

Mission of the Church: A Liberation Theology Perspective

- Lazar Stanislaus, SVD -

Introduction

Liberation theology began in Latin America and it has continued to gain prominence over the years in the Church. It has not remained the same, and now in Latin America it has undergone many changes. Its first formulations often mirrored attitudes prevalent in the late 1960's and early 1970's. These years were, in Gutierrez's words, a time of great "revolutionary ferment". Seeing the relevance of this theological expression, it spread to other countries too, but not in the same way. The theologians of Africa and Asia reflected their conditions along with their people and expressed many more liberation theologies – Black theology, African theology, Asian theology, Min-Jung theology, Planetary theology, Buffaloes theology and so forth. In this article, some pointers of Liberation theology from Latin America are explored. Then I shall try to highlight some nuances of the Indian theology of Liberation and draw some orientations from this for our missionary task in India.

I. Liberation Theology from Latin America – Some Pointers

Liberation theology arose out of a profoundly disturbing experience, the experience of the Christian faith confronted by the misery of the masses of poor in Latin America. The Medellín Document says, "that misery, as a collective fact, expresses itself as injustice which cries to the heavens" (*Justice*, n. 1). Leonard Boff and Clodovis Boff in their book, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, begin with two stories that illustrate the agony of poverty in Latin America (1987:1-2).¹ Medellín says, "When speaking of injustice, we refer to those realities that constitute a sinful situation" (*Peace*, n. 1). According to Segundo, it increased awareness of the situation which in turn evoked a sense of urgency to respond. The first line of Liberation theology stressed the conversion of the middle class because they need to commit themselves to liberate the poor. Theologians developed a second line of Liberation theology which sought to learn from the poor. Others would say that the response to poverty arose quickly when the priests and religious began to reflect with their communities on the living conditions of their people. Gustavo Gutierrez has given his own account: "I discovered three things, I discovered that poverty was a destructive thing, something to be fought against and destroyed, not merely something which was the object of our charity. Secondly, I discovered that poverty was not accidental. The fact that these people are poor and not rich is not just a matter of chance, but the result of a structure. It was a structural question. Thirdly, I discovered that poor people were a social class. When I discovered that poverty was something to be fought against ... it became clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action" (see Bonino 1976:278). While knowing and studying the situation, Gutierrez articulated his vision and methodology for liberation.

1. Social analysis

Liberation theology takes into account, the context of the situation, pays special attention to the root causes of the present situation, and considers them from a historical perspective. Liberation theology is not expected, nor is it competent, to propose solutions, strategies or political alternatives, but it seeks the help of the social sciences. Many analyses have been proposed by various theologians, some of which have been accepted and others rejected or taken partially. The

Dependence Theory based on class struggle and Marxist theory are very commonly used. But the rejection of Marxist theory in its totality is well accepted, though a few prefer to use the tool of Marxian analysis excluding some of his categories. Gutierrez says, “atheistic ideology and the totalitarian world-view — are certainly to be discarded and rejected from the point of view of our faith, from a humanistic perspective and from the point of view of a sane social analysis” (see Paikada 2000:237).

To analyze society, certain scientific methodologies are important. Liberation theologians have mainly used Marxism, the Dependency Theory, the effect of capitalism and the impact of socialism. Not all theologians use the same theory in a similar way, and not all of them use all these analytical methods.

They use social analysis because liberation in the socio-political sphere is not to be completely separated from the salvific message of the Gospel. Leonard Boff says, “the main scheme of liberation is the socio-political realm, because it is there that we most keenly feel the stings of alienation and sin, of oppression and lack of freedom. It is certainly true that the liberation of Christ and God is something more than just socio-political liberation. But it is also socio-political liberation” (1979:128). Scannone has been one of the first to highlight the significance of the cultural sphere and the necessity to include it in the socio-analytical mediation.

2. Preferential option

The poor occupy a preferential place in the proclamation of the Reign of God, they together with others who show solidarity with them become agents for the realization of the Reign of God. “The fact that the starting point or ultimate principle of the option for the poor is to be found in faith in Christ is a statement of theological ontology — considering the thing itself, objectively. From the subjective or anthropological standpoint (be it logical, pedagogical or political), the option for the poor can be based on motivations other than that of faith” (Pixley and Boff 1989:116).

Leonardo Boff names three necessary mediations to be used in Liberation theology, namely the socio-analytical mediation, hermeneutical mediation and the mediation of pastoral practice. These help people to see the reality with the eyes of the poor, to analyze the situation in the interests of the poor, and to join them in their struggle for liberation. This involves a clear option for the poor, political, ethical and evangelical. The God of the Bible, through the prophets and finally through the incarnation of the Son of God, made a preferential option for the poor, the poor people living at the time in Canaan and Egypt, and later in Palestine and Israel.

