

Prayer and Engagement as the Basis of Theology

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Whereas in traditional (Western) European approaches theology usually precedes practice – despite the well-known principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* – many contextual theologians (not just in Latin America) have effected an epistemological breach, turning practice into the first act of such theology. They point out that theology must not be divorced from action but that the Word of God must be interpreted in relation to the reality of one's own situation.³¹ Although practice primarily means engagement in a present-day situation, it is nevertheless the practice of a life of faith and as such inseparably connected with the practice of prayer: "The Christian life as an affirmation of the gift of the Kingdom of God is not just a task, but it also involves prayer. There can be no life of faith without a contemplative dimension."³² It should follow that theology comes further down the line, although without being secondary, and only then should a person adopt a reflected spirituality as a possible form of discipleship.

The relationship between theology and spirituality

This epistemological breach, however, is not a breach with the entire theological tradition. Rather, such theologians can trace their roots to a very important tradition where a reflection upon faith follows a spiritual perspective, as expressed in a famous dictum by Anselm of Canterbury: "I believe in order to have insight", and which continued to prevail until the Middle Ages. However, from the

³¹ Cf. Final declaration of the founding conference of the EATWOT in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1976, in: Herausgefordert durch die Armen – Dokumentation der Ökumenischen Vereinigung von Dritte-Welt-Theologen 1976-1986, Freiburg i.Br. 1990, 43f. On this epistemological breach see: Küster, V., Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie, Göttingen 2011, 55-63.

³² Gutiérrez, G., Theologie der Befreiung, with a new introduction by the author and a new foreword by Johann Baptist Metz, Mainz 1992, 36.

14th century onwards, there has been a separation of theology and spirituality which has benefited neither of the two. "Discourse on faith corresponds to the Christian life of the Church and finds its meaning within it. Any speculation that does not help a person towards life in the Spirit is not Christian theology. And so the fact remains: any true theology is also spiritual theology."³³ Theology is critical reflection of practice and is founded on it; it does not form the basis of practice as can be observed in Europe at times. Ultimately, what is seen as foundational to Christian theology is an encounter with Christ as the starting point for one's spiritual experience. This makes it possible to obtain freedom in an all-embracing sense and gives meaning to it. As such an encounter always takes place in a specific context (in time, in history, etc); it is essential not simply to import spirituality from other contexts but "to drink from one's own sources", as Gutiérrez puts it in his reflections on Bernard of Clairvaux, i.e. our basis must be our own encounter with Christ. Both in the past and the present, the many efforts of people in Latin America to achieve liberation have always been times of solidarity, prayer and martyrdom – "a place of experience that leads to a new way to live one's life as a Christian and thus a new spirituality. This is the characteristic feature of our theology, backed by the entire spiritual wealth of the Latin American Church."³⁴

Based on Matthew 25:31-46, an encounter with Christ and the main characteristics of discipleship are seen as manifesting themselves in a life of fellowship with the poor and in working with them and for them. This results in the Gospel-inspired practice of solidarity and liberation which aims to change history and thus to usher in God's Kingdom. Engagement in the process of liberation – resulting from an awakening of the poor in Latin America – is therefore based on an essentially spiritual foundation. It acquires a theological dignity whenever the spiritual life of such Christians precedes their theology and whenever

³³ Gutiérrez, G., *Aus der eigenen Quelle trinken – Spiritualität der Befreiung*, Mainz 1986, 46.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, op.cit., 47. This reference to the people in one's theological understanding puts the focus on the community, so that the "de-privatisation of the subject of understanding" becomes the central epistemological element in liberation theology. (Fornet-Betancourt, R., "Hören auf das Volk" – Theologische Methode oder ideologisches Programm – Überlegungen zur Denkstruktur der lateinamerikanischen Befreiungstheologie", in: *ibid.*, Philosophie und Theologie der Befreiung, Frankfurt am Main 1988, 31-45 and 41.) See also the articles by Martin Maier and Giulio Girardi in: Fornet-Betancourt, R., (ed.), *Befreiungstheologie: Kritischer Rückblick und Perspektiven für die Zukunft*, Vol. II: Kritische Auswertung und neue Herausforderungen, Mainz 1997, 11-24 and 25-44.

it becomes the object of their theology. And so, according to Ellacuría, it is more appropriate to translate the “poor in spirit” in the Sermon on the Mount as “the poor with the Spirit”, “i.e. the poor who accept their existing poverty with all its human and Christian potential from the perspective of God’s Kingdom”.³⁵ Based on a genuine reality of discipleship, on the experience in Latin America, on reading Scripture and indeed on reading the entire history of salvation in relation to the poor, the poor are a “theological place” because “they are the greatest, most scandalous, prophetic and apocalyptic presence of the Christian God and thus a privileged place of Christian practice and reflection”³⁶. In a Latin American context the poor are seen as the most important sign of the time, revealing the direction of God’s plan, effected through Jesus, and therefore having a deeply spiritual dimension and connecting spirituality and theology with one another.³⁷

