

## Liberation theology rooted in Bible, Christ, Father Gutierrez says

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Liberation theology, which interprets the teachings of Christ in relation to liberation from unjust social, economic and political conditions, is rooted in the Bible and the life of Jesus, said the priest who developed the concept nearly 50 years ago.

Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez told an audience Nov. 7 at St. Paul University in Ottawa that "theology is a hermeneutic of hope. Theology touches on the motive, the story of our Lord in history."

"Theology is a letter of love to God," the Peruvian theologian known as the father of liberation theology added during a program in which he received an honorary doctorate.

"Theology is not a perfect response to that question, but an effort to respond," he said, noting the immense suffering and mystery of poverty.

Since liberation theology arose in the 1960s, its reputation has suffered from time to time through associations with Marxism, utopian thinking and even armed struggle.

But in an interview, Gutierrez, 86, said the news media is responsible for such a reputation. Liberation theology has never been condemned by any pope, he said.

"The preferential option for the poor is the link to our faith in Jesus Christ," Gutierrez said, recalling the words of Pope Benedict XVI in an address at the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. "This question is central: the preferential option of the poor."

The document emerging from the conference also contains many "affirmations in line with liberation theology," Gutierrez said.

Ninety percent of liberation theology is linked to Jesus Christ, he explained. With Pope Francis coming from Latin America and his shared experience of poverty in that part of the world, he said, liberation theology is being re-examined.

"At the same time, we must avoid to reduce the teaching of the pope to one theology," Gutierrez said. "I don't accept this. He is speaking about the Gospel."

"Liberation theology is a theology recalling the relevance of the poor for the Christian message, but it is not creating this," he said. "It is enough to read the Gospels, to expect strongly about the poor."

Liberation theology cannot be divorced from the Gospel, he continued, describing it in one manner as a theology of salvation. "At the same time we must pay attention to the moment. 'Liberation' was a very important word in Latin America at that time," he said.

From words that are known and accepted, we say "this is our question, to speak from the liberation from sin, to forgive and so on," he said.

"A theology cannot create another message," he said. "Theology is a reflection about the message [of the Gospel]."

Born in Lima, Peru in 1928, Gutierrez originally studied to become a doctor, but questioned whether he could serve people better as a doctor or as a priest. He chose to be a priest.

Gutierrez came from a poor family and during his teen years was confined to a wheelchair with osteomyelitis, an infection of the bone marrow. As a young priest, in pastoral work in a poor parish, he saw severe poverty as "the most strong challenge to the announcement of the love of God."

In Latin America, a Catholic continent, half of the population at the time was scandalously poor and the love for these poor people was not present, he said.

While Pope John XXIII had spoken of the preferential option for the poor, there was an absence of attention to poverty in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, he said, and led to further reflection.

In 1967, Gutierrez was invited to Montreal to teach on the church and poverty. It was while teaching the course that he began to pull together his thoughts on the relationship of poverty to the Gospel, giving birth to liberation theology. Poverty was not only a social question, he said, but also a theological question.

Gutierrez said poverty destroys faith and destroys the person. "It is always an evil; it is never a good," he said.

He dismissed romantic ideas of poverty, calling it always an evil. In the Bible, however, there are two senses of poverty: material poverty and spiritual poverty as represented by the first Beatitude. Spiritual poverty leads to a detachment from temporal life so as to do the will of God, he said. That detachment may lead to voluntary poverty, but that choice is out of solidarity with the poor, not solidarity with poverty, he said.

Liberation theology reveals how the fight against poverty must be a priority, but poverty is not the only question in Christ's revelation, he said. The fact the poor die before their time must be addressed, he said.

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