

# Arguments that Favor a Theology of Liberation

*Many people think the Vatican totally opposes liberation theology, yet recent Church documents have actually endorsed some of its ideas*

Latin America's liberation theology has been legitimized by the highest-levels of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The Pope, himself, now considers it to be "a new stage" in Catholic theology, for all times and all places. Those who have wanted to have it branded as heterodoxy have been unsuccessful.

In March and April of this year, John Paul II made several references to liberation theology, as a Christian reflection that "is not only opportune, but also useful and necessary." Speaking to a representative group of 21 Brazilian bishops, in a unique meeting at the Vatican's Hall of Congregations on March 13, he said, "The Church recognizes that its obligation is to continue that reflection, to bring it up to date and to deepen it, as a reflection that tries to respond to the serious problems related to social justice, equality in interpersonal, national and international relations, peace and disarmament, freedom, the fundamental rights of the human person, etc."

In a special message to the Brazilian Bishop's Conference on April 9, he added, "We are convinced, you and we, that liberation theology...must constitute a new stage—closely linked to previous ones—in that

theological reflection begun with the Apostolic tradition and carried on by the great Fathers and Doctors, with the ordinary and extraordinary Magisterium, and in the most recent period, by the rich patrimony of the Church's social doctrine, as expressed in a series of documents that go from *Rerum novarum* to *Laborem exercens*."

On April 5, the Vatican also published its "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" (*Libertatis nuntius*), signed on March 22, with the Pope's approval, by Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It reaffirms that freedom and liberation are "the center of the Gospel message" (Nos. 1 and 2), and it once again recognizes the fact that "one of the principal phenomena of our times, that affects entire continents, is the awakening consciousness of people who, burdened by the weight of secular misery, aspire to a life of dignity and justice and are willing to fight for their freedom" (No.17).

Extending the theme of liberation to a world-scale, the same document denounces the development of "dependent relationships" that result from the "concentration of economic power" which includes: the "technological power" of the contemporary world (No. 12); the use of technology to "perpetrate genocide" (No. 14); and the establishment of "new relationships of inequality and oppression"



## latin american issues

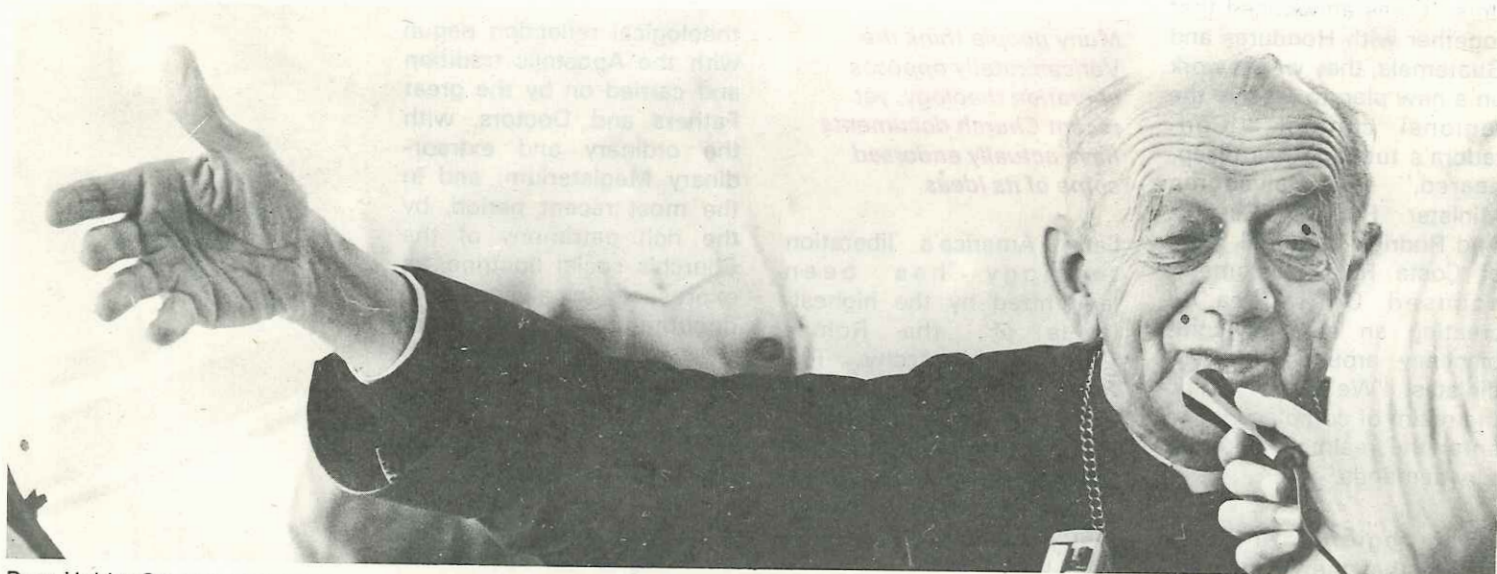
among nations "endowed with might and those that are not" (No.16).

