



# The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology

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## Abstract

The battle for meaning and influence between Latin American liberation theologians and the Vatican was one of the most significant conflicts in the global Catholic church of the twentieth century. With the election of the Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio as head of the global church in 2013, the question about the legacy of liberation theology was actualized. The canonization of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the pope's approximation to the public figure of Gustavo Gutiérrez signaled a new approach to the liberation theology movement in the Vatican. This article argues that Pope Francis shares some of the main theological concerns as pontiff with liberation theology. Although the pope remains an outsider to liberation theology, he has in a sense solved the conflict between the Vatican and the Latin American social movement. Through an analysis of ecclesial documents and theological literature, his can be discerned on three levels. First, Pope Francis' use of certain theological ideas from liberation theology has been made possible and less controversial by post-cold war contexts. Second, Pope Francis has contributed to the solution of this conflict through significant symbolic gestures rather than through a shift of official positions. Third, as Pope Francis, the Argentinian Jorge Mario Bergoglio has appropriated certain elements that are specific to liberation theology without acknowledging his intellectual debt to it.

**Keywords** Liberation theology · Marxism · Pope Francis · Latin American Christianity · Post-conciliar Catholicism · Religion and politics

The disagreements and battles over theological issues between Latin American liberation theologians and the Vatican constitute one of the major intraecclesial conflicts of the twentieth century. The Vatican attempted to combat the dissemination of controversial strands and ideas of Latin American liberation theology through measures such as public “notifications” from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF),

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ensorship of books in the seminaries, and the avoidance of liberation theologians in the promotion of priests to entrusted positions such as episcopates. Because of their supposed deviation from Catholic orthodoxy, the Vatican sought through CDF to correct the theological errors of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino and enforce what it considered as their lack of obedience to the official teaching of the Catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

After the election of the Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio in 2013, questions were raised about his relation to the world famous ecclesial movement that had caused so many controversies in the church, particularly during the cold war when many in the movement allied themselves with the political left in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> In Argentina, Bergoglio had been known as a powerful opponent of liberation theology as the Jesuit Provincial during the 1970s. Just a month into his pontificate, however, Vatican officials said that Pope Francis had decided to unblock the beatification process of the Archbishop of El Salvador Oscar Romero, hailed as a saint for liberation theology ever since the assassination of him in 1980. Furthermore, in September 2013, news surged that the pope had met in private (not on his official schedule) with the so-called father of liberation theology, the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez was in Italy to launch the Italian edition of the book he had co-written with no other than the head of CDF from 2012 (until 2017), cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller.<sup>3</sup> It appeared dramatic and led to headlines in the international media. As the biographer Paul Valley concluded: "After three decades of hostility from the conservative pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, this was an extraordinary turnaround."<sup>4</sup> The former opponent of the movement had embraced its primary figures and made the Vatican itself into an ally of it. And when Leonardo Boff, formerly silenced by CDF, enthusiastically proclaimed that Pope Francis had called him to ask for materials in order to write his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, the impression was strengthened that the Argentinean pontiff had reconciled himself with liberation theology. No wonder that some of the fierce conservative opposition to Pope Francis accused the Argentinian of betraying the anti-Communism of his predecessors for rehabilitating the "Marxist" liberation theology.<sup>5</sup> In Boff's words, "Francis is one of us. He has made liberation theology the common property of the church and he has, moreover, extended it."<sup>6</sup> Had the once so controversial Latin American liberation theology become "common property" for the Catholic church and its pope? Or was the Argentinean liberation theologian Ruben Dri

<sup>1</sup> Unlike in the case of Boff and Sobrino, no "Notification" on Gutiérrez' work was made public by the CDF. In 1983 the Peruvian bishops' conference was informed by the CDF that a case on Gutiérrez had been opened. 24 years later CDF informed that it was closed. Sergio Torres, "Amerindia: Return from Internal Exile," in *Aparecida: Quo Vadis?*, ed. Robert S. Pelton (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 155.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance José Francisco Gómez Hinojosa, *De La Teología De La Liberación a La Teología Del Papa Francisco: ¿Ruptura O Continuidad?*, Colección Gs (Madrid: PPC 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez and Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. Robert A. Krieg and James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Valley, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots: The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, Revised and expanded second edition. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 142.

<sup>5</sup> George Neumayr, *Political Pope: How Pope Francis Is Delighting the Liberal Left and Abandoning Conservatives* (New York: Center Street Books 2017), 1–11.

<sup>6</sup> Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, "Brazil May Soon Have Married Priests, Says Leonardo Boff," National Catholic Reporter, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/brazil-may-soon-have-married-priests-says-leonardo-boff>.

(1929-) closer to the truth when he affirmed that “[h]e never took the reins of liberation theology because it’s radical”?<sup>7</sup>

This article argues that Pope Francis is still at odds with liberation theology, although he shares some of its main theological concerns as a pontiff. The pope is not “one of them” (Boff) in this sense, but he has nonetheless in a certain way solved the conflict between the Vatican and the ecclesial movement. First, Pope Francis’ negotiations of themes from liberation theology were prepared by post-cold war contexts that displaced some of the most controversial topics of liberation theology and brought others to the fore. Second, Pope Francis solves this conflict through symbolic gestures rather than open intellectual engagement with specific expressions of the innovative ideas of the movement. Third, Pope Francis rejects some aspects of liberation theology and appropriates others without explicitly acknowledging his intellectual debt to it. These strategies reflect one of the few opinions the Argentinean has shared about liberation theology: It has positive as well as negative aspects, the negative being due to what Bergoglio in 2010 described as its “recourse to Marxist hermeneutics”.<sup>8</sup>

To ask in what sense the legacy of liberation theology has been renegotiated in the case of the current pope is also to inquire about the significance of the first Latin American pope in history. We may ask: What is the Latin American dimension to what has come to be known as “the Francis Effect” when the impact of liberation theology is considered?

## Liberation Theology as Social Movement and Historical Legacy

Liberation theology is here defined as a body of literature but also as a social movement, in agreement with previous scholarship.<sup>9</sup> As an ecclesial movement, it is a social movement that has attempted to shape church and society through distinctive ideas and practices carried out by agents with personal connections and institutional links. Here, the emphasis is on the ideas and theology that has been articulated by the most influential intellectuals of the movement, primarily highly educated Catholic theologians with connections to the priestly hierarchy and with an explicit commitment to the liberation of the poor in tune with political leftism.<sup>10</sup> To conceive of liberation theology as a movement also means to take into account the dynamic nature of this

<sup>7</sup> Jim Yardley and Simon Romero, “Pope’s Focus on Poor Revives Scorned Theology,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/world/europe/popes-focus-on-poor-revives-scorned-theology.html>.

<sup>8</sup> “... la apelación a la hermenéutica marxista a la realidad.” Sergio Rubín and Francesca Ambrogetti, *El Papa Francisco: Conversaciones Con Jorge Bergoglio* (Barcelona; Miami: Ediciones B, 2013), 83.

<sup>9</sup> João Chaves, “Latin American Liberation Theology: The Creation, Development, Contemporary Situation of an on-Going Movement,” in *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Themes and Developments in Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Leiden: Brill, 2015). André Corten, *Pobres E O Espírito Santo : O Pentecostalismo No Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1996). David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit : Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996). Michael Löwy, *A Guerra Dos Deuses : Religião E Política Na América Latina* (Petrópolis, Brésil: Editora Vozes, 2000). Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology : Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> The movement is ecumenical and has not consisted exclusively of Catholics. The Brazilian Protestant Rubem Alves may even be said to be the first to employ the term of the movement with his 1968 dissertation “Toward a Theology of Liberation” (PhD defended at Princeton University).

historical phenomenon that surged in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). While the term “liberation theology” was not in use at the time of the Second General Conference of the Latin American episcopate in Medellín in 1968, this effort of the Latin American bishops to translate the Council to their regional context is commonly considered as the founding event of the movement. New research has nevertheless questioned the view of the Medellín conference as the univocal expression of Christian progressivism, without denying its immense effect on Catholics that were mobilized to take action on the political left.<sup>11</sup> It is not the case that there was a progressive consensus and theological cohesion at the outset and that reactionary conservatives dismantled it. Disagreement and negotiation played a formative role that can be detected in the inherent tensions of the Medellín text as a productive reception of the Council.<sup>12</sup>

After the movement’s expansion in Latin America in the 1970s, its influence was reduced in the decades thereafter. While some journalists left the impression that Pope John Paul II crushed liberation theology and certain scholars have concluded that the movement has had rather “meagre results”,<sup>13</sup> the political influence of the movement has persisted well into the 2000s. As manifestations of the electoral success of political leftism in Latin America, the former president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, legitimated his populism with liberationist ideas.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Worker’s Party that governed Brazil from 2003 until 2016 was partly the result of political mobilization within Catholic base communities,<sup>15</sup> which has been the exemplary model for organizing Christian community life in liberation theology.

