

RECENT CATHOLIC TEACHING ON LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Fr Carl Telford

INTRODUCTION

This paper has a precise objective – to explain two recent Catholic documents from the sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The first, called *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, was issued on August 6, 1984 (hereafter, C.A.). The second was called *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, issued March 22, 1986 (hereafter, C.F.).

Both are concerned with the theology of liberation – a theological reflection centred on the biblical theme of liberation and freedom. This theology is wide-spread in all Christian churches, but the documents are obviously aimed at Catholics. There is such a range of theologies of liberation that it would be imprecise to say “theology of liberation” – but correct to say “theologies of liberation”. We find them in South America, Africa, and Asia, the Pacific. My own experience in New Zealand is that there is a real interest among Catholics, priests, brothers, and sisters, and laity for learning about liberation theologies.

These two documents have separate, but related, purposes, so must be read together, to see what the Catholic teaching is on theologies of liberation.

C.A. sets out “to draw the attention of pastors, theologians, and all the faithful to the deviations, and risks of deviations, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology”.¹ It, therefore, has a warning role – to point out the defects of some theologies of liberation.

C.F. “has the task to highlight the main elements of Christian doctrine and freedom – to indicate its principal theoretical and practical aspects”.² It does not set out to explain every point on Catholic teaching,

¹ C.A., Introduction.

² C.F., Introduction.

just the principal aspects. And each country's Conference of Catholic Bishops would have to set out more precise guidelines and teaching for their particular situation. These two documents give authentic Catholic teaching, that must be present in all theologies of liberation – and it is doing this for the whole church of 800 million Catholics. The Sacred Congregation is an organ of the Pontifical teaching authority – so has a real status.

In the reception of the documents, since the first, “C.A.,” was negative, and seemed to “attack” some particular theologians, it was a media event. But the second document, C.F., the more-important one, and a positive document, was ignored, since it was not as newsworthy. My impression is that many people think the Catholic church is opposed to all liberation theologies. This is not true. The church is committed, more than ever, to liberation and freedom – and to authentic theologies of liberation.

So I have begun with C.F. – the more-important document.

PART 1 – FUNDAMENTAL TEACHING OF C.F.

A. Structure of the document

This document has five parts –

1. State of Freedom in the World Today
2. Man's Vocation to Freedom and the Tragedy of Sin
3. Liberation and Christian Freedom
4. The Liberation Mission of the Church
5. The Social Doctrine of the Church: for a Christian Practice of Liberation

It begins with the reality of the situation (Parts I and II), then moves on to explain how the church sees freedom – and what is the precise mission of the church (Parts III and IV), and, finally, the church's practice of liberation.

B. Aspirations for liberation

There are deep aspirations throughout the world for liberation. This word, “aspirations”, is a common term in recent church documents,³ and means the “in-most stirring movements” of people. People wish to be free, and responsible for their own destinies. It is a sign of the times, that persons desire a say in how their world is being run, and, at the same time, wish to be free from all that hinders their freedom. So we can see the quest for freedom from disease, from ignorance, from colonial rulers, from the oppression of a foreign culture, freedom from racism, and sexism.

Yet, at the very same time, the paradox occurs that this world is, more than ever, threatened by bondage, e.g., colonialism changed the foreign rulers, but, sometimes, the new local rulers were as bad, if not worse, than the foreign ones. Diseases have been cured, so that we live longer, and this can mean the tragic situation of so many old people, who are lonely and neglected, as in the developed countries, which now sees euthanasia as a way of solving this “problem” of the aged.

So, it is, that the more man freed himself from the danger of nature, the more he experienced a growing fear confronting him . . . what forces can protect man from the slavery of his own domination?

C. Christian freedom

These aspirations are universal. But how have, especially Christians, experienced freedom? Yet it has been said that the church opposes human freedom. But she is simply stating the truth “human reason must . . . function in the light of the revelation, which Christ entrusted to his church”.⁴ So the dangers in misuse of freedom must be pointed out.

But there is a deeply-Christian experience of freedom: “The reality of the depth of freedom has always been known to the church, they (know) that they are the object of God’s infinite love.”⁵ The poor – the little ones – have a special knowledge of this freedom and liberation. We can think of

³ The development of recent Catholic teaching on social issues is well explained by Donald Dorr, in recent writing, Donald Dorr, *Option for the Poor*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1983.

⁴ C.F., p. 20.