Latin American spirituality is not a matter for a few minorities who might be restricted to monastic orders and congregations; neither does it primarily have the purpose of cultivating individual values in order to approach a personal ideal of perfection. Rather, it is a matter of active discipleship, of combining contemplation and action in a resurrection-based spirituality, of refusing to turn a blind eye on suppression and exploitation mechanisms. It means having the conviction that life will have the final word. “It is fed by the testimony of the Resurrection, when death died, and also by the struggle for liberation fought by the poor in their commitment to their inalienable right to life.”³⁸ The resulting form of discipleship makes it necessary to receive from God the spiritual experience of the poor and to obey His will that all men must be enabled to live. The spirituality of liberation is nourished by the practice of liberation as experienced by Christians among the poor and the oppressed, so that it is closely connected with the faith and the religiosity of the people.³⁹

³⁵ Ellacuría, I., “Las bienaventuranzas, carta fundacional de la Iglesia de los pobres”, in: *ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, San Salvador 2000, 416-437 and 436f. (translation via German).

³⁶ Ellacuría, I., „Die Armen als „theologischer Ort“ in Lateinamerika“, in: *ibid.*, *Eine Kirche der Armen – Für ein prophetisches Christentum*, Freiburg i.Br. et al. 2011, 201-217 and 208.

³⁷ Cf. Lateinamerikanische Bischofskonferenz, *Die Kirche in der gegenwärtigen Umwandlung Lateinamerikas im Lichte des Konzils*, Dokument der II. Generalkonferenz des lateinamerikanischen Episkopats in Medellín 1968, chapter: „Pastoral der Führungsschichten“, No. 13.

³⁸ Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, 38f.

³⁹ Cf. Gutiérrez, G., *Die historische Macht der Armen*, Munich 1984, 78.

The spiritual experience of the people

The epistemological breach, mentioned above, shows itself particularly clearly in the treatment of the spiritual experience of the poor, e.g. in recognising the evangelistic potential of the poor, "as it continually confronts the Church with questions by calling upon it to repent"⁴⁰ (Puebla 1979). In one's own practice, however, it is not just a matter of accepting the questioning and the challenges that go with this call for repentance, but of genuinely living among the poor. "Unless one lives in friendship with the poor and shares one's life with them, there can be no genuinely liberating practice, as love is only possible between equals."⁴¹ This also means that we must not deny them our own spiritual development which we have experienced, so that the new form of discipleship can receive its strength from the sources of the Bible and from our spiritual traditions. Biblically, we must particularly emphasise the Exodus experience of the Jewish people, i.e. "breaking with death (which stands for slavery and hardship), approaching Yahweh and repenting in the midst of His people"⁴² – a decision which must be repeatedly affirmed and reinforced, so that the totally new situation of freedom and justice can become a genuine reality for everyone. The Bible passage which is seen as being of major importance is Matthew 25:31-46 (about the sheep and the goats), where a person's treatment of the poor is equated with their behaviour towards Christ. Many Latin American Christians see their experience summed up in the Magnificat: "The joy about the presence of God's love widens one's heart so that we are full of gratitude and care for others. In this way the Magnificat combines trust in and dedication to God with the desire to engage with and be close to his favourite children, i.e. the humble and the hungry."⁴³ The main characteristics of a Latin American spirituality that arises from one's care for the poor and for the oppressed are solidarity and the need for repentance, though also an experience of God's unmerited love and joy in contrast to situations of suffering, as well as one's spiritual childhood through active engagement against inhumane

⁴⁰ Lateinamerikanische Bischofskonferenz, *Die Evangelisierung Lateinamerikas in Gegenwart und Zukunft*, Dokument der III. Generalkonferenz des lateinamerikanischen Episkopats in Puebla 1979, No. 1147.

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 36.

⁴² Gutiérrez, *Aus der eigenen Quelle trinken. Spiritualität der Befreiung*, op. cit., 84.

⁴³ Gutiérrez, op. cit., 140.

poverty and, ultimately, the fellowship of the Church as opposed to the loneliness that comes from suspicion and imprisonment.⁴⁴ Prayer primarily has its place in an experience of the unmerited quality of God's love – that love without which there could be no contemplation and no move towards total dedication. It expresses an awareness that love and peace are ultimately gifts of God, yet without declaring one's own human endeavours as obsolete. "Prayer is an expression of faith and of trust in the Lord; it is an original and specific act of a believer. Prayer takes place within the context of God's love which, as we know, is essentially characterised by its unmerited nature."⁴⁵ This experience of unmerited grace leads to new forms of communication, particularly silence, which is so typical of prayer whenever words are no longer sufficient, as well as the language of the symbols used in the liturgy.

