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Contemporary Humanism /
Quaderno 2019

cittadella editrice

«Questa è la sfida di Munera: leggere i fenomeni e le creazioni del diritto, dell'economia, dell'arte, della letteratura, della filosofia, della religione nella loro unità, ovvero come creazioni profondamente umane: come scambi di "munera" e, dunque, come luoghi di umanizzazione. Come tentativi, messi in campo da un essere umano sempre alla ricerca di sé stesso, di appropriarsi in pienezza di una umanità che certamente gli appartiene, ma della quale è anche sempre debitore (e creditore) nei confronti dell'altro: nel tempo e nello spazio. Un compito che Munera intende assumersi con serietà e rigore, ma volendo anche essere una rivista fruibile da tutti: chiara, stimolante, essenziale, mai banale» (dall'editoriale del n. 1/2012).

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RODRIGO POLANCO *

The Latin American Theology as a Humanist Proposal

A Liberation of the Non-Person

Latin American Theology underwent significant development following the Second Vatican Council, with a proposal that has come to characterize the continent: Liberation Theology (LT).¹ Taking into consideration a series of streams of thought developed in the first half of the 20th century (transcendentalism in theology and philosophy, theologies of history, theologies of praxis, the YCW method,² sociological theories of analysis, etc.), LT made its own synthesis from the context of Latin American poverty and oppression, and the liberation processes underway, which characterized the decade of the 1960s. This theology explicitly set out to accompany these liberation processes based on the Word of God, and as a church rising in – and as a result of – those broad processes.

Among other relevant aspects, though born as a critical reflection, this theology develops its thoughts from the historical praxis of the liberation of the oppressed and from a conceptualization of the poor as *non-person*. This validates LT as a humanist proposal with two unique features: a *theological* humanism and a *liberating* humanism (liberating people from injustice and oppression). My intention is, therefore, to show how these two classical elements of theology (history as a context for God's manifestation, and the concept of person, from theological origin), have reached a new dimension in the reflection of LT. Hence, LT has elaborated a significant theological approach to contemporary humanism, with God's concrete manifestation

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¹ «Latin American theology» is usually identified with «liberation theology», but in essence, they are different. «Liberation theology» represents a broad and varied stream of Latin American theological thought which, given its importance, novelty and origin, has been generally identified as «Latin American theology». It is this Liberation Theology that our text refers to.

² We refer here to the *see-judge-act* methodology, characteristic of the specialized Catholic Action.

in the fight for the equality of all people and their development as persons. Beyond their historical conditioning and the vast changes that have taken place in the world and Latin America in the third millennium, some theological institutions remain currently relevant as regards our topic.

After introducing LT and the semantic context behind the concept of person, we will develop three aspects that confirm the character of LT as theological and liberating humanism.

1. *Humanism in Liberation Theology*

Humanism is a complex topic since, as we know well, the concept itself is polysemic, both from the perspective of its historical development and from its meaning(s). However, it has retained a transversal core element in the tension of the topic of God. This is evident, for example, in the way the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* defines humanism: «Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and does not accept supernatural views of reality».³ No matter how fair and universally accepted this concept of humanism may be, it poses a *non-believer* stance, and has been so ever since the Enlightenment.⁴ This *secular* humanism has naturally led to frequent attempts to create the idea of *Christian* humanism.⁵ In any case, every reflection on humanism raises the issue of God in one way or another.

Things have been evolving differently in Latin America since the 60s. Atheism, as a cultural phenomenon, has never been essential: the continent is, for the most part, made up of believers and Christians (even though this has been changing dramatically in the past few years).⁶ The roles of injustice and the corresponding craving for liberation, on the other hand, have become extremely relevant. In this context, Latin American LT has

³ Byelaw 5.1 of the *International Humanist and Ethical Union*, quoted in A. COPSON, *Whats Is Humanism?*, in A. COPSON – A. C. GRAYLING (editors), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism*, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex 2015, p. 6. Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 1-6.

⁴ Cfr. R. NORMAN, *On Humanism*, Routledge, London 2012, pp. 8-15.

⁵ In Chile, for example, there is a *University Academy of Christian Humanism*.