⁵ C.F., p. 21.

the great joy of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, serving the poorest of the poor. She possesses no goods, yet is deeply free, and frees others. As well, there is the wonderful gift of freedom from sin, and the bondage of evil. We are gifted with the mercy of God the Father – and His forgiveness.

Each morning this week, I have been celebrating mass in a squatter settlement of Lae. There is a new beautiful church, built in the middle of these shacks. Some would say that these squatters don't need a church – but only better houses, hospitals, schools, and yet, while their dignity requires that these schools and houses be built, the poor have the right also to know the joy of being loved by God, and given His grace, and to experience Christian freedom. However, our churches surely are an affront to the love of God, when they are not signs in healing the sick, instructing the ignorant, and other works of mercy.

D. Scriptural understanding of freedom and liberation

The document now moves on (pp. 43-60) to a long exposition of the scriptural understanding of freedom and liberation.

The Old Testament is centred around Israel's experiences of liberation by God. He has set them free "from the house of bondage, and He gives them a new land, and the status of free-born. But God requires that His chosen people also free others – and be just in their dealings. So we, certainly, find the prophets voicing God's anger that the people ignore their side of the covenant. The poor of Yahweh are "a people humble and lowly, who live in hope of the liberation of Israel". God alone can free from the slavery of a sinful world.

So when Jesus came, "The poor have the good news preached to them". This is a sign of the Messiah, but Jesus was poor Himself, and identified with the oppressed. "If you did to the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

But Christ frees us, above all, by the power of His paschal mystery. He has achieved definitive liberation by this mystery.

The document summarises Christian freedom as "justification by the grace received through faith and the church's sacraments". That is the

freedom God, as loving Father, offers us by the work of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶

This may seem removed from the need for liberation from hunger or disease. So I should like to explain one of the central, if not the central, idea of both documents. It is summed up in an important extract from Paul VI.

I will quote it in full:

“Likewise, we profess that the kingdom of God, which has its beginnings here on earth, in the church of Christ, is not of this world, whose figure is passing away. The proper growth of this church is not able to be judged as being identical with the progress of human culture, or of the sciences, or of technical skills. Her proper growth, rather, consists in this: that the vast riches of Christ be more deeply known, that hope may be more constantly placed in eternal goods, that there may be a more-ardent response to the love of God, and that grace and holiness may be more-widely diffused among men. By that same love, the church is impelled to have, constantly at heart, the true temporal good of mankind. While she does not cease to warn her children that they have, here on earth, no lasting city, she also urges each one, according to his condition of life and resources, to foster the growth of a truly-human society, to promote justice, peace and fraternal harmony among men, and to come generously to the aid of one’s brother, especially the poor and unhappy. Therefore, this great concern, with which the church attends to the needs of mankind – that is, to their joys and expectations, their sorrows and labours – is nothing else than the eagerness, which so vehemently impels her to be present to mankind, with this goal in mind: to enlighten men with the light of Christ, and to bring together, and join all men, in Him, who is their only Saviour. Indeed, this concern must never be understood as meaning that the church is conforming herself to the reality of this world, nor is losing the ardour with which she awaits her Lord and His eternal kingdom.”⁷

⁶ C.F., p. 52.

⁷ Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, June 30, 1968.

This goes right to the heart of the paradox of our Christian faith in the world, but not of it – healing the body, yet our prime concern is for the soul. We could say, building both schools and churches . . . giving bread and the bread of life – working for justice and peace – as well as evangelisation – building the earthly city, yet waiting for the new earth and new heaven. Our human way likes to concentrate on one aspect – since that is easier for our human minds to grasp. Yet “faith embraces several truths, which appear to contradict each other. It is always the harmony of two opposing truths. This synthesis of such truths is the hallmark of a Catholic vision.”⁸

E. The church’s specific mission

C.F. discusses the church’s specific mission, in the light of the situation and the gospel. How should Christians respond, as Christians? What have they to offer?

Her essential gift is one of offering integral salvation. “The church’s essential mission, following that of Christ, is a mission of evangelisation and salvation.”⁹ She does this in the Spirit of the Beatitudes.

“She takes great care to maintain, clearly and firmly, both the unity, and the distinction between evangelisation and human promotion: unity, because she seeks the good of the whole person: distinction, because these two tasks enter in different ways into her mission.”¹⁰

Once again, we see the importance of Paul VI’s words. There is always a temptation to reduce the church’s work to one dimension only – but all dimensions are her concern. She must remain, however, above all, faithful to our supernatural destiny.

C.F. – goes on to discuss three areas where balance is needed.

