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Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology: Traditional Catholicism from the Perspective of the Afflicted Poor

Kimberly Anne Humphrey

One week in Guatemala taught me more about life, painful realities, and God than eighteen years in the United States ever could. My experiences in Guatemala made it absolutely necessary for me to reevaluate my perceptions of God, faith, and religion. The Roman Catholicism that I encountered in Guatemala was considerably different than that which I had grown up with in a small New England town. The Guatemalan Catholicism I witnessed was intrinsically led to the Mayan customs of its people and their history of persecution and poverty.

Gustavo Gutierrez grew up in this context in Lima, Peru. His theological prowess resulted in a classical European education that did little to acknowledge the plight of the poor and oppressed. His return to Guatemala left him intensely aware of the disconnect between the Church's teachings and the reality of life for many of the people of the Church. Gutierrez's reflection upon the plights of his people was placed in the context of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and Third World Liberation Theology was formed. This is a theology written from and for the perspective of the neglected poor, and it asks the universal Church and global economic and social structures to change.

THE LIFE OF GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ

Gustavo was born and grew up in Lima, Peru, half Hispanic and half Indian—he was automatically placed amongst the oppressed in his nation (Brown 23-24). For a large chunk of his adolescence he was confined—first to bed and then to a wheelchair due to a particularly painful case of osteomyelitis (Brown 24). It was during that time that his passion for reading and learning was fanned into full flame. Gustavo set out to become a priest and his impressive academic achievements garnered him attention and the opportunity to study theology at the most prestigious schools in Europe (Brown 24). Gutiérrez did not return to Peru for ten years, and when he began living and working amongst those peoples again he realized that the Eurocentric theology he had studied did not connect with the experience of oppressed Peruvians. The theology he had learned in Europe was writ-

ten as though the poor did not exist; the theology was written on the presumption that life around the world was a reflection of European existence. This perspective prevented the theology from applying to people of the third world because their existence most definitively did *not* reflect the life of first-world Europeans.

Upon this realization, Gutiérrez began to rethink his classical training and set himself to the task of relearning and reinterpreting the Latin American reality and the role that faith played in that reality (Brown 26). It was from this rediscovery of his home, his people, and his religion that Liberation Theology emerged. Gutiérrez and the people he served knew chaos as daily life and his theology serves as both a plea and a charge that channels the call of God.

His theology drew immediate attention from Rome as questions about his orthodoxy arose and the then Cardinal Ratzinger notably disagreed with Liberation Theology (Brown 36, 42-43). The disagreement with Rome took a clear toll on Gutiérrez; he was being chastised by the very Church which he loved dearly and sought to serve (Brown 44). Part of the reason why Gutiérrez garnered some unwanted attention from Rome was because of his active participation in bridging the gap between politics and religion; this practice is seen particularly in his contact with Christian base communities. Gutiérrez says “the poor with their deprivation and their richness burst into my life. This is a people suffering from injustice and exploitation whose faith at the same time goes very deep” (*The Density* 171). Gustavo admired the strength of faith which he witnessed in the base Christian communities. When he encountered these communities he realized that these poor Christians were expressing a theology of political action and community which Gustavo felt he was only being to understand (*The Density* 171).

The Christian base communities, which operated mostly without the presence of a priest, contained the threat of restructuring the organization of the Church. They spoke of a place in which theology worked from the bottom up, contradicting the traditional hierarchy that works top down. The Christian base communities could be seen as a place where the Church is no longer needed and the particularity of the Church is lost; the Catholicism of the base communities could be interpreted as a Catholicism that is in name only and has no connection to the Church in practice. Gutiérrez, however, saw the Christian base communities as the foundation for theology. According to Gutiérrez, these base communities were beginning to formulate a theology as they reflected upon their evangelizing actions as a faith community. This process demonstrated the poor’s ability and right to think—the poor affirmed this right which they are so often denied in their discussions on God and faith. The resulting theology, therefore, is not one of an

individual but of the entire community, and it expands itself to include the entirety of the Church (*The Density* 172).

The hierarchical complaint about this perspective was that the theology of the Church would be weakened because the most prestigiously educated would no longer be formulating the theology. In fact, it would often be the uneducated who would be demonstrating theology. Gutiérrez's response to this is that the educated who live amongst the poor, such as Gutiérrez himself, can serve as teachers to the poor with their greater knowledge of scripture and tradition. He claims, however, that it is the questions and the hopes of the poor that demand more from theology; the poor ask for a theology that is "committed both to the place and to making sense of a—very necessary—reflection upon the faith" (*The Density* 173). This affirmation has not stopped Rome from distrusting the Christian base communities, and it has been this issue which has caused the most difficulty between Gutiérrez and Rome. The other charges that were levied at Gutiérrez include reducing religion to politics and having a dangerous infatuation with Marxism (Brown 42-43).

Despite this personal and public difficulty Gutiérrez remains faithful to the tradition and the Church, but it becomes apparent in his writings that he is constantly on a balance beam—he must be certain to remain in the good graces of the Church hierarchy while refusing to compromise on his message. He has been able to do this by using traditional theology and Papal statements to support his position; whenever he would make a radical declaration, he would cite a traditional source that would protect him from any accusations. Gutiérrez recontextualized classical theology, but in that process he also incorporated classical theology into his final product, remaining balanced on the thin line between change and constancy.