⁶ According to a poll made by *Corporación Latinbarómetro* (January 2018), those who declare having no religion in Latin America have increased from 4% in 1995 to 18% in 2017; while the number of Catholics has decreased from 80% to 59% in the same period. The number of evangelicals has increased from 14% to 19% in that period. Cfr. *El Papa Francisco y la religión en Chile y América Latina – Latinbarómetro 1995-2017*, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latNewsShow.jsp>. Accessed on May 1, 2018.

approached the issue of God from a new perspective: the core topic is no longer whether God exists, but instead, *which* God we believe in. In this sense, the tension existing in Latin America is not between faith *or* humanism, but about *what* faith could agree with humanism. In other words, the fundamental theological question is not atheism, but the potential idolatry we could be immersed in, believing in a God that would accept, validate, or even want the injustice that a great majority continues to live in.⁷ In fact, unfair suffering in Latin America has not led to atheism, but to «idolatry».⁸ Thus, the huge challenge for Christian theology in Latin America rather than to provide a rational basis for religious belief, and with it, the God-man synergy has, in the first place been who the God we believe in is: a God that participates in the liberation (= salvation) processes of His people.⁹ This synergy between God and man, therefore, does not perpetuate or promote a sub-human condition but becomes truly *humanizing*. Only such a God can be worthy of such a man, and true to the essence of God as love. According to G. Gutiérrez, whom we can consider the father of this theology, «How can we find a way of talking about God amid the suffering and oppression that is the experience of the Latin American poor?»¹⁰ In fact, for the same author «our partners in dialogue are the poor, those who are «non-persons» – that is, those who are not considered to be human beings with full rights, beginning with the right to life and to freedom in various spheres».¹¹ «Our society does not see the poor as people. They are invisible and have no rights; their dignity is not acknowledged».¹²

⁷ Cfr. R. MUÑOZ, *Dios Padre*, en I. ELLACURÍA – J. SOBRINO, *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, Trotta, Madrid 1990, vol. I, pp. 531-549, here p. 532. Cfr. also J. SOBRINO, *Reflexiones sobre el significado del ateísmo y de la idolatría para la teología*, «Revista Latinoamericana de Teología», 7, 1986, pp. 45-81, especially pp. 49-54.

⁸ In this sense, it is different from F. DOSTOYEVSKI's approach in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, «Revelry», Chapter IV, when Ivan refuses to admit a «higher harmony» as regards the suffering of an innocent, since no further happiness «is worth a child's tears»; therefore, he very respectfully hands his entry ticket back [to God], because «it is too expensive for us» (EDAF Publishers, Madrid 2013, pp. 289f.).

⁹ LT considers «Liberation» a better concept than «salvation», not because they oppose one another, but because liberation implies salvation and makes it more explicit. Liberation is the realization of salvation. Hence both concepts are dialectically articulated: socio-political liberation is the crucial starting point to reach eschatological salvation, given that man's eschatological destiny cannot do without his historical concreteness. All in all, liberation coincides with salvation (cfr. J. L. SEGUNDO, *Libertad y liberación*, en I. ELLACURÍA – J. SOBRINO, *Mysterium Liberationis*, cit., vol. I, pp. 373-391).

¹⁰ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics, and Salvation*, Orbis, New York 1988, p. XXXIV.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. XXIX.

¹² G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Meglio i poveri. Il punto di partenza della teologia della liberazione*, in «L'Osservatore Romano», May 7, 2015.

This would then be a theology that accompanies the poor in the long and painful process of liberation from non-person to a person in their own right. It does so by showing a God that is committed and reveals Himself through this transformation from non-people to the people of God. We will not attempt to develop this theology here, not even schematically, or to assess its contributions and weaknesses. We intend to present three basic elements in its proposals that characterize this Latin American Theology and have led to a better understanding of God's actions in the world in correlation to human development. Hence, we can find some clues to the meaning of contemporary humanism, open to transcendence and aware of the context.