Although it can be said to be marginal as a social force within the Latin American churches, it has left a historical legacy primarily tied to the memory of the martyrdom of key figures and to the body of literature produced by the intellectual elite of the movement. This legacy can be categorized as a cultural memory that is most persistently remembered in the margins of the Catholic church. With the election of an Argentinean pontiff of the same age as the first generation of liberation theologians, the handed-down memory of liberation theology was to some extent moving closer to the center of attention and remembrance. It was no longer only relegated to the margins or the archives, but was implicitly interpreted and renegotiated by the head of the largest religious organization on earth.

<sup>11</sup> Juan Eduardo Bonnin, *Discurso Político Y Discurso Religioso En América Latina Leyendo Los Borradores De Medellín (1968)* (Buenos Aires: Arcos, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> In the words of Jon Sobrino, “Medellín was more than the mere application or extrapolation of the Council”. Jon Sobrino, “The ‘Church of the Poor’ Did Not Prosper at Vatican II,” *Concilium*, no. 3 (2012): 83.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary, *Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9. The hypothesis of the movement’s «meagre results» is found in Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage 1994), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Ole Jakob Løland, “Hugo Chávez’s Appropriation of the Liberationist Legacy in Latin America,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 6, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Activists from unions and church groups such as base communities were the primary social base for the party in 1990. Considering the power of the Worker’s Party in Brazil in the 2000s, the conclusion that liberation theology in Latin America has had “meagre results” appears questionable. Ji Follmann, “Progressive Catholicism and Left-Wing Party Politics in Brazil,” in *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism*, ed. W. E. Hewitt and John Burdick (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000).

## Liberation Theology and the Theology of the People

As an Argentinean theologian, Pope Francis is naturally influenced by Latin American theology. Two of the specifically Latin American expressions of Catholic theology after the Second Vatican Council are liberation theology and the theology of the people.<sup>16</sup>

While much has been written about the roots of Pope Francis' thinking the theology of the people,<sup>17</sup> less has been developed in current research about the possible links between Pope Francis and liberation theology. Theology of the people is commonly considered as a strand of postconciliar theology developed in Argentina by theologians such as Lucio Gera, Rafael Tello, and Juan Carlos Scannone. Of these three, Scannone is the only one to be explicitly cited by Pope Francis.<sup>18</sup> The three were among the theologians that undoubtedly contributed to the renewal of Catholic theology in Argentina after the Second Vatican Council that eventually also inspired forms of liberation theology in this national context.<sup>19</sup>

Lucio Gera is a figure that cannot easily be relegated to only the group of thinkers pertaining to the theology of the people, particularly given his role as advisor to the Latin American bishops' conference in Medellín (CELAM) in 1968 and his close cooperation with the Movement of Priests for the Third World (*Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo*).<sup>20</sup> The movement channeled much of the social radicalism and revolutionary spirit of Catholic priests in Argentina until its disagreements over the meaning of revolution and the armed struggle led to its gradual fracture. It was one the creative laboratories for the formulation of liberation theology in Latin America until the coup d'état in 1976 violently put an end to its activities that from then on were considered "subversive" by the military regime. Lucio Gera and Rafael Tello helped to furnish renovation and radicalization among their students and future priests in the 1960s. The two served as consultants together in the Episcopal Commission for Pastoral Practice (COEPAL) that the Argentinean bishops established after the Second Vatican Council. In this theological milieu, Tello's contribution to an Argentinean theology of the people was further articulated.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, a wide

<sup>16</sup> Feminist theology and indigenous theology also deserve to be mentioned in this context of Latin American schools of theology.

<sup>17</sup> Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour, "The "Theology of the People" in the Pastoral Theology of Pope Francis," in *Discovering Pope Francis: The Roots of Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Thinking*, ed. Brian Yong Lee and Thomas L. Knoebel (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019). Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017). Thomas R. Rourke, *The Roots of Pope Francis's Social and Political Thought: From Argentina to the Vatican* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). Juan Carlos Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," *Theological studies* 77, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>18</sup> § 117 in Pope Francis, "Laudato Si," [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>19</sup> There is therefore somewhat misleading to depict the theology of the people as "an Argentine alternative to liberation theology", as the political scientist Thomas R. Rourke has written Rourke, *The Roots of Pope Francis's Social and Political Thought: From Argentina to the Vatican*, 9. Rourke's description of the dissociation of Gera and Tello to the Movement of Priests for the Third World is also too sharp. See *ibid.*, 73–74.

<sup>20</sup> José Pablo Martín, *El Movimiento De Sacerdotes Para El Tercer Mundo: Un Debate Argentino* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento 2010), 272.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Rivero, *El Viejo Tello En La Coepal Sus Intervenciones Entre Los Peritos De La Comisión Episcopal De Pastoral En La Recepción Del Concilio Vaticano Ii En Argentina (1968–1971)* (Buenos Aires: Agape Libros 2015). In my biography about the liberation theologian Lidio Dominguez there is an episode that exemplifies Gera's and Tello's support of this young and radical generation of Catholic theologians that met resistance from conservative bishops. A significant part of them, like Dominguez, will opt for an armed struggle as the path to authentic liberation and the Montoneros guerilla as a mean for it (Løland 2009: 64–72).

range of social issues were discussed here that overlapped with themes and concerns of liberation theology. In other words, there is no sharp delineation between Argentinean theology of the people and Latin American liberation theology. This has, however, been the object of some debate.

In the introduction to a recent edition of some of Lucio Gera's main theological writings, the Argentinean theologian Virginia Raquel Azcuy summarizes the tension between liberation theology and theology of the people as crystallized in the option between liberation and evangelization.<sup>22</sup> Although an influential Argentinean bishop like Eduardo Pironio (cardinal from 1976) and others prepared a synthesis of the two that came to expression through Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* from 1975 and the conclusions at the Latin American bishops' conference in Puebla in 1979, the tension between the two schools remained. As Juan Carlos Scannone has maintained, the theology of the people has privileged a historical-cultural analysis over the structural social analysis of liberation theology. Furthermore, the theology of the people is distinguished from liberation in its refusal to be informed by the thought and categories of Marxist philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the moment of seeing within the theological reflection process has in the theology of the people a different perspective where the history and religiosity of the faithful people become decisive for what sort of pastoral action that is needed. Theologians such as Scannone and Juan Luis Segundo<sup>24</sup> sorted the theology of the people as one of several strands under the wider umbrella of Latin American theology. But as Azcuy remarks, this is still a question open to debate and there is no consensus on Scannone's position.<sup>25</sup> That said, the two Latin American schools of postconciliar theology can still be distinguished. Therefore, theologians such as Gera, Tello, and Scannone will not be treated here as typical representatives of liberation theology.

While Pope Francis has expressed a certain distance toward liberation theology, he has spoken in more favorable terms of the theology of the people. What is more, he has affirmed that his first apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* expresses a "theology of the people" without connecting it to specific Argentinean theologians.<sup>26</sup> Besides, he has affirmed that he is not fond of the term "theology of the people," without clarifying why.<sup>27</sup>

The aim here is not to say that liberation theology has had a deeper impact on Pope Francis' pontificate than the theology of the people, but merely to explore the possible links between Pope Francis' pontificate and this Latin American ecclesial movement. There are certain maneuvers, decisions, and ideas expressed by the pontificate of Pope Francis that have more to do with liberation theology than with the theology of the people. Hence, there is need to analyze this relation.

<sup>22</sup> Virginia R. Azcuy, "Introducción," in *La Teología Argentina Del Pueblo*, ed. Virginia R. Azcuy and Lucio Gera (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado 2015), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," 124.

<sup>24</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, 1985 ed., *Liberación De La Teología* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1976), 234–36.

<sup>25</sup> Azcuy, "Introducción," 27.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis and Dominique Wolton, *A Future of Faith : The Path of Change in Politics and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2018), 187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



## The Conflict Between Liberation Theology and Rome

The liberation theologian Lidio Dominguez (1936–2012) influenced Pope John Paul II on the Polish pontiff's first journey to Latin America in 1979.<sup>28</sup> The liberation theologian had been recommended by the Argentinean cardinal Eduardo Pironio to John Paul II as a speech-writer that would help the pontiff to connect with the poor peasants and indigenous people of Mexico, where the Latin American bishops' conference (CELAM) was to gather. Aware of Polish pope's anti-Communism, one of Dominguez' motives of accepting the task was to avoid a confrontation between the pope and Marxism. In his liberationist perspective, Dominguez was convinced that Marxism was an ally in the cause of the liberation of the poor in Latin America. Although John Paul II accepted large parts of Dominguez' drafts, the Polish pope or other consultants edited them in manners that sharpened the tone with regard to some tendencies in liberation theology.<sup>29</sup> This illustrates how conflicting views were negotiated in papal statements that on the one hand officially acknowledged concerns of the liberation theology movement and on the other delegitimized some of them. It was in particular the opening address to CELAM prefigured the conflictive issues raised by the CDF statement "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" in 1984.