For Christians, faith in Christ leads to the poor, and commitment to and with the poor leads us into the mystery of Christ. Jesus makes us discover the poor and their greatness, and they lead us to Jesus and his Reign. Between the two poles there is what Paul VI called an “unceasing interplay” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 29). The option for the poor has a Christological aspect from a theological basis. One cannot ignore that it also has a *pneumatological* basis and the importance given to the Spirit and the poor, it has also a *mariological* aspect, these theological considerations need longer explanations.²

As believers in Christ, we need to respond to the situation of the poor. This option thus prompts all to work for human dignity. It can be done mostly with the poor and the oppressed and the Church has to be with them in their struggle and this is the challenge for the Church, “Wherever there is oppression, there will be struggles to win life-sustaining conditions — struggle between classes, between races, between nations, between the sexes. This is simply an observable fact, not a moral imperative or a scientific conclusion. We can see the just struggles of the oppressed going on around us, and we cannot see any other way out of the vast problems that afflict humanity at the close of the twentieth century” (Pixley and Boff 1989:242).

3. Faith in action

Awareness of the reality of poverty and its effects triggered responses of Christian compassion and indignation. Liberation theology asked how the Bible addressed these situations and how Christians ought to respond to the world of poverty, suffering, and oppression that surrounds them? The response has to be more than just praying for the poor, it must involve action. Thus, from the outset, Liberation theology involves a **commitment to the poor**, and a **liberating praxis**. A clear thinking and action of Black theology is, “an unqualified commitment to the Black

community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God's liberating work in the world" (Cone 1970:33).

Theology follows in a distinctive manner the pastoral action of the Church and is a reflection upon it. Theologians have insisted that the first and fundamental objective of the commitment of Christians, is action. Gutierrez says, "The Christian community professes a "faith which works through charity". It is real charity, action and commitment to the service of others. "Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows; it is the second step" (1995:9). Again he insists, "A privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the faith will be the life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church" (1995:9).

Commitment to the people, specially the poor, plays an important part in theologizing. Faith is a commitment to God and human beings, then, in today's world a commitment to the process of liberation is vital. The participation in the process of human liberation is the way of being in the world. It is necessary for Christians to have an understanding of this commitment and thus involve themselves in the process of liberation.

Theology is defined as "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word", it does not mean that wisdom and rational knowledge are replaced with praxis, rather these two are taken to have a more explicit ecclesial praxis. This theology is a theology of the future, but in practice it must be a critical appraisal of the historical praxis, in the sense the people would like it to be. Molman says that theological concepts "do not limp after reality... They illuminate reality by displaying its future" (1967:36). Praxis in action is praxis of love or love in action. This call to action has to take into consideration the changing socio-economic and political *scenarios*.

4. *Biblical Themes*

God is the **liberator**, this theme is powerfully explored by various scholars interpreting the Bible texts. Although there is no consensus on the interpretations, the central theme: God is the liberator is clearly brought forth in their exegesis. The exodus event serves as a powerful paradigm to understand God as the liberator. The exodus was the central event in Israel's history; it does show God responding to the cries of the poor; it did involve liberation from physical suffering and oppression, and not just salvation from personal sin. Yahweh, the God of Israel, brought them out from the oppressed society to form them into a new society, a contrast society where there will be equality, peace and no social stratifications. According to Lohfink, Yahweh did not work through political change but removed the Israelites from Egypt; they were taken away from the structure. Moreover, the Israelites did no violence to the Egyptians, did not even fight against them. 'Yahweh will do the fighting for you; you have only to keep still' (Ex 14:14). The violence done ... was brought on by Yahweh, not by human actions; the Israelites view the exodus as a miracle, as the work of God alone" (Mc Govern 1993:69).

Liberation theologians insist that God's concern goes far beyond compassion and charity; it involves **justice**. The prophets and their message has one central theme —justice. To know God means to do justice otherwise one does not know God (*cf.* Hos 4:1-2). Miranda's *Marx and the Bible* explores the connection between knowing God and doing justice. He insists that doing justice is a manifestation of knowing God who inspires, motivates and is part of our life. 'Through our words and deeds we communicate to others that we know God. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah know only one decisive theme — justice and they communicated this theme vigorously to the people in spite of the opposition and failures of the people.

Liberation theology does not speak of a transcendental principle extracted from the Bible and then applied to concrete situations. It does not interpret reality philosophically, but starts from the concrete situations of society, its problems, freedom of people, and the oppressive structures. The social problems and contradictions are considered and not the reconciling conceptual opposites.

An Asian Liberation theologian, Aloysius Pieris, reiterates "that the biblical basis of Liberation theology is not a transcendent principle derived from reason and confirmed by the Bible but the very foundational experience that gave birth to the Bible, a canon within the canon, by which the Bible itself is criticized internally. This foundational experience is the election of the oppressed class as God's equal partners in the common mission of creating a new order of love, a mission that can be shared by anyone who becomes one with God by being one with the oppressed class. Each concrete situation that reveals a new class of oppressed — women, minorities, and the like — is a continuation of this biblical revelation" (1989:308).