2. *A non-person lacks relationships*

Prior to undertaking these three classic topics, it is important to state that the use of the person/non-person contraposition is not without relevance. As is well known, «person» as a concept is theological-trinitarian in origin, and which points to *relationship*. In fact, the historical notion of a person as such arises from the theological-trinitarian reflection. The concept is coined to explain that which is unique and unrepeatably in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – each one being a distinctive person – *is* their mutual relationship, that is, each one exists in and *through* the other two. This preserved the unity of God in the subsistence of three different persons. The same notions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit constitute relationships. That is, that which constitutes the divine persons is their relationship of origin and purpose. Without such relationship, they would simply not exist. They exist in so far as they *constitute a relationship*. Thus, J. Ratzinger states: «Put more concretely, the first person does not generate in the sense the act of generation a Son is added to the already complete person, but the person is the deed of generating, of giving itself, of streaming itself forth. The person is identical with this act of self-donation». Similarly, the same must be said of the other two persons. «In God, person is the pure relativity of being turned toward the other».¹³

However, with the development of Christology, which had to address the problem of Christ's two natures (human and divine) in the single person of the Incarnate Word, the concept of person faced serious philosophical and theological difficulties: along with «the lack of precision in the accepted concepts», «the available philosophical concepts were drawn exclusively from the natural spectrum of the conscious subject, which ranged from the

¹³ Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology*, «Communio», 17, 1990, pp. 439-454, here 444.

nature of the species, on the one hand, to individuality, on the other».¹⁴ Therefore, in a Christological context, it was not possible to go beyond understanding the *person* simply as *the individual conscious subject*.¹⁵ This understanding did not address in its full merit the richness of the concept from a Trinitarian perspective. And hence the concept was applied to each human being, losing its relational dimension and leading to significant consequences for social order. To mention just one, this poorly developed concept failed to exert any determinant influence on social justice issues. Nevertheless, it served to defend everyone's right to life but not the quality of the life of the poor.

In fact, a human being is obviously a person given their individual existence and human nature. However, deprived of their egalitarian and fair relationships, whatever the area, such being would actually live as the opposite of a person, unable to develop many of their potentialities, that is the capacity to establish fair relationships: with God and with other human beings. Thus, the concept of person, simply understood as an individual conscious subject, is clearly not enough to refer to a human being, in so much as it does not encompass *relationship* as theirs in essence. For this reason, and in the aforementioned semantic context, G. Gutiérrez was right in stating a core issue: «we refer to the poor as the non-persons, not in a philosophical sense as it is evident that each human being is a person; [but] in a sociological sense, the poor are not accepted as persons in our society».¹⁶ Establishing the distinction between a philosophical and a sociological sense, Gutiérrez is criticizing precisely the common notion of a person as a conscious subject. In fact, if the *relationship* lacks importance in the definition of «human person», then many human beings can well be considered «persons» (in good conscience) despite living under oppressing or invisibilizing relationships, that is, as non-persons. Clearly, this would not only be so from a socio-economic perspective.¹⁷

For this reason, during the 20th-century theology sought to recover the notion of relationship as inherent to the concept of the human person, particularly from the perspective of personalism. A good example of such efforts is H. von Balthasar. For Balthasar, the individual conscious subject can only understand who he really is – what unrepeatably distinguishes him

¹⁴ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory, III: The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1993, p. 209. Cfr. also *ibidem*, pp. 217f.; J. RATZINGER, *Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology*, cit., pp. 447-454.

¹⁵ Cfr. H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama*, III, cit., p. 206.

¹⁶ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Meglio i poveri*, cit.

¹⁷ We must acknowledge that in the XVI century such a concept was useful so that the indigenous peoples of America could continue to «exist», but obviously useless to grant them truly fair and «human» conditions. The School of Salamanca conceptual and legislative material proved to be very useful but insufficient.

from another individual conscious subject – from the relationship with *you* as open to *us*, through which the person becomes aware of himself through the giving of himself. This knowledge of himself will remain fragile if it is limited to interpersonal human relationships. «Such a guarantee [...] can only be given by the absolute Subject, God. It is when God addresses a conscious subject, tells him who he is and what he means to the eternal God of truth and shows him the purpose of his existence – that is, imparts a distinctive and divinely authorized *mission* – that we can say of a conscious subject that he is a “person”». ¹⁸ According to Balthasar, the person is the mission, the divine vocation, a purely Christological definition that illuminates every human being as created in the image of the Logos. What finally constitutes the unique and *personal* being is precisely his unrepeatable relationship with God, in Christ. ¹⁹ In addition, the unrepeatable is also social. Therefore, deprived of his relationships, with the subsequent pervasive effects on his relationship with God, the human being is also denied his condition as a person.

