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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the historical and theological evolution of Ecclesiology of Liberation in Latin America. The aim is to provide critical reflections on the attacks that Ecclesiology of Liberation has faced over the past century "At first, the Latin American Catholic Church was influenced by medieval essentialist theology, which opposed socialist ideas.".. In the twentieth century, Theology of Liberation emerged in response to the theoretical-theological crisis experienced by "revolutionary Christians" engaged in political struggle. This theology proposed rethinking the conception of salvation as to the historical process of Liberation. The critique of European theology by Latin American theologians introduced a historical dimension to soteriology, leading the Church to recognize the necessity of constructing the Kingdom of God among people through historical processes of Liberation. Ecclesiology of Liberation sought to renew ecclesial practices but faced opposition from traditional European theology. Political factors, such as U.S. influence and the rise of neoconservatism during Reagan's administration, also affected Theology of Liberation. Despite criticisms, Theology of Liberation remains active, adapting to new realities and diversifying into areas such as feminist, Indigenous, and African theology. The election of Pope Francis brought renewed hope to this theology, which continues to strive to remain relevant in a globalized world.

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*This essay examines the historical and theological evolution of Ecclesiology of Liberation in Latin America. The aim is to provide critical reflections on the attacks that Ecclesiology of Liberation has faced over the past century "At first, the Latin American Catholic Church was influenced by medieval essentialist theology, which opposed socialist ideas.".. In the twentieth century, Theology of Liberation emerged in response to the theoretical-theological crisis experienced by "revolutionary Christians" engaged in political struggle. This theology proposed rethinking the conception of salvation as to the historical process of Liberation. The critique of European theology by Latin American theologians introduced a historical dimension to soteriology, leading the Church to recognize the necessity of constructing the Kingdom of God among people through historical processes of Liberation. Ecclesiology of Liberation sought to renew ecclesial practices but faced opposition from traditional European theology. Political factors, such as U.S. influence and the rise of neoconservatism during Reagan's administration, also affected Theology of Liberation. Despite criticisms, Theology of Liberation remains active, adapting to new realities and diversifying into areas such as feminist, Indigenous, and African theology. The election of Pope Francis brought renewed hope to this theology, which continues to strive to remain relevant in a globalized world.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This essay centres on Ecclesiology of Liberation and its historical and theological evolution in Latin America. The objective is to provide critical reflections on the challenges that Ecclesiology of Liberation has endured over the past century. The analysis begins with the influence of medieval essentialist theology on the Latin American Catholic Church and its opposition to socialism. Pope Leo XIII's 1878 encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris* defended a governing power based on divine and natural law, while the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* explicitly addressed social issues and the plight of the working class.

In the twentieth century, theologians such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged Thomistic theology. Theology of Liberation emerged in response to the "theoretical and theological" crisis faced by "revolutionary Christians" engaged in Latin America's political Liberation struggle. Theology of Liberation proposed rethinking the concept of salvation and its relation to the historical process of liberation.

The critique of European theology by Latin American theologians introduced a historical dimension to soteriology. This led the Latin American Church to recognize the need to construct the Kingdom of God among people through historical Liberation. Ecclesiology of Liberation sought to renew ecclesial practices in

Latin America but faced opposition from traditional European theology.

Next, we examine the political and religious factors that contributed to the decline of Theology of Liberation, including the influence of the United States neoconservatism during Reagan's administration. With these internal and external challenges, Theology of Liberation was criticized and rejected by conservative movements within the Church itself.

Despite these critiques and challenges, Theology of Liberation remains a vibrant field of theological reflection and scholarly work, adapting to new realities and expanding into areas such as feminist theology, Indigenous theology, and African theology. The election of Pope Francis has brought renewed hope for this theology, which continues to seek relevance in a globalized and technologically connected world.

## II. THEOLOGY AND HISTORICITY: THE ORIGIN AND DECLINE OF THEOLOGY OF LIBERTATION

The analysis of Ecclesiology of Liberation is based on a theoretical-theological foundation rooted in Theology of Liberation, which consists of interpreting and updating the conciliar innovations of Vatican II within the Latin American context. The historical and theological conditions for its development go back to the early 1960s, a time when the Catholic Church in Latin America was influenced by essentialist theology rooted in medieval Thomistic-Aristotelian thought. This theology interpreted the social order as a manifestation of the predetermined essence of things according to the divine mind (Gotay, 1985, p.31) and openly opposed socialism.

This theological line had been upheld by the Church long before. Since the 19th century, with Pope Leo XIII's (1810–1903) encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, dated December 28, 1878, a governing power founded on divine and natural law was defended:

They refuse obedience to the higher powers, to whom, according to the admonition of the Apostle, every soul ought to be subject, and

who derive the right of governing from God; and they proclaim the absolute equality of all men in rights and duties. They debase the natural union of man and woman, which is held sacred even among barbarous peoples; [...] (Leão XIII, 1878, p. 1).

