

Liberating Nonviolence and Institutionalized Violence: Making Peace with Liberation Theology

The theology emerging in recent decades from Latin America and the southern regions of the world stresses God's liberating action for God's people who are poor and oppressed. This liberation theology has revolutionized theology--and the world itself. Though some first world theologians and religious authorities have tried to dismiss and denigrate it, liberation theology has emerged from and spoken deeply to the people of God themselves, proclaimed anew the Gospel's hope for the poor in light of the world's injustices, and sparked a transformation for justice and liberation that is only just beginning.

How does liberation theology connect with a theology of nonviolence? What are the similarities, common ground, and differences that could strengthen and challenge each theological movement? A theology of nonviolence, which speaks of a peacemaking God in a world of total violence, needs to listen to the voice of liberation theology, the voice of the poor, and the voice of their liberating God, in order to contribute to true social change that will manifest a genuine peace based on justice for the poor of the earth. Likewise, the struggle for liberation in the third world can learn from those movements and theologies of active nonviolence which are transforming war and injustice into greater peace and justice. Together, they can point the way to a liberating nonviolence which can transform our world, by rooting out the causes of violence, dismantling the structures of injustice, and bearing fruit in true peace with justice for reconciled humanity.

Liberation Theology as Critical Reflection on Praxis for Justice

Liberation theology, posed initially by Gustavo Gutierrez in his ground-breaking work, A Theology of Liberation, speaks about God from the perspective of the world's poor and oppressed and about God's desire to liberate the poor from that oppression. Though liberation theology emerged primarily from Latin America, today it can encompass any theological movement which condemns specific forms of oppression and seeks true liberation (and thus includes Asian, African and African-American, as well as feminist theologies). It begins among the poor as a theology of the poor, for the poor, and by the poor. It starts with the inhuman experience of poverty, the institutionalized violence of misery which kills millions of people around the planet. It declares that the violence of poverty is not the will of God, that God wants every human being to have life to the full, not to die in misery. Liberation theology declares that God is actively involved in the struggles of the poor, to end the violence of poverty around the world. It points to the God who liberates, beginning with the biblical story of Exodus and culminating in the liberating life and message of Jesus Christ, the liberator, who continues to liberate the poor today. It explores the Gospel as good news for the poor and challenges Christians to act for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

When asked to define liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez responded:

Theology is a way to speak about God, a way to look at life from a faith perspective. Thus, liberation theology is an attempt to speak about God from the perspective of the poor and for the poor of Latin America. Theology is always marked by a certain point of view, a way to understand things. Our way is marked by poverty. We often say that this theology comes from this question: How to say to the poor, the oppressed, the insignificant person, "God loves you"? Ultimately, this is the question for our Christian commitment, our preaching and our theology as well. But how to say this? This question is crucial because the daily life of poor persons seems the negation of "God loves you." In other words, liberation theology addresses how to speak about God (because theology is always a way to speak about God) from the suffering of the innocents, the suffering of poor persons. I would like to say honestly that this question is larger than our capacity to answer it. It's a very deep, permanent question. Ultimately, we have no intellectual answers except to be with the poor.(1)

"Behind liberation theology, there is a spiritual experience of a liberating God, the experience of innocent suffering, the experience of the hope of the poor," Gutierrez observes.(2) The good news of liberating theology announces the good news of the Gospel, that God struggles with the poor for justice. Such news is catching fire around the world as poor people are standing up and demanding an end to injustice and a share in true justice.

