

SALVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

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The relationship between salvation and social justice has been, at least until recently, a *quaestio disputata* for the Catholic Church. We can illustrate the recent conflicts and the ambiguity by briefly reviewing the most important official documents touching on the relationship between salvation (the "kingdom of God") and social justice (or liberation). Beginning with Vatican II (1962-65), official Catholic documents display an instructive ambivalence on this central question.

Gaudium et spes. The Second Vatican Council rejected the dualism which regards the work of grace as wholly extrinsic to conscious life and divorced from created human values. Against those who supposed that human beings have a double destiny, natural and supernatural, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (GS) insists on the single "integral vocation" of each human being and humanity as a whole. All are called to communion with God.¹ Yet, GS makes careful distinctions: For example, we must carefully distinguish earthly progress and salvation:

Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern [*magnopere interest*] to the kingdom of God. (39)

The Council did more than simply rule out false dualisms and facile identifications of "earthly progress" with the reign of God. It suggested their unity in several other texts; but it still left much unresolved about just how salvation and social justice are related.

Populorum progressio. In his 1967 encyclical *Populorum progressio* (PP), Paul VI advanced the discussion by introducing the concept of "integral development" for each person and all persons (14, etc.). The pope drew on Jacques Maritain's notion of "integral humanism" which seeks human fulfillment at every level of human reality, including the level disclosed by faith, that is, the level of sin and God's call to salvation. The pope summarized the idea of integral development in the following well-known passage: "[T]he fullness of authentic development . . . is for each and all the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human." Less human conditions

¹Integral vocation: GS 11, 35, 57, 63, 91. Single destiny (not a dual destiny, natural and supernatural): GS 22, 24, 41, 92. The language of *integral* human fulfillment derives from the French philosopher Jacques Maritain.

include the lack of material necessities, moral deficiencies caused by selfishness, and oppressive social structures. More human conditions include:

the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities, victory over social scourges, the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of culture. Additional conditions that are more human: increased esteem for the dignity of others, the turning toward the spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, the will and desire for peace. Conditions that are still more human: the acknowledgement by human beings of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality. Conditions that, finally and above all, are more human: faith, a gift of God accepted by the good will of human beings, and unity in the charity of Christ, Who calls us all to share as sons and daughters in the life of the living God, the Father of all Human Beings. (20-21)²

Pope Paul also writes that the labors of the Christian "share[] in the creation of the supernatural world" (28); and "union with the sacrifice of our Saviour contributes to the building up of the Body of Christ in its plenitude" (79).³

Medellín. At their historic meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, the Catholic bishops of Latin America addressed their own pastoral concerns in the light of Vatican II. They drew heavily on GS and PP. They speak with greater power and precision than GS about the relationship between salvation and earthly human fulfillment: "In Salvation History, the divine work is an action of integral liberation and human development at every level."⁴

They write that the Christian message offers people "the possibilities of full liberation, the riches of *integral salvation* in Christ our Lord." Rejecting "simplistic confusions or identifications," the bishops nonetheless underline

2 "What must be aimed at," writes Paul VI by way of summary, "is integral humanism. And what is that if not the fully-rounded development of the whole person and of all persons?" (42). The phrase "integral humanism" reflects the influence of Maritain.

3 Cf. PP 44, 76. Like GS, PP distinguishes the "Kingdom of Heaven," which the church establishes on earth, from the relatively autonomous political order (13). It likewise distinguishes the fulfillment of "nature" which it styles "personal and communal development" from the "further perfection" which is salvation (15-18).

