminist theological milieu call, rather, for the reformulation of the whole discourse so as to truly include women. See María José F. Rosado Nunes, "Women's Voices in Latin-American Theology," trans. Paul Burns, in *Feminist Theology In Different Contexts*, vol. 1996/1 of *Concilium*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (London: SCM Press/Maryknoll, New York: Orbis), 6-13.

<sup>13</sup>Aquino, *Cry for Life*, 113.

<sup>14</sup>In the first chapter of their book *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989, originally published in 1987), Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer call for a new anthropological perspective, that is, an anthropology which is human-centred, unifying, realist, and pluri-dimensional.

<sup>15</sup>Among other characteristics commonly found in women's theological activity, the Final Statement of the Latin American Conference on Theology from the Perspective of Women held in Buenos Aires in 1985 notes that it is unifying as well as communitarian and relational; see *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), 182.

every person. Their soteriological vision therefore converges with that of Gutiérrez. What they add to his vision, however, is historical specificity. Latin American feminist theologians contribute a unique particularity to the historical category of "the poor" as they reflect from within communities where poor women struggle daily together for liberation from many forms of oppression, and are learning to express in their own terms their experience of salvation. Furthermore, their reflection strengthens the theological foundations of a soteriology of communion. It is all the more important therefore to include their developing contribution in a reflection on the communal dimensions of salvation from a Latin American point of view.

The issue of inclusive language arises in the context of my concern with feminist voices in Latin America. Gutiérrez was criticized for his use of sexist language in his earlier publications, and he took care to make his language inclusive in later works. For the sake of historical accuracy, and to record the shift in Gutiérrez's awareness of the dimensions of women's oppression/liberation, I will not change exclusive language when quoting Gutiérrez in this dissertation.

### **A Vision Rooted In Biblical Tradition And The Peruvian People**

It is important to highlight, at the outset, the broad thrust of the challenging soteriology of Gutiérrez, and its

deep rootedness in the life-giving soil of Christian tradition. Debates over the validity of the term "preferential option for the poor," the use or misuse of a Marxist critique, and the perceived reduction of the gospel to the purely political have distracted attention from the richness and depth of Gutiérrez's overall soteriological vision rooted in biblical covenantal tradition. Foundational to it is the biblical message of God's gratuitous love and our sisterhood and brotherhood as God's redeemed children. It is the experience of God's inclusive love which drives the vision.

Seeking to describe Gutiérrez's theology which speaks of a God who will rejoin a fragmented people, Curt Cadorette culled from his own Peruvian experience the metaphor of the *vals criollo*: "It is a narrative about the struggles of ordinary persons seeking love and meaning. The *vals criollo* is the music of Lima's poor sung in their own idiom and expressive of their deepest feelings."<sup>16</sup> In the following pages I will attempt to capture some of the dominant strains of this melody as it is interpreted in the soteriology of a Peruvian native.

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<sup>16</sup>Curt Cadorette, "Peru and the Mystery of Liberation: The Nexus and Logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology," in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 50.

## PART ONE: PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGY

### CHAPTER ONE

#### GUTIERREZ'S SOTERIOLOGY SITUATED

A decided soteriological focus has shaped the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez from its very beginnings. In a talk to Latin American theologians meeting at Petrópolis in 1964--a talk which set the early agenda of what was to become liberation theology--he raised the central question of how to establish a saving dialogue with people in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Later, in *A Theology of Liberation* which he subtitled *History, Politics, and Salvation*, he noted one of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology: "the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation;" and he called for renewed foundational investigation of the notion of salvation.<sup>2</sup> There and throughout his work, his own investigation has been guided by the two prime intuitions of liberation theology, that is, its perspective of the poor and

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<sup>1</sup>Roberto Oliveros, "Liberación y teología: Génesis y crecimiento de una reflexión (1966-1976)," trans. Alfred T. Hennelly, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), 83. This is a revised version of the original *Teología de la liberación, Perspectivas* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1971).

its theological method firmly linking practice and theory in the interests of liberation. The result is a soteriology "from the underside of history" which challenges other influential approaches to soteriology.

Is it possible to identify a common core understanding of the meaning of Christian salvation among contemporary theologians? After all, as Carl Braaten has pointed out, in two thousand years, the church has never produced a dogma of salvation and, over these years, theologians have focused on different dimensions of salvation in a multiplicity of symbols related to particular times and places and various human needs and concerns.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, through the many salvific experiences in the Christian tradition and through later theological interpretations of these experiences, one does perceive a widely shared core. David Tracy is therefore justified in postulating basic constants of Christian understandings of salvation, constants which anchor in the Christian tradition a given soteriology like that of Gustavo Gutiérrez. For example, Tracy's description of Christian salvation as an experience-acceptance of "releasement" from bondage and "releasement" to a new, authentically free, way of life as a Christian can be broadly applied to liberation soteriology. Gutiérrez also understands the salvific

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<sup>3</sup>Carl E. Braaten, "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 35 (1981): 117-131. This article traces major outlines of contemporary debates over soteriology from an evangelical point of view.

experience as a gift and task disclosed by Jesus Christ, the decisive manifestation of the God who is encompassing love and, as love, grounds all reality.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, four distinctive characteristics of contemporary notions of salvation noted by Roger Haight help to describe Gutiérrez's soteriology as well. He, too, highlights the actuality of salvation, its integral nature, its comprehensiveness, and its eschatological emphasis.<sup>5</sup>

A survey of various soteriological positions in contemporary Christian thought does readily uncover, however, marked differences and oppositions among theologians representative of dominant movements.<sup>6</sup> Divergent conceptions of faith and theology, of history and politics, result in differing soteriological approaches. Gustavo Gutiérrez has taken his distance from many of the dominant soteriologies and has developed, with other Latin American liberation theologians, an approach which is distinctive of liberation soteriology. In helping to chart the paths along which

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<sup>4</sup>David Tracy, "The Christian Understanding of Salvation-Liberation," *Face to Face* 14 (Spring 1988): 38-39.

<sup>5</sup>Roger Haight, "Jesus and Salvation: An Essay in Interpretation," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 244-246. For further discussion of common contemporary notions of salvation, see also Jean-Pierre Jossua, "L'enjeu de la recherche théologique actuelle sur le salut," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 5 (1970): 24-25.

<sup>6</sup>Differences emerge clearly, for example, in Donald Bloesch's survey article "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 35 (1981): 132-144. And he did not include in his review the soteriological position of ecological theologians.



liberation theologians have subsequently traveled in the 1960s and since, he was compelled to turn away from some of the major assumptions and tendencies defining liberal, neo-orthodox, and evangelical theologies. In the course of his soteriological reflection, he systematically laid the groundwork for extending the notion of salvation beyond conventional understandings.

### **I. Latin American Liberation Soteriology**

One can enumerate a number of important soteriological concepts common to many contemporary theologians, including Latin American theologians. My own list includes salvation as an intrahistorical reality; the eschatological dimension of salvation; the unity of creation and redemption in one salvific design; salvation conceived in terms of human fulfillment and wholeness; the universality of salvation; the role of Jesus Christ and the church as sacraments of salvation; and the emphasis on human agency in the salvific process. In highlighting commonalities, however, one runs the risk of minimizing the revolutionary nature of the contribution by Latin American liberation theologians to contemporary soteriology. For, in recasting fundamental notions from the viewpoint of the oppressed understood collectively, and in developing a new methodology, liberation theologians have created a new paradigm within which salvation

is interpreted.<sup>7</sup>

With Juan Luis Segundo, Latin American liberation theologians contend that only questions raised by one's own set of problems can guide one's hermeneutic.<sup>8</sup> They consider their particular set of problems to be defined by the overwhelming situation of systemic poverty, oppression and death in which the vast majority of their society lives and dies prematurely, a situation which the poor and those in solidarity with them struggle to transform. The object of liberation theologians is not only to theorize in the midst of this unbearable sinful reality but to participate in the process of liberation. They are involved in what Enrique Dussel has termed "a ministry of liberation beyond the limits of ontology."<sup>9</sup>

The implications for contemporary soteriology are significant; as Gutiérrez has observed, "living and thinking the faith from within the culture of 'history's absent ones' demands a new mode of understanding the salvific message of

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<sup>7</sup>Leonardo and Clodovis Boff's short work, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987, originally published in 1986), provides a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the history, agenda, methodology and themes of Latin American liberation theology.

<sup>8</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, *The Humanist Christology of Paul*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986, originally published in 1982), 172.

<sup>9</sup>Enrique D. Dussel, "Domination-Liberation: A New Approach," trans. J. D. Mitchell, in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 53.

the gospel."<sup>10</sup> Liberation theologians pose as a central question the relationship between salvation in Christ and concrete liberations on the socio-economic and political levels, as well as in the areas of human development and faith. In the succinct phrasing of Ignacio Ellacuría, they conclude that "liberation is the historical shape of salvation."<sup>11</sup> And, given the collective nature of the experience of the Latin American poor, that shape is essentially communal. A praxis of solidarity with the poor and marginalized through which salvation in history is effected assumes primary importance. So does analysis of the causes of their oppressive reality. Abstracted from practice and the social sciences, theology is reduced to an academic exercise. In fact, Gutiérrez considers various theologies, including a theology of liberation, not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes.<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Leonardo Boff insists that, a theology of liberation requires active participation in a particular

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<sup>10</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), 194. It was originally published in 1979 as *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones).

<sup>11</sup>Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," trans. Margaret D. Wilde, in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis/Australia: Collins Dove, 1993), 551. The English edition was abridged and adapted from the original Spanish edition published in 1990.

<sup>12</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 174.

movement, base community, centre for the defence of human rights or trade union.<sup>13</sup>

Different liberation theologians have articulated from various perspectives a shared soteriological vision of salvation integrally linked to liberation. Juan Luis Segundo focused on humanization. For him, human life in society, liberated as far as possible from alienations, constitutes the absolute value of salvation.<sup>14</sup> Roger Haight summarizes his view: "Essentially Segundo sees the historical process of salvation as one of humanization, and since the human is constituted by freedom, this process is one of liberation, or the release of freedom from bondage for creativity."<sup>15</sup> According to Ignacio Ellacuría, salvation in spiritualistic, personalistic, or merely trans-historical terms implies a false and self-interested ideologization of salvation.<sup>16</sup> Convinced that it is impossible to speak of salvation except in terms of concrete situations like those suffered by the

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<sup>13</sup>Leonardo Boff, "Vatican Instruction Reflects European Mind-Set," (August 31, 1984), in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, 416. The English text is from *LADOC* 15 (January/February 1985): 8-12.

<sup>14</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, "Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Crux," trans. J. P. Donnelly, in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 108.

<sup>15</sup>Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 85.

<sup>16</sup>Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 545.

oppressed in Latin America, he emphasized the historicity of Christian salvation as he attempted to rethink the classical problem of the relationship between Christian salvation and historical liberation. Alvaro Quiroz Magaña has also reflected on the historical nature of salvation in the contemporary Latin American context. In his view, salvation is mediated in economic, political and social realities, and it results in concrete changes which are reflected in the very structures of social life where communities of brothers and sisters are formed. The church as sacrament of historical liberation is the sacrament, not of an individualistic salvation, but rather of a salvation for the individual and for the collectivity.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is a question of salvation of and by the poor, and, through them, of all.

In *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics*, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff systematically explored, from an epistemological angle, the nature of the relationship between salvation and historical liberation. They favour the concept of "regional" liberations, that is, liberations in socio-economic and political areas, over that of integral liberation. Clodovis Boff wrestled with the salvation/liberation problematic in terms of language and concluded:

In exact theological terms, liberation is defined

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<sup>17</sup>Alvaro Quiroz Magaña, "Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 201-202.

as the social or political dimension of salvation. The larger horizon is salvation. It's against that horizon that liberation is situated. Liberation doesn't embrace, cover, include salvation. Salvation includes liberation, penetrates it, and spills out beyond it on all sides.<sup>18</sup>

In his approach to the question, Leonardo Boff sought to identify the salvific dimensions of socio-economic liberations or partial liberations. While affirming the eschatological dimension of salvation, he also argued that, because salvation is situated as well within the historical process, it is possible, with the eyes of faith, to discern a salvific element present in economic, political and social reality. Liberation is the act of gradually delivering reality from the various captivities to which it is historically subject and which run counter to God's historical project. Partial liberations, then, anticipate eschatological salvation.<sup>19</sup> Therefore he articulated the relationship between salvation in Jesus Christ and historical liberations as one of "identification without total identity."<sup>20</sup>

A general Latin American liberation soteriological consensus was reflected in a statement of the bishops of Peru to the 1971 synod on justice in the world: "The salvation of

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<sup>18</sup>Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984), 102. This work was originally published in 1979 as *Da libertação: O sentido teológico das libertações sócio-históricas* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes).

<sup>19</sup>Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 56-57.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

Christ does not stop at political liberation, but the latter has its place and true meaning within the total liberation incessantly announced by sacred Scripture."<sup>21</sup>

## II. The Soteriology Of Gustavo Gutiérrez

Gutiérrez has clearly noted the soteriological nature of his theology: "The theology of liberation is a theology of salvation in the concrete, historical and political conditions of our day."<sup>22</sup> A statement in which he identified the point of departure for liberation theology in general is relevant to his own soteriology as well:

It is born of a disquieting, unsettling hope of liberation. It is born of the struggles, the failures, and the successes of the oppressed themselves. It is born of a manner of seeing oneself and one another as daughters and sons of the Father, as a deep and demanding community of brothers and sisters.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, Gutiérrez's soteriological perspective is determined by the option for the poor and their communal commitment to liberation. From his point of view, communities of the poor are the primary subjects of salvation in the midst of the present Latin American reality. His experience with them led him to reassert the salvific significance of society

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<sup>21</sup>Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, 128. The Peruvian bishops presented a paper as a contribution to the world synod of bishops held in Rome in November 1971. Hennelly took the text from *IDOC International* (December 11, 1971): 2-18.

<sup>22</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 63.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

and history. His approach is at once historical, communal, and political.

#### A. Salvation In History

The question of the relationship between salvation and the process of human liberation throughout history is vital for liberation theologians. Central to Gutiérrez's soteriological vision is the conviction that, as he expresses it, "salvation--the communion of human beings with God and among themselves--orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfillment."<sup>24</sup> He adopts the unified view of history affirmed by many leading Catholic theologians after groundbreaking discussions on the relationship of grace to nature.<sup>25</sup> Since there are not two histories, one sacred and one profane, but a single history, salvation is an intrahistorical reality open to all and embracing all dimensions of human existence: "The history of salvation is the very heart of human history...The salvific action of God underlies all human existence."<sup>26</sup> In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez explored two major biblical themes to support the argument of a unified history at the heart of

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<sup>24</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.

<sup>25</sup>See *Truth*, "Contemporary Theology and the Unity of History," 124-127 where Gutiérrez acknowledged the contribution to this debate of, among others, Yves de Montcheuil, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs van Balthasar, and Juan Alfaro.

<sup>26</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86.



which is salvation history. With the aid of a wide range of scriptural commentators, he examined the relationship between creation and salvation, and the sense in which the eschatological promises can be considered historical promises already partially fulfilled.<sup>27</sup>

From the outset, he adopted the position of scholars who point to a close link between creation and salvation in the Bible.<sup>28</sup> He argued that creation is part of the salvific process; it is the first act of salvation: "The creation of the world initiates history, the human struggle, and the salvific adventure of Yahweh."<sup>29</sup> Second Isaiah 43:1 and 42:5-6 as well as numerous psalms, like psalms 74, 89, 93, 95, 135, and 136, present Yahweh as simultaneously Creator and Redeemer. In Isa.44:24, Amos 4:12ff. and 5:8ff., Jer.33:25ff, 10:16, 27:5, and 32:17, and Mal.2:10, creation is the work of the Redeemer. The link between creation and salvation in the

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<sup>27</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 86-91. For an earlier articulation of Gutiérrez's viewpoint, see "Toward a Theology of Liberation," (July 1968), trans. Alfred T. Hennelly, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, 71-72; and "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 31 (June 1970): 225ff.

<sup>28</sup>Many evangelical theologians take issue with the concept of a universal salvation in which creation and redemption are united on the grounds that it is incompatible with Paul's notion of election and predestination. Emilio Nuñez expresses the widely-shared view: "What is beyond any doubt is that in Eph. 1:3-14 the apostle talks about election and predestination, concepts that contradict the thesis that creation is the first salvific act of God with a universal, or universalist, outreach." *Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul E. Sywulka (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 186.

<sup>29</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87.

Bible infuses the accounts of the historical and liberating experience of the Exodus: "The creative act is linked, almost identified with, the act which freed Israel from slavery in Egypt."<sup>30</sup> The Creator of the world is also the God who liberated Israel for re-creation as a covenantal community. For Christians, the relationship between creation and salvation is further strengthened by the redemptive action of Christ who initiated a new, universal, creation in order to complete the Creator's original liberating movement: "This liberation...creates a new chosen people, which this time includes all humanity. Creation and salvation therefore have, in the first place, a Christological sense: all things have been created in Christ, all things have been saved in him (cf. Col.1:15-20)."<sup>31</sup> Through active participation in the building of a just, inclusive society, human beings continue the work of creation/salvation: "To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save."<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to a common misrepresentation of his position, Gutiérrez does not, however, limit salvation to the purely historical.<sup>33</sup> Central to his eschatological

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<sup>30</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 87.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>33</sup>For example, Atilio René Dupertuis claimed that, in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez never ventured beyond the realms of history: "All categories in which eschatology is made to

perspective is the salvific importance of present historical action for a future at the end of history. In the course of a rapid review of the eschatological dimension of revelation in *A Theology of Liberation*, he noted a primary idea which had recently emerged: the Bible presents eschatology as the driving force of salvific history. He pointed out that implicit within this notion are two moments which must be held in dynamic tension. Present and future are equally important and are integrally linked in the sense that the projection towards the future is included in the present event:

The historical implementations of promises in the present are--insofar as they are ordered toward what is to come--as characteristic of eschatology as the opening to the future. More precisely, this tension toward the future lends meaning to and is expressed in the present, while simultaneously being nourished by it...The action of Yahweh in history and at the end of history are inseparable.<sup>34</sup>

He concluded, then, that "the full significance of God's action in history is understood only when it is put in its eschatological perspective; similarly, the revelation of the final meaning of history gives value to the present."<sup>35</sup> Gutiérrez does, in fact, recognize an eschatological reserve; at the same time, he upholds the validity and effectiveness in the salvation process of concrete historical action in the

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transcend history are not contemplated." *Liberation Theology: a Study in its Soteriology* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1982), 201.

<sup>34</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 95.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

present: "The complete encounter with the Lord will mark an end to history, but it will take place in history. Thus we must acknowledge historical events in all their concreteness and significance, but we are also led to a permanent detachment."<sup>36</sup>

To sum up Gutiérrez's argument, salvation is occurring in history. It has a "this worldly" context. As a result, far from devaluing this world, this historical approach to salvation gives to the world its authentic meaning and autonomy because salvation is already within it.<sup>37</sup> There is no question, however, of minimizing God's initiative in the salvific process. In his introduction to the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez responded to critics who accuse him of immanentism by recalling the repeated emphasis in his writings on the gratuitousness of God's love as the first and last word in biblical revelation, and by defining salvation as "God's unmerited action in history, which God leads beyond itself."<sup>38</sup>

#### **B. Community As The Primary Subject Of Salvation**

Many prominent modern theologians have located faith in an encounter between the individual and God, and they have portrayed salvation as primarily personal, individual, and

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<sup>36</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 97.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, xxxix.

interior.<sup>39</sup> According to the anthropocentric soteriological perspective of Rudolf Bultmann, salvation is offered for personal decision in the kerygmatic event which determines the authenticity or inauthenticity of a particular hearer's existence. In *Theology of the New Testament I*, for example, Bultmann interpreted kerygma in personalist terms as "personal address which accosts each individual throwing the person himself into question by rendering his self-understanding problematic, and demanding a decision of him."<sup>40</sup> And he insisted that salvation occurs only in the proclamation of the word.<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth also developed his soteriology in ontological terms, focusing primarily on the individual subject. In *Church Dogmatics IV*, for example, he defined salvation as the fulfillment of one's being in participation in the being of God by the gift of God.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Karl Rahner presented salvation as the acceptance in freedom of God's self-communication as the absolute answer to the question of human existence. Salvation is accomplished when God gives God's self as the inner fulfillment of unlimited

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<sup>39</sup>Rebecca S. Chopp supports this analysis; see her *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986), 29-33.

<sup>40</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament I*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1965), 307.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>42</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, vol. 4, pt. 1, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 10.

transcendentality and a human being accepts the gift in obedience and freedom.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, Gustavo Gutiérrez emphasizes the communal nature of the salvific process. He acknowledges the personal dimension but, in his view, the individual is part of the community, and the good news of salvation is addressed to communities, to peoples. For him, communities of the poor are the primary subjects of salvation at this historical juncture.

Gutiérrez developed the communal dimensions of his soteriology in reaction to the devastating socio-economic effects of the modern ethos on his society, and in light of his experience in base Christian communities. For example, a statement from *The Power of the Poor in History* expresses succinctly the critique of individualism found especially in his earlier writings:

Individualism is the most salient characteristic of modern ideology and bourgeois society...Individual interest and initiative are the point of departure and motive force for economic activity...The individual now becomes the absolute principle of economic activity, and thereby also the absolute principle of the organization of society, which is made up of individuals. Individual liberty is the prime consideration.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, Gutiérrez calls attention to the social/communal/class character of poverty, and to the

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<sup>43</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 172.

<sup>44</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 174. For further development of Gutiérrez's analysis, see also 171-185.

fundamentally communal nature of the transformative praxis of the poor. It is through communal efforts that they are fashioning a new social order and new persons. It is in community that they are engaged in liberation. Furthermore, it is base Christian communities which, through their communal faith commitment, help to ensure that this liberation is integral: "Faith in a God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history."<sup>45</sup>

Gutiérrez is convinced, therefore, that communities of the poor and those in solidarity with them are prime addressees and recipients of salvation, and its agents and witnesses. As do other liberation theologians, he interprets the Exodus experience of the Jewish people to be paradigmatic of the collective salvific experience of poor Latin American communities.<sup>46</sup> They, too, are addressed by the saving word of God in the midst of an oppressive reality, "a reality contrary to the reign of life that the Lord proclaims."<sup>47</sup> Like the captive Jews, they have a collective identity: they

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<sup>45</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 8.

<sup>46</sup>Gutiérrez reflected at length on the Exodus experience as paradigmatic for Latin American base Christian communities in chapter two of *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984, originally published in 1983).

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

are the poor, that is, members of exploited classes, oppressed ethnic groups, and despised cultures, including women from these groupings who are doubly oppressed. It is simply because they are poor, however, that God chooses to save them. They are recipients of an unmerited gift.<sup>48</sup> For the gratuitous love of God is a key dynamic in the salvific process. Gutiérrez suggests, also, that communities of the poor are recipients of salvation because they are communities: "Community life cultivates receptivity for God's reign."<sup>49</sup> Communal values and structures facilitate communion. In his view, furthermore, communities of the poor not only receive salvation; engaged as they are in liberation at all levels, they are also agents of salvation. Through solidarity and a communal praxis of liberation, they are transforming their situation of captivity and building communion in history: "The poor are actively entering into Latin American history and are taking part in an exodus that will restore to them what is rightfully their own. This struggle for their rights is located within a quest for the kingdom of God."<sup>50</sup> They are also evangelizing because, in their struggle for liberation, they are proclaiming a loving God who acts through them to save. Communities of the poor who struggle and hope together, and whose members have often given their blood in the cause of

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<sup>48</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 78-79.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.



liberation, are witnesses, then, to salvation. And they help the church as a whole to bear witness to its proclamation of the reign of God.<sup>51</sup>

### C. The Political Dimension Of Salvation

Latin American liberation theologians are not alone among contemporary theologians in drawing attention to the political dimension of salvation. Johannes Metz has described soteriology as "a political theology of redemption."<sup>52</sup> He insists that the Christian's permanent relation to the world is inherent in salvation, and understands this relation in the socio-political sense of a critical liberating force vis-à-vis the social world and its historical processes.<sup>53</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx has set his soteriological reflection squarely in the contemporary experiences of disintegration, alienation and human violations of all kinds; and he maintains that free human action to restore integrity of life in particular situations of brokenness is salvific. He insists that such action must include socio-political activity to be effective.<sup>54</sup> The contribution of Latin American liberation

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<sup>51</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 22.

<sup>52</sup>Johannes B. Metz, "Redemption and Emancipation," *Cross Currents* (Fall 1977): 328.

<sup>53</sup>Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Herder and Herder, 1969), 114.

<sup>54</sup>Schillebeeckx dealt explicitly with the meaning of salvation in Part Four of *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980).

theologians to the discussion of this particular issue is distinguished, however, by an immediacy and urgency due to their own context. Gutiérrez set his reflection in what he described as "the revolutionary ferment of the Third World countries" where the majority live in dependency, injustice, and exploitation.<sup>55</sup> These are "the concrete, historical, and political conditions" which helped to determine his particular perspective.

Gutiérrez and other Latin American theologians are convinced that political action which is creative and transformative must be taken to address the causes of the present reality. In their pursuit of a new social order and liberation on all levels, Christian communities must become politically engaged. From the beginning, Gutiérrez took issue with the prevailing understanding of politics as distinct from one's personal and professional life, and limited to "politicians." According to him, such a "socially sterile compartmentalization of life"<sup>56</sup> has prevented the adoption of an integral, cohesive strategy for dealing with the root causes of the present social order. The practice of politics as usual has also ensured the continued absence of the poor

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<sup>55</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 129. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez acknowledged the merits of Metz's political theology in highlighting the political dimension of the Christian faith but he also critiqued "the rather abstract level on which the political sphere is at times treated in Metz's writings." 129. See 126-130 for elaboration.

<sup>56</sup>Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future," *Horizons* 2 (Spring 1975): 34.

and their values from the political process, and has prevented the necessary radical questioning of the ruling order and oppressive culture.<sup>57</sup>

Gutiérrez links salvation and politics by developing a new understanding of politics defined in terms of the revival of the concept of utopia as a dynamic element in the historical becoming of humanity. The term utopia refers to an historical plan for a qualitatively different society and expresses the aspiration to establish new social relations among human beings. He uses the notion to clarify the relationship between faith and political activity: "Faith and political action will not enter into a correct and fruitful relationship except through the effort to create a new type of person in a different society, that is, except through utopia."<sup>58</sup> Defining politics in the broad sense as "the global condition, and the collective field, of human accomplishment,"<sup>59</sup> he argues that it is within the arena of politics that Christians in search of salvation must commit themselves. And, in their political engagement, they must make critical use of the contribution of the social sciences if their transformative efforts are to be socially

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<sup>57</sup>For a summary of Gutiérrez's new understanding of politics and the inadequacies of the common approach at that time, see *Power*, Chapter three.

<sup>58</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 138.