In his book, A Theology of Liberation, Gutierrez called for "a new way to do theology." He envisioned theology as "critical reflection on historical praxis," thus, "a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humanity and also therefore that part of humanity--gathered into ecclesia--which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology," he wrote, "which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed."(3) Liberation theology cannot simply be pondered in the classroom; it is lived among the poor who seek justice. This praxis for justice combines "both the goal and criterion" of liberation theology.(4)

The biblical reflection which accompanies the praxis of liberation theology has refocused traditional theology to reimagine God as a God of the poor, a God who takes sides with the poor, and a God who calls us to live a "preferential option" for the poor and oppressed. "For the Christian," Gutierrez teaches, "the option for the poor is centered in God--the God of Jesus Christ who prefers the 'last.' The preference for the poor wants to take very seriously the Gospel expression, 'The last will be first.' Thus, our option is not rooted in the quality of the poor, but in the nature of God. We don't need to romanticize the poor to be committed. We are committed because we believe in God. It's a theocentric option."(5) Liberation theologians image Jesus precisely then as the liberator of the oppressed. This Jesus is present among the poor, marginalized, oppressed and voiceless peoples who live and die on the streets and in the slums of Latin America and throughout the world wherever there is poverty and oppression. This liberating Jesus fulfills God's work of liberation and gives over his life in the struggle of justice for the poor, even to the point of dying on a cross, executed as a revolutionary for justice. Today, the liberating Christ continues that struggle of liberation for the oppressed people of the world. Indeed, the risen Christ lives on wherever people struggle for human liberation and justice.

Theology rooted in the world of the poor sees the injustices, oppression and death that the poor of the world are subjected to in each concrete situation and context. It understands that in a world of violence, the poor are belittled not just as people without resources, but as "non-relevant persons" or "non-persons," as Gutierrez writes. This theology pushes us forward in our action for justice with the poor so that the poor will be able to live fully human lives with basic justice and human dignity. It uses social analysis combined with biblical reflection in basic Christian communities to transform the realities of injustice and oppression. It encourages us to join God in liberating the poor so they can be fully alive and fully human. It works with the poor in their faith in a liberating God for all the justices and dignities that God created for everyone, including food, decent housing, education, health care, peace and a future for all children. In this light, the great icon and martyr of the poor, Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in El Salvador on March 24, 1980, rephrased the age-old insight of St. Irenaeus to declare that God is not just glorified in fullness of human life, but given our world, specifically, Romero declared, "the glory of God is the poor person fully alive!"(6)

Liberation theology does justice. It both denounces the systemic, social sin of violence and injustice which kills millions of poor people throughout the world, and it announces the good news of God's liberation for justice and peace, for the creation of a new world where everyone knows the fullness of life. Liberation theology insists on the Gospel imperative to do justice, accompany the poor, and liberate all who suffer under oppression. It speaks then to a faith life that struggles for justice for and with the poor, that labors to break free from the oppressive structures which oppress the third world. Such theology is necessarily, as Gutierrez points out, "the second act." The "first act" involves commitment, the personal decision we make with our whole being to be available to God and the poor of the world for the transformation of the world.(7)

The Biblical Images of Liberation

Liberation theology correctly highlights the primordial demand for justice for the poor which is at the core of the scriptures. Thousands of base Christian communities gather every day around the third world to study this scripture in light of the poverty and injustice they suffer. The poor are now reading the scriptures from their perspective of injustice. They bring a new hermeneutic of suspicion to the text, questioning the first world interpretation of the scriptures which have justified and blessed the structures of injustice which oppress the poor.

From Exodus to Isaiah, from the Gospel of Matthew to the Book of Revelation, we read about a God who takes sides with the poor in their struggle for liberation. The God of Exodus led the suffering people out of oppression (Exodus 1:8-14; 2:23-24; 3:7-10ff); this same God became incarnate among the poor, journeyed to Jerusalem and underwent crucifixion to offer a resurrection gift of peace that brings justice and liberation to all humanity. This liberating God is the same God liberating the poor of today's world. Walbert Buhlmann comments on this new insight to the biblical understanding of the God of the poor:

