THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE IN A WORLD OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

Judith Ann Brady, O.P.

Fordham University

Poverty and wealth are uneasy companions throughout history. A study of the quest for wealth that consumed the colonizers who came to the Americas in the fifteenth century parallels the determination to acquire riches in the twenty-first century. Gustavo Gutiérrez researched the life of Bartolomé de las Casas to portray how Dominican friars sought justice for those in poverty and wealth.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ AND THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Gustavo Gutiérrez, an indigenous priest born in 1928 in Lima, Peru, is a man of the poor and a founder of Liberation Theology. He suffered from osteomyelitis as a teenager, was ordained to the priesthood after years of dedicated study, taught laypeople at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, and was a theological advisor in the fourth session of Vatican Council II. As the poor took center stage, a phenomenon known as the "irruption of the poor", Gutiérrez identified the context of Liberation Theology as "a new kind of society (characterized by justice), a new kind of human being (characterized by other-directedness), and a new kind of Christian disciple (for whom justice is a requirement of faith) all coming into being in those whose faith in God leads them to fight for freedom and justice, that is, for a *human* life" (Nickoloff, 1996, 3).

Poverty was the starting point for reflection as Gutierrez explored society. His writings were pivotal for the deliberations of the Latin American bishops when they met at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). CELAM [El Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano] first identified poverty as "institutionalized violence" (Medellín 2.16) and as Gutiérrez wrote, their documents

clearly state that poverty leads to "early and unjust death" and that it is "a global human problem and therefore a challenge to living and preaching the gospel. Poverty thereby becomes a theological question, and the option for the poor makes us aware of it and provides a way to think about the issue" (Gutiérrez, 2009, 322).

Poverty is spreading a wider net as nations continue to experience the effects of a world-wide recession. In an effort to better understand increased poverty in the United States, Gustavo Gutiérrez's focus on income and class disparity in sixteenth century Spain reveals the struggle involved in the quest for wealth and glory. *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* introduces a Spaniard who chose to love those who were poor and oppressed instead of accumulating personal riches. This work will guide a theological discussion on poverty and wealth.

LIBERATION OF THE POOR

Gutiérrez (1973) argued that injustices such as poverty can be overcome by liberation and that a Christian understanding of liberation is rooted in biblical and theological tradition. He distinguished between three interdependent processes of liberation. First, political and social liberation works to eliminate the causes of poverty and injustice. The goal is to achieve a society based on respect for persons, which encourages people to attend to the needs of the weakest members. Second, human liberation attempts to work at a deeper level by "liberating human beings of all those things—not just in the social sphere—that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity." Vatican Council II called this a "new humanism," in which men and women are defined by their responsibility to their brothers and sisters and to history (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, #55). Third, liberation from selfishness and sin will eliminate injustice at its

very root. This last process of liberation relies upon God for "only the grace of God, the redeeming work of Christ, can overcome sin" (Gutiérrez, 1999, 26).

Gutiérrez explained the connection between globalization and poverty. He noted that the dominant policy, neoliberalism, exalts the economy and encourages globalization. Through multi-lateral trade agreements global corporations supersede political power; as a result, local governments effectively lose control of business. Markets without restrictions have enormous power throughout the world. In the name of supplying goods cheaply, local businesses, including local farmers, are losers, for they cannot compete against huge international corporations.

Economic neoliberalism and globalization have resulted in growing inequality. The economy may thrive, but people suffer. As a result, people and the environment are treated like commodities to be used and thrown away. In Gutiérrez's words, globalization has led to "the exclusion of a part of humanity from the economic loop and from the so-called benefits of civilization" (Gutiérrez, 2003, 100). Economic neoliberalism secures profits for owners and investors, but the vast majority of the population suffers as corporations show little or no respect for human life and for nature.

LAS CASAS: IN SEARCH OF THE POOR OF JESUS CHRIST

Gustavo Gutiérrez does an exhaustive study of the Dominican friar who became the bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566). He examines colonization through the lens of theology by reflecting upon all aspects of colonization. When Las Casas first came to the West Indies in 1502 he paid scant attention to evangelizing the Indians. He returned to Rome to complete his studies and there he was ordained a priest in 1507. Upon his return to the Indies Las Casas once again ministered to the Indians. Las Casas' experience as an *encomendero* opened his eyes to the lived reality of the Indians. He considered himself "a good *encomendero*, diligent in

his business affairs, and yet humane and fatherly with the Indians who worked for him" (Gutiérrez, 1993, 46). Only when he was refused sacramental absolution for not caring for the spiritual needs of the Indians did he begin to think seriously about his responsibilities.