Likewise, it upheld a divinely desired unequal society:

Thus, as even in the kingdom of heaven He hath willed that the choirs of angels be distinct and some subject to others, and also in the Church has instituted various orders and a diversity of offices, so that all are not apostles or doctors or pastors,(10) so also has He appointed that there should be various orders in civil society, differing in dignity, rights, and power, whereby the State, like the Church, should be one body, consisting of many members, some nobler than others, but all necessary to each other and solicitous for the common good. [...] (Leão XIII, 1878, p. 4)

In fine, as the recruits of socialism are especially sought among artisans and workmen, who, tired, perhaps, of labor, are more easily allured by the hope of riches and the promise of wealth, it is well to encourage societies of artisans and workmen which, constituted under the guardianship of religion, may tend to make all associates contented with their lot and move them to a quiet and peaceful life. (Leão XIII, 1878, p. 7).

The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* 1891, was significant for explicitly addressing social issues, especially the working-class problem:

The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self reliance and closed mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy. The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind

with painful apprehension; wise men are discussing it; practical men are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and rulers of nations are all busy with it - actually there is no question which has taken deeper hold on the public mind. (Leão XIII, 1891, p. 1).

On the other hand, the Pope considered the socialist solution inappropriate for Christians, reinforcing the opposition between Christianity and socialism. While the former was described as essentialist, the latter was characterized as subverting the natural order:

It must be first of all recognized that the condition of things inherent in human affairs must be borne with, for it is impossible to reduce civil society to one dead level. Socialists may in that intent do their utmost, but all striving against nature is in vain. There naturally exist among mankind manifold differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal conditions. (Leão XIII, 1891, p. 7).

According to Gotay (1985), this conflict was intrinsically tied to the Catholic Church's worldview, particularly the Thomistic theory of natural law as reformulated through Jacques Maritain's perspective. This new interpretation of Thomas Aquinas came to be known as neo-Thomism. As noted by the encyclical, inequality of conditions is a "necessary difference" that "benefits everyone." Socialism, on the other hand, would bring disorder to the pre-established order of nature since man's natural vocation is to accept his condition with patience. Historicity, the socialist worldview, could never be accepted as a foundation for social organization — it is nothing more than an accident, in contrast to what is purely necessary and essential.

Although Pope Pius XI (1857–1939) sought a middle ground between capitalism and Christianity through charity, the 19th century ultimately solidified the dichotomy between neo-Thomist-based theology and historically-based theories such as socialism.

The 20th century brought significant changes in theology, with theologians such as Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenging Thomistic theology through new philosophical references. Exegetical studies revitalized the historicist and materialist thinking of the Hebrews, while Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx contributed to existential theologies. Louis-Joseph Lebret explored development theology, Emmanuel Mounier developed personalism, and José Comblin and Paul Tillich contributed to historical theologies. Harvey Cox addressed secularization theology, and political theologies were developed by Blanquart, Richard Shaull, Metz, and Moltmann, as observed by Gotay (1985).

Within this context, Gotay (1985) claimed that Theology of Liberation emerged due to the theoretical-theological crisis faced by "revolutionary Christians,"<sup>1</sup> who, by engaging in the political Liberation struggle in Latin America, questioned the relationship between their faith and political practice, as well as the connection between the historical process of liberation and salvation. This formative process is understood through the radical nature of its changes, and the political implications of Latin American theology. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the concept of salvation.

Revolutionary Christians embraced a theological framework that prioritized historical, political, and social analysis as a hermeneutic tool for theology. This required redefining how theology should address fundamental questions of human existence. The resolution of human problems must occur within and through history, and all truths regarding human social constructions must supposedly be derived from it. History, thought dialectically, positions truth as an evolving concept yet to be fully realized. By adopting this post-conciliar theological approach, theologians proposed rethinking the idea of salvation, particularly its "karyological" significance. For

<sup>1</sup> An expression used by Gotay (1985) in his work: "Revolutionary Christian Thought in Latin America and the Caribbean. Implications of Theology of Liberation for the Sociology of Religion," referring to Christians who joined the liberation movement.

Gotay (1985), this is the root of the theoretical-theological crisis that led to the emergence of Theology of Liberation. In other words, as noted by Figueroa-Villarreal (1999), the core of Theology of Liberation lies in answering the question of the relationship between salvation and the historical process of liberation.

It is a fact that this pre-conciliar theological conception, although upheld for many centuries, did not originate within the society that first embraced the Christian revelation. The worldview from which Jesus and the early Church interpreted their reality and understood their faith gradually took on increasingly distant contours.. Influenced by the Greco-Roman worldview, it was translated into a new language and shaped according to the philosophy of the Gentiles. According to Marques (2008), the transposition of Christian content to a philosophical mindset developed dialectically in the first three centuries of the Christian era, when Christianity, initially denied as a theoretical-philosophical tradition, absorbed the conditions that made philosophy possible, asserting itself through the metaphysical aspects of the Greek *Logos* and ethical postulations.

