SANCTIFICATION AND LIBERATION

JOSÉ MIGUEZ BONINO

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No Christian theology can forgo the question of sanctification. It is unavoidably posed both by the Scripture and by the tradition of the Church. It is demanded by the very nature of the Gospel. Moreover, there are, at least three basic affirmations which mark the scope and structure of any reflection on sanctification: (1) The triune God claims the total existence of the human being; in Jesus Christ, God "sanctified" the whole human race: has made it God's own; (2) The believer recognizes and honors this claim by "consecrating" himself/herself to God and God's purpose: the objective sanctification is subjectively appropriated; (3) This "sanctity" is lived out in concrete historical and social forms—in biblical terms, this "sanctity" is "a way of walking," a particular kind of "conversation" carried by the believer in the world.

In the Reformation tradition, the dominant concern with regard to sanctification is to make clear the total—and even the "exclusive"—priority of God's initiative. This was usually done by making a clear-cut distinction between justification and sanctification. Then, it was not always easy to speak with equal force and clarity of the relation between the two. Recent formulations have tried—in my view successfully—to overcome the dichotomy. Barth has expressed it saying: "justification as origin and sanctification as goal are priori-

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tary just as justification as presupposition and sanctification as consequence come second...therefore both are superior and sub-ordinated" (KD, IV.507ff). Otto Weber makes the same point in a different way: "Justification is not just the original cause of sanctification but its constant ground. Sanctification, in turn, is not just the consequence of justification but rather its living and continual effect in the concrete life of man" (Foundation of Dogmatics, II:329).

For Wesley, if I see it correctly, the main question is "how is the active Christian subject constituted?" His definition of what such active Christian subject does may not be very original—it synthesizes the best ascetic, philanthropic and devotional counsels of his day. But how does this subject come into being? He comes to the answer "listening to the Reformation." One could put it by saying that Wesley received from Luther a doctrine of sanctification by grace through faith. I have tried to express it saying that, "Sanctification continues to be for Wesley the goal of redemption and of Christian life. He has to preach faith because it is the only means of access into the ambit of sanctification."

Why begin in this way? Because I think that a theology seen in the perspective of liberation should (from the point of view of a Latin-American Methodist Protestant) build on this double foundation: the priority of God's action and God's active claim of the total life of the Christian that incorporates him/her in God's purpose and action in the world. The question becomes, then, what does such a Liberation perspective bring to the understanding of sanctification? Or how would a doctrine of sanctification be articulated within the parameters of a theology of liberation?

In particular, Latin American Liberation Theology has been perceived in the North Atlantic world as predominantly—or even exclusively—concerned with structural, macrosocial phenomena. Such perception is not altogether wrong but it is somewhat superficial. Class structure, the phenomenon of dependence, the relations of production, the ideological question are instrumental to the understanding of the human condition of the people—particularly the poor, oppressed, marginal or excluded, and to the transformation of that condition in the direction of God's salvific purpose for humankind. It is possible that, in this concern—and confronted with a theological tradition that refused to relate to structural questions—our theological expression has not been able to adequately express the relation between the macro-social and micro-social, the collective and the personal, the objective and the subjective. But the pastoral praxis of this theology has always been concerned precisely with this relation. I think this is precisely what a theology of liberation can bring to the consideration of sanctification.

Let me quote at this point a few sentences of Hugo Assmann which seem to me to put the question in a strikingly clear and fruitful way:

With respect to the rich experience in which the personal need to love and be loved is realized, what is the meaning of giving one's life for one's brother in the wider context of the historical process? Is there not a need to enlarge the parameters of our experiential references in our understanding of the gratuitousness of love?"
In what follows I will simply try to show how the centrality of love in the thought and praxis of Liberation Theology relates the microsocial, personal and subjective dimension to the structural concerns and social struggles. Due to the limitations of time I can only point very briefly to three areas: the reconstruction of the human subject, the building of society, and spirituality.