His accomplishment, however, cannot be limited to his ability to remain true to two imperative elements of his belief—he should also be commended for the preeminence the role "pastor" takes in his life:

The pastoral work came first. And the pastoral role is not limited to Lima. Gustavo is a priest and a pastor wherever he goes. I know people in New York City who, when he taught there, would not have survived without the pastoral help of this short, unpretentious, eminently kindly man. There must be thousands of such people in Latin America. (Brown 47)

Gustavo's theology is filled with the idea of community, and it is one that he has clearly taken to heart. This concept is shown in the testimonies about him that speak of one truth: to live in community is to serve others. The work of Gutiérrez

is exemplified with service, and his theology asks all of us to listen to the call of God and to accept our own role as conduits of God's love and justice.

METHODOLOGY

Gustavo Gutiérrez initiated a new way of formulating theology within the Catholic Church. If the Church was going to meet the prodding of God and the needs of its people, then the theology could no longer be formulated by privileged academics sitting in air conditioned libraries without any insight into the suffering of the poor in their shanties. The orthodoxy which this form of theology continues to prioritize has prevented theology from addressing the marginalized. Gutiérrez has no intention of denying the importance of orthodoxy. He does, however, hope to limit the primacy orthodoxy holds in Christianity in order to acknowledge the great importance of concrete deeds and actions. The hope is to balance orthodoxy with the historical praxis so that commitment to orthodoxy does not prevent the faithful from committing themselves to history in which God works (*A Theology of Liberation* 8).

According to Gutiérrez, theology has, at times, pandered to the privileged; theology has lost touch with the poor and marginalized for whom God has a preferential love. Many theologians today write as though the poor and the help-less conditions in which the poor survive do not exist, causing the suffering to be without a theology on which they can rely. It is this disconnect between theology and the poor that troubles Gutiérrez most; God is a suffering God who is present with the poor in their slums and shacks and, therefore, theology should strive to reflect on and speak to the context of the poor and the marginalized. It is for this reason that Gutiérrez places such emphasis on the "historical praxis" which should be recognized in all works of theology (*A Theology* 5). Theology is a critical reflection on action in the light of faith. Faith is, in part, the understanding that God loves us and that we must return that love by showing it to the world; we must commit ourselves to the world to commit ourselves to God (*A Theology* 36-37).

This belief is in contradiction to the distinction of planes model which is so popular in Eurocentric theology. Christianity has done a very thorough job of separating God and spirituality from earthly existence. Because spirituality has been relegated to a transcendent awareness that does not interfere with earthly life, spirituality is no longer embedded in the day to day life of Christians. Under this model the sacred and the secular are two different realms which never meet. This separation makes it near impossible for the poor to find a connection with God—the lives of the poor are dominated by a desperate need to live against all

odds. Therefore, the connection that exists between God and the poor is that God suffers like the poor on the cross and in the slums (*A Theology* 36-37). If God is relegated out of the slums of the poor and into another realm that exists to humanity only in contemplation, then God ignores the poor to whom God repeatedly proclaims love. This disconnect is what makes the distinction of planes a faulty model. Gutiérrez amends this disconnect by collapsing the planes onto each other and proclaiming that God is fully present in the earthly existence of God's people (*A Theology* 36-37).

The Church as a Political Force

For this reason we must commit ourselves to the world, and we cannot claim to be committing ourselves to the world if we are ignoring the abused poor; the poor are in desperate need of love and justice and to ignore them is to ignore God, who became an oppressed person in Christ and loved the poor greatly. Meeting the needs of the poor and the oppressed is far different than meeting the upper class's need for approval of actions that are marginalizing others (*A Theology* 166-167). The Church has spoken out vehemently in encyclicals and other official documents against the inhumane conditions in which so many must live. Strong action must go hand in hand with those arguments. God calls the Church to exist in solidarity with the poor and the Church should strive to answer this call. The Church, however, cannot be the only structure with cares for the oppressed. The Church should stand as an example of charity and justice to all society (*A Theology* 151). Perhaps more importantly, the Church should offer a critique of society; the Church should consistently point to the flaws within our social structure and call upon both institutions and individuals to do something about those problems. In this way, the Church must be a political force that involves itself concretely in the existence of the poor. For the lives of the poor to differ in any significant way from the deplorable conditions in which they currently exist there needs to be more than one institution standing with the poor. The Church has as one of its goals to help those who are in need—in need of water, food, medicine, and love. It is impossible for the Church to fulfill this goal if it acknowledges the existence of the suffering third world population in words but not in deeds (*Essential Writings* 24-25).

What should remain constant in theology is the understanding that God is with the marginalized, whoever that may be. Today, the largest group of marginalized people is the poor, and theologians should strive to keep this in mind and write accordingly. The official statements and stances of the Church that relate to

poverty have been both radical and hopeful. Unfortunately, the uneducated poor who desperately crave God's love often do not have access to these encyclicals and speeches—in order for the poor to know the stance of the Church, it must be made clear through the actions and words of its clergy and religious leaders. It is through bold actions that the Church will be able to encourage the marginalized (*A Theology* 8). Liberation Theology may offer the Church a chance to communicate its official stances into an action-based initiative that will reach out to the needy. The Church has, particularly since Vatican II, recommitted itself to being a Church that works in solidarity with the poor and which attempts to follow God through spreading love in action.

Theology as the Second Step

Gutiérrez sees theology as the “second step” (*A Theology* 9). Theology should not originate in solitude and then ask others to conform their actions to that theology; theology should be what derives from our reflection upon our actions (*A Theology* 9). This places action at the forefront and ensures that the theology is firmly embedded in the historical praxis. Theology as the first step does not take into account the struggles to which God calls us in the earthly realm. Theology as the first act tends to be a theology that becomes so abstract that it has no consequences on earth—it reminds people to focus on prayer, and to attempt to overcome earthly existence in favor of joining with God in contemplation. While this theology has merits, it can also fall into ignoring the plights of the marginalized, and it can allow Christians to ignore the suffering of their brothers and sisters. Theology that is the first step is written as though the poor and the marginalized do not exist and do not need help (*A Theology* 7). However, if the deeds come first and then the theology arises out of a reflection on those deeds, the theology is better situated to be a more accurate statement on the current conditions of society and how to best do away with the ills:

The Christian community professes a “faith which works through charity.” It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step...the pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community. (*A Theology* 9)

This methodology establishes the primacy that is placed on action throughout all of Gutiérrez's theology. It is through action that we encounter God, through

action that we can follow the call of God, through action that we can start to make positive changes in the world, through action that we can establish the gift of community.