5. Questioning ideologies

All faith expressions have some ideology and all ideologies presuppose some underlying faith and Segundo rejects any viewing of Christianity simply as faith or of Marxism simply as an ideology. Both have values and the question is how these values are expressed and recognized. As the years went by, the Liberation theologians had various views on ideology, but lately they recognized that an ideology is not just negative connotations, but has different points of view. One can say, “the distinctive method of Liberation theology as a challenging of ideological elements in traditional modes of expressing reality and Christian truths, leading to a new understanding from the perspective of the poor”(Mc Govern 1993:43). But various works on liberation reveal that the major themes in Liberation theology with some form of deideologizing, prevailing ways of thinking, interpreting and articulating always sought the expression in the light of poor and the suppressing and dehumanizing situations. From the criticism of ideologies, the new paradigms emerged to understand the situation and the way to interpret the message of the Gospel, and Boff calls them: *The Socio-analytical Mediation*, *The Hermeneutical (Biblical –Theologica) Mediation* and *The Practical Mediation*. In all these Boff admits that he has borrowed the methodological pointers from Marxism, but not the dogmatic political aspect or as a strict scientific method or as a philosophy. Segundo in his book *Faith and Ideologies*⁴ brings out clearly these two elements. He contends that theology contains ideological elements and often reflects the language and the values of the dominant, prevailing culture of the rich, the mental frame of the oppressors, and the life pattern of the ruling class. Theology refers not only to the past but more so to the present.

Hence he proposed the methodology of the hermeneutic circle. This involves interpreting the word of God afresh in the light of present conditions, striving to change reality, and then reinterpreting the word of God again. The “hermeneutic circle” involves a suspicion of ideological elements which are given to the people as Christian message (see Segundo 1976:7-38). In this way, deideologizing theology can take place giving new meaning and interpretation to the present context in the light of the Gospel.

6. Clarity on Controversies

Undoubtedly Liberation theology faced opposition from many people, especially from the hierarchy on the various ideological adaptations and interpretations. Liberation theology makes use of Marxist concepts but these concepts do not retain the same meanings. ‘Praxis’ connotes the living out of the Christian faith, not Marxian tactics of change. ‘Class struggle’ expresses the reality of social conflict in Latin America, not to a programme to stir up hatred or to eliminate some ruling class. ‘Poor’ denotes the landless peasants and the oppressed in society and the Marxists focus mainly on the industrial proletariat that are viewed as the bearers of emancipation (Mc Govern 1993:230). Some theologians used Marxian analysis for understanding society, some used it only as one of the tools of analysis. Now, there is a general shift from accusing capitalism, and socialism too does not remain as an unquestioned paradigm for liberation aspirations.

Liberation theology certainly elucidates the political involvement for liberation. Does it reduce faith to politics? Politics has two senses: first, the global and historical efforts of the human race to realize its potentials and second, politics in the narrower sense of orientation towards power. Gutierrez asserts that “all is colored politically”, hence the liberation perspective has this element which cannot be overlooked. But all theologians do not attribute politics in a same strand. Over the years, it has changed. Now they talk about a “participatory democracy” from within civil society.

7. Spirituality

Liberation theology has always laid stress on spirituality, this spirituality involves both a call to follow Jesus in working for and with the poor, but is also a profound reflection on what the Christians learn from the poor about God and his power. “To commit oneself to the process of liberation is for a Christian a new way of identifying himself or herself with Christ and constitutes a novel Christian experience, full of promise and possibility, but also of difficulties and disappointments. In fact for many Latin American Christians, liberating commitment corresponds to an authentic spiritual experience in the original, biblical sense of the term: It is living in the Spirit who causes us to

acknowledge ourselves in a free and creative way to be Children of the Father and brothers and sisters to each other” (see McGovern 83-84).

Prayer and spiritual reflection are important and the contemplative element takes the person to experience God, but one cannot truly confess faith in God without service to the Reign. But we are called upon to respond to the actuality of the Reign. This needs commitment, purity of heart, letting go our egoism and always being open to what the Spirit is saying to us.

The preferred method to develop the spirituality of liberation varies from one theologian to another. John Sobrino in his *Spirituality of Liberation* states that prayer sustains the people in their struggle and helps them to move ahead in the process of liberation. Gutierrez develops the spirituality in his book *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, where the Church has to immerse itself among the poor and find God who liberates the people. A spirituality of liberation calls for a spirit of courage in the face of persecution, a spirit of quest for the truth, a spirit of fidelity and a spirit of holiness.

II. Indian Liberation Theology

In India, there is no single liberation theology, as multiple oppressive forces work upon various communities, such as the Dalits, Tribals, Women, fisher-folk, bonded labourers, etc. Hence we have Dalit theology, Tribal theology, Feminist theology and some others in the forefront that voice their own theological stand. Here, we present only some important pointers which focus on liberation. The diverse Indian theologies are not treated separately.