THE REBIRTH OF THE PERSON

Gustavo Gutiérrez has contended that, while evangelization means to the North Atlantic world leading the secularized person to accept the existence of God, in Latin America it is to help the non-person to the awareness that God is their father. The first part of the statement may or may not be correct; the second undoubtedly is. The category of "the non-person" is not merely an impressionistic description: it designates a phenomenon which results from a particular history and social conditions which affect large majorities in Latin America (but also in other areas of the so-called Third World and increasingly important groups in the industrialized countries) and which has specific social and psychological characteristics. "Non-person" designates, on the one hand, the negative evaluation of such people by the dominant system (and as a consequence also to some extent their own negative self-evaluation) and, on the other hand, the destruction of the cultural, social, and personal self-identity through the diverse forms of exclusion, oppression, and repression.

We will not now take the time to trace the historical conditions which have created this situation or analyze the economic policies and the corresponding political and social factors which extend it now even beyond the "traditional poor" to sectors of the middle classes. But we do face a new kind of "poverty," which produces what Durkheim, R.K. Merton and others have analyzed as "anomia" and father Joseph Wresinski has so realistically and dramatically described in his writings on "the poorest of the poor."

When people try to describe this situation they use words with a deep biblical and theological resonance: death, destruction, disintegration, corruption. And when we try to characterize the way out of such a situation we also lay hands on terms like new life, rebirth, renewal. These are the words which, in Pauline language, are used to describe the direction of "the old age," captive to the "powers," immersed in the "flesh" and moving towards death or living already the impending death. And, on the other hand, the words that express redemption as entering into a new sphere of life, "a new time," as it were, a new atmosphere of existence (being "in Christ" or "in the Spirit"), which is not anymore dominated by the powers of destruction but dynamized by the righteousness of Christ and the power of love.

How can this movement take place? Certainly, in the power of the Spirit. But what are the mediations and ways by which the Spirit operates in the concrete conditions of our situation? I will refer here to the pastoral experience of Base Christian Communities—whether Catholic or Protestant—because they illustrate in a very special way the relation between personal, communal, and structural, objective and subjective, which Liberation Theology tries to articulate theologically. But we see similar processes of personalization and community, although perhaps more "intro-
verted," in other religious experiences—like Pentecostal communities. And we have to ask ourselves whether and how we can recognize and celebrate the action of the same Spirit in other forms of associations and movements among the poor.

1. **Becoming a person means claiming the dignity of children of God which is proclaimed in the Gospel and being recognized as such by sisters and brothers.** A short story also from Mexico—which repeats itself almost literally in most of our countries—illustrates this point. The story of an illiterate, poor woman, who supports her family with her work. She is regularly battered by her husband who comes home drunk. One day a neighbor invites her to the community. She goes one, two, several times. She discovers that reading the Bible and reflecting on it is the central source of strength and wisdom. It takes her some time to have the courage to admit that she cannot read. But slowly, on the pages of the Bible, she is taught to read. And one day she faces her husband: "Listen to me. I have learned about the Gospel. How we are living is not right. It should be different. You should not hit me and the children. It will be different." Things did change. And she shares her reflection with us: "God has given wisdom to women. Men have strength, but it is useless because they lack the wisdom of women. And women do not discover their wisdom until they read the gospel." The Bible and the Church have now become their own. God speaks and they can listen, converse, respond.

2. **Becoming a person means claiming and receiving "the word," the right to speak and be heard.** Pablo Richard tells of his experience in a small base community in Central America. He was presiding over a celebration. The Gospel had been read and everybody had expressed their response...with the exception of an Indian, who had remained silent. Pablo thought it would be good to hear him and invited him to say "what he thought" about this text. The man began to cry and Pablo thought he had embarrassed him and apologized. "No", the man answered, "you have not embarrassed me. I cry for joy because it is the first time in my life that anybody asks me what I think." The anonymous man and woman in the shanty town, the receiver of orders, the passive subject of somebody else’s word now has a name. He/she can respond; he/she can utter a word and be heard. His/her suffering, his/her hope, his/her reality as a person can now be projected and built together with others their common identity.

3. **Becoming a person means becoming a maker of decisions.** They will build a road. They will address the authorities (ecclesiastical or civilian). They will start a mission in another place. The decisions will be reached by consensus, where every person will have a right to participate. Some decisions will be easy. Others will be costly and dangerous—to accept or resist eviction, to join in a strike, to occupy a piece of idle land. Their very life will be at stake. Some decisions will prove wrong. But they have become women and men who can take their lives into their own hands.