The Power of the Poor

This revisioning of how theology should be created is radical and threatening as it turns the status quo of both society and the Church on its head. Gutiérrez sees the cultural norms of society seeping into the Church's theology. Christ stood in direct opposition to the social status quo as God does throughout history as evidenced in the Exodus narrative, for example. In order for the Church to truly follow Christ as is its goal, it must attempt to stand against the status quo of society, which allows for the objectification of God's beloved people. The Church must strive to stand against society, to be an example of submitting yourself to follow God, instead of striving to conform to the unjust social norms (The God 107). The emphasis that Gutiérrez places on the historical praxis gives power to the poor and oppressed. It is these marginalized people who truly understand the nature of the problems in society today. Not only this, but the marginalized also understand the essentialism of action as the first step. The need for action is more blatant for those who are suffering daily, for they know that only through action will their situation improve (The Power 51). Gutiérrez also sees the constant presence of Christ with the poor and the oppressed in the Gospel and talks of God's preferential love for the poor (The God xii). These three factors combined—the marginalized understanding of the historical praxis, the need for action, and God's preferential love for the marginalized—all give the poor power because it is within their community that God is living and at work. It is theologians in the midst of the poor who can establish a theology because of God's presence with the poor (The Power 36).

God resides amongst the suffering, hungry and poor, and if the Church does not follow God into the lives of the poor then the Church will prevent itself from living side by side with God. For this reason Gutiérrez calls for the Church to act on its commitments to being a Church of service, a Church that finds its power through commitment to God and one another. Gutiérrez calls for the Church to stand in solidarity with the poor, to become a Church of poverty and to embrace God's call to spread love and community among the poor. The Church should constantly be seeking out God; the Church will find God in the slums, in the rookeries, in the dirty, grimy and appalling places of the world, because this is where the God who suffers with the poor resides (The Power 51).

If the Church is cloistered, is pursuing God in the comforts of affluence, it is

not following the call of God. This incarnation of the Church would not be open to God's call to work for salvation in history. This is not to say that Gutiérrez is not connected with the tradition of the Church; Gutiérrez makes it clear that he loves the Church and does not want to abandon it. He does, however, want to see the Church make the tradition work for those who are suffering in Latin America. He wants the Church to be successful in its mission of being a light in the darkness. However, Gutiérrez sees that there is no way that the Church can be that light without being prepared to follow the call of God into the dingy world of the oppressed and marginalized. Gutiérrez sees in his day to day existence with the poor that theology has become an abstract idea that has little relevance to our world, especially to that world of the poor and the oppressed. Gutiérrez sees faith as more than just affirmation of God's existence—it is also the awareness that God loves us and that such a love calls us to respond lovingly to the people who suffer around us, those whom we make our neighbor. If this is true, then theology cannot only be abstract but should be an "existential stance" (*Essential Writings* 24).

GOD IN COMMUNITY

If the theologian is writing theology alone in a cloistered library, then that theologian cannot truly be writing a reflection that takes into account the historical praxis of a suffering people. In fact, theology cannot be the purview of an individual, rather it must be a reflection of the communal experience which God sanctifies and encourages, especially when the community is centered on the experiences of the marginalized. Theology is not a task that is completed in solidarity, it is a product of the entire ecclesial community reflecting upon shared experience. Theology "is done from the Word of God received and experienced in the Church, and for the sake of its proclamation to every human being and especially the disinherited of the world" (*The Density* 173). Gutiérrez proclaims that a theology written from the perspective of the poor is necessary to build the society that God has promised us. A theology from this perspective is the best way to have an open discussion on faith which deals with the greatest and most concerning issues of this day. It is a theology done in a community of God's beloved people that consists of bearing witness to the Word of God in the modern world (*The Density* 173).

In short, to live the perspective of the poor is to see the world and its problems differently; Gutiérrez believes that to see the world from the perspective of the poor is to attempt to see the world as God sees it. When we see the world from

the perspective of the poor our conception of faith is made new. Gutiérrez cites the suffering God incarnated in Christ to claim that this is how God calls us to see the world. Any theology that does not take the impoverished into account does not have the echoes of God's call to the world. God has placed God's self into the slums with the poor. This statement calls for a theology that centers around those people who are most often shunned and ignored (*We Drink from our own Wells* 43).

Gutiérrez talks about theology as "language about God" and the crafting of this language takes place amongst the poor, those who have faith despite the sinful situation in which they live: "Thus we seek to make a language about God (that is, theology) together with a people living the faith in the midst of a situation of injustice and exploitation which is the denial of God" (*The Density* 174). Those who are constantly surrounded by sin, whose lives are dictated by violence and yet still have faith, are the prime example of hope to the suffering world. Suffering is paired with hope and joy in this circumstance, and from this coupling arises a contemplative language. This language speaks unceasingly about Christ as the link between the arriving Kingdom of God and the pained world in which we live. Gutiérrez acknowledges that this language is arising across the world and affirms that this language deserves to be heard amongst all the others in the Catholic Church. This language is a theology which springs from the hope of the oppressed and feeds that hope into a higher flame. This theology aims to spread the love of the God of life (*The Density* 174).