Too long had we preached a piety that was individualistic (you and your Jesus), spiritualistic (save your soul!), and supernaturalistic (make no account of the goods of this world; strive rather for those of eternity). [Now] we rediscovered the fact that the God of the Bible gets very involved in politics, takes sides with the poor, hears the cry of the beloved people, and leads them out of the Egypt of their political and economic misery. God can do very well, thank you, without incense and animal sacrifices. God wants a commitment to the poor, and the prophets said so in no uncertain terms. Jesus too, wrought signs of God's power and love for all women and men, especially the poor, the sick, the starving, and sinners. And so we Christians have come to know once more that it is not enough to cry, "Lord, Lord!"(8)

"To know God is to do justice," the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed to an unjust world.(22: 13-16) Our very religion is the doing of justice, for the God we worship liberates the poor and brings justice to the poor. Indeed, as Jeremiah and the prophets proclaimed, to worship God is to join God in bringing justice and liberation to the poor and oppressed. As Robert McAfee Brown explains, "To know God is not to engage in private piety or subscribe to certain orthodox statements or worship correctly on the Sabbath. To know God is to do justice. Conversely, the sign of not knowing God is to do injustice."(9) The prophet Amos, as another example, cried out God's same message of justice and liberation:

Yes, I know how many are your crimes, how grievous your sins: oppressing the just, accepting bribes, repelling the needy at the gate!...Seek good and not evil, that you may live; then truly will the Lord, the God of hosts, be with you as you claim! Hate evil and love good, and let justice prevail at the gate, then it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will have pity on the remnant of Joseph...I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemnities; your cereal offerings I will not accept, nor consider your stall-fed peace offerings. Away with your noisy songs! I will not listen to the melodies of your harps. But if you would offer me holocausts, then let justice roll down like waters and goodness like an unfailing stream.(Amos 5:12-15,21-24)

The concluding chapters of Isaiah put forward the case of God's liberating work in no uncertain terms:

Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: that a person bow his head like a reed and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help and God will say: Here I am! If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; if you bestow your

bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday, then the Lord will guide you always and give you plenty even on the parched land.(Isaiah 58:5-11)

According to the Gospel of Luke (4:16-30), Jesus began his public ministry by choosing Isaiah's bold appeal for liberation from oppression and justice for the poor. Quoting Isaiah 61: 1-2, Jesus opened the scroll and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

After sitting down, Jesus announced to the congregation, "Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." Though they were initially "amazed" at his words, it only took a few minutes before they were so offended and threatened by his revolutionary message that they tried to kill him by throwing him off the cliff outside the synagogue. In a sense, the people of God still have trouble accepting Jesus' revolutionary announcement. Jesus' whole life summons us on a mission of liberation and justice, a ministry to the poor and oppressed for a radical transformation and restructuring of the world. For the comfortable, such an announcement can be bad news because it requires a political and economic conversion towards the struggle of liberation for the poor and oppressed. For the poor, this event announces God's active solidarity in their struggle for justice and liberation.

The good news which Jesus preached to the poor has been summed up by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1-7:28) and by Luke, in the Sermon on the Plain (Lk. 6:21-49). This message is addressed to the poor gathered around Jesus and begins with a blessing towards those poor. Blessed are the poor, the Beatitudes proclaim, for the reign of God is yours. As Gutierrez points out, this blessedness proclaims the coming of God's liberation of the poor, indeed, the fulfillment of God's reign of justice at hand and specifically for them:

"Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God" does not mean, it seems to us: "Accept your poverty because later this injustice will be compensated for in the kingdom of God." If we believe that the Kingdom of God is a gift which is received in history, and if we believe, as the eschatological promises--so charged with human and historical content--indicate to us, that the Kingdom of God necessarily implies the reestablishment of justice in this world, then we must believe that Christ says that the poor are blessed because the Kingdom of God has begun: "The time has come; the Kingdom of God is upon you"(Mark 1:15). In other words, the elimination of the exploitation and poverty that prevent the poor from being fully human has begun; a Kingdom of justice which goes even beyond what they could have hoped for has begun. They are blessed because the coming of the Kingdom will put an end to their poverty by creating a world of brotherhood and sisterhood. They are blessed because the Messiah will open the eyes of the blind and will give bread to the hungry. Situated in a prophetic perspective, the text in Luke uses the term poor [to mean]... poverty is an evil and therefore incompatible with the Kingdom of God, which has come in its fullness into history and embraces the totality of human existence.(10)