4. **Becoming a person means opting for or taking on a project for the future, to give an earthly shape to their hope.** This happens slowly as local and immediate issues become related to larger ones: for instance, entering trade unions, or involving themselves in different political movements, addressing Church ques-
tions. There will be differences and the community will define the limits of their pluralism. But differences will be related to a global goal: to build a new society of justice and solidarity. Commenting on the Magnificat, a Mexican woman from a community said: "This is the message that Mary brought to Mexico. It is the word of her Son. We don't think any more just about our family, we think of Mexico." Faith is not related exclusively to a personal destiny, it embraces the destiny of a people.

Thus, common reflection, celebration and action are the cradle of a new identity. The non-person claims and is given the word. They become decision-makers. God speaks with them in the Gospel and they can respond. The Holy Spirit gathers the ekklēsia as they come and celebrate together. Thus, my personal identity is not re-created over against the other but together with him/her. And social identity is not achieved by suppressing the individual (as in the mass) or in naked competition (in the neoliberal ideology), but by projecting, acting, praying together in freedom. It would be illusory to think that things happen as smoothly as this summary may suggest. Rivalry, competition and confrontation are ever present and invade every area of human life—family, church, neighborhood, friendship. All these are present in the community. The important thing is the universe of meanings and symbols in which the whole ambiguous process of this recreation of the person takes place. Personal self-realization and the building of the world are conceived and approached as a project of love, an active, responsive, constructive and lucid love in which the free acceptance of God's love and the openness in trust to the neighbor presuppose and implicate each other.

THE SHAPE OF A NEW SOCIETY

There is, to be sure, nothing new in this spiritual event. It is an event of grace. It is simply the announcement that "you are accepted." But how this announcement is mediated is here the key question. We have almost exclusively relied on "proclamation," usually understood as oral proclamation. But we know that words take their meanings in terms of the language code and the social relations in which they are used. How can the "non-person," for whom the name of God has been related to an experience of unilateral submission and domination, receive the message of "unconditional acceptance" as a word of empowerment and hope, unless a community of mutual acceptance, of freedom and decision, of life and action gives content to that message. The community is for the non-person the concrete historical locus where the experience of re-humanization takes place. To be "in Christ" is to be in the community of love and mutual acceptance. We are not speaking of two things, but of a single event which needs to be accounted for in the two propositions: "I am accepted by God" and "I belong in the community of love."

Such communities have existed throughout history in many forms. But in many cases their inner coherence has been established through isolation from the rest of society. The contrary happens in this case. On the one hand, there is a universality in their understanding of God's concern which makes the boundaries of the community extraordinarily flexible and fluid. Anybody who comes belongs. Membership—insofar as it exists formally—is determined by closeness to the center.
meeting, celebration, participation, action, rather than by reference to a frontier. On the other hand, oneness is ensured by the relation between local action and global concern: "from exclusive concern for the family to the concern for Mexico," as the woman of our story put it.

This larger project is governed by a basic option: the paramount concern for the poor. Of course, in a situation characterized by oppression and marginalization such an option sets a frontier and involves confrontation. This should concern us at a later point. But before turning to this question I would like to explore briefly the meaning of this process of evangelization and personalization in community for political existence and the political project.

1. A first observation has to do with the question of power. In his Microphysics of Power, Michel Foucault has taught us that power cannot be understood simply as a thing that some people have and others have not. Rather, it is a movement, a relation, a network. He offers "an ascending analysis of power" for which "the infinitesimal mechanisms" of a society—perhaps the family, the Church, the school—"are invaded, colonized, used, dominated, displaced or extended by more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination." Global domination becomes possible because it universalizes power relations at the micro-social level. Once established, though, global domination infiltrates and strengthens domination at the smaller level. How can the vicious circle be broken? The only answer is: working simultaneously at both points.

If global domination is stable to the extent that all relations are pervaded by the same conception and exercise of power, changes in the conception and exercise of global power—structural or revolutionary change—can only be profound and lasting to the extent that they are continually generated and supported by changes in micro-relations. It is in this sense that the human transformation that takes in the base community is a source of transforming power, not only because it provides a model and a stimulus for organization, but because it establishes a form of identity and relationship which "puts in circulation" a different conception and operation of power. Several instances of such influence both at the level of social and ecclesiastical organizations, could here be cited as illustrations.