<sup>59</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 47.

effective.<sup>60</sup>

Gutiérrez bases his rationale for Christian participation in the political process, then, on a global understanding of politics as one of the dimensions of integral liberation. Salvation has a political dimension because the liberation which Jesus offers is universal and all-encompassing. In a discussion of the relationship between political liberation and liberation in Christ, he argued that Christ's salvific message and action have a political dimension because they go to the roots of all disunity: "To preach the universal love of the Father is inevitably to go against all injustice, privilege, oppression, or narrow nationalism."<sup>61</sup> The gospel acquires its political dimension from the very nucleus of its message that communion with God and one another is possible in history and beyond it: "The Kingdom is realized in a society of fellowship and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all persons with God. The political is grafted into the eternal."<sup>62</sup> Gutiérrez has not hesitated to acknowledge realistically that the realization of this salvific vision does, however, entail social conflict. He argues that, in the process of freeing us from sin, the root of all injustice, and opening the way for communion, Jesus did

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<sup>60</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 62 and 63.

<sup>61</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 135.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

challenge the rich and powerful on behalf of the poor.<sup>63</sup> His followers, too, must be prepared for social conflict: "Politics today involves confrontation...Being an 'artisan of peace' not only does not dispense from presence in these conflicts, it demands that one take part in them, in order to pull them up by the roots."<sup>64</sup> In his view, the building of a just and inclusive community cannot be achieved without political confrontation in a society divided according to social classes and ethnic groupings.

While he maintains that Christians in search of salvation must commit themselves politically, Gutiérrez is careful to avoid political reductionism. In the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, he specifically declared:

It is not possible, however, to deduce from the gospel a single political course that all Christians must follow...The faith does indeed set down certain ethical requirements...but the requirements do not entail a specific political program.<sup>65</sup>

And, from the beginning, he has held that Jesus was opposed to all politico-religious messianism because it does not respect either the depth of the religious realm or the autonomy of political action."<sup>66</sup> On these grounds, Gutiérrez rejects any kind of Christian ideology of political action and every form

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<sup>63</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 132.

<sup>64</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 48.

<sup>65</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 175, note 1.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

of politico-religious messianism.

### **Conclusion**

By linking redemption with liberation in all its dimensions, including the socio-economic and political, Latin American liberation theologians have played a major role in moving contemporary soteriological discussion beyond ontology, individualism, and a tendency to privatize or spiritualize the notion of salvation. In his own works, Gutiérrez has attempted to make salvation "historically specific," as Rosino Gibellini termed it,<sup>67</sup> by reflecting on the historical, communal, and political dimensions of salvation as they are interrelated in the liberative praxis of groups within popular movements, particularly that of base Christian communities. In the process, he has deepened our understanding of the fundamentally communal nature of salvation. As the following chapters will demonstrate, within Latin American liberation theology, the distinctiveness of his contribution lies in his consistent articulation of salvation not only as liberation, but as liberation for communion. From his perspective, we are liberated in and for community.

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<sup>67</sup>Rosino Gibellini, *The Liberation Theology Debate* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 29.

## **PART TWO: FROM BROKEN TO HEALING COMMUNITY**

### **CHAPTER TWO**

#### **LIBERATION IN COMMUNITY**

Community--community concretized originally in the particular historical moment of Latin America from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s--is the basis of Gutiérrez's soteriological reflection. He experienced a movement from broken community to healing community, a movement begun with revolutionary expectations in the early years and continued into the present with the greater realism which results from acknowledged failures and with the kind of creativity which gives birth to new strategies for transformation.

Divided into two sections, this chapter will first probe Gustavo Gutiérrez's own understanding of the roots of his soteriology. From his perspective, I will review the perimeters of the reality of massive socially structured evil in Latin America at the time of the birth of liberation theology; popular liberation movements which awakened and deepened the political awareness of the dispossessed and developed new ways of working in the interest of concrete liberation praxis; and, finally, base ecclesial communities whose uniqueness consists in the combining of reflection on faith and liberative praxis in communities of the poor. The later 1980s and 1990s have obviously brought significant

changes to the Latin American reality as well as to popular liberation movements and base ecclesial communities. In this particular section, however, the focus will remain on the earlier period. The second part of this chapter will identify the central soteriological principles which emerged from Gutiérrez's historical experience, that is, a communal praxis of liberation, the poor as agents of transformation, solidarity as liberating social praxis, and gratuitous love. Gutiérrez developed a communal soteriology which highlights the relationship between salvation, understood as integral liberation in and for community, and history, viewed as one history at the heart of which is salvation history. Liberating communities of the poor played a central role in the shaping of his vision.

### **I. Historical Roots**

Leonardo Boff grasped an essential characteristic of Gustavo Gutiérrez when he remarked that, in his case, we cannot separate personal and community life from theology, for his theological reflection is the product of the community of life and work whose destiny he shares.<sup>1</sup> Committed as he remains to the Rimac communities among whom he lives and works, Gutiérrez himself has always insisted that theologians be deeply rooted in the Christian community. He acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup>Leonardo Boff, "The Originality of the Theology of Liberation," trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 47.



his own communal point of departure in a rare personal statement:

The poor with their deprivations and their richness burst into my life...Work with what could generically be called basic ecclesial communities, a term expressing this entry of the poor into the Church, placed me in contact with a world in which, in spite of its being a re-encounter with my own roots, I feel I am merely taking my first steps.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he declared that, as a Latin American, he was goaded by the life and death of his people and awestruck by the rich welter of Christian communities that emerged in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> His writings constantly highlight, then, the dynamic relationship between the poor and God, between praxis and faith, but always from a communal perspective, that is, from the point of view of a people, "the people who are

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<sup>2</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Task of Theology and Ecclesial Experience," trans. Dinah Livingstone, *The People of God Amidst the Poor*, vol. 176 of *Concilium*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 62. During the course of an interview on the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination, Gutiérrez made clear his continuing commitment to communities of the poor and the fact that they are the source for his theology: "Plain and simple, I belong to the people and I seek to walk with them and within this context, to live out my faith in Christ, which I share with the people. Also from there, I begin a theological reflection." "Gustavo Gutiérrez: 25 Years in the Theology of Liberation," *LADOC* 14, no.5 (May/June 1984): 14.

<sup>3</sup>Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective: Finding Our Way to Talk about God," trans. John Drury, in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology, Papers from the Fifth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, August 17-29, 1981, New Delhi, India*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), 230.

simultaneously poor and Christian."<sup>4</sup>

In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez made the soteriological point that human beings are called to meet God insofar as they constitute a community. As he put it, "it is a question not so much of a vocation to salvation as a convocation."<sup>5</sup> This conclusion expressed a profound conviction that we are saved within a liberative community engaged in transformative historical praxis. It reflected Gutiérrez's experience of both the reality of Latin American oppression and the collective effort against it mounted by the popular liberation movement and base ecclesial communities active in Latin America in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

#### A. The Reality

As do other Latin American liberation theologians, Roberto Oliveros identifies as the basic foundational experience of liberation theology the brutal fact of the

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<sup>4</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities: Papers from the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology, February 20-March 2, 1980, Sao Paulo, Brazil*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1981), 112.

<sup>5</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 45.

<sup>6</sup>Roberto Oliveros is a recognized authority on the rise and development of liberation theology during this period. See "Teología de la Liberación: su génesis, crecimiento y consolidación (1968-1988)," in *Teología y Liberación: perspectivas y desafíos*, 89-107.

slavery and poverty of the Latin American masses.<sup>7</sup> Leonardo Boff has stated categorically that anyone who does not perceive this scandalous Latin American reality will fail to understand the discourse of the theology of liberation.<sup>8</sup> It is not the purpose of this section to accumulate data and statistics available elsewhere; nor will I attempt to document some of the innumerable personal stories of suffering and death hidden behind the statistics. In the context of formative influences, my concern, rather, is to present the Latin American reality as it was perceived and interpreted from Gutiérrez's particular perspective as he began to articulate his soteriology.

Gutiérrez's intimacy with the poverty of his people is obvious from the following descriptions selected from many:

Beyond any possible doubt, the life of the poor is one of hunger and exploitation, inadequate health care and lack of suitable housing, difficulty in obtaining an education, inadequate wages and unemployment, struggles for their rights, and repression. But that is not all. Being poor is also a way of feeling, knowing, reasoning, making friends, loving, believing, suffering, celebrating and praying.<sup>9</sup>

There are countless small things: wants of every kind, the abuse and contempt that the poor endure, lives tormented by the search for employment, incredible ways of earning a living or--more accurately--earning a crust of bread, mean

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<sup>7</sup>Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 4.

<sup>8</sup>Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 125.

bickerings, separations of family members, sicknesses not found at other levels of society, infant undernourishment and death, unjust prices for products and commodities, total confusion about what is necessary for themselves and their families, delinquency springing from abandonment or despair, the loss of one's own cultural values.<sup>10</sup>

Over and over again in the formative years of liberation theology, he declared starkly that poverty means death, death in many forms, whether physical death through hunger, sickness or repression, or cultural death through the destruction of traditions and cultures, particularly those of the most despoiled groups such as Amerindians, blacks, and women doubly marginalized and oppressed. And he emphasized the massive social dimensions and institutionalized, systemic character of the poverty and injustice endemic to Peru and the whole of Latin America. Whether describing the reality, identifying the poor, or analyzing causes, he adopted a collective perspective.

Seeking to describe the lacerating Latin American reality, Gutiérrez called attention to "the world" or "the universe" of the poor on a continent of injustice and dispossession where whole countries are dominated and oppressed. Typically, he denounced a society "scarred by profound inequality, injustice, and the exploitation of some by others and one social class by another,"<sup>11</sup> and a social order "set up financially, politically, and ideologically by

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<sup>10</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 114-115.

<sup>11</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 67.

a few for their own benefit."<sup>12</sup> Within this situation of institutionalized violence and class confrontation, he decried particularly a "culture of oppression"<sup>13</sup> characterized by widespread violation of human rights, imprisonment, torture, exile and death, as well as a "culture of poverty"<sup>14</sup> in which the majority of Latin Americans live. A massive reality in Latin America and its greatest present problem, poverty was presented by Gutiérrez as both material and cultural in that it results in the destruction of people and peoples, of cultures and traditions.<sup>15</sup>

As poverty has a collective dimension, so, too, do the poor have a collective identity. Gutiérrez stated explicitly: "When we talk about the poor, we are talking about something *collective*. The isolated poor person does not exist."<sup>16</sup> He developed his point in this way: "The poor person is a member of a people, and hence, as poor, the product of a social structure. As such, he or she is the product and result of a historical process--a conflictual historical process."<sup>17</sup> He

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<sup>12</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 37.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>15</sup>Gutiérrez, "Speaking about God," trans. Paul Burns, in *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost*, vol 171 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984), 29.

<sup>16</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 111.

<sup>17</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 106.

was specific in his collective definition of "the poor:" "By 'the poor' I mean here those whose social and economic condition is the result of a particular political order and the concrete histories of countries and social groups."<sup>18</sup> He therefore referred not so much to the poor individual as to whole groupings. He noted, in fact, that when Latin American liberation theologians began to talk explicitly about liberation theology in 1968, they used the three terms of class, race, and culture to talk about the poor and oppressed.<sup>19</sup> Throughout his writings, then, the poor were identified by variations of the phrase "the exploited classes, oppressed ethnic groups, and despised cultures."<sup>20</sup> Within these categories, he considered the most dispossessed to be Amerindians, Latin American blacks, and the women of marginalized sectors who are doubly oppressed. In search of a feature common to the various groupings of the poor, Gutiérrez coined the term "nonpersons" whom he broadly defined as "the ones systematically and legally despoiled of their humanness, the ones who scarcely know they are persons at all."<sup>21</sup> It is they who form "the society of the

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<sup>18</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156.

<sup>19</sup>Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective," 230-231.

<sup>20</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 60.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 57. Gutiérrez frequently reflected on this concept; see also, for instance, *Power*, 92; "Statement by Gustavo Gutiérrez," in *Theology in the Americas*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976), 312; and *Truth*, 7.

nonperson,"<sup>22</sup> to which belong, collectively, the Latin American poor.

Consistent with liberation theology's hermeneutical methodology, Gutiérrez's understanding of his reality moved beyond mere description to analysis of causes. In this area, also, his approach was global as, along with the newly conscientized poor, he called into question the whole of the economic, social and political order which oppressed and marginalized them. Over the years, his well-researched causal analysis has evolved,<sup>23</sup> but, along with other Latin American liberation theologians, he continues to hold the view that what is at issue is the violence of a system. In the period under discussion, Gutiérrez developed this idea particularly in an article by the same title,<sup>24</sup> and in *The Power of the Poor in History* where he discussed the internationalization of capitalism and its devastating effects on poor countries. In his view, poverty and the inequitable distribution of income

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<sup>22</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 92.

<sup>23</sup>For insight into the evolution of Gutiérrez's social analysis based on the theory of dependency, see Lee Cormie's "Unfinished Revolutions," a valuable guide to and update of the dependency approach in Latin America. See also Cadorette's *From the Heart of the People*, 18-27. Gutiérrez himself reflected on the evolution of Latin American social analysis theory in "Option for the Poor," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Libertationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 238-239, and *Theology of Liberation*, xxiv-xxv.

<sup>24</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Violence of a System," trans. Paul Burns, in *Christian Ethics and Economics: The North-South Conflict*, ed. Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Pohier (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 93-100.

were the fault of the capitalist system itself, they were due to its very logic.<sup>25</sup> A capitalist society based on private profit and private ownership of the means of production created unjust social structures which benefited a privileged minority. The internationalization of capitalism further exacerbated exploitation as executives of transnational corporations sought high production at low wages and became ever more sophisticated in "decapitalizing" poor countries. The process of growth and restructuring within the capitalist economic order resulted in the "concentration of economic, financial, military, technological, commercial, and alimentary power in a small clutch of countries."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the proven ability and readiness of directors of transnational corporations to move their businesses around the world to escape restraints and maximize profits mitigated against reform by individual countries. Unjust economic conditions fuelled explosive tensions in relationships on all levels, personal, local, national, and international. The dominant capitalist ideology therefore supported a social configuration marked by social injustice and class conflict. Captivity best described the situation of the poor oppressed by the present system, and "liberation" rather than "development" best captured the goal of efforts at transformation, efforts which had to be collective and communal to be successful in face of

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<sup>25</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 117.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.



such massively structured domination.

As his analysis of the way capitalism worked in his own country and throughout Latin America demonstrates, Gutiérrez relied most heavily on a dependency approach in his social analysis. In the early 1970s, he summarized the essence of its conclusions in the following way: "The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many."<sup>27</sup> He understood, though, that a comprehensive social analysis had to take into account internal as well as external factors. Influenced by dependency theorists such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, Gutiérrez, unlike many at the time, always grasped this essential point.<sup>28</sup> Dependency theory has since evolved. As Lee Cormie has noted, contemporary dependency analysts redefine capitalism as a world system defined from their perspective through the establishment and reproduction in changing forms over time of dominating and exploitative

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<sup>27</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 51. In "Unfinished Revolutions," Lee Cormie drew attention to the range of Latin American thinkers surveyed by Gutiérrez and to the pluralism in dependency studies emerging at this time; Cristobal Kay's *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment* (New York: Routledge, 1989) is a good resource in this area.

<sup>28</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 52. Cardoso and Faletto are authors of the classic *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, trans. Marjory Mattingly Urquidi (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979.)

relationships between core and periphery.<sup>29</sup> While Gutiérrez still upholds the validity of a general dependency approach, he readily acknowledges today the deficiencies of earlier dependency theory as a tool in the social analysis of the complex Latin American oppressive reality, and he calls for the development of new analytical tools which go beyond the socio-economic dimension.<sup>30</sup> His stance was similar in the early years of liberation theology. In *A Theology of Liberation*, he acknowledged that the notion of dependence had emerged as a key element in the interpretation of the Latin American reality, but he went on to caution that much more needed to be done in working out an adequate theory of dependence: "There is urgent need for a purification to eliminate the less scientific approaches, for a clarification of terms used, for an application of the general categories to ever more complex and constantly evolving realities."<sup>31</sup>

On this point, it is important to note for the record that, in his social analysis, Gutiérrez's always intended to take into account factors of racism, gender discrimination, and cultural marginalization which worsen poverty and aggravate the conflict between social groups. As noted

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<sup>29</sup>Cormie, "Unfinished Revolutions," 33.

<sup>30</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xxiv; "¿Dónde dormirán los pobres?" in *El rostro de Dios en la historia* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1996), 17, note 22.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 52-53.

earlier, he made frequent references to despised races, doubly oppressed women, and marginalized ethnic groups. As their theology has evolved, liberation theologians have become increasingly aware of the challenge to listen more carefully to voices representative of these groups and to incorporate their unique perspective into social analysis. Along with other Latin American liberation theologians like Pablo Richard, Gutiérrez recognizes in this methodological approach one of the richest theological veins for the future.<sup>32</sup>

#### **B. Popular Movements**

"In our starting point, then, we find the deaths of our people, but also the will to live," observed Gutiérrez in a 1978 address to the Catholic Theological Society of America.<sup>33</sup> The will to live was embodied in popular movements whose struggle he interpreted as a collective undertaking for liberation.<sup>34</sup> In various writings, he rapidly sketched the historical development of popular

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<sup>32</sup>See Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 237 and the Introduction to the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, xxiii. See also Pablo Richard, "La Teología de la Liberación en la nueva coyuntura," 5-6.

<sup>33</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Voice of the Poor in the Church," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 33 (1978): 33.

<sup>34</sup>To reiterate, in this chapter the focus remains on Gutiérrez's perspective. For an excellent review of the rise of popular movements and a knowledgeable appraisal of their gains, see James Nickoloff, "The Church and Human Liberation," 88-116. As he notes, the literature on Peruvian popular movements is already extensive and growing rapidly.

liberation movements under different headings which suggested the significance he attributed to them: "From the Praxis of Liberation;" "The 'Absent Ones' Make Their Presence Felt;" "The Historical Power of the Poor;" and "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America."<sup>35</sup> He repeatedly affirmed as a necessary subversive memory the historic capacity of the poor of Latin America to resist domination, keep hope alive and even celebrate life. He also judged the popular movements which arose in the 1960s to be a new phenomenon with, upon later theological reflection, profound soteriological import.

Gutiérrez considered the decade of the 1960s a time of "the apprenticeship of the popular masses in the craft of their own liberation"<sup>36</sup> as they participated in a process of popular commitment to social change. In his view, the years from 1965 to 1968, the pre-Medellín years, were decisive ones in the experience of members of Latin America's popular movements. New forms of exploitation introduced by the internationalization of capital with the consequent reorganization of the world economic system, increasing repression by national security regimes intent on maintaining oppressive systems, a new consciousness of the rights of the poor, and a more rigorously scientific study of the causes of poverty created a new situation notable for the combined

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<sup>35</sup>References are to "Faith as Freedom," 26-30; "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 108-110; and *Power*, Chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 75.

effort of poor people to struggle for liberation. The popular struggles of the late 1960s were marked by greater breadth and a radical depth as the revolutionary energies of the popular classes were galvanized into action by the new awareness of the causes of their situation and of their role in building a different society which they gained through membership in groups organized to effect change. Solidarity became the byword for action among the Latin American poor and those supporting them. Popular movements of the 1970s consolidated their base. Despite great difficulty and hardship as well as some vacillation and the occasional retreat, they were better orientated and better organized than ever before. By the end of the 1970s, Gutiérrez could emphasize in *The Power of the Poor in History* the maturation of the popular movement, despite appearances to the contrary.<sup>37</sup> A slogan encountered often yet today by visitors to Peru expressed well the confidence of the poor in their communal action: *El pueblo unido jamás será vencido* (United, the people will never be defeated).

According to Gutiérrez, from a utopian perspective, the popular movement in Latin America at that time constituted an "irruption" of the poor in history, the dimensions of which could be captured by the Quechuan word for a great reversal--

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<sup>37</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 83.

*pachacutti*.<sup>38</sup> For, as the poor were making their presence felt in the historical process of Latin America through collective attempts to free themselves from exploitation, they were, at the same time, developing a new identity, a new culture, and a new historical awareness. The collective struggle for liberation was proving to be the locus of a new way of being and of being a people in Latin America. Thanks to a new self-consciousness and self-affirmation, the poor were reclaiming their rights, especially the right to think and to live. A culture of democracy and nonviolence was replacing the culture of oppression. With a new historical consciousness of their reality, "nonpersons" engaged in the process of self-liberation were becoming agents of transformation. They were exercising their power in history.

In his book on Job, Gutiérrez quoted a character from Albert Camus' *The Plague*: "We were all up against the wall that plague had built around us, and in its lethal shadow we must work out our salvation."<sup>39</sup> Through their collective effort toward transformation of their limit situation of poverty and death, popular movements served a powerful pedagogical function for Christians intent on working out their salvation. One understands, then, Gutiérrez's insistence that liberation theology could not have arisen

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<sup>38</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 112.

<sup>39</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 13.

before these movements and their historical praxis of liberation had reached a certain maturity.<sup>40</sup>

### C. Base Ecclesial Communities

From the midst of his suffering people, Gutiérrez the theologian asked in anguish:

How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression? How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly? How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent? What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?<sup>41</sup>

The base ecclesial communities which emerged in the midst of the general liberation movement in Latin America provided a concrete pastoral context for response. It was on the basis of his experience with them that he sought to answer in formal theological terms his "great question." For these faith communities engaged in concrete liberation effectively witnessed to an evangelical love of neighbour which revealed God. Oliveros would later identify their original intuition

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<sup>40</sup>Gutiérrez, "Two Theological Perspectives: Liberation Theology and Progressivist Theology," in *The Emergent Gospel*, ed. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978), 240. He makes the same point in *Power*, 190 and 204.

<sup>41</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, xiv. Gutiérrez articulates versions of this "great question" throughout his writings; see, for example, *Job*, 102 and *Truth*, 7.

as the "heart and soul" of liberation theology.<sup>42</sup>

In "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People," a major paper delivered to the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology (EATWOT) meeting in Brazil in 1981, Gutiérrez described base Christian communities as he had come to know them. As his choice of title suggests, his observations crystallized around the twofold character of the poor in Latin America as a people both oppressed and believing. In his view, these two interlocking dimensions accounted for the meeting point, within the broad popular movement, of organizations of the poor and Christian communities of the poor. They also provide still today a unifying perspective for the base ecclesial communities themselves and so are of major importance in any attempt to understand their workings and import.

In Latin America, "base" means poor, poor in the collective sense outlined earlier, that is, exploited classes, marginalized races, despised cultures, and women from these groupings. It also includes those who make an option for the poor, who join in solidarity with the poor; in other words, it includes both persons from the oppressed groups as well as those from other classes, races and cultures "who make their own the life, the interests, and the aspirations of the poor

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<sup>42</sup>Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 7.



and oppressed."<sup>43</sup> Communities were formed as persons of the base gathered in support of the popular movement, to live and celebrate their faith in that context, and to break bread together. Within them, people could meet and become aware of themselves as persons and responsible subjects and so, by their very nature, these communities aimed at destroying the system which exploited them. They were called "Christian" in that they were rooted in a believing people, followers of a Christ whose messianic practice reveals a God who expresses a gratuitous love of preference for the poor. Arising in the very process of living out what Christ means for the common masses, these communities were church, church situated in the midst of oppression and the struggle for liberation. Through their efforts to free themselves from exploitation, defend their rights as poor people, and fashion a human society that is free and just, base Christian communities became "evangelizing cadres" who gave authenticity to the proclamation of the word of God. Gutiérrez described them as "privileged places where the poor people read the Bible and make its message their own in their own terms... moments of fraternal encounter when we recognize God as our Father."<sup>44</sup>

To raise the question of the presence of God in an unjust world is fundamentally to inquire into the meaning of

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<sup>43</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 116.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 118.

salvation. By their very existence, nature and purpose, base Christian communities were a primary source for soteriological reflection. They confirmed the presence of a loving God in the midst of oppression and revealed the nature of God's saving deed with all its historical implications. Leonardo Boff recognized this when he called attention to the profound soteriological nature of their faith: "The faith that these Christians live...is the motive force for liberation here and now, for the historical translation of the salvific deed of Jesus Christ and the salvific will of his Father."<sup>45</sup> Gutiérrez's experience of the liberative praxis of base ecclesial communities reinforced lessons learned from the broader popular movement and deepened his soteriological reflection by placing it in a specifically Christian context. As a result, he speaks not only of the transformative power of the poor in history but also of their evangelizing power, and he articulates with greater conviction the key soteriological categories of solidarity and gratuitous love.

## **II. Central Soteriological Principles**

Living and thinking the faith from within the world of the poor convinced Latin American liberation theologians that their people were experiencing a particular time of salvation. Immersed in the historical liberation process under way among base Christian communities, Gutiérrez fashioned a soteriology

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<sup>45</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 65.

which honours their efforts as salvific. It was in the context of their communal struggles for liberation that, in the "second act" of theological reflection, he articulated an understanding of salvation as communion with one another and God begun in history. They furnished him with central soteriological principles as he explored the salvific significance of society in history.

#### A. A Communal Praxis of Liberation

Liberation theology has been called a "praxic" theology in that it is interested primarily in transforming an unbearable reality.<sup>46</sup> In a discussion of theology as critical reflection on praxis in light of the Word, Gutiérrez reviewed the historical emergence of an emphasis on praxis in theology. He listed the following contributing factors: the rediscovery of charity as the centre of Christian life, an evolution of the spirituality of the activity of Christians in the world, a greater sensitivity to anthropological aspects of revelation, recognition that the life of the church is a *locus theologicus*, the Blondelian definition of philosophy as a critical reflection on action, the Marxist focus on praxis geared to the transformation of the world, and the rediscovery of the eschatological dimension in theology.<sup>47</sup> Gutiérrez

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<sup>46</sup>Jon Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 353.

<sup>47</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 9.

characterizes the transformative action which is praxis as both historical and liberating. It is historical in that it transforms history; it is liberating in that the transformation of history is effected by and from the perspective of the poor of this world. And, from the beginning, as early as the 1968 conference in Chimbote, he has insisted that the work of constructing a more just world has salvific value. Everything that contributes to human liberation contains the value of salvation and communion with God.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, historical and liberating praxis is effective to the extent, largely, that it is communal. For one does not engage in effective transformative praxis alone or in isolation (*el pueblo unido jamás será vencido*). Liberative praxis implies identification with persons who are part of exploited and marginalized groupings and the formation of organizations and communities to abolish current unjust systems and build a different society. In a Christian context, as base ecclesial communities have demonstrated, liberative praxis is also understood most profoundly as a praxis of love in community with those who are considered the least:

The praxis of liberation, therefore, inasmuch as it starts out from an authentic solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, is ultimately a praxis of love--real love, effective and concrete, for real, concrete human beings. It is a praxis of love of

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<sup>48</sup>Gutiérrez, "Toward a Theology of Liberation" (July 1968), in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alftred T. Hennelly, 70.

neighbor, and of love for Christ in the neighbor, for Christ identifies himself with the least of these human beings, our brothers and sisters.<sup>49</sup>

Gutiérrez insists, as well, that this praxis of love is rooted in the gratuitous and free love of the Creator who seeks restored communion by becoming a God of history in solidarity with the poor and the dispossessed and through them with all humans.<sup>50</sup>

Gutiérrez is quick to warn against an individualistic charity which would turn a deaf ear to the call to right structural injustice and would ignore the collective dimension of the neighbour emphasized earlier in this chapter. To reiterate, the neighbour is, as he has put it, "a person considered in the fabric of social relationships...situated in economic, social, cultural, and racial coordinates."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the journey toward liberation is a community journey. This is the *leitmotif* of *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, as the subtitle "The Spiritual Journey of a People" suggests. Like the chosen people delivered from captivity, in the course of their own communal walking in the Spirit the Latin American poor encounter God anew and are liberated to love, to love in concrete ways which bring about actual transformation. The main point is, however, that they are liberated in community. Gutiérrez made this clear in response

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<sup>49</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 50.