The critique of European theology made by Latin American theologians, as explained by Gotay (1985), thus imprints a historical character on soteriology. The aim is to understand faith from a perspective that considers “real history”. Not without reason, the introduction of a historical character into theology has a crucial conciliar inspiration: revelation should be read considering a historical-critical criterion. The historical-critical method of biblical texts emerged with a strong desire for “deconstruction” of narratives with the intent of “distinguishing the various sources,” offering little attention both to the general structure of the text and the message preserved in its current state (Dei Verbum, 1993, p. 3). This more “negative” function of the method generated strong discontent.

Thus, the historical-critical exegesis could appear fragmentary and destructive, especially since certain exegetes, influenced by the comparative history of religions, as it was

practiced at the time, or based on philosophical conceptions, issued negative judgments against the Bible (Dei Verbum, 1993, p. 3).

Even so, the Church did not disregard it:

The historical-critical method is the indispensable approach for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Since the Holy Scripture, as the “Word of God in human language,” was composed by human authors in all its parts and sources, its proper understanding not only permits but requires the use of this method (Dei Verbum, 1993, p. 3).

Concurrently, the Latin American Church recognized the need for the new historical consciousness emerging in the conciliar spirit and understood that it was time to build the kingdom among men through the historical process of Liberation. Soteriology needed to be confronted through a critical analysis grounded in history, in order to secure the new conciliar inspirations that saw the modern world as a sign of hope and the need for closer dialogue. Salvation and Liberation drew closer and gained meanings more aligned with the reality of the people: “As every liberation is already an anticipation of the full redemption of Christ, the Church in Latin America feels particularly in solidarity with every educational effort aimed at liberating our peoples” (Medellín, 1968, p. 22).

Just as Christ did not deny His human condition, salvation, in Liberation, assumed, this Christological integrity. This new salvation conception, for Gotay (1985), was the foundation upon which Liberation Ecclesiology sought to renew its ecclesial practices in Latin America. However, for this purpose, the European theological language, grounded in eternity, limited the concept of a God who reveals and acts in the real history of His people. Once again, as seen in the 19th century, history was opposed.

In this sense, assuming the concrete history of a people as a place of revelation and recognizing that, within this same context, God acts and walks with His people did not seem to liberation

theologians to be very different from what occurred with the people of Israel. Election is a recurring theme in the sacred texts, and the history of salvation is the hermeneutic framework that Christianity has embraced from the beginning. However, when considered through European theological categories, Theology of Liberation was reduced to a "theory of revolution", that is a theory that appropriates theological categories to establish and justify the socialist revolution.

Liberation Theology tends to respect the autonomy of the very theory of revolution that arises from scientific socio-economic analysis, for which theology acknowledges it does not possess scientific tools. Gotay (1985) recalls that Hugo Assmann had already responded to this critique. If the historical coincidence led to the simultaneous emergence of both socialist revolution theories and Liberation Theology, it is not the responsibility of this theology, as Rahner and others wanted to defend. Europe wanted to interpret these two events in a monolithic way, through its own theological lenses.

### III. "THE "ENDLÖSUNG DER JUDENFRAGE" AS SOLUTION TO THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION IN LATIN AMERICA"

After briefly presenting the central theme behind the emergence of the Ecclesiology of Liberation — the incorporation of historicity into the theological discussion — theoretically and theologically grounded in Theology of Liberation, it becomes possible to analyze the underlying consequences of practicing this truly Latin American ecclesiology and the paths it followed in response to European reactions within its "Theo-logos- centric" process, as noted Lima (1988). To achieve this, political and religious ecclesial factors will be analyzed separately. It is important to emphasize that these dimensions are deeply interconnected. However, for analytical, methodological, and criteriological reasons, this analysis will be conducted separately, highlighting the specific nuances of each factor.

#### 3.1 Political Factors

The analysis of political factors will be conducted based on the studies of Delcio Monteiro de Lima in his work *Os Demônios Descendem do Norte*. This book that has largely been forgotten today but deserves to be revisited due to its historical-theological importance and its contribution to understanding the contemporary Catholic landscape, which faces severe internal crises. Lima (1988) argues that it is a complex task to demonstrate the external political influence on the Latin American religious context in the second half of the 20th century, particularly in Brazil. This challenge has not changed; on the contrary, it has worsened. However, he emphasizes that "it has not escaped the keen observer that clear evidence exists of external mechanisms interfering in support of the new scenario that emerges from the extraordinary momentum gained by modern movements or sects that have arisen in the country" (Lima, 1988, p. 8).