2. But this process "from below" cannot subsist by itself unless it is placed within a larger, structural change. Again Assmann has expressed it sharply in a discussion of Wesley's social holiness: "Social holiness depends on the historic mediations which articulate it. Social holiness is not enough." In other words, if "holiness" is to become really social, it has to find an understanding of society, a view of the total social reality—an "ideology" if one uses the word positively—a concrete project for social construction and a strategy for action. All these elements are, in a way, "secular," they belong to society as a whole. But they are not "neutral," they represent different views of life, different locations in society and different understandings of the world. Has the community of faith, the women and men "born anew" and committed to God's purpose, any direction when they try to find the historic mediations? Are we, in fact, in our struggle for change, forced to choose between the capitalistic "technocratic" neoliberal model where human life is sacrificed to the
so-called "objective" mechanisms of the universal market or the authoritarian and bureaucratic so-called socialism which has failed to deliver both its material and its social promises?

It seems to me that the kind of "social holiness" generated in the new Christian identity-in-community is here relevant at several points:

A. The only protection from authoritarianism is active participation: in this sense the community is the seedbed of a participative democracy as it seeks forms of organization, control and operation which disperse power and make it accountable to the highest degree compatible with order and efficacy;

B. The basic motivation for social construction which emerges from this experience is solidarity, not merely as an abstract "ontological" principle, but as something that has to be "built" into the forms of political, social and economic organization;

C. Such a participative, solitary construction of society in a situation of oppression and inequality, runs against individual and collective interests, authoritarian traditions and existing structures. It therefore generates struggle: the image of the "enemy" is always present and we are tempted to define our identity as a function of the "enemy." But in the experience of the community the deeper identity is not primarily related "to those on the other side," but born in the encounter with the sister and brother who listens to me, who sustains me in the struggle to the point of laying down their life for me. Opposition to the enemy—necessary as it is—is not an end in itself but a temporary function of a solidarity that seeks to enlarge the circle of belonging: the militants, the community, the poor and oppressed outside the community, those engaged in the struggle for liberation elsewhere in the world, the people from other social groups and classes who make an option for the poor and potentially "all" as the conditions of oppression are overcome;

D. Finally, the choice of "solidarity" as the form of "holiness" in social construction, represents a theological perspective on political and social praxis, which I would call "the perspective of the greater good" over against the perspective of the lesser evil which predominates in so much Christian political ethics. Here Wesley's idea of "perfection" has a social relevance because the ever-present possibility of achieving a greater good is not based on a purely utopian vision or a superficial "anthropological optimism" but on the power of God's grace and the action of the Holy Spirit to which no artificial limit or blockage can be established. Sin, on the other hand, is not a fixed quantity or an absolute limit, but a negative force, with which a permanent struggle has to be waged. In other words, the eschatological distance is not a preset limit, but an ever-moving target, or better, an absolute future that challenges us to discern the relative futures striving to be born from the womb of present reality. Love, which is the only absolute future and the only absolute opposition to sin, is the power that gives an insight into new possibilities and motivates the struggle for "the greater good."

A NEW SPIRITUALITY

We must recognize the ambiguity of the word "spirituality." However, we must also reflect on the fact that new understandings and new forms of acting out the
Christian faith have been related to new forms of experience, celebration, personal and communal discipline, which, for lack of a better term, we can call “spirituality.” Speaking of this fact, J. Hernández Pico S.J. from Nicaragua says that “the theology of liberation has been born from a spirituality of liberation.” And his colleague Jon Sobrino defines that theology as rooted in “the experience of meeting God in the encounter with the poor.” Liberation sanctification, if such an expression can be used, cannot be understood if it is considered only a theology or a praxis—if it is not seen as discipline, prayer, and celebration. Let me simply recall some aspects of what I mean by “liberation spirituality.”

1. It is, first of all, an understanding of spirituality as “walking in the Spirit” in the Pauline sense of an existence inspired and led by the highest gift of the Spirit which is love and therefore furthest removed from boasting, self-satisfaction, and the contempt for others which are the way of “the flesh.” It is in this sense that the São Paulo Conference of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 1980) has defined a true spirituality:

   Spirituality is not only a moment in the process of the liberation of the poor. It is the mystique of the experience of God throughout this process. It is the encounter with the living God of Jesus Christ in everyday and personal life. Prayer and commitment are not alternative practices. They require and reinforce each other. Prayer is not an evasion but a fundamental way of following Christ, which becomes available for the encounter with the Father and for the demands of mission (Para. 56).