<sup>50</sup>Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 38.

<sup>51</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 116.

to a question at his doctoral defence about the scope of the word "collective." He observed that, in *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, he used "collective" as a synonym for "communal," and the expressions "collective adventure" and "community enterprise" synonymously. His rationale was that, although the following of Jesus is a personal, free decision, discipleship cannot be lived out except in community.<sup>52</sup> In *The God of Life*, also, Gutiérrez highlighted the communal nature of God's covenant with the Jewish people and the fact, therefore, that belief in God is something communal: "The covenant is made with a people, with a human group, not an individual person. Since faith is something that lives within a community, the individual's life of faith is put right, regulated, and judged by the entire people called to the covenant with the Lord."<sup>53</sup>

Strong in a common identity as brothers and sisters, children of a loving Father, Christians are invited, then, to join the oppressed in a communal praxis which transforms history with a liberating love. As Miguel Manzanera pointed out, one of the strengths of Gutiérrez's notion of salvation lies in the salvific nature of a liberation praxis which succeeds in integrating the grace of charity and the praxis of

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<sup>52</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 49.

<sup>53</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991, originally published in 1989), 34.

a human love which is concrete, radical and universal.<sup>54</sup> A liberating community serves as an indispensable matrix for this praxis.

### B. The Poor As Agents Of Transformation

Liberation theologians join post-Enlightenment West European theologians in stressing the importance of human action in history and the key role played by human beings as subjects of history. They differ, however, in their further identification of these subjects. Liberation theology's particular frame of reference is that of the poor and oppressed as agents of transformation. It is especially the poor who are subjects of liberative praxis and, without a focus on the poor as subjects, theology degenerates into academic exercise.<sup>55</sup> From their own vantage point, Latin American liberation theologians rearticulate notions of the revolutionary subject and critical class consciousness in dialogue with Marx.<sup>56</sup> Unlike Marx, of course, they base

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<sup>54</sup>Manzanera, *Teología, Salvación y Liberación en la obra de Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 184.

<sup>55</sup>Gutiérrez, "Two Theological Perspectives," 247.

<sup>56</sup>In "Liberation and Marxism," an article which is particularly helpful from an historical point of view, Enrique Dussel specified liberation theologians' borrowings from the younger Marx, the social critic; see *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1991), 197-204. In his discussion of Gutiérrez and Marxism, Dussel noted Gutiérrez's profoundly theological use of such Marxist categories as class struggle, revolution and utopia and he made the point that the kind of Marxism of interest to Gutiérrez is not a dialectically

their reflection on the poor as subjects on a central theological intuition that the biblical God is a liberating God who is revealed in the concrete praxis of the poor.

As he reflected on the gains of popular movements, Gutiérrez attributed the power of the poor in Latin American history at this particular time to the fact that they were becoming conscientized and were organizing for social change. They were irrupting onto centre stage. Furthermore, as privileged recipients of God's liberating revelation, they were agents of evangelization.

According to Gutiérrez's assessment, the poor irrupted "from the underside of history" due to two particularly important factors. First, they constituted a "de facto social collectivity."<sup>57</sup> The sense of group identity proved to be empowering as the popular movement effected change in the daily lives of the poor and worked for a new order at various levels. In the course of their common struggles, the poor began to recognize themselves, and to be recognized, as a people whose energetic presence in history was affirming life. In the very midst of their devastating reality, they continued to be signs of hope against hope as they tenaciously resisted together the destruction of their hope. Second, they gained strength for historical transformation from their own values,

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materialist Marxism but one which is economically critical, decidedly political, and culturally analytical; see 201-202.

<sup>57</sup>Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 236.



values derived from race, history and language. The poor affirmed the age-old value of community, for example, as they created new social relationships in the liberation process. Threatened by crises, they responded with inventiveness and creative energy. In a 1984 interview entitled "Joy of the Poor Confounds the Powerful," Gutiérrez summed up other key values found among the poor which help to explain their influence as agents of transformation: "There is a profound desire for justice, an enormous capacity for solidarity in order to bring about justice, and a surprising joy that celebrates life in spite of everything."<sup>58</sup> In another interview, he acknowledged in moving terms the influence on his theology of his mother's simple faith which made him understand the importance of gratuitous love and reaffirmed his conviction that an option for the poor is based finally in the nature of God.<sup>59</sup> Gutiérrez's continuing confidence in the power of the poor is attested to by the fact that, in recent writings, he highlights yet again the values which guide the poor in resisting fresh assaults on their hope by the new world order.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Gutiérrez was interviewed by Mario Campos in *Latinamerica Press* (10 May 1984): 3.

<sup>59</sup>Gutiérrez, "Criticism Will Deepen, Clarify Liberation Theology," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, 424. The English text is taken from *LADOC* 15 (January/February 1985): 2-7.

<sup>60</sup>See, for example, Gutiérrez, "Liberación y desarrollo: un desafío a la teología," in *Liberación y desarrollo en América Latina: Perspectivas* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas,

The role of the poor as agents of transformation takes on further significance when they are seen also as agents of evangelization. Convinced that God gratuitously reveals love and liberation to the poor of this world, liberation theologians insist on the hermeneutical privilege of the poor in proclaiming the gospel. In their document "A Preferential Option for the Poor," the bishops confirmed at Puebla the evangelizing potential of the poor: "For the poor challenge the church constantly, summoning it to conversion; and many of the poor incarnate in their lives the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity, and openness to accepting the gift of God." The document went on to note that the witness of a poor church can evangelize the rich attached to their wealth and thus convert and free them.<sup>61</sup>

His participation in base ecclesial communities led Gutiérrez to a new understanding of evangelization as involving oneself in the process of proclamation carried out by the poor. For the poor are not just privileged addressees of the gospel message; they are also its bearers by their very identity.<sup>62</sup> This is not to minimize the importance of their

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Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1993), 27; "¿Dónde dormirán los pobres?," 29

<sup>61</sup>Document "A Preferential Option for the Poor," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, 256-257. The English text is taken from *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979), 264-267.

<sup>62</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 120.

action. Evangelization and liberation are reciprocally linked and the poor evangelize by liberating themselves. Their transformative efforts in community reveal a loving, liberating God whose action in history is mediated by the poor as God's agents. It is in this sense that Gutiérrez claims of marginal groups involved in the liberation process that "the salvation of humanity passes through them."<sup>63</sup>

### C. Solidarity As Liberating Social Praxis

The vast dimensions of socially structured injustice make imperative the liberating social praxis of solidarity. It is no wonder that, as Gutiérrez has phrased it, "the determination to be in solidarity characterizes the life of the poor."<sup>64</sup> As José Míguez Bonino remarked, the notion of solidarity has a long history.<sup>65</sup> Recent events in Europe have popularized the word, but its meaning in the Latin American context must be specified. Gutiérrez has offered the following definition:

The word has been used among the poor of the continent for the action that follows upon their new awareness of their situation of exploitation and marginalization, as well as the role they must play in the building of a new and different society. For Christians this action is an efficacious act of charity, of love for neighbor

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<sup>63</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 116.

<sup>64</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, xii.

<sup>65</sup>José Miguez Bonino, "Love and Social Transformation in Liberation Theology," in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 124.

and love for God in the poor.<sup>66</sup>

It is from this essential notion of solidarity as transforming action, and, for Christians, a transforming action of evangelical love for neighbour and God, that he developed the fundamentally soteriological idea of solidarity as liberating social praxis.

He reasoned as follows. The preferential option for the poor, "the axle on which turns a new way of being a human being and being a Christian in Latin America,"<sup>67</sup> necessitates a conversion. Christians must break with a previous situation of lack of solidarity with the poor and leave their own world to enter, in some way, the world of the poor:

Commitment to the poor means entering, and in some cases remaining in, that universe with a much clearer awareness; it means being one of its inhabitants, looking upon it as a place of residence and not simply of work. It does not mean going into that world by the hour to bear witness to the gospel, but rather emerging from within it each morning in order to proclaim the good news to every human being.<sup>68</sup>

The poor, also, are called to conversion. They are invited to reject their oppressive situation, to move beyond individualism and join in solidarity with other poor people. Experience of and among the poor then issues in action, in

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<sup>66</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 2.

<sup>67</sup>Gutiérrez, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation," trans. J. P. Donnelly, in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 59.

<sup>68</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 125.

solidarity with the poor, with their interests and struggles. Flowing out of a concrete option for the poor, solidarity implies a liberating social praxis because we discover that we cannot be for the poor and oppressed if we are not against all that leads to human exploitation. We therefore become engaged with the poor in forging a new social consciousness, a new society and a new humanity.

Solidarity with the poor can take, as we have seen, the form of voluntary impoverishment. In chapter thirteen of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez explored the concept of poverty as solidarity and protest. His insights add depth to the understanding of solidarity as liberating social praxis. He presented Christian poverty as an act of love and liberation which has redemptive value. Its deepest motivation is love of neighbour and it has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, as an attempt to struggle against the poverty of the poor in imitation of the Jesus of Philippians 2:6-11. As such, it has an inevitable political character since siding with the poor in Latin America puts persons and communities in a position of social conflict, with all this implies of personal risks. He concluded that, understood in this way, Christian poverty is most authentically an act of solidarity with the poor.<sup>69</sup>

Intrinsic to the conception of solidarity as

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<sup>69</sup>See particularly the conclusion to Chapter 13 for elaboration.

liberating social praxis is Gutiérrez's insistence on love as its existential context. It is not duty but rather genuine love and friendship which should motivate individuals and groups to engage in solidarity with the poor. According to Gutiérrez, there can be no true gesture of solidarity without love, without the affection and tenderness of a friendship between equals. He consistently makes this point,<sup>70</sup> for friendship implies the sharing on which commitment to the poor is built. Offered in love, the gesture of solidarity as expression of authentic commitment to liberation becomes an efficacious sign of communion with a liberating God. From this perspective, solidarity with the marginalized in their transformative action witnesses fidelity to the Exodus covenant and its ethic: "The love God offers is a faithful love, but it requires in return a fidelity to the covenant that will seek to put the establishment of justice and right on a solid footing."<sup>71</sup>

It is important to note that Gutiérrez does not perceive solidarity with the poor as exclusive of those who are not poor and, therefore, as an obstacle to universal love. On the contrary, he views it as the condition of an authentic solidarity with everyone, the very condition, in fact, of

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<sup>70</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 104; *Theology of Liberation*, xxxi; *God of Life*, 134-135; "Christian Hope for the New Millenium," a lecture delivered at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, Ontario, November 29, 1996 and published as an edited transcript in *Catholic New Times* 20, no. 22 (15 December 1996): 8-9.

<sup>71</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 34.

universal love since it breaks down social oppositions in the quest for a new society in the reign of justice and love.<sup>72</sup> Both universality and preference mark the proclamation of the reign since God addresses a message of life to every human being without exception while at the same time showing preference for the poor and oppressed. In fidelity to the reign of God, Christians are similarly called to love everyone but to exhibit a preferential option for the poor.<sup>73</sup> Community is not fragmented by solidarity with the poor; rather it is strengthened.

The principle of solidarity is a hermeneutical key to Gutiérrez's soteriology. A central soteriological principle, it is also a methodological one. Intent on doing theology in a revolutionary situation, liberation theologians insist on the unity of spirituality and theology in a unified methodological process designed to assist in liberation. As Robert McAfee Brown remarked, "the real centre for liberation theology is the deed, and it is the quality of the deed that defines the nature and authenticity of the theological affirmation."<sup>74</sup> The authenticity of a soteriology of communion is verified, for Gutiérrez, in a praxis of solidarity with the poor and marginalized. In terms of

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<sup>72</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 129.

<sup>73</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 117.

<sup>74</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, Preface to the 1990 Orbis publication of *Power*, xiii.

methodology, this praxis is both point of departure and *terminus ad quem*.

#### D. Gratuitous Love

As will become evident in Part Two, Gutiérrez's soteriological vision is firmly rooted above all in the gratuitous love of God. Gratuitousness is its framework. Like the author of the book of Job which he so eloquently interprets, Gutiérrez may be considered a "champion of the gratuitousness of God's love."<sup>75</sup> For he considers the revelation of God's gratuitous love at the origin of all things to be the central theme of biblical revelation. *On Job* contains Gutiérrez's most thorough treatment of this theme and, as we shall see more closely in chapter four, it is there that he explicates most fully his understanding of the gratuitousness characteristic of God's love. For the moment, I simply note a key insight which Gutiérrez highlights from Job's encounter with the mystery of God: "In the just governance of the world God does not follow well-trodden paths that would limit divine action. Moving through history, God walks a path in freedom."<sup>76</sup> Gutiérrez continued his reflection on Job's learnings in *The God of Life* where he emphasized that grace gives the quest for justice its full meaning and that "God's love...operates in a world not of

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<sup>75</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 14.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.



cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness."<sup>77</sup>

As is the case with his other central soteriological principles, Gutiérrez experienced gratuitous love in liberative community prior to conceptualizing it in his theology. Gutiérrez's reference to his own mother's teaching of simple gratuitous love has already been noted. In *Job*, he identified gratuitousness as a main characteristic of the faith of the poor in general.<sup>78</sup> In *The God of Life*, he remarked that Job's sense of the gratuitous love of God, evident in his realization that all is God's gracious gift, is a sense often found among poor but believing people.<sup>79</sup> His development of gratuitous love as a soteriological principle was undoubtedly most influenced, however, by the solidarity of base ecclesial communities. As he sees it, it is there that the integral link is made between gratuitous love and solidarity.

Upon theological reflection, Christians who engage in solidarity as liberating social praxis do so, finally, in imitation of Jesus Christ who reveals God's gratuitous, saving love through the act of solidarity which is the incarnation. As gratuitous love is the foundation of God's salvific activity, so is it to be foundational for the liberative praxis of Christians. Gutiérrez maintains that the call to

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<sup>77</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 162.

<sup>78</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 54.

<sup>79</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 155.

gratuitousness lies at the heart of the behaviour of a follower of Jesus;<sup>80</sup> it is gratuitous love which most profoundly motivates solidarity with the poor in their struggles for liberation. It is a question of both gift and task. An option for the poor is a theocentric, prophetic option rooted in the gratuity of God's love, the gift of which demands gratuitous love on our part as we join the poor in the mission of salvation.

### **Conclusion**

The insistence of liberation theologians on liberative praxis as "first act" is well known. This chapter has sought to probe in greater detail the communitarian nature of this "antecedent moment," as Clodovis Boff termed it,<sup>81</sup> and its significance for the soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. For it is from within a community at once poor and believing that his reflection has its roots and continues to grow. His experience of both the reality of massively structured Latin American oppression and the collective effort against it mounted by popular liberation movements and base Christian communities within them nourished a deep conviction concerning the fundamentally soteriological role of liberating communities among the poor. In their profoundly communal

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<sup>80</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 135-136.

<sup>81</sup>Clodovis Boff, "Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Otto Maduro, 73.

nature, the soteriological principles which emerged from reflection on the "first act" express this conviction. Even in face of recent events in the world and in Latin America which have significantly affected the present reality as well as the agenda and strategies of the popular liberation movement and base ecclesial communities, Gutiérrez has remained steadfast in this conviction. Rooted though they are in the historical reality of Latin America in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, his central soteriological principles retain their validity and relevance in the 1990s.

Latin American feminist theologians endorse Gutiérrez's central soteriological principles and have no difficulty interpreting them from a feminist perspective and applying them to the salvation of women. They are critical, however, of the absence of reference to women's specific experiences and hopes. They insist on highlighting women's experience of liberation in community as fertile soil from which these principles also emerge.

For Latin American feminist theologians as well, "the poor" refers primarily to a social group deprived of material goods and to a group whose identity is collective.<sup>82</sup> They are specifically concerned, however, to include the reality of poor women. As the opening sentence of Carmen Lora's

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<sup>82</sup>Ivone Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for the Poor Woman," trans. Dinah Livingstone, in *Women, Work and Poverty*, vol. 194 of *Concilium*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 110 and 113.

sociological reflection on them asserted, it does not take a profound and systematic study to note that some dimensions of Latin American women's oppression are related to gender.<sup>83</sup> To cite but one illustration, Consuelo del Prado's reflection on women's spirituality contains an especially wrenching description of, in particular, indigenous, peasant and marginalized women working in the cities. It is a stark observation on the reality of death experienced by poor women in general:

They live in an estranged world. They are torn from their land; they are deprived of their schools, their language, and their traditional clothing as well as their children, spouses, and their place in the community. If poverty is death then poor women confront many deaths in their lifetime: the death from hunger, sickness, repression, the death of their traditions, and of their deepest femininity.<sup>84</sup>

While much of this description is true of poor Latin American men also, the situation of poor women is aggravated by patriarchal discrimination against women in the popular sectors. Traditionally, men exercise control over sexuality, reproduction, and women's work, and the sexual division of labour means that women must carry a double work load.<sup>85</sup> As Aquino points out, in the reality of life, most Latin American

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<sup>83</sup>Carmen Lora, "Mujer: víctima de opresión, portadora de liberación," in *Mujer: Víctima de opresión, portadora de liberación*, ed. Carmen Lora, Cecilia Barnechea, Fryné Santisteban (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, 1985), 21.

<sup>84</sup>Consuelo del Prado, "I Sense God in Another Way," in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 141-142.

<sup>85</sup>Aquino, *Cry for Life*, 13-18.

women live in impoverished conditions and are dominated by men who are themselves exploited; they are "the oppressed among the oppressed."<sup>86</sup> Latin American feminist theologians speak of the triple oppression of many women: "Racial discrimination, sexism, and capitalist exploitation in Latin America constitute the triad that keeps women in subjection."<sup>87</sup>

While their analysis of this reality is guided by liberation theology's social analysis methodology and incorporates the main findings of this analysis, their own critical investigation in the social sciences uncovers other elements which, interpreted from a feminist perspective, are essential to a deeper understanding. María Pilar Aquino lists some of them in *Our Cry For Life* under the title "Latin American Women's Discovery of Causality:"

the relationship between men and women in both the personal and social dimension, the existence of ancestral stereotypes defining female tasks, the social division of labor between the sexes, the broadening of the political dimension from the public to the private, the three-fold struggles of class, sex, and race, and the importance of daily life.<sup>88</sup>

In further developing their analyses, it is not enough, then,

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<sup>86</sup>María Pilar Aquino, "Including Women's Experience: A Latina Feminist Perspective," trans. Colette Joly Dees, in *In The Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), 66.

<sup>87</sup>Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 116.

<sup>88</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 28.

for Latin American feminist theologians to identify patriarchal and *machista* systems of oppression; specific mechanisms must be named and analyzed. According to Aquino, however, liberation theology from the perspective of Latin American women still suffers from an inner methodological weakness. It must develop its methodology through recourse to feminist theory, anthropology and philosophy, sciences which will help in understanding women's particular situation from the Latin American viewpoint.<sup>89</sup>

Latin American feminist theologians also deepen understanding of the profoundly communal nature of the "antecedent moment" of liberative praxis. Gutiérrez finds the source of his theology in the communal transformative efforts of the popular movement and base Christian communities in general; they root their theological reflection particularly in the liberative praxis of women in poor communities and popular movements. María Clara Bingemer gives us a sense of the communal activities of these poor women in defence and celebration of life, and of the impact they are having:

In rural areas, in *favelas*, in the poor communities on the edges of the big cities, they are organizing in groups around their common work, inspired by their faith in the Lord and their love for the people of which they are a part. Mothers' clubs, community gardens and kitchens, and a variety of other women's organizations are springing up everywhere, organizing the struggle, strengthening faith, defending life, consolidating courage and

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<sup>89</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 116.

unity, celebrating the feast.<sup>90</sup>

As for the liberating presence of women in base ecclesial communities, Bingemer states a fact well-known to anyone familiar with the Latin American church:

With the word of God and the gospel of Jesus as their only wealth, the women of the Latin American poor are taking over the leadership and the administration of the great majority of the increasing number of biblical groups and basic ecclesial communities, giving the church a new look and a new vigor. In the farthest corners of Latin America, they are there...ministers and servants of communities organizing to struggle and celebrate.<sup>91</sup>

In his interview with Elsa Tamez, Gutiérrez was quick to acknowledge the central role of poor women in base ecclesial communities, a role which is often much more important than that of men, and he suggested that the fundamental reason for their prominence is women's closeness to suffering and their capacity for struggle.<sup>92</sup> Such a remark leaves him open to charges of contributing to a certain "biological essentialism" pervasive in a good part of Latin-American theological output, in the judgement of María José Rosado Nunes.<sup>93</sup> The main

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<sup>90</sup>Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 476.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 476.

<sup>92</sup>Tamez, *Against Machismo*, 42-43.

<sup>93</sup>According to Rosado Nunes, "one of the criticisms made by women social scientists of liberation theology is precisely its reduction of socially constructed sexual categories--gender--to biological characteristics. One of the indicators of this referral of women to biology is their removal to 'feminine essence', to what is 'different', 'mysterious'." "Women's Voices in Latin-American

point remains, however, that he recognizes as vital the participation of women in the liberation movement. Their experience in this process must be taken into account in a soteriological reflection on the dynamics of liberation in community.

There is evidence throughout Gutiérrez's writings that he is well aware of the human frailty of the poor and the often mixed results of their liberation movements. It must certainly be acknowledged that, broken as they undoubtedly are, communities themselves can also be oppressive at times. As we have seen, however, Gutiérrez's utopic and deeply Christian soteriological vision is solidly grounded in an ongoing experience of liberation in community which, despite real failures and countless deaths, justifies that hope against hope to which believers are called. Gutiérrez calmly expressed such hope in a comment on the world of the poor on the threshold of the 1990s: "No sudden burst of resistance is in the offing, but the voice of these downtrodden has begun to be heard, and this augurs well for the future."<sup>94</sup>

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Theology," 10.

<sup>94</sup>Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 237.



## CHAPTER THREE

### LIBERATION FOR COMMUNITY

Critical debate has dissected Gustavo Gutiérrez's famous definition of integral liberation as a single salvific process which unites the three distinguishable dimensions of political liberation, human liberation, and liberation from sin and admission to communion with God. The descriptive adjective "integral" is of the essence and to restrict communion with God to the third dimension of liberation is seriously to violate Gutiérrez's conception both of salvation and of the unity of history. Within each dimension, liberation is sought for the sake of community and the final goal of communion is being partially achieved at every step of the struggle for liberation. Integral liberation occurs within a community framework and Gutiérrez conceives of salvation as a simultaneous process of liberation in community and for community.

The lens which enables a clearer focusing of soteriological vision is that of faith. Gutiérrez has described the function of faith in this way:

Faith reveals to us the deep meaning of history...it teaches us that every human act which is oriented towards the construction of a more just society has value in terms of communion with God--in terms of salvation; inversely it teaches that all

injustice is a breach with God.<sup>1</sup>

The gospel proclaims the mystery of salvation, that is, God's saving action of love which draws us into community with one another and with God. In the course of articulating his understanding of this salvific message from within a liberating community, Gutiérrez reflects on salvation as communion and on sin as breach of communion; he also presents his vision of covenantal community already being achieved in part but not yet fully realized as it will be in the eschaton.

#### **I. Salvation As Communion**

Many recognize that Gutiérrez has offered a major reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation. They also commonly insist, however, that he has equated salvation and liberation *per se*. For example, in the interpretation of liberation theology presented in *An Alternative Vision*, Roger Haight made no attempt to distinguish Gutiérrez's position from that of others when he stated that "salvation in this world, in history, is liberation, and its ultimate goal is final liberation and freedom."<sup>2</sup> He noted, in fact, that Juan Luis Segundo and Gutiérrez were in "complete agreement" on the conflation of the two symbols of salvation and liberation.<sup>3</sup> Peter Kendrick gave to his dissertation on the concept of

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<sup>1</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 139.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Haight, *Alternative Vision*, 39.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 307, note 7.

salvation in Gutiérrez's theology the title *Christian Freedom and Liberation*, and he concluded that Gutiérrez "identifies" salvation with liberation.<sup>4</sup> There is little critical sense that Gutiérrez has in fact broadened the notion of salvation by insisting that liberation is defined communally and that communion is its final goal. For instance, Stanley Hauerwas based his critique of the centrality of the metaphor of liberation in liberation theology, as articulated by Gutiérrez in particular, on the argument that "liberation only makes sense as a means to a more profound sense of fellowship."<sup>5</sup> He concluded that the most important contribution of Christians to liberation struggles is to be "a community of the liberated who can witness to paradigmatic forms of service."<sup>6</sup> He seemed oblivious of the fact that these are, substantially, Gutiérrez's very points.

Selective reading can be misleading in that Gutiérrez speaks of salvation sometimes as liberation, at other times as life, and, yet again, as communion. In *A Theology of Liberation* we read that "the Bible presents liberation--

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Wright Kendrick, *Christian Freedom and Liberation: A Biblical and Theological Critique of the Concept of Salvation in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990), 309.

<sup>5</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, "Some Theological Reflections on Gutiérrez's Use of 'Liberation' as a Theological Concept," *Modern Theology* 3, no.1 (October 1986): 70.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

salvation--in Christ as the total gift,"<sup>7</sup> and, a little later, that "liberation, understood as an integral whole...is at the heart of the Lord's saving work."<sup>8</sup> In this same work, however, we find the following description of salvation: "It is God's gift of definitive life to God's children."<sup>9</sup> In *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, Gutiérrez maintained that "the deeper meaning of what we call 'integral liberation'...is, in the final analysis, the acceptance of the kingdom of life."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Gutiérrez equates salvation and communion. For example, he has stated: "Salvation--the communion of human beings with God and among themselves--is something which embraces all human reality."<sup>11</sup> What, then, is the ultimate meaning of salvation for Gutiérrez? A sentence from *We Drink From Our Own Wells* offers a succinct statement which encompasses the three themes of liberation, life and communion; at the same time, it leaves little doubt as to the goal of salvation:

In the final analysis, to set free is to give life--  
-communion with God and with others--or, to use the  
language of Puebla, liberation for communion and  
participation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xiv.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., xl.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., xxxix.

<sup>10</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 12.

<sup>11</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 85.

<sup>12</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 92.

Gutiérrez's soteriological vision of communion rests on a foundational distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *for*. It is a classical distinction and one of the basic elements of the Christian view of salvation, as we saw at the beginning of chapter one in reviewing Tracy's perspective on Christian understandings of salvation-liberation. Latin American liberation theologians commonly affirm this distinction. For instance, Leonardo Boff divides the process of liberation into liberation *from* an overall system of oppression and liberation *for* the self-realization of the people.<sup>13</sup> He also speaks of liberation *from* every stigma and liberation *for* real life, for open-ended communication of love, grace, and plenitude in God.<sup>14</sup> In adopting the classical distinction, Gutiérrez consistently highlights liberation as freedom *from* all that oppresses and freedom *for* communion.