The Sermon on the Mount (and the Plain) trumpets good news of liberation and justice aimed specifically to the poor and oppressed peoples of the earth. It calls forth the reign of God's justice and peace which is at hand and affirms them in their struggle, God's struggle, for justice and liberation. But the culmination of the Sermon on the Mount (and the Plain) outlines a mandate more revolutionary than any of us have been prepared to hear: it invites us to nonviolence, the unconditional love of God at work in us through the love of enemies, which can bring down imperial systems of war, injustice, and oppression. The proclamation of nonviolence in Jesus' teachings caps his good news of liberation to the poor.

The Gospels make clear that Jesus understood the connection between liberation for justice and peacemaking through nonviolent love. Indeed, Jesus challenged the theologians of his day for neglecting both justice and peace. "Alas for you Pharisees," Jesus said at the house of a Pharisee. "You who pay your tithe of mint and rue and all sorts of garden herbs and overlook justice and the love of God! These you should have practiced...."(Luke 11:42) Seek justice for the poor and practice the love of God, what I call the way of active nonviolence, Jesus tells the comfortable theologians of his day. Liberation and nonviolence are the number one priorities for Jesus' theology and they must be put into action before anything else.

How seriously we take Jesus' command to seek justice and practice the nonviolent love of God, to connect his message of liberation with his way of resisting evil through active nonviolence and the love of enemies, will measure our discipleship. Entrance into the poor's struggle for liberation and nonviolent transformation will unlock the door into God's reign of justice and peace. An exploration into this connection between liberation theology and a theology of nonviolence may help us connect the movements for justice and the movements for peace. When these theologies and movements connect, when theologians join the poor in practicing justice and nonviolence, then the reign of God's justice and peace will indeed be at hand.

Connecting Liberation Theology and a Theology of Nonviolence

The Gospel message of liberation which the poor are teaching us impacts our theology of nonviolence. Instead of a "passive" nonviolence which first world Christians sometimes advocate, a nonviolence which actually is no nonviolence at all, liberation theology challenges us to root our theology in the poor's struggle for justice and liberation. It calls us to a risky, active nonviolence that takes on and transforms the structures and institutions of injustice and oppression which kill the poor around the world. Our hermeneutic of suspicion needs to hear the perspective of the poor inviting us into their life struggle for justice, a struggle which will require further change of lifestyle, conversion of heart and a deeper solidarity.

Meanwhile, a theology of nonviolence challenges liberation theology not to give into the despair of revolutionary violence, but to hear and practice the challenging, revolutionary nonviolence of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount which, when practiced, conveys good news of liberation to the poor. Indeed, a theology of nonviolence calls us beyond every form of violence, whether institutionalized structural violence, repressive military violence or revolutionary violence. It bestows the weapon of God to the poor and oppressed: the weapon of nonviolent resistance to evil and the love of enemies which can transform us all, liberating both the oppressed and the oppressors into God's reign of justice and peace.

Fundamentally, liberation theology names a theology of the poor. This theology characterizes their claim in the reign of God's justice as a gift that belongs to them. Thus, the poor of the world are not waiting for white, first-world North Americans to liberate them; they are moving ahead in their own faith journey into God's reign. The challenge to North American peacemakers lies in not just being for the poor, but resisting the forces of destruction that are killing the poor around the world. Thus, a preferential option for the poor professed by the North American solidarity movement expresses a commitment to resist institutionalized violence, low-intensity conflict, and the militarism that holds the poor of the world hostage to first world greed. A liberation theology of North America becomes then a theology of disarmament, transformation, nonviolence and resistance.

