Liberation Theology: Then and Now

Since my time in El Salvador (a year prior to my trip in Nicaragua) I have continuously been seeking how to integrate and bring together salvation and faith in Jesus Christ with the liberation and social justice that this implies. I came to Nicaragua with an understanding that Jesus can be viewed in many ways. One such way is seeing Jesus as liberator who calls us to participate in the changing of the social, political, cultural and ecclesial structures of our time. Another way of seeing Jesus is as lover, master, companion, etc who offers a personal relationship and requires fidelity, trust, vulnerability just like any other love relationship. I identified and still continue to strongly identify Jesus as my lover and companion whom I have entered into a relationship with and am walking with daily. All of this was nourished by my conversion experience senior year of high school. This was a very personal liberation from marijuana, drinking and sexual immorality in which I was invited and entered into discipleship and relationship with Christ. Being in El Salvador brought new ideas of the political and social liberation, the building of justice which many times call for a dramatic change in the current system. When I returned from El Salvador, my family had moved to Boise, Idaho. There in Boise, with dreams of starting a youth group which would focus on community scripture readings, social analysis and radical action, I met a group of conservative Christians as I worked at the biggest corporate restaurant chain in
America. They invited me to meet up with them for a Bible study, and a bit reluctantly I said yes. During the rest of the summer, I became extremely close with them, and they taught me a lot about the type of commitment, repentance, obedience, trust, purity and selflessness that it takes to walk in relationship with God and do His will. Over the course of my junior year at SLU, these ideas were confirmed, reshaped, deepened and questioned. I left to go to Nicaragua with a deep relationship and commitment to Christ and a brief and skeptical view of liberation theology.

Previous to my experience in Nicaragua, my understanding of liberation theology had mostly been shaped from the perspectives of fellow students, of whom I felt diminished the importance of being in relationship with Christ. Many times at SLU, I saw the more progressive Christians misuse the Bible as a way for their ideas and political ideologies and movements to gain credibility. I saw them completely ignore the call to repent and follow that Christ requires on a personal level. I saw a lack of prayer, lack of listening to God’s will, lack of commitment to and love for the Church, lack of moderation and awareness of alcohol consumption or sexual activity. I understood their desire to distinguish themselves from the more conservative Christians, who almost disconnect the relationship with Christ to social change; yet I thought that they went too far in claiming Christ as liberator that they would deny or ignore the other aspects and dimensions of what make up the fullness of walking with Christ. It is by being in this love relationship, like that of two spouses, that we are able to know how best to listen to how God moves and calls us, receive strength and guidance, and actually become the grace and love of God as we give our self to the project of building the Kingdom. We ask the God that is saving where God wants us, and offer all our actions in participation
in the Kingdom. In the *Book of Mev*, Dr. Chmiel states that “it is more important to act in God than talk about God” (Chmiel, 63). Full and holistic liberation must be rooted in our individual and communal action in communion with God.

We had our first class with Rafael Aragon, a Dominican priest who has been in Nicaragua for over 28 years, and I listened. I listened to him tell us how he accompanied peasants in biblical formation, directed a radio station and put out theological articles in his magazine called *Alternativas*. He claimed that the Church should be the prophetic voice that accompanies these social movements, informing it, deepening it and challenging it. In short, the church needs to call for repentance from sin: A critical voice that calls us away from the evil and injustice of this world, found in all levels from personal sin to structural sin, and invites one towards the justice and love of God and to participate in bringing about His Kingdom.

Rafael Aragon continued to stress that liberation theology must have its origin in prayer and must bring together spirituality and mysticism with the reality of the poor and social and political struggle. Both of these are necessary and critical. Clodovis Boff claims that this spirituality comes before one’s commitment to the poor:

“The ultimate root of my spirituality isn’t a poor person. It’s not political, nor a new society, nor anything exterior. It’s a fire there inside! It’s an experience—a pulse of life—wherein I feel the touch of the Spirit! I think this spirituality comes before the option for the poor. I believe that this is pre-confessional, pre-political, pre-verbal. You in your deepest identity with God” (Puleo, 150).

Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga of Brazil understands this spiritual and mystical root of liberation theology when he states, “The contemplative life isn’t just important—it’s my whole life! I always say, the more radically we are revolutionaries, the more radically we should be contemplatives” (Puleo, 236). The true liberation theologians have always
understood the necessity for a deep interior, spiritual life filled with prayer and intimacy with God. I began discovering that true liberation theology is rooted in the spirituality of this relationship with Christ and God and that my acceptance of liberation theology in fact dives me deeper into the calling of this relationship.