2. A spirituality is necessarily linked with a discipline of life, a way of organizing personal and communal life and the relation to the world. In a liberation spirituality this involves at least two important aspects:

   A. What are the concrete forms in which the life of the Christian person and community becomes transformed into solidarity with the poor and oppressed? The responses—particularly for priests and for middle-class militants and theologians—have been varied: some have given up their places in society and literally moved to live among the poor, sharing their condition; others have established a pattern of commuting, trying to keep a certain leverage for action, acting as advocates while also risking—and paying for—their solidarity in terms of rejection, persecution, and even death. Others have joined organizations of defense and protection—trade unions, neighborhood organizations, human rights movements. It is clear that we can never achieve the “total emptying” of the Incarnation, but it remains as the pattern—the form of the servant—which permanently challenges us.

   B. What are the communal forms of discipline? I have already mentioned the Base Ecclesial Community as one of the most significant instances of liberation spirituality. But it is also necessary to refer to “religious life” (in the classical sense of religious communities or religious orders—and here we remember several studies which have spoken of Wesleyan societies in their similarity to religious communities or a religious order). The subject has not been as carefully studied as it deserves. But it would not be difficult to show that (1) religious orders and societies (of several
types) have usually appeared when the Church confronts a new historical situation and is called to generate a new missionary response, and (2) such movements centrally represent a will of “total availability” to respond to the situation. In Latin America this response has not resulted in the creation of new orders or societies but in a significant renewal and reconsecration of existing ones. From my limited experience as a non-Catholic I seem to see an impressive witness of religious orders to the “option for the poor.” The thousands of women and men of religious orders and congregations which have taken up the most difficult and risky tasks, sustaining and animating communities in the remotest places, serving as a network of communication and mutual support among such communities, working to feed the religious life of these communities with the theological, liturgical and biblical tools necessary for their nurture are simply a witness of that renewal. The fact that many have already fulfilled this self-giving in martyrdom measures the depth of the commitment.3

3. Finally, there is the area of worship and celebration. What Pablo Richard calls “the original and originating experience” of the theology of liberation as “a spiritual experience” has found varied and rich forms of expression. We can follow them in prayers of persons and communities—for instance as Father Cardenal has gathered them in Psalms and in The Gospel in Solentiname, in biblical meditation (reflected in the Community Bible Readings gathered in Brazil or in the memories of visits to BEC by C. Boff in Teologia pes o chao y Deus e o Homen no Inferno Verde). But it is perhaps the explosion of song and music that could best illustrate the vitality of the new ecclesial reality related to the church of the poor, a phenomenon comparable with the deep spirituality of the black slave community in America. The contrast life/death and its overcoming in the contrast death/resurrection, the celebration of the unity in the Spirit (“Because the Spirit unites us; for the Spirit is life, love and freedom”), the constant affirmation of trust in God (“Let nothing shock you, let nothing frighten you/Whoever lives in God has always enough”) and the commitment to follow Christ in his solidarity with the poor and rejected mark the dominating themes of the songs which have spread all over the continent. The experience of God’s grace in the rebirth of the person in community, the acceptance of “the yoke of the Kingdom” as commitment to a “social holiness” which tries to relate interpersonal, community, and structural issues and the celebration of hope seem to be the ways in which the Christian communities who understand the Gospel as a word of liberation try to respond to the promise and the call of sanctification.

NOTES
1. From “Conversion—a Latin-American re-reading,” in Faith Born in the Struggle for Life (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), p. 4. In this and the following chapter I have tried to give an interpretation of Wesley’s emphasis on conversion and sanctification from a Latin American perspective.
3. “Is social holiness enough”—A Catholic Reading,” in Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., Faith Born in
4. There is an abundant and increasing amount of literature on this theme in which we can include works of Pablo Richard, Segundo Galilea, Jaci Maracchin, Gustavo Gutiérrez, José Bonino, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino among others.
5. An issue of the journal Vida Religiosa published in 1987, to which I contributed a brief comment, explores this issue more carefully.