1. *Integral approach*

In the theology of liberation, constant efforts are made to understand integral liberation which is a matter of inner freedom and inner liberation but these are interlinked to the social, economic, political and cultural liberation in history. Ultimately this integral approach is rooted in the Indian world-view in which the other worlds mutually interpenetrate. An integral liberation consists of spirituality, which is the force of our action. This spirituality is developed with the vision of the reality of the divine, human and cosmic nature. The praxis of liberation “is viewed simultaneously as a process of liberation of the self, society and nature – all organically linked together by common bonds of unity” (Wilfred 2002:99).

The situation of oppression cannot be analyzed simply in terms of class in India. There are ethnic, racial, linguistic, cultural, religious and caste factors which are central to any proper understanding of our societies. It is true that in India one cannot apply the same methodology of analysis, be it economic, or cultural theories to analyze and propose similar pointers to diverse groups. The complexity of liberation lies in this aspect, we need a holistic approach, but the approach itself may vary from place to place.

Economic and political analysis just gives the situation of the oppressed people, but in the Indian context, the cultural analysis is very important. Culture gives identity, values, and meaning to social groups. When the cultural structure has an oppressive system, then the people are trapped in a particular mind set. “While a sociologist can never see that a reality of social injustice is sin — rupture with God and with fellow men, faith sees sin at the core of the ruptures of fraternity of human beings pointing to exigencies of behaviour and options” (Paikada 2000:232).

Religious stories, myths, proverbs, popular stories, similies and metaphors are some of the aspects of culture. “The ‘*mythos*’ over against the ‘*logos*’ has been a strong point of Indian ethos. India has understood her *logos* always in relation to *mythos*, and never without it” (Wilfred 2002:102). But through the transmission of values, the oppressive values and meanings are transmitted. The caste system has social, economic and political aspects which have made people suffer continuously. The dehumanization is sanctioned by religious interpretation, so the social structure gets strengthened. Similarly, women in particular are victims of a certain value system in the Indian society. The qualities the ideal woman is supposed to have are shyness, decency, obedience, service, dependency, fearfulness and the like. A wife is supposed to consider her husband a god, always subservient, obedient and at the service of her family. This cultural system is perpetuated by the rich

and the middle classes in their own interests and they manipulate the system to a large extent for their own advantage. Hence, the liberation of the oppressed in the light of Gospel values would be to dismantle the cultural system itself. Jesus disobeyed the laws, questioned the accepted practices of that time and refused to accept that lepers and sinners were 'untouchables'. He respected the excluded and the outcastes. His touching and healing them gave dignity, and they were accepted as equals in society.

The option for the poor implies also an option for a just socio-economic world order that guarantees and promotes freedom and equality. In the process of liberation, people become the centre. "A greater cooperation and dialogue with the protagonists of integral humanism and ecology will prove to be beneficial in this respect. This aspect can no longer be set aside as being outside the purview of theology" (Paikada, 2000:405-6). The preferential option for the poor is rooted in the *kenosis* of God and his self-emptying love which is central to the Paschal Mystery of redemption.

2. Dialectical approach and compassion

Latin American theology has brought the knowledge of the liberative process in bringing the historical and the dialectical dimensions of reality into the understanding of the Christian faith. In India too, we use this dialectical method, taking the history of revolutionary movements of protest, resistance to oppression, *morchas* and *dharmas*, etc. With the understanding of Asian religions, compassion to the other is important, the expression of the divine flows through this to the other. Hence "both dialectics as well as compassion are part and parcel of Asian history and ethos, and the Asian way to liberation is in its unique combining of what would appear to be mutually exclusive polarities. Dialectics is the other side of compassion. This integration and harmony between dialectics and compassion has something to offer to all those forms of theology which share the Indian concern of liberation" (Wilfred 2002:104).

Through the compassionate attitude, one moves beyond pity. The liberative approach is "not about pity. It's more about passion. Pity sees suffering and wants to ease the pain; passion sees injustice and wants to settle the score. Pity implores the powerful to pay attention; passion warns them about what will happen if they don't. The risk of pity is that it kills with kindness; the promise of passion is that it builds on the hope that the poor are fully capable of helping themselves if given the chance" (*Time*, 26 December 2005, p. 27). Passion moves people to act. Compassionate action respects people and enters into the people's perspectives.

3. Inter-faith projects

The formulation of the faith-praxis axiom has to be set in the context of other faith traditions. This is a great challenge. This can be done only when we develop the theology of religions and make much progress where we genuinely share the truth, the understanding of the divine, the meaning of suffering, the salvation and the meaning of life and make interfaith dialogue a meaningful reality. The poor, the oppressed and the marginalized Indians are the active subjects of the process of liberation. The poor in India belong to all religions, and when faith is put into practice, the various faith traditions are to be considered. In India, liberation must be an *inter-religious project*. "The multi-religious character of the liberation projects sets the various religious partners in dialogue with one another. Therefore, an ongoing inter-religious dialogue is in the very texture of Indian Liberation Theology" (Wilfred 2002:95).