Fr. Aragon also said that liberation theology must confront the issue of personal liberation, natural beauty, and the presence God apart from any reference to social structures and political movements. A friend of Clodovis Boff said to him, “Clodovis, may I make a criticism of liberation theology? It’s missing fragrance” (Puleo, 156). Liberation theology is so focused on structural sin, social analysis and communal liberation that it does not have the room to articulate the beauty of a mountain stream or to address the desire to be accepted in the community or to guide those yearnings for intimacy with God. The historical and structural focus can overlook the human’s spiritual, heavenly and mystical needs. Rubem Alves, one of Latin America’s best known Protestant theologians, criticizes that liberation theology doesn’t address the sense of loneliness or the personal and emotional experiences of a person:

“My feeling is that the liberation theology has to some extent unlearned the art of speaking directly to the very personal fears and anxieties—the fear of death, anxieties about the future, depression—because of its emphasis on sociological, political and economic criteria” (Puleo, 193).

We continued to have more theology classes. We went to the Nicaraguan Evangelical University and talked with a theologian named Carlos Ruiz. He mentioned that a big criticism was that liberation theology used Marxist philosophy and was a theological extension of his philosophy. He claimed that they studied Marx so that they could have better tools to do analysis and better tools to help build the Kingdom God. They in no way wanted to apply the philosophy of Marx, only extract the valuable tools
in hopes of constructing a more detailed analysis and potentially more life giving systems. One thing I noticed, not only with Fr. Aragon or Carlos Ruiz but with other Nicaraguan leaders, directors, community organizers, students and cooks is that they had a lot of dreams and great visions of the future. I realized that any good theology must have a great vision and hope: hope that things can and will change: excitement, anxiety and anticipation of the potential of change, of beauty, of greater being and greater life and greater promise. This vision must never be forgotten and never be overcome by pessimistic hopelessness or passionless realism. This believing and seeing and yearning and striving and panting after the Kingdom that is breaking through into our world must be infused with our theology and therefore infused with our Christian walk and love.

I felt like my hesitations about liberation theology were being addressed. The spirituality aspect was not only important but crucial, and it was not a “perfect” theology that could address all the needs and dimensions of human beings. It has tremendous value, and one that I continue to shape my life around. However, it doesn’t offer me the hermeneutical framework or theological language to address the personal, emotional and relational problems of my life. For that, I find other theologies or sources much more fruitful. I realized that it isn’t about having one theology or the other; theologies overlap and feed each other. My theology is a mezcla of evolutionary, liberation, and traditional theology, shaped by Leonardo Boff and Cardinal Ratzinger, the rosary and the protest, the Eucharistic adoration and the bus rides up to N. Saint Louis, the daily devotions and the meetings at the Center for Theology and Social Analysis, the classroom and the city dump. These all form my theology, which is neither conservative nor liberal, traditional nor progressive, but rather authentic to the path that I feel God invites me to, mature in
my experiencing a diversity of approaches, questions, doubts and actions and always
growing and seeking better integration and realization of living in, with and for God and
others.

*The Book of Mev* accompanied me through my study of liberation theology and
my time in Nicaragua and *The Red Thread* accompanied me after it. They both gave me
a framework in which to understand my sufferings, my frustrations and my desires
working with the poor. They also helped me understand that sharing life with the poor
isn’t always a romantic episode of God’s life springing forth and smashing the chains of
poverty, or pure identification with their struggle, or utilization of our skills and talents,
or acceptance and welcome. A true commitment to walking with the poor reveals our
own poverty, our own inability, and the crushing frustration and oppression of death.
This path becomes apparent whether we are just beginning or are on our way out.

Jennifer Atlee Loudon, who was a member of Witness’ for Peace during the
Nicaraguan Contra War and author of *The Red Thread*, upon coming to Nicaragua wrote,
“I want to DO something to overcome the powerlessness of BEing here. I am beginning
to see that being a WITNESS does not mean saving anyone. It means simply to be with,
accompany, and to tell the story” (Loudon, 34). Penny Lernoux’s continual conversion
with the poor is expressed when she says, “I who always wanted to be the champion of
the poor am just as helpless. I too must hold out my begging bowl; I must learn—am
learning—the powerlessness of Christ” (Chmiel, 93). And after Mev’s death, Father
John Kavanaugh gave a homily in which he said, “As her friends and family saw her
great relinquishment, their love was kindled all the more. They entered love’s
powerlessness, its pain, its joy, its happiness. In her death as in her life and labor, Mev
brought us more fully into the mystery of it all. Is there anyone who has ever led us more deeply into the poverty of the Cross?” (Chmiel, 326). As I spent more time visiting coffee cooperatives, Christian Base Communities and especially the Managua City Dump, I began to see that working with the poor means I join them in being powerless, and start to share the frustration and oppression and weakness. It is then that we become one, and we struggle together rather than me for them. This downward mobility is a critical way of being Christian. Liberation theology plunges us into the poor and our own poverty. It is from there that we as Christians must stand and struggle for “bread and Mozart” as Mev puts it in her poem, “Life Without Mozart” (Chmiel, 79).