From the second half of the 20th century, dozens, if not hundreds, of new "Christian sects" proliferated in Latin America. According to the author, proselytizing indoctrination alone would not have been sufficient to cause such significant proliferation or meet the needs of those who were no longer satisfied with traditional religiosity. Thus, it can be affirmed that "there is no doubt about the influence of an accelerating factor in the entire process" (Lima, 1988, p. 09). However, it would be highly unlikely that a political plan existed with the specific purpose of directly interfering with the ecclesiological structure of Latin America, particularly in Brazil. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that social and religious movements, even if not fully organized, may have been influenced by foreign ideologies introduced through either unintentional or intentional gaps.

According to Lima (1988, p. 9):

A perspective that considers this religious transition in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, reveals the phenomenon as one that capitalizes on political dividends for opportunistic action. The proliferation of new

sects, which recruit believers relatively quickly, especially among the poorer segments of urban and rural populations, expands the avenues for consolidating ideas defended by the dominant establishment. Maintaining the status quo is less complicated than changing it. Religious movements with significant popular appeal fit perfectly into this strategy because, in their eagerness to increase their membership, they focus exclusively on the transcendent, leaving the temporal as it has always been.

Furthermore, beginning in the 1960s, the U.S. Department of State, assuming responsibility for formulating American foreign policies, "became convinced that Latin Americans' Christianity was not a sufficiently inhibiting barrier to the penetration, if not of international consumerism, then at least of advanced forms of modern socialism" (Lima, 1988, p.10). This suspicion was primarily directed at the Catholic Church, which adopted an ecclesiology linking faith to social issues, was seen as a potential obstacle to U.S. interests.

Regarding accusations of Marxism, Lima (1988, p. 22) cites a statement from a Communist Party leader, who clarified that communism viewed Christianity as a rival ideology:

Communists may have missed the course of history. They are being trampled and overtaken by events in an incredibly striking way particularly in Latin America and Brazil. In the case of basic ecclesial communities, it is also the old habit of suspicion: everything coming from the Church is deemed suspect. And so, stubbornly, they are playing into the hands of the right. Basic ecclesial communities, therefore, face two adversaries: the right and the communists.

The General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (CELAM), meeting in Medellín, wrote in its document, traditionally known as the "Medellín Document," that socialism was a challenge for both the Church and the Latin American economy:

The liberal capitalist system and the temptation of the Marxist system seem to exhaust, on our continent, the possibilities for transforming economic structures. Both systems violate human dignity: one because it presupposes the primacy of capital, its power, and its discriminatory use for profit. The other, although ideologically defending humanism, envisions humanity collectively and, in practice, becomes a totalitarian concentration of state power. We must denounce that Latin America is trapped between these two options and remains dependent on power centres that control its economy (Medellín, 1968, p. 5).

The lack of more nuanced and specialized analyses by Europe (in the case of the Church of Rome) and the U.S. perpetuated the common-sense discourse, widely accepted and disseminated by specialized media, that anything related to social issues must have a "red" tone. Even today, this identification of social concerns with socialism hinders serious discussions, especially among the people, about what distinguishes a liberating ecclesial action from a genuine communist action. On the other hand, it is known that capital structures its analyses in two poles: those who favour profit (for some) and those who oppose it. The latter group, which identified and continues to identify with the liberating ecclesial practice, is logically subordinated as communist.

As Silva (2014) suggests, the American action against Ecclesiology of Liberation would include another argument in addition to those mentioned: the rise of neoconservatism during Reagan's administration. This movement primarily focused on American youth, incorporating Calvinist theological principles of progress, which resulted in a significant increase in suicides among American university students. Another factor contributing to its spread was the support of private media corporations, which subsidized large print runs of publications and secured government investments through cultural foundations, as noted by Lima (1988).

The influence of the neoconservative offensive became more evident when the U.S. Department of State adopted more assertive stances, suspecting the Latin American ecclesiological approach, especially regarding Catholic leadership. This suspicion was seen as a possible breach of loyalty in supporting democracy in countries under American hegemony. The first offensive came with the release of the *Rockefeller Report* in 1969, commissioned by President Nixon:

Although it is not yet widely recognized, the military establishments and the Catholic Church are also among today's forces for social and political change in the other American republics [...]. Few people realize the extent to which both these institutions are now breaking with their past. They are, in fact, moving rapidly to the forefront as forces for social, economic, and political change. In the case of the Church, this is a recognition of a need to be more responsive to the popular will. [...] the Church may be somewhat in the same situation as the young – with a profound idealism but, as a result, in some cases, vulnerable to subversive penetration; ready to undertake a revolution if necessary to end injustice, but not clear either as to ultimate nature of the revolution itself or as to the governmental system through which the governmental system by which the justice it seeks can be realized (The *Rockefeller Report On The Americas*, 1969, p. 31).