Option for the poor – a love of preference for the marginalised. There is a call today to respond to injustice by such an option and preference. We can see this preference in the life of Jesus, but it was never

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Rosemary Sheed, tran., London UK: G. Chapman, 1967.

⁹ C.F., p. 63.

¹⁰ C.F., p. 64.

a purely earthly or material concern. “He taught detachment from earthly riches so we might desire the riches of heaven.”¹¹ Jesus brought grace and peace to the poor, as well as healing, and bread. All human misery is, therefore, the concern of the church. But it must not be an option that excludes anyone – even the rich. In fact, there is a special call for love for the new poor in our society – the unborn, and the elderly.

Basic Christian communities are a vibrant way to show the church’s concern for justice, so is a source of great hope, if lived in communion with the whole church.

The same applies to “local theologies”, which come from a particular perspective. They can highlight certain aspects of the word of God. The strength of local theology can also be its weakness, it can become so inward-looking as to forget the wider experience of the whole church, and be enriched by it as it can, itself, enrich the universal church.

F. How to put the new commandment into practice?

This section of C.F. deals with the problem of putting this Christian teaching on liberation into day-to-day life.

Any practice must begin from the knowledge of the problems of society – and here we should use the skills of human wisdom and science, e.g., anthropologists, sociologists. What is going on? At the same time, there needs to be a deep knowledge of the gospel, and this will result in a social teaching, a social ethics, a set of principles that will govern our activity.

There are three basic principles that are always valid for Christian social action. The first is the principle of human dignity. Any social teaching must give full recognition to the natural rights and duties of each human person. This is a natural right that no government gives, since it comes from God Himself, and no government can take away the dignity of any human person, be he or she rich or poor, white or black, Melanesian or German, etc.

¹¹ C.F., p. 66.

The second principle is solidarity. We are all obliged to promote the common good, so there is no place for social or political individualism, or a capitalism that is *laissez-faire*. We are our brothers' keepers. There is an individualism that is unhealthy in the face of our world's problems.

The third principle balances the second – it is subsidiary. The state, nor any social body, must not take away the freedom of individuals by collective force: so that the question must be always asked, is this able to be done by a lower organisation, e.g., can the provincial government care for roads, or must the national government come in? For another example, should the local parish decide this, or does it involve a decision by the bishop? In the light of these three principles, we can judge social situations, structures, and systems. These principles are valid for any human situation, so in that they, in a sense, are not specifically Christian. The Christian church says that all governments and organisations must respect these principles, since every human being has rights, by the dignity of being a human being.

G. How do we understand unjust structures?

Liberation theologies are intensely concerned about structural change. There must be fundamental changes. C.F. gives some principles to understand structural change:

- a. These structures are created by human beings, and are not the result of a determinism of history.
- b. As such, structures are good in themselves, when they are conformed to natural law, and the common good.
- c. But they will always be marked by sin. So how to change an unjust structure, e.g., a sugar-cane farm, where the owner lives in luxury, while his workers' children suffer from malnutrition.

The first priority is the conversion of individual hearts, an appeal to voluntary action, and the freedom of others. But this is not to be a passive reaction. There must be changes, but in a specifically Christian way. At every step of the way, the freedom and rights of all must be respected, so that no human dignity, even an oppressor's, is lost by injustice. So

Christians must reject systematic recourse to violence as the only path to structural changes. This involves rejection of the myth of revolution, to change by force and arms.

But, at the same time, there is, in Catholic teaching, a true place for armed struggle to free persons from unjust structures.

The document lists the many conditions, the discernment required, before this armed struggle takes place. This is a last resort, and may, in the light of the terrible force of modern weapons, not be justified. The church favours passive resistance as its favourite method of change.

H. Role of laity in the transformation of work, politics, culture, and education

C.F. spends much time on the way to work for an in-depth transformation of society. I can do no more in this paper than briefly set out some of the major points in this extremely rich section. Work is a key to the whole social question, and the dignity of human workers requires that all be given the opportunity to work, to use their talents. This seems, in my view, an area in Papua New Guinea that is a real key to the stability of the country: Pope John Paul has written an encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, on this whole question of work. C.F. can merely briefly summarise the encyclical's main insights, so it is doubly difficult, in this article, to summarise a summary.