4 Transformed by love through faith and baptism, the Christian "seek[s] out a new, more profound relationship with God, one's fellow human beings, and created things." Ibid., "Justice," 4. The bishops consider the dynamism toward transformation and development in Latin America to be "an obvious sign of the Spirit" who conducts the history of people toward their destiny. This dynamism for transformation leads, not only towards more effective control of nature and towards personalization and community, but towards an encounter with God. God labors in history to save the whole human being, body and soul. Just as Israel experienced the saving power of God in the Exodus, Latin Americans experience the same saving God in the integral development described by Pope Paul in PP, 20-21. Ibid. "Introduction to the Final Documents," 4-6.

the profound unity which exists between God's plan of salvation realized in Christ, and the aspirations of man; between the history of salvation and human history; . . . between the supernatural gifts and charismas and human values.⁵

Justice in the World. In 1971, Catholic bishops from around the world gathered in synod in Rome, produced a document, *Justice in the World* (JW), which declared that

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world [are] . . . a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.⁶

"Declaration" of the Synod on Evangelization. The next Roman synod (1974) sparked lively discussion about salvation and liberation. The synod's brief statement sparked with the language of "integral salvation or complete liberation of human beings and of peoples," "the total salvation of human beings or rather their complete liberation," "the true and complete liberation of all humans, groups and peoples," and so on. Adopting more of Medellín's language, the synod spoke of the need "to eliminate the social consequences of sin which are translated into unjust social and political structures."⁷ For the first time, a universal synod spoke of a salvation which embraced, or included, created human values.

Evangelii nuntiandi. The following year Paul VI issued his apostolic exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (EN) in response to the synod's recommendations.⁸ "As the kernel and center of His Good News," wrote the pope,

Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses human beings but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being given over to Him. (EN 9; cf. 18, 31)

True, Pope Paul stressed the primacy of the person and interior change (18, 20); he also insisted on the transcendent call to union with God, ultimately in the hereafter; and

5 Ibid., "Catechesis," 4; cf. *ibid.*, 17. "In the search for salvation, we must avoid the dualism which separates temporal tasks from the work of sanctification" ("Justice," 5). "[A]ll creation is grafted onto the saving design that includes all humankind" ("Liturgy," 4). "[A]ll liberation is an anticipation of the complete redemption of Christ." All "growth in humanity" brings us closer to salvation ("Education," 9).

6 Synod of Bishops, Second General Assembly, *Justice in the World* in Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976), 6.

7 "A Declaration from the Synod," *Origens* 4 (1974):308.

8 Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (Washington: U.S.C.C., 1975).

he rejected, finally, any reduction of salvation to merely economic or political liberation⁹ (8, 27, 28, 32-36). But EN spoke the language of Medellín, declaring that God's salvation "is liberation from everything that oppresses human beings." For "the supernatural life . . . is not the negation but the purification and elevation of the natural life" (47; cf. 18-20).

Puebla.¹⁰ At first blush the Puebla document seems to avoid explicitly identifying salvation with the "integral liberation" mentioned throughout the document (see 141, 475, etc.).¹¹ The unusual expression "integral salvation" has dropped from sight.¹² The document elaborates on EN: "Christian liberation" has two inseparable elements:

The first is liberation from all the bondage of personal and social sin, from everything that tears apart the human individual and society and whose source is egotism, the mystery of iniquity. The second element is liberation for progressive growth in being through communion with God and other human beings; this reaches its culmination in the perfect communion of heaven

This liberation is gradually being realized in history, in our personal history and that of our peoples. It takes in all the different dimensions of life: the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, and all their interrelationships. (482-83, trans. emended)¹³

The obvious interpretation is that this "Christian liberation" is another word for salvation.

9 In this sense one interprets "The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them, because . . . not every notion of liberation is necessarily consistent and compatible with an evangelical vision" (35). Any liberation which lacks a transcendent ground, motive and goal carries the seeds of its own destruction. Ibid.

10 Quotations from the Puebla document are taken from John Eagleson and Philip Scharper eds., *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

11 According to 480, the "*positive echoes*" (emphasis added!) of Medellín's elucidation of integral humanism were taken up by *Evangelii nuntiandi* and by Pope John Paul II whose address at Puebla also alludes to "incorrect interpretations" of Medellín. (See Pope John Paul II, "Opening Address at the Puebla Conference" in *Puebla and Beyond*, p. 57.) The next paragraph continues: "But there are different conceptions and applications of liberation. . . . [T]hey contain points of view that can hardly be brought together satisfactorily. The best thing to do, therefore, is to offer criteria that derive from the magisterium and that provide us with the necessary discernment regarding the original conception of Christian liberation" (481).