Although the term "liberation theology" did not appear in the pope's 1979 address, it was commonly assumed that he referred to the movement in it. The pope celebrated "the positive elements" from the conclusions at the CELAM in Medellín eleven years earlier, but warned against what he called "the incorrect interpretations" of them. He felt the necessity to proclaim that "the principal duty" of Latin American Catholics were to "be the teachers of the truth". This was "not a human and rational truth, but the Truth that comes from God" and was to lay the foundation for what the pope qualified as "an adequate 'praxis'".<sup>30</sup> "Praxis" in quotation marks referred to the preferred term of the liberation theologians that insisted on the primacy of the Aristotelian or even Marxist *praxis* over an isolated spirituality. Liberation theology had insisted on ecclesial praxis in the form of concrete struggle for the oppressed as the starting point for true theology. Without naming specific works or theologians, the pope actually insisted on primacy of the opposite: "Besides oneness in charity, oneness in truth ever remains an urgent demand upon us."<sup>31</sup> In other words, before community in praxis there is a community in truth. Concerned about "the purity of doctrine" in light of the tendencies to interpret Medellín incorrectly, the pope directed his attention to the topic of Christology.

Now today, we find in many places a phenomenon that is not new. We find "re-readings" of the Gospel that are the product of theoretical speculations rather than of authentic meditation on the word of God and a genuine evangelical commitment... In some cases people are silent over Christ's divinity... In other cases people purport to depict Jesus as a political activist, as a fighter against Roman

<sup>28</sup> Ole Jakob Løland, *Lidio: En Uvanlig Historie* (Oslo: Spartacus, 2009). Published in Norwegian.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 244–53.

<sup>30</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Opening Address at the Puebla Conference," in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1979), 58.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

domination and the authorities, and even as someone involved in the class struggle. This conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive man from Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis.<sup>32</sup>

The pope's rhetoric about "theoretical speculations" that in his view are not authentically Catholic or Christian is aimed at targeting the tendency to emphasize the humanity of Jesus on the cost of his divinity. This accusation of the tendency in liberation theology to reduce Christian faith to the mundane, earthly, and political persisted as a pattern well into the 1984 Instruction. More severe in the 1979 address, perhaps, was the pope's criticism of the idea of Jesus in the liberation theology movement as politically committed and as involved in a reality described with the Marxist category of "class struggle." The view of Jesus as revolutionary in this political sense was simply not reconcilable with true Christian faith. Besides, the pope affirms that the Christians do not have to recourse to ideologies in order to collaborate in the liberation of man.<sup>33</sup> And unlike the papal encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope John Paul II did not leave a legitimate room for armed struggle against dictatorships in a region where the majority was governed by military regimes.<sup>34</sup> In the address, all violence was denounced as immoral.

This admonition to refrain from images of Jesus as revolutionary or subversive might strike one as insensitive and harsh in a cold war context where adherents to liberation theology were being imprisoned, tortured, and even assassinated while being accused with very same labels. This group was heterogenous. Some had committed themselves to armed struggle, while many others were engaged in non-violent activities like organizing cooperatives or alphabetization programs. In Argentina, more than 10,000 disappeared in the name of the military regime's combat against "subversivos" (Spanish). Nevertheless, Peter Hebblethwaite interestingly points to the "mildness" of the pope's formulation at this instance.<sup>35</sup> By Catholic standards, it can be described as mild given that there is no talk of "errors" and still less of heresy,<sup>36</sup> although any theological innovation within a Catholic church concerned with doctrinal purity or orthodoxy is, in principle, of course, potentially heretic.

The issue of class was taken up again in the 1984 instruction. In the view of the Instruction, class struggle is a perspective on history which poses a severe danger to the Christian faith since it implicitly denies "the transcendent character of the distinction between good and evil" and therefore leads to "political amorality" that merely follows deterministic laws of Marxism.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it goes hand in hand with the affirmation of the necessity of violence. And by employing Marxist analysis on history and society, some strands of liberation theology had embraced visions of reality that were

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 59–60.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Populorum Progressio* (1967) warns against revolutionary violence but acknowledges its legitimacy in cases "where there is manifest, longstanding tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good". Kenneth R. Himes et al., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, Second edition. ed. (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 311.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Hebblethwaite, "Liberation Theology and the Roman Catholic Church," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 183.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>37</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation", " in *Liberation Theology : A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1990), 404.



“incompatible with the Christian vision of humanity,” according to the Instruction.<sup>38</sup> What is more, there is a “tendency to identify the kingdom of God and its growth with the human liberation movement” that is contrary to the conclusions of Vatican II.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the soteriology that discerns signs of the Kingdom, and therefore of salvific importance, in political realities is not tolerated. Moreover, the innovative thoughts in liberation theology about social sin and sinful structures were deemed a dangerous immanentism since evil cannot be located “principally or uniquely in bad social, political, or economic ‘structures’”.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion of class was also to some degree validated when the CDF text acknowledged the aspiration for liberation as most forcefully expressed in “the heart of the disinherited classes”.<sup>41</sup> Even more, when the Instruction proclaimed that “the scandal of the shocking inequality between rich and poor” or “between social classes in a nation” the parasitic relation between liberation theology and the CDF became evident.<sup>42</sup> It was as if, in its eagerness to warn Catholics against the Marxist deviations of liberation theology, the CDF had radicalized official Catholic discourse on the topic of social and economic inequality.<sup>43</sup> One level is the discursive and another is the political, of course. While doctrinally attuned to some of the main concerns of adherents to the liberation theology movement, together with other factors, the 1984 Instruction led to the marginalization of base communities and bypassing of liberation theologians for major positions in the hierarchy for the years to come.<sup>44</sup> It caricatured the liberation theology movement in ways that effectively delegitimized it.

Many concerns of liberation theology were officially reaffirmed by the bishops at Puebla in 1979, including the legitimacy of base communities, the option for the poor, and the perception of liberation as salvation from poverty in history. Nevertheless, the battle for the meaning of the documents began in the moment its conclusions were approved by the Vatican.<sup>45</sup> The Colombian Alfonso López Trujillo was a major opponent of liberation theology since he was appointed as the president of CELAM from 1972 until 1984. When the current pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, in one of his few publications from this period, privileges the voice of López Trujillo in his interpretation of the Puebla conclusions, it is illustrative for Bergoglio’s position in this ecclesial battle.<sup>46</sup> In the article, Bergoglio argues that Puebla warns against the dangers of the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>43</sup> The 1984 Instruction is “one of the most radical documents ever to emanate from the Vatican”. Hebblethwaite, “Liberation Theology and the Roman Catholic Church,” 187.

<sup>44</sup> A significant example is the ecclesiological impact is the splitting of Cardinal Paul Evaristo Arns’ archdiocese into five parts. Warren Edward Hewitt, “Popular Movements, Resource Mobilization, and the Legacy of Vatican Restructuring in the Archdiocese of São Paulo,” *Canadian journal of Latin American and Caribbean studies* 18, no. 36 (1993).

<sup>45</sup> After the 1968 meeting in Medellín all CELAM conclusions have had to wait for authorization, and partly correction, from the Vatican before publication. According to Agenor Brighenti, about 250 modifications of the text approved by the Latin American bishops were made by the Vatican before final publication. Agenor Brighenti, “Documento De Aparecida: O Texto Original, O Texto Oficial E O Papa Francisco,” *Revista Pistis e praxis: teologia e pastoral* 8, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>46</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “Actitudes Conflictivas Y Pertenencia Eclesial. A Propósito De Tres Publicaciones,” *Stromata* 39, no. 1-2 (1983).

ideologies for the church,<sup>47</sup> but he interestingly bypasses the documents' statement about the necessity of ideologies as mediating factors for social action.<sup>48</sup> Bergoglio is also, like López Trujillo, concerned with the lack of discipline in the church, reveals the article.

Liberation theology in a country like Argentina was to a large degree formulated by a generation of seminarians and priests that were perceived by certain ecclesial authorities as disobedient, even rebellious. Some of this rebellion would lead to a rupture with the traditional parochial structures and creation of new base communities among the poor. In even more radical cases, it led to some priests' active collaboration with left-wing guerillas, the Montoneros in particular. As the Jesuits' provincial in Argentina, Bergoglio sought to marginalize liberation theology, reinstall pre-Vatican traditions and dismantle the new community that the Jesuits Francisco Jalics y Orlando Yorio had installed among the poor. He left them with no other choice than to dissolve the community or leave the order, which is the roots of a conflict with Bergoglio that is inseparably tied to the sequestration, torture, and imprisonment of them just 2 months after the military coup in March 1976. They were considered "subversives".<sup>49</sup> In addition, Bergoglio was one of the few provincials in Latin America that refused to implement the "Decree Four" that had been agreed upon at the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation in the Jesuit order, which took place from 2 December 1974 through 7 March 1975.<sup>50</sup> The decree stated that "the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement", but Bergoglio downplayed the decree and preferred not to mention it to novices.<sup>51</sup> Its call for social and political action was suppressed. But that was decades before he became elected pope.

Peter Hebblewithe concludes that there is no unequivocal condemnation of liberation theology on the part of Rome in the 1979 opening address in Mexico nor in the "Instruction" of 1984 in the sense of the condemnations proclaimed against various modern movements and ideologies of what John O'Malley has termed "the long nineteenth century".<sup>52</sup> Still, there are ideas peculiar to the postconciliar liberationist movement in Latin America that have caused disagreements and conflicts between the Vatican and Catholic liberationists. Hence, as a whole, the liberation theology movement is not condemned in these major official reactions from the Vatican.<sup>53</sup> It is warned

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>48</sup> §535. CELAM III, "Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future. Final Document of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate," in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 198.

