



# Monseñor Romero and Liberation Theology

By: Michael Lee

On the difficult road to Oscar Romero's beatification, the question about his relationship to liberation theology was always a concern in Vatican circles. When the postulator for Romero's cause, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, announced that the long-delayed process had been "unblocked," many attributed it to the newly-elected Pope Francis, a Latin American whose emphasis has been a church "that is poor and for the poor." However, subsequently, Paglia claimed that it was Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, who removed the final hurdle in the process.

That Benedict, a long-time critic of liberation theology, would approve of Romero's beatification after so many years came as a surprise. After all, it was as Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), that he wrote the most stinging critique of liberation theology, *Libertatis nuntius* (1984). He had silenced Leonardo Boff and investigated a number of other liberation theologians. If Benedict supported Romero's sainthood, it must have been a significant change in his thinking. Or was it? Benedict, even as pope-emeritus, has never indicated any softening of his position on liberation theology. So, if Benedict did not change, perhaps it was Romero—or at least the presentation of Romero—that was modified in order to make him more palatable to an audience skeptical about liberation theology.

Scholarship on the Catholic church in El Salvador prior to the civil war has identified Archbishop Romero with what Peterson calls the "progressive Catholicism" that emerged from the post-Vatican II and Medellín pastoral and theological initiatives encouraged by Romero's predecessor Luis Chavez y Gonzalez. Initially, Romero did not

demonstrate an affinity for this progressive Catholicism in his years as auxiliary bishop in San Salvador (1970-1974) or bishop of Santiago de María (1974-1977). However, Passionist priests who worked with Romero have argued that the latter period begins a process of transformation that, with Romero's elevation to Archbishop and the murder of Rutilio Grande, sees him become the leading advocate and defender of a church that had begun to experience the brunt of repressive violence. Theologically, Archbishop Romero's opponents were, except for Bishop Rivera Damas, the other members of the Salvadoran Bishops' Conference (CEDES) and right-wing Catholic organizations, not those who embraced liberation theology. Though some historians note a more radical wing of clergy, Romero is still identified within a spectrum of liberation theology.

Contrary to this general scholarly consensus, the Italian historian, Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, has argued that Romero remained distinct from and disapproving of liberation theology throughout his life. Noting the critical statements that Romero makes in the early 1970's regarding liberation theology, Morozzo claims that certain themes remain consistent from that period on: Romero cautions against reducing faith to politics, condemns insurrectional violence, and identifies a merely material or historical end for human liberation as insufficient. In this view, Romero may have been patiently hospitable to those committed to liberation theology's vision, but he never shared that vision.

Jesús Delgado has argued as well that Romero was not influenced by liberation theologians, pointing out that their books remained on Romero's shelves unopened. Though a superficial claim, it does point to what can be considered a disconnect between liberation theologians and Romero. Romero did not attend the many conferences of their work, did not publish books alongside them, nor did he cite them in his writings or homilies. Thus, this account of Romero's theological inclinations presents him as completely distinct from liberation theology, and because it is Morozzo who wrote the biographical portion of the Vatican's "*Positio*" that makes the case for Romero's sainthood, paves the way for a canonization that could avoid recognizing Romero's liberation theology.

As compelling as the evidence is for this position, its failure to persuade can be identified in three theses.

***The objection that Mons. Romero was not a liberation theologian misunderstands the nature of theology itself.*** Certainly, Oscar Romero was not a professional liberation theologian. He did not earn a doctoral degree. He did not have a university appointment. He never published a book or journal article. However, this is a truncated view of the theological task. In their introduction to liberation theology, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff helpfully distinguish between three levels of liberation theology: the popular, the pastoral, and the professional. Mons. Romero may never have participated in a theological congress, but his preaching and ministry served, as Martin Maier, SJ has shown, as a theological inspiration. His pastoral work in the Archdiocese of San Salvador brought together liberation theology at the popular and professional levels to direct its proclamation of the gospel as a full liberation. He leaves a rich theological legacy.