It adds, "The new technological power is united with economic power and leads to its concentration. Thus, both within a single people, as well as between peoples, new dependent relationships have been created in the last 20 years that have produced

serve instead to increase those threats. The machines of death that confront each other today are capable of destroying all human life on earth."

At least eight of the "Instructions" one hundred points speak of the Church's experience with the poor, of their Biblical and theological conceptualizations and of the Church's mission among

close their hearts, cannot be within God's charity" (No.56). In the a similar spirit, the document adds, "For the same reason, those oppressed by misery are the object of the Church's preferential love, which from the very beginning, and despite the errors of many of its members, has never ceased its work to aid, defend and free them. This has been done through



Dom Helder Camara, archbishop of Recife, Brasil. A leading exponent of Theology of Liberation.

the new demands for liberation." And it asks, "How can we prevent technological power from being turned into a force of oppression against human groups or entire peoples?" "The search to fulfill self-interests seems to be the norm for international relations, ignoring any consideration of the common good for humanity." In the same tone, it acknowledges the destructive capacity of the modern "machines of death" and warns against the weakness of "recognizing a juridical order as the sole guarantee for the relationships within the great human family" (Nos. 15 and 16).

"When trust in the law no longer seems to offer sufficient protection, security and peace are sought through mutual threats, representing a danger for all of humanity. The forces that ought to serve for the development of freedom,

them (Nos. 21, 22, 45, 46, 47, 66, 67 and 68). The third chapter, entitled "Liberation and Christian Freedom," repeats that "the Prophets vigorously denounced the injustices against the poor" and that "they became God's spokesmen on their behalf;" that God "is the supreme recourse of the weak and the oppressed, and the Messiah shall have the mission of defending them;" and that "injustice against the weak and the poor is a grave sin, which breaks the communion with Yahweh" (No.46).

On the topic of "love, the gift of the Spirit," the document again insists that "the love of God, instilled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, implies love for one's neighbor" (No. 55). And in the light of that commandment, "the Apostle James severely reminds the rich of their obligations, and Saint John affirms that they who have worldly goods and seeing their brother in need,

countless works of charity, which always and everywhere are indispensable. In addition, through its social doctrine, whose implementation is urgently needed, the Church has tried to promote structural changes in society in an effort to obtain decent living conditions for people" (No. 68).

The importance of many of these topics and aspects of the approach used, had been developed and emphasized by liberation theology in Latin America since its birth around 1967.

Liberation theology seriously and systematically applied the teachings of the universal assembly of Catholic bishops known as the Vatican Council II, held in Rome between 1962 and 1965. The Council declared, "Before all else, fulfill the demands of justice, so as not to give as charity that which is really justice; abolish the causes and not only the effects of evil; and organize aid



## Latin American Issues

The fact that the Nicaraguan government had changed its position was what led Washington's Central American allies to bring up new obstacles to the signature of the Treaty. In Esquipulas, the Sandinistas not only agreed to sign, they presented a list of weapons and security aspects they would be willing to "reduce, limit, regulate or do away with."

38

Washington's attitude, on the other hand, wavered between statements of support for Contadora and open opposition to the peace-maker's activities. Presidential envoy to Central America, Philip Habib, first said that the U.S. would suspend aid to the contras if Managua signed the Peace Treaty. Present at Oscar Arias Sánchez's inauguration in San José, Vice-President George Bush declared that the United States would abide by the Contadora agreements if they were "global and verifiable."