In this connection of justice and peace, Gutierrez writes that all Christians are invited to join the class struggle of the poor and oppressed for justice. We are called to take sides as God does. "Neutrality is impossible," he pointed out. "It is not a question of admitting or denying a fact which confronts us; rather it is a question of which side we are on."(11) As we follow Christ and become people of nonviolence, we need to begin among the poor and oppressed, as Jesus did, in their journey of nonviolent resistance and transformation. As we join the victim of the world's institutionalized violence, we will be undertaking a true nonviolence, the nonviolence of God who sided with the poor by becoming incarnate among the poor and oppressed. Gutierrez understands this connection of nonviolence and liberation, as he writes:

The universality of Christian love is only an abstraction unless it becomes concrete history, process, conflict; it is arrived at only through particularity. To love all men and women does not mean avoiding confrontations; it does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony. Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness...One loves the oppressors by liberating them from themselves. But this cannot be achieved except by resolutely opting for the oppressed, that is, by combatting the oppressive class. It must be a real and effective combat, not hate. This is the challenge, as new as the Gospel: to love our enemies....It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love. But love does not mean that the oppressors are no longer enemies, nor does it eliminate the radicalness of the combat against them. "Love of enemies" does not ease tensions; rather it challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula.(12)

Both theologies need to listen to the experience of the poor and to those who struggle to become a people of nonviolence in a world of imperial violence. This listening will spark a deeper faith and new directions for both; it will lead to a deeper liberation, a deeper nonviolence, a global transformation for justice and peace. In this deepening, liberation theology and a theology of nonviolence will lead Christians to protest and resist every form of violence, oppression and injustice, from institutionalized violence, repressive violence and revolutionary violence, from systemic injustice, fascism, nuclear war, hunger, disease, and every form of poverty.

Liberation theology calls a theology of nonviolence to be rooted in the experience of the poor and oppressed, in the struggle of the poor for justice, so that our nonviolence has integrity, passion and action. It will be then, like Jesus, a nonviolence that liberates.

Three twentieth century figures who have fully integrated the struggle for liberation and the way of nonviolence are Gandhi, King and Day. In his movement for the suffering masses of India, Gandhi encouraged the liberation of India from the brutal British oppression, but he did so specifically along the principles of nonviolence. Martin Luther King, Jr. followed Jesus and Gandhi by sparking a liberation movement against the racial injustice that oppresses African-Americans throughout the US. King was both a liberation theologian and a theologian of nonviolence; both a practitioner of liberation and nonviolence. Indeed, King enacted a liberating nonviolence which caught the imagination of the world. Perhaps, more than anyone in this century, King spoke for the poor, for justice and for peace. Similarly, Dorothy Day lived the connections between God's justice for the poor and God's movement for peace. In her Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, she accompanied the homeless poor with her very life. At the same time, she taught and practiced the Gospel nonviolence that said No to every war of the century and proclaimed Christ's way of nonviolence. Her life witness for justice and peace continues to bear fruit not only in the church, but throughout North America. Her life suggests the real connection between liberation and nonviolence, a solidarity with the poor and the peacemaking peoples of the world. Dorothy Day called for both a preferential option for the poor and a preferential option for peace. With Gandhi, King, Day, and the thousands of others around the world who are making the connections, the liberating, nonviolent reign of God is at hand.

These connections are already being made by the poor and oppressed peoples of the world, from repatriating Guatemalan refugees to the indigenous peoples of Ecuador. In the village of Cantomanyog on the island of Negros in the Philippines, the poor who suffer hunger and injustice, as well as a repressive military force and an intimidating revolutionary force, have banded together, in light of the biblical call to liberation and nonviolence, to create a "Zone of Peace," a region on their island where no weapons are allowed so that they can live in peace and struggle in peace for justice. The villagers of Cantomanyog have been suffering from years of low-intensity conflict, similar to the war waged against the people of El Salvador. Their Zone of Peace commenced on February 1990, when 300 Christians from all over Negros processed in "a peace caravan" to their village, against the wishes of the military. "Our village is open to everyone whose intentions are good," said Natividad Epanan, a community leader holding her two-year-old child, declaring Cantomanyog the first Zone of Peace in the Philippines. "We wish to be free from the

danger of weapons of war and death. Therefore, whoever enters this zone of peace should not bring any guns with them."(13) The residents have no weapons to enforce their "zone of peace," but the publicity of their stand and the moral force of nonviolence behind it has kept the violence away. Their declaration caught the imagination of the nation and gave people new hope in their nonviolent struggle for justice and liberation.