When the other religious traditions are considered for the liberative task, the scriptures too are taken seriously. From the Biblical tradition, the exodus event, the prophets, the concept of justice, the liberative praxis of Jesus are meaningful propositions. Similarly, there is an active ferment of liberative thought and praxis articulated by Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. We need to refer to and take into account the sacred writings of our neighbours and what they tell us about freedom and liberation. "The traditions of our people with all their symbolic expressions in folklore, myths, festivals, celebrations, stories, rituals, etc., with the key concepts like *dharmas*, *mukti* and *lokasamgraha* in the sacred scriptures of India as well as in the life of great liberative personalities and movements, will be made to interact with the situation and the struggle. The Indian theological reflection will thus try to discover their liberative and their oppressive potential. Thus, a new hermeneutics for the interpretation of the Indian religious scriptures and symbols will evolve a holistic vision of reality, and an integral approach to liberation will be decisive in their approach" (*ITA Statement* 1986: n. 48).

This is the special contribution and challenge to Indian liberation. Christians are only 2.3 per cent of the total population of India. Christian theology is but a drop in the ocean and it cannot penetrate the ethos of India alone. Only together with other religious traditions can the liberative potential be explored. This calls for inter-faith liberative principles and methodology.

III. Mission of the Church

Liberation theologians and the popular movements they support need to move beyond identifying the causes of poverty and oppression, there is enough evidence and awareness is created among the people. The challenge for the Church is how the poor can become more effective agents of social change. The mission dimension must evolve from reflection on the experiences of the poor, specific aspirations of the poor, the culture of the people and the various celebrations, the myths, folklore and stories, to equality with others and respect in society.

The urgency of the liberative mission of the Church has been expressed many times, but we need to reiterate again and again: “The liberation and empowerment of the marginalized who form more than half of the people in our countries, and the healing of our ravaged planet, have to be at the top of the agenda of a concerned Church. The Church is called to embrace the afflicted with a cosmic compassion that reveals the face of Jesus who fed the hungry thousands (*cf* Lk 9:12-17), gave speech to the dumb and sight to the blind (*cf* Lk 7:21-22). These actions manifest Jesus’ mission to promote God’s rule in the world. The Gospel impels us to take sides with the poor and challenges us to follow Jesus in his self-emptying love and solidarity with the victims of history” (*Conclusions* 2001: n. 10). Many documents, religious congregations’ chapters, Catholic religious groups and many others have been explicit, but the effect is not fully seen by the people. Although various factors could be involved for not having vibrant works, the Church must again and again relaunch the project of liberative tasks among people.

Salvation involves liberation from sin, whether individual or structural, and this means societal transformation, economic equality and rights, political freedom and ensuring overarching human dignity and rights in a community or region. Salvation is both individual and communitarian, all are called to participate in “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace”, as the Preface for the Feast of Christ the King so beautifully expresses it. “Genuine liberation is therefore possible only if there is both a change of structures and change of hearts; if personal conversion complements social change; and of a cultural revolution leavens a sociopolitical one” (Soares-Prabhu 1992:113). The Indian Theology of Liberation concerns structural change as well as the personal conversion and transformation of specific concerns. The symbiosis of these concerns will have to be taken up by the people for holistic liberation.

1. Liberation of the poor and prophetic compassion

In the light of Liberation theology, love for the poor leads to liberation of the poor. Christianity is seen as a religion which is compassionate to the poor, but liberation of the poor from the perspective of socio-economic and political spheres would mean more than just loving talk and caring service. Love would imply more than the niceties of relationship. Love in the fuller sense would lead to embracing all the spheres of society. Christian love can have far-reaching political and social implications and consequences, then it calls for effective orientation, ***prophetic compassion***. This whole implication is also called ‘***culture of prophetic love***’ (Wilfred 2002:245-247). The prophetic sense of mission is the urgent need, the emergence of a prophetic Church is the current need. One or two individuals can make a difference in a particular place. The Local Church as a whole could promote this culture of prophetic love or prophetic compassion, so that the liberation of the poor can be experienced. This is a process, the freedom and liberty will not take place in a short span of time, but the whole culture of the people or the Local Church emerge with this sense of urgency to liberate the Dalits and Tribals, the light of freedom will be seen by the people.

In the light of our work among the Dalits, the Indian Theological Association says, “The Church will become an authentic witness to the Gospel and symbol of God’s liberating initiative in Jesus Christ when it works towards the total emancipation of the Dalits. The active involvement of the Church with Dalits in their struggle for liberation, social justice and human dignity while constituting an essential aspect of the Church’s mission in India” (*Statement of ITA* 2005: n.16).