Drawing from other lines of thought, Latin American theology has followed the same reflexive approach, centering «personality» on the relationship with God and others, i.e., in the potential ability *to relate* to others, rather than on his conscious subjectivity. In other words, the poor (in the broad sense of the word: destitute, exploited, discriminated) is still a «person» in the sense of conscious individuality but has been stripped of his character of «person» since he cannot establish fair and humanizing relationships. It is from this perspective that the contributions and emphases of this theology must be understood, and therefore as concerning and relevant to contemporary humanism.

3. *God speaks in and through history: signs of the times*

The first topic that characterizes LT is its (new) theological starting point: historical, concrete and inductive. The Latin American church, in the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, in Medellin in 1968, endorses and displays this more inductively-oriented theological method undertaken by the Magisterium in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). Later, LT further expands it. In fact, during the difficult drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*, «a crucial point in the evolution of the topic and of the formula itself [the signs of the times]²⁰ was the creation in September 1964» of a sub-

¹⁸ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama*, III, cit., p. 207.

¹⁹ Cfr. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama*, III, cit., pp. 207f. and 219f.

²⁰ Concept already used by Juan XXIII (*Humanae Salutis*, 4) and Pablo VI (*Ecclesiam suam*, 19).

committee «for the signs of the times, presided by M. McGrath»,²¹ «whose role was to deepen the analysis of the modern world so that the framework was based on historical reality».²² In the Catholic Magisterium, this opened up the way for the inductive method, which despite the initial distrust among experts and council fathers,²³ tried to introduce, according to M. McGrath, an «empirical approach» to reality with a «descriptive, openly objective, and even phenomenological»²⁴ focus. This novel methodology was explicitly embraced by the Latin American Magisterium in 1968, during the Conference of Bishops in Medellín. M. McGrath himself, at the time bishop of Santiago de Veraguas, Panama, stated in one of the opening conferences: «This method, this strong focus on a Church servant of man in his real and current condition, has dictated the approach of this Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops [...] We start, as the Council indicates, scrutinizing the signs of the times in Latin America; then we examine them in the light of the Gospel; and finally from these confrontations we will outline some pastoral projections for the salvific service of our peoples».²⁵ This constituted the guiding lines for the 16 commissions that drafted the 16 conclusive documents of the Conference.

Clearly, Medellín was based on the method proposed by the *Young Christian (Catholic) Workers* (see-judge-act), widely disseminated in the working class sectors of Latin America since the 30s, from the worker pastoral movement strongly promoted by the Latin American Church. This methodology, developed in Belgium by its founder, Joseph Cardijn, had somehow exerted some influence on the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁶ Hence, LT assumed and appropriated the method, «though dialectically surpassing it», from an «epistemological recasting».²⁷ This is, at the moment of judging the historical praxis in the light of the Word of God (the time to judge), praxis itself helps in the understanding of Revelation «within the context of the current social reality» (the time to see). Therefore, «the confrontation between «situation» and «revelation», dialectically lead to a dual change of meaning: «a novel sense of reality», due to the effect of what has been revealed about

²¹ C. SCHICKENDANTZ, *Un enfoque empírico-teológico. En el método, el secreto de Medellín*, «Teología y Vida», 4, 2017 (LVIII), pp. 421-445, here p. 434.

²² G. TURBANTI, *Un Concilio per il mondo moderno. La redazione della costituzione pastorale Gaudium et Spes del Vaticano II*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000, p. 373.

²³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

²⁴ M. McGRATH, *Notas históricas sobre la Constitución Pastoral Gaudium et Spes*, in G. BARRAÚNA (editor), *La Iglesia en el mundo de hoy. Estudios y comentarios a la Constitución «Gaudium et Spes» del Concilio Vaticano II (Esquema XIII)*, Studium, Madrid 1967, pp. 165-181, here p. 179.