The second offensive was the *Santa Fe Report*, published in May 1980, which expressed suspicions about the presence of Marxist theoretical references in Latin American Catholic ecclesiology:

The role of the Church in Latin America is vital to the concept of political freedom. Unfortunately, Marxist-Leninist forces have used the Church as a political weapon against private property and productive capitalism, infiltrating religious communities with ideas that are less Christian than communist (Lima, 1988, p. 44)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Santa Fe Report*, Proposition No. 3 – Part 2

Overall, the presence of these sects, stemming from the expansion of American neoconservatism, demonstrates that Ecclesiology of Liberation disrupted socio-political structures not only in Latin America but also globally, leading to its gradual deconstruction.

### 3.2 Ecclesial Factors

This discussion will be based on the reflection of José Oscar Beozzo in his article: "História da Igreja Católica no Brasil". Since the papacy of John Paul II (1978), a process of continuity and change has been observed concerning the post-conciliar ideas of Paul VI. This process was later referred to by Pope Benedict XVI as the "hermeneutics of reform" in his "Address to the Roman Curia" on December 22, 2005. In the words by pope Benedict XVI,

[...] Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult? Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or - as we would say today - on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarrelled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit. On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call "a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture"; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the "hermeneutic of reform", of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remains the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God. The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. (Bento XVI, 2005, p. 6)

The main concern was to close specific open discussions at the Second Vatican Council that generated unorthodox interpretations. Thus, the Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church were launched, which became known as "the return of great discipline" (Beozzo, 1989, p.167).

In this context, Beozzo (1989) comments that the concern of the official Church and figures like then-Cardinal Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI) was that the aggiornamento proposed by Pope John XXIII and the consolidation of conciliar reforms might have led the Church to certain practices that were significantly distant from the values present in pre-conciliar ecclesial action, as described in the *Instruction Libertatis Nuntius* by the same cardinal. This concern is expressed more radically today. The rise of traditionalist movements— from the followers of Lefebvre —and sedevacantism is alarming, especially in Brazil. John Paul II's stance varied according to the theoretical theological context. In social issues, such as human promotion, social justice, the search for peace, and the defence of life, his discourse showed openness and support for innovations, following the post-conciliar trend of dialogue with the modern world. However, on moral issues, his attitude remained conservative, leading to noticeable "course corrections" in controversies with Theology of Liberation. Another rupture was regarding the formation of the clergy:

Important sectors of the clergy and episcopate, with full support from Rome, propose a return to traditional seminaries, breaking with two trends that matured in the post-conciliar period: the first, of theological studies openly accessible to laity and seminarians, religious and religious women [...]; the second, to organize formation through small communities of life embedded in popular settings (Beozzo, 1989, p.168).

One cannot forget a clear act of rupture with Vatican II, the direct interference of the Holy See in some instances, such the veto on the work of Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff, *Igreja Carisma e Poder*, followed by the imposition of

obedient silence; the suspension of the CLAR (Latin American Conference of Religious) *Palavra-Viva* project; and the prohibition of the Bible reading methodology promoted by CEBI, persecution of Latin American theologians like John Sobrino, among others.

"What is perceived is that what Benedict XVI called 'conciliar continuity' was viewed by the Latin American Church as 'rupture,' and vice versa. During the time of John Paul II, post-conciliar ideas were retracted because, for Benedict XVI, they did not promote Vatican II but rather broke with it." The Ecclesiology of Liberation, whose spirit drew from Vatican II, was gradually blocked by the theoretical-theological practice of the Magisterium, which was much more concerned with uniformity than dialogue. Until it received its "*Endlösung der Judenfrage*" (Final Solution) under Benedict XVI, who definitively prescribed Theology of Liberation as a theology that was not Catholic.

All these religious and political factors contributed to the gradual dismantling of Theology of Liberation in its new form of church practice. In his address to the Bishops of South III and South IV Regions of the Brazilian Bishops's Conference, during the *Ad limina apostolorum* visit, the pope wrote:

In this regard, beloved Brothers, it is worth remembering that last August the Instruction *Libertatis Nuntius* on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith celebrated its 25th anniversary. It stressed the danger that is entailed in an a-critical acceptance on the part of certain theologians of theses and methodologies that derive from Marxism. Its more or less visible consequences consisting of rebellion, division, dissent, offence, and anarchy make themselves felt, creating in your diocesan communities great suffering and a serious loss of vitality. I implore all those who in some way have felt attracted, involved and deeply touched by certain deceptive principles of Theology of Liberation to consider once again the above-mentioned Instruction, perceiving

the kind light with which it is proffered. I remind everyone that "'the supreme rule of her [the Church's] faith' derives from the unity which the Spirit has created between Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church in a reciprocity which means that none of the three can survive without the others" (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 55); and that in the context of Church bodies and communities, forgiveness offered and received in the name of and out of love for the Most Blessed Trinity, whom we worship in our hearts, puts an end to the suffering of our beloved Church, a pilgrim in the Lands of the Holy Cross (Bento XVI, 2009, p. 2)

Pope Benedict XVI insists on interpreting to read the Ecclesiology of Liberation as a "methodological option." Allow me to explain. If the Latin American Church has engaged with the impoverished, it was certainly not due to reading Marx or any similar literature. What the official Church has never understood is that the preferential option for the poor is not merely a choice but a reality lived daily by the Latin Church. Those who live the reality of Latin America do not need Marx to understand that a class struggle is taking place, whether they choose to participate or not. Once again, the Church makes the issue of historicity—both concrete and material—invisible. History does not choose sides; it reveals the sides, and the Church, faced with this class game imposed by a system it has never questioned, must make a choice.

