

Latin American Theology and the Pandemic

Dr. Rocío Figueroa Alvear

Auckland, 21 August 2020

As a Peruvian theologian married to a New Zealander I came here as a migrant with my own context and theology. During the last years I came to terms with the fact that I was a victim of sexual abuse within the Church and my theological work has been influenced by it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsfimkO-OAE>). Identifying myself as a survivor has enabled me to theologize with my own voice and feel the commitment to begin theologizing from the unheard voices of the victims of sexual abuse.

At the same time, I have embraced my Latin American roots and its way of doing theology. I feel like I am doubly 'out of place' when it comes to doing theology. I am out of place when I try to do Latin American theology because I am in New Zealand, and I am out of place doing theology in New Zealand using a cross-cultural reading of theology.

I would like to draw upon Latin American theology to provide an analysis that is able to interpret and give sense to some of the 'signs of the times' that the Pandemic is manifesting.

1. A Theology of the Signs of the Times

First, let's try to define what we mean by "signs of the times." We find the term in the document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 11:

The People of God ... Motivated by this faith, it labours to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other people of our age.

Yves Congar described how the 'signs of the times' concept permits a different type of theology; highlighting the historicity of the world and the Church and proposing another way of theologizing. In his view this concept has an important epistemological value for a theology that assumes a historical consciousness and uses an inductive and concrete method rather than the traditional deductive and abstract methodology. History has become a valid source for theologizing. History here refers not just to the historical sources, but in a wider sense as 'the history lived, experienced, narrated and interpreted by a culture' (Schickendantz 2014). Reality and history are not just the situation in which the truth of the Gospel is applied, but belong to the theological cycle itself. The hermeneutic cycle perceives reality from the word and action of God and perceive the word and action of God from reality. History has the capacity to manifest God's presence and that is why Jon Sobrino affirms that the signs of the times concept is not just a pastoral concept but also a theological one.

2. Point of departure: "Preferential option for the most vulnerable"

In the '60s Liberation Theology concentrated on the economic situation of the poor in Latin America. Gustavo Gutierrez recognised that most of the people in the world are poor and survival is their major preoccupation, death, their closest destiny. The point of departure of Liberation Theology in the '60s was the preferential option for the poor. They used social analysis as their methodology. Today, this perspective has been broadened. At the same time the definition of 'poor' has expanded. Many liberation theologians extend the definition of the poor to include not only those who are economically poor, but also those who are poor socio-culturally. These are people who suffer a variety of discriminations: social, economic

or discrimination based on gender or race. That is why in different contexts theologians talk about a preferential option for different types of vulnerability or marginalization.

The word 'option' relates to the commitment of solidarity with the poor and vulnerable and a rejection of anything that is contrary to the dignity of the human being. This commitment to the most vulnerable has its roots in the Gospel itself. First, God revealed his preferential option for the poor in the life of Jesus: Jesus himself was poor; he committed his life to those forgotten by the world; associating with the marginalized within his own cultural circle: the unclean, the sinners, the ill, the poor, the lepers, and women. Why did he do that? Why did he become one of them? Gutierrez asks, what do the poor in Latin America reveal about God and how can we talk about God as a Father in an inhuman world?

It is important to clarify that for Gutierrez the demand of having a preferential love for the poor didn't emerge just because of the injustice that they had lived or because of their suffering. It was not because the poor were morally better or even morally good. It was a demand which has its origin in God's initiative. When Gutierrez affirms that his point of departure is the poor, he refers to God's free and unreserved love for the poor.

3. The see-judge-act method

Together with the theology of the signs of the times, Liberation theologians in Latin America used the method see-judge-act.

The method see-judge-act was created after World War I by the French movement Young Christian Workers (JOC) as a pastoral method for Christian education. Liberation theologians use see-judge-act in an entirely different way. They use the method, not for a pastoral purpose but as a methodology within the theology of the signs of the times.

When the Latin American method talks about "see" it refers not just to a sociological analysis. It is a theology of history (theology of signs of the times) that considers history as one of salvation or condemnation. The act of 'seeing' means seeing reality in the light of faith. Because we see through faith, we are already judging in the light of the Gospel. That is why the steps of seeing, judging and acting are not separate but intertwined. When we see we are already judging and when we judge we can see better. Also 'seeing' is itself an act; facing reality.

While in the past some Latin American theologians have used the socio-analytic mediation to understand reality, today other liberation theologians dig into human stories to find resources for their reflection. For example, Choan-Seng Song invites Asian theologians to use not only stories from the Bible but also from those forgotten by history, from the poor as a source for theological thought. According to Peter Phan it is through listening to and reflecting upon the stories of suffering people that theology becomes liberation theology.

That is why we will try to 'see' the pandemic through the eyes of the poor in particular from the perspective of a Peruvian woman from the Amazon called Maria:

<https://www.facebook.com/Uncovered.C4News/videos/379801522952448/>

A) See

Today, what are the signs of the times?

We are in a unique historical situation. The entire world suffers from the same threat: the pandemic, Covid-19. And this pandemic manifests a world-wide sign where the most affected by the pandemic are the most vulnerable and poor.