The context is God's love. According to an intuition of Augustine, this love is the fullness of human freedom, and authentic freedom is life lived in God's love. Inspired by Pauline texts like Galatians 5:1 and 13, Thomas Aquinas distinguished between freedom *from* and freedom *for*. Gutiérrez

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<sup>13</sup>Leonardo Boff, "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," trans. J. P. Donnelly, *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 78.

<sup>14</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology For Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978, originally published in 1972), 280-281.

summarized his insight in this way:

The first refers to freedom from sin, selfishness, injustice, need, and situations calling for deliverance. The second refers to the purpose of the first freedom--namely, love and communion; this is the final phase of liberation.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Christ did come to set us free and to give us life in its fullness (Jn. 10:10), but the ultimate purpose of this liberation and life is communion in love. These different dimensions are simultaneously present, of course, partially in this life and fully in the eschaton. A reflection by José Comblin on the Pauline understanding of freedom and its relational nature supports Gutiérrez's position:

To be free is to be with others, to enter into new human relations inspired by love. The actual content of freedom is the relation of reciprocal openness and mutual service between men. There is no such thing as a freedom of man on his own...There is liberation only in a new way of communal life.<sup>16</sup>

We have been set free to love and the fullness of freedom is found in union with God and one another. The entire process of liberation is directed toward communion. Gutiérrez emphasized the distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *for* as key in exploring the relationship between freedom and liberation, a vital question in liberation theology from its

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<sup>15</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 67.

<sup>16</sup>José Comblin, "Freedom and Liberation as Theological Concepts," in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 99.

beginnings. This distinction remains central to his soteriology in the 1990s. In our new context, he continues to affirm that we have been set free for love, and that this interpretation of the concept freedom *for* gives to that of freedom *from* its profound meaning.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, Gutiérrez conceives of salvation as communion. A statement in *The Truth Shall Make You Free* makes this quite clear:

Liberation...is a journey toward communion. Communion, however, is a gift of Christ who sets us free in order that we may be free, free to love; it is in this communion that full freedom resides.<sup>18</sup>

Gutiérrez repeats this central insight throughout his writings.<sup>19</sup> He emphasized its importance yet again by giving the title "Free to Love" to Part Three of *We Drink From Our Own Wells*. It is in light of his broad soteriological vision, then, that he criticized the second Vatican Instruction on Latin American liberation theology, *Libertatis Conscientia*, for its lack of full development of the idea of communion as the ultimate purpose of liberation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Gutiérrez, "¿Dónde dormirán los pobres?," 39-41.

<sup>18</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 106.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 24; "Faith as Freedom," 26; *Wells*, 92; and "Christian Hope for the New Millenium," *Catholic New Times* 20, no. 22 (15 December 1996): 9.

<sup>20</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 139.

## II. Sin As Breach Of Communion

If salvation is communion with God and others, sin is a breach of that communion. It, too, occurs in community and concerns the well-being of community. It is for this reason that Gutiérrez reflects at length on sin. The following quotation from *The Truth Shall Make You Free* explicitly links the centrality of sin in his theology to his soteriology of communion: "This breaking of friendship with God and others is a rejection of that 'communion with the Lord and with all humans [which] is more than anything else a gift'."<sup>21</sup> The fundamental alienation, sin is a negation of love with historical consequences which are only too apparent in the unconscionable situations of social injustice and death experienced daily by the poor. It is their large-scale marginalization, as well as the sheer magnitude of their suffering, which led Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians to rediscover the collective dimensions of sin and to speak of the evil of social sin. Gutiérrez's own reflection gains depth and legitimacy from the fact that it is an integral part of a broader soteriological vision which emphasizes unity over division and reconciliation over alienation.

The Latin American reality of poverty and oppression described at the beginning of chapter two is a sinful reality. As such, Gutiérrez emphasizes, it is a divisive reality with

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<sup>21</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 138.



built-in social conflict, founded as it largely is on a West European bourgeois ideology which inordinately benefits the middle and upper classes, and so the minority over the majority. Inequitable social structures result in the constant struggle of the poor on the basic level of life and death--for food, shelter, employment, health care, education and the most elementary human rights. Yet the privileged enjoy a comfortable life and ignore the cries of the poor and the need for change. Social barriers are erected which hinder attempts to move out of this debilitating situation, and so a state of "institutionalized violence" is perpetuated. Gutiérrez's succinct description of this state captures its sinful nature:

It is violence because it effectively deals in negation of and contempt for human life. It is institutionalized because it is not something fleeting or occasional, but a social system built on, institutionalized in, the death of the poor for the profit of the few.<sup>22</sup>

The oppression of the Latin American poor is made more acute still by the political and military repression which has spilled the blood of so many martyrs. A countersign to the reign of God, this conflictive reality is judged theologically to be a situation of sin. To explore its fullest dimensions is to become aware of the extent of the break with each other and God which sin represents.

It is significant that it is in the course of an

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<sup>22</sup>Gutiérrez, "Violence of a System," 94.

article on the violence of the system that Gutiérrez presents the most complete elaboration of his understanding of sin:

Not sin as a private, intimate occurrence, needing only 'spiritual' redemption, without questioning the social order we live in; rather, we are dealing with sin as a social, historical event, a lack of brotherhood and a break with God, and a personal, inner cutting-off because of this. Sin occurs in oppressive structures, in the domination and plunder of nations, races and social classes; what is opposed to the kingdom of love and life is thus seen to be the ultimate root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

A number of key ideas emerge. Underlying them are two main premises. The first, that the one history moves toward the total communion of all human beings with God, has already been discussed in the context of Gutiérrez's insistence on the unity of history. The second is that the very root of human existence is relationship with God in solidarity with other persons. Gutiérrez bases this premise on his reflection on the core of the gospel message of salvation as that of "the mystery of filiation and fellowship--our status as children of God and brothers and sisters of one another."<sup>24</sup> He claims, in fact, that the theology of liberation is born of a manner of seeing oneself and one another as daughters and sons of the Father and as a deep and demanding community of brothers and sisters.<sup>25</sup> With repeated use of the familial terms favoured by Paul in Colossians 1:26 and Romans 16:25-26, he attempts

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<sup>23</sup>Gutiérrez, "Violence of a System," 94-95.

<sup>24</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 67.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

not only to suggest the intimacy of the liberated community with God and among themselves but also to offer a theological rationale for the socio-economic and political structures necessary to promote salvific communion in the present. In other words, the reality of our status as God's children and sisters and brothers of each other must be reflected in concrete communities of liberation. Otherwise, situations of sin will persist.<sup>26</sup> The two premises concerning the unity of history and relationship with God and each other as the root of human existence are therefore integrally linked in Gutiérrez's thought, as the following quotation indicates:

There are not two histories, one of filiation and another of human community, one in which we become children of God and another in which we become one another's sisters and brothers. There is only one history, and it has both aspects together.<sup>27</sup>

Three aspects of sin are highlighted in the previously quoted statement which expresses Gutiérrez's understanding of sin. Each reinforces the broader notion of sin as an historical breach of salvific communion. Sin is an historical event, it is social by nature, and it has collective

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<sup>26</sup>In the context of sinful social distortions, Leonardo Boff included in his own reflection on the fatherhood of God as the basis of universal fellowship the notion that all beings are created in the Son, by the Son, with the Son and for the Son, and are therefore sons and daughters and brothers and sisters in the Son. This notion helps to correct authoritarian distortions and oppressive images of God as absolute Lord, supreme Judge and solitary Father, images too often supportive of oppressive social structures. See *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988, originally published in 1986), 167-170.

<sup>27</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 64.

dimensions.

Combatting a traditionally spiritualistic approach to sin which minimizes its historical significance in social life, Gutiérrez argues that sin is an historical event or fact. A part of the daily events of human life, it is a personal and social intrahistorical reality with the devastating concrete consequences so graphically apparent in Latin America today. Originating in a socially and historically situated freedom,<sup>28</sup> the fundamental alienation which is sin cannot be encountered in itself, but only in particular alienations. For, apart from the concrete alienation, sin is meaningless and incomprehensible.<sup>29</sup> Gutiérrez interprets the sin of omission in this same vein. To keep silence in the face of events wracking Latin American countries, before the sufferings of the poor brought on by the economic crisis, racial and gender-based exclusion, political repression, and so on, means actively to accept and participate in concrete, historical situations of sin.<sup>30</sup> Both love and sin are realities which occur in history as we are living it and making it at the moment. Communion with God and one another is either deepened or destroyed in the historical process.

Sin has been viewed traditionally, not only as an

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<sup>28</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 101.

<sup>29</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 62. See also *Theology of Liberation*, 103.

<sup>30</sup>Gutiérrez, "Violence of a System," 94.

occurrence outside of history, but also as a private, intimate affair, a matter between the individual and God. Emphasizing, rather, the social and historical nature of sin, liberation theologians resituate it within the larger framework of social relationships. The documents of Medellín and Puebla followed this lead. Despite the assertions of some evangelical critics to the contrary, liberation theologians do not deny the personal dimension of sin. Gutiérrez has explicitly stated: "This emphasis, however, by no means signifies a forgetfulness of the personal dimension of sin. The breaking of friendship with God is the action of a free will."<sup>31</sup> He and other liberation theologians were impelled, however, to develop a social perspective in light of the devastating social realities so apparent in Latin America which they interpret as consequences of sin. For Gutiérrez, the bottom line is that to sin is to reject communion and community; it is to refuse to love, a refusal which negatively affects relationships with God and among ourselves because relationships of injustice and exploitation are created. Certainly a breach with God, sin is also a breach of the communion of persons with each other. To sin is to deny that another human being is a sister or brother. The turning in of individuals on themselves manifests itself in a multifaceted withdrawal from others. Motivated by selfishness, sin is not, therefore, something that occurs only within some intimate sanctuary of the heart;

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<sup>31</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 137.

it has a social dimension since it affects interpersonal relationships among people who naturally live within a web of social relationships. It vitiates our solidarity with others as well as our relationship with God and therefore hinders the creation of a just and human society.<sup>32</sup>

As for the institutional aspect of sin, José Ignacio Gonzalez Faus has pointed out that, in the notion of structural sin, Latin American liberation theologians have recovered the Johannine notion of the sin of the world. As does Gutiérrez, he interprets the gravest significance of this sin of the world to be denial of family unity within a social order hostile to God:

'The world' means a socioreligious order hostile to God or an oppressive system based on money or power for the few. This sin makes the world unable to grasp the truth: the truth that God is a Father and Just (cf. John 17:25) and human beings are therefore God's children and brothers and sisters of one another.<sup>33</sup>

It is from this perspective that Gutiérrez joins other liberation theologians in denouncing the sin in those oppressive structures which social analysis determines to be the causes of situations of injustice. The institutional or collective dimensions of sin become obvious in the institutionalized violence of a social system ordered against the interest of the marginalized majority. As the Medellín

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<sup>32</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 97, and *Power*, 147.

<sup>33</sup>José Ignacio Gonzalez Faus, "Sin," trans. Dinah Livingstone, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 536.

document on peace, for which Gutiérrez was largely responsible, asserted, the widespread oppression of the poor in Latin America is due to "a structural deficiency of industry and agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life."<sup>34</sup> This structural deficiency amounts to systemic sin because the domination and plunder of whole nations, races and social classes are actually structured into the socio-economic and political system. As Gutiérrez reasons, behind an unjust structure there is a responsible collective will which rejects God and others.<sup>35</sup> It is unjust structures which have created broad strata of poverty in Latin America and dehumanized the poor. Systemic sin has resulted in an unjust social order antagonistic to the establishment of salvific community.

Considered a new insight in the early 1970s, Latin American liberation theologians' understanding of sin has by now gained wide acceptance among socially conscious Christians. Gutiérrez's approach has the merit of grounding that common understanding in a comprehensive soteriological framework. As did other liberation theologians of the founding years, he emphasized especially the aspect of class

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<sup>34</sup>Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, 110. The English text is taken from *Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council: II Conclusions*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Division for Latin America, United States Catholic Conference, 1973).

<sup>35</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 15.

conflict within capitalist societies in his treatment of social sin. As he made clear in his 1984 article on theology and the social sciences, he viewed this particular aspect as the one which posed the most acute problems for the universality of Christian love. At the same time, he refused to reduce historical conflict to "economic" factors alone.<sup>36</sup> With more theological reflection being devoted to categories of race, culture, gender, and ecology as liberation theology evolves, a further deepening and broader application of the vital notion of sin as breach of communion is to be anticipated. Gutiérrez has already pointed the way in insisting that, in the concrete living out of our life together, whatever is opposed to the kingdom of love and life is sinful.

### **III. Covenantal Community Already And Not Yet**

In redefining the terms and framework for interpreting the meaning of salvation, liberation theologians eschew interpretations which are narrowly "spiritual" as well as politically reductionistic. Gutiérrez has embraced the concept of an "integral" liberation and has been careful to insist again and again on the unity of the complex process of salvation in which three dimensions are distinguishable but inseparable. Some liberation theologians like the Boffs have criticized with some justification the use of the term

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<sup>36</sup>See *Truth*, 70-71.



"integral liberation" on the grounds that it tends to deprive concrete historical liberations of their full meaning and legitimacy and that it is usually understood in a spiritualistic sense and therefore causes confusion.<sup>37</sup> The concept remains, however, fundamental to Gutiérrez's soteriology and it provides the framework for his vision of liberating and liberated community.

Closely linked to the idea of integral liberation is the biblical theme of covenantal community. From *A Theology of Liberation* through *The God of Life*, Gutiérrez has consistently developed the theme of liberation in light of the covenant made in love. The exodus event is a communal experience of liberation wrought by God through human intermediaries because of a prior love for and desire of union with oppressed, unfree human beings. He has expressed his viewpoint on the saving event recorded in Exodus in this way: "The realization of the liberating love of Yahweh had been present from the beginning of the process...The full experience of that freedom was to come in the communion of the promised land."<sup>38</sup> The point of the journey to liberation is that it leads to encounter with God while, at the same time,

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<sup>37</sup>For a fuller discussion of the value and limits of the terms, see Leonardo Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 43-44 and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 68-74. Clodovis Boff elaborated on his epistemological critique in *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987, originally published in 1978), 87-88.

<sup>38</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 74.

a new creation, a community, is fashioned. In Exodus, liberation and covenant are inseparable:

The exodus affords a grasp of the perspective in which the covenant is situated, and the covenant in turn gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt. Liberation leads to communion. This is the process by which the 'people of God' is built.<sup>39</sup>

Salvation is accomplished through an historical re-creation oriented toward eschatological fulfillment. Final communion with God and others is anticipated historically in covenantal communities struggling for integral liberation.

In keeping with his covenantal and eschatological perspectives on salvation, Gutiérrez focuses his vision on the promised land, symbol for him of a radically different situation as prophesied by Isaiah 65:17-23. In the promised land, human beings find daily food, enjoy personal freedom and dignity, and find communion with God and one another.<sup>40</sup> In Gutiérrez's experience, an historical equivalent of the covenantal community on the way to the promised land is being tentatively fashioned in Latin America base ecclesial communities within the broader popular movement. For within these communities, the poor and those in solidarity with them are committed to a collective enterprise of integral liberation and, in their love for one another, they live out in very real and practical ways the norm of the new covenantal

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<sup>39</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 9-10.

<sup>40</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 17; *Wells*, 79.

community.<sup>41</sup> They are affirming life in the midst of death. Gutiérrez finds hope in the new directions taken by these communities for they are engaged in a new social experience in Latin America as agents of their own transformation. While the revolutionary thrust of the 1970s has been blunted by the overwhelming power of the 1990s' new world order, and a debate is occurring in Latin America concerning their future and their role in the growing civic movement,<sup>42</sup> there is every reason to believe that the primary salvific task of base ecclesial communities remains the same.<sup>43</sup> Part Three of this study will explore the specifically ecclesiological implications of Gutiérrez's soteriological reflection on base ecclesial communities. My intent, at this point, is to examine the kind of society which he envisages being built with the help of covenantal communities committed to integral liberation and life.

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<sup>41</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 15.

<sup>42</sup>In a Brazilian context, José Comblin raises some vital questions about the future in "Algumas Questões a Partir da Prática das Comunidades de Base no Nordeste," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 50 (1990): 335-381; respondents who view the future of base ecclesial communities in a positive light include Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, "CEBs: ¿Estrutura ou movimento?" *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 50 (1990): 930-940 and Eduardo Hoornaert, "Futuro das CEBs," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 51 (1991): 161-163.

<sup>43</sup>For confirmation of this point of view, see Pablo Richard, "The Church of the Poor in the Decade of the '90s," *LADOC* 21, no. 2 (November/December 1990): 11-22 and 29; and "Current Trends in the CEBs in Latin America," *LADOC* 24, no. 3 (January/February 1994): 19-24, an interview of a team engaged in formation of Base Christian Communities.

At issue is a society which is "qualitatively different."<sup>44</sup> It is one in which the three dimensions of an integral liberation are to some degree concretized, always within a community framework. Covenantal community takes shape through historical actions leading to liberation within each dimension. As each is explored in turn, it is important to keep in mind Gutiérrez's methodological principle of distinguishing in order to unite through the normative focus of the saving love of God revealed in Jesus.<sup>45</sup>

#### A. A Just Society

Gutiérrez often points out that the questions posed by the poor centre first, not so much on the religious world, but on the economic, social and political order which oppresses and marginalizes them. He follows their lead in identifying structured social injustice as the root cause of their misery and he therefore calls for a social revolution.<sup>46</sup> What he promotes is a different society built in response to the needs of the poor rather than for the benefit of a few who hold the

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<sup>44</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 131 and 134.

<sup>45</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 187, note 55, and *Truth*, 127-128.

<sup>46</sup>While Gutiérrez advocates revolutionary change as opposed to the unproductive tinkering of developmentalist strategists, he is critical of a theology of revolution on the grounds that it runs the risk of becoming a revolutionary Christian ideology; see "Liberation Movements and Theology," trans. J.P. Donnelly, in *Jesus Christ and Human Freedom*, vol. 93 of *Concilium*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 138.

power. Throughout his writings, Gutiérrez's vision of a just society focuses on fundamental systemic change designed to facilitate relationships of equality. In very general terms, he calls for the creation of "a society of equals, in which there are no oppressors and no oppressed,"<sup>47</sup> "a new social order, based on justice and fellowship."<sup>48</sup> He envisions an intrinsically democratic social structure within which justice and love become a greater reality. He does not stipulate particular conditions for the realization of such a society since this is the domain of what he terms scientific rationality. He is guided, however, by a critical grasp of the conclusions of social scientists whose analyses of the Latin American reality uncover the causes of the present unjust situation and so point to transformative possibilities.<sup>49</sup>

Gutiérrez's soteriological rationale for involvement in the fashioning of a just society has a clearly unifying focus:

All struggle against exploitation and alienation,

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<sup>47</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 159.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>49</sup>The 1984 article "Theology and the Social Sciences" in *Truth*, Chapter 2, contains Gutiérrez's most extensive treatment of the value of the social sciences in laying the necessary groundwork for social change. Among the many works which review and critique Gutiérrez on this subject, Curt Cadorette's *From the Heart of the People: the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Oak Park, Illinois: Meyer Stone Books, 1988) provides a succinct and accessible guide to the theorists who have influenced Gutiérrez's thinking in this area; see, in particular, Chapters 3 and 4.

in a history which is fundamentally one, is an attempt to vanquish selfishness, the negation of love. This is the reason why any effort to build a just society is liberating. And it has an indirect but effective impact on the fundamental alienation. It is a salvific work, although it is not all of salvation.<sup>50</sup>

Yet he avoids Christian romanticism as well as political reductionism. In *A Theology of Liberation*, he claimed to have no false hopes regarding the possibility of advancing smoothly and by pre-established steps toward a more developed society;<sup>51</sup> in *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, he called attention to the complexity of the reality and the importance of not being naive about it.<sup>52</sup> Recourse to the social sciences is intended to identify in as scientific a manner as possible the true causes of the present unjust reality. Furthermore, Gutiérrez and other Latin American liberation theologians insist that the gospel imperative to love our neighbour demands of Christians concrete action in the socio-political arena. In the desperate situation in which they live, they interpret love of neighbour in terms of social order. Roger Haight has summarized the presuppositions underlying their position:

Because of our historical consciousness and sense of responsibility for history and its social structures, and because of the fact of interdependence and the social nature of human existence that postulates that we all participate

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<sup>50</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 103-104.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>52</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 2-3.

in the social structures that are in place, and because of the influence of social structures on human lives, love of neighbor today must include a concern for those social structures that keep human lives in bondage and unfreedom, and a concern for creating new liberating social institutions.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, love of neighbour is the most fundamental motivation for political action to bring about a just society. It is not a question, though, of reducing political action for transformation to a particular political programme. As we saw in chapter one, Gutiérrez has made his position clear. To quote him once more:

I am obviously not identifying the preferential option for the poor with any ideology or specific political program. Even if they represent legitimate options for the Christian laity, they do not at all satisfy fully the demands of the gospel.<sup>54</sup>

On occasion in his writings he did judge that, on condition that Latin Americans fashion their own solid theory, "socialism" represented the most fruitful and far-reaching approach to the liberation movement in Latin America; yet he remained critical of many of the concrete forms of socialism in the world and took his distance from the atheistic, determinist approach often identified with Marx.<sup>55</sup> Recently, he asked social scientists to consider the possible role of

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<sup>53</sup>Haight, *Alternative Vision*, 23-24.

<sup>54</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 160. On this point, see also *Truth*, 64, 66 and 77.

<sup>55</sup>For Gutiérrez's views on socialism, see, for example, *Theology of Liberation*, 55-56 and 249, note 51, and *Power*, 46.

markets in the construction of a just society.<sup>56</sup> The point is that his vision of a just society transcends any particular political platform. In his view, the most effective safeguard against political reductionism is a truly evangelical social praxis informed by the transforming love of God:

A relapsing into ideology made to justify a particular social situation is inevitable when the gospel is not lived as the word of a Father who loves us freely and gratuitously, with a love which renews the face of the earth, and calls us always to new life in his Son.<sup>57</sup>

The gospel, not political ideology, guides the praxis of base ecclesial communities at their best as they struggle to bring about a just society.

#### **B. Forgers Of A New Humanity**

Base ecclesial communities struggle to create a society which is qualitatively different not only from a socio-economic point of view but also in the area of human freedom, both internal and external. As Gutiérrez has defined it, their project involves "the creation of a new humanity in a new society of solidarity."<sup>58</sup> They are therefore engaged in a permanent cultural revolution in history. As I pointed out in chapter one, in an effort to encourage political engagement in this area of liberation, Gutiérrez developed the

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<sup>56</sup>Gutiérrez, "Liberación y Desarrollo," 28.

<sup>57</sup>Gutiérrez, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation," 74.

<sup>58</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 137.



notion of utopia and reaffirmed the unity of salvific history open to eschatological fulfillment. With broad strokes, he also surveyed the development of ideas which influenced the modern dynamic understanding of human liberation.<sup>59</sup> In this section, however, my interest lies not so much in following him further in these directions as in identifying the communal dynamic which he considers vital to the forging of a new humanity whose refashioning will be completed in the eschaton.

In developing his ideas on the second dimension of liberation, Gutiérrez made use of an expression current at the time in political philosophy and historical approaches to the problem of social change. In his interpretation, "new human being" suggests that new social structures are not enough; human development is also required:

The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be human, a *permanent cultural revolution*. In other words, what is at stake above all is a dynamic and historical conception of the human person oriented definitively and creatively toward the future.<sup>60</sup>

Gutiérrez argues that, in Latin America, this refashioning of the human person is being effected by the poor in community. As a result, their cultural revolution bears their own stamp which sets it apart from the modern European movement for freedom in a number of important ways.

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<sup>59</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 17-22 and 135-140.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

Most significantly, it is a cultural revolution from "the underside of history." It is the poor who are empowering themselves and becoming agents of their own transformation as they seek to liberate themselves from exploitation:

The 'others'--the exploited classes, oppressed cultures, and ethnic groups that suffer discrimination...are becoming less and less an object of demagoguery and manipulation, or an object of half-heartedly disguised 'social work,' and more and more the agents of their own history--forgers of a radically different society.<sup>61</sup>

They are imposing their own aspirations and values on the liberation process and, slowly but surely, they are learning a whole new way of being human. The evidence in support of Gutiérrez's affirmation is growing. I offer one encouraging illustration from the liberation of poor women in community noted in the conclusion to chapter two. Through participation in such projects as community kitchens and the organization of milk programmes as well as leadership roles in base Christian communities, poor women in Peru, triply oppressed in a traditionally *machistic* and racist society, are claiming a new sense of personhood and self-worth, and so are discovering their own voice. As this example indicates, what is decisive for their human development and that of the poor in general is the community. For it is communities of solidarity which are creating the space necessary for growth of the person in its many dimensions and for new-found human freedom to be exercised. The individual grows within a society in

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<sup>61</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 190.

liberative solidarity.

The fact that Gutiérrez understands the whole salvific community of the poor to be forgers of a new humanity becomes apparent in *We Drink From Our Own Wells* where he articulates most completely the spiritual dimensions of the communal liberation process. The following quotation is pertinent:

An entire people--with all its traditional values and the wealth of its recent experience--has taken to the path of building a world in which persons are more important than things and in which all can live with dignity, a society that respects human freedom when it is in the service of a genuine common good, and exercises no kind of coercion, from whatever source.<sup>62</sup>

It is not that Gutiérrez romanticizes this evolving humanization; his intimacy with poor communities makes him quite aware that the world of the poor is inhabited by flesh-and blood human beings capable of indifference to others, abuse, pettiness, and individualism. It is, rather, that he finds reason for hope in noticeable changes among the poor who participate in communities of solidarity. As James Nickoloff points out, Gutiérrez's utopic vision has been nourished by visible gains in this aspect of liberation through the *movimiento popular*:

Empirically verifiable shifts in the behavior of the poor, such as the transition from the language of favors to that of rights, signal a deeper transformation in individual and collective identity. As a 'school of solidarity' for the last half century, the popular movement engenders pride in personal uniqueness, equality among diverse persons, loyalty to 'others,' commitment to

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<sup>62</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 27.

participatory democracy, and devotion to an ethic of life.<sup>63</sup>

Base ecclesial communities solidify these gains by confirming them from a faith perspective.

The communal character of the humanization process underway in Latin America is decisive in another way as well. While personal or interior freedom is recognized as vital to the creation of a qualitatively different society, the utopian project transcends individual growth and challenges the modern individualistic thrust. The new society is qualitatively different in that it is a society characterized by solidarity. Emphasis is placed on social development, that is, on the formation of a new social consciousness and on the social appropriation of freedom. The expression "social appropriation of freedom" is intended, in fact, to distance the liberating project from the individualistic viewpoint of the modern Western world and liberal culture. Personal freedom must extend, not only to the majority, but to all. As Gutiérrez sees it, the ultimate goal of the present cultural revolution is "a real encounter among persons in the midst of a free society without social inequalities."<sup>64</sup> The new humanity being forged by the poor in covenantal community is intrinsically social.