The question of solidarity, especially in helping the under-developed countries is mentioned (pp. 90-91). "The serious socio-economic problems, which occur today, cannot be solved, unless new fronts of solidarity are created: solidarity of the poor among themselves, solidarity with the poor, to which the rich are called, solidarity among the workers, and with the workers."¹² Mutual sharing is required for this transformation – a sharing that is not a manipulation or neo-colonialism.

¹² C.F., p. 89.

Freedom to follow one's own culture is necessary today, and, at the same time, this means the right to education. "The first condition for this is the elimination of illiteracy",¹³ a challenging statement.

The state has to promote culture and education – but, at the same time, within limits. The family is the fundamental and primary educator.

Persons have the right to participate in this promotion of education and culture: no state has a monopoly. "No one can be excluded from this participation in social and political life, for reasons of sex, race, colour, social condition, language, or religion. Keeping people on the margins of cultural social and political life constitutes, in many nations, one of the most glaring injustices of our times."¹⁴

C.F. has briefly discussed the controverted role of priests and politics.

I. Conclusion

C.F. finally places the woman, who has experienced God's liberation by grace most deeply, Mary, the Mother of Jesus: "She is the most-perfect image of freedom, and of the liberation of humanity, and the universe."¹⁵ It is, above all, in her song, Magnificat, that we can understand this liberation.

But she is also a woman who encourages us to faith in the victory of God's love. The poor have seen her as this sign of hope. Liberation and freedom are ultimately gifts from God. Before the immensity of the task, we could despair of ever freeing this world. Mary is a sign of the ultimate victory of God that nothing can hinder.

PART 2 – FUNDAMENTAL TEACHING OF C.A.

There are 11 divisions in this second document, which has a more restricted purpose than C.F. I will not summarise the first five divisions, which cover: Aspirations for freedom, Biblical foundations and interventions of the Magisterium. These topics have been covered more thoroughly in C.F.

¹³ C.F., p. 92.

¹⁴ C.F., p. 95.

¹⁵ C.F., p. 97.

What is special about C.A. is its critique of certain theologies of liberation. It is important to be clear that C.A. is only discussing those limited number of theologies of liberation, which are dangerous new interpretations of Christianity, and so “seriously departs from the faith of the church”.¹⁶ C.A. is clear that the document is not to restrict or hinder those theologians involved in writing on liberation. It has the very *limited* aim of correcting defective theologies, by pointing out the defects, and the true Catholic perspective that is missing.

The major defect in these theologies is their uncritical acceptance and use of Marxist analysis and ideology. This analysis and ideology contains, at its heart, a materialism that denies the dignity of the human person and their eternal destiny.

As well, this analysis leads to a subversion of the meaning of truth. How? This Marxist analysis believes history shows the gap between the oppressors and the oppressed. These theologies of liberation claim to come from the viewpoint of the oppressed, and this is the only valid view-point. The oppressors’ theology is false, because it comes from their selfish quest to be master, and to enslave others. So, they and their theology, must be rejected. The oppressed find the true theology, because they are participants in the struggle for liberation. Only praxis against oppression discovers this view-point. Only those in this struggle can analyse. Truth is, alone, found by participants in the struggle for liberation against oppressors.

The principle of class struggle is accepted by these theologies of liberation as the fundamental law of history. There is only one history. Human history of God’s saving work is the history of His work, saving the oppressed. Liberation movements are salvation history, if it is human progress of this oppressed, then God is there. So there is a denial of the transcendence of God’s kingdom, which is not identical with human progress.

The theory of class struggle means that love of enemies is counter-productive. There is no real place for Christians from oppressor and oppressed classes to mix, even at Mass. They belong to opposed views.

¹⁶ C.A., p. 6.

The true church is the church of the poor, and even the hierarchy is seen as an organ of oppression. They would seem to especially apply to “Roman” theology. There can be no compromise, or real dialogue, with the enemies of freedom, who belong to the ruling class, be they in church or society. This is, of course, a political reading of the Christian message, which reduces it to this world.

So, it departs from this tradition, in setting a Jesus, who is only a man struggling to liberate His people so Jesus, God and man, is replaced by a political reformer, who is divisive and only on the side of the oppressed. The church is called upon to follow His example, so her spiritual nature and transcendent message, and sacraments of grace, are ignored. There is a reductionism.

C.A. concludes with a call to a true theology of liberation, that is faithful to the three truths that John Paul II spoke about at Puebla in 1979: the truth about Jesus, the Saviour, the truth about the church, and the truth about man. These cannot be changed without becoming unfaithful to the gospel and tradition. The church must proclaim the true liberation that occurs by true reform of a person’s heart by the Holy Spirit. This liberation is never by violence.