12 See 343, however.

13 Christ liberates human beings from sin *and all its consequences* (187, 1194) which include injustice of which sin is the root (70, 517, etc.). In the spirit of EN, evangelization should serve integral liberation (343-344, 362, etc.).

The bishops further note that "even though the Kingdom of God comes to pass through historical realizations, it is not identified with these realizations nor exhausted in them" (193). But they declare in striking fashion that "lay people . . . are pledged to the construction of the Kingdom in its temporal dimension" (787). Finally, in the Eucharist, Christ changes humanity's history into a saving history (918).

Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation. In 1984, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued its highly critical and controversial *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* to be followed a year and a half later by a longer, more constructive *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*.¹⁴

The second Instruction warns that, not only would it be a grave error to *reduce* salvation to earthly liberation¹⁵; they ought not be identified in any way. For they "do not belong to the same order". God's kingdom (or reign)--which does mean complete liberation when history is consummated--corresponds to "eternal life", while "earthly progress" corresponds to "temporal life" (60).¹⁶

Salvation (or the salvific dimension of liberation) is freedom from sin and communion with God (3, 22, 47, 51, 99).¹⁷ Salvation corresponds to the "transcendent order" and the "city of God". Liberation in the "temporal order" or the "earthly city" is its ethical consequence.¹⁸ Therefore, the "essential mission" of the church is "evangelization and salvation" through word and sacrament, even though it has another, secondary task, namely, "human promotion" which seeks the "temporal good" in the earthly city (62-64).

14 Soon after the release of this document, the Vatican imposed an 11-month silence on Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff; shortly before that Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez barely escaped censure by Peru's bishops whom Vatican officials had pressured to act. Gutiérrez was summoned to Rome to defend his theology.

15 The first instruction accused unnamed liberation theologians of denying the distinction between the salvation history and profane history (a charge the second instruction failed to repeat); for they radically secularize the reign of God, absorbing it into history and equating it with the liberation movement, understood in Marxist terms (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* [Vatican City, 1984] IX, 3; cf. X, 6).

16 The "supernatural order of salvation and the temporal order of human life" are two distinct, if inseparable, "spheres" (80).

17 Sin is the root of all forms of slavery. Cf. also the first Instruction, "Introduction" (pp. 3-4); cf. VI, 4; X, 7.

18 "The salvific dimension of liberation cannot be reduced to the socio-ethical dimension, which is a consequence of it" (71; cf. 99; compare the first Instruction, "Introduction" and IV, 13).

Redemptoris missio. Surprisingly, John Paul II's 1990 encyclical on international missions, *Redemptoris missio* (RM), seems to break with the second Instruction and return to the vision of Paul VI's EN.

In RM the pope claims that a "'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people strive for the good of the human person, but a human person who is truncated, reduced to the merely horizontal dimension." We might suppose that the pope wants to limit the scope of salvation; but his intention is the opposite. "We know, however," he continues, "that Jesus came to bring *integral salvation*, one which embraces the whole person and all humankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation" (RM 11). The concept of Medellín, integral salvation, appears to have risen from the grave. The pope goes on to confirm this perception:

At the beginning of his ministry [Jesus] proclaimed that he was "annointed . . . to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4,18). To all who are victims of rejection and contempt Jesus declares: "Blessed are you poor" (Lk 6,20). . . .

The liberation and salvation brought by the Kingdom of God come to the human persons in their physical and spiritual dimensions. . . .