This stance outlines the hope that Gutiérrez has for theology, and once again it revolves around Gutiérrez's main stance: that the poor should become the center of theology. We should attempt to remain rooted in the tradition of the Church, but we should take the theology of the Church and place the poor at the center of it all. The action-first nature of this theology, which asks for a commitment to the suffering of the world in deed before in reflection, furthers this poor-centered ideal. If action in the attempt to follow the call of God and ease the suffering of the world comes first in theology, then you must go to the source of the most widespread suffering in the world, poverty (*The Power* 103). None of this is to say that action is more important than theology, for theological reflection on action is what gives action meaning and substance: "Every action of ours must be accompanied by a reflection to orient it, to order it, to make it coherent, so that it does not lapse into a sterile and superficial activism" (*Essential Writings* 25). Theology is intensely important as it enables us to understand actions more fully, but theology can never replace the deeds of charity that make

concrete, positive differences in the world. It is in the act that we follow the call and example of God to spread love and justice (*Essential Writings* 25).

Theology from the Underside of History

To spread love and justice is a central theme of the Bible, one that Gutiérrez comes back to frequently. Committing to this message requires a willingness to try and act today to benefit the least of these who suffer in squalid conditions across the globe. God calls us to act to change these conditions; God asks us to follow God deep into the grunginess in which the marginalized live. Theology should not be written from the perspective of a wealthy man who has no understanding of the suffering of the poor; Theology must be written from the “underside of history” and attempt to place the dark, seedy slums in the center, because that is where God can be found (*A Theology* 169). By placing action in the forefront of the process, historical context is taken into account by default. A theology that keeps in mind the historical context and bears witness to God’s call to action while placing the poor at the center of the theology will allow for great changes to be made in the world (*A Theology* 148). However, it also challenges the way theology is currently done by many and can be seen as a threat to the status quo.

Part of what has defined the prevailing order in not only the Catholic Church but the entire Christian world has been the distinction of planes. This model has allowed for people to separate their spiritual and religious life from their worldly life. One of the reasons why Gutiérrez claims that Christians are so hesitant to involve themselves and their faith in the earthly, political world is because of this particular tradition. This mindset has Christians separate their existence to two different spheres—their sacred life and their secular life. Not only has this forced Christians to live two different existences, but it has also attempted to relegate God out of our world and into a transcendent place that does not intersect with our corporeal realm (*A Theology* 36). In an attempt to reverse this mindset Gutierrez’s theology collapses those planes onto each other; Gutiérrez believes in one Christ-filled history (*A Theology* 37).

This is a bold step to take for a member of the Roman Catholic clergy who is as connected with the tradition of mandating a separation between an earthly existence and a spiritual one. The monastic tradition has left a mark on Catholicism, for in order to be spiritual or spend your life in contemplation of God, you must cloister yourself away from the world. To know and embrace the material world is to allow yourself to be distracted from God. Gutiérrez is in a constant struggle between his theological beliefs and his commitment to the tradition of

the Church; he does not see his theology as opposed to the Church, but rather as a methodology and perspective which could only enrich the Church's mission in the world. He does not want to throw away his love for the Church, but he cannot ignore what he believes to be a better way to understand the workings of God in society and history.

Within this single Christ-filled history that Gutiérrez proclaims, it is impossible to separate God from our earthly experience. Due to the fact that we cannot relegate God to a place outside of our world it is near impossible to claim that our actions in the world have little to do with God. God is active in our history, in our world, and God asks us to take up the responsibility of that activity in order to help our brothers and sisters today. In the Bible it becomes clear that God is in intimate contact with human beings and is committed to humanity. God's commitment is the most prevailing of Biblical promises. Gutiérrez quotes Exodus 29: 45-46 to verify the strength of God's commitment to humanity: "I shall dwell in the midst of the Israelite, I shall become their God, and by my dwelling among them they will know that I am the Lord their god who brought them out of Egypt." (*A Theology* 106-107). God is among us in an intimate fashion. God lives with us and resides in our world. God lives in community with us.

God's complete presence in our world and God's readiness to act in history is made apparent once again in the Christ event; God became human and lived in our world of sin and death, and the promises God made to that world are meant to be fulfilled in history. Christ conquered sin and death and gave the world the great gift of community. To follow Christ is to live out the gift of community that God so generously bestowed upon us. The Holy Spirit dwells in all people as they live in their very concrete historical situations, and in this way God continues to be present in history, spurring humanity on to fulfill the promises of God in that history (*A Theology* 108-109). Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, God is present to every person. This means God cannot be relegated to live only within the Church buildings because God is present in every place and to every person.

There is not part of the world that exists outside the presence of God: "Since the Incarnation, humanity, every human being, history, is the living temple of God. The 'pro-fane,' that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists" (*A Theology* 110). This means that everything is in the presence of God and that no aspect of life can be separated from that presence. To believe in God and to put your faith in God is to attempt at every step to make your awareness of God in everyone, particularly the poor and the oppressed, supersede all other priorities. This is why faith is so challenging—it asks for our constant attention and diligence and love

for others. That constant challenge to show love for others is particularly relevant in our efforts to follow the example of Christ in pursuit of the objectified, because God resides with those who have been spurned and ignored from their brothers and sisters (*The God* 90).

As God suffers alongside the poor, we are asked over and over again by God to show love for those with whom God is suffering; to show love for the poor and the oppressed (*We Drink* 20). God has become part of everyone in the incarnation, but God's preference lies with the poor and we must see God in the poor in a particularly intimate way that begs for our attention and love. God asks an incredible amount from us, but the Grace of God makes it possible for us succeed; because of God's Grace we are given the ability to keep trying to succeed even when we want to quit (*We Drink* 108).