<sup>49</sup> Marta Diana, *Buscando El Reino: La Opción Por Los Pobres De Los Argentinos Que Siguieron Al Concilio Vaticano II* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2013), 377-83. Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *The Jesuits in Latin America, 1549-2000: 450 Years of Inculturation, Defense of Human Rights, and Prophetic Witness* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 299. Fortunato Mallimaci, "Crisis Del Catolicismo Y Un Nuevo Papado: Bergoglio Antes De Ser Francisco Y El Sueño Del Papa Propio En Argentina," *Estudos de Religião* 27, no. 2 (2013). Valley, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots: The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, 38-44.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Jesuit Theological Discourse since Vatican II," (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 300.

<sup>51</sup> Marcelo Larraquy, *Código Francisco: Cómo El Papa Se Transformó En El Principal Líder Político Global YCuál Es Su Estrategia Para Cambiar El Mundo* (Barcelona: Debate, 2016), 156-60.

<sup>52</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> The rhetoric in the CDF Notifications on Leonardo Boff from 1985 and Jon Sobrino from 2006 is notably different. For instance, the language carries more condemnatory meaning when it claims to have revealed the "errors" of Boff and Sobrino's books.

in generalized and vague terms that in the long run limited the impact of the social movement within the Catholic church.

## 1990s: Innovations in Liberation Theology in a Post-Cold War Context

How did the once so conservative provincial for the Jesuits in Argentina come to reconcile himself with liberation theology? And importantly, which of the various liberation theologies that surged from the 1960s in Latin American Christianity did he come to accept or reconcile himself with? One of the main explanations is to be found in the historical context of the Latin American church after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. The political resonance and possible reception of ideas and motifs from liberation theology, such as the liberation of the poor, was considerably different in a post-cold war context in which Latin American democracies secured freedom of expression and joining leftist guerillas was no longer an option.

The demands of Latin American liberation theology were no longer as politically explosive or a cause for scandal within and outside the Catholic church as before.<sup>54</sup> When the geopolitical world was no longer bipolar, the ideological opposition between capitalism and communism became to a large degree replaced by the overarching challenge of the dominant neoliberal capitalism. Hence, neoliberal globalization could more easily be denounced as a cause for cultural fragmentation or economic injustices without affirming some sort of socialism as its alternative when this option seemed less viable. In the national context where Jorge Mario Bergoglio in 1992 was appointed auxiliary bishop in the capital and 6 years later entered into the position as Metropolitan Archbishop, protests against neoliberal policies were widespread. Interestingly, in the Catholic church, resistance to neoliberalism is not limited to groups connected to liberation theology. This agenda unites a broad range of Catholic groups.<sup>55</sup>

In this situation, liberation theology evolved with new ideas and new emphases. The post-Cold War context had displaced some of the most controversial topics of liberation theology and brought others to the fore. During the 1990s, liberation theology was developed in two innovative ways that influence Catholic theology in Latin America in a broader sense: Creative theological reflection was produced in dialogue with the field of economy and ecology.<sup>56</sup> Liberation theologians as Franz Hinkelammert, Hugo Assmann, Jung Mo Sung, and Julio de Santa Ana analyzed neoliberal economic theory within a theological framework that led to the criticism of the idolatry of the market.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> "Liberation theology... has abandoned most of the revolutionary rhetoric of the earlier period... appealing to what is now a mainstream element in official social teaching of the church – the preferential option for the poor." Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads : Democracy or Revolution?* (New York: Oxford University Press 1990), 175.

<sup>55</sup> Luis Miguel Donatello, "Catolicismo Liberacionista Y Politica En La Argentina: De La Política Insurreccional En Los Setenta a La Resistencia Al Neoliberalismo En Los Noventa," *América Latina, hoy*, no. 41 (2005): 93.

<sup>56</sup> Gender and sexuality is another field with which liberation theologians engaged and which led to innovative contributions in the 1990s. These significant contributions met more resistance in official Catholic teaching, however.

<sup>57</sup> In particular, the environment at Depto EcuMénico de Investigaciones in Costa Rica proved to be innovate and productive in this field. See for instance Hugo Assmann, *Sobre Idolos Y Sacrificios : René Girard Con Teólogos De La Liberación* (San José: DEI 1991).

The social sciences had been of high importance for liberation theology since the days when the theory of dependence surged. Therefore, the engagement with ecology and insights from the natural sciences seen in Leonardo Boff's *Grito da terra, grito dos pobres* from 1995 was something new in liberation theology. While Boff before the fall of the Berlin wall had been one of the most optimistic voices among the liberation theologians on the value of the Communism,<sup>58</sup> the praise of aspects of “actually real socialism” was nowhere to be seen in his book on ecology. The call for socialist transformation or revolution of society was replaced by a criticism of the common exploitative logic of the entire modernity, both in its liberal-capitalist as well as in its socialist-Marxist form.<sup>59</sup>

The theology of the Peruvian priest that conventionally is called the “father” of liberation theology also exemplifies some of this evolvement. His *A Theology of Liberation* that was published in 1971 marks the beginning in common historical accounts of the movement.

### **Gustavo Gutiérrez: The Evolvement of Liberation Theology**

One year before the Puebla conference, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928-) published the essay “La fuerza histórica de los pobres” (“The Power of the Poor in History”).<sup>60</sup> Here, he makes up status of the period since the “new popular awareness could burst as a social force in the popular liberation struggles of the 1960s”.<sup>61</sup> The Peruvian theologian is describing a historical process where the class of poor and exploited people, who have been absent in Latin American societies, make themselves present through popular struggles of liberation from misery and domination. He then dedicates considerable space to the reactions to these struggles from “the oppressors” while displaying sympathy for the political left, exemplified by “the socialist program” of Allende in Chile.<sup>62</sup> Gutiérrez also fills the term “subversive” with a positive, Christian meaning.<sup>63</sup> He further writes:

We affirm a utopia on the way to becoming a historical reality... This “utopianism” clashes with the “realism” of the oppressor, who is incapable of appreciating the kind of historical rationality that springs from the power of the poor... Such misconceptions only hinder the development of the revolutionary energies of the popular classes. In particular, they constitute an obstacle to the exercise of a

<sup>58</sup> For instance, after a trip to the Soviet Union in 1987 Leonardo Boff proclaimed that the “social organization of the Soviet Union when compared with our dependent and exclusive capitalism avoids the eroticization and commercialization of everything and maintains a basic healthiness of human and social relations, offering the objective possibility of living more easily in the spirit of the Gospels and of observing the Ten Commandments”. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?*, 173.

<sup>59</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecologia: Grito Da Terra, Grito Do Pobres*, 2004 ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 1995), 97-98.

<sup>60</sup> Translated in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London: SCM Press 1983), 75-107.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

liberating faith on the part of the Christian communities based in those popular classes.<sup>64</sup>

Gutiérrez' theological discourse is structured by a fundamental opposition between "poor," "popular classes," "exploited" on the one hand and "dominators" and "oppressors" on the other hand. True, liberating faith is to be found in churches and communities that in some sense base themselves on the life and conscience of these "popular classes." The true Christian faith is in a sense class-based. Moreover, "revolutionary energies" are something that is in tune with the divine will of liberation. The revolutionary forces, connected to resistance to capitalism and an option for political leftism, are a sign of God's salvific will in the world. In an essay published in 1973 further clarifies the meaning of "poor" and therefore also his interpretation of the widespread slogan of the Catholic church in Latin America after the Medellín conference, what was known as "the option for the poor." While this slogan and the term "liberation" were interpreted differently in these years, ranging from "socialist revolution" to "spiritual liberation" or simply charity works for the poor,<sup>65</sup> Gutiérrez interpreted them with terms commonly used on the Latin American left:

The poor, the oppressed, are members of one social class that is being subtly (or not so subtly) exploited by another class. This exploited class, especially in its most clear-sighted segment, the proletariat, is an active agent. Hence, an option for the poor is an option for one social class against another.<sup>66</sup>

It is hard to escape the impression that Gutiérrez categorizes the poor and interprets the meaning of Christian faith within the framework of some sort of class struggle in a sense that overlaps with Marxism. Hence, Gutiérrez is a possible target for the Polish anticommunist and newly elected pope in the address at Puebla in 1979. Moreover, what was controversial in the liberation theology in Gutiérrez' version of the 1970s was not only the Marxist influence, but also the argumentative weight given to the insights of social sciences in general that would lead to criticism of liberation theology.<sup>67</sup>

In 2004, Gustavo Gutiérrez published his recent reflections on liberation theology in a work that contained texts by the Peruvian liberation theologian and the Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller.<sup>68</sup> Müller was known as a conservative theologian, even by the standards of the College of cardinals. What is more, he was appointed Prefect for the CDF in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI. The pope had, of course, as cardinal been the very symbol of the Vatican's opposition to liberation theology since the Instruction of 1984.<sup>69</sup> One could easily conclude that Gutiérrez had made an intelligent move if

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 81–82.