While reflecting on the condition of women in India, all are called to work for gender justice. The dehumanizing situation of women is an integral part of the cultural system, the non-equal status is meted to women in the Church in the structure of the Church itself, and the marginalization erodes progressively because of the societal system itself, hence, “taking human life seriously, men and women are challenged to identify and resist forces negating the well-being of women and to recognize their dignity, worth and contribution in all spheres of life” (*Statement of ITA 2004: n.28*).

The prophetic stand must liberate the Dalits, Tribals, women and other disadvantaged groups and involve them in the process of gaining their human rights and human dignity: “the strength of the mission will be proportionate to the strength of the prophetic challenge we are able to pose to individuals and the structures of Satan and Mammon.... If mission is a prophetic task and if it is to be exercised in collaboration with others, it means that the call to this task is addressed to all who participate in God’s mission” (*Conclusions 2000: nn. 19-20*).

2. Corporate mission and Dynamic Involvement

Understanding the complexities of globalization and its impact, there is a tendency to resign oneself to it, or give into it. Its impact is great and difficult to withstand, the flow of capital and the marketing system engulf the people, and the poor bear the brunt of the effects of globalization through unemployment, completion, and unskilled spectrum. The change could come about through the corporate mission, meaning that the whole Church in the county should focus its mission endeavour against the evil effects of globalization. The power of collective bargaining has to be exercised by the Church. This calls for involvement. Instead many people bypass the uncanny things which happen in society as onlookers, when our faith demands us to show its depth, and to become involved. ***Non-involvement*** is the biggest sickness of the people or for that matter of the Indian Church.

The *Antoyodaya*, the rising of the least, evident among the Dalits, Tribals, Women, and fisherfolk, is a sign that they awakened and that the Church, by its guiding hand and cooperation, can strengthen these rising organizations. Although the rising is seen, it is neither consolidated by the people nor by the Church. The rising of the least has an impact on the majority community, the political powers, the controllers of economic systems and the money powered upper *élite* castes. This would also mean that these powerful communities should empathize with the rising of the least and have the heart to get involved to help them to assert their dignity.

The awakening of the masses for their liberation challenges the Church to reorient its institutions and services to work for liberation. The educational, health, and social welfare institutions should have this special concern for the poor and the oppressed and this has to be part of the vision and practice of the institutions. The educational institutions should reserve a certain percentage of places and adopt a stable practical policy towards their treatment of the marginalized. Indeed a fixed percentage of monetary help for the poorest sections in the social service sector would be of immense help to these people. Hence, efforts have to be made by all the bodies of the Church and all the people, calling for corporate mission. The collective bargaining power in society in favour of the poor and weak needs a corporate mission perspective.

Liberation theologians stress the Good News to the poor, but the non-poor are not only to be challenged, but they need to have a conversion of heart. The goal of the Reign of God includes all, the poor and the non-poor and we are moving towards the Reign where justice, fellowship and freedom would prevail. Hence, the recognition of mission to the rich, and the oppressors should not be left out. “If we want to work with the non-poor then our language will have to change. Mere prophetic denunciation will not help. A call to revolution, especially violent revolution, may even be counter-productive, radicalizing divisions and letting the emotions dominate practical reason. We will have to be reasonable. More important still, we will have to look for good-willed collaborators in the dominant group” (*Amaladoss 2005:731*) Christian involvement in politics is very necessary, and it has to be promoted, but one has to move with caution and it has to be with the other peoples’ movements that are also committed to justice. Christian involvement in politics has to be holistic in nature taking into consideration the weak and marginalized of all religions as well as other concerns of society. This involvement has to be both prophetic and messianic.

3. Diversity and asserting identity

India is pluralistic in the areas of culture, religion, ethnicity, language, etc. Every linguistic or ethnic group needs space to grow.

The growth of the people needs recognition and encouragement. There are also many vested interests in blocking the rights of other ethnic groups for political or economic reasons. Hence, liberating these groups is the urgent need today and by asserting their identity as a group in the pluralistic context, they can hope for a better future. Hence, to reread the biblical sources from the perspective of pluralism and diversity which define to a large extent our commitment to liberation. The big challenge is to reread the scriptures of various religions from the perspective of liberation for the freedom and liberty of the multi-ethnic or religious groups.

Every group can and should promote its particular identity. The question is asked whether it is the goal or the means. This cannot be the end of each group and this alone cannot attain liberation. Each group with its distinct identity should merge also with other regional communities or the national community. It cannot look on the other as the enemy. Multi-culturalism in a country is welcome, but ways should be found to integrate them to live as a larger community where justice and peace is established. Dalit and Tribal theologians are stressing the importance of people asserting their identities, but at the same time they have to think of integrating them into the wider identities at the regional and national levels. The challenge to the mission of the Church is to keep the balance between the assertion of the oppressed groups' identities and at the same time to integrate them into the larger identity of the Church and society.