Humanity as Brothers and Sisters

Christ tells us to call God, "Our Father." By making God a parent to us, it becomes clear that all human beings are our brothers and sisters, and we must love them and be charitable to them. Gutiérrez draws the relationship between being children of God and siblings to one another quite succinctly in *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. He affirms that there is only one history—the history in which God is an active player. In this history God is our father and we are all brothers and sisters to each other. By calling God our Father we are committing ourselves to treating the rest of humanity as our brothers and sisters (*The Truth Shall Make You Free* 126). Because of this unity of history, to be a neighbor to someone cannot be a passive role; it must be an active responsibility that goes and seeks out the suffering others, and those actions make you a neighbor of others. It is easy to love those who love us, to care about those who we know intimately and whose affections we know we have in return, but God has higher expectations of us (*We Drink* 50).

We are called to seek out our neighbors at every moment, especially those who are suffering from poverty and marginalization, and we should strive to realize that there are others across the world suffering injustice and living in a way that is against the will of God. God calls us to seek out these people and to infuse our actions towards them with a love that hopes to heal and liberate (*The Power of the Poor in History* 44-45). To be a neighbor is not merely to be aware of others or to call all people your neighbor; to be a neighbor is an active state

of being that involves loving others, particularly the oppressed other, and fighting to end their suffering because you see Christ in their suffering (*A Theology* 112-113). Our actions towards others should be guided by the universal feeling of love that Christ exemplifies and charges us with. We must love God and each other so much that we see the disparity between the Word of God and the reality of our world and then try to reconcile that disparity (*A Theology* 113). Christ showed us the love of God for humanity and that love is can be translated in human relationships: "Loving us as a human, Christ reveals to us the Father's love. Charity, the love of God for human beings, is found incarnated in human love—love for parents, spouses, children, friends—and it leads to its fullness" (*A Theology* 114). Because God was incarnated in Christ, who showed humanity the love of God and gifted humanity with an example of what love should be, we are called to show that love to one another in our relationships. We are called to bring this love to everyone, and it is in the incarnation of this love that we can find community.

It is only through the gift of God's gratuitous love that we can show a response in love to God through charitable actions to others. God's gratuitous love is God's greatest gift—it is the ever-present, undeserved love that God holds for humanity. It is the love that forgives all and asks humanity to forgive as well; it is the love that has the ability to heal the heart, soul, mind, and body. The communion that exists between God and humanity is a great gift but this gift is also a call; it is a call for us to accept the love that God offers by sharing that love with others through liberation. In that liberating process we answer God's call and embody God's love to be shown to the world (*A Theology* 119). In the gift of the Holy Spirit divinity resides in every person, especially with the poor, therefore to find spirituality and a unity with God, we must find unity with our fellow objectified brothers and sisters, for they have God within them in a particularly intimate manner. We cannot find God and neglect each other—to be with God is to love one another (*A Theology* 119). It is due to God's gratuitous love for us that we can love each other fully and encounter one another completely.

It is in the unity between humanity and God that the full joy of Christianity lies—it is the joy of a unified love that God spreads over all of us and that calls us to further enrich the existence of love in our world, in our moment of history. Joy is love and love is life; the joy we find in love for each other and God is a reflection of the joy of the resurrection which proclaims this love to be the truth, and which proclaims sin to be a temporary interruption in the fellowship of love. The resurrection and the actions of love that the resurrection spurred and called us

to are all signs of liberation. To liberate is to feel the love of God and follow the call that is embedded in that love to serve others. When we answer the call to serve others we are united with each other and with God while we are working towards liberation. To liberate is to follow God's call and to act in love towards each other and when we are acting in the spirit of love we are unified by that love with God and our siblings under God. Therefore, in order to follow the call of God and to be united with God, we are called to love and liberate one another (*A Theology* 119-120).

UTOPIA

In order to liberate, God calls us to create a new society; in our current society the vast majority of people live in poverty, isolation, and oppression. This situation is in direct contradiction to the will of God. Because of this, the changes that God calls us to through the process of liberation must be radical. We cannot simply revise the current structures, because those structures are sinful at their base. God calls us to reinvent society, to make it a society that functions for the poor and the oppressed instead of one that benefits the few. Because our current systems degrade community there must be a social revolution. Today society teaches us to serve ourselves first. That ideal is the very nature of capitalism and because of this, it becomes ever more difficult to follow the call of God and build community with those around us. If society is constantly telling us to fulfill our own desires before we think of others we cannot show love to others; our actions are paralyzed by our own self interest. For this reason we need a true social revolution; we need to listen to God's call to create a society where we can truly show love to others and make the poor and the oppressed the center of our attention and love (*The Power* 44-45). Gutiérrez speaks of this eloquently and with an immediacy that is imperative to the message: "Hence we speak of social revolution, not reform; of liberation, not development, of socialism; not modernization of the prevailing systems" (*The Power* 45). While some may say that these goals are impossible and naïve, Gutiérrez affirms that these goals are real in a way that sin is not. Sin is against the will of God and is, therefore, *unrealistic*. Contrary to sin, this universal change that Gutiérrez speaks of follows in the footsteps of God and is possible and real for God and God's faithful people. The realism of this change is based on the coming Kingdom of God; this Kingdom is certainly different from what currently dominates social norms, but it is entirely real as it is in accordance with the call of God (*The Power* 45). God is a defender of social justice, and God is constantly calling us to see the faults in our world and to right them—to see the lack of community,

to acknowledge the fault in our self-serving society, to recognize the presence of God in every human and to build a society in which these truths are practiced and affirmed (*The God of Life* 120-121).