Although the modern mind might easily regard Latin American prayer as primitive or even superstitious at times and although such prayer combines some very diverse elements, it must not be seen as illegitimate. Such a view would be based on a superficial understanding. "Being deeply embedded in this popular piety and at the same time nourished by its potential for protest against oppression and its desire for freedom, the prayer life of the Christian churches engaged in the liberation process is full of extraordinary creativity and depth."⁴⁶ Puebla gives a similarly positive assessment of popular piety, as it promotes cross-fertilisation between the liturgy and popular piety, so that, on the one hand, the desire for prayer and charismatic renewal can be channelled along safe tracks. "On the other hand, popular religion with its great wealth of symbolism and expression can also add a creative force to the liturgy. If this force is defined correctly, it can serve the universal prayer of the Church by providing it with more and better access to our culture."⁴⁷ Both popular piety and the prayer of the individual are seen as evangelistic values that lead to comprehensive Christian liberation; one special expression of fellowship and of participation in such evangelisation is the liturgy. Although the prayer of the individual often arises from purely personal needs and

⁴⁴ Cf. Gutiérrez, *op.cit.*, 105-149; cf. *ibid.*, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 261-267.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *Aus der eigenen Quelle trinken. Spiritualität der Befreiung*, *op.cit.*, 122.

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 37. Cf. also in detail: Irarrázaval, D., *Cultura y fe latinoamericanas*, Santiago de Chile 1994; *ibid.*, *Rito y pensar cristiano*, Lima 1993.

⁴⁷ Puebla, No. 465e.

expresses itself in traditional forms, it is expressly associated with the call upon a Christian “to engage in morality, social engagement and evangelisation.”⁴⁸ Similarly, it is said about popular piety, whose expression must apparently respect cultural factors of the indigenous population, that it helps a person “to develop an awareness of their responsibility for their own destiny”⁴⁹ and that, over and above this, it will lead to a Christian lifestyle and to engagement.

The purpose of prayer is by no means to avoid the unpleasantness and hardship of everyday life or to escape into some kind of spiritualism. Rather, both celebration and prayer are focused on God who desires all men to live in fullness and in dignity. Whenever fellowship and an encounter with Christ are at the centre of prayer, such fellowship “must not shrink from the utmost pain of agony”⁵⁰ which showed itself in Jesus’ prayer on Gethsemane (Luke 22:45). Prayer and solidarity with the poor have become inseparable, and practice means a combination of prayer and engagement.

Prayer and engagement

This close relationship between contemplation and action has its equivalent in the well-known rule for life devised by Ignatius of Loyola and formulated in a paradox by Gábor Hevensis: “Trust in God as if success in all things depended on you and as if nothing depended on God, but do your utmost as if you could do nothing and God could do everything.”⁵¹ The point of this dialectical formulation is to express that we should not use our own capabilities and possibilities without an awareness that, ultimately, our success depends on God while at the same time not letting our great trust in God stop us from active engagement. In other words, “I have an important role to play, but things don’t depend on me.”⁵² An outstanding example of this spirituality was Oscar Romero who referred to this saying by Ignatius on several occasions and who saw the ultimate reason for the close relationship between contemplation and action in the incarnation of

⁴⁸ Puebla, No. 909.

⁴⁹ Puebla, No. 935.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 38.

⁵¹ Quoted in: Schönfeld, A., „Paradox der geistlichen Fruchtbarkeit – Ignatianisches Jahr 2006“, in: *Geist und Leben* 79 (2006) 1-10, 7.

⁵² Maier, M., *Oscar Romero – Kämpfer für Glaube und Gerechtigkeit*, Freiburg i.Br. et al. 2010, 144.