Drawing on Brightenti's (2008) reflections on the Option for the Poor, he states that, even though CELAM in Aparecida in 2007 said that the realization of Vatican II had not yet happened due to a lack of courage and commitment, on the other hand, it is also observed: "certain revisionists and setbacks to pre-conciliar positions today only confirm the watershed that this 'Kairos' represents in the Church." (Brightenti, 2008, p. 1).

The missionary zeal requested by CELAM in Aparecida must be accompanied, above all, by overcoming what can be called the "ecclesiocentrism", that has reigned for over a

millennium. The ecclesiology in this model does not go beyond a "christomonism":

The ecclesiology of the second millennium is characterized, among other things, by a christomonism that eclipses its Trinitarian matrix. Based on a Docetic Christology, the Church's self-awareness, in identifying itself with the Body of the Glorious and Resurrected Christ, has historically tended to reduce its ecclesial nature to the leaders of this Body, who are the clergy. A layperson is defined as one who is not a cleric, essentially someone who has no proper place in the Church. . They are recipients, if not consumers, of the sacraments dispensed by the hierarchy or, at most, extensions of its arm. (Brightenti, 2008, p.02)

Aparecida was an attempt to rescue the missionary spirit of Medellín, so that the Church would be in a "permanent state of mission," in which everyone, without exception, could have life in abundance.

Even with this landmark for Latin America, which was Aparecida 2007, the stance of the Universal Church remains one of curtailment and combat against the Ecclesiology of Liberation. To illustrate this stance, I will present some recent interventions from the Holy See regarding the practice of Latin American ecclesiology. Firstly, it is essential to say that not all Catholic movements that emerged during the conciliar opening process of Vatican II received this same spirit. One such movement, the Montfort Cultural Association, has strived for the return of the pre-conciliar tradition. In one of its online articles, the website openly criticizes theologian Leonardo Boff." Thus, the article states:

To the surprise of all our readers, it is with immense pleasure that we publish, at the end of this article and in whole , an article by the former friar, heretic, and apostate Leonardo Boff, now simply Genésio. Annoyed by the various pronouncements of the pope during his visit to Brazil, especially with what the pope said to the Bishops of the CNBB, Theology of Liberation finds itself lost and,

through its leading Brazilian heretic, declares a war against the pope and the Catholic Church. [...] Nothing like cancer appears to be better removed. Let the heretics openly declare who they are and either leave or be expelled from the Church, which they only remain to more efficiently destroy it. In this Boffian article, the author removes the mask, showing that he is at war with the Church and with Pope Benedict XVI, confessing to profess a doctrine that is contrary to the Church (Fedeli, 2008, p. 4)

Another argument in this attack in Latin America is the comment by Colombian priest João Pedro Baresi, cited by Marcelo Netto Rodrigues in a virtual article, in which he speaks of the purpose of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Brazil:

The visit of Ratzinger is part of a plan primarily concerned with the exodus of Catholics, but not only that. According to Baresi, the pope will also take advantage of the trip to attempt to put an end to Theology of Liberation [...] What matters is not Theology of Liberation, but liberation itself, as Gustavo Gutierrez always says. If anyone has something better that contributes to the commitment to liberation in the light of faith, let them indicate it. (Rodrigues, 2007, p. 1-2)

Also, in this same sense, there have been two recent censures in Latin America. The first to Jesuit Jon Sobrino when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith examined and condemned his two books: "*Jesus Christ Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*" (1991) and "*Faith in Jesus Christ: An Essay from the Victims' Perspective*" (1999)<sup>3</sup>. The second to theologian José Maria Vigil for his work: *Theology of Religious Pluralism*, which is

part of ASETT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians)<sup>4</sup>.

#### IV. CURRENT REFLECTIONS

According to Peixoto (2007), the socio-anthropological reality of Latin America still suffers from some marks that have accompanied it since the arrival of colonizers: poverty and exclusion. The Ecclesiology of Liberation, in truth, has lost its vigour from the 1970s and 80s, but some pastoral experiences and popular movements remain active. The election of Pope Francis brought hope to this theology, which struggles to survive and now faces perhaps its greatest challenge: a conservative and fragmented Church..