Gutierrez goes into more depth in his explanation of this utopian society. Biblical utopias are possible to create only through the Grace of God and it is by this Grace that the utopia is defined. Utopia is defined by God and springs from God's call which asks us to recognize God's discontentment with the prevailing social order. The abuse of life in the current society is what spurs people to heed God's call and look to revolutionary change: "Its [society's] deficiencies are to a large extent the reason for the emergence of a utopia. The repudiation of a dehumanizing situation is an unavoidable aspect of utopia. It is a matter of a complete rejection which attempts to strike at the roots of the evil" (*A Theology* 136). Utopia cannot just be a critique of today, it must also be an articulation of tomorrow. Utopia must be an announcement of what will be, of a social order that is radically different from the one that has been denounced. It is to look forward to the coming Kingdom and attempt to meet it, "the driving force of history and subversive to the existing order" (*A Theology* 136).

This rejection and announcement will only have any power, however, if they come with a genuine commitment to creating humane living conditions for all; the revolution is needed to put the idea into practice. Utopia cannot be taken out of history, rather it must be worked for every day by people who strive to put the poor and the oppressed first (*A Theology* 136). The process of liberation enacts itself in Utopia. Utopia begins to take shape as the liberation grows both politically and socially. For this to happen people have to be actively pursuing God and neighbor—the climate through which utopia expands is one of hope, courage, love, and justice. God and humanity are bound together by a shared aspiration (*A Theology* 139). We as humans cannot fully understand the depth of love of which we are capable, but through this unexpected depth that we are able to commune with God. The critique that Gutiérrez's utopia is too political, too human is combated with the fact that it is within our humanness we can find God: "If utopia humanizes economic, social, and political liberation, this humanness—in the light of the Gospel—reveals God" (*A Theology* 139). To be a fount of love and justice is to come into closer contact with God. It is impossible to follow in God's footsteps without learning of God. Therefore, working towards love and justice in society is to come into intimate contact with God. This communion powers Christian hope and joy and leads towards a future manifestation of God's Kingdom. (*A Theology* 139). Utopia is what flourishes in the

meeting between the gift of the Gospel, God's gratuitous love and the activity of humanity with the aim of following the call of God (*The Power* 81).

LIVING IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

One of the ways that God calls us to build this utopian society of love and respect is to live in solidarity with the poor. This chosen poverty is not only a protest against the prevailing system but it is also a way of joining in that community to which God calls us. Solidarity also is a testament to spiritual childhood, the willingness to follow and trust in God that strengthens our resolve when we must face fear, violence, and even death (*The God of Life* 121). In solidarity with the poor we protest the evil that dominates their lives. This protest becomes real in confrontation. To protest the current system is to confront that system and hold it accountable for the injustice it has done. By confronting the prevailing system we answer the call of the God of life:

Real poverty is, according to the Bible, an evil, a situation not intended by the God of life, an acceptance of means seeking to eliminate the injustice that causes the spoliation and mistreatment of the poor. This effort necessarily presupposes a solidarity with their hopes and interests, friendship with them, and a sharing both of their lives and of their struggle for justice. This commitment and quest manifest an acceptance of God's will, and this acceptance in turn is the ore of spiritual poverty or spiritual childhood; in other words, it is the essence of discipleship. (*The God* 122)

To place ourselves in solidarity with the poor and to accept the mantle of suffering and oppression that goes hand in hand with poverty is a way we can build community. It speaks of a place in which the suffering of others is acknowledged and then taken on; it is a place where acts of love and sacrifice are manifested in order to follow the call of the God who loves and sacrifices for us.

Standing in solidarity with the poor speaks of a spirituality that seeks to find and follow God wherever God make take you—even into the pits and slums of the poor. Gutiérrez's discussion of spirituality makes it clear that he wants to historicize spirituality and make it a social and political force even though spirituality has had a different role in the history of the Catholic Church as strictly transcendent. While Gutiérrez strives to make it clear that he recognizes the worth in that, he also makes it clear that spirituality should also have historical consequences that represent the love of God. God's gratuitous love for us is constantly calling us to spread love and build community with others. It is through that gratuitous love that we are given the ability to attempt to follow God. It is God's grace that makes

it possible for humanity to achieve good in this world. When humanity is able to humble itself before God and to follow God wherever God may lead us we arrive at a truly extraordinary state—a state in which selfless deeds can be made and community can be built. Only when, with the help and guidance of God's gratuitous love, we break down the sin of selfishness can we create a community built on freely loving others (*The Truth Shall Make You Free* 127). When this community is built, the will of God will be seen more fully in our society. Clearly, God calls for radical changes before it will be possible to make our society more compatible with the Kingdom of God (*The God* 120-122).

THE NATURE OF SIN AND REDEMPTION

The intrusion of sin in our lives makes it a constant challenge to follow God on this road to community, but Christ's resurrection has freed us from sin and we therefore have the ability to create community. Sin makes life more difficult, but it does not make anything impossible because the faithfulness of God will never fail; God will always save us from ourselves and our sin. Knowledge of this faithfulness fills us with hope and gives us the strength to follow God's call. God made all actions of love, including the building of community, possible to us with the gift of Christ's love and the resurrection (*The Truth* 135). To sin is to reject the love of God and the gift of fellowship that is inherent in that love. Such sin has now become imbedded in our social structures which propagate selfish attitudes and the neglect of the needy to the point where we have been lulled into a state of passivity that has prevented change from growing.