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<sup>63</sup>Nickoloff, "Church of the Poor: The Ecclesiology of Gustavo Gutiérrez," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 523.

<sup>64</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 138.

### **C. A Community Liberated From Sin And Admitted To Communion**

To reiterate a point which may seem obvious but which can get lost in the theological controversy often surrounding their reflection, the main preoccupation of liberation theologians is liberation of the poor. They seek total liberation, a liberation which integrates not only social transformation and human liberation but also liberation from sin which enables communion with God and one another. Base Christian communities play a key role in the whole liberation process in that, through them, faith as liberating praxis is introduced in an intentional and effective way into each dimension. This final section will focus on the significance of their contribution to the third dimension in particular, the one which gives unity to the entire process.

In Gutiérrez's experience, it is faith communities among the poor which are responsible for another approach to liberation founded on the biblical sources of commitment to transformative action in history. He reflects soteriologically on their reading of the Bible and concludes that the Bible reveals a loving God whose salvific action liberates from sin and draws all into communion. The paradigmatic event of the exodus shows clearly the global scope of God's liberating action and has both religious and political meanings. Furthermore, the Bible teaches Christians that the process of liberation finds its deepest sense and fullest realization in the work of Christ who carries out

God's saving action in history and calls Christian communities to do in like manner. For Christians, a soteriological vision of integral liberation and communion is ultimately rooted in the Gospel:

In the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. Christ makes humankind truly free, that is to say, he enables us to live in communion with him; and this is the basis for all human fellowship.<sup>65</sup>

It is in this sense that liberation in Christ, the third dimension of liberation, is so intimately connected with the other two and gives the whole process its meaning and unity. Such a Christological perspective on salvation justifies the social appropriation of the gospel by faith communities whose situation of oppression highlights the social dimension of sin in all its concrete manifestations and whose liberative efforts attest to the social significance of liberation in Christ.

Gutiérrez considers the action of base Christian communities within this third dimension of liberation to be two-pronged, like that of Christ the Saviour. Through their solidarity in the liberation movement, they engage in a liberating evangelization which announces the scope of the liberation from sin effected by Christ; at the same time, they form community in partial realization of the final goal of

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<sup>65</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 25.

salvation.

As we saw in the section on sin, liberation theologians understand sin as a social event with disastrous historical consequences. Where scientific analysis unmask the causes of injustice, theology penetrates to the root of all forms of enslavement, that is, the breach of communion with God and each other. It is this breach which is mended by Christ's saving action in liberating humanity from sin. Liberation from sin therefore enables, at the same time, liberation from social oppression and constraints on human freedom and development, visible effects of the breach of communion with God and each other. As Gutiérrez reasons, "liberation from sin by Christ...attacks the ultimate root of all injustice and thus links together, though without confusing them, the several dimensions of liberation."<sup>66</sup> Although important, changes in the socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres are therefore inadequate from a Christian point of view. Change must occur in the area of the fundamental alienation, sin. The faith perspective brought to the liberation movement by base Christian communities therefore broadens and deepens understanding of the entire process as originating in the saving action of a liberator God incarnate in Jesus the Saviour. At the same time, insight into the mystery of God's saving love and its demands in a history of oppression provides motivation for the creation of

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<sup>66</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 121.

a just society and a new humanity. Inspiring and radicalizing as it does their commitment in history, the evangelization undertaken by base Christian communities in response to the covenant with God is liberating in the most profound sense.

A vital and communal experience, faith not only reveals the source of human alienation and God's reconciling initiative; it also prompts Christians to unite in communities of solidarity, thereby announcing in a liberative manner the good news of restored communion with God and one another. Gutiérrez expresses faith's unifying dynamic and its significance in this way:

Faith comes alive in the dynamism of the good news that reveals us as children of the Father and sisters and brothers of one another, and creates a community, a church, the visible sign to others of liberation in Christ.<sup>67</sup>

As we have seen, Gutiérrez considers the core of the gospel message of salvation to be revelation of the mystery of our identity as children of God and brothers and sisters of each other. In his view, base Christian communities witness to the reality of this mystery in their concrete historical situation as they go about the building of authentic brotherhood and sisterhood in history. Through their very existence, they are engaging in liberating evangelization because they are announcing the reality of the love of the Father which "calls all persons in Christ and through the action of the Spirit to

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<sup>67</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 67.



union among themselves and communion with him."<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, through their transformative action in response to this gift, they are engaged in the liberation necessary for communion. Communal projects to feed, shelter and clothe the poor and to nurture their self-worth and growth as persons, as well as communal initiatives to change the structures which keep them enslaved, all advance the reign of God. As the bishops stated at Puebla, "authentic communion and participation can exist in this life only if they are projected on to the very concrete plane of temporal realities."<sup>69</sup> By affirming that communion can be achieved, at least in part, within liberative community, base Christian communities are therefore participating in the salvific movement toward total communion.<sup>70</sup> Liberated from sin and admitted to communion with God, they are, in effect, giving historical form to the biblical vision of a covenantal community already moving toward the promised land and the enjoyment of full communion.

### **Conclusion**

Certainly Gutiérrez requires proof of communion/salvation in the concrete actions prescribed by Matthew 25:31-45, actions directed to social and political

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<sup>68</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 153.

<sup>69</sup>Quoted in *Truth*, 139.

<sup>70</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 155.

liberation. He also insists on the necessity of constructing a new human being in history and through human effort. The last section of this chapter gave shape to the historical translation of Gutiérrez's conception of salvation as communion. Charges of positing a substitute salvation which is reductionistic can hardly be sustained, however, in light of Gutiérrez's overall vision which accentuates communion with God and others as the unifying dynamic in the salvific process. He has clearly stated the controlling goal of the entire process: "To be saved is to reach the fullness of love; it is to enter into the circle of charity which unites the three Persons of the Trinity; it is to love as God loves."<sup>71</sup> And he presents Christ as the one who brings us liberation, a total liberation, the unity of which comes in the final analysis from communion with God and others.

Latin American soteriology from the perspective of women also emphasizes the idea of liberation for community and communion. Feminist theologians willingly embrace the notion of salvation as communion. The Final Document of the Intercontinental Women's Conference held in Oaxtepec, Mexico in 1986 articulates the soteriological vision of participants as "the vision of God's new creation, where no one is subordinated or enslaved, but where free people take part in God's liberating project to build a true community and a new

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<sup>71</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 113.

society."<sup>72</sup> María Clara Bingemer speaks eloquently of the ecclesial community of liberated men and women who hope, pray and work for an inclusive messianic humanity which finds its destination in the great mystery of Love.<sup>73</sup> In her reflection on the all-inclusive characteristic of the church as the people of God, Aracely de Rocchietti clearly relates liberating community and salvation:

Jesus preaches with clarity a new relation between humanity and God and between men and women under the grace of this new relationship which is already to be found among his disciples as the eschatological gift of salvation.<sup>74</sup>

That the soteriological vision of these feminist theologians converges with that of Gutiérrez is not surprising when one reflects on the highly relational quality characteristic of the identity and world view of Latin American poor women. Aquino speaks of "the logic of solidarity and mutuality characterizing the way the oppressed women feel and think,"<sup>75</sup> and Ana María Tepedino notes the fact that they and the women theologians who articulate their experience reread revelation and reality with a view not only to individual liberation but

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<sup>72</sup>*With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Fabella and Onduyoye, 187.

<sup>73</sup>María Clara Bingemer, "Reflections on the Trinity," trans. Jeltje Aukema, *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 80.

<sup>74</sup>Aracely de Rocchietti, "Women and the People of God," trans. James C. G. Grieg, *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 101.

<sup>75</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 73.

to the liberation of an entire people.<sup>76</sup>

José Míguez Bonino once described the historical project in which Latin American liberation movements are engaged as "a humanized, participatory society in solidarity."<sup>77</sup> Critics have required of him, as of other liberation theologians, more definite guidelines as to how such a society is to be structured. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, called for "a more fulsome account of the nature of Gutiérrez's 'fraternal' society and how it is best accomplished."<sup>78</sup> Paul Sigmund judged that the new social order advocated by liberation theologians in general remains "a utopian ideal of a cooperative equalitarian, non-exploitative social order--with the details to be filled in later."<sup>79</sup> In *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Míguez Bonino made the case, however, for leaving some options open rather than attempting, at this historical juncture, to structure too rigidly the new social model. He stressed that its more definite shaping was still in progress as strategies were proposed by various theorists and groups in different

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<sup>76</sup>Ana María Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," trans. Phillip Berryman, in *With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 165.

<sup>77</sup>José Míguez Bonino, "Love and Social Transformation in Liberation Theology," in *Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 124.

<sup>78</sup>Hauerwas, "Some Theological Reflections," 74.

<sup>79</sup>Paul Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 178.

countries according to different views which were sometimes conflicting. He therefore justified liberation theology's frequent use of the expression "historical project" precisely because it is a midway term between utopia and a technically developed model for the organization of society.<sup>80</sup> While it can be argued that technical specificity lies beyond the role of the theologian, even of the liberation theologian whose theological approach insists on taking into account current political theory and social analysis, there is no question that concrete political and socio-economic strategies must be effected. In the construction of the new social order envisioned by Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians, there is therefore more foundational work to be done by political theorists and experts in the social sciences. Women must also be more widely consulted.

Valuing as they do daily life with its web of relationships, Latin American women focus on the transformation of relationships at all levels as key to the building of the kind of covenantal community which Gutiérrez seeks. For example, Aquino calls for profound changes "in family relationships, in relationships between couples, friendship, the equal division of tasks, common production and social reproduction, in the expression of warmth, gestures strengthening solidarity, and every experience that makes life

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<sup>80</sup>José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 38-40.

human."<sup>81</sup> She points out that feminist work is trying to find new answers, new ideas and paradigms, and new ways of understanding that are more whole and inclusive.<sup>82</sup> In the meantime, as Ivone Gebara observes, creative strategies for personal and communal change are in fact being effected by women in many poor communities. They have become aware of the value of housework and are fighting for it to be given proper recognition and status. At the same time, they have broken out of the purely domestic sphere and have organized for a different society and against all kinds of authoritarianism, as well as sexual and racial discrimination.<sup>83</sup> Gebara also notes the significant contribution which many poor women in Latin America are making to the forging of a new humanity. By opting for themselves and seeking transformation of traditional images of themselves and their roles in society, they are fashioning new creatures, new women. In this sense, she maintains that "women's attainment of historical self-awareness and readiness to act on it is one of the 'cultural revolutions' of our time."<sup>84</sup> Their learnings are therefore invaluable in the fashioning of covenantal communities.

In the introduction to the 1988 revised edition of A

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<sup>81</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 101.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>83</sup>Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for the Poor Woman," in *Women, Work and Poverty*, vol. 194 of *Concilium*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr, 114-115.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 111.

*Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez drew attention to the need for a refining of the analytical tools used by Latin American social scientists and the development of new ones.<sup>85</sup> He also had many questions for social scientists gathered at the 1992 international seminar organized by the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas. The object was to encourage research relevant to the actual realization of a new social order.<sup>86</sup> He would do well to pose questions as well to more Latin American feminist theorists since his purpose and theirs is finally soteriological, that is, the ongoing creation in history of covenantal community anticipatory of the eschaton.

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<sup>85</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xxiv.

<sup>86</sup>Gutiérrez, "Liberación y desarrollo," 28.

## PART THREE

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

To define liberation theology as critical reflection on Christian praxis is to highlight its historical starting point. Challenged by the Latin American reality of systemic oppression and inspired by the liberation struggles of poor communities, liberation theologians have revolutionized theological discourse and methodology. Liberative practice has become a hermeneutical principle for knowledge of God as the hermeneutical circle moves from the human being to God, from history to faith, from love of our brothers and sisters to the love of the Father, from the poor person to God--and back again.<sup>1</sup> For the goal is to transform the historical reality, to liberate. As Gutiérrez has repeated over and over again, speech about God plays an important role as salvific activity, but it is uttered as "second act" from the midst of transformative praxis which seriously calls into question the value of merely abstract or purely academic approaches to theological questions.

If discourse about God is not to be separated from discourse about the historical process, what soteriological insights about God emerge from Gutiérrez's experience of and

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<sup>1</sup>Gutiérrez draws this version of the hermeneutical circle in *Power*, 15 and 61, and in *Truth*, 47-48.



critical reflection on the liberative praxis of Latin American Christians? Or, to phrase it differently, what are the theological foundations of the soteriological vision fashioned by communal liberative praxis? As Part Two makes clear, thanks in large part to base ecclesial communities within the popular movement for liberation, Gutiérrez understands salvation as liberation in community and for community with God and one another. What, then, did communities of the believing poor teach him about God, and about God's role, the human role, and the mission of the church in the liberation process? In their pastoral response to suffering and exploitation, what answers to his "great question" did they suggest?

As he does theology from "the underside of history" and explores foundational theological categories from within the soteriological framework of liberation for communion, Gutiérrez articulates a renewed understanding of, in particular, the nature of God as gratuitous love, the identity and mission of Christ as liberator and reconciler, spirituality as a communal journey of contemplation in liberative praxis, and the church of the poor as sacrament of communion. Since the project of salvation is located between gratuitousness and justice, central to all these categories is the concept of communion as both gift and task. The struggle for integral liberation leads to encounter with God and one another, and speech about God learned in encounter serves to

deepen commitment to the struggle.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## SOTERIOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE MIDST OF A PEOPLE

## I. God: Mystery Revealed In Salvation History

If we reverently approach the poor, to listen to the voice of God, shall we not be mystifying a harsh and cruel reality, preventing it from reaching us with its primal outcry? Shall we not be bringing from outside a God of academia or poetry, not discovering the God already there, a more internal, more living, more biblical, and nearer God? And yet, we must dare...<sup>2</sup>

As they dare to speak about God from the midst of a people, Latin American liberation theologians seek to respect the integrity of both traditional biblical revelation and the experience of the believing poor. From the beginning, their focus has been on God as mystery, mystery gratuitously revealed in history, particularly among the poor and oppressed. Ronaldo Muñoz divides their reflection in the early years into two periods. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, God was *mysterium liberationis*, and knowledge of God was mediated through the praxis of liberation; in the late 1970s and 1980s, while still liberator, the God who is mystery is also the God of life, knowledge of whom is mediated in

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<sup>2</sup>Javier Jiménez Limón, "Meditation on the God of the Poor," in *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology*, trans. Barbara E. Campbell and Bonnie Shepard (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), 151. The original book was published in 1980 under the title *La lucha de los dioses: los ídolos de la opresión y la búsqueda del Dios Liberador*.

experiences of life among those immersed in situations of death. As the principal biblical referents for Latin American liberation theology in the first period, Muñoz lists the Exodus, the pre-exilic prophets, and Jesus' ministry in Galilee; he expands the list for the second period to include the prophets of the exile, the psalms and the apocalypses, and Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

In their exploration of the nature of God as mystery, liberation theologians adopt a dialectical approach characteristic of their people's age-old faith. The result is what Victorio Araya terms a "bipolarity" in language about God as traditional categories of transcendence and immanence are rearticulated in terms of "God the greater" and "God the lesser:"

In liberative theo-logical reflection, language concerning Mystery is characterized by a bipolarity, in virtue of which, simultaneously and dialectically, is asserted the mystery of a God *siempre Mayor*, 'ever greater,' and the mystery of a God *siempre Menor*, 'ever lesser.' In virtue of this basic affirmation, God's radical *mysteric transcendence* comes to the fore: the ever greater God is the utterly other--God in absolute otherness--the Holy, the Inconceivable, absolute Mystery; in a word, the Transcendent. Conjointly, there is God's radical *historico-salvific immanence*: the ever lesser God...God in the incarnation, who assumes lowliness (becomes poor) in solidarity with the lowly and the poor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ronaldo Muñoz, "God the Father," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Otto Maduro, 410.

<sup>4</sup>Victorio Araya, *God of the Poor: The Mystery of God in Latin American Liberation Theology*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987), 34. Published originally in 1983, this book represents one of the first systematic attempts at foundational

Key to accessing the mystery of God is the twofold hermeneutical principle that the wholly other God is revealed in history, and the locus of God's historical self-revelation is, more precisely, the world of the poor who struggle for liberation and life. The application of this principle is evident in liberation theology's particular approach to Jesus, for Christians the primary revelation of God.

Jon Sobrino describes "God the greater" as being "beyond all control, being the totally other, being 'the greater being'."<sup>5</sup> From a review of Jesus' teaching and attitudes, he notes the accomplishment of the impossible as typical in Jesus' experience of God, and concludes that, for Jesus, God is grace and the realization of the impossible by grace is the way that God's transcendence, God's "unmanipulable mysteriousness" is mediated.<sup>6</sup> Sobrino also makes the essential connection between God's transcendence and love, and establishes as inseparable the relationship between being greater and being a God who shows a preferential love to the poor: "The most typical aspect of Jesus' understanding of

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articulation of the notion of God in a Latin American liberation theology more intent, at the beginning, on implications for spirituality than on a concern for systematization.

<sup>5</sup>Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984), 144. This work was originally published in 1981 as *Resurrección de la verdadera Iglesia: Los pobres, lugar teológico de la eclesiología*.

<sup>6</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978, originally published in 1976), 163-165.

God is that God is greater because he is love, and that this greater love of God is also partial--that is, it takes sides."<sup>7</sup> Pablo Richard has further elucidated the notion of "God the greater" through an etymological study of the word transcendence designed to support the concept of a God who transcends the limits of oppression and death.<sup>8</sup>

It is this greater God who freely chooses to become "God the lesser" encountered in the world of the poor. As Araya expressed it, "the liberator God is present in history, the history taken on by God out of love. God, the wellspring of life, justice, and love, assumes a 'radically distinct' reality: poverty, injustice, suffering, and death."<sup>9</sup> Sobrino has probed the soteriological phenomenon of the "lessening" of God from a christological point of view:

The revelation of the mystery of God has been accomplished in terms of a 'lessening,' a kenosis. Indeed the incarnation of Christ presupposes a double 'lessening.' The first one consists in the fact that he became human...The second, proclaimed and emphasized by the Church of the poor, consists in the fact that he became weak and showed solidarity with the poor.<sup>10</sup>

Undergirding the reflection of liberation theologians on "God the lesser" is the claim that, as Sobrino put it, "the

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<sup>7</sup>Sobrino, "The Epiphany of the God of Life in Jesus of Nazareth," in *Idols of Death and the God of Life*, 92.

<sup>8</sup>Richard, "Theology in the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 161.

<sup>9</sup>Araya, *God of the Poor*, 36.

<sup>10</sup>Sobrino, *True Church*, 149-150.

transcendental experience of God is made concrete in specific historical channels,"<sup>11</sup> and the church of the poor is a privileged channel for the experience of God. The church of the poor mediates knowledge of "God the lesser" particularly in its praxis of solidarity for the sake of liberation and in its struggle for and enjoyment of life in all its concrete dimensions.

The God of the poor is a God of love and justice, and a God of life, a God who intervenes in history on behalf of the oppressed. Faith in this God is therefore a gift which contains within it a summons to join in the salvific task in history. Juan Luis Segundo termed commitment to liberation "the proper access-road to God" and concluded that the authentic face of God is encountered in this commitment.<sup>12</sup> This viewpoint accounts for liberation theologians' emphasis on knowledge of God intimately linked to the practice of justice.<sup>13</sup> Their anti-idolatry reflection is to be placed in this context. To quote Araya, "faith in the God of the exodus, in the God of justice, in the God of life, demands a discernment of and a struggle against the idols of a system of

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<sup>11</sup>Sobrino, *True Church*, 126.

<sup>12</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1974, originally published in 1970), 16-17.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, José Porfirio Miranda's well-known exegetical study of the biblical theme that to know God is to do justice, in *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, trans. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1974, originally published in 1971), 44-53.

oppression that is structurally unjust and 'antilife'.<sup>14</sup>

An overview of the approach to the question of God by Latin American liberation theologians in general provides a framework for examining more closely Gutiérrez's distinctive contribution to the subject. As the following quotation indicates, he, too, links the mystery of God and the experience of the poor: "We, from a continent marked by unjust and premature death, also think that experience is a condition for being able to talk about God and say to the poor, 'God loves you.' The experience is the experience of the mystery of God."<sup>15</sup> Where are the points of convergence with the common thinking which he has helped to shape? What particular insights emerge from his own soteriological vision?

#### **A. A God of Gratuitous Love In Solidarity With The Poor**

As does Job, Gutiérrez makes a wager in speaking of God. As he describes it, "the wager has to do with speaking of God in the light of the unjust suffering that seems, in human experience, to deny love on God's part."<sup>16</sup> What enables him to win his wager is the liberative praxis of base

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<sup>14</sup>Araya, *God of the Poor*, 91. A good introduction to the topic, *The Idols of Death and the God of Life* presents a powerful sustained reflection on idolatry in the contemporary Latin American context from the perspective of a number of different contributors.

<sup>15</sup>Gutiérrez, "Epilogue," in Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil, *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994, originally published in 1993), 217.

<sup>16</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 5.



ecclesial communities where God is experienced. Gutiérrez has no real interest in systematization for its own sake; rather, from the beginning, he has explored the meaning of God for a spirituality of liberation. From his point of view, commitment to the poor in acts of solidarity freely chosen out of love witnesses to a loving God who gratuitously seeks restored communion through justice for all, particularly the marginalized. James Nickoloff put it well: "Active, affective, and, yes, 'political,' identification with the struggle of the marginalized opens up a horizon for grasping the paradox of God's unconditional yet simultaneously demanding love."<sup>17</sup> While the gratuitous love of the God of life is a central theme of the Bible and the cornerstone of its soteriological vision, it is communities of believers caught in situations of unspeakable suffering who make credible this theological concept by linking it with a search for the justice required for communion. As the second part of this section will illustrate, they do so in imitation of Christ the liberator and reconciler.

Pivotal, then, to Gutiérrez's ongoing soteriological reflection is the concept of the gratuitousness of God's love. It is from this perspective that he approaches the mystery of God and the spirituality of liberation. All is grace and the search for justice must be placed within the framework of the

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<sup>17</sup>Nickoloff, "Liberation Theology and the Church," *Religious Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (January 1992): 9.

gratuitousness of God's love.<sup>18</sup> As recently as in the 1993 epilogue to *Political Holiness* he affirmed that "gratuitousness provides a context for justice, and gives meaning to history."<sup>19</sup> As he went on to point out in his epilogue, the recognition of gratuitousness as a context for justice also ensures against making of social justice an idol. It is vital to explore his presentation of God in terms of gratuitous love to refute charges of Pelagianism by some evangelical theologians and others who criticize Gutiérrez for reductionism, and to sound the depths of a soteriology solidly anchored in and enriched by Judaeo-Christian scriptural revelation.

The titles of two sections of *The God of Life*, "At the Turning Point of the World: Gratuitousness" and "All Is Grace," capture well the gist of Gutiérrez's thought. His most thorough treatment of the theme of gratuitousness is found in *On Job* where it is intimately tied to the theme of God's saving love in the midst of pain and anguish. He explored God's revelation to Job in the context of these twin themes particularly in chapters nine and ten. From his encounter with God, the suffering Job gains a graced insight that "the entire work of creation bears the trademark of

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<sup>18</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Compartir la palabra A lo largo del Año Litúrgico* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas/Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1995), 383.

<sup>19</sup>Casaldáliga and Vigil, *Political Holiness*, 212.

gratuitousness,"<sup>20</sup> and that "God is entirely independent of space and time. God acts only in accordance with the utterly free divine will: God does what God pleases to do."<sup>21</sup> The conclusion is that "gratuitousness is the hinge on which the world turns and the definitive seal set upon it. This is the reality that embraces and gives meaning to everything."<sup>22</sup> This is the reality which engenders hope in the midst of despair.

For the revelation concerning God's gratuitousness does not end the discussion from Gutiérrez's point of view. His vision of salvation as communion with God and one another leads him to highlight the all-important connection between God's gratuitousness and God's love as a basis for the justice which ensures communion. From the midst of a personal experience of poverty and multi-faceted suffering, including the pain of social isolation, Job identifies with the misery of others and comes to a hard-won but ultimately graced understanding that God's salvific plan has its origin in gratuitousness, yes, but the gratuitousness of a creative love which intends redemption.<sup>23</sup> He comes to realize that "divine gratuitous love has been made the foundation of the world,"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 67.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

and that "God's love, like all true love, operates in a world not of cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness."<sup>25</sup> This insight into a God of gratuitous love is essential since it is the gratuitous nature of God's love which accounts for God's preferential love for the poor and desire to see justice done them. It is simply because they are poor that God loves them and calls them to communion, as reflection on such biblical passages as 1 Samuel 2:4-8, Luke 1:51-53 and 6:20-21, and Matthew 25:31-46 makes clear.<sup>26</sup> Gratuitous love is foundational, therefore, to God's salvific activity. Ronaldo Muñoz describes a God who wishes to enter into communion with us "from the free and gratuitous movement of a visceral love for us."<sup>27</sup> In the same vein, Gutiérrez speaks of "a God who loves gratuitously, a God who refuses to be contained by our categories and to submit to a standard of conduct based on a *quid pro quo*."<sup>28</sup> The utter freedom of God's love, which alone explains God's preference for the weak and oppressed, lies at the heart of the biblical message.

Gutiérrez's insistence on the gratuitousness of God's saving love is to be understood, then, within his purpose of linking love and a preferential option for the poor as a basis

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<sup>25</sup>Gutiérrez. *Job*, 87.

<sup>26</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 88 and 104; *Power*, 96.

<sup>27</sup>Muñoz, "God the Father," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 412.

<sup>28</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 39.

for social justice. As he himself pointed out in *On Job*, the conviction that the commitment to justice has ultimate meaning only within the perspective of God's gratuitous love has been part of the theology of liberation from the beginning and has always fed the spirituality that animates it.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, justice finds its full meaning and source in the freely given love of God. In a happy turn of phrase, Gutiérrez noted that "the justice of God is deep and true because it is steeped in gratuitousness."<sup>30</sup> Commitment to the poor finds its point of reference within the vast and mysterious horizon of God's gratuitous love, a love which we are called to imitate, however imperfectly. It is gratuitous, preferential love which sends God and us on a quest for the justice which restores communion. As Gutiérrez reasons, justice implies relationship between human beings and, understood in the biblical sense of right relationship, justice is in fact equated with salvation understood as communion:

The word 'justice,' while referring to the bonds established among persons living in society, denotes the nexus of human beings with God as well. The first meaning is not erased. It is only assumed into a connotation so important and rich, in Scripture, that it comes to be equivalent to salvation--that is, to total communion with God and

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<sup>29</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 129, note 4.

<sup>30</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 117.

others.<sup>31</sup>

It is out of consuming desire to restore full communion, to save, that the God of gratuitous love does justice, particularly to the poor.

To conclude, the answer to the foundational theological question of who God is for Gutiérrez is clear. God is gratuitous love revealed in solidarity with the poor. To be sure, God is also liberator and life. Gutiérrez and his colleagues have explored the latter image in more depth in recent writings. As the outline of Part One of *The God of Life* makes clear, however, the larger and controlling context for exploration of the nature of God is God's being as love, gratuitous love. According to Gutiérrez's conception of the mystery of God revealed in history, the God of gratuitous love, "God the greater," is known in our own search for justice, a search which leads us also to loving solidarity with the poor where "God the lesser" is experienced.