<sup>65</sup> Bonnin, *Discurso Político Y Discurso Religioso En América Latina Leyendo Los Borradores De Medellín (1968)*, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> "Sociologismo" (Spanish) as an exaggerated use of sociology was an accusation that liberation theologians such as Hugo Assmann were familiar with. Assmann, *Sobre Ídolos Y Sacrificios: René Girard Con Teólogos De La Liberación* 92.

<sup>68</sup> Translated into English in 2015 as Gutiérrez and Müller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*.

<sup>69</sup> In reality, Ratzinger's opposition to liberation theology was made public in March 1984 due to an unexpected criticism in the form of an article.

recognition as an orthodox theologian was what he needed, having co-authored a book with Müller.<sup>70</sup> That said, there is no reason to suppose that Müller was ready to embrace what the 1984 Instruction had criticized as a theology with “concepts uncritically borrowed from Marxist ideology”.<sup>71</sup> When we compare Gutiérrez’ work from 2004 with the ones from the years up to the bishops’ conference in Puebla in 1979, major differences become evident.

First, “socialism” or “revolution” is no longer a task to pursue or a cause to sympathize with in Gutiérrez’ text from 2004. Here is no mention of the 1959 revolution on Cuba or the 1979 revolution in Nicaragua, nor is it worth for Gutiérrez to remember the moral examples of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Camilo Torres who took up arms against the oppression.<sup>72</sup> To the extent that the term “revolution” occurs, it is used to describe aspects of modern capitalism or individualism. Second, while the emphasis on the marginalized and poor is maintained it is expressed with terms without the former Marxist connotations, such as “the proletariat.” Third, terms such as “oppressor” and “dominator” are absent. The former descriptions and denunciations of these oppressors’ strategies have disappeared from Gutiérrez’ theology of 2004. In other words, the class struggle that Gutiérrez’ texts from the 1970s seemed to presuppose and associate to is replaced by a call for solidarity and love for the poor. The former emphasis on the conflictive causes of poverty and the urgency of taking side with a specific social class is replaced by a warning to exaggerate the conflictive dimension of societies on the expense of the universal Christian love: “Conflictive social realities cannot make us forget the requirements of a universal love that does not recognize the boundaries of social class, race, or gender.”<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the earlier emphasis on the necessarily political dimension of Christian love in oppressive societies is now moderated with an awareness of the limits of political action: “... the demands of the gospel go beyond the political project of building a different society.”<sup>74</sup> This is an author who seems to have heard the warning of the 1984 Instruction to identify the Kingdom of God with the growth of human development. Gutiérrez also finds it necessary to underline that “to speak of a scientific understanding of the social universe cannot be considered something definite.” And the father of liberation theology tells the story of a fundamental revision of the movement’s theology:

It is possible to go astray in these matters, and in fact this has happened. Nor have misunderstandings been lacking in the face of new themes and new languages. In this way a debate over the theology of liberation arose which even flowed beyond the world of the church and into the wide and stormy world of the media. Nevertheless, beyond appearances and arduous discussions, a profound process was taking place in those years, characterized by a serious and respectful

<sup>70</sup> Some years later, Müller would constitute some of the main opposition to Pope Francis within the College of Cardinals, perhaps expressed most fully in the book *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* (2014). The book, co-authored with four other cardinals, consisted of a criticism of the idea that divorced could receive communion.

<sup>71</sup> Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation", 401.

<sup>72</sup> As Gutiérrez did in the 1970s. See for instance Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History : Selected Writings*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> Gutiérrez and Müller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*



confrontation, well-founded objections, requests for necessary refinements from those who have the authority in the church to do so (...).<sup>75</sup>

No longer pitting the popular classes against the dominating ones, nor the church of the people against the institution, Gutiérrez is here attuned to listen humbly to the established authorities in the church. He embodies the shift from an innovative, self-confident, and potentially heretic theology infused by Marxism to a more moderate and orthodox one.

It is on this background that main concerns of liberation theology are incorporated into the conclusions of the general meeting of CELAM in Aparecida in 2007, where Jorge Mario Bergoglio as archbishop of Buenos Aires is heading the editing committee of the final conclusions. In striking contrast to the last general meeting for CELAM at Santo Domingo in 1992,<sup>76</sup> the autonomy of the Latin American church was expressed at the 2007 meeting in Aparecida without the same effort from the Vatican to control the bishops and the outcome of the meeting.<sup>77</sup> Under Bergoglio's leadership, the Latin American bishops had the courage to correct or modify Pope Benedict XVI's controversial remarks in his opening address.<sup>78</sup> The pope had affirmed that "the announcing of Jesus and his Gospel did not presuppose in any moment an alienation of the pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it an imposition of a foreign culture."<sup>79</sup> This caused controversy and reactions from state leaders such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.<sup>80</sup> Significant, however, was Pope Benedict XVI's clear confirmation of the option of the poor and the act of anchoring this theme in the very same scriptural passage as the fathers of Medellín had done: "... the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in that God who became poor for us, so that he would enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9)."<sup>81</sup>

Contrary to what many had expected or feared, in Aparecida the Latin American bishops reasserted central concerns of liberation theology: They reintroduced the see-judge-act scheme from Medellín and Puebla, reaffirmed the preferential option for the poor, restated the importance of the base communities (CEBs), and confirmed the core issue from liberation theology of an integral liberation (conversion of persons and transformation of structures in the society).<sup>82</sup> What is more, Aparecida broke the telling silence in the 1992 documents from Santo Domingo about the martyrs that had not yet been canonized but who still were considered saints in the Latin American church.<sup>83</sup> The primary example of such a martyr was, of course, a figure that for many

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ken Serbin, "Latin America's Catholics: Postliberationism?," *Christianity and crisis* 52, no. 18 (1992).

<sup>77</sup> Even a figure like Pope Francis is critical towards the Santo Domingo Meeting. Hernán Reyes Alcaide, *Papa Francisco. Latinoamérica: Conversaciones Con Hernán Reyes Alcaide* (Buenos Aires: Planeta 2017), 106.

<sup>78</sup> "The Gospel reached our lands as part of a dramatic and unequal encounter of peoples and cultures." § 4 in the introduction to the Concluding Document of Aparecida.

<sup>79</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Inaugural Address of Benedict XVI," in *Aparecida: Quo Vadis?*, ed. Robert S. Pelton (Scranton: University of Scranton Press 2008), 2.

<sup>80</sup> Løland, "Hugo Chávez's Appropriation of the Liberationist Legacy in Latin America."

<sup>81</sup> XVI, "Inaugural Address of Benedict XVI," 6.

<sup>82</sup> Agenor Brighenti, "Aparecida: As Supresas, Sua Proposta E Novidades," *Perspectiva teológica* 39, no. 109 (2010): 310.

<sup>83</sup> § 98 in the Concluding Document of Aparecida: "We wish to recall the courageous testimony of our men and women saints, and of those who, even though not canonized, have lived out the gospel radically."

personalized the radicalism of liberation theology: Archbishop Óscar Romero (1917–1980).<sup>84</sup> The fathers of Aparecida had, under Bergoglio's leadership as chair of the editorial committee of the final document, paved the way for an official recognition in the future of the sainthood of Romero and other Latin American martyrs. In these efforts for consensus among the various interests and theologies of the region's bishops, preparations of the Latin American dimension to what has come to be known as "the Francis Effect" were being made—without any of the bishops being able to foresee that the Archbishop who stood out as a leader for them in Aparecida was to be elected as the first Latin American pontiff in history six years later.

## Symbolic Gestures Rather than Open Intellectual Engagement

Pope Francis has been aptly characterized as a man that "communicates as effectively by gestures as by words".<sup>85</sup> It is also due to the gestures that the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff has praised Pope Francis as someone who embodies liberation theology in the sense of that the pontiff acts in a liberating way for the poor. While Boff's book on Pope Francis is devoid of analyses of the pope's discourse, Boff is all the more impressed by the pope's appearance and deeds:

The new pope, Francis, comes from outside the framework of old European Christendom, so bogged down with traditions, palaces, princely spectacles, and internal power disputes. He is distinguished by simple, down-to-earth, obvious gestures that value life's common sense. Francis is breaking all the protocols and showing that power is always a mask, even when this power is supposed to be of divine origin.<sup>86</sup>

Icons of liberation theology like Ernesto Cardenal and Pedro Trigo also praised Pope Francis. Trigo was one of those who would praise the Argentinian pope in hagiographic terms, such as claiming that "Pope Francis is the incarnation of the council *par excellence*, since... he is so charismatic that he creates a Pentecost".<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, breaking protocols or incarnating the Second Vatican Council can hardly be said to be fruits of liberation theology or examples of the movement's peculiarities. A popular or charismatic pope is not the same as a liberationist pope.

