

LIBERATION THEOLOGY^{1/}

THE REST OF THE STORY

by Robert Blair Kaiser^{2/}

Liberation Theology came alive when the bishops and theologians of Latin America returned from Vatican II and took a hard look at the history of the Church that had always sided with the one percent of the population that owned ninety-nine percent of the land. That traditional Church counseled the poor to be satisfied with their lot, and to join their suffering with that of their crucified Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If they were good, and said their prayers, and paid their pastors to say masses for their dear departed loved ones, they would find salvation in the next life.

By the early 1970s, many of those priests and bishops had been radicalized – by a serious change in Latin American society, and by an equally serious change in the Church.

In the 1950s and 1960s rapid industrial development in Latin America led to benefits for the wealthy and the middle class, but it was a development that had thrown most of the peasants into deeper poverty. Millions of them moved into shantytowns on the margins of cities like Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires and Santiago. Soon they were demanding fundamental changes in Latin American society, even calling for revolution. To keep them in line, leaders of the oligarchy used their power to replace their democracies with military governments, even military dictatorships, which sometimes controlled the people in the extreme, by killing them or making them “disappear.”

Then came Vatican II, with a new theology that told people that, yes, they would find salvation in the next life, but Jesus had also come to bring them salvation now, in the form of a new awareness that the world was good – in fact, redeemed. Now they had a vocation, as followers of Jesus, to make the world better, by bringing it under a reign of justice and peace. Soon, priests and nuns were fanning over the continent urging little people to organize for their share of the world’s goods. The priests and nuns, many of them from Germany, the United States and Canada, taught people to read and vote, to modernize their fields, to form marketing co-ops and labor unions. They set up small base “Christian communities” that prayed together and read stories of liberation from the book of Exodus. They sang the words sung by Mary when she learned she was to become the mother of Jesus, the Magnificat, giving them a liberationist interpretation that their mothers never thought of.

*My soul magnifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
Because ... he has put down the mighty from their seat
and he has exalted the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he has sent empty away.*

Soon, a small group of Latin American theologians, who had done postgraduate work in Europe, were reflecting on the faith they saw manifesting itself in new ways. Gustavo Gutierrez had studied in Louvain, Lyons and Rome. Luis Segundo had been at Louvain and Paris. Jon Sobrino took his theology courses in Frankfurt. Loenardo Boff, a Franciscan from Brazil, learned at the feet of Karl Rahner in Munich. They had all analyzed the Council’s most revolutionary document, *Gaudium et Spes*, which had addressed itself in an opening paragraph to the poor and afflicted of a world that was freed by Christ, “a world that might be fashioned anew according to God’s design and reach its fulfillment.”

In 1968, three years after the Council, the bishops of Latin America met in Medellin and endorsed a radical notion that the Church should side with the rich and powerful no longer. And the continent needed some profound changes. They were led by Sergio Mendez Arceo, the bishop of Cuernavaca, Mexico; Samuel Ruiz, the bishop of Chiapas, Mexico; Cardinal Landazuri Ricketts of Lima, Peru; Cardinals Paulo Evaristo Arns and Aloisio Lorscheider, both Franciscans from Brazil; and by Dom Helder Camara, the birdlike, ascetic archbishop of Recife, Brazil, known as the Red Bishop after he famously urged the bishops of Vatican II to sell all their emerald rings and their diamond-and-ruby- encrusted chalices and give the proceeds to the poor.

And why shouldn’t these bishops have sided with the poor? Almost half of the world’s Catholics were Latin Americans, and most of them were living in poverty. Why shouldn’t the bishops encourage the creation of a social order that better reflected gospel values? Grinding poverty was not accidental. It was the result of carefully constructed social arrangements of benefit to the few at the expense of the many.

Why shouldn't the little people try to alter those arrangements? Why shouldn't they become more aware that Christ had called them to be all they could be? "Conscientization" was the difficult word coined by a Brazilian educator named Paulo Freire to describe the process of becoming more aware.

Gustavo Gutierrez had a better, simpler word: "liberation." In December 1971, he published his seminal work, *Teologia de la liberacion*. In May 1971, Hugo Assmann had conducted a symposium in Montevideo – "Oppression-Liberation: The Challenge to Christians" – and shortly thereafter, Leonardo Boff had published a series of articles under the title *Jesus Christo libertador*. A movement had begun, something, moreover, that caught the imagination of Catholics around the world who had been wondering what effect the Council might have on the Church. Latin America was now giving them an answer.