All of this formation occurred during my time in Nicaragua. Yet what would happen when I returned to the United States? Would liberation theology, something that seemed so plausible and necessary in a poor Latin American country, have no room to be nourished and expressed in the United States? How to creatively live out liberation theology in the United States, in middle-class Boise, Idaho, and at the enclosed campus of Saint Louis University was the next challenge. Liberation theology attunes you to listen to those who cry out, understand why they are crying out, and do what you can to stop it. It makes you aware of your neighbors, your privilege, the racial, economic, military systems that perpetuate this injustice and pushes to you to act in whatever context you are in. Nearly all of the theologians, bishops and lay people in The Struggle is One emphasize being in solidarity with Latin American through immersion/solidarity trips and being responsible for the actions of our government toward these countries. Yet they also realize that liberation is needed wherever there is oppression and poverty. Leonardo Boff claims that, “to deepen your solidarity you must first discover within
yourselves what are the oppressions that oppress you? Who is crying out? From there, think of a strategy for listening to the crying out and change things so that people won’t need to cry out” (Puleo, 182). In her letter to Father Biondi, Mev brought up the questions of how SLU as a university could take this model of solidarity and accompaniment of the poor from the UCA and implement it here in Saint Louis. She understood that liberation theology is not just a Latin American phenomenon, but could also be lived out here in the United States. She suggests that we join in more dialogue with our local community and try to be a truly Christian university, a sign of God’s reign of justice, peace, dignity and compassion in the world (Chmiel, 217). She recommends inviting members of the UCA community to help SLU craft a vision for there university, she encourages us to be in dialogue with SLU alumni working with the poor in Saint Louis and are immersed in the reality of St. Louis and encourages listening sessions in which people from the community (East Saint Louis, North City, Midtown) are invited to speak about there reality (Chmiel, 217).

Though I have a meeting with the Chair of the Theology Department sometime soon to discuss these ideas on how the theology program could improve and I have helped lead SLUCAP Saturday’s St. Matt’s youth program for almost 4 years, my action has been on a much more personal level rather than working with SLU. Liberation theology gave me ideas of interdependence, common struggle and solidarity. Silvia Regina De Lima Silva states that “solidarity comes through a change in place—leaving where you are a bit. You have to move from a place of imperialism to the place of brother and sister, friendship and equality, recognizing each other’s truth” (Puleo, 113).
I have made the commitment this semester to be involved with the St. Matt’s parish community as well as De la Salle Middle School. Three to four days a week I take the bus up from Lindell and Sarah up past Martin Luther King Blvd to Kennerly Ave. I tutor an eighth grader named Kendrick, I run a basketball program for the kids on Wednesday, I run the youth Saturday morning program for the neighborhood kids, and I participate in the worship and events of the parish community. My experience with liberation theology has taught me the humility with which to enter into other contexts. I do not go up to do “service” but rather have established a relationship with the community to the extent that I want to participate in the good work going on. I work as closely as possible with Melynie, who lives in the neighborhood and oversees the youth program. I try to work more in a spirit of cooperation and dialogue, joining our efforts and working together, rather than a lack of communication and mutual participation. Prayer centers my action in the community. I work in constant dialogue with God, receiving strength and guidance, wisdom and forgiveness. I take the bus every time I go up, many times being the only white person, and I engage in conversation, feel my unity and separation from them, listen to the struggles that people in North City face and try to identify with them. Many times I have realized my arrogance in thinking that I am this wonderful University student “moving down” to be with the poor and it has helped me to treat those different than me with more respect and dignity. I also experience the evil of the city: drug abuse, sex abuse, racism, segregation, violence, gangs, and racist policies. I also feel my privilege and wonder how to live as a middle-class university student in a city torn by inequality. It makes me ask, “Where do I want to stand?” “Where should I be standing?” “Will you stay there even if it hurts?” “Will
you stay even if seems fruitless?” “Will you stay, even if you feel like you are doing nothing, maybe even hurting?” “Will you stay if that means you are left alone?” “Will you stay even in despair and anger and confusion?” My decision to be in the Ville neighborhood is one I’ve made out of love for the children and a desire to become closer to the community and join them in their efforts. I have received so much love and seen so much hope in that community, and my answer to these questions is yes. But that doesn’t mean that these are not very real questions or that the oppression doesn’t sometimes have its day. These things can suck the life out of you and make you shrink back in fear and weakness. When one confronts poverty, oppression, injustice, evil, this is what one goes through. But in myself or my church, the Managua City Dump or North City, I try to believe in and work for the God of life that I see, and try to overcome the evil and oppression which prevents this from flourishing. I try to stand as Jennifer Atlee-Loudon did:

“I will not recoil from this evil. I won’t cower inside myself as it laughs at me. I will open my eyes wide and clear, and stare straight into it until I reach the life that I know is still there, unable to be destroyed. ‘I am here. I am alive. I create. Don’t give up, keep walking with me.’ I take the hand God offers. I am a servant of Life” (Loudon, 106).
Works Cited