#### **B. Christ The Liberator: Irruption Into History Of God's Gratuitous Love**

The God in whom communities of the believing poor hope, as does Gutiérrez in their midst, is, then, the God of the poor and oppressed. In their theological reflection on the praxis of liberation, liberation theologians are faced,

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<sup>31</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993, originally published in 1992), 10.

according to Gutiérrez, with the challenge of a deeper understanding of what "God of the poor" means in a concrete history of oppression and struggle for liberation. They come to this understanding through Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the principal hermeneutic of the faith and the foundation of all theological discourse.<sup>32</sup> Unlike many other liberation theologians, Gutiérrez has not devoted a whole work to christology--or to pneumatology for that matter. While essential to his soteriology, his christological perspective is discovered, rather, from a study of his treatment of Christ in various parts of his writings. It soon becomes apparent that he conceives the soteriological role of Jesus, principal hermeneutic of a faith understood in terms of liberative praxis, to be that of liberator and personification in history of God's gratuitous love. The poor know God as gratuitous love in solidarity with them in their situation of oppression and struggle for life because Jesus became one with them and revealed this God to them. They believe that God seeks their salvation and that of all humanity because Jesus the Saviour sought integral liberation for the sake of communion.

In its evolution, liberation christology has adhered to certain principles which distinguish it. As well as insisting on the hermeneutical privilege of oppressed Christians, liberation theologians have focused, primarily

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<sup>32</sup>Gutiérrez, "Freedom and Salvation: A Political Problem," trans. Alvin Guttierrez, in *Liberation and Change*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 83.

though not exclusively, on the historical Jesus. They have adopted as a central category the reign of God which they have interpreted from the point of view of liberation, and have emphasized spirituality as the following of Christ in bringing about the reign of God.<sup>33</sup> Their reflection on the historical Jesus has emphasized certain aspects of his experience of God as more important than others. Jon Sobrino has listed them:

His fundamental and foundational relationship to the kingdom of God as the mediator of that kingdom; his ministry toward the poor as the primary recipients of his message; his historical solidarity with the socially oppressed of his time; his total immersion in the historical conflicts occasioned by his mission; the persecution and death that he accepted as part of his own destiny and as a logical and historical consequence of his own mission.<sup>34</sup>

It is within this general framework that Gutiérrez developed his own christological reflection, a reflection central to his soteriology of communion.

Gutiérrez interprets the revelation in Jesus Christ in a manner consistent with his understanding of God. In his articulation of the common liberation view of Jesus as the liberating God incarnate, he presents him as the irruption

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<sup>33</sup>Among the helpful general introductions to Latin American liberation christology's content and methodology, note the following: Roger Haight, *Alternative Vision*, Chapter VI; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987, originally published in 1982), and "Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 440-461; and Julio Lois, "Christology in the Theology of Liberation," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 168-194.

<sup>34</sup>Sobrino, *True Church*, 129.



into history of gratuitous love: "Jesus is the irruption into history of the one by whom everything was made and everything was saved."<sup>35</sup> The fulfillment of the promise of love, in him we recognize God to be love. Furthermore, not only is Jesus an irruption into history of God's gratuitous love, he is an irruption "that smells of the stable."<sup>36</sup> The gratuitousness of God's love manifests itself historically in Jesus' solidarity with the poor, in the choice of the poor as the locus of God's salvific activity on behalf of all. According to Gutiérrez's interpretation of Philippians 2:6-11 and 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul's insight into the incarnation as an act of voluntary impoverishment for the sake of liberation and restored communion gets to the very heart of the revelation given in Jesus Christ:

He does not take on the human sinful condition and its consequences to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with others who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their sin and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons.<sup>37</sup>

It is understandable, then, that the poor of Latin America identify with "the poor Christ," an expression that has been acquiring more and more meaning for them in that it springs from their everyday sufferings, struggles and hopes and conveys their sense of the presence of a loving God in

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<sup>35</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 61.

<sup>36</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 85.

<sup>37</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 172.

solidarity with them. As Jon Sobrino has phrased it, Jesus is "the historical sacrament of God's option for the poor...the maximal historicization or concretization of God's option for the poor."<sup>38</sup>

From Gutiérrez's soteriological standpoint, it is vital to establish that Jesus Christ, irruption into history of the God of gratuitous love, is "precisely *God become poor*,"<sup>39</sup> for it enables him to make the link between the person of Jesus and his saving work in building God's reign within a history sorely in need of liberation. In Jesus, the God of gratuitous love seeks to restore communion with humanity and establish a community of brothers and sisters, and this God chooses solidarity with the poor as the necessary salvific praxis. Gutiérrez relies on Luke 4:16-20 as a paradigmatic text in his interpretation of the reign's project as liberation for communion. In *The God of Life*, he argued that the text plays a role in the gospel of Luke similar to that played by the exodus in the Old Testament. He noted, too, the integral connection between liberation and communion highlighted by the reference to "a year acceptable to the Lord," that is, a jubilee year:

The good news the Messiah proclaims to the poor is focused on liberation. This perspective is further underscored by the phrase 'a year acceptable to the

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<sup>38</sup>Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 688.

<sup>39</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 13.

Lord'...By doing away with all unjust inequality, the year of the Lord's favor was meant to contribute to the permanent establishment of a fellowship among the members of the Jewish people and, in the final analysis, of communion with God.<sup>40</sup>

In *The Power of the Poor*, Gutiérrez also placed the reign of justice which Jesus proclaims in the Luke 4 passage in the context of love and historical liberation: "The only justice is the definitive justice that builds, starting right now, in our conflict-filled history, a kingdom in which God's love will be present and exploitation abolished."<sup>41</sup> An observation by Roger Haight on the general soteriological stance of Latin American liberation theologians is pertinent. He remarked that, for them, salvation does not lie in an abstract affirmation that there is a God but rather in the way Jesus lived his life.<sup>42</sup> As Gutiérrez understands the life and mission of Jesus, the Word made flesh proclaimed the reign of God and effected salvation through a deliberate messianic practice of liberative solidarity with the poor. His goal was integral liberation in the concrete socio-economic and political conditions of a given historical period.

From Gutiérrez's point of view, in Christ the liberator the liberation process necessary for communion is fully completed. For his saving work encompasses all three

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<sup>40</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 9.

<sup>41</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 14.

<sup>42</sup>Haight, *Alternative Vision*, 134.

dimensions. As was made clear earlier, at the root of socio-economic and political injustice, as well as alienating situations which repress human freedom and development, lies sin, the breach of friendship with God and others only too evident as a social, historical fact. A counter sign to the reign of God, sin demands a radical liberation, and only Christ can offer this gift: "Because sin is radical evil, it can be conquered only by the grace of God and the radical liberation that the Lord bestows."<sup>43</sup> In liberating us from sin, then, Christ ensures that our liberation is total and establishes a basis for communion and community, as we saw in greater detail in chapter three.

In terms of christology, it is important to note again the insistence of liberation theologians on the concrete nature of liberation. The reign of God, fulfillment of the promise and hope of complete communion of all persons in God, is begun in an historical society struggling for community and justice. Although the building of the reign must not be confused with the establishment of any particular version of a just society, the latter has relevance for the reign. Gutiérrez quoted the bishops at Puebla to the effect that "'authentic communion and participation can exist in this life only if they are projected on to the very concrete plane of temporal realities'."<sup>44</sup> As a result, there is a political

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<sup>43</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 138.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in *Truth*, 139.

dimension to the saving work of Christ which must be recognized. Gutiérrez explored the idea of a "political Christ" in a ground-breaking section of *The Theology of Liberation*.<sup>45</sup> Precisely because Jesus offers an integral liberation, he is concerned about specific historical situations of oppression and injustice. To preach the universal, gratuitous love of God entails opposition to all injustice and privilege. The testimony and message of Jesus therefore acquire an inevitable political dimension. In his public life, Jesus turned to the prophetic tradition and confronted the groups in power on behalf of the poor. The resultant conflict resulted in his death. While the cross must be set in the context of gratuitous love and the quest for communion, the life and death of Jesus have, then, undeniable political connotations which his followers must realistically acknowledge. In Gutiérrez's opinion, the Puebla document on christology fails precisely to do this. It therefore lacks any stimulus for practice and reflection.<sup>46</sup>

## II. A Fundamentally Communal Spirituality

A survey of the literature on liberation spirituality, including works by Latin American liberation theologians

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<sup>45</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 126-135.

<sup>46</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 143.

themselves<sup>47</sup> as well as their interpreters,<sup>48</sup> reveals very quickly that Gustavo Gutiérrez is a recognized authority in this area. He is widely quoted and his synthesizing work, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, has become a classic.<sup>49</sup> His approach is ecclesiological and touches deeply into the root experience of Latin American Christian communities engaged in liberative praxis among the poor. In an attempt to define liberation spirituality, Gutiérrez adopted the image of drinking from the well of their experience. Jon Sobrino offered the following interpretation of this image:

The basic image here is that there is a 'well' in Latin America that is filled with the water of life, filled with the faith, the hope, the love, the dedication and joy, and often enough the tears and the blood, of Christians who have committed themselves to the liberation of their own poverty-stricken peoples. Thanks to this well of Christian life, there can be a new spirituality.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Jon Sobrino has often addressed the topic; for a list of Latin American writings which he considers representative in this field, consult his *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988, originally published in 1985), 184, note 20. I would add to his list the recently published *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation* by Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil.

<sup>48</sup>See Haight, *Alternative Vision*, Chapter XII.

<sup>49</sup>The central insights of this book express a fundamental and consistent theme throughout Gutiérrez's speeches and writings. His address to the 1981 EATWOT conference, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective: Finding Our Way to Talk About God," returns to ideas articulated particularly in chapter ten of *A Theology of Liberation* where he discusses liberation spirituality, and we find these ideas repeated in all his subsequent works, specifically in "Speaking about God," in *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility*, vol. 171 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo, 27-31.

<sup>50</sup>Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 50.

My object in this section is to explore Gutiérrez's articulation of this new spirituality as fundamentally communal and, in the process, to demonstrate how it grounds theologically his soteriology of communion. From this perspective, three insights of Gutiérrez concerning spirituality are key: spirituality is a collective walking in the Spirit; contemplation is a communal experience of God's gratuitous love; and liberating action is the creating of communion in history.

#### **A. A Collective Walking In The Spirit**

As Gutiérrez has pointed out, "a spirituality is one (not *the*) way of being a Christian, and develops round the core of a central intuition, which is in turn linked to the challenges of the historical moment which produced it."<sup>51</sup> In Latin America, that historical moment is defined by the irruption of the poor; the central intuition formative for Christian spirituality is that God is primarily encountered among them. It is on the basis of this intuition that liberation theologians redefine spirituality and reinterpret traditional categories and certain evangelical values associated with them.

Traditionally understood as the following of Christ, spirituality in this era means following "the poor Christ,"

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<sup>51</sup>Gutiérrez, "'Drink From Your Own Well'," trans. Paul Burns, in *Learning To Pray*, vol. 159 of *Concilium*, ed. Casiano Floristan and Christian Duquoc (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 41.

and doing so in community with the poor. In reaction to what they consider a spiritualistic understanding of spirituality which has emphasized the transcendent over the imminent and the spiritual over the material or corporeal, liberation theologians speak of "walking in the Spirit," with all the connotations of connection to concrete daily reality which this expression implies: "The initial encounter with the Lord is the starting point of a *following*, or discipleship. The journeying that ensues is what St. Paul calls 'walking according to the Spirit' (Rom 8:4). It is also what we today speak of as a *spirituality*."<sup>52</sup> This walking is not, however, primarily an individual undertaking. Gutiérrez is quite explicit in his dismissal of an individualistic spirituality on the grounds that it "has no means of steering those who have embarked on a collective adventure of liberation towards the following of Christ. It has nothing to say to those who are trying to see 'the suffering features of the Lord' (*Puebla*, 31) in the poor and oppressed."<sup>53</sup> It is a question rather of a collective walking in the Spirit:

The following of Jesus is not, purely or primarily, an individual matter but a collective adventure. The journey of the people of God is set in motion by a direct encounter with the Lord but an encounter in community: 'We have found the Messiah.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 54.

<sup>53</sup>Gutiérrez, "'Drink From Your Own Well'," 39.

<sup>54</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 42; see also *Truth*, 6.



As we saw earlier, the call to salvation is a "convocation." The Exodus events of liberation and covenant-making are above all community events. To recognize that the following of Jesus is undertaken along a communal route rather than along some private path is to recover the biblical understanding of the journey of a people in search of God.

In Gutiérrez's view, this collective walking in the Spirit is being attempted today by the church of the poor. A new spirituality is being fashioned, then, by the lived experience of base ecclesial communities in the crucible which is Latin America. From within the harsh reality of endemic social injustice, a spirituality of liberation with universal implications is being born:

A new prophetic and mystical language about God is arising in these lands filled with exploitation and hope. We are learning anew how to say 'God.' We are seeing the first stages of a process of reflection that seeks to give expression to the life of faith and hope being lived by the oppressed everywhere.<sup>55</sup>

The communal liberating experience of the believing poor is giving new meaning to gospel values traditionally identified with the following of Christ. Gutiérrez reinterprets, in particular, conversion, poverty, spiritual childhood and joy in light of the church of the poor's collective walking in the Spirit. Consistent with his soteriological perspective, he highlights especially the communal dimension of these

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<sup>55</sup>Gutiérrez, "Reflections from a Latin American Perspective," 233.

foundational values.

Conversion is a requirement for salvific solidarity. Always a radical transformation of ourselves in imitation of Christ, conversion in the present historical situation of oppression demands that we follow Christ into the world of the poor with whom he identifies: "It means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ--present in exploited and alienated persons."<sup>56</sup> To be authentic, conversion today requires a break of some kind with our previous social milieu in order to enter into a meaningful solidarity with the poor:

We have to break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class, in other words, with all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those who suffer, in the first place, from misery and injustice.<sup>57</sup>

Conversion must be radical enough to transform social relationships and draw Christians into community with the poor.

Poverty must then become an essential ecclesial stance. The significance which Gutiérrez attaches to Christian poverty is obvious from the fact that he devotes a whole chapter to it in *A Theology of Liberation*. In his opinion, it has relevance in the contemporary situation only as solidarity with the poor and protest against actual poverty. The most profound meaning of Christian poverty is

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<sup>56</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 118.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

found in Christ the liberator who became poor in an act of gratuitous love and liberation. In imitation of him, Christians are challenged to a commitment of solidarity with the poor which protests against the evil at the root of poverty and seeks to heal the resultant breach of communion. In this sense, voluntary impoverishment out of love for the poor neighbour has redemptive value:

The witness of poverty lived in an authentic imitation of Christ...places us at the very heart of the situation of despoilment and oppression and from there proclaims liberation and full communion with the Lord.<sup>58</sup>

Authentic spiritual poverty can only be lived in a commitment of solidarity with the poor, and it is spiritual childhood which makes possible this commitment. He links these two evangelical values in the context of the call to build community among the poor. He defines spiritual childhood as an attitude of openness to the will of God, an attitude of openness, then, to the poor for whom God shows a preferential love. This is the attitude of the Jesus of the Philippians 2 hymn. Like spiritual poverty, spiritual childhood is therefore an indispensable condition for entering the world of the poor. As the following quotation illustrates, this conception of spiritual childhood is central to Gutiérrez's soteriology:

Spiritual childhood is one of the most important

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<sup>58</sup>"Liberation, Theology and Proclamation," in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 64.

concepts in the gospel, for it describes the outlook of the person who accepts the gift of divine filiation and responds to it by building fellowship.<sup>59</sup>

Drawing on the familial analogy, he further describes spiritual childhood as "the attitude of those who know themselves to be sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters of their fellow human beings."<sup>60</sup> Of the essence of discipleship, spiritual childhood is a prerequisite for response to the salvific task of reconciliation.

The collective walking in the Spirit in which the church of the poor is engaged generates communal joy, fruit of the Spirit. Victory over suffering, this is an Easter joy born of hope in the resurrection and intimately bound up with the liberating activity of God in favour of the oppressed:

In the fullness of life brought to us by liberation in Jesus Christ, and in the historical power of the poor, we discover the source of the remarkable joy that the poor manifest in their struggle, in their prayerful praxis. No superficial glee, this; no empty 'joy' born of unawareness of the reality of oppression and suffering. This is easter gladness-joy that passes through death and pain, in intense, profound hope.<sup>61</sup>

Gutiérrez certainly does not minimize the martyrdom suffered by so many Christians in Latin America. He does, however, place it in the context of death in the common cause of liberation. Joy is possible even in the face of martyrdom

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<sup>59</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 127.

<sup>60</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 161.

<sup>61</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 107.

because of sure hope that death is not the final word of history and that the journeying of the liberative community will end in salvation.

**B. Contemplation: A Communal Experience of God's Gratuitous Love**

About midway through *A Theology of Liberation* Gutiérrez made a statement about God which those who undervalue the spiritual depth of his theology might find surprising. He claimed that "Bonhoeffer was right when he said that the only credible God is the God of the mystics."<sup>62</sup> He hastened to add, however, that this is not a God unrelated to human history, and therein lies the crux of the soteriological matter. For, to quote Segundo Galilea, Christian mysticism is a mysticism of commitment.<sup>63</sup> Gutiérrez would agree also with another statement of Galilea which describes liberation as "the historical and theologico-spiritual place of encounter of the political and contemplative dimensions in the Christian."<sup>64</sup> Yet he prefers to highlight the fact that liberation spirituality is a communal way of living the faith within the transformative dynamism generated by the twin movements of contemplation and

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<sup>62</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 119.

<sup>63</sup>Segundo Galilea, "Liberation as an Encounter with Politics and Contemplation," trans, J. P. Donnelly, in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, vol. 96 of *Concilium*, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 26.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

action. He makes his most original contribution to the formulation of liberation spirituality by developing this theme. Union with the God of gratuitous love and justice implies union with our poor neighbours as we participate together in the historical process of liberation for communion. In other words, spirituality is a community enterprise. Gutiérrez's insights into the communal dimension of liberation spirituality as contemplation in liberating action have been formed by his people, a people which he describes as "becoming increasingly better organized and more effective in the struggle to assert its rights to life and justice and at the same time giving evidence of a profound sense of prayer and of a conviction that in the final analysis love and peace are an unmerited gift of God."<sup>65</sup>

Central elements in the experience of base ecclesial communities, love of God and commitment to the poor are the twin movements which set in motion and keep in motion the collective walking in the Spirit. As Gutiérrez insists, both movements need each other dialectically: "If it is true...that one must go through humankind to reach God, it is equally certain that the 'passing through' to that gratuitous God strips me, leaves me naked, universalizes my love for others, and makes it gratuitous."<sup>66</sup> It is within this context that Gutiérrez develops his two-fold approach to liberation

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<sup>65</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 111.

<sup>66</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 119.

spirituality as contemplation in action. Both lead to communion with God and one another. Through contemplation we are joined to God, and God's gratuitous love is savoured as pure gift; through commitment to the poor we are joined to one another, and to God in one another, and grateful response is made for the gift.

Gutiérrez's meditation on the book of Job captures the essence of his understanding of contemplation in the midst of the suffering poor of Latin America. Contemplation in this particular historical community puts us in touch with the gratuitous love of God and helps us communicate it. As Job eventually learned, justice alone does not suffice in our speaking about God. It is contemplation, silence before God in the presence of the poor whose faces are recognized and whose names are known, which finally reveals the mystery of God as gratuitous love:

The truth that he has grasped and that has lifted him to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. Only when we have come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith.<sup>67</sup>

Contemplation helps us grasp the truth, long understood by communities of the believing poor, that everything has its origin in God's unmerited love. It is in this sense that Gutiérrez describes prayer as "a space available for gratuitousness...a special moment of gratuitousness that ought

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<sup>67</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 162.

to fill up all the corners of our life, even during our most concrete tasks."<sup>68</sup> It opens us up to an encounter with God where the gift of salvation received in gratitude prompts similar giving. Prayer therefore remains vital in the life of Christians committed to the process of liberation: "Prayer to the God who liberates and does justice does not remove us from the historical process, but rather compels us to immerse ourselves in it so that we may responsibly exercise our solidarity with the poor and oppressed."<sup>69</sup> It is a privileged way of being in communion with God and one another as we do justice. For contemplation in the midst of poor communities struggling for liberation is no superficial prayer, nor is it, finally, an individual one. The Job which Gutiérrez presents as an inspiration and guide comes to contemplate the fuller dimensions of God's reality in the midst of an experience of identification with the wretched of the earth. The mysticism in question is a deeply communal mysticism learned through solidarity in the struggle for integral liberation.

### **C. Liberating Action: Creating Communion In History**

In contemplation, base ecclesial communities teach a mystical language for speech about God. In their praxis of love that does justice, they also teach another language--the

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<sup>68</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 47.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.



language of prophecy. This language denounces the situation of injustice and exploitation endured by the poor majority in Latin America as well as its structural causes, and it expresses the demands of gratuitous love. And it, too, is a communal language about God. As Miguel Manzanera observed, Gutiérrez picks up the theme of human mediation in the salvation process developed by contemporary theologians and moves it to more radical conclusions by placing it in a community framework. Salvation lies not only in the gratuitous self-communication of God and human beings' free acceptance of this self-communication; communion with each other through concrete acts of liberative praxis is necessary for communion with God.<sup>70</sup> As vital a way to God as contemplation, solidarity with the poor translates into historical efficacy the salvific unifying design of a God of gratuitous love. Grateful response for the gift of communion is made, a response which builds communion in history.

With contemplative insight into the mystery of God, particularly God's preferential option for the poor and consequent desire for justice, comes the realization that the gift of salvation contains within it an historical salvific task:

The gift of the status of child of God is experienced only in historical contexts. It is in making our neighbours into sisters and brothers that we receive this gift, for it is a gift not of

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<sup>70</sup>Manzanera, *Teología, salvación y liberación en la obra de Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 106-107.

word but of work.<sup>71</sup>

Because love must be efficacious, communion with God requires solidarity with others. What is at stake is nothing less than the reign of God and its ethics, as Gutiérrez makes clear in chapter seven of *The God of Life*. Chapter twenty-five of Matthew's gospel emphasizes the essential communal dimension of the reign of God and teaches that this reign has to do with very concrete realities, with food, health, clothing, drink and other daily realities which reveal specific and historical demands of God's love. The language of prophecy, liberating action in solidarity with the poor builds the reign of God and helps define discipleship within it: "Disciples are those who practice justice or righteousness through life-giving works of love."<sup>72</sup>

Contemplation and liberating action are therefore essential elements of a communal spirituality which enables encounter with a liberating God in the present Latin American situation of oppression. One language about God is inadequate without the other. Gutiérrez insists on their dynamic relationship in the revelation of God:

Without the prophetic dimension the language of contemplation is in danger of having no grip on the history in which God acts and in which we meet God. Without the mystical dimension the language of prophecy can narrow its vision and weaken its

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<sup>71</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 18.

<sup>72</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 131.

perception of the God who makes all things new.<sup>73</sup>

Contemplation in liberating action, liberation spirituality probes the mystery of God and discovers language, however inadequate, for expressing it--and it does so from the heart of a people.

### III. Church Of The Poor: Sacrament Of Communion

Enrique Dussel has termed liberation theology the theology of an ecclesial experience on a continent-wide scale.<sup>74</sup> According to James Nickoloff who has carefully studied Gutiérrez's ecclesiology, the church serves as the privileged locus of Gutiérrez's theological inquiry as well as a source, hermeneutical principle and norm of all theological statements.<sup>75</sup> Nickoloff also observed that Gutiérrez's reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation provides the conceptual framework for his ecclesiology.<sup>76</sup> The intent of this section is to probe in greater detail Gutiérrez's ecclesiology designed in light of a soteriological vision of liberation in community and for community. I will argue that the formula "sacrament of communion" best summarizes his theology of the church. A deeper understanding of the

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<sup>73</sup>Gutiérrez, *Job*, 96.

<sup>74</sup>Dussel, "Recent Latin American Theology," trans. Paul Burns, in *The Church in Latin America 1492-1992*, ed. Enrique Dussel (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), 394.

<sup>75</sup>Nickoloff, "Liberation Theology and the Church, 9.

<sup>76</sup>Nickoloff, *The Church and Human Liberation*, ii.

ecclesiological ramifications of the soteriological principles outlined in chapter two will emerge since the following brief discussion is focused on them.

#### **A. Church Of The Poor**

The concept "church of the poor" encapsulates well liberation ecclesiology with its rootedness in the devastating Latin American socio-economic situation and its insistence on integral liberation as the church's mission within this historical reality. Leonardo Boff articulated the common understanding of this latter point when he pointed out that, unlike other groups which are restricted in their aim and rationale to socio-historical liberation, the church has the role of maintaining "the totalizing perspective of integral liberation."<sup>77</sup> Liberation theologians have extended Vatican II's emphases on the communal dimension of faith and the church's mission in the world to include the notion of church as the people of God among the poor or, more accurately, the poor people of God.

In *The True Church and the Poor*, Jon Sobrino took pains to point out the difference between the Latin American understanding of the phenomenon of base communities and that of those in so-called developed nations who tend to view base ecclesial communities as small faith communities with greater freedom and initiative in comparison with the institutional

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<sup>77</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 12.

church. As does Gutiérrez, he emphasized that the church of the poor embodied in base communities has adopted the historical primary fact of the poor and has made this fact the centre of its ecclesial self-definition and mission. A description of the church of the poor therefore goes beyond Vatican II's "people of God," beyond the image of a church with an ethical concern for the poor, and beyond the idea of a class church. What has emerged in Latin America is a view of the universal church which has as its basis the majority of human beings who both individually and collectively constitute the real poor and has embraced voluntary impoverishment and persecution for the sake of effective solidarity with the poor.<sup>78</sup> According to liberation theologians, it is this church of the poor which has become a sacrament of God's salvation in history as it witnesses to the possibility of transformation of individuals and social structures.

In a very real sense, then, the church of the poor helps to actualize Gutiérrez's particular soteriological vision by activating its central principles of a communal praxis, the agency of the poor in action for transformation, solidarity as liberating social praxis, and gratuitous love. A statement from "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People" captures the gist of his thinking as he highlights the vital salvific role played in history by base Christian communities. Through

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<sup>78</sup>Sobrino, *True Church*, 133-138.

"encountering God in the poor, in solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed, in a faith filled with hope and joy that is lived within a liberation process whose agent is the poor," they transform history and proclaim the Father's love at every moment.<sup>79</sup>

In Gutiérrez's opinion, the involvement of Christians in the world of the poor constitutes the most important fact in the life of the Latin American church. Its significance is above all soteriological in that it results in the creation of communities of solidarity which are bearers of God's salvation in history:

It gives rise to a new way of being a human being and believer, a new way of living and thinking the faith, a new way of being summoned, and summoning, into *ek-klesia*, church, the assembly of those called together for mission.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, the base ecclesial communities described in chapter two of this dissertation live an "ecclesial experience of filiation and fellowship"<sup>81</sup> as they create social relationships of a community of brothers and sisters.