Gutiérrez claims that the social structure that many cling to may, in fact, be the same institution that is causing the most harm to people across the globe: capitalism. The market has become omnipotent for many, but they often forget that the market does not hold any power—it is the rich that become almighty in the capitalist market. Within this economic system, Gutiérrez professes that it becomes easy for the rich to increase their wealth while the poor sink further into destitution. According to Gutiérrez, capitalism has become so infiltrated by sin that it can no longer be a feasible option—there is no way for capitalism to exist without it meaning the objectification and demoralization of the most vulnerable in humanity. For many, however, their affinity for capitalism has become an idolatrous love. In this idolatry people worship their own accumulation of money and power and subsequently box God out of their lives. The selfish mindset that is inspired by capitalism has bred a society in which it is near impossible for people to discern the call of God, and spirituality, therefore, is stunted. The message of

the true God, the God of life, the God of community, reveals this idolatry for what it truly is—institutionalized sin that systematically puts the individual before the community. The idea that the market will work itself out eventually for the betterment of all has become such a common interpretation that the market has deafened people to the call of God. This becomes an especially easy trap to fall into because it is so much easier for us to simply wait the market out than to go seek out our siblings and live in solidarity with them (*The God* 53).

These problems that plague the world are more than abstract indignities and conceptual problems. They have real life consequences for millions that spring from institutionalized sin; “sin is not something that occurs only within some intimate sanctuary of the heart” (*The Power* 147). Sin has social consequences, it is more than a personal slight against God; it is what ultimately leads to poverty, marginalization, and injustice. To sin is to be disconnected from God and humanity and this disconnect is manifested in turning away from those in need. To make the effort to follow God is to assume the mantle of taking on a stance of solidarity with the poor. Gutiérrez reiterates that according to the Bible the ultimate cause of social injustice is sin. This does not mean that there are not structural reasons for the rampant poverty in the world. It does, however, mean that these structural sins do not happen by chance—they are the result of habitual human failings. This failing manifests itself in humanity repeatedly turning its back on God and each other (*A Theology* 24).

Worship and the gratuitous love of God.

Because sin is in history and has historical consequences, so does love. Love in history takes the form of salvation and can be seen as the communion of God with humans and humans with each other. Every good thing in this world is has its roots in God’s gratuitous love for humankind; it is a love we cannot hope to earn or deserve but it does set an example for us. God’s love is empowering—to experience the love that God gives so willingly to us inspire us try and spread that love to others. The love that God feels for us asks us to be examples of that love to the world. It is within this context of God’s gratuitous love that we are able to find freedom. This is true because we are only free when we come to the understanding that the promises of God hold more strength and truth than the failings of our own world. Once this realization is reached we are free to act in the path of God—the fears that spring from living in a sinful world do not own us when we come to this realization. This gives us the courage to be able to work in history in the name of God—it enables us to truly confront the ills of the world and

work against them. True worship is also made available to us when our eyes are opened to the gratuitous love of God and we find ourselves in freedom. Worship, according to Gutierrez, must be rooted in rejoicing with God and God's people in community.

Worship is a physical, mental and emotional manifestation of our faith in God. Our faith is possible only because of God's faithfulness to us and God springs from God's Gratuitous love for us. Because our faith in God is inspired by God's faithfulness to us in *history* we are inspired to act out our faith in God in history as well. Faith then is a proclamation that goes beyond words and is imbedded in action. Proclaiming our faith in God cannot be judged by pious words, instead it is our actions that speak of our faith in God. Those with faith are freed to follow God in their acts; while the dangers of our worlds still frighten them the faithful are given courage through the gratuitous love of God that enables them to confront the dangers of the world and conquer those dangers (*The God* 47). Our faithfulness to God is shown through our faithfulness to God's people—particularly the poor. In our faith we are given strength and encouragement through God; we may still tremble in front of the evil of the world but that trembling does not prevent us from taking a stand (*A Theology* 123). To stand in opposition of sin, to stand with God and humanity is to worship God; it is a moment of profound communion between God and woman/man. In that time of communion life is affirmed and sin is surmounted (*The Power* 83).

In the theology of Gutiérrez worship is never something that can be separated from concrete actions. Worship and prayer is what reminds humanity of God's faithfulness to humankind and prompts God's people to respond to God's faithfulness with faithfulness of our own. Worship also serves as a reminder of the commitments that God asks God's people to make to one another. The Our Father is a prime example of this call; humanity is reminded of God's goals for humanity: to work towards building God's kingdom on earth, provide food for all, forgive each other, and avoid temptation. God's gratuitous love gives humanity the strength to do all of this and through worship humanity is reminded of that love and strength. Worship is what empowers humankind to turn their faith into action, to embrace their freedom, and to submit themselves to God (*Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year* 54-56).

Sin is the force that works to breakdown community amongst humanity and that tries to disconnect humanity from God. However, salvation is only glimpsed when sin loses its hold and God's call for a loving and just community to be established on earth is rendered. It is only through God's grace, God's gratuitous

love for us, that sin can be tampered and salvation can grow. It is through God's gratuitous love that God incarnated God's self as Christ who served as an example to all people in the joy and salvation that is found in community. Through Christ's death and resurrection sin lost its hold over humanity. The love that was present in God's sacrifice for us freed us to follow God's call to love one another as God loved us. It is God's love for us that invites us to love one another, and it is through that love that we can come to an understanding of what our love and justice should look like. It is because of God's grace that we have the capability to rise above sin and establish a community where love and justice take precedence. In this society the poor are acknowledged and their dignity is restored; in this society God calls humanity to eradicate poverty and injustice (*A Theology* 85). Salvation is, therefore, rooted in the historical praxis.

SALVATION AS LIBERATION

Salvation and liberation become one in this context. Liberation is the attempt for humanity to follow the call of God and establish a society based on love and justice, to try and create a place where the dignity of everyone is recognized and where sin does not dominate life; salvation rooted in history has the same aims. Liberation is not simply the fruit of human efforts—it is a gift from God that manifests itself when humanity humbles itself and follows God. It is a gift that is most dramatically seen in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ brought humanity into intimate communion with God and allows humanity to follow God into the defeat of sin; love now has the chance to defeat hate and be the prevailing norm in the social order, if only humanity follows the call of God (*A Theology* 103).