The text affirms an integral understanding of the salvation proclaimed by Jesus. We might wonder if the vision is not still a bit privatized, focussed exclusively on the forgiveness and the healing of the individual. But John Paul continues:

The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another. Jesus sums up the whole Law, focusing it on the commandment of love The Kingdom's nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings--with one another and with God.

The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness. (RM 14-15)²⁰

These paragraphs unambiguously affirm the integral character of salvation-liberation. In this respect RM constitutes a breakthrough in official Catholic teaching.²¹ Still, one swallow does not a summer make.

20 In addition: God offers in Christ "the experience of a complete liberation which goes to the root of all evil, namely sin" (RM 23; cf. RM 28 on the work of the Spirit and RM 59)

21 It is noteworthy that paragraphs 14-16, containing this creative language, make no reference to papal or conciliar documents but only to Scripture.

Centesimus annus. One year after RM appeared, *Centesimus annus* (CM, 1991), John Paul's encyclical on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, limited itself to restating fundamental theses on this topic, reminding us that no political society . . . can ever be confused with the Kingdom of God" and that

temporal societies . . . , as the adjective indicates, belong to the realm of time, with all that this implies of imperfection and impermanence. The Kingdom of God, being *in* the world without being *of* the world, throws light on the order of human society, while the power of grace penetrates that order and gives it life. (CA 25)

Santo Domingo. In 1992, the Latin American bishops, assembled in Santo Domingo, produced, under close Vatican supervision, a document which restricts itself to quoting RM 15 to the effect that the Kingdom is "communion among all human beings--with one another and with God" and to affirming that Jesus died and rose "to free us from sin *and all its consequences*" (SD 27; emphasis added). The "consequences" of sin would presumably include oppressive social structures, but the inference is not made.²⁴

There the matter stood, with ambiguities, until 2004, when the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that had been commissioned earlier by John Paul II.

The ***Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church***. The *Compendium* leaves no doubt about the "integral" or all-embracing character of the saving action of God:

Salvation, which the Lord Jesus obtained "at a price" (1 Cor 6:20; cf. 1 Pet 1:18-19), is achieved in the new life that awaits the righteous after death, but it also permeates this world in the realities of the economy and labour, of technology and communications, of society and politics, of the international community and the relations among cultures and peoples. "Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation" (1, citing RM 11; cf. 3).

The salvation offered in its fullness to human beings in Jesus Christ . . . is salvation for all people and of the whole person: it is universal and integral

24 IV Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, *Nueva evangelización, promoción humana, cultura cristiana* (San Salvador: CELAM/Arquidiócesis de San Salvador, n.d.). I abbreviate this as SD in the text. See the articles in Alfred Hennelly, S.J., *Santo Domingo and Beyond* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993). See also Victor Codina, "Crónica de Santo Domingo," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*, Vol. IX, No. 27 (Sept. - Dec. 1992): 259-71 and Jon Sobrino, "Los vientos que soplaron en Santo Domingo y la evangelización de la cultura", *ibid.*, pp. 273-92.

salvation. It concerns the human person in all his dimensions: personal and social, spiritual and corporeal, historical and transcendent. It begins to be made a reality already in history Its completion, however, is in the future (38; emphasis in orig.)

God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also the social relations existing between human beings. (52; emphasis in orig.)

In its ground-breaking chapter on the environment, the *Compendium* affirms:

The definitive salvation that God offers to all humanity through his own Son does not come about outside of this world. While wounded by sin, the world is destined to undergo a radical purification (cf. 2 Pet 3:10) that will make it a renewed world (cf. Is 65:17, 66:22; Rev 21:1), finally becoming the place where “righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13). (453).

In this survey of official documents, we can trace a hesitant, interrupted development that more and more clearly affirms the “integral” nature of the salvation which God is working in Christ. Can it be that, after 2000 years of Christianity, the Catholic Church is only now, thanks to the Council and the cry of the world’s poor, overcoming a kind of “privatization” of salvation that took hold under Platonizing influence during the Patristic era and returning to the more biblical understanding of salvation?