²⁵ M. McGRATH, *Ponencia N° 1: Los signos de los tiempos en América Latina hoy*, Onac, Santiago 1968, pp. 6f.

²⁶ Cfr. A. BRIGHENTI, *Raíces de la epistemología y del método de la teología de latinoamericana*, «Medellín», 78, 1994, pp. 207-254, here pp. 208-211.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 253.

the situation and a «novel sense of revelation» because of the impact of the situation».²⁸ The moment to *see* and *judge* are dialectically questioned.

This method is sustained on a fundamental theological assertion: God speaks in history, a notion that articulates theological principles and historical events.²⁹ In the big context of the «emergence of historical thought in the 19th century»,³⁰ which Catholic theology undertook «with the development of the idea of history of salvation»,³¹ after the Second Vatican Council we can state that «the acting of God in history is given in the deeds and through human decisions» in human conscience. The acting of God *is manifested* and *takes place* in them»,³² and the phenomena in which such acting is apparent are called *signs of the times*. Considering the complexity involved in determining «clear-cut and universally valid criteria to discern the signs of the times»,³³ we must see them as an act of revelation that reveals not only who God is and what He wants, but also who the human being is and what God expects from him. In this line, we must assert that there are historical events that can constitute a *theological locus in their own right* (*locus theologicus proprius* in the words of Melchor Cano), that is, the authentic word of God, «thanks to a process of discernment that reveals an instance of God's Word in a concrete historical situation».³⁴

This has been the path of LT so far, insisting that theology is not just about God. It is about God in so far as He is present and acts through history. Then it is about *the acting of God in history* which is always, somehow and to some extent, a *re-action* to certain situation or event (salvation) and an *interaction* with persons and concrete peoples (the people of God – Church)». ³⁵ This is how theological science becomes pertinent to the human being and not idolatrous. Faith constitutes «an invitation to walk in history «according

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 238, quoting X. MIGUÉLEZ, *La teología de la liberación y su método. Estudio en Hugo Assmann y Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Herder, Barcelona 1976, pp. 84-85.

²⁹ Cfr. C. SCHICKENDANTZ, *Signos de los tiempos. Articulación entre principios teológicos y acontecimientos históricos*, in V. AZCUY – J. COSTADOAT – C. SCHICKENDANTZ (editors), *Lugares e interpelaciones de Dios. Discernir los signos de los tiempos*, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago 2017, pp. 33-69.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 37, quoting the title of P. HÜNERMANN's dissertation thesis, *Der Durchbruch des geschichtlichen Denkens im 19. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg 1967.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 46, quoting P. HÜNERMANN, *La acción de Dios en la historia. Teología como interpretatio temporis*, in ID., *El Vaticano II como software de la Iglesia actual*, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago 2014, pp. 175-216, here p. 192f.

³³ P. HÜNERMANN, *El trabajo teológico al comienzo del tercer milenio. Los signos de los tiempos como elementos esenciales de una teología histórica*, in ID., *El Vaticano II como software de la Iglesia actual*, cit., pp. 217-261, here p. 242.

³⁴ C. SCHICKENDANTZ, *Signos de los tiempos*, cit., p. 60.

³⁵ F. DE AQUINO, *El carácter prático de la teología: Un enfoque epistemológico*, «Teología y Vida», LI (2010), 4, pp. 477-499, here p. 490.

to God», to defend the victims and practice justice», hence «the problem of God becomes a mystery by antonomasia: [...] the mystery that creates love and hope [...] Hence, the history of love and justice is at the same time the history of walking with God in the hope of being lead to Him».³⁶