Jorge Bergoglio chose "Francis" as his name as pope. This would serve as a signal that he as pope was to serve the poor. Shortly into his pontificate, he retrospectively construed a narrative about the origin of the election him as the new pope that proved to be influential. The Argentinian gave the impression that the election of him in the

<sup>84</sup> On the silence of the martyrs in Santo Domingo in 1992 see Jon Sobrino, "The Winds in Santo Domingo," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond: Documents and Commentaries from the Fourth General Conference of Latin American Bishops*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1993), 178–80.

<sup>85</sup> John W. O'Malley, *Catholic History for Today's Church: How Our Past Illuminates Our Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2015), 69.

<sup>86</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Rome & Francis of Assisi: A New Springtime for the Church*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2014), 47.

<sup>87</sup> The author's translation. Pedro Trigo, "El Papa Francisco, Expresión Actualizada Del Vaticano II," *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 97 (2016): 7.

college of cardinals was not the result of a successful campaign for promotion or career move, but rather the consequence of a divine call— made in the name of the poor:

During the election, I was sitting next to the Archbishop Emeritus of Sao Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a good friend. When things started to move in a dangerous direction, he comforted me. When the votes reached the two thirds, there was the usual applause, because I had been elected. Then, he hugged, kissed, and told me: “Do not forget the poor!” That word made an impact on me: the poor, the poor. Immediately, I thought of Francis of Assisi in relation to the poor.<sup>88</sup>

Pope Francis would interpret this option of the poor through symbolic acts such as refusing to live in the papal palace, washing the feet of prisoners on Maundy Thursday during Easter or planning papal visits to places associated with social exclusion (The island Lampedusa in Italy or Ciudad Juárez in Mexico). Nevertheless, Pope Francis’ particular concern for the poor or his successful mediations of this church of the poor could hardly be explained by the influence of liberation theology. It rather illustrated how “the preferential option for the poor” could be shared by adherents and opponents to liberation theology alike since its meaning could be interpreted in multiple ways, ranging from traditional Christian charity work to modern political leftism. Moreover, Pope Francis’ vision and staging of the church for the poor could be considered as an expression of a broad Catholic tradition of concern for the poor, expressed in official papal teaching such as *Mater et magistra* (1961) or *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975).<sup>89</sup> Pope Francis’ admiration for the latter text has been expressed in sayings like “*Evangelii Nuntiandi* is the greatest pastoral postconciliar document”.<sup>90</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) is also a document where Pope Paul VI’s warnings against politicized or ideological misuses of the Christian and salvation motif of “liberation” is expressed without the hostility or polemical tone of Pope John Paul II at the 1979 Puebla meeting.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio has never been very explicit or elaborated much on his view on liberation theology. As an Archbishop, he subscribed to the Uruguayan professor Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour’s (1944-) criticism of liberation theology as at times too ideological and too violent for the Catholic church to tolerate. In his preface to Carriquiry Lecour’s 2005 book *Una apuesta por América Latina*, the archbishop of Buenos Aires he expresses his sympathies for the vision in the book for an authentic culture in Latin America marked by Christian evangelization that is threatened by ideologies that are foreign to this culture.<sup>91</sup> Carriquiry Lecour elaborates further on this opposition in the book and criticizes theology of liberation as a secularizing theology

<sup>88</sup> Ernesto Cavassa, “On the Trail of Aparecida,” *America Magazine*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/trail-aparecida>.

<sup>89</sup> In *Mater et magistra* (1961) Pope John XXIII had stated that he felt a “profound sadness” since he had himself witnessed “a wretched spectacle indeed—great masses of workers who, in not a few nations, even in whole continents, receive too small a return for their labor”. Himes et al., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, 207.

<sup>90</sup> The author’s translation. Reyes Alcaide, *Papa Francisco. Latinoamérica: Conversaciones Con Hernán Reyes Alcaide*, 108.

<sup>91</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “Prólogo,” in *Una Apuesta Por América Latina : Memoria Y Destino Históricos De Un Continente*, ed. Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamerica, 2005).

that imposes unwanted ideologies on the church. This rather general view on liberation theology coheres well with the utterances made by the same Bergoglio in the 2010 interview with Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin.<sup>92</sup> Here, Bergoglio affirms that there were theologians of liberation that went down the wrong path. The major preoccupation for the poor that were seen in the 1960 provided a fertile ground for any ideology to enter. Nevertheless, this danger of ideological infiltration that was evident in these mistakes of liberation theologians disappeared gradually as the conscience about the richness of popular religiosity in Latin America grew. Moreover, Bergoglio emphasizes in the interview that there were thousands of pastoral agents, priests as well as lay people, that committed themselves to the option for the poor in the way that the Catholic church desired that they do. The archbishop is also careful to emphasize that for the church should not engage in partisan or party-based politics, but in the wide-ranging politics that arises from the commandments and the gospel.<sup>93</sup>

As a pope, however, Bergoglio has expressed few opinions about liberation theology. He has not, like his predecessor, acted as an intellectual that engages openly with theoretical ideas or academic interlocutors. As a Catholic world leader, Bergoglio acts more as a priest than as a professor. Therefore, his approach is pastoral rather than doctrinal. And when asked for his opinion about liberation theology, as a pope Bergoglio has answered in a way that indicates that he wants to evade controversies on the matter:

Dominique Wolton: Do you think that the reinforcement of inequalities within the context of globalization gives a boost to liberation theology?

Pope Francis: I'd rather not talk about the liberation theology of the 1970s, because that's something specific to Latin America...<sup>94</sup>

The reason for refusing to reflect further on the topic raised by the interviewer is somewhat elusive. At the outset, the fact that liberation theology is specific to a region and belongs to the past is not a convincing reason for not wanting to reflect on it. And when Pope Francis is yet again asked about liberation theology in the same interview book, the pope limits himself to stating that “[l]iberation theology has a partial aspect, in the good sense, but also in the bad sense.”<sup>95</sup> Then the pope once again evaluates the Marxist interpretation of liberation theology as bad. Interestingly, he points out that there were various understandings of liberation theology “after the French movement of May 1968,” which leaves the impression of impulses or inclinations to interpret liberation theology in Marxist terms as something coming from outside of Latin America. Similar to the impression created by his foreword to Carriquiry Lecour's 2005 book, the pope answers as if this Marxist interpretation is the result of an infiltration of an ideology that is foreign to the Latin American church. And so, implicit here is an authentic Latin American faith against an inauthentic ideology from Europe. Although the pope does not say it explicitly, the logic embedded in his reflection seems to be that there is room for an authentic liberation theology cleaned of Marxist

<sup>92</sup> Rubin and Ambrogetti, *El Papa Francisco : Conversaciones Con Jorge Bergoglio*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

<sup>94</sup> Francis and Wolton, *A Future of Faith : The Path of Change in Politics and Society*, 51.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

contaminations. In the case of Gustavo Gutiérrez we saw how purified his liberation theology of 2004 had become in comparison to his 1978 essay. It had become a sort of sanitized version of it, worthy of recognition from a conservative pillar of the college of cardinals, Gerhard Ludwig Müller, a man that in 2012 was to be appointed by pope Benedict XVI as the cornerstone of Catholic orthodoxy as the head of the CDF. Pope Francis' relation to Gutiérrez exemplifies, among other gestures, the Argentinian pope's ecclesial politics towards the movement of liberation theology.

First, through the gesture of inviting the “father” of liberation theology to a public audience in the Vatican a few months into his pontificate, Pope Francis signaled willingness to dialogue with the once so controversial theologian.<sup>96</sup> On his papal visit to Peru in 2018, the pope had scheduled another meeting with Gutiérrez and in 2019 the Pontifical Commission for Latin America invited the Peruvian theologian to the symbolically important conference at the occasion of 40 years since the Puebla conference. Gutiérrez was the preferred speaker on the conference together with some of the pope's closest collaborators, such as the mentioned Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour, Juan Carlos Scannone, and Carlo María Galli.<sup>97</sup> None of them are considered as liberation theologians and Scannone has profiled himself as a representative of the “theology of the people.” Being entrusted the task of interpreting the theological significance of the Puebla meeting at a conference arranged by the Vatican, Gutiérrez had surely not been called to Rome for interrogation. He had obtained official recognition by the Vatican and the impression was left that Pope Francis had reconciled himself with Gutiérrez' revised version of liberation theology. Although there is no official record of it, the story Leonardo Boff tells about being contacted by Pope Francis and encouraged to send material for the elaboration of the *Laudato Si* encyclical, is another gesture that signals reconciliation.<sup>98</sup> In one sense, the impression left by the official involvement of Boff in drafting a papal encyclical indicates an even stronger willingness to solve the long conflict between the Vatican and the liberation theologians. After all, Boff was unlike Gutiérrez silenced for 1 year and decided to leave priesthood. The publicity of Boff's conflict with the Vatican has been much higher than in the case of Gutiérrez.

Second, the power to lift sanctions against a suspended Catholic priest is another instrument a pope possesses to signal closeness or distance to a person that once entered priesthood, like the liberation theologians. The lifting of such sanctions is an authorization that can signal interest in dialogue, community, and even reconciliation. Instead of upholding sanctions or denouncing the controversial actions once made in the past by the liberation theologian Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann (1933–2017), pope Francis decided in August 2014 to end the suspension of the Nicaraguan priest. Pope John Paul II laid the suspension on d'Escoto Brockmann more than 30 years ago.<sup>99</sup> D'Escoto Brockmann had been suspended for his disloyalty to the canon law from 1983 that forbids clerics in the Catholic church from assuming public offices. He served as a foreign minister in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua from 1979 until

<sup>96</sup> Valley, *Pope Francis : Untying the Knots : The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, 143.