The movement wasn't all talk. Theologians had become pastors, militant agents of inspiration for the life of the Church at its root. A theologian would deliver a paper at a weekend congress, then return to his community to conduct a class in community organizing, resolve a labor dispute, or fix a broken water main. The Boff brothers, Leonardo and Clodovis, worked to build plumbing systems and durable housing for the homeless of Petropolis, near Rio de Janeiro, once the imperial capital of Brazil. They also helped convert a vast rubbish dump into a recycling center.

What they were doing was recognizably right. Two international synods of bishops meeting in Rome, in 1971 and again in 1974, took positive notice of the new theology of liberation, because it confirmed what had been done at Vatican II. Pope Paul VI assigned Archbishop Karol Wojtyla of Krakow to write the final report of the 1974 synod of bishops, but he was so disappointed with his draft that he put it aside and handed over the entire record of the synod to the Jesuit editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, Roberto Tucci, who had also been an editor of *Gaudium et Spes*. Tucci produced a text for the pope that historians have hailed as one of the finest documents of Paul VI's papacy, the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Proclaiming the Gospel. The document devoted fifteen central paragraphs to a discussion of the relationship between evangelization and liberation.

When the world's largest religious order, the Jesuits, met in Rome in 1974 for their thirty-second general congregation, they emphasized the idea that Christ had come to bring salvation not only in the next life, but in this one too. Indeed, in the Lord's Prayer, Christians had been praying from the beginning, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth . . ." But Christians had to do more than pray; they had to work hard, and that hard work had to include hard political action. In the meeting, which, Jesuitically thorough, went on for more than three months, the Jesuits decreed that their own men in Latin America (and in other parts of the third world, particularly) get involved in helping make life more livable for everyone. They talked about "a fundamental option for the poor," a phrase that was picked up by the Latin American bishops and practically made a mantra.

Bishop Ruiz of Chiapas later pointed out, "The formulation may be recent, but the calling has been part of the Church from the beginning. The only thing that we have to answer to at the end of time is whether we loved Christ in the poor. 'I was hungry and you fed me and gave me drink.' If we, in our Christian situation, don't love the poor, if we don't opt for them, we simply are not Christians."

The Jesuits' move was a courageous one, nonetheless, and their father general, Pedro Arrupe, knew what it portended. He said, "If we live out this decree, then we will have martyrs."

Arrupe was right. In the next two decades, scores of Jesuits were harassed, beaten and murdered by military and paramilitary goons, many of them trained in counterrevolutionary tactics under the aegis of the United States Army at Fort Benning's School of the Americas. Thousands of others, ordinary citizens whose sympathies lay in the kind of changes that would right the inequalities in most Latin American societies, were beginning to disappear. Indeed, the word "disappear," an intransitive verb in English, became transitive in Spanish, *desaparecer*, "to make disappear." The noun for "those who have been made to disappear" is *los desaparecidos*. They were the ones who were grabbed out of their beds in the middle of the night, tortured, and then loaded into helicopters and dropped from great heights into jungle and ocean. *Los desaparecidos* were the ghostly symbols of more than a decade of terror. Only the Church had the political power to stop the terror, and it might have done so, but in 1979, something happened to throw the Latin American Church into a tizzy.

The organization of Latin American bishops (called CELAM) met in Puebla, eighty miles from Mexico City, to put their blessings on the theology of liberation and preach the Church's "preferential option for the poor." That could have helped bring on a new reign of justice and peace according to the

Council's vision as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*. But Karol Wojtyla showed up in Puebla, too, and now he was wearing a white cassock. He was the new pope, and his voyage to Puebla, one of the first foreign trips of his papacy, would give him an opportunity to tell the Latin American bishops what he thought about the new theology.

He didn't think much of it. His own nuncios in Latin America had already convinced him that liberation theology was part of a communist plot; those nuncios, in turn, had been convinced by agents of the CIA, including characters like marine colonel Oliver North. North never gave the impression that he was much interested in theology; he and his men simply wanted the Church to support right-wing governments in Latin America that were giving American corporations free rein to exploit Latin America and take what kickbacks they could extort.

In a meeting that was closed to the press, John Paul warned the bishops at Puebla about a view of Jesus that was espoused by some of the new theologians – “of Jesus as a revolutionary, involved in the class struggle.” Said the pope: “The idea of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive man from Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis.” He said he was worried that the Church was advocating violence as a class struggle that was purely political.