A Theology of Liberating Nonviolence

Liberation theology and a theology of nonviolence blend together into a liberating nonviolence, the active peacemaking the Jesus lived, taught and practiced. Liberation challenges nonviolence to side with the poor, to risk our first world privileges, indeed our very lives in a nonviolent struggle for liberation and justice for the poor. The call of liberation and nonviolence to the Christian community of the first world is Jesus' call to the rich official in Luke's Gospel. "Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."(Lk.17:22) When the man went away sad, Jesus turned to his disciples and told them, " How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the reign of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the reign of God."(Lk.17:24-25) After asking who can be saved, Peter told Jesus, "We have given up our possessions and followed you," to which Jesus responded, "There is no one who has given up house or wife [or husband] or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the reign of God who will not receive back an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come."(Lk. 17:28-29) Like the rich official, North American Christians are called to sell our possessions, give them away to the poor and follow Jesus to the cross in his nonviolent struggle for justice and peace. If our lives are to be good news of liberation to the poor and oppressed of the world, we have to enter as closely as possible into solidarity with them. In other words, we have to change our lifestyles to be serious about nonviolence. Indeed, in order to resist the institutionalized violence which the US economy wages against the world's poor (including the poor in the US), we need to withdraw our complicity from this economic system, resist the culture's mad rush of consumerism, and begin a living solidarity with the poor. Then, our nonviolence--and our theology--will be more authentic. We will be given new eyes to read the scriptures and see the vision of God's reign coming to us all.

"Christian poverty, an expression of love," as Gutierrez concludes, "is solidarity with the poor and is a protest against poverty."(14) The life of active nonviolence, liberation theology teaches us, includes a life of Christian poverty as an expression of love, a solidarity with the poor and the nonviolent protest against the poverty inflicted on the poor. This Christian solidarity of voluntary poverty and simple lifestyle joins the poor in their struggle for justice. It seeks the conversion of the first world's spending, away from billions spent on weapons of war and global annihilation, to money spent for food, medicine, and housing for the world's poor. Such active solidarity with the poor will push us forward to speak out the truth of justice in a spirit of nonviolence, to break the silence of our complicity and apathy with systemic injustice from which we benefit economically. As we befriend the poor, we will find ourselves more and more able to risk our lives for those we love, the poor and oppressed who suffer and die under the brutalities of the world's governments. The poor, our friends, will convert our hearts, fill us with love, and help us to know the forgiveness of God through their forgiveness of us. As we change our lives and our lifestyles, we will be converted because we will begin to understand the depth with which many poor people love their enemies and practice nonviolence; we will experience this love first hand. This solidarity will help us risk civil disobedience to imperial violence and willingly take on suffering without retaliation because our hearts will be on fire for the liberation of those we love, those oppressed by the system. As we join in the struggle for liberation, our nonviolence will become more provocative, more creative, more public--more nonviolent--because it will be grounded in the suffering peoples of the earth. Finally, as we enter into greater solidarity with the poor and oppressed, we will be given the gift of hope. The poor have great hope in God, and hope is granted to those who believe and place all their trust in God and God's way of nonviolent action for justice. The poor can liberate us from our first world despair and teach us to hope.