Considering new realities (the globalized and technologically mediated world), the perspective of Theology of Liberation has broadened and diversified ecumenically. A specific "activism," characteristic of the 1970s, has been reviewed reflecting contemporary challenges, such as the problem of Ecotheology: "It is neither a rupture nor a denial of Medellín and its methodological proposal, but a new moment in the development of its walk with the history of the liberation of the poor [...]" (Peixoto, 2007, p. 193).

The new context requires proper restructuring, especially in the educational field. It is essential to implement an education that promotes Liberation, combined with political practice and profound theological reflection. From this educational perspective, it is possible to reformulate pastoral work as a theological space that supports a liberating ecclesiological practice, and promotes the production of critical knowledge and a spirituality oriented toward freedom.

It is time to strengthen and consolidate practices imbued with renewal that maintain the spirit and choices of Medellín 68. Because the people experiencing poverty and the excluded expect more than anathemas,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH. *Notification*. Regarding the works of Fr. Jon SOBRINO S.I.: Jesucristo liberador: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth (Madrid, 1991) and Faith in Jesus Christ: An Essay from the Perspective of the Victims (San Salvador, 1999)." Disponível em: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20061126\\_notification-sobrino\\_po.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_po.html).

<sup>4</sup> ASETT. Declaração de Solidariedade com José Maria Vigil. Disponível em: <http://www.adital.com.br/site/noticia.asp?lang=PT&cod=32048> acessado em 06/08/08.

censorship, distrust, discrimination, and internal disputes over ecclesial spaces, they expect evangelizing dynamism, a prophetic dimension, and the struggle for justice (Peixoto, 2007, p.193).

It is equally important to know how to interpret criticism. A Ecclesiology of Liberation cannot exist without liberation spirituality. Moreover, it must associate itself with social communication media (exceptionally social networks) to mediate social movements and gain the support of disadvantaged classes.

Despite this process of regression and attacks from conservative movements within the Church itself, Theology of Liberation (LT), the foundational basis for Ecclesiology of Liberation, remains active in theological-theoretical reflection and production. The same spirit that inspired Medellín continues to inspire theologians such as Father Júlio Lancelot and others to preserve this way of being in the Church.

In this sense, LT today is understood not only by this exact name. Its decline has allowed for a different perspective, leading to diversification. Liberation in a socio-economic sense, after the crisis of the 1990s, recognized new emerging subjects: women, Indigenous people, Black people, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc. These groups have emerged in such a way that they contributed to the concretization of the abstract terminology of "the poor." People experiencing poverty now have a distinct face, color, and gender identity. (Latin American Agenda, 2007, p.222).

These new theological-theoretical forms (feminist theology, Indigenous theology, Afro-theology, etc.) have replaced previous reflections that were solely political, expanding into ethnic, cultural, and ecological fields. However, such theologies are not widely covered by the media because they do not align with its market-driven interests, as their content does not correspond to popular trends.

Another way to observe the praxis of this Ecclesiology of Liberation was through the creation of the World Social Forums (WSF) in 2001, with the theme: "Another world is possible."

Although it did not originate from a religious movement but rather a popular one, the liberating spirit was present within it. It did not take long for the liberation movement to adopt this new mode of reflection when, in 2005, the first World Forum on Theology of Liberation (WFTL) took place in Porto Alegre, also linked to the World Social Forums (WSF). This experience was repeated in 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya. This experience led to the creation of the work Theology of Another Possible World (Latin American Agenda, 2007, p.222).

Between 2001 and 2006, the ASETT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) was created, which has grown significantly in theological production and reflection, particularly on the theme of religious pluralism:

In light of this change [Second Vatican Council], a new self-understanding of our religion is necessary, as we no longer conceive it as the only true religion but rather as one among many, all of which are genuinely and uniquely willed by God (Latin American Agenda, 2007, p.223).

Several works have been published, such as "*Pelos muitos caminhos de Deus*", among many other activities. Also worth mentioning is the work developed in the *CONCILIUM* journal:

The famous international journal *CONCILIUM* accepted the proposal made by the Latin American Theological Commission (CTL) to dedicate a monographic issue of the journal to the challenge of this pluralist reconversion of LT. One of the first issues of the journal in 2007, edited by Carlos Susin, Andrés Torres Queiruga, and José María Vigil, will spread this internationally [...] (Latin American Agenda, 2007, p.223).

The CLT, linked to ASETT, which recently held its General Assembly in South Africa, adopted the following priorities: a) Liberation paradigm, always present and essential as it concerns the integral Liberation of the human being; b) Pluralist paradigm, rereading Christianity with the conviction that salvation is a plural path; c) Multireligious challenge, recognizing religious diversity as a value and constructing a theological

language based on this point; d) Post-religious challenge, addressing the crisis of religion as the new theological space on which LT must reflect.