4. Working for justice

The most significant change at the theological level has centred around two factors: **(a)** Social justice is now seen as an integral part of Christian charity, and involvement in the struggle for social justice is considered inseparable from evangelizing activity; **(b)** Dialogue and cooperation with the believers of other religions for the promotion of justice and peace are seen as a *sine qua non* for the Church and have been accepted as the way of life, in keeping with the Church's vocation to work for the Kingdom of God and for the welfare of the poor (Paikada 2000:161).

In Indian history, the perpetrators of injustice continue and often it is passed on from generation to generation even without questioning the structure, tradition, or the mode of treating the simple and weak people. Hence, a constant effort has to be made to identify the oppressors in the cultural system, structural practices, and even in the political and bureaucratic framework. Opposing these oppressors and denouncing corrupt practices, and demanding that rights based action be coordinated for better results in society. The Methodologies are important in order to relate with them or dialogue with them without hate. "In our following of Jesus the prophet we denounce injustice; and in our following of Jesus the self-emptying servant we are reminded that in denouncing we must never hate and cut off the possibility of relationship and dialogue with the oppressors" (*Conclusions* 2001: n.18). The mission of the Church calls for the self-emptying of the *kenotic* path. It denotes a Church of the poor characterized by a visible solidarity with the victims at the same time as it relates with the oppressors.

Reconciliation is a significant task in society, it is always attentive to affirming the dignity and rights of every individual. Reconciliation should not be used to derail the process of establishing justice. "As followers of the prophetic Christ we seek justice; as followers of the self-emptying Christ we seek reconciliation. Our efforts to pursue justice must take place, and find direction, through our efforts to pursue reconciliation" (*Conclusions* 2001: n.17). Here, one can reiterate the restorative justice over retributive justice.

5. Liberating dialogue

The poor, the oppressed and the marginalized Indians are the active subjects of the process of liberation. The poor in India belong to all religions, and when faith is put into practice, the various faith traditions are to be considered. In India, liberation cannot but be an *inter-religious project*. Dialogue with other religions is an important and coherent part of the mission. Other religions possess immense goodness for transforming society with its truth, (*marga*) and way of life. But this dialogue also paves the way to critical collaboration. We dialogue with other religions, we are also

learning to affirm our faith in Jesus and his message of the Reign, in this process, mutual discovery, self-criticism, and enrichment is possible and can be of great help for the renewal of the religions. This dialogue also paves the way to peace or harmony in society. Hence, dialogue has to be a liberating dialogue for the people. This leads to protest against the forces of communalism and fundamentalism which are on the course of monologue. Hindutva ideology has far-reaching consequences in society dividing and segregating the people and with its ideological framework systematically pushing aside the Dalits and Tribals.

Mission's call is to "oppose all tendencies of cultural nationalism and intolerance of pluralism whereby the rich variety of our country is sought to be wiped out by the wealthy who are the protagonists of the inadmissible monoculturalism" (*Conclusions* 2000: n.22). The dialogue is also geared towards the liberation of all people, hence a radical critique of religions has also to be undertaken, which would give hope for an alternative society. All religions should be involved in a serious dialogue to bring about a just social order and this is the challenge of interfaith dialogue to the Church as well as to the other religions.

6. Education of the oppressed

Our preferential option is for the Dalits, Tribals, oppressed women, orphans, differently-abled people, children, widows, prisoners, AIDS patients and other economically poor children. It is actually an obligatory category of people. Educating them is one of the paramount tasks of the Church to share the process of liberation with them. In the context of the paradigm shifts in theology and praxis, new strategies have to be evolved and then, our education ministry becomes, a mission. *Education is mission* and we need to move ahead with this vision to give awareness, motivating people by showing them different paths to liberative action. "The search for fresh goals and the commitment to renew options will motivate us to seek answers to tomorrow's problems with a stout heart, prophetic zeal and greater enthusiasm to participate fully in this sublime mission of the Church. This new consciousness will enable us to situate our excellence in terms of our relevance to the needs of God's Reign, rather than situating it in terms of an excellence irrelevant to the majority of God's people" (*Conclusions* 2004:41).

Conclusion

The mission of the Church is to participate in Jesus' mission and to continue to actualize the Reign of God that Jesus brought. In service to this Reign the Church finds its identity (*cf. Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14). Here, the Church is called to announce, serve and witness to the Reign of God. According to the signs of the times and the context, the importance of this service and witness to the Reign become more demanding and gain prominence. This does not mean neglecting proclamation of the Good News.

The problem of Liberation theology does not come from outside forces. "The problem is internal to Christianity: what was early Christianity? Why did Christianity change? How to return to the roots of Christianity? The poor do not question the Church from outside, as do the Indigenous or Blacks. The poor are within the Church, and by every right, are the Church. So why are they not in fact what they are by right?" (Comblin 1998:215).