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.americalatina.va/content/americalatina/es/articulos/congreso-internacional-a-los-cuarenta-anos-de-la-conferencia-de.html> Accessed 31.03.21.

<sup>98</sup> For Boff's story see <https://leonardoboff.org/2020/01/27/dos-papas-two-types-of-man-two-models-of-the-church/> Accessed 31.03.21.

<sup>99</sup> Valley, *Pope Francis : Untying the Knots : The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, 143.

1990, but asked the Vatican for permission to say Mass a few years before he died. In February 2019, the Vatican also allowed the liberation theologian and poet Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020) to celebrate Mass. Cardenal had been suspended for the same reason as d'Escoto Brockmann, serving as a Minister in the Sandinista government after the revolution in Nicaragua in 1979. Given the international repercussion of Cardenal as one of the icons of liberation theology, it was yet another decision that signaled Pope Francis' reconciliation with his former opponents in the church.

Third, through his politics of canonization, Pope Francis has signaled an approximation to liberation theology and recognition of some of its key figures never seen before on part of the Vatican in this area of ecclesial politics since the rise of liberation theology in the 1960s. It took just one month before Vatican officials, most likely with the permission of the pope, announced that Pope Francis had decided to “unblock” the canonization process of Archbishop Óscar Romero. Ever since the assassination of the Archbishop of San Salvador in March 1980, liberation theologians had called for an official recognition of Romero's martyrdom. What is more, many of them considered it a scandal that an Archbishop who died for the sacred cause of the liberation of the poor was denied a regular canonization process in the church. The liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, for instance, expressed incomprehensibility on the matter and did not accept the explanations that were sometimes given from formal authorities in the Catholic church, that a recognition of Romero's sainthood would cause conflicts in the church or that canon law required more caution in this case.<sup>100</sup> Pope Francis has surely not limited the canonization processes during his pontificate to figures linked to liberationist Christianity. Moreover, there was another dimension to the sainthood of Archbishop Óscar Romero that could not be reduced to the interpretations of his life and death given by liberation theologians. The cult around Archbishop Romero was also an expression of a less theologically articulated and more popular form of Catholicism practiced among wider parts of the Catholic population in Central America than those who identified themselves with liberation theology.<sup>101</sup> That said, the pope could hardly have been unaware of the recognition of some of the legacy of Latin American liberation theology caused by his papal authorization of the initial opening of the canonization process in 2013, the beautification decision in 2015, and the final sanctification in 2018. It is hard to imagine a symbolic gesture on the pope's part that would have greater potential at improving the relations between the Vatican and liberation theologians than the canonization of Óscar Romero as an official saint in the Catholic church. The unblocking of the canonization process of the Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Câmara (1909–1999) made public in 2015 and the beautification of the Argentinian bishop Enrique Angelelli (1923–76) in 2018 are decisions taken by Pope Francis that contain similar symbolic meaning, but the symbolic weight of the case of Romero is undoubtedly unique in postconciliar Catholicism in Latin America and for global Catholicism of the twentieth century.

<sup>100</sup> Sobrino, “The Winds in Santo Domingo,” 179.

<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Contemporary Popular Catholicism in Latin America” in *The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America*, ed. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston, and Stephen C. Dove (New York: Cambridge University Press 2016).



## Pope Francis: Rejects Aspects of Liberation Theology<sup>5</sup> and Appropriates Others

Liberation theology can be understood as a series of attempts to radicalize the Social Doctrine of the Catholic church for the cause of the poor. Likewise, the intellectuals of the movement also sought to reformulate theological disciplines like Christology. Through a postconciliar return to the sources of Scripture and tradition, liberation theologians contributed to new readings of the Gospels in particular that were more attuned to modern biblical criticism. Pope Francis tends to emphasize the role of the theology of the people when confronted with the question the Latin American sources of his theology.<sup>102</sup> Although there is obviously some truth to this (also because the borders between theology of the people and liberation theology are blurred),<sup>103</sup> what we encounter in Pope Francis' discourse appears to be a negotiation of the legacy of liberation theology. Through this negotiation, some elements characteristic to Latin American liberation theology are rejected by the pontiff while others are appropriated and integrated into the papal discourse without explicitly referring to the liberation theologians.

What seems to be clearly rejected by Pope Francis is the reliance of Marxist philosophy in theology and the embrace of a vaguely defined "socialism." On his first journey as pope to Latin America, to Brazil in 2013, Pope Francis warned the CELAM leadership in ways reminiscent of Ratzinger's 1984 Instruction. The Argentinian reiterated the warning from his predecessors of reducing the gospel to an ideology and made it clear that this was a particular danger when applying the see-judge-act methodology, without mentioning that this has been a cornerstone of liberation theology. By describing one of the ways of making an ideology of the gospel as "sociological reductionism," the pope could also reaffirm the decades long resistance in the Vatican to any form of Marxism:

This is the most readily available means of making the message an ideology. At certain times it has proved extremely influential. It involves an interpretative claim based on a hermeneutics drawn from the social sciences. It extends to the most varied fields, from market liberalism to Marxist categorization.<sup>104</sup>

Pope Francis is eager to distance himself from any ideology and to criticize different models for politics, whether it is economic liberalism or Marxism.<sup>105</sup> His theology

<sup>102</sup> See for instance Francis and Wolton, *A Future of Faith: The Path of Change in Politics and Society*, 187–88.

<sup>103</sup> Rafael Luciani, "Lo Opción Teológico-Pastoral Del Papa Francisco," *Perspectiva teológica* 48, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>104</sup> Pope Francis, "Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America During the General Coordination Meeting, Sumaré Study Center, Rio De Janeiro, Sunday, 28 July 2013," [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130728\\_gmg-celam-rio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-celam-rio.html).

<sup>105</sup> "Ideology" does never receive the positive content that the Puebla document sometimes gives it. In Pope Francis' discourse "ideology" is always something the believer should avoid. See Pope Francis' warnings in "Meeting with Representatives of Civil Society. León Condou Stadium, Colegio San José, Asunción (Paraguay) Saturday, 11 July 2015," [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150711\\_paraguay-societa-civile.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150711_paraguay-societa-civile.html). The pope calls for "a non-ideological ethics". §57 in "Evangelii Gaudium," [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

serves primarily to delegitimize political powers and ideologies, not to legitimize concrete new policies. Like the 2004 version of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Pope Francis consistently avoids the use of “proletariat” or “class” and he seldom speaks of “oppressors”.<sup>106</sup> Like Gutiérrez, he prefers “the poor,” “the excluded,” or “the marginalized” used in ways that are free from connotations of class struggle. The viewpoint of Pope Francis as leftist,<sup>107</sup> or the impression of the pope as more critical of the political right than the left, is misguided. This impression is partly due to the post-cold war context in which the pope addresses social concerns for the poor and where capitalism is the dominant economic reality. In this sense, Pope Francis stands firmly in the tradition of the Social Doctrine of the church, building on Pope John Paul II’s fierce criticism of capitalism before and after the fall of the Berlin wall.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, this papal criticism of capitalism gained actuality in Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in veritate* from 2009, written in the aftermath of 2008 financial crisis. So what is the Latin American effect on the papacy after 2013 with regard to this particular topic?

*Evangelii Gaudium* probably remains the most programmatic document for Pope Francis’ papacy. In this apostolic exhortation from 2013, the traditional Catholic anticapitalism, expressed through the Argentinian’s predecessors, receives notably Latin American marks. Here, the pope draws connections between the realities of economic inequalities and deaths of the poor on one hand, and the idolatry of money and the literally deadly logic of the market economy on the other:

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills... The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. *Ex* 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings.<sup>109</sup>

The Brazilian scholar of religion, Allan da Silva Coelho, has pointed out that while Pope Francis’ predecessors spoke of an idolatry of money they never connected this grave sin directly to the function or logic of market economy.<sup>110</sup> Here, the traditional criticism of capitalism from the social doctrine of the Catholic church is articulated as a denouncement of a practice of idolatry attested to in the Bible. Never before has the criticism been accentuated in this way by a pope, who also speaks of a “deified market”

<sup>106</sup> There is one exception to this, on a very general level, in Francis and Wolton, *A Future of Faith : The Path of Change in Politics and Society*, 187.

<sup>107</sup> For instance in Neumayr, *Political Pope - How Pope Francis Is Delighting the Liberal Left and Abandoning Conservatives*.

<sup>108</sup> For instance, in his encyclical *Centesimus annus* where the Polish anticommunist pope denounces “a radical capitalist ideology” reflected in a government “blindly entrusts their solution to the free development of the market forces”. Himes et al., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, 467.

<sup>109</sup> §53 and §55 in Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*”.

