

# **LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

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*Archbishop Albert Bundervoet MSC, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Rabaul, has kindly given permission to publish the following paper on liberation theology. It was prepared by him for the Catholic Bishops' Conference as a working paper only; it represents his personal views, not the official position of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, as such. It is a very timely document, and we hope it will stimulate discussion in wider theological circles in Melanesia.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the “Preferential Option for the Poor” became a growing reality in the Church of Latin America, some parts of the Bible, where God shows Himself as the liberating force of the oppressed people of God, received more attention, and the whole of the Gospel message was read with eyes on the inhuman situations of poverty, injustice, and oppression of the majority of the peoples of Latin America. This analysis of real situations under the light of the Word of God was the origin of Liberation Theology. This theology is part of a conversion of heart by the Latin American church, resulting from Vatican II, *Populorum Progressio*, and the Conferences of Medellin and Puebla.

Between 1964 and 1980, I visited Brazil and several countries of Latin America seven times. During these years, I was able to observe the shifting of the church from supporting the governments, towards supporting the poor and oppressed. And I saw it as a movement under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### **1. Liberation Theology in Latin America**

Under the moving force of the Holy Spirit, theologians remain what they are – human beings. They were touched by the cry of the poor in their situation of need, injustice, and oppression. They thought that the voice of

the poor should be heard and listened to by the Latin American church. That means that their theology was oriented towards the specific tasks of evangelisation in Latin America.

## **2. Liberation Theology in Papua New Guinea**

*Basic Principle:* If evangelisation is to be effective, it can never prescind from the cultural and social context in which it takes place, or from the life-situation of those to whom it is directed. That is why Liberation Theology, as it was elaborated in Latin America, is not, and cannot, be an “article for export”.

I understand that, in similar situations, similar theologies can be produced. But for our situation in Papua New Guinea, the frame should be different. The content should be different. We have to go back to the cultural and social situation of our country, and to the life-situation of our people. Indeed, Christian faith is not indifferent to that reality.

The analysis of the situation of our people constitutes a real challenge to the work of evangelisation in the church. And in this Year of Youth, we have only to think of the problem of youth in our country, to see how urgent and acute the need is. In fact, the community of the people of God has the mission of announcing the Good News of Redemption to all peoples, at all times. That means that they have to pay attention to the signs of the times and places, that they have to listen, in the Name of the Risen Lord, to the joys and the anxieties, the hopes and the fears of the people of God, especially those who do not have a voice elsewhere.

## **3. We Have to Learn from the Liberation Theology of Latin America**

For us in Papua New Guinea, it could be a danger to conclude, from the fact that our situation on the social and cultural level is different from that of Latin America, that we do not need Liberation Theology at all. Liberation Theology is a reflection on the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is a message of freedom and a force for liberation, in the context of the life-situation of a concrete people.

Here in Papua New Guinea, our analysis will show us:

- A country, where power is a temptation to corruption, and corruption is the beginning of acquiring the goods of the community to enrich oneself; it is the beginning of the oppression of others.
- A rich country with a growing economy, where greed and materialism develop quickly, with their offshoots of drinking, gambling, and stealing, leading to gangster and rascal activities.
- A country where the analysis of the social, economical, cultural, and political situation is a great need, in order to identify the real needs. And then, in the light of the Word of God, we try to find out what is the will of God for us and our people, here and now. We know the weak and wrong points we will discover in our analysis are so many forms of sin, injustice, and selfishness. The whole history of salvation is there, to show us how God set His people free, if they follow the directions He shows to men.

#### **4. We Have to Find Our Own Way**

Once this work of analysis has been done, the national-pastoral planning process can start. The first thing to do is to start with a *Theological Bishops' Commission*, that accepts the challenge to reflect and find ways of implementing the analysis, and, consequently, the planning. This Bishops' Commission should have the faculty, at some stage, to co-opt into their deliberations a number of priests, and, if deemed necessary, of lay people, thus providing a channel for two-way communication. What way are we going?

From experiences elsewhere in the world we have to learn that, if we want to move our people away from materialism, and to keep them open to spiritual values, we must be careful to build up, in our pastoral-planning process, many forms of spirituality, movements concentrated on the imitation of Christ. For instance, from the beginning, the accent has to be put on "personal conversion" as a prerequisite for any changes for the good. We have to fight for the values of family life, which have such deep roots in the culture of our people, against the present permissiveness on all

levels. Prayer groups will have to help us to keep the balance against materialism – groups of people who come together to listen to the Word of God, to reflect on it in the light of the Holy Spirit, searching for what it may tell them in their situation, and putting the Eucharist and Christ Jesus in the centre of their lives. Our conversion towards a theology that touches life, and the reality people live in, will be coloured by the “See”, “Judge”, and “Act” method of the Catholic Action of Josef Cardijn, now raised to a pastoral principle.

As long as the church does not tackle the weak points, the sins of our society, anything else it does – Mass and the sacraments, processions and devotions, and, to some extent, its social works of schools and hospitals – could at times appear hypocritical.

## **5. A Glance at the Future**

What I try to say is that the contemporary contextual theologies invite us urgently to bring the reality of Papua New Guinea and the Word of God together for reflection, prayer, and deliberation. That, leaving each bishop free and responsible for his own diocese, guidelines be elaborated on a national level to meet the most urgent needs of the people of God in our country. In that way, Papua New Guinea should build its own Liberation Theology, in order to keep the church and people together. We should not forget that the church and the good news were brought into the reality of Papua New Guinea as “Fremdkörper”, from outside, and that the process towards authenticity, towards integration into the life of our people, is an ongoing process, where our own Liberation Theology has its task. Mistakes made elsewhere, and correctives imparted by the church, will guide us in our work.