A steadfast, liberating nonviolence will struggle to liberate the poor from the oppressive violence of poverty that our culture inflicts on them, as well as to liberate ourselves from our own addiction to violence. Because this task is so great, we can only do it through the liberating grace of a nonviolent God. An active, liberating nonviolence then will help us renew our Christianity and take our Gospel more

seriously than our citizenship in the structure of imperial violence which has become the United States. Indeed, we will become nonviolent revolutionaries seeking not just the overthrow of the status quo, but the transformation of society and human hearts as well. Such solidarity will require a deeper commitment to the poor and oppressed who are suffering around the world. As we accompany, befriend and love the poor, we will realize the depths of the world's violence and understand finally that we can no longer stand idly by but that we need to commit our entire lives to their liberating, nonviolent struggle for justice.

Oscar Romero reflected a theology of liberating nonviolence that struggled for the liberation of the oppressed poor and an end to the institutionalized violence, as well as the repressive violence and revolutionary violence that sowed further seeds of destruction. Romero's liberating nonviolence called for conversion, demanded a real accompaniment (and defense) of the poor, and an outspoken proclamation of the truth, even if such truth-telling cost him his life. "Like a voice crying in the desert, we must continually say No to violence and Yes to peace," Romero urged. His pastoral letter of August, 1978, called for an active nonviolence and new justice for the poor which would root out the causes of violence. He outlined the evils of "institutional violence," begged for the conversion of the repressive forces, and advocated "the power of nonviolence that today has conspicuous students and followers." "The counsel of the gospel to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, far from being passive or cowardly," he wrote, "is the showing of great moral force that leaves the aggressor morally overcome and humiliated.... There is an unshakable moral principle that says one cannot do evil in order to achieve good," he concluded. (15) Romero committed himself to that nonviolent struggle for the liberation of the poor and continues, like Jesus, to invite us into that poor's struggle for justice with an active love.

Like Romero, Dom Helder Camara of Brazil has long linked the struggle of liberation with the movement of nonviolence that resists structured violence. Camara is credited with forming Brazil's base community movement which today has over 100,000 communities; he is also considered a founding father of liberation theology. As the primary organizer of the 1968 Latin American bishops conference in Medellin, he was the first to promote "the preferential option for the poor" for the church of Latin America and the world wide church. He speaks as one of the church's greatest proponents of Gospel nonviolence. "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint," he has observed, "but when I ask why there are poor, I am called a communist." Though he has survived death threats and assassination attempts for his call for nonviolent conversion, liberation and revolution, he still holds a deep unconditional love for all people. Indeed, Camara loves his enemies, and that has made all the difference. "In the heart of every human being there are faults and sins, but there is always love," Camara told me once. "I think for human eyes, it is not easy to discover love in certain hearts, but God is able to discover love." (16) Camara appeals to the love in every human heart to join in the struggle for justice for the poor and the nonviolent witness for Christ's peace.

Similarly, Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina, founder of Latin America's SERPAJ movement (Service for Peace and Justice), a movement of active nonviolence for the end of poverty and war, calls the poor of the Latin America and the third world to an active nonviolence, as he explained when he accepted the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize:

For this continent where I live, the choice of the evangelical power of nonviolence presents itself, I am convinced, as a challenge that opens up new and radical perspectives. It is a choice that gives priority to a value essentially and profoundly Christian--the dignity of the human being, the sacred, transcendent, and irrevocable dignity that belongs to the human being by reason of being a child of God and a brother or sister in Christ, and therefore our own brother or sister. In these long years of struggle for our organization--the Service for Peace and Justice in Latin America--we have walked by the side of the poorest and most disadvantaged.... We have much to share in order to achieve, by means of the nonviolent struggle, the abolition of injustices and the attainment of a more just and humane society for all. It is a walking side by side with our brothers and sisters--with those who are persecuted, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who suffer because of oppression, those who are anguished by the prospect of war, those who suffer the cruel impact of violence or see constantly postponed the achievement of their basic rights... Despite so much suffering and pain, I live in hope because I feel that Latin