But then the pope reversed himself, or perhaps, as happened so very often during the rest of his papacy, he put on another hat. The very next day, in Cuilapan, he spoke to a half million Indians from Oaxaca and Chiapas, and he told them about his concern for the poor, who had “to make up for lost time, often a time of prolonged suffering and unsatisfied hopes.” Then he blasted the injustices that had warped the lives of the Latin American poor and lit into those responsible for the ongoing repression of the powerless. “The worker has the right to real help – which is not charity or crumbs of justice – in order that he may have access to the development that his dignity as a man and a son of God deserves. It is necessary to carry out bold changes and urgent reforms without waiting any longer.”

Who was the real John Paul? The man at Puebla who worried about holy violence or the man at Cuilapan keening over the plight of indigenous peoples? Over the next few years, John Paul couldn't decide who he was, or whether liberation theology was a healthy movement or something of the devil. He commissioned one negative letter on liberation theology in 1984. He had another letter drafted in 1986 that seemed to cancel the first. He was being chivied on all sides, with the Latin American bishops pushing from the left and his own nuncios in Latin American capitals and the members of Opus Dei pulling from the right. What took place during the mysterious visits to the pope of Robert McFarlane, President Ronald Reagan's national security adviser and right-wing ideologue, has yet to be revealed, but it no doubt had an influence on the pope, coordinated as it was with the envelopes full of large bills delivered to the pope's friends in Poland.

In February 1992, the *National Catholic Reporter* ran a furious editorial in reaction to a *Time* magazine cover story that detailed the clandestine operation alliance between the American government and the Vatican. There was nothing new about the Church entering into political alliances, said the editorial. “What appears new is the extensive nature of the clandestine into which the pope drew the Church and the degree to which Catholic prelates and other clergy apparently worked at the direction of the CIA.” It went on:

NCR, along with many other Catholics, has criticized the pope for seemingly perching Vatican foreign policy upon the narrow legs of Polish nationalist needs. We see more clearly each month the debilitating and compromising effects of that parochial mindset.

Throughout the Reagan years, we reported the growing confluence of aims and policies of Pope Paul and the White House: the common desire to end martial law in Poland, to roll back Communism in Eastern Europe, to maintain a “credible” U.S. nuclear deterrent, to keep progressive priests out of politics, to diminish the influence of liberation theology, to beat back the growing political awareness of Catholic base communities. The list goes on. Now we see it was more than a confluence. It was organized collusion.

If the pope took note of the struggle between the right-wing oligarchies in Latin America and the new theologians on the left, he might have asked himself, *Cui bono?* Who has the most to gain? It was certainly not men like Archbishop Helder Camara, who was worshipped in Brazil as a living saint. Neither Dom Helder nor any of his priests were advocating violence. Was the pope ever told that? By 1980 more

than eight hundred Latin American priests and nuns had been martyred, largely at the hands of army officers and paramilitary hit men.

Perhaps the pope's nuncios, the sons of privilege, were, in fact, part of the cover up. Three of them would later go on to become cardinals in the Curia, back in Rome, where they had begun their glittering careers at an elite academy for Vatican diplomats, where admission was largely confined to young men from the aristocracy in Italy. During their hitches in Latin America, two of them played tennis with the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, and part of their job was to hobnob with the rich and the powerful. Their preferential options were certainly not with the poor. The poor were threatening the security of their friends in power.

The pope should have treated the nuncios' reports about a Marxist clergy with skepticism, but there was no evidence that he did, and every indication that when he looked at priests like Miguel D'Escoto and Ernesto Cardenal, the priests who had become foreign minister and the minister of culture, respectively, in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, he saw images of communist commissars he had known in Poland. By the time he was wagging his finger at D'Escoto and Cardenal in Nicaragua in March 1983, the pope had lost much of his ambivalence about liberation theology; he was also influenced by his prefect of the Holy Office, Joseph Ratzinger, who had spent his early teens as a member of the Hitler youth. (Some of his peers refused to join.) For much of the 1980s, Ratzinger went after liberation theologians with quite a fury.

Ratzinger began his battle with the priest who invented it, Gustavo Gutierrez, a theologian from Peru. Instead of charging him with heresy, he played a political game. He first told the bishops of Peru (where Gutierrez had been teaching) that they should deal appropriately with Gutierrez for he had been "making the Church into a partisan group, *which threatens the legitimacy of the hierarchy.*" Going to the Peruvian bishops was a mistake. They did not even censure Gutierrez after Karl Rahner sent them a letter defending liberation theology.