These assertions show that LT clearly perceives God's presence in the world not like that of any «mundane actor», but rather as a *mystery*, and this is how it applies the term to Latin American issues. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that God is the *Totally Other*, though being at the same time the *Non-Other*, according to Nicolas of Cusa. In fact, God embraces all beings in his inscrutable greatness, while He gives himself to all beings in a total giving of Himself, in the limited abasement of human language.³⁷ We may authentically get to know God, but only by means of human language and symbols. He will nevertheless still constitute an uncontainable mystery. His self-revelation through «profane» historical events which both reveal and conceal God, prevents us from attempting to identify Him acritically with any contextualized image, without using the purifying warning of Lateran: «Between Creator and creature no similitude may be expressed without indicating a greater dissimilitude» (*Lateran IV*, DH 806). God will always make Himself visible through an even bigger dissimilitude. Therefore, LT understands that knowing God will always imply discernment and a historical process where the acting of God is revealed and recognized. God is known in history, but not in just any history. He can be found in a history of encountering Him through the brother that walks to his liberation or to the recovery of fair relationships. Knowing God is loving the fellow being in his concrete history (*1John 4:8*). We must know God's deeds and options in order to discern His presence, discover and know Him, i.e., love Him.

4. *The irruption of the poor as a historical subject*

Clearly, then God speaks *in* and *through* human events, and cannot speak but *in* and *through* them. But are there any especially eloquent events? Indeed. LT discerns such events in the irruption of the poor as a historical subject. This leads to the second aspect that enlightens our topic. It is well known that LT understands itself as «an attempt to accept the invitation of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council and interpret this sign of the times [= *the irruption of the poor*] by reflecting on it critically in the light

³⁶ J. SOBRINO, *Reflexiones sobre el significado del ateísmo y de la idolatría para la teología*, cit., p. 77.

³⁷ Cfr. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, T. & T. Clark, Michigan 1991, pp. 625-627.

of God's word».³⁸ In effect, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, in due time acknowledged «the powerful and almost irresistible aspiration that people have for «liberation» constitutes one of the principal «signs of the times» which the Church has to examine and interpret in the light of the Gospel».³⁹

However, as we have already suggested, the notion of poor constitutes a broad concept. Initially, LT understood this concept as regarding the «“dominated peoples”, “exploited social classes”, “despised races”, and “marginalized cultures”». Today, though, there is broader awareness of the huge complexity of the world of the poor. «The world of the poor is a universe in which the socio-economic aspect is basic but not all-inclusive».⁴⁰ «The poor is the “insignificant”, that who is considered a “non-person”, someone whose right to realize their human rights to the fullest is not acknowledged. People devoid of social or individual weight, not taken into account in the society or in the church»,⁴¹ either due to their economic distress, skin color, gender, or any other cultural discrimination, who are disregarded by a society that decides to overshadow them so they do not appear to exist.⁴² In other words, poverty means *death*, lack of relationships. In this context, it is necessary to point out that in the tradition of the Old Testament, the *Sheol*, or place of the dead, meant precisely a place devoid of relationships with God and the rest of the human beings, and thus, a place of total solitude.⁴³ This explains the suffering derived from this situation, and why the People of Israel rested their hopes on a God who could not abandon those He loved, nor allow the victory of death over His love. Evidently, there is some degree of equivalence in meaning between *poverty*, *death* and *lack of relationships*. The poor, however, is also «the other» in a society that develops by his side, though irrespective of his fundamental rights, alienating him, careless about his life and values. Therefore, history, read from the perspective of this other, becomes a totally different history».⁴⁴

In line with the aforementioned, it can be clearly stated that the poor has become a *non-person*, someone who has been deprived of relationships. Now, precisely because they have been excluded, considered «the other» in

³⁸ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *A Theology of Liberation*, cit., p. XXI.

³⁹ *Instruction on Certain Aspect of the «Theology of Liberation»*, Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1984, N° 1.

⁴⁰ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *A Theology of Liberation*, cit., p. XXI.

⁴¹ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Situación y tareas de la teología de la liberación*, in G. GUTIÉRREZ – G.L. MÜLLER, *Del lado de los pobres. Teología de la liberación*, San Pablo, Madrid 2013, p. 69.

⁴² Cfr. FRANCIS, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2013, N° 53.

⁴³ Cfr. *Psalms* 116:3-7; 139:8.