The pandemic is like a mirror or x-ray of our societies. Latin America is now at the centre of the pandemic. Peru, my own country, is the second most affected Latin American country after Brazil and is the 7th in the world with more than 428,000 infections and 19,000 deaths.

Jon Sobrino analysing natural disasters points out the importance of not talking just about the natural factors of a disaster and their mitigation, but also the necessity of taking the historical-social factors seriously. The fact that most victims of the pandemic are poor is not an accident, but it belongs to the “historical essence” of the pandemic. So, the consequences of the pandemic are not only produced by natural causes, they are also a product of injustice.

In the pandemic the poor are the most vulnerable; they are the ones who are suffering the most and that is why this pandemic is an epistemic means to see the world. This pandemic has revealed the sin of our structures in which we have abandoned the most vulnerable. It helps us to visualize what our consumeristic societies seek to hide. The pandemic allows us to see how we shaped society before the pandemic arrived and how we have forgotten to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. We have no answer to God’s question of Abel after the death of Cain: “Where is your brother?” (Gen. 4:9).

The poor are our point of departure and a sign of the times. That doesn’t mean they are objects of our social charity nor objects of concern. We are not asked to theologize for the poor but to theologize from them. So I theologize from Maria, the woman in the video.

In our video Maria says: *‘Either I die trying to get out or starve to death in my room’*. She defines what it means to be poor and confronts us with a reality that is perhaps new to us here in NZ or Australia. It strikes me how Maria’s definition of poverty is similar to Gutierrez’ definition. For Gutierrez poverty means death: unjust and premature death.

But when we see Maria, when we see the faithful poor, we don’t only see the deficiencies but also their values, in which, although affected by the circumstances, they don’t lose their hope for the future. Maria says: *‘My destination is my home. I am just thinking of my husband’*. It is a realist’s hope. It doesn’t mean that she didn’t feel anxiety or tiredness. At night she felt guilty and feared danger, but she never got angry with God. Although she went through moments of darkness in the silence of uncertainty, she had total trust in God.

B) Judge

In the Latin American method to ‘judge’ is not an ethical judgement; rather it attempts to see ‘the real’ with God’s eyes trying to find the salvific dimension of life. Judging is to read the facts based on the demands of the Gospel. Ignacio Ellacuria refers to this stage of judgement as taking charge of the real. Taking the burden of historical reality means to be affected by tragedy. Judging allows us to overcome the unreality in which we live and we feel responsible for proclaiming the truth of these tragedies. Theology ought not to be merely a theoretical science remote from world. Rather, theology should be concerned with how people can live the dignity of the children of God and propose ways to make this world God’s home.

We must resist the temptation of not seeing, we need to let ourselves be touched by the pain of the victims. Maria said something that deeply affected me. She said: *“the virus has a*

treatment, but hunger doesn't". She makes us understand that the virus is not the main problem. The problem is poverty and the injustice that causes it. We as theologians need to denounce the real problem of the pandemic.

As theologians we are also entrusted to reflect on 'God's (*theo*) words' (*logos*). Taking care of reality is having our ears open to listen where God is speaking. Looking at my people, the faithful people of my country and looking to Maria I don't just see tragedy. I see the presence of God walking with her and I can hear the presence of the risen Christ in her words. There is a joy and a courage that comes from the Spirit of God. Her courage springs from her love for her children and her trust in God. While Maria is crossing the Andes, she sings and says: *'If we sing, we forget that we are walking, we forget the tiredness'*.

Her voice breaks with tears while she sings *"I will get to my little house"*. Maria challenges us how to speak of hope and how to sing to God with the beauty of the psalmist: 'May my tongue hit my palate if I forget You. Our oppressors asked us: Sing a hymn to Zion now!' (Psalm, 137). Her words are God's hymn. She, in the middle of her exile, looks up and feeling the pain insists on singing a song of hope.

At the end of her long journey she affirmed: *"Thankfully God has protected us, but I have put you at risk"*. I think that here we can perceive Jesus' total trust in the Father.

c) Act

The voice of Maria and many other voices must move us to work for justice. I feel that our mission as theologians is to give voice to the Marias of the world. They are the ones who can help us to listen to the voice of God. She is that sign of the times which calls me to oppose any kind of injustice and to follow the way of justice. Her voice is the self-giving of the victim that continues loving God and the others.

Sharing the cross of Jesus, giving hope to the marginalized and becoming witnesses of Jesus' resurrection; these ways let us live our hope in the resurrection.

References

Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, 'The Sodalicio Case in Peru: Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Church Sexual Abuse' in Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.) *Lived Religion and Trauma: Transcending the Ordinary*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), pp. 155-76.

Lluís Oviedo Torró, 'Teología en tiempos de Pandemia', *FronterasCTR*, (15 April 2020) in: <https://blogs.comillas.edu/FronterasCTR/2020/04/15/teologia-en-tiempos-de-pandemia/>

Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator, A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

Carlos Schickendantz, 'Autoridad teológica de los acontecimientos históricos. Perplejidades sobre un lugar teológico', *Revista Teologia*, T. L, n. 115 (December 2014).

Peter C. Phan, 'Method in Liberation Theologies' in *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), 40-63.