Finally, “there is need for social teaching of the church, which is open to all the new questions, which are numerous today. The contribution of theologians, and other thinkers in all parts of the world, to the reflection of the church is indispensable today.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Finally, I should like to offer a few reflections, after studying these documents.

A. Theology in dialogue in 1987

These two documents are part of a dialogue that is going on between the Christian faith, traditions – the wisdom of Christ’s word – and the 1000s of men and women involved in the struggle for justice. There is a great need for a conversation between the needs of the oppressed and the gospel of freedom. The genesis of C.F. is an example of the need for

¹⁷ C.A., p. 11.

dialogue. After the strong critique of some theologies by C.A., there was felt, in the Catholic church, especially from the Latin American churches, that the second document should be more positive. So, C.F., itself, is explicitly open to further development. It does not claim to be the final word. It wishes to aid the progress of a better theology of liberation. One big help to dialogue is the avoiding of labels. Some see Pope John Paul II, or Cardinal Ratzinger, as “conservative”, and Boff or Gutierrez as “Marxist”. These are “media-style” labels that categorise, simplistically, someone’s views and opinions. What is the truth of the other person’s position? That is the question we need to ask about differing theologies if there is to be a real dialogue.

B. Theology in shock

By this, we mean that we can no longer afford to do theology in isolation from the aspirations of humanity. That is what theologies of liberation are saying loud and clear. Theology will never be the same again. The answers of traditional theology do not satisfy many people, passionately concerned in the quest for a just society. For myself, as one teaching theology, I must take greater care to listen to this movement in the church. I see it as a call to conversion, to a deeper intellectual, moral, and religious conversion.

Both documents are clear that they should not be taken as “no” to liberation and work of justice. This work is needed more than ever. Profound changes are required, and there can be no retreat from the church’s involvement in the authentic liberation of humanity. This is a loud call to the whole church to be more involved in justice and peace.

C. Theology from below

This conference is concerned with theology by the people. That concern for theology from the grassroots people is a sign that these Christian people wish their human dignity to be respected. They are no longer satisfied with only a theology from above. These “grassroots” wish to be involved in the exploration of revelation. It should not be the preserve of theologians, and, certainly, no theologian can claim to have the final absolute answer. This is especially difficult for a theologian to accept. Our theological learning is hard-won. We must work hard to gain theological insights, so it is difficult to have to admit that we can gain

something from those who have not our theological experience. Yet, surely, we can learn from each other, even from “grassroots”. What is God teaching them? Liberation theology is concerned about listening to this Christian experience of the poor. So, all theologians should be listening to the “grassroots”, and learning from them, as the “grassroots” can learn from theologians.

D. Where liberation theologies need correction

This paper makes no claim to have studied all liberation theologies. So, I can only make a few general observations.

The first distinction is between good theology, that is open to new insights, and defective theology, that overstates its claims, or is a transformation of the basic gospel. Also there is an arrogance that would claim modern movements alone are liberating. The history of the church is full of the work of so many Christian men and women, who have worked with the poor, to free captives, to educate the ignorant, to heal the sick.

All liberation theologies wish to remove present oppressive structures, but what then? What is the ultimate goal of liberation? What is their explicit vision of the new world?

Those who are involved in liberation, and all theologians, need the gifts of self-critical reflection. Why are they involved? I gained much from an article that studied the psychology of those involved in work for justice and peace.¹⁸ There can be a projection of unresolved personal conflicts on to outside groups or institutions.

E. Liberation theologies and Papua New Guinea

How can these documents help us in Papua New Guinea? First, we can avoid the mistake of others, who have supported liberation movements that have eventually become oppressive, when actually in control. The documents ask a critique of underlying assumptions and anthropology in any theology of liberation. Does this liberate, in actual fact?

¹⁸ Unfortunately, our library here in Port Moresby does not seem to hold this issue of *Human Development*, from memory, an issue in the early 1980s by an American Capuchin, a graduate of the Institute of Psychology at the Gregorian University of Rome.

Secondly, we have institutions and structures now that need liberation. It seems to me, the family, the unemployed, and youth, all need urgent attention, so that they become a priority for church and government.

Finally, the specific work of the church is to proclaim Christ as liberator of the whole person, body, and soul, and of the whole world. So, we are called, as church workers, to proclaim this liberation more urgently, and with greater conviction. The church is being challenged in a profound way. We have no option but to respond with deeper Christian love than before.