America has risen to its feet. Its liberation can be delayed but never denied. We live in hope because we believe, like St. Paul, that love never dies. Human beings in the historical process have created enclaves of love by their active practice of solidarity throughout the world, and with a view to the full-orbed liberation of peoples and all humanity. For me it is essential to have the inward peace and serenity of prayer in order to listen to the silence of God, which speaks to us, in our personal lives and in the history of our times, about power of love. Because of our faith in Christ and humankind, we must apply our humble efforts to the construction of a more just and human world. And I want to declare emphatically: Such a world is possible.(17)

"We know that peace is only possible when it is the fruit of justice," Esquivel told the gathering in Oslo. "True peace is the result of the profound transformation effected by nonviolence which is, indeed, the power of love."(18)

In 1986, when I asked Perez Esquivel about the connections between liberation for justice and active nonviolence, he turned first to the Gospel. "The Gospel itself is revolutionary," he said. "It is a liberating force."

When one begins to read the Gospel from this perspective, everything becomes a liberating message, everything follows a coherent line of liberating action. Many Christians see the call to pacifism in the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount is where all the strength and power of this nonviolent liberating message is concentrated and synthesized. When Jesus says, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other," he's not telling us to be stupid. He's calling us to change the situation, to act in a different manner, to change bad into good, to return good for evil, to respond to injustice in a new way. Under no circumstances does that mean weakness. [The work before us] is to assume a deeper understanding of the liberating message of the Gospel. The work is to break the structures of dominance through the force of nonviolence and through a personal commitment (such as a vow of nonviolence). Public demonstrations and confrontative actions, too, are important. Nonviolence needs to be directed towards social transformation, creating new alternatives in the economic situation, in the relations of power, and in the political and cultural situations.(19)

With Gandhi, King and Day, Helder Camara and Perez Esquivel symbolize those disciples who have integrated the struggle for liberation with the Gospel mandate of nonviolence. They reject violence, even for revolutionary causes. They practice the revolutionary, liberating nonviolence of Jesus.

A theology of liberation and nonviolence, if adopted by Christians around the world, can unleash the Gospel's power to liberate the poor from the lethal structures of poverty, injustice, and war. For North Americans, living in a culture of unparalleled violence, this new, active theology will lead us to resist the corporate and military structures which kill the poor at home and abroad. The combination of liberation for justice and active nonviolence leads to a subversive, revolutionary theology, indeed, to the Gospel itself, which we discover is both liberating and nonviolent. In this new link, we can discover God's way to justice and peace. Indeed, we will encounter the risen Jesus who leads the poor in a movement of nonviolent liberation.

Notes

(1) Mev Puleo, "How Do You Tell the Poor God Loves You? An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez," in St. Anthony Messenger, February, 1989, 10.

(2) Ibid., 11.

- (3) Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 15.
- (4) Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology," in Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, Systematic Theology, I, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 65.
- (5) Puleo, St. Anthony Messenger, 13.
- (6) Jon Sobrino, Archbishop Romero, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 16.
- (7) Robert McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key. (Phil: Westminster Press, 1978), 72- 73.
- (8) Walbert Buhlmann, With Eyes to See (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 68-69.
- (9) Brown, Theology in a New Key, 91; also, Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 194-195.
- (10) Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 298-299.
- (11) Ibid., 275.
- (12) Ibid., 275-276.
- (13) John Dear, Seeds of Nonviolence. (Baltimore: Fortkamp Pub. Co., 1992), 261-263.
- (14) Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 300-301.
- (15) John Dear, Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle For Justice (Eric, PA: Pax Christi USA, 1991), 20.
- (16) John Dear, "In Every Heart, There Is Love: An Interview with Dom Helder Camara," Pax Christi, Fall, 1991, 20-21.
- (17) Adolfo Perez Esquivel. Christ In a Poncho. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 136- 137.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) John Dear, "The Liberating Force of the Gospel: An Interview with Adolfo Perez Esquivel," Pax Christi, June, 1986, 16-17.