Sin allows for an invasion of death into life—it allows for hunger and neglect, homelessness and fear; God is the God of life and when humanity promulgates death for others they are not listening to the call of God (*The Power* 47). To live in sin is to live in isolation, while to live in salvation is to live in the fullness of community where God and humanity are both entirely present (*The Power* 62). God loves us gratuitously in a way we cannot deserve, but God calls us to live up to God's expectations of love and justice. God's covenant reminds us of God's gracious love for us and then asks us to answer the call to serve others in the same way. While humankind continues to falter, God is ever present to renew the covenant and bestow God's gratuitous love upon us to aid in following God's call.

Freedom in faith and new humanity.

We are called to have faith—knowledge of and response to God's love—in order to fight sin. However, faith alone will not conquer sin unless it is employed within history to make changes to the social, economic, and political changes of the day (*The Power* 62). In order to be able to make these changes people must be free. Freedom allows people to act as they truly want to—as people who hunger for God and community should; freedom gives people the ability to embed the love of God in their actions. Sin attempts to prevent people from acting within the frame of freedom that God has bestowed upon them. It is by following the call of God and reclaiming that freedom that love and justice can spread. Once this freedom is claimed it becomes easier for people to follow the call of God, to stand in solidarity with the suffering poor and to build the community that is the antithesis of sin. This community welcomes God and men and women to stand together under the banner of love and justice which changes the social structures of our world from the inside out; this community is revolutionary and has the capacity to follow the Grace of God into the formation of a utopia (*The Power* 62).

In this utopian space, people are transformed and a new humanity is seen. In the current sinful society it becomes easy to ignore the call of God and perpetuate the sin which surrounds humanity. However, in utopia humankind has made the conscious decision to follow God, accept their freedom, and love and respect each of their neighbors. These actions result in a new humanity both liberated and saved through faith. Utopia breaks with the cycle of sin and evil and establishes a cycle of love, justice, and respect. In this cycle it becomes easier for people to follow the call of God; God's presence has been made apparent in the Church and in society at large. In this world people follow God into the arms of their neighbor—love is given freely and justice is the ever present goal. New humanity is not backed into a corner by the sin and injustice that dominates society, because God makes it possible for new humanity to have strength and freedom. This strength and freedom makes it possible for people to step into the edges of the darkness and hold up God as their beacon until the whole world is bathed in God's glorious love and justice (*We Drink* 92).

WHAT NOW?

I embarked upon this research in the hopes of being able to find a way of reconciling my faith tradition with the staggering poverty of Guatemala. Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology answered many of these questions, but his theology also raised a new set of inquiries. How does this theology written from the perspective

of the forgotten poor affect the life of an upper-middle class white American woman? Will I simply put a few more dollars in the second collection basket? Will I just feel a slightly more prominent twinge of guilt as I flip off commercials that ask me to support a poverty stricken child's education? I am blessed in that I have grown up in a household where charitable works are a top priority, and I have always been reminded to be both thankful and generous. I do believe, however, that the true need for charity can only be understood through time and experience. My time in Guatemala which has been further enriched by this research has allowed me to comprehend the desperate situation that reigns supreme in parts of the world and this understanding calls for a change.

This change will alter my reality—I will live in a world where solidarity and not privilege is a goal to work towards. I will live in a mindset where expansive, universal love is a historical reality and where hate and cynicism are aberrations. This world will remind me of God's call to love my neighbors—all eight billion of them. My new understanding will be built on God's gift of freedom and empowerment which can surmount the power of sin and fear. This new attitude will be dictated by the historical presence of God and God's call for humanity to walk in God's footsteps of love, generosity, and courage.

While this new reality promises the world a better future for all it also calls for the privileged, myself included, to sacrifice as God suffered on the cross to offer us eternal life. The cross and resurrection offered us a chance at life and love. God suffered for the poor and we must as well to follow in God's footsteps of salvation. Gutiérrez's theology has the potential to offer hope to a world that has fallen into a painfully cynical mindset; however, in order for this hope to be fulfilled the world has to suffer through some growing pains. First, the rich must see and acknowledge the suffering of the poor. The circumstances in which the poor live must be a concrete reality for the privileged. These circumstances have become reality for me and that means that I must be prepared to turn away from luxury in favor of solidarity. I can not place the accumulation of vast wealth on my list of priorities; my life should be based around following the example of God. This means that I should strive to not get caught up in a materialistic cycle that deprives others of food and water. Wealth needs to be brought down from its idolatrous status. I am now constantly aware that capitalism is an economic system, no more and no less, and that it does not have the power to provide for everyone; it is God's loving power that provides for everyone. I am called to answer God's love with love of my own that expands to work toward the protection of every individual's life.

If the work of Gutiérrez is truly going to influence my life then I am to stand in protest of the degrading conditions that dictate the lives of the poor. This will not be easy. To follow in the footsteps of God Gutiérrez describes will mean forgoing some comforts; it will mean striving to be a reflection and conduit of God's gratuitous love. Quite simply, this theology asks that the example God has set for us in being a servant to the poor will guide my actions. Any hardship in my life that will result from this commitment will be outweighed by the love and joy that accompany following God into the slums of the poor. My charge will not be easy and I know it is something that I will struggle with throughout my life, but I do hope that I will be able to continually recommit myself to discerning God's call and freely following that call. If I can succeed in this endeavor my life and the lives of those around me will be enriched by the joy of community and faith.

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