⁴⁴ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Situación y tareas de la teología de la liberación*, cit., p. 69f.

society, «the poor must take responsibility for their destiny».⁴⁵ «They have gradually been turning into active agents of their own destiny and beginning a resolute process that is changing the condition of the poor and oppressed of this world». This is not «an automatic result of this situation», but rather a consequence «of the right of the poor to think out their own faith».⁴⁶ In this process of gaining awareness, through reflecting critically and taking action, the disregarded gradually recovers fair relationships and truly becomes a *person*.

Therefore, it is essential to consider that the poor is not merely a topic that must be approached from a serious theological perspective, but above all, as a «hermeneutical locus» and as a «subject of theology».⁴⁷ The poor are a hermeneutical locus because God not only looks at things from their own perspective, that is, from «the other history», which is true history, but also from there He looks at the whole history. The poor are a theological locus because there God reveals himself and his project about a human being. The history of liberation is also *Word of God*.

5. *Orthopraxis and true knowledge*

If God acts and «expresses Himself» in and through history, and that God, we declare to be love, then the only proper language to speak of God amidst those marginalized from society is a praxis committed to the liberation (= salvation) of such non-people, so they can become people in their own right. God speaks precisely when he declares to be part of the process of liberation (= recovering relationships) and not of the structures that contribute to make people non-persons (= «dead»). Therefore, the critical reflection (in the light of the Word of God) of historical praxis of liberation becomes a crucial element of this theology. This constitutes our third topic.

When talking about the critical reflection of praxis, «of» refers both to the object and to the «*place* where or from where said praxis operates, with the subsequent consequences for its *subject*».⁴⁸ This theology favors orthopraxis over orthodoxy, given that it reflects the act of faith as expressed in the praxis of liberation. Orthopraxis is, then, the verifying criterion of the truth of the received revelation. That is, «the originality of LT lies not so much in the method as in the «spirit» of the method, that is in the *pragmatics* (in its fundamental options) and the *semantics* (in its liberating view) more

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁴⁶ G. GUTIÉRREZ, *A Theology of Liberation*, cit., p. XXI.

⁴⁷ J. C. SCANNONE, *La teología de la liberación. Caracterización, corrientes, etapas*, «Stromata», 1-2, 1982 (XXXVIII), pp. 3-40, here p. 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

than on its *syntax* (the internal rules of its discourse)». In other words, the theologian needs to «concern himself with liberation»⁴⁹ before devoting to theology. This theologian must become an activist, not just a practitioner; hence, three aspects must be articulated: «analyzed reality, revelation and praxis».⁵⁰

The complexity of the articulation of theory and praxis, much studied at present, cannot be addressed here. However, for a better understanding of this aspect of LT, it is worth stating that regarding the see-judge-act method, LT focuses on the second stage: to judge. The starting point, though, is always to see, which is in itself an interpretation, mediated by a theory capable of transforming reality. Seeing also constitutes a «source of ideas and reflection, a place for revision and a criterion of truth».⁵¹ Nevertheless, the decisive moment is the judging, which involves «understanding praxis in the light of the Revelation, and understanding Revelation itself, within the context of the current social reality».⁵² To judge essentially constitutes a dialectic tool which understands in order to transform, «generating a confrontation between context and revelation, a dual change: «*a novel sense of reality*» and also «*a novel sense of the Word*», within a relationship controlled by Faith».⁵³ However, this dialectical approach to the understanding of the judging provides praxis with a huge «epistemological density», since the moment it leads reflection, becomes a place of verification of such reflection, and it constitutes itself as a reality to be thought, as the place of intellectual access; «it is part of the process of building *theological theory*».⁵⁴

An important consequence of the aforementioned is that the poor and their processes of liberation have become the social and theological *loci* of doing theology. If we understand the hermeneutic-dialectic method to its fullest, and in addition, we understand that «praxis is the beginning and end of the dialectic, the driver and the goal»,⁵⁵ then praxis itself plays a determinant epistemological role. In fact, from the right dialectic approach, God can be truly known through praxis, taking into consideration that God, in his apophatic mystery, both *reveals himself* and *hides* in praxis and history. For this to be possible, «the move from Theology to practice» and «the

⁴⁹ A. BRIGHENTI, *Raíces de la epistemología y del método de la teología de latinoamericana*, cit., p. 222.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 238.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

⁵⁴ F. DE AQUINO, *El carácter prático de la teología*, cit., p. 490.