Christ. The unadulterated and inseparable connection between the two natures of Christ has its equivalent in the connection between human activity and the work of God, between nature and grace and between prayer and an active striving for justice. “Romero shows that spirituality has nothing to do with escapism or an esoteric approach, but that it is primarily about the lives of the poor. This spirituality can be summed up as follows: ‘God’s glory means that the poor person lives.’”⁵³

Like repentance and also solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, this requires us to have a certain stamina and unshakable persistence, based on a firm conviction of our cause, knowing what we want to achieve, putting our hope in the Lord and risking our lives for others. “Genuine, sound spirituality will prevent us from wavering in our engagement and in our Christian lives.”⁵⁴

Orthodoxy and orthopraxis

Prayer and spirituality therefore not only form the foundation of theology and engagement, but also secure both elements against opposition and can be recommended as a form of discipleship once our entire practice has been critically interpreted in the light of God’s Word. Orthopraxis and orthodoxy are inevitably and fruitfully connected with each other. “If anyone wanted to be content with only one of these, then the other would elude them. Orthopraxis and orthodoxy challenge one another, and either of them would be nothing without the other.”⁵⁵ The contribution of theology is precisely its critical reflection on the close relationship between engagement and prayer, i.e. Christian practice, and then, on this basis, talking about God. In view of the living conditions of most people (and in some sense everyone) in Latin America, the decisive theological and pastoral question continues to be: “How can we find an appropriate language about God in the face of the suffering and oppression that characterises the lives of the poor in Latin America?”⁵⁶ The required contextualisation of theology also includes entering into dialogue with the various cultures of the continent, supported by an under-

⁵³ Maier, Romero, 146.

⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *op.cit.*, Aus der eigenen Quelle trinken. Spiritualität der Befreiung, 117.

⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 41.

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 42. Cf. especially *ibid.*, Von Gott sprechen in Unrecht und Leid – Ijob, Munich 1988.

standing of theology as wisdom, as a direct experience of God, of the people and of the culture. This is where poetry has a major position as a privileged space for an expression of popular wisdom.⁵⁷ The dialogue between faith and culture in Latin America permits a productive dialogue with other contextual theologies and thus with the dimension of the universal Church. This dimension expresses itself not in standardisation or uniformity but in real-life solidarity and in discipleship, forming a fellowship that also manifests itself in people praying with one another. When theology has its starting point in the complex, real-life practice of the people in a given place, then it adopts a serious attitude towards the *sensus fidelium* of the people of God. "This understanding of faith arises from the sense of faith among the faithful who are involved in the basic ecclesial communities while at the same time being aware of their firm part within the community of the universal Church and pondering the Christian truths which they 'consider in their hearts through a deep understanding' arising from 'a spiritual experience' (Dei Verbum 8)."⁵⁸

As we saw above, we owe this experience to God's free and unmerited initiative – God's gratuitous impartation of self-revelation, expressed above all through the silence of prayer. Yet it must not be limited to that, as it takes place in the close relationship between prayer and engagement, thus confirming yet again the mutual relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis and the significance of the poor as a theological place: "The mystery of God must be received in prayer and in human solidarity; this is the moment of silence and of practice."⁵⁹ Such a view helps us to avoid two dangerously one-sided approaches: A spirituality detached from reality which runs the risk of not manifesting the grace-filled love of God in history, and a form of Christianity that is limited to political activism and which fails to

⁵⁷ Cf. Scannone, J. C., *Teología de la liberación y doctrina social de la iglesia*, Madrid 1987, 133-144.

⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, 44; cf. also Espín, O. O., *The Faith of the People. Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*, Maryknoll 1997, 63-90.

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, G., *Densidad del presente, Selección de artículos*, Lima 1996, 350, quoted in: Maier, M., "Spiritualität und Theologie im Werk von Gustavo Gutiérrez", in: Mariano Delgado et al. (eds.), *Blutende Hoffnung – Gustavo Gutiérrez zu Ehren*, Lucerne 2000, 54-66 and 56. "But the gift of God the Father Himself tells us when and how this gift can best be received. In the world of the poor it is received in a form of practice – praxis – that works towards the grand task of eliminating the sin of the world and thus the death of the world, so that the world and man will have life in abundance." (Ellacuría, I., *Espiritualidad*, in: *ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos* II, 47-57, 53, translated via German).

express the full character of justice. To put it positively, there must be a spirituality that is primarily expressed in one's life and deeds and is only then formulated in theoretical terms, a spirituality that has its incarnation in the flesh of the poor and oppressed and which can therefore be found just as much in the lives and songs of the poor as indeed in the celebrations of basic ecclesial communities. "It is a spirituality that combines the immanent with the transcendent, the individual with the community, liberation from structural sin with liberation from personal sin, freedom from evil and from malicious powers with the freedom of the children of God."⁶⁰

Again, we can see the contours of a theology of prayer from the perspective of Latin American liberation theology (though without being restricted to it): Prayer and the people's life of faith must take priority over theology. There must be a connection between contemplation and action, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, as expressed so aptly in the Magnificat.

⁶⁰ Ellacuría, I., "Aporte de la teología de la liberación a las religiones abrahámicas en la superación del individualismo y del positivismo", in: *ibid.*, *Escritos teológicos II*, 193-232, 222, translated from Maier: *Spiritualität*, 65.