In 1510 Dominican missionaries from the Convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca arrived in Hispaniola. Dedicated to contemplation and poverty, they observed how the Indians were held in low regard and treated like animals. Often the Indians had been worked to the point of exhaustion, gotten sick, and died cruel deaths. The friars compared the sad lives of the Indians with those of the Spaniards who benefited from mistreating them. The Dominicans then "set the facts of the case over against the principles of justice and right'-juntar el derecho con el hecho." They based their ethical analysis on gospel reflection and as a community, they developed a sermon based on the reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent that began with "I am 'a voice in the desert..." (Jn 1:23). As a sign of their unity each friar signed his name to the sermon, and Friar Antón Montesino was the preacher. All the notables of the island were invited and heard the preacher proclaim, "You are all in mortal sin! You live in it and you die in it!" He described their treatment of the Indians as servitude that followed wars waged against the Indians and which resulted in their deaths. He noted how the Spaniards gave the Indians little food, had no regard for those who got ill, and complained when they died. Friar Montesino stated that the Spaniards were responsible for killing the Indians by forcing them to work the mines every day. They made little or no attempt to catechize the Indians. In the words of the friars, "Are they not human beings? Have they no rational souls? Are you not obligated to love them as you love yourselves?" (Gutiérrez, 1993, 29). The Dominicans stated clearly that when the Spaniards acted out of greed, it caused untold human suffering and death for the Indians. The preachers

concluded that the Spaniards were in danger of damnation because they had ignored the Christian obligation to love the Indians as they loved themselves.

This sermon was the first of many that aroused the wrath of the settlers who complained first to the preachers and then wrote to church and political authorities in Spain. The friars' public words of reproach were a threat to those who were profiting at the expense of the Indians. While the Spaniards could no longer claim ignorance of the effect of their actions, their hearts were hardened and their minds closed to change. Despite criticism from King Ferdinand and their provincial, Alonso de Loaysa, in Salamanca, the Dominican missionaries under the leadership of Pedro de Córdoba, continued to defend the Indians against the abuses of the Spaniards.

CONVERSION IN THE LIFE OF LAS CASAS

As he dedicated his life to evangelizing the Indians, Las Casas experienced two conversions: the first occurred as he prepared his sermon for the feast of Pentecost in 1514. These words caused him to examine his life.

Tainted his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods!

Mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor.

The Most High approves not the gifts of the godless.

[Nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins.]

Like the man who slays a son in his father's presence

Is he who offers sacrifice from the possessions of the poor.

The bread of charity is life itself for the needy,

He who withholds it is a person of blood.

He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living;

He sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages.

(Sirach 34:18-22)

His reading of Scripture in the context of the suffering of the native peoples helped him to acknowledge that he had benefited from the slaughter of innocent people. Even if he were kind to his servants, he still shared responsibility for conquering a peaceful people. His privileges

were the direct result of oppressing people, robbing them of life, redistributing their land, and forcing those who survived into slavery. The violence of war including kidnapping, rape, and splitting family members apart led inexorably to the cruelty visited on those who survived to live a life of forced labor (Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, 47-48).

As an *encomendero* Las Casas was in daily contact with the indigenous people so he came to know their strengths and their suffering. Gradually Las Casas came to view the Indians as persons in their own right, persons worthy of respect but for whom respect was denied, life was interrupted and often taken prematurely, leadership wrested from the hands of their leaders and forcefully assumed by the Spaniards. He realized that he had to act on the preaching of the Dominicans and his prayerful reflection on the gospel. To be a disciple of Jesus he would have to reject his position of power and its path to wealth.

On the feast of the Assumption, Las Casas' preaching cut through any illusions the Spaniards had that they were on moral high ground. As Gutiérrez reports, Las Casas' sermon contrasted the works of charity required of a Christian with the cruelty exhibited by the *encomenderos* who neglected their obligations to the people they controlled by their "blindness, injustices, and tyrannies—the cruelty they were committing against those innocent, meek people, and how they could not be saved if they continued to hold them". In a spirit of restitution Las Casas renounced his right as an *encomendero* to control the lives and direct the work of the native peoples. His actions upset the Spaniards by questioning the goods that they had acquired and the wealth that they had amassed (Gutiérrez, 53).

When his preaching failed to change the minds of the *encomenderos*, Las Casas traveled to Barcelona to make a formal presentation to King Charles V in December 1519. He went as a witness of all that the Spaniards had visited on the Indians: cruel wars, slavery and death for

those who survived. In Las Casas' words, "I was moved, not because I was a better Christian than anyone else, but by a natural, most pitiful compassion for people who had never deserved this from us, suffering such terrible wrongs and injustices" (Gutiérrez, 54).