## V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

First, this essay is a free-form reflection on the ecclesiology of liberation, encompassing its theological, political, and ecclesial aspects. It is not exhaustive and does not aim to be; it merely describes a critical mass for thinking about general and vital elements to project new actions. In this sense, some points are particularly relevant to highlight.

The most important fact regarding Liberation theology is the relationship between theology and history. Historicity is an issue that has always posed a challenge, both for science and philosophy. Theology is no different. The Ecclesiology of Liberation, as shown, is based on Theology of Liberation, which introduces the historical aspect as an element that cannot be overlooked. It is not new that one of the characteristics of theological sciences is their presupposition of truth within a discourse of authority. Theological beliefs are formed from an epistemological perspective that requires certain theses to be accepted as accurate, and it is on these that arguments must be constructed. We will not delve into the legitimacy of theological truth but will merely address its nature.

Theological truth is ontological and transcendent, meaning it does not undergo re-evaluation. This fact gives this discourse the character of certainty, a factor heavily questioned by contemporary epistemologists. Theology of Liberation, on the other hand, understands that if truth is of an ontological nature, it can only be accessed in and through history. The relationship between this view of truth and the traditional one presents oppositions. While traditional theological truth is seen as a condition for history itself, as explained by papal encyclicals in the 19th century, Theology of Liberation believes that theological truth occurs in history to change it, as evidenced by the event of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever

believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The Son of God preexists in his divine nature but suffers the hardships of history, and his actions have real impacts. The divine salvific act does not happen outside of history but through it. History itself conditions the way the Resurrection occurred: "Three days" were necessary—a temporal condition. It is within this perspective that the Ecclesiology of Liberation should also be understood: the salvific action of the Church, as the sacrament of Christ, implies being in the real and concrete history, changing and being changed by it. Liberation cannot occur on a purely spiritual plane but must, like the Son of God himself, impact reality.

Secondly, it is essential to touch on the relationship between Ecclesiology of Liberation and Marxism (or socialism or communism). The fact that a liberating stance points out significant nuances of social reality does not make it a symbol, synonym, or substitute for socialism. "It is undeniable that, during the 1970s and 1980s, many ecclesial movements formed alliances with political movements of a socialist tendency. However, this alliance, often misunderstood, does not define the theological or ecclesiological nature of Liberation. Liberation is not synonymous with the proletariat's revolution but is "life in abundance," as promised in the Johannine writings.

However, instead of elaborating on proving that Theology of Liberation is not socialism, as briefly mentioned earlier—that is, the Church in Latin America has always known how to differentiate and distinguish its ecclesial practice from its political options—I want to show how this identification is much more a relationship between traditional theology and capitalism than between Theology of Liberation and communism. The political and theological arguments that have fought against Theology of Liberation have always opposed it by uncritically accepting the polarization between capitalism and communism. Both the papal encyclicals of the 19th and 20th centuries sought to identify Theology of Liberation as a branch of communism but relied

on capitalism for this. In other words, the accusation of communism is much more a defence of capitalism than anything else.

There is an important issue that will not have time to delve into: there is not just one type of socialism. In each place it has manifested, its expressions are diverse. However, the accusations against Theology of Liberation have always relied on traumatic experiences of this system. On the other hand, traditional theology, linked to significant capital, offers little concrete to address the problems raised and condemned by Theology of Liberation. If the Son of God serves as the example, He openly revealed the contradictions within His society without ever having read a single line of Marx. . It is impossible to read the Gospels and not see the figure of the impoverished (economically and culturally). Thus, class struggle, which is by the capitalist system, depending on any historical materialist theory, is a fact. to what capitalists and traditional capitalist theology claim, it was not invented by socialism but by the surplus value production of capitalism.

Lastly, the recent battles against Ecclesiology of Liberation during the papacy of Pope Francis have, in part, been responsible for the crisis in contemporary Catholicism. To combat the current pope, conservatives and traditionalists have diverged to such an extent that various anti-ecclesial movements have found space to emerge. Movements, already known in the past, called sedevacantists, now proliferate within the Catholic Church. This crisis of "great discipline" (initiated by Pope John Paul II) calls into question the true intentions of traditional theology regarding its apologetics. When Benedict XVI was elected, the papal figure among conservatives and traditionalists was reinforced and glorified. However, with the same rigidity and vigour, the election of Francis rendered the figure of the Supreme Pontiff almost "dispensable."

These contradictions among conservatives, traditionalists, and sedevacantists present worldwide, but especially in Brazil, in my view, undermine the true intentions of traditional theology against Theology of Liberation. The great concern of theologians, conservative

movements, traditionalists, and sedevacantists is that theology cannot and should not lose its purity with issues that may call into question dubious political options. In this sense, traditional theology, preoccupied with the historical immersion that Theology of Liberation presents, fears being submerged in the depths of political-capitalist history. By accusing Theology of Liberation of being immanentist, communist, and heretical, traditional theology presents its great mirror: utilitarian, capitalist, and atheist.

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