The theology of liberation that Gustavo Gutierrez represents is entirely orthodox. It is my full conviction that a condemnation would have very negative consequences. Today, there are diverse schools and it has always been thus... It would be deplorable if this legitimate pluralism were to be restricted by administrative means.

After that boost from Rahner, the Peruvian bishops were proud that liberation theology had, in a way, been born on their soil. But Cardinal Ratzinger was undaunted. He went after other leaders of the movement through his own inquisitorial processes, and by issuing condemnations, mostly under the pope's signature. In the summer of 1984, he published a negative *Instruction on Liberation Theology*, and in September of that year he had Leonardo Boff come to Rome for a "colloquy" about his book *Church: Charism and Power*. Ratzinger felt that Boff had made the Church into "a purely human structure" and that liberation theology had reduced the gospel to "the Jesus project," something that "looked religious but was really atheistic."

Ratzinger sent his secretary, Joseph Clemens, in his black Mercedes to fetch Boff from a Franciscan house in Rome, and specified that Boff was to come to the Holy Office alone. Boff jokingly asked, when he climbed into the car with Clemens, if handcuffs would be necessary.

Boff's conversation with Ratzinger was amiable, if indecisive. Edward Schillebeeckx once said the most awkward moment in such interrogation comes in trying to make small talk over coffee. In Boff's case, Ratzinger began by suggesting that Boff looked good in a habit and should wear one more often, that it was a sign of witness. Boff said it could also be a sign of power. Ratzinger smiled. When the colloquy broke up with no mention of censure, Boff thought he might have won the day.

He was wrong. On March 11, 1985, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a notification on *Church: Charism and Power*. Boff's book endangers the faith, the congregation said, in its concept of dogma, in its understanding of sacred power, and its overemphasis on the prophetic role of the Church. The word "prophecy" – used as it was in Latin America, especially by the disciples of Paolo Freire – called upon the people to speak out, to be prophets in the biblical sense. According to a biographer of Freire, "Prophets denounce what stinks to high heaven and announce the good news." Now prophetic voices in Latin America cried out about the unpleasant odor coming from the Vatican and its seemingly alliance with the power structure in Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Argentina and Peru.

Ratzinger responded on April 26 with a formal order silencing Boff. He was not to publish, teach or speak publicly until further notice. Boff accepted the decision, and for a time declined even to take phone calls from colleagues. "I prefer to walk with the Church rather than to walk alone with my theology," he said. Those were not the words of a contumacious man, but of a man who loved the Church.

Gutierrez, now a Dominican, was better known internationally, and Sobrina and Segundo, both Jesuits, had greater intellectual range, yet Boff was the only liberation theologian hauled to Rome for an inquisition process, the only one silenced, the only one whose writings were repeatedly condemned, the only one whose movements were tracked in Rome with exacting precision. Boff told of going to a remote Amazon village to participate in a religious retreat. "Three days later," he said, "word had reached the Vatican about where I was and what I was saying."

Boff drew Ratzinger's fire because he was visible and voluble: he knew how to talk to the press, which made him a dangerous man inside the Vatican, and he started doing that in the late 1980s. After he had time to nurse the wounds he suffered in Rome at the hand of Ratzinger, Boff started to exercise his own liberation. He called a news conference to demand the dissolution of papal sovereignty and the recall of the world's nuncios, a move that did not endear him to the Roman Curia. The Curia had a second reason to go after Boff: he came from Brazil, the most populous Catholic nation in the world. If Ratzinger was going to make an example of anyone, who better than a Brazilian? (For the same reason, Ratzinger had gone after the American moral theologian, Charles Curran, on the birth control question, rather than any continental theologians like Bernard Haring and Josef Fuchs, who held the same positions as Curran and were, besides, more universally well-regarded theologians. Condemning an American, particularly on the birth control issue, would get more press attention.)

Boff was also singled out because, more than any other liberationist, he trained the conceptual tools of liberation theology on the all-too-human structures of the Church itself. Boff argued that a "clerical aristocracy" had expropriated from the people of God the means of religious production, and hence had misappropriated the right to make their own decisions. This sounded like Marxist jargon, but all Boff meant was that the Church didn't want people to grow up.

Boff was also talking about schism, a word that sounded more frightening than he intended in 1984, when he said of Catholicism's destiny: "The future of the institutional Church lies in this small seed that is the new Church, growing in the fields of the poor and the powerless. The new Church must have the courage to be disobedient to the demands of the center without anger or complaint." Americans who could compare "the demands of the center" with England's imposing a ruinous tea tax on the colonials in Boston had no difficulty recognizing the legitimacy of the revolution that Boff was calling for.