Las Casas underwent a second conversion when he became a Dominican friar in 1522. He withdrew for some years to live the common life and devote his life to prayer and study. He realized that brute force was antithetical to evangelization. It was Las Casas' heartfelt conviction that "the gospel must be proclaimed by persuasion and not by force" (Gutiérrez, 307). Las Casas had a burning desire for all to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but the means had to be peaceful, mindful of the dignity of each person, and respectful of the Indians' freedom to choose how they would worship God. This he viewed as a matter of justice which meant "respecting the rights of all, building a social order calculated to protect and promote all persons as human beings—indeed, to make them agents of their own destiny." The Dominican friar was convinced that the right "to the life and liberty of persons" was "trampled underfoot in the Indies by the wars of conquest and the system of the *encomienda*" (Gutiérrez, 235).

LAS CASAS: PROTECTOR OF THE INDIANS

While Las Casas became known as a Protector of the Indians after years of ministering to the native peoples, preaching the love of Christ, and traveling to the Spanish court to intercede for and defend the Indians, it is important to note that Las Casas saw Christ in each Indian.

Because they were made to suffer at the hands of the Spaniards, Las Casas related their suffering to the agony and death of Jesus. Las Casas worked to have the royal authority protect the rights of the Indians and was vocal in defending them. He critiqued as unjust the sections of the Burgos Laws promulgated in December 1512 that effectively condoned the continued exploitation of the Indians. Las Casas opposed these laws on many counts: primarily for upholding the *encomienda*,

a system that would lead inexorably to the death of the Indians and the destruction of their way of life; the laws gave credence to calumnies leveled against the Indians by colonists; they made it impossible to instruct the Indians in the Christian faith when they were condemned to experience only abject servitude and bitter exploitation; and because the Indians, who were most affected by the laws, were not consulted before these laws were approved (Gutiérrez, 280-283). After many years of advocacy the New Laws approved in 1542-1543 revoked the hereditary nature of the encomienda system, but the encomenderos reacted so violently that King Charles V revoked that portion of the law. Las Casas at the height of his power and influence at the court once again experienced how the rich were able to control the lives of the poor. The greed of the encomenderos made them deaf to the cries of the poor. Gold had become their idol. Both the colonizers and the Spanish crown shared guilt for benefiting from usurping the land and resources of the Indians. The good news of the gospel was undermined and blunted by the unjust deeds of those who made Christianity appear to be a message of violence and hatred. Las Casas, however, never wavered in his love of God and his love for the Indians. His writings, Historia de las Indias and Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias (1542), record the wars waged to conquer and subdue the Indians, how they were forced to work and reap the wealth of gold and silver for the Spaniards, and the destruction of the native population.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ ON POVERTY AND LIBERATION

Gustavo Gutiérrez envisioned liberation for all people, especially the poor and oppressed.

How might his ideas on liberation apply to the current economy? Poverty and oppression diminish the opportunities for living a good life and lead to early death. While the living conditions of North Americans far exceed those of many poorer nations, job loss and the

inability to pay for housing, food, and healthcare has disrupted the lives of people, led to hunger and homelessness, resulted in anger and frustration, and caused physical and mental disease.

Gutiérrez is firmly convinced that poverty is "more than a social issue. Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology as well." He goes on to say that theology occurs within a particular historical context and that, "Our context today is characterized by a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor." Poverty is more evident today as many more millions feel its sting. "The faces of the poor must now be confronted. And we also understand the causes of poverty and the conditions that perpetuate it…Now we know that poverty is not simply a misfortune; it is an injustice" (Hartnett, 2003).

Gutiérrez explained the preferential option for the poor as concern for those who suffer from material poverty which could lead to "premature and unjust death". He goes on to say that, "God's love has two dimensions, the universal and the particular; and while there is a tension between the two, there is no contradiction." God's love includes everyone, but "God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life." The option for the poor "involves standing in solidarity with the poor, but it also entails a stance *against* inhumane poverty" (Hartnett, 2003). In a recent article Gutiérrez quotes Pope Benedict XVI who said in his opening address to the CELAM meeting in Aparecida, Brazil in May 2007 that, "the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9)" (2009, 317).

Solidarity with the poor implies a communal spirituality as disciples of Christ embrace the reign of God. Theology as Gutiérrez wrote is "a hermeneutics of hope, an understanding of the reasons we have to hope." As a gift from God, hope "opens followers of Jesus to the future and to trust." He notes that theological work "becomes more demanding when it begins with the

situation of the poor and continues in solidarity with them." As difficult and fragile as such hope appears, it nonetheless offers creative possibilities in a world of crisis. The gospel needs a prophetic proclamation including the "connection between justice and God's gratuitous love". Proclaiming the kingdom of God is proclaiming the love of God. God's reign is "already' present but 'not yet' fully realized" (2009, 323). The kingdom/reign of God is both a gift and grace as it is also a task and responsibility.

Judith Ann Brady, O.P., is an adjunct assistant professor of theology at Fordham University. E-mail: srjbrady@optonline.net

References