***In his homilies and pastoral letters, Mons. Romero developed the same themes as liberation theologians.*** Methodologically, liberation theology distinguished itself by an inductive approach that took the experience and faith of Christians seriously. This marked a departure from the approach that had dominated Catholic theology for over a century, neo-scholasticism. Rather than a deductive application of abstract definitions, liberation theology is as Gustavo Gutiérrez has formulated, a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God. Influential in this approach was the ver-juzgar-actuar approach of Catholic Action.

This approach led liberation theologians to arrive at new insights on theological topics such as: God, Christ, the church, sin, etc. Specifically, emerging from the widespread poverty and inequality of Latin America, this theological approach asked fundamental questions about the relationship between the human aspiration for liberation and the Christian proclamation of salvation. Significant contributions of liberation theology to contemporary thought include among others: the preferential option for the poor, the reality of social sin, the importance of ortho-praxis. To be sure, there were many different varieties of liberation theologies, but these characteristics help illuminate the family resemblances in this theological approach.

Romero's writing and preaching as Archbishop exhibit the same inductive approach of liberation theology and develop the same themes. Indeed, the structure of his second, third and fourth pastoral letters follows the see-judge-act methodology. Key to Romero's method and content was their focus—poverty. Romero's mature theology begins with the experience of the poor, wrestles with proclaiming the gospel to the poor, denounces those who exploit the poor, and arrives at a more profound understanding of faith because of that engagement in the world of the poor. As Romero stated in Louvain, "Y de ese mundo de los pobres decimos que es la clave para comprender la fe cristiana, la actuación de la Iglesia y la dimensión política de esa fe y de esa actuación eclesial. Los pobres son los que nos dicen qué es el mundo y cuál es el servicio eclesial al mundo. Los pobres son los que nos dicen qué es la 'polis', la ciudad y qué significa para la Iglesia vivir realmente en el mundo." Romero's theological approach was a liberationist one that yielded insights consonant with the contributions of other liberation theologians.

***Those who wish to separate Mons. Romero from liberation theology incorrectly assume that it is contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church.*** Liberation theologies exist on a spectrum and have always possessed an internal critique. In fact, Romero's criticisms of extreme positions in liberation theology that are supposed to demonstrate his distance from it have been made by liberation theologians themselves. The problem is an inheritance of *Libertatis nuntius*, which warned of certain aspects of liberation theology but never cited a text or named a figure.

In El Salvador, liberation theology has been most visibly identified with the Jesuits Jon Sobrino and the late Ignacio Ellacuría, whom Romero consulted for their theological expertise. Yet, the work of these professional liberation theologians is only part of a much wider fabric. Liberation theology in El Salvador includes the pastoral work of women religious and priests such as David Rodríguez, Inocencio Alas, Rutilio Grande, Noemí Ortiz, Alfonso Navarro, Sylvia Arriola, Rogelio Ponseele, Miguel Ventura and many others. It was at the heart of the centros de formación such as Los Naranjos and El Castaño. It inspired the courageous example of women and men in the comunidades eclesiales de base and their delegados de la palabra, many of whom paid for their faith like Romero, at the price of their own blood. Monseñor Romero is a part of this tapestry. To be sure, there were disagreements, such as the debate after Romero's tentative support of the October 1979 junta, but Romero's ministry, his denunciation of injustice, his defense of human rights, his attempt to center the church on the plight of the poor is inextricably tied to the story of liberation theology. He embodies its highest values in seeking to make the Reign of God present in the world.

To say that Monseñor Romero was the embodiment of liberation theology means confronting the dubious caricatures and guilt by association that have too often distorted the reality of liberation theology and its proponents. But perhaps more than setting the record straight, rightfully connecting Romero with the legacy of liberation theology, with that vision and hope the inspired committed Christians to live faith in a way to transform society, means that it can continue to inspire. It may be in conflicts over mining or gang violence, but the cries for liberation can still be heard, and they deserve the hope offered by Romero's liberative example.



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