It is not a question of a new form of ecclesiocentrism since the gift contains a task which Gutiérrez terms "liberative evangelization" or "evangelizing liberation." If the church's mission is to proclaim the gospel in the world, proclamation of the gospel in the concrete historical

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<sup>79</sup>Gutiérrez, "Irruption of the Poor in Latin America," 115.

<sup>80</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 38.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

circumstances of contemporary Latin America means bringing good news to the world of the poor from the viewpoint of the believing poor. Engaged in a communal liberating praxis, members of the church of the poor reread the Bible and announce as its core message the demanding gift of the gratuitous love of God who calls us all into the communion of the family of God where the poor are given preference. For Gutiérrez, the salvific content of evangelization is clear: "To proclaim the gospel is to announce the mystery of filiation and fellowship--our status as children of God and brothers and sisters of one another."<sup>82</sup> He considers evangelization liberative to the extent that it proclaims the gratuitous character of God's love and is rooted in the messianic practice of Jesus who opted for the poor in practical ways. A messianic people, the church of the poor proclaims the gratuitousness of God's love in the measure that it promotes in history the presence and needs of the poor: "The freely given and unmerited love of God is proclaimed by speaking of the poor and their needs, their rights and dignity, their culture, and above all, of the God who wants to place them at the center of the history of the church."<sup>83</sup> The good news of God's love is affirmed most effectively by members of a church of the poor inserted in the popular struggle for socio-economic and human liberation. They not

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<sup>82</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 67.

<sup>83</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 104.

only announce salvation by collaborating in various ways in concrete efforts for liberation but also concretely denounce the social injustice which inhibits it.

### B. Sacrament Of Communion

A liberating Christian community which announces and celebrates in word and deed full communion in the reign of God becomes a sacrament of communion. It is important to note that it is the requirement of solidarity in the midst of poverty which has moved liberation theologians' notion of church as sacrament of salvation to a conceptual level different from that of many North American and West European theologians. Theologians like Yves Congar elaborated the second Vatican council's insight concerning the church as sacrament of salvation in the modern world of affluent, largely "middle class" societies;<sup>84</sup> liberation theologians like Gutiérrez choose rather to develop the Medellín and Puebla conferences' emphasis on the church as sacrament of salvation in a poor world. And for Gutiérrez sacrament of salvation and sacrament of communion are interchangeable.

From Gutiérrez's ecclesiological perspective, the church fulfills its role as a sign in history of the universal communion which it is called to effect in the measure that it is a church of the poor. In *The Truth Shall Make You Free*,

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<sup>84</sup>See Yves Congar, *Un peuple messianique: L'Eglise sacrement du salut; salut et libération* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1975).



among other instances, Gutiérrez stated his conviction that the church is the sacrament of communion with God and unity of the human race.<sup>85</sup> In all discussions of this topic in his writings he is clear that the unity which is the fundamental vocation of the church and one of its essential "notes" must be understood to include all those currently alienated by dominant systems: "In a divided world the role of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the radical causes of social division. If it does so, it will be an authentic and effective sign of unity under the universal love of God."<sup>86</sup> In Latin America, the church may be considered a sacrament of salvation to the extent that it is the visible sign of the presence of God within the liberation process and witnesses to God's unifying design by giving pride of place to the poor in concrete ways. In other words, the Christian community is a credible sign inasmuch as it truly is a messianic people which practises "messianic inversion" in imitation of the Saviour.<sup>87</sup> From the broader church, Gutiérrez calls for nothing less than a new ecclesial consciousness with a shift from mere words to actual solidarity.

The eucharist as celebration of salvific community in history is a second notion which Gutiérrez develops in his

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<sup>85</sup>Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 144.

<sup>86</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 161.

<sup>87</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 104.

reflection on the church of the poor as sacrament. The themes of community and eucharist are interwoven. The eucharist is inseparably connected to the creation and building up of human fellowship; and the first task of the church is to celebrate with joy and thanksgiving the gift of God's saving action revealed in the formation of community in history.<sup>88</sup> The 1984 Instruction charged that, in liberation theologians' understanding of the eucharist, unity, reconciliation, and communion in love are no longer seen as a gift we receive from Christ.<sup>89</sup> In Gutiérrez's case, certainly, the charge is groundless. From his soteriological point of view, communion is gift before it is task and the breaking of the bread in community celebrates the gift.

Gutiérrez refers, of course, to the celebration of the eucharist by a church of the poor. From his point of view, "the celebration of the Lord's Supper presupposes a communion and solidarity with the poor in history. Without this solidarity, it is impossible to comprehend the death and resurrection of the Servant of Yahweh."<sup>90</sup> To celebrate is to recall effectively and, without a real communal commitment against alienation in all its forms and for a society of

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<sup>88</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 148.

<sup>89</sup>Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'," (August 6, 1984), in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, 409. The English text is taken from *Origins* 14 (13 September 1984): 194-204.

<sup>90</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 16.

solidarity and justice, the celebration of the eucharist remains an empty action.<sup>91</sup> Within a church of the poor, on the other hand, the eucharist preserves its salvific role of sacrament as it both creates profound human fellowship and anticipates full communion:

In it is expressed profound communion in human sorrow and joyous acknowledgment of the risen Savior...[and] a confidence that the communion of life that does not yet exist among us can become a reality.<sup>92</sup>

Celebrated by a church of the poor which is itself a sacrament of communion, the eucharist is not an evasion but a profound motivation for engagement in the salvific project.

### **Conclusion**

Examination of the theological foundations of Gutiérrez's soteriological vision dispels any doubt concerning its groundedness in the Latin American reality of oppression, in biblical tradition, and in the life of the church. It is clearly and fundamentally a soteriological reflection from the midst of a people both poor and believing. From his intimate and long experience among them, he has found a way to talk with the poor about God, spirituality and church as answers to his "great question." In the process, he has reinforced the vital role of Christian communities in God's historical project of the restoration of communion and has laid a solid

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<sup>91</sup>Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 150.

<sup>92</sup>Gutiérrez, *Wells*, 134.

theological foundation for the recovery--all the more necessary today--of a salvific significance for theology in society and history.

### God

Far from depreciating the action of God in the mystery of salvation, we have seen that Gutiérrez has, in fact, grounded his soteriology in the gratuitous love of God, a theme which recurs as a dominant *leitmotif* throughout his writings. His description of gratuitousness as the "atmosphere" for efficacy highlights his conviction that salvation is wrought within the overarching framework of God's grace freely given in love. Christ the liberator is the irruption into history of gratuitous Love. It is gratuitous love, both God's and ours, which draws all into communion and seeks justice for the poor especially. Gift and task, the gratuitous love of God permeates the whole of Gutiérrez's soteriology. Ultimately it serves as the linchpin of his response to the "great question." Careful reading of Gutiérrez on this theme makes clear, then, that charges that he actually divorces salvation and faith and virtually ignores God's transcendence cannot be substantiated. To claim, as does David Carey Dixon, for example, that, in Gutiérrez's conception, "salvation is primarily a historical project subject to human planning and praxis, to which the divine

liberator relates only in a vague, overarching sense"<sup>93</sup> is seriously to misread Gutiérrez's soteriology.

For Latin American feminist theologians also, communal liberative practice is a hermeneutical principle for knowledge of God. They develop their theological insights especially from the liberative practice of women in poor communities. María Pilar Aquino rearticulates Gutiérrez's "great question" in these terms: "What does it mean to speak about the God of life to people whose daily experience is being despised because they are poor women of oppressed races?"<sup>94</sup> It is from this unique vantage point that they further elaborate the theological foundations of a soteriology of communion.

For example, their feminist re-imagining makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the inclusive nature of God. From their point of view, the imaging of God as Father which is central to Gutiérrez's soteriological reflection can be problematic in light of the ambiguous perception of father figures in the *macho* and patriarchal cultures of Latin America.<sup>95</sup> Convinced that cultural, anthropological, and theological dualisms have strengthened the androcentric nature of God's image, they seek a fuller,

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<sup>93</sup>David Carey Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology in the Writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino* (Ph.D diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988), 110.

<sup>94</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 131.

<sup>95</sup>Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary*, 123-124.

more communal and relational understanding of God through the development of images which express feminine dimensions of God. Common biblical images are *rachamim* or mother's womb, *ruach* or breath of life, and *hochmah* or wisdom.<sup>96</sup> Latin American feminist theologians do support Gutiérrez's conception of God as gratuitous love which saves by drawing all into community and communion. The main point of María Clara Bingemer's reflection on the Johannine concept of *agape* illustrates this: "John's *agape* is the love of God that comes from above and flows over the world, encouraging loving relationships and communion which eventually return to God."<sup>97</sup> At the same time, Bingemer draws attention to another important feminist contribution to a fuller appreciation of the communal dimensions of salvation. Convinced that it provides one of the main avenues for a reconceptualization of God in women's terms, Latin American feminist theologians are joining in the current reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, focusing on it as mystery of communion and community of love among persons. As for the specifically christological foundations of a soteriology of communion, the most relevant feature of Latin American feminist christology is undoubtedly the emphasis, common to feminist christology everywhere, on the egalitarian practice

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<sup>96</sup>Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary*, 134.

<sup>97</sup>Bingemer, "Reflections on the Trinity," in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 65.

of Jesus in favour of an inclusive community. In the process of rediscovering Jesus' relation with women and women's activities within the new community, deeper meaning is given to Gutiérrez's vision of Christ the liberator as the irruption into history of God's gratuitous love.<sup>98</sup>

### **Spirituality**

The fact that Gutiérrez has drunk long and deep from the well of the liberation experience of Latin American base Christian communities has renewed his understanding of spirituality. His contribution to liberation spirituality literature is made primarily in the form of a sustained development of liberation spirituality as fundamentally communal. He has reinterpreted contemplation in action from a communal perspective, that is, as an experience among poor communities of God's gratuitous love responded to by the liberating action of creating communion in history. In the process, he has succeeded in making more concrete his soteriological vision of building community for communion. Up to this point in time, he has not offered a developed pneumatology in the more systematic sense. To do so eventually would ground his reflection even more solidly. Understanding of the nature and vital role of the Spirit in a

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<sup>98</sup>For a succinct summary of the presuppositions, themes and features of Latin American feminist christology culled from a range of leading theologians, see Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 138-149. Note also Nelly Ritchie's article "Women and Christology" in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 80-95.

soteriology of communion needs to be deepened.

While he insists, as do Latin American feminist theologians, on the universal thrust of liberation spirituality and on the complex unity of the spiritualities of various groups within it, Gutiérrez has not affirmed in any sustained way the value of women's particular contribution in the area of spirituality.<sup>99</sup> There is no question that Latin American women's spirituality offers a rich vein for mining in any attempt to reinterpret spirituality as fundamentally communal. Communion and solidarity are central aspects of the spiritual experience of poor women by the very fact that they are women and poor. Ana María Tepedino maintains that the thrust to community and communion is part of woman's constitution:

A woman, by her very constitution, seems always to be extending herself, carrying people--through her experience of faith, of prayer, of life, feeling the impetus to overcome individualism and hearing the call to community experience. She meditates on the things of the heart and opens herself fully to communion.<sup>100</sup>

The daily struggle to nourish and defend life provides impetus to overcome individualism and move into community, as the moving stories of so many poor women throughout Latin America attest. Consuelo del Prado identifies the experiences of community and communion as fundamentally soteriological for

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<sup>99</sup>Tamez, *Against Machismo*, 43-45.

<sup>100</sup>Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," in *With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 167.



women:

Opening ourselves up to communion is a great calling, our highest aspiration...Only in community can we overcome the fear that clings to our life. Only in communion will we be able to live out the solidarity to which the poor and Christ call us. Like Mary, we will respond most fully to the Word of God when we step out of ourselves and into the plenitude of communion.<sup>101</sup>

In this light, one readily understands why compassion and solidarity are considered the chief characteristics of Latin American women's spirituality. Moving from solitude into community is an act of love foundational to it and the innumerable instances, most often unrecorded, of poor women doing so validate and help to concretize Gutiérrez's soteriological vision.

### **Ecclesiology**

Sacrament of communion, the church of the poor makes concrete Gutiérrez's central soteriological principles. Exploration of his ecclesiological perspective reveals how unfounded is the misconception that he considers base ecclesial communities to be basically political cadres in a class struggle. Rather, in its deepest soteriological essence, the church of the poor is "sacrament of communion." This formula best describes Gutiérrez's theology of the church. It also draws together in a powerful symbol the different threads of his soteriology of communion.

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<sup>101</sup>Del Prado, "I Sense God in Another Way," *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 144-145.

Given their hermeneutical perspective, it is not surprising that the ecclesiological reflection of Latin American feminist theologians largely converges with that of Gutiérrez. The church of the poor as sacrament of communion is a concept which readily lends itself to their own interpretation. Their choice of communal images for the church attests to this fact. They portray the church as "community of salvation," "body of Christ," "people of God," and "baptismal community in the discipleship of equals."<sup>102</sup> It is because of the vital leadership roles of women within them that feminist theologians view base ecclesial communities primarily as communities of equal discipleship. Aquino explains their rationale: "Women can find their place in this model of the church. Because it is based on charisms and ministries, women share in it as active members at all levels."<sup>103</sup> It is on this basis that they affirm the soteriological import of base ecclesial communities.

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<sup>102</sup>See Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 160-171 as well as de Rocchietti's "Women and the People of God," in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, 98-105.

<sup>103</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 171.

## **PART FOUR: IMPLICATIONS BEYOND LATIN AMERICA**

### **CHAPTER FIVE**

#### **GUTIERREZ'S SOTERIOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES REVISITED**

A passionate commitment to the poor and to love and life in the midst of sin and death led Gustavo Gutiérrez to undertake a major reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation. What relevance, if any, does his soteriology have outside Latin American situations of oppression and communities of the poor struggling for liberation? Does it offer a general sense of direction for witnessing to and nurturing the coming of the reign of God in our own particular historical situations? What insights does this approach offer for theological reflection on our own experience? Does it speak a word of hope to believers committed to the poor elsewhere? In this chapter, I will consider implications of Gutiérrez's soteriological vision beyond Latin America. After a brief review and summary of the substance of my study, I will illustrate the wider relevance of Gutiérrez's soteriology by examining its import for two communities committed to salvation in the Canadian context.

#### **I. Review And Summary**

This dissertation has focused on the profoundly

communal nature of Gutiérrez's soteriology. A number of key points have emerged.

Gutiérrez does not simply equate salvation and liberation. He interprets salvation ultimately as communion with God and one another in history and beyond it. Within each of the three dimensions which he distinguishes in the unified process of integral liberation, liberation is sought for the sake of community, and the final goal of communion is partially achieved. We are set free *from* oppressive situations *for* love and communion. The ultimate purpose of liberation is communion in love. The journey of a people to liberation leads to encounter with God, and a new creation--community--is simultaneously fashioned. Eschatological salvation, final communion with God and others, is anticipated historically in covenantal communities like base Christian communities engaged in integral liberation. From this soteriological perspective, sin is a breach of communion with devastating historical consequences. Institutionalized and systemic, it weaves injustice into the socio-economic and political fabric of community, impedes human development, and prevents communion with God. Sin is a rejection of salvation in history.

In Gutiérrez's view, the primary subject of salvation is the community rather than the individual. It is a question of a "convocation" to salvation. He acknowledges the personal dimension of salvation but, for him, the individual is always

part of a particular historical community, and salvation has concrete social and political implications for that community. Furthermore, it is communities of the poor and those who make a preferential option for them who are the main subjects of salvation at this historical juncture. Newly conscientized, they call into question the socio-economic and political order which oppresses and marginalizes them, and they create alternatives and adopt cohesive strategies of liberation. Guided by their faith, base Christian communities create a new mystical and prophetic language for speaking about God, and they form a church which is a sacrament of salvation.

As subjects of salvation, communities of the poor experience salvation as both gift and task. Because of God's gratuitous love of preference for them, they are addressees and recipients of God's salvation. Jesus' messianic message and practice were centred on them, and his followers are called to do likewise. Communities of the poor are also called, however, to participate in the work of salvation. For example, in the midst of their transformative activity and through their soteriological reflection on Scripture and Christian tradition, communities of the believing poor hear and accept the word of God as the saving word of a loving God who desires historical liberation and longs for communion of all in God. They respond to the gift by becoming agents of and witnesses to salvation. As agents, they struggle for liberation in all its dimensions and are "evangelizing cadres"

who bring the good news of salvation to the world from the viewpoint of the poor. As witnesses, they proclaim by their very presence the active presence in history of a loving God who has made a saving covenant with a people. They give concrete shape to the biblical vision of covenantal community.

Gutiérrez succeeds, then, in highlighting the salvific significance of community in history. From within a particular historical situation of oppression, he affirms an integral relationship between salvation and the communal process of liberation in history. His approach is at once historical, communal, and political. He demonstrates that salvation is an historical reality which is open to all and embraces all dimensions of human activity; with the help of popular movements and base ecclesial communities, he illustrates the salvific value of communal action for transformation; and he argues convincingly that liberating communities must engage in the arena of politics in the broad sense in their efforts to transform society. Gutiérrez's four central soteriological principles arise from his experience in salvific communities, and the goal of each of these principles is historical transformation in anticipation of final communion in the eschaton. A communal praxis of liberation is necessary in face of structural injustice and the collective dimension of oppression; it is the poor who are agents of transformation as they affirm life in the midst of death; liberating social praxis requires solidarity understood as

transformative action with and for the poor, and individuals are invited to move beyond isolating individualism and join in solidarity in the building of a new society; and there is an integral link between gratuitous love for the poor on God's part and ours and solidarity in the search of the social justice which restores communion. Communities which put these principles into action in their liberating praxis are participating effectively in the salvific process and making a difference in history.

Gutiérrez's overall vision of salvation as liberation for communion converges with that of Latin American feminist liberation theologians. His articulation of it lacks, however, an analysis of the oppression particular to women and theological reflection on the unique nature of women's liberation in community. Nor does it specifically challenge the church to liberate women for full communion. From their perspective of women in communities of the poor, Latin American feminist liberation theologians give further historical specificity to Gutiérrez's soteriological vision. They broaden our understanding of the nature of Latin American oppression by focusing their analyses and theological reflection on the triple oppression suffered by many poor women who experience economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and sexism. They make more concrete the meaning of liberation in community by calling for new relationships of equality between women and men in society and

in the church, and by proposing specific ways of achieving this goal. Furthermore, Latin American feminist liberation theologians strengthen the theological foundations of a soteriology of communion by reflecting on the inclusive and relational nature of God, on the egalitarian messianic practice of Jesus, on the solidarity, mutuality, passion and compassion characteristic of women's spirituality, and on the church as a community of equals. The addition of their voice gives deeper resonance and greater authenticity to the *vals criollo* interpreted by Gutiérrez in his soteriological reflection.

## II. Implications Beyond Latin America

In the early 1980s, Fritjof Capra warned that the profound, multi-dimensional crisis in which we find ourselves is a turning point of planetary dimensions.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1990s, the depth of the world "disorder" named by Latin American liberation theologians like Pablo Richard is becoming more and more apparent. The complexity of the current crisis precludes, of course, simplistic solutions. Research and dialogue must be carried on throughout the global village at all levels. If an inclusive vision is to be articulated, however, the voices of the marginalized must be heard. The soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez gives expression to the

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<sup>1</sup>Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 33.



experience, vision, and hope of some of them, that is, communities of the poor in Latin America. It is vital, then, to explore its implications for those of us who live in other parts of our common world. I share Henri Nouwen's conviction that the spiritual destinies of the people of North and Latin America are intimately connected, and that the Christian communities of Latin America are summoning us in the North to conversion.<sup>2</sup> Revisited in the Canadian context, Gutiérrez's soteriological principles help to articulate a renewed sense of identity and mission in, for instance, Christian churches and Roman Catholic religious orders, communities dedicated to actualizing an inclusive vision in our own society. Transformative communities by their very nature, it is vital that their members grasp the communal dimensions of, and integral relationship between, salvation and historical liberation in all its dimensions, and that they make a political option for the poor and marginalized.

#### **A. The Canadian Context**

The devastating ramifications of the world "disorder" are becoming more and more apparent also in Canadian society. *Promises to Keep, Miles to Go: An Examination of Canada's Record in the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty (1996)*, a well-documented report by the Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice, illustrates this fact. Its

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<sup>2</sup>Henri Nouwen, "Foreword," *Wells*, xxi.

authors point out that the growing poverty in Canada may not yet be as catastrophic as that of developing countries; but it is severe: "Canadian poverty is very real in its effects which include lower life expectancy, chronic health problems, infant mortality, psychiatric disorders, and poor school performance. Poverty in Canada can still lead to illness and death."<sup>3</sup> This report provides convincing evidence of the worsening socio-economic condition of many in our society. Food banks assist over 2 million Canadians a year; 40% of those being helped are children.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 1.2 million Canadian households lack adequate shelter and experience problems such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of central heating, and the need for major repairs.<sup>5</sup> In 1994, there were 1,362,000 poor children in Canada, 300,000 more than in 1989.<sup>6</sup> The poverty rate of young families is 44.4%, up from 41.1% in 1993, and up dramatically from 20.4% in 1980.<sup>7</sup> The poverty rate for young people is rising while their participation in the labour force is dropping; 32,000 fewer young people were

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<sup>3</sup>Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice, *Promises to Keep, Miles to Go: An Examination of Canada's Record in the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty (1996)* (Toronto: Our Times, 1996), 4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

employed at the end of 1995 compared to the end of 1994.<sup>8</sup> Between 1993 and 1994, the poverty rate for unattached women under 65 increased from 40.1% to 44.9%; 56.4% of single mother-led families lived in poverty in 1994.<sup>9</sup> Life expectancy, health, education, employment, and quality of housing are sub-standard for aboriginal people in Canada.<sup>10</sup> *Poverty Profile 1994*, a 1996 report by the National Council of Welfare, an advisory body to the federal government, presents as dismal a picture of poverty in Canada. With the aid of data collected by Statistics Canada, its authors conclude that "nearly 4.8 million children, women and men--one of every six Canadians--were living in poverty in 1994, and the overall national poverty rate was 16.6%."<sup>11</sup> In their recent pastoral letter on the struggle against poverty, the Canadian Roman Catholic bishops focused on women, aboriginal people, displaced persons, and families with young children as some of the groups most deeply affected by poverty in Canada, and they identified some of the new Canadian victims of global restructuring: "the fishery workers and coal miners who watch their entire industries shut down; the industrial worker whose job is exported to a low wage zone; the office worker who is

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<sup>8</sup>*Promises*, 25.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>11</sup>National Council of Welfare, *Poverty Profile 1994* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1996), 1-2.

declared 'redundant' because of new technology and downsizing."<sup>12</sup> Also among the growing number of the poor in Canada are the homeless, the underemployed, the poorly paid, injured workers, people without adequate, accessible health care, disabled persons, and many other victims of the current sustained assault on the social safety net, environmental deregulation, and an increasing marginalization of "the other." Indeed, if the category "poor" is expanded to include the marginalized from power,<sup>13</sup> it embraces most working people, women, people of colour, and growing numbers of those who were formerly middle-class. Within our own country, then, it is hard to ignore signs of a deepening oppression of the poor, whether it be from a socio-economic, political, or religious point of view.

Canadian theologian Mary Jo Leddy has argued that the categories of Latin American liberation theology, such as oppressor/oppressed, are not applicable in a predominantly middle-class Canadian society.<sup>14</sup> In the 1990s, in any case,

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<sup>12</sup>Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, "The Struggle Against Poverty: A Sign of Hope for our World," *Catholic New Times* Supplement (3 November 1996): 2-3 and 6.

<sup>13</sup>In his lecture on "Christian Hope for the New Millenium," Gutiérrez reminded his Canadian audience that poverty is not only understood in an economic sense: "To be poor is to be insignificant, to be anonymous, nameless." *Catholic New Times*, 20, no. 22 (15 December 1996):8.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Jo Leddy, "Exercising Theology in the Canadian Context," in *Faith That Transforms: Essays in Honor of Gregory Baum*, ed. Mary Jo Leddy and Mary Ann Hinsdale (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 128.

our middle class is rapidly shrinking as the gap widens between a rich minority and a poor majority, and the number of economically poor and dispossessed people grows at an alarming rate. The fact of growing poverty and alienation in Canada must be addressed by communities of faith. We cannot simply import the whole of Latin American liberation theology into Canada; we need to articulate concerns, concepts and horizons specific to our context. The methodology and central insights of liberation theologians are, however, promising for reflection and transformative action by communities in Canada. Rooted in the biblical option for the poor, Gutiérrez's soteriological approach and his central principles provide a valid and useful framework for understanding better the salvific process at work within our Canadian reality.

#### **B. Implications For Canadian Christian Churches**

The 1971 Roman Catholic Bishops' Synod document *Justice in the World* affirmed action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world to be a constitutive dimension of the church's mission of redemption and liberation from every oppressive situation.<sup>15</sup> In 1974, the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops was revamped and mandated to develop a

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<sup>15</sup>Synod of Bishops Second General Assembly, "Justice in the World," (30 November 1971). In *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John*, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976), 514.

comprehensive plan of action to consolidate the goals of the Synod on justice.<sup>16</sup> In the ensuing years, prophetic statements were issued on a number of national social justice issues,<sup>17</sup> guidelines and education manuals were developed,<sup>18</sup> and social justice networks and alliances were established throughout the country.<sup>19</sup> Other Christian churches engaged at this time in similar activities to promote social justice. Since the early 1970s, the social justice agenda of Canadian churches has also been advanced in a number of significant ways by the interchurch coalitions, a uniquely Canadian ecumenical experiment.<sup>20</sup> It is generally acknowledged, however, that the social teachings of the churches remain their best kept secret, and that the essence of the 1971 Synod statement concerning the salvific value of social action has not been effectively communicated to the grassroots. My experience as a social justice coordinator in a Roman Catholic diocese has confirmed my conviction that

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<sup>16</sup>Tony Clarke, *Behind The Mitre: The Moral Leadership Crisis in the Canadian Catholic Church* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995), 11.

<sup>17</sup>E. F. Sheridan has compiled the social teaching documents of the CCCB in two volumes: *Do Justice* (Toronto: Editions Paulines & The Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1987), and *Love Kindness* (Toronto: Editions Paulines & The Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1991).

<sup>18</sup>Clark, *Behind The Mitre*, 15.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 12-15 and 98-102.

<sup>20</sup>See *Coalitions for Justice: The Story of Canada's Interchurch Coalitions*, ed. Christopher Lind and Joe Mihevc (Ottawa: Novalis, 1994).

other ways must be developed to engage more believers in the churches' mission of historical transformation.

The formation of liberating communities with and for the poor and marginalized is, I believe, a call of the Spirit today. Throughout the country, groups of social activists and small faith communities are beginning to spring up, intent on joining the poor in their struggle for justice. Within these communities, a liberating praxis appropriate to a given situation of injustice is more realistically developed, and the integral connection between faith and historical transformation better grasped in actual experience of injustice and alienation. Isolating individualism which breeds despair is transcended. These communities are affirming the universality and vitality of Gutiérrez's soteriological principles.