Nonetheless, a week later, on May 14, White House spokesman Larry Speakes indicated that Washington would not withdraw its support of the contra even if Nicaragua signed the peace accords. The following day, President Reagan confirmed this position. Meanwhile, Washington analysts spoke of struggles within the administration concerning the official position *vis a vis* Contadora.

The differences came to light when on May 20 the *New York Times* published a Pentagon document which argued that the Peace Treaty would lead the United States to a costly policy of containment of Nicaragua, as well as risking a generalized regional war. The Defense Department immediately disowned the document. The conflict was apparently resolved when the White House reconfirmed the official position: support for a peace treaty will be conditioned to the

restoration of democracy in Nicaragua, that it cease to support subversion, that it break off military ties with the Socialist countries, and that it reduce its military apparatus.

Thus, June 6 loomed closer and closer. Five days before the controversial date, Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo announced that none of the five Central

"negotiating modifications to the Treaty has come to an end, since all that remains is to implement and execute the agreements, given the political goodwill of the countries concerned."

As for the Panama Declaration, the document states three basic commitments: Central American nations will neither lend their territory nor support irregular



Nicaraguan children defending their national sovereignty.

American nations would sign the Peace Treaty on the programmed date. He explained that the decision had been made at the Esquipulas presidential summit. So June 6 came and went, and nothing was signed.

But there was one other meeting between Contadora, its Support Groups and Central American representatives, to discuss pending aspects of the agreement. Out of this gathering came two documents: a definitive version of the Peace Treaty, and the Panama Declaration. Jorge Abadía, Panamanian Foreign Affairs Minister, declared that the time for

forces; no country will join military or political alliances that threaten peace and security in the region; no power should provide military or logistical support to irregular forces or subversive groups, nor threaten the use of force as a means of overthrowing a government in the area.

Reactions to the final version of the Peace Treaty and to the Panama Declaration were diverse. The Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, said the documents were a "political bomb for the United States." On the other hand, Guatemalan foreign affairs Minister Mario Quiñones, declared that Contadora's



in such a way that those who receive it *are progressively liberated from external dependence and begin to be able to care for themselves*" ("Decree on Secular Apostleship," No.8).

Thus, in addition to the Bible, the Tradition and the Church's Magisterium, liberation theology began to use the social sciences. By then, social theory no longer explained poverty, oppres-

colonization was coupled to, reinforced and maintained by the internal forms of colonization in our own countries, headed by the oligarquies and ever-smaller power elites.

Liberation theologians began, then, to read the Bible, the Tradition and the Magisterium with new eyes, from the optic of Latin America's poverty, exploitation and oppression. They

hunger, misery and oppression; in a word, from the injustice and hatred that are born from human selfishness" (Second Latin American Bishops Conference; Medellin, Colombia; August-September, 1968).

Clearly this authentic manner of living and preaching the Gospel represents hope for the poor, the majority of people in the continent, but it also questions those who



Which way the Church?

Photo by Rogelio Cuellar.

sion and Latin America's underdevelopment as the result of *natural causes or pure chance*—which would definitely make God responsible for injustice—. Nor was it explained as the product of some *historic and passing backwardness*, as traditional Latin American culture (urban-rural) facing the modern culture of the rich countries (industrial-urban). Rather, it explained those conditions as the *product of ancient and new forms of foreign colonialization* by the countries of the First World in military, political, cultural, social, commercial, technological and financial matters. This external

reclaimed the Gospel's historical and public character, going beyond the interpretations that often tended to reduce the Gospel to idealism and privatization. For liberation theology, God's salvation through Jesus Christ is not only a question of that which goes beyond history, nor that which is solely spiritual—understood here in its dualist sense, as the opposite of the material— but rather it involves man's individual and social reality. "It is the same God who, for all times, sent his Son in the form of a man to liberate all men from the slavery that results from sin, ignorance,

hold power. Thus, in some places in the world, liberation theology is the victim of "persecution for the cause of justice," both inside and outside the Church. Nonetheless, as the Pope said recently, the Church "recognizes its obligation to continue that reflection, to bring it up to date and to deepen it, as a reflection that tries to respond to the serious problems related to social justice, equality in interpersonal, national and international relations, peace and disarmament, freedom, the fundamental rights of the human person, etc."★

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