<sup>110</sup> Allan Silva Coelho, “A Idolatria E O Papa Francisco: Radicalidade Na Crítica Ao Capitalismo,” *Estudos de religião* 33, no. 1 (2019): 216-19.

that “become the only rule”.<sup>111</sup> In this way, modern market economy becomes absolutized in a way that effectively kills in the form of social exclusion. As liberation theologians would say, it kills the poor that dies before their time. When the pope states that “our challenge is not so much atheism as the need to respond adequately to many people’s thirst for God,” the resemblance of liberation theology becomes clearer. A liberation theologian like Jon Sobrino has called for a focus on idolatry rather than atheism as the real threat of the poor and therefore of the church. The denouncement of idolatry is more biblical and more relevant to the sinful state of the world, according to Sobrino.<sup>112</sup> In a notable contrast to Benedict XVI, and in reminiscence of liberation theology, Pope Francis focuses on idolatry at the expense of atheism.

In 1998, a group of Argentinians Jesuits close to the current pope published an anthology with theological and ethical perspectives on market economy and neoliberalism. Among the editors was the theologian of the people, Juan Carlos Scannone. It is noteworthy that the concept of the idolatry of the market operative in Pope Francis’ discourse does not figure in the book.<sup>113</sup> But it does indeed figure in the DEI school of liberation theology of the 1990s, as also pointed to by Allan da Silva Coelho.<sup>114</sup> In works of the mentioned liberation theologians of this school, an innovative theological analysis of the inherent logic of a laissez-faire market economy is formulated. It is not absorbed by the theology of the Aparecida document of 2007 but it seems to have left its marks on Pope Francis’ accentuation of Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis’ view of an absolutization and divinization of the market that literally kills resembles the sacrificial logic of the idolatry of the market detected by the DEI school in the 1990s. Hence, the denunciative aspect of liberation theology proves to be attractive to a pope ready to denounce economic injustice without embracing a concrete model as alternative to it.<sup>115</sup>

Pope Francis takes a step further in his interpretation of the social teaching in the church with his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*. In this text, the denunciative tone of negative effects of the market economy is extended to the theme of ecology. It is a document that is structured with the methodology of the see-judge-act-scheme. Moreover, the intimate link between the cause of the poor and the protection of the environment reminiscent of the 1990s ecologically oriented liberation theology is fundamental to the argument. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that an allusion to the book of title Leonardo Boff’s book *Ecology. Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* from 1995 is commonly heard in the document’s paragraph 49:

Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on

<sup>111</sup> §56 in Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*”.

<sup>112</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Jesucristo Liberador : Lectura Histórico-Teológica De Jesús De Nazaret*, 4 ed. (Madrid: Trotta, 1991), 235-50.

<sup>113</sup> Juan Carlos Scannone and Gerardo Remolina Vargas, *Ética Y Economía: Economía De Mercado, Neoliberalismo Y Ética De La Gratuidad* (Buenos Aires: Bonum, 1998).

<sup>114</sup> Coelho, “A Idolatria E O Papa Francisco: Radicalidade Na Crítica Ao Capitalismo,” 206–07.

<sup>115</sup> «Socialism» or «welfare state» are not common terms in Pope Francis’ discourse, which overall leaves little indication of what kind of society the Catholic church is calling for. Nevertheless, there are some indications that the Pope calls for more state regulations of the economy. “The liberal market economy is madness. The state needs to regulate a little bit.” Francis and Wolton, *A Future of Faith : The Path of Change in Politics and Society*, 68.

the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.<sup>116</sup>

In Pope Francis' official genealogy, the turn to ecology in the Catholic theology that led to the production of *Laudato Si* took place at the Aparecida meeting in 2007.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the shift in Latin American Catholic theology with regard to ecology occurred already in the 1990s liberation theology. It is highly likely that there were influential bishops present at the 2007 CELAM meeting in Aparecida familiar with the ecological theology of the Brazilian liberation theologians Leonardo Boff and Ivone Gebara.<sup>118</sup> While environmental concerns seem to have had a lasting impact on official Catholic teaching in Latin America, Gebara's liberationist feminism has been neglected and even actively resisted by Latin American bishops such as the current pope.

## Conclusion

The conflict between liberation theology and Rome seems to have been solved through the charismatic enactment of the church of the poor in the person of Pope Francis, but also through the adjustments of the theology of various actors. In the post-cold war era, Jorge Mario Bergoglio is confronted by the overwhelming reality of poverty and dominance of capitalism in a world where Communism is no longer a threat and Marxism no more attractive to intellectuals in the church. But interestingly, Pope Francis absorbs elements from new directions taken within liberation theology in the 1990s, such as the theological criticism of neoliberal market ideology and the ecotheology. This new approximation to the figures and the thought of liberation theology takes place after substantial self-criticism has been made on part of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, attuned to the 1984 Instruction and other forms of criticisms of liberation theology in the church, in particular in relation to Marxism.

Jon Sobrino is one of the few profiled liberation theologians that has not only praised Pope Francis but also made some of his criticism public. Sobrino admits having been positively surprised by a person that within the Jesuit Society was known for his controversial role as provincial in Argentina during the 1970s. Sobrino credits Pope Francis for his compassion for the victims and for the canonization of Óscar Romero. Nonetheless, he notes that the tone in the theology of the pope is quite traditional and without a historical-critical awareness of the biblical texts. This lack of historical awareness is reflected in the Christology and martyrology of the Aparecida document, which Bergoglio had a key role in the final editing of. The Aparecida document does not insist on the historical conflicts that led to the execution of Jesus and of the Latin American martyrs of the twentieth century (such as Archbishop Romero). It alludes to the martyrdom, as if it had a value in and of itself, according to Sobrino.<sup>119</sup> While Sobrino does not

<sup>116</sup> Francis, "Laudato Si".

<sup>117</sup> Reyes Alcaide, *Papa Francisco. Latinoamérica: Conversaciones Con Hernán Reyes Alcaide*, 95.

<sup>118</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Teología Ecofeminista: Ensaio Para Repensar O Conhecimento E a Religião* (São Paulo: Olho d'Água, 1997).

<sup>119</sup> Jon Sobrino and Charo Mármol, *Conversaciones Con Jon Sobrino: A Cargo De Charo Marmol* (Madrid: PPC, 2018), 304–06.

mention it explicitly, this criticism could apply to the way that Pope Francis decided to canonize a martyr like Óscar Romero. Pope Francis' sermon on that day was free of allusions to any of the historical contexts that gave rise to the conflicts that led to the assassination of Romero.<sup>120</sup> The official hagiography of a victim of such a dense moment in the history of Latin American Christianity was limited in scope and content. Some would even say that it was poor in spite of the rich memory in Latin America of Romero's martyrdom.

The claim that Pope Francis is some sort of a political leftist seems greatly exaggerated. In light of the critical appraisal of some elements of liberation theology, Pope Francis appears more of a figure of a selective integration of symbols and groups connected to the liberation theology movement. He is not so much one of them as a figure of reconciliation between formerly oppositional groups within Latin American Catholicism. The post-Cold War context makes his approximation to liberation theology less controversial and his liberationist accentuation of traditional Catholic anticapitalism more understandable, particularly when he connects it to the deterioration of the environment.

Through headlines in the media and some rather uncritical works, Pope Francis has gained a reputation as a radical reformer and even as a revolutionary pope.<sup>121</sup> But it is unlikely that the Catholic church has been governed by a revolutionary pope for the past eight years. The solved conflict with liberation theologians does not confirm such portrayals. Pope Francis does not call for any of the sort of political revolutions that some liberation theologians agitated for (and even participated in) in the 1960s and 1970s. The pope's theological rhetoric is mostly denunciative of the economic and political status quo without any embrace of a revolutionary alternative.

Pope Francis is sometimes compared to Pope John XXIII, based on the warm and human charisma and pastoral orientation of both.<sup>122</sup> With time, it will become clear which of them that proved to be most influential in the history of the Catholic church. The decision of Pope John XXIII to convoke a council and announce that it would be a council of *aggiornamento* rather than condemnation in the typical anti-modernist fashion of the past proved to be historical. But Pope John XXIII did not write the drafts, nor did he control the votes of radical documents of Vatican II. Moreover, if one were to look for a revolution in the Catholic papacy, perhaps one should look to Pope Benedict XVI rather than Pope Francis. It may be the case that not one single action taken by Pope Francis so far can be said to surpass the radicalism of Pope Benedict XVI's decision to abdicate as pope in 2013—a decision we have yet to realize the full historical consequences of.

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<sup>120</sup> Pope Francis, "Holy Mass and Canonization of the Blessed: Paolo Vi, Oscar Romero, Francesco Spinelli, Vincenzo Romano, Maria Caterina Kasper, Nazaria Ignazia Di Santa Teresa Di Gesù, Nunzio Sulprizio. St Peter's Square Sunday, 14 October 2018," [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181014\\_omelia-canonizzazione.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181014_omelia-canonizzazione.html).

<sup>121</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the making of a radical pope* (New York: Holt, 2014).

<sup>122</sup> O'Malley, *Catholic History for Today's Church: How Our Past Illuminates Our Present*, 71.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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