For example, gratuitous love which issues in a preferential option for the poor is central to the experience of the Kairos community formed to provide affordable housing for sole-support mothers in Peterborough, and the Fort Erie faith community which developed as part of the refugee movement in Canada. Both groups responded to a particular situation of social injustice in their city by expressing solidarity with its victims in effective ways. Through prayer and reflection on the biblical revelation, these middle-class Christians essentially understand that God loves the poor simply because they are poor and in need of liberation, and

they realize that they are called to a similar gratuitous love. Whether or not they express their motivation in these terms, gratuitous love is motivating more Canadians to make a preferential option for the poor, the marginalized, and the exploited earth, and to participate in some way in liberating community. Small faith communities are quietly demonstrating that the quest for justice is justified with less stridency within the broader vision of God's inclusive love.

Small faith communities committed to social transformation and interchurch coalitions for justice are also demonstrating the value of a communal praxis of liberation. Their influence remains limited, however. If resistance to the corporate agenda is to be successfully mounted and creative alternatives are to be effectively implemented, prayer and action must be more broadly based. Social activists like Tony Clark of the Conference of Catholic Bishops' Social Affairs Commission saw this need in the early 1980s:

I argued then that we needed to put a priority on coalition building as a new vehicle through which people from diverse constituencies could learn to work together, developing an alternative vision for Canada's future through common action on critical social issues. We knew by then that no one organization or sector of society could expect to 'go it alone' and effectively take on the corporate giants.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1990s, the point has been driven home by the need to mobilize against recent federal and provincial deficit-driven

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<sup>21</sup>Clark, *Behind The Mitre*, 80.



cutbacks on social programmes, and for the realization of alternative socio-economic and ecological visions. As a result, members of Canadian churches are putting more energy into coalition building and are aligning themselves more deliberately with the growing social movement in this country. In Ontario, the Inter-faith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) continues to be an influential catalyst for change in this direction.<sup>22</sup>

Because the necessity of a fundamental social realignment is becoming more and more obvious if Christians are to fulfill their prophetic mission, Canadian churches are being urged to greater solidarity with the poor. As Gutiérrez has pointed out, solidarity is defined as transformative action with and for the poor. Some Canadian Christians are becoming more aware that acceptance of the soteriological principle of solidarity as liberating social praxis has significant implications for individual believers, local church communities, and the institutional church of each denomination. All are invited to conversion, to enter in some concrete way the world of the poor and marginalized and make it the locus of our salvific action. In their statement on the eradication of poverty in Canada, the Roman Catholic

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<sup>22</sup>For example, during the 1990 election, ISARC organized a series of anti-poverty hearings across the province. People living in poverty told their story to panel members from the religious community who then drafted follow-up recommendations. See *Neighbour to Neighbour*, ed. Carol Brethour Stephens (Kitchener-Waterloo: Brethour-Stephens and Associates, 1990).

bishops challenge church members to solidarity with the poor in these terms:

The role of Christians is not simply to exhort, but to join in the struggle for social change, as well as to reflect and pray on current social issues and on our own social responsibilities...All Christians must know how to recognize the poor today, further the liberating work of God, work for justice and take up the path of solidarity.<sup>23</sup>

And the bishops affirm the solidarity efforts of such groups as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, ecumenical coalitions like PLURA, community-based organizations and women's groups, local and regional groups which propose economic development strategies, and groups involved in the co-op movement.

If unjust structures are to be challenged effectively, and alternatives created and pioneered, it is becoming increasingly clear, furthermore, that transformative action must be effected by, and from the perspective of, the Canadian poor and marginalized. In other words, they must be recognized and accepted as agents of transformation within society and church. It is important to explore what this means for social analysis and theological reflection in the Canadian reality, and for methods of developing and implementing specific plans of action. Particularly in inner cities, a few churches are taking a first step in this direction by forming community among the poor and marginalized in their neighbourhoods. However, if the perspective of the

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<sup>23</sup>Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, "The Struggle Against Poverty," 7.

poor is to be articulated and honoured, a major shift in attitude is required, not only on the part of middle-class Christians but also among the poor and marginalized themselves. At present, the majority of the poor and marginalized are unrepresented in most local congregations. At best, they are objects of charity rather than partners in the search for justice and communion with God and one another. Conscientized and organized, the poor and marginalized can be significant forces for social change by critiquing unjust structures and helping to design alternatives. If they were more fully incorporated into church communities, and their salvific role taken seriously, Canadian churches would become more credible and effective sacraments of salvation. Fortunately, social coalitions and small faith communities across the country have begun to lay the groundwork by seeking to involve the poor and marginalized more closely in their struggle for social justice and in their communal faith life. The National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), the Ontario Association for Interval and Transition Houses for women in crisis, communities like Kairos in Peterborough and Solidaridad in Toronto, and communities which are part of the refugee movement like the Romero House community in Toronto and the community in Fort Erie are good examples of the valuable resources available to church communities as we search out ways for the poor to become agents of their own transformation.

According to María Pilar Aquino, the emergence of the church of the poor at the heart of the liberating process in Latin America is the most important sign of the church's renewal on the continent.<sup>24</sup> Canadian churches are also being invited to renewal by participating more fully in the growing movement for social justice and the promotion of an inclusive social vision. As reflection on our ecclesial reality illustrates, Gutiérrez's soteriological principles can serve as a basis for the churches' transformative activity in history, and for their own renewal.

### C. Implications For Roman Catholic Religious Orders

The viability of Roman Catholic religious orders in the postmodern era is an open question. Literature on their renewal since the second Vatican council reveals widespread rejection of the traditional theology of religious life which no longer reflects contemporary experience, and a profound search for meaning focused on issues of identity and mission.<sup>25</sup> Many orders are dying. In the 1990s, however, one detects in the literature signs of renewed vitality and a

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<sup>24</sup>Aquino, *Cry For Life*, 42.

<sup>25</sup>Included among the writers who have helped shape the debate in North America are Sandra Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986); Gerald Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Barbara Fiand, *Living the Vision: Religious Vows in an Age of Change* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); and Mary Jo Leddy, *Reweaving Religious Life: Beyond the Liberal Model* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990).

convergence around future directions.<sup>26</sup> As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, "a prophetic stance suffused with contemplation is being glimpsed as the crucial spiritual force that seeks expression in coming forms of religious life."<sup>27</sup> In a world of massively structured injustice, human want and environmental devastation, women and men religious are becoming more and more aware that the question of their own viability is integrally linked to the poor and marginalized among whom God is revealed. As they seek a more authentic prophetic-contemplative way of life, many are therefore turning to the theory and practice of Latin American liberation theology. Interpreted in the the North American context,<sup>28</sup> Gutiérrez's central soteriological principles do have significant implications for a renewed understanding of

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<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991); Michael Maher, "Our Religious Life in Canada," *Canadian Religious Conference Bulletin* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1993), a CRC document prepared for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' Preparation Committee for the 1994 synod on religious life; Joan Chittister, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995); Barbara Fiand, *Wrestling With God* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); Marcia Allen, "We Each Take Our Turn: Toward A New Corporate Identity," *Leadership Conference of Women Religious Occasional Papers* 25, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 11-18.

<sup>27</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God," *Review for Religious* (January/February 1994): 9.

<sup>28</sup>Canadian and American religious orders differ in some significant respects; however, discussion concerning contemporary religious life and future directions has arisen from similar experiences and has been fed by common analyses and theological reflections. Their shared literature gives evidence of this.

the role and function of contemporary religious life.

The principle of a communal praxis of liberation is of vital importance in the current debate about mission and ministry. In the post Vatican II era, many congregations of women and men religious relinquished institutional forms of ministry in favour of a variety of less visible individual ministries. In 1992, a study on the future of religious orders in the United States concluded that, as a result, many congregations now lack a sense of corporate identity and clarity regarding their mission and that religious have acted only in limited ways on behalf of absolute human needs.<sup>29</sup> The same may be said of Canadian congregations. I agree with Doris Gottemoeller that what must be re-identified and revived is corporate mission, not necessarily corporate ministries.<sup>30</sup> What is needed is a communal praxis of liberation focused on transformative tasks to which a given religious group is called by reason of its charism. For example, the Sisters of St. Joseph were founded in mid-seventeenth century France to be reconciling communities in the midst of a society torn apart economically, socially, politically, and religiously by the thirty years war which had just finished. In search of unity and reconciliation, they

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<sup>29</sup>See executive summary of "Future of Religious Orders in the United States" by David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, *Origins* 22, no. 15 (24 September 1992): 271.

<sup>30</sup>Doris Gottemoeller, "Apostolic Religious Life: Ecclesial Identity and Mission," *Origins* 24, no. 14 (15 September 1994): 256.

lived in small communities in the villages and towns of southern France and tended, in a variety of ways, to the material and spiritual needs of their neighbours.<sup>31</sup> In fidelity to the spirit of their founding Sisters, Canadian Sisters of St. Joseph are reaffirming the importance of their particular mission in a divided contemporary society where human beings are often alienated from themselves, each other, God, and the earth. They are committing themselves with other like-minded people of faith to forms of community life as well as various individual or communal ministries which specifically further their corporate mission of unity and reconciliation. Joan Chittister confirms the value of such a communal praxis in the course of her reflections on the revivifying of contemporary religious life. She advocates a new kind of corporate witness made possible by ensuring that each individual ministry responds to a common congregational articulation of an order's mission in contemporary society.<sup>32</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, the 1996 post-synodal document on religious life and its mission, challenges women and men religious to be "experts of communion" and makes it clear that community is formed for the sake of the mission.<sup>33</sup> To suggest a renewed

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<sup>31</sup>Marguerite Vacher, *Les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph du Père Médaille aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Ph.D. diss., University of Lyon, 1989), 212-216.

<sup>32</sup>Chittister, *Fire in These Ashes*, 169.

<sup>33</sup>John Paul II, *Consecrated Life: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata of The Holy Father John Paul II on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and the World*

understanding of communal praxis is not to call for a monolithic approach to ministry for the sake of more efficient production and visibility. Among women religious today, there is growing interest in chaos theory in physics which offers a new paradigm for understanding ways of being corporate, of being in community, through the concept of fluid relationships within an organic structure.<sup>34</sup> In my view, however, the main point remains that a communal praxis of liberation as I have interpreted it helps to unify members of a given religious order around their mission and so increases their effectiveness and deepens their sense of identity. Furthermore, new forms of religious life will undoubtedly emerge as they join associate members and others in a particular communal praxis.

Gutiérrez's three other soteriological principles provide a useful basis, I would suggest, for a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional religious vows. While some would replace multiple vows with a single, all-inclusive vow of commitment to religious life,<sup>35</sup> the more recent trend favours reinterpreting celibacy, poverty, and obedience in the

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(Sherbrooke: Médiaspaul, 1996), #46 and #72.

<sup>34</sup>The foundational work under discussion in this connection is that of Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992). Marcia Allen reflects on the significance of Wheatley's insights for a better understanding of contemporary religious life in "We Each Take Our Turn: Toward A New Corporate Identity," *Leadership Conference of Women Religious Occasional Papers* 25, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 11-18.

<sup>35</sup>Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 90.



context of the reign of God and global concerns. For example, Chittister speaks of reckless love, generous justice and limitless listening,<sup>36</sup> and O'Murchu redefines the vows in terms of intimacy, stewardship, and receptivity.<sup>37</sup> This ongoing discussion is vital in light of a conclusion of the Nygren-Ukeritis Report that the loss of conviction about the vows poses a significant threat to the future of religious life.<sup>38</sup>

The current emphasis on the relational aspect of the vow of celibacy helps to prepare the ground for a reinterpretation of celibacy in light of the soteriological principle of gratuitous love. Women and men religious are being challenged today to be "gratuitous lovers," to love without reservation or limitation all of God's creation, and especially that part of it which is poor and marginalized, simply because it is poor and marginalized. Their vow of celibacy is meant to free them for this salvific purpose. At this period in history, however, many religious orders are much-encumbered. The capacity of their members for gratuitous love is being inhibited, not only by a legitimate financial concern for the welfare of elderly members, but also by certain out-dated traditions and middle-class values and lifestyles. At the same time, newly-reworked mission statements

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<sup>36</sup>Chittister, *Fire in These Ashes*, 102.

<sup>37</sup>O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, 174.

<sup>38</sup>Nygren and Uketitis, "Future of Religious Orders," 264.

and chapter documents articulate a growing sense of the need to risk, to reach out in love to the neediest in concrete gestures of solidarity. For example, the mission statement of the Canadian Religious Conference includes the following statement: "The 'love of Christ urges us' (2 Cor. 5:14) to be in solidarity with the poor, to denounce injustice, to foster a concern for the environment, to work for peace."<sup>39</sup> Many women and men religious are increasingly identifying the need for liberating communities today. Richard Renshaw expresses the challenge in this way:

The challenge today is for Religious to attend to the birth of significantly different human communities that will be intentionally committed to living in harmony with the Earth and bridging the deep divisions that have occurred within the human community as well as between the human community and the Earth.<sup>40</sup>

Renewed energy for necessary personal and communal transformation can flow from a fresh understanding of celibacy as a vow which enables and expresses gratuitous love.

As we have seen, Gutiérrez maintains that Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor in the interests of communal transformation. Christians are called to conversion, to make a preferential option for the poor, to enter the world of the poor in some way. Increasingly, women and men religious are interpreting

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<sup>39</sup>"CRC Mission Statement," *Canadian Religious Conference Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 1.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Renshaw, "Midwife to New Life," *Canadian Religious Conference Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 4.

their vow of poverty from this perspective. As Sandra Schneiders has defined it, the challenge is to renounce "the childish irrelevance of an artificial dependence and the romanticism of a useless and unreal imitation of the destitute," and to concentrate on alleviating misery while building the structures of human solidarity.<sup>41</sup> Intrinsic to a contemporary understanding of the vow of poverty is a preferential option for the poor and marginalized which expresses itself concretely in solidarity as liberating praxis. This praxis is taking many forms, the choice of a simple life-style, the critique of unjust structures, networking for the promotion of social justice, participation in creative economic, ecological and social alternatives, and residence among the poor and marginalized. As a future thrust, *Vita Consecrata* calls on members of religious orders to respond generously and boldly to new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, above all in the most abandoned areas.<sup>42</sup> As they seek to respond effectively to present let alone future needs, they are being invited to a conversion which draws them into solidarity with the poor and marginalized and with exploited creation. As many of them are beginning to realize, this solidarity offers a means to a more authentic living out of their vow of poverty.

In her study of religious vows in an age of change,

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<sup>41</sup>Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 103.

<sup>42</sup>*Vita Consecrata*, #63.

Barbara Fiand presents obedience as "a standing in a listening posture" vis-à-vis the needs of the reign of God in this world as they unfold among us.<sup>43</sup> Liberation theologians remind women and men religious of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor in determining these needs in light of the gospel. In this sense, the vow of obedience is intimately connected to Gutiérrez's soteriological principle that the poor are agents of transformation. In their efforts to further the reign of God in the world, members of religious orders are listening more attentively to the poor and marginalized among whom God's salvific intention is revealed. The poor and marginalized and those in solidarity with them are becoming more conscientized and are organizing for social change in Canada as elsewhere. Intentionally or not, they are proclaiming the gospel as they liberate themselves. Those who vow obedience are realizing that they must enter more fully into dialogue with the poor and marginalized, participate in their transformative efforts, and form friendships and community with them in order to facilitate the listening required by their vow. They know that, in this way, they will be better able to discern the will of God in these times when absolute human need has assumed global proportions.

### **Conclusion**

In this final chapter I have explored some of the

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<sup>43</sup>Fiand, *Living The Vision*, 75.

implications of Gutiérrez's soteriological reflection for faith communities in Canada which are facing their own *kairos* moment in the midst of growing gaps, increasing concentrations of power, and other evidence of pervasive social injustice. With the help of Gutiérrez's central soteriological principles, I have highlighted key issues and discerned possible future directions for Christian churches and Roman Catholic religious orders in particular. For their salvific action to be effective in the long run, however, it is critical that their members understand and accept three assumptions foundational to Gutiérrez's soteriological approach: that salvation is historical, that it entails forming community with the poor and marginalized, and that, along with contemplation and liturgy, it requires political engagement.

Formed in their faith, as were Christians elsewhere, according to a distinction of planes theory which separated church and world, the natural and supernatural, the profane and sacred,<sup>44</sup> are Canadian Christians not being called by the Spirit now to recognize the salvific value of transformative human action in history? It is important that they grasp the foundational concept of a unified history at the heart of which God's reign is being advanced. As Gutiérrez points out,

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<sup>44</sup>In chapter 5 of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez analyzed in detail the distinction of planes approach and the reasons for its irrelevance for pastoral action and theological reflection in the contemporary world.

"history, for us Christians, is the place of our meeting with God: the Word was made flesh, the Word was sent among us."<sup>45</sup> I agree with him that our challenge is to transform time as *chronos* into *kairos*, to recognize it as a time of grace. Canadian Christians are being invited to understand, also, how essential to God's reign is the formation of liberating communities inclusive of the poor and marginalized. The still too prevalent charity approach to the poor and marginalized has proved ineffective in bringing about lasting structural change. A justice approach which emphasizes right relationship paves the way for the kind of inclusive community which is a sign of God's reign. The most sensitive educational challenge is undoubtedly, however, that of broadening the common understanding of politics in order to motivate faith communities to become politically engaged on behalf of social justice. Rather than respected as "the collective field of human accomplishment," to use Gutiérrez's definition,<sup>46</sup> politics is popularly dismissed today as corrupt, self-seeking, and bi-partisan. Yet, confronted by massive systemic injustice, there is more need than ever for political action by faith communities. There are clear political orientations to a vision of inclusive community and to the vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience reinterpreted in the contemporary context. As Diarmuid O'Murchu points out,

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<sup>45</sup>Gutiérrez, "Christian Hope for the New Millennium," 8.

<sup>46</sup>Gutiérrez, *Power*, 47.

"simplicity and justice cannot be lived out without reference to the ruling powers, their policies and activities."<sup>47</sup> Canadian interfaith social justice coalitions have been operating on this assumption from the beginning but, to yield significant results, their political engagement and the implications for the church of experiences of solidarity with victims must be more widely understood and supported by their faith communities.

The poor and marginalized are addressees and recipients of God's salvation as much in Canada as in Latin America, and they have the potential to be its agents and witnesses as well in a more conscious fashion. Emphasizing as it does the salvific significance of inclusive community and the transformative role of communities of the poor and marginalized, Gustavo Gutiérrez's soteriology has, therefore, profound implications for the poor and marginalized in Canada as well as for people of faith called to join with them in their salvific task.

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<sup>47</sup>O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, 161.

## CONCLUSION

Gustavo Gutiérrez has made a major contribution to contemporary soteriological reflection in his emphasis on communities of the poor as *loci* of salvation. Exploration of the communal dimensions of salvation from this particular perspective continues to be a vital theological task at this juncture. As I argued in chapter five, his insights have relevance beyond the borders of Latin America. Intrinsic to the reigning neoconservative/neoliberal orthodoxy is an ideology of individualism which ignores the social context of evil and denies sin as a communal reality. Gutiérrez's soteriology of communion "from the underside of history" provides the kind of communal framework for reflection and transformative action needed to challenge current accepted wisdom effectively on behalf of the poor and marginalized for the sake of inclusive community.

Gutiérrez has laid solid theological groundwork for further development of the notion of liberating community as salvific. New voices are articulating different dimensions of oppression and liberation, and, as liberation theologians incorporate these unique perspectives more fully into their reflection, understanding of the centrality of liberating community in the salvation process will be deepened. The contributions of Latin American feminist theologians highlighted in this dissertation illustrate the point. So



does the soteriological reflection of ecological theologians who are helping us to grasp the essential interrelatedness and interdependence of all that exists. They, too, interpret salvation in terms of communion.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, they often pay little attention either to "the poor" or to socio-economic and political liberation. The soteriological reflection of Gutiérrez and ecological theologians would be enriched by mutual dialogue. For the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth are inextricably joined in a new theological paradigm which has emerged at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Gutiérrez's soteriology of communion provides a basis as well for fruitful interreligious dialogue and transformative action. Gutiérrez intentionally developed his ideas in a Christian context, specifically that of Latin American catholicism, and readers sensitized today to the soteriological vision of other faith traditions may question the phrasing of some of his christological statements. His vision of liberation for communion of all in God is, however, relevant to the universal search for communion, a soteriological question in other faiths also. For, as Diarmuid O'Murchu has pointed out, there is a sense of

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<sup>1</sup>The work of Sallie McFague illustrates this approach. She articulates her understanding of the meaning of salvation in ecological terms especially in chapter five of *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. from the Italian by John Cumming (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995).

relatedness at the heart of all religions which profess belief in a god or supreme being. This supreme being does not merely exist but is forever seeking a reciprocal relationship with creatures and with creation as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Insights from interfaith theological dialogue would undoubtedly challenge Gutiérrez's vision. In any case, the fact that a number of people of different faiths are committed together in liberative communities throughout the world affirms the wide appeal of notions of relatedness like that articulated by Gustavo Gutiérrez.

In conclusion, I note again the broad thrust of Gutiérrez's soteriology, and its deep rootedness in Christian tradition. Foundational to its whole structure is the gratuitous love of a saving God for individuals, communities and peoples. In the course of this dissertation, I have addressed a number of criticisms of Gutiérrez's approach, in particular by some evangelical theologians who accuse him of immanentism and political reductionism. At issue are fundamentally divergent interpretations of the nature of faith, the task of theology, salvation history, and the role of politics in it. One criticism strikes at the heart of Gutiérrez's conception of the salvific process and seems to me especially unfounded. Far from belittling God's saving initiative by placing too much weight on human responsibility, Gutiérrez repeatedly insists on God's gratuitous love as

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<sup>3</sup>O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, 121.

central to salvation. Nonetheless, Emilio Nuñez concludes his discussion of salvation in liberation theology, and in the works of Gutiérrez specifically, with the following assessment: "In the final analysis, what stands out in liberation theology is not the action of God, but that of man. What Gutiérrez hopes for is a world 'fashioned by [man's] own hands;' not so much a theophany, or manifestation of God, as an 'anthropophany,' or manifestation of man."<sup>4</sup> Careful study of Gutiérrez's soteriology reveals how wrong such conclusions are. He rejects an either-or mentality and invites us to do what he claims Job had to do: "leap the fence set up around him by [a] sclerotic theology." For, as he puts it, "the world outside the fence is the world of gratuitousness; it is there that God dwells and there that God's friends find a joyous welcome."<sup>5</sup> It is there, too, that the poor and those in solidarity with them join in salvific communities which nourish that hope against hope to which people of faith are called.

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<sup>4</sup>Nuñez, *Liberation Theology*, 204.

<sup>5</sup>Gutiérrez, *God of Life*, 163.

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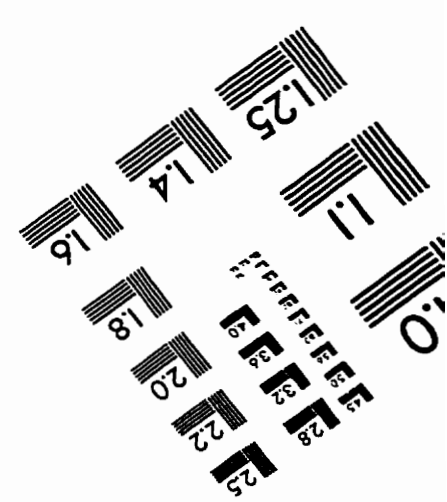
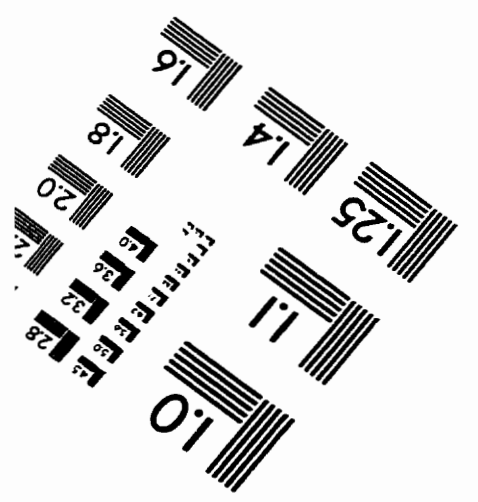
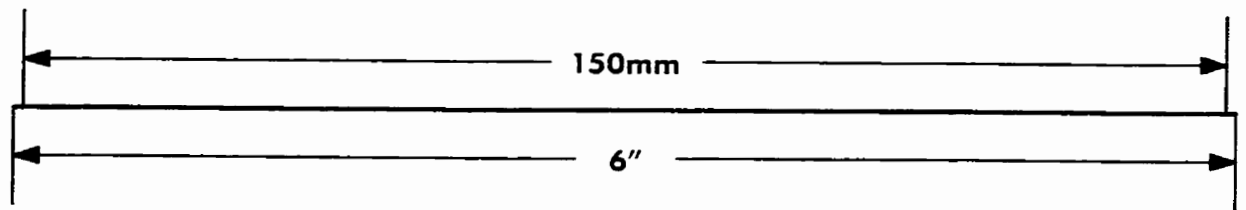
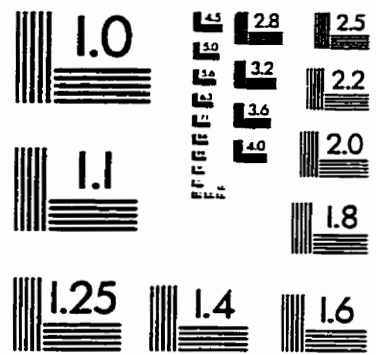
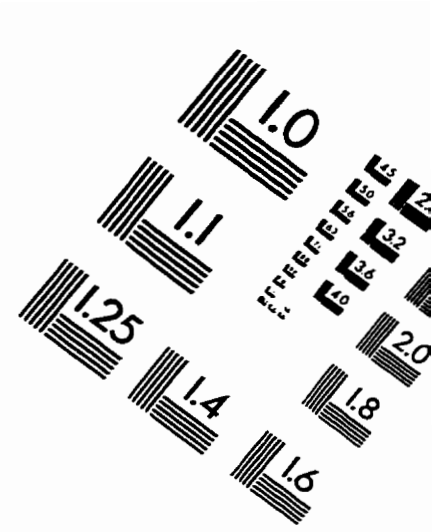
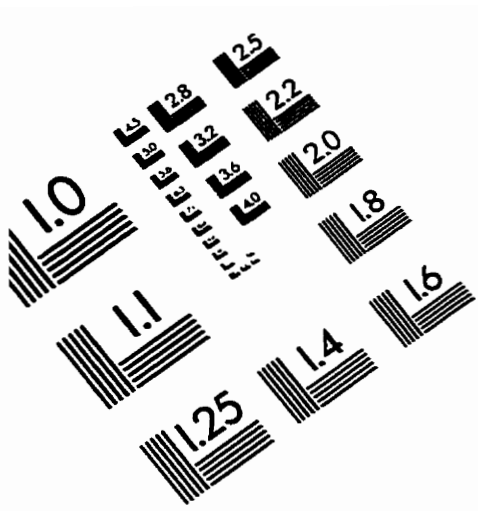
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