⁵⁵ Z. BENNETT, «*Action is the life of all*»: *The Praxis-Based Epistemology of Liberation Theology*», in C. ROWLAND (editor), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 39-54, here p. 45.

move from practice to theology»,⁵⁶ need to have the same degree of importance and be equally relevant in the process of theological reflection. Hence, praxis will constitute a theological place in the true sense of the word.⁵⁷ For LT, this constituted «a new hermeneutical perspective».⁵⁸

6. Some conclusions

Despite its obvious limitations, through its important contributions LT has rendered some interesting elements pertaining to the reflection on contemporary humanism. They have already been hinted at throughout this text. We will now focus on a couple of core ideas.

In the first place, the awareness that the poor is a *non-person* brings forth a theologically and historically rooted concept, this time, in a concrete and contextualized way. The person is constituted as such through his relationships, but those devoid of oppression. In some way, the adjective «liberating» used by LT makes the notion of the relationship more accurate. The person results from a series of relationships, but these, in turn, must develop their own potentialities, because not every relationship contributes to making a person. Similarly, the same way that a relationship involves an event, being a person involves processes. The *personality* is then always two-fold: something possessed and something to be acquired. Each person is what he is meant to be on condition that his life leads to his liberation. This is all mankind's responsibility.

The second idea is the importance of the poor as a *theological subject*. First, being the protagonist of one's own destiny presupposes dignity, since no one can be expected to survive from the crumbs of others. In addition, this implies the poor as the hermeneutical and theological place of the act of God, as mentioned above. But it is worth emphasizing that these two concepts, often treated as synonyms, have a different meaning. God *looks from* the poor but also *speaks in* the poor. They constitute word of God. The concept of poor, of course, is constantly evolving considering its temporal, cultural and geographical nature, but the concepts of *theological place* and *hermeneutical place* will always prevail throughout time. God will always speak in the poor and see from their reality. This is exactly what reflects the nature of God in Christ: abasement for love and self-revelation through such abasement. No humanism can do without this «theological» category since it is intrinsically human.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*, pp. 46-48.

⁵⁸ J.C. SCANNONE, *La teología de la liberación*, cit., p. 7.

In the third place, the *irruption of the poor* in history, as a sign of the times, shows how God walks next to the human being and how His presence brings dignity to the life of the concrete man and woman. In fact, according to Irenaeus, «the glory of God is the person fully alive and the life of man is the vision of God».⁵⁹ This famous quote means, in Irenaeus' theology, that God himself dignifies (= gives glory) the human being by trying to provide him with an authentic life by making himself present (= so He can be seen) in human history.⁶⁰ This synergy has been a characteristic conviction from the very origins of Christian theology but had become somewhat obscured in the past few centuries, relegating Christianity to the margins of history. In spite of all its limitations, LT constitutes a contemporary answer that faces this challenge from a more structural approach. From the dialectical dialogue with Revelation, and assuming the right negative theology, the liberation of man allows for God's revelation. Assuming that, having been created in the Logos the human being can know God, he can only do so in the history of people.

Despite its many varieties and models, can be globally considered a *theological and liberating humanism*, precisely because God manifests Himself through and in the fight for equality of all human beings, and through their development as persons. This avoids the possible separation or contradiction between confession of God and human good, while it also accepts as synonyms *liberation* and *theology* hence allowing for a salvific correlation between thinking God and human service, the ultimate goal of every theology.

⁵⁹ *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei* (*Adversus haereses* IV,20,7).

⁶⁰ Cfr. R. POLANCO, «Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei». *Reflexiones sobre el homo vivens en el pensamiento de San Ireneo*, in *Multifariam. Homenaje a los profesores Anneliese Meis, Antonio Bentué y Sergio Silva*, Anales de la Facultad de Teología 61, Suplementos a Teología y Vida, ed. by S. FERNÁNDEZ *et alii*, UC, Santiago 2009, pp. 159-191.

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