What Liberation theology has already achieved is of great significance. It has drawn the attention of the Church, the civil leaders, the politicians, the lukewarm Christians and others. The poor have become prominent. The poor can have hope and see the future with optimism. Liberation theology strives to keep alive the hopes embodied in Jesus' central message of the Reign of God. The mission of the Church is how to actualize this Reign of God which is alive and active here and now and shows the horizons of the Reign which will bloom to the full.

As long as the poor are continuously oppressed, the mission of the Church cannot turn away its focus from the liberation of the poor. To be effective, it has to find a creative way to cooperate with other movements. Liberation theology itself has to find new ways to articulate itself according to the changing *scenario* of the world and the mission of the Church has to adopt creative ministries to bring transformation to the world, so that all people can move towards a new heaven and a new earth.

The Church's concerted action is very important, looking ahead with confidence and doing concrete liberative actions is called for. "There is not going to be any new Medellín in the near future. Nor will there be any new Vatican II in the near future; it would not have anything new to say because the Church is not yet ready to receive a new impulse.

The social movement that led to social reform and to the Welfare State started around 1870. Vatican II came ninety years later. A new social movement to respond to the new wave of economic revolution has barely begun. Now is the time to begin to work out new responses to the new challenges” (Comblin 1998:217).

Medha Patkar, the well-known social worker while addressing the priests and religious at Ishvani Kendra in January 2005, said that the Christians are doing good works in our country, but they can still do much more. For the transformative works on which the Church is now engaged, she said that it does not need the mighty institutions which it has at present. The fight against material poverty requires that individuals and groups be liberated from possessiveness and acquisitiveness. The constant challenge has been, how the Church can identify with the struggling sections of society and share the suffering of its people, the Church’s identity and insertion lies in the process of inculturation. The Church moves on, but may not keep up with the fast changing *scenario* or problems of the world. The proportionate response of the Church to the conditions of the people is to be desired far more.

References

- Amaladoss, M. “Liberation theologies and Indian Experiences: Some Questions”, *Vidyajyoti*, 69 (2005) 725-733.
- Boff, Leonardo, “Christ’s Liberation Via Oppression”, in Roslino Gibellini, ed., *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979.
- Bonino, Jose Miguez, recorded the statements of Gutierrez in *Theology of the Americas*, eds. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976.
- Comblin, Jose, *Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology*, New York: Orbis, 1998.
- Conclusions of the Research Seminar* on “A Vision of Mission for the New Millennium”, Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 9-12 March 2000.
- Conclusions of the Ishvani Kendra Silver Jubilee Colloquium*, “The Church in Mission: Universal Mandate and Local Concerns”, Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 24-27 October 2001.
- Conclusions of the Research Seminar* on “Education as Mission”, Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 10-14 January 2004.
- Cone, James H., *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Philadelphia: Lippincot, 1970.
- Gutierrez, G., *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 1984; and *Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis, 1995 (eighth printing).
- McGovern, M.F., *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 1989.
- “Medelín Documents”, in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, presented by Joseph Gremillion, New York: Orbis, 1976, pp. 455-476.
- Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, New York: Harper and Row, 1967.
- Paikada, Mathew, *Indian Theology of Liberation as an Authentic Christian Theology*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publication, 2000.
- Pieris, A., “Human Rights Language and Liberation Theology”, in *The Future of Liberation Theology*, eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, New York: Orbis, 1989, 299-310.
- Pixley, J. and C. Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, Kent: Burns and Oates, 1989.
- Segundo, Juan Luis, “Two Theologies of Liberation”, *The Month*, vol.17, n. 10 (1984); and *Liberation of Theology*, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976.
- Soares-Prabhu, George, “The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus: Lessons for an Indian Theology of Liberation”, in *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, F. Wilfred, ed., NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992, 100-115.
- Sobrinho, John, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness*, NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988.
- Statement of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), *Women’s Concerns and Indian Theological Responses*, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, 25-29 April 2004.
- Statement of the Indian Theological Association, *Dalits’ Concerns and an Indian Theological Response*, CRI, Brothers’ Institute, Bangalore, 24-28 April 2005.
- Statement of the Indian Theological Association, *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 28-31 December 1985.
- Soares-Prabhu, “The Pedagogy of Jesus”, Wilfred, Felix, ed., *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992.
- Wilfred, Felix, *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002.

Footnotes

¹The first incident tells of a woman who confessed that she received communion, even though she came too late for Mass, because she had not eaten for three days and she literally hungered for the host. The second story tells of a Bishop who vowed to assist some hungry person each day after he met a woman who tried to nurse her baby from a bleeding breast that contained no more milk.

² Cf. J. Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1989; I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, Kent: Burns and Oates, 1989.

³ Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, New York: Maryknoll, 1974.

⁴ J. Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies, Vol.I*, New York: Maryknoll, 1984.

Ref.: Text sent by the author for SEDOS in June 2007.