But if Boff wanted to be disobedient to the demands of the center, then he had to expect the center to retaliate. In 1992, Ratzinger gave Boff the Kung treatment. He banned him from teaching as a Catholic theologian and ordered the Franciscans to censure his writings because he had "not cleansed his ecclesiology from the elements of dissent and internal class struggle." That class struggle may have been the major issue all along, not a struggle between social and economic classes, but the battle inside the Church between Rome and the people out there – with Rome, the upper class, always exerting its largely unchallenged prerogatives over the underclass. From near the top of the papal pyramid, Ratzinger could only see the poor thirsting for justice in the *favelas* of Rio (with priests like Boff at their side) as people at the margins. Ratzinger could ignore them, and where he could not ignore them, as in the case of Boff, a priest and a member of an ancient religious order, he could diminish them. In the end, Boff left the priesthood and departed with a memorable line: "Ecclesiastical power is cruel and merciless. It forgets nothing. It forgives nothing. It demands everything."

Ratzinger could be cruel because, after all, he had a theology of history that divided the world between the good guys in the City of God and the bad guys in the City of Man. It was an us-against-them approach that gave the good guys no other choice except to do battle. "The antagonism between the world under the power of the Evil One and the disciples of Christ will never be mitigated," Ratzinger told one journalist, "but will grow ever more bitter in the course of time." As a disciple of Christ, he had his duty – to oppose the surrounding culture (which he identified as the Evil One) and enlist others to do so as well, no matter what the cost. "Today more than ever," he said, "the Christian must be aware that he belongs to a minority and that he is in opposition to everything that appears good, obvious, logical to the 'spirit of the world,' as the New Testament calls it."

Ratzinger couldn't have made his diametric opposition to Vatican II and to its signature document, *Gaudium et Spes*, any clearer than that. Those who found inspiration in the document to make a better world were, to Ratzinger, simply rebelling against their lot in life. He urged they not put their hopes in "secular political progress." They should rather, 'accept the Cross of Christ.'

There was something terribly abstract about that judgment, lodged by a man who had spent his whole life behind a desk. He had seen little of the cross, while the active proponents of liberation theology got to know the cross on rather intimate terms. Thousands of them – many priests and nuns, but a good many laypeople besides – were martyred at the hands of the Latin American military. And many who were not murdered found their struggles ending in apparent failure. This, too, was part of the cross – a manifest imitation, many of those who suffered believe, of Christ himself, who didn't want to die, but accepted his death at the hands of the Romans and certain Jews for daring to speak his truth to their power.

In 1988, John Paul II told a large crowd gathered in the cathedral at Santa Cruz, Bolivia, "The pope and the whole Church, all of us, have to create a meeting point between the so-called world of the left and the so-called world of the right, because the world cannot live in continuing division, it cannot live in conflict. I want to tell you who belong to this third world that the solution to overcoming the division of left and right must be found right here in your human, Christian and social reality. That is my hope."

Soon John Paul II was convinced he could not trust the liberation theologians to create a meeting point between the left and the right. They were consorting with the political left. In fact, to him, they were the left, and he didn't want to speak to them any longer.

When Boff was standing in judgment at the Holy Office, Cardinal Arns came to Rome with him, but was barred from the meeting. So Arns asked to see the pope. After waiting for two weeks, Arns called the papal household and said that if he couldn't see the pope, he would head back to Brazil. The next day, Arns was received, but it was barely an audience. The pope sat in a high-backed chair. Arns was left standing. Arns spoke his piece, telling the pope that liberation theology was entirely in the spirit of the gospel as he understood it and that the people of Latin America were no different from the people of Poland. They, too, needed and wanted freedom from the exploitation of their masters. When he had finished his defense, the pope, still wordless, reached for a button and buzzed for his secretary to take Arns away.

1/ Adapted from *A Church in Search of Itself*, by Robert Blair Kaiser, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, © 2006. Printed with permission.

2/ Robert Blair Kaiser spent ten years in the Jesuits before he left to pursue a career in journalism. He was a religion reporter for the New York Times, Time Magazine and CBS, and is now a contributing editor for Newsweek. He is the editor of JustGoodCompany.com, a journal of religion and culture. His books include: *Clerical Error*, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, and *Pope, Council and World*. He lives in Phoenix, AZ and in Rome.