**Liberation Theology**James Hayes-Bohanan, Ph.D  
First Parish Church and Bridgewater State University

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**Readings**

Two readings from *The Violence of Love* by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador

When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God’s promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin’s consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.

*and*

Let us not forget: we are a pilgrim church, subject to misunderstanding, to persecution, but a church that walks serene, because it bears the force of love.

Source: [http://www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com/)

**Sermon**

One of our many joys in recent weeks has been that the New York *Times* has just profiled the 26-year (so far) marriage between Pam Hayes-Bohanan and me. The reporter spoke to each of us separately in preparing for the article that appears in today’s print edition, and in the process I learned that my political activism at the time we were undergraduates in the mid-1980s played a bigger role in bringing us together than I had realized. Pam had remembered my involvement in the Nuclear Freeze movement, and I recalled that that she was involved in efforts on our campus to end apartheid in South Africa.

These are the causes we each shared with reporter about the other, but when Pam first mentioned my own activism in those days, my first thought was of the Sanctuary Movement. I was never very deeply involved, but I was connected through three distinct communities at different times during the 1980s. Some will recall that this movement was promoting asylum status for those fleeing civil wars in Central America. Tens – perhaps hundreds – of thousands of refugees – a significant proportion of the population of these small countries – were in the DC area alone. My first connection was through our campus community, particularly the foreign languages department of which Pam was a part. I remember asking a guest speaker from the State Department why refugees from Central America were not granted asylum in the way that was becoming routine for refugees from Eastern Europe. I was surprised at his candor in suggesting that such a policy would be an admission that the United States was complicit in the human-rights abuses that were driving that migration.

My other connections to Central America at the time were both religious. Through the family of my former fiancée – you can read a little about them in the *Times* article – I became acquainted with a renegade congregation of Roman Catholics meeting in a retreat center that was geographically just outside of Annapolis, Maryland, and ideologically just outside the control of the church hierarchy. A bit later, I was serving as a very young Director of Religious Education in a DC-area UU church which – like many Catholic congregations in the area – was giving serious consideration to moving from asylum to sanctuary. Just as we argued that the Fourth Geneva Convention obligated the United States to provide asylum to those fleeing the violence of war, we considered our individual congregations to be areas of sanctuary, safe zones recognized by a variety of ancient legal traditions. The Catholic and UU congregations put me in direct contact with the asylum seekers and with the Berrigan Brothers – priests from Pam’s home town who had been two of the original Catonsville Nine.

I share this bit of personal history by way of explaining why I found myself caught up in the excitement and speculation about the recent election the new pope. I have to admit that I followed media coverage of this conclave than I have any election of UU leadership. The irony does not escape me – even if I *were* Catholic I would have no voice in the selection of its next leader. Whoever was chosen, however, I knew that he – or she; hope springs eternal – could potentially affect the lives of millions in a region about which I have grown to care deeply, and that I now have the privilege of visiting often.

The only characteristic of a papal conclave that exceeds its importance, of course, is its secrecy, so that it created a weeklong period of perfectly empty news coverage in search of news. Reporters and pundits filled the idle hours of smoke-watching with speculation about the geography of papal selection. Would he be African? Would he be Latin American? Conditioned by years of sports coverage, the Boston media were fixated on an unexpected opportunity to keep reversing the Curse, as Cardinal O’Malley warmed up in the bullpen, repeating his disinterest in the job too often to be believed. Would he be Asian? After two popes from elsewhere in Europe, would this diversity prove to have been too much, causing the cardinals to retreat back to Italy?

While the world outside speculated, the men inside – way inside – actually did something surprising. Not only did they choose a pope from the global South, they chose one from Latin America where the church’s numbers are declining, rather than Africa, where it is growing rapidly. Moreover, among the Latin American choices, they chose the least likely, Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, last on most lists of contenders from the region.

Before moving on to the theological and political implications of this choice, I must make a bit of a geographic digression that ties together not only this morning’s music but also several transatlantic air routes. Monsignor Bergoglio was the son and grandson of Italian immigrants who had been drawn to work in Argentina when it was more prosperous than Italy. Eventually, the large Italian community in Argentina would lead to the establishment of a small Italian community in Cape Verde. In the days of Mussolini and Salazar, the Cape Verdean island of Sal was identified as a convenient location for an airport halfway between Rome and Buenos Aires. That island now hosts many Italian resorts, and it is a vital connection between Cape Verde and Boston.

Back to the future pope: not only was his family Italian: it was a working class family that struggled in the New World. And as he rose through the ranks, he eschewed many of the attendant privileges, never forgetting those humble origins. Lest I sound overly enthralled with this pope, I should note that early reports about his reported homophobia – though hardly surprising, given the process by which he was selected – was disappointing, as is his extremely hard line on abortion. At the time of his inauguration, it was also not clear to what extent he had cooperated with the persecution of human-rights leaders during the Dirty War period in Argentina, which was more or less contemporary with the terrible events in Central America that I mentioned previously. In fact, I volunteered to present this sermon mainly because I was curious about these allegations and wanted a good reason to explore them, and the prospects for renewed support for Liberation Theology in Rome.

First, I should take a moment to describe what liberation theology is. I begin with excerpts from one of its most powerful opponents, Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI. Writing as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in his capacity as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Divine Faith in Rome, he made the case against what he saw as the profound heresy of a movement that had been initiated by Pope John XXIII. Here I am excerpting his original letter “Liberation Theology” as it appeared in his *Instruction* of Autumn 1984. It is available on a web site known as Christendom Awake.

1. Liberation theology is a phenomenon with an extraordinary number of layers. There is a whole spectrum from radically marxist positions, on the one hand, to the efforts which are being made within the framework of a correct and ecclesial theology, on the other hand, a theology which stresses the responsibility which Christians necessarily hear for the poor and oppressed, such as we see in the documents of the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) from Medellin to Puebla. In what follows, the concept of liberation theology will be understood in a narrower sense: it will refer only to those theologies which, in one way or another, have embraced the marxist fundamental option. …

2. Liberation theology … constitutes a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church. At the same time it must be borne in mind that no error could persist unless it contained a grain of truth.

Furthermore, the error concerned would not have been able to wrench that piece of the truth to its own use if that truth had been adequately lived and witnessed to in its proper place (in the faith of the Church). So, in denouncing error and pointing to dangers in liberation theology, we must always be ready to ask what truth is latent in the error and how it can be given its rightful place…

3. Liberation theology is a universal phenomenon in three ways:

a. … it sees itself as a new hermeneutics of the Christian faith, a new way of understanding Christianity as a whole and implementing it. …

b. While liberation theology today has its center of gravity in Latin America, it is by no means an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. It is unthinkable apart from the governing influence of European and North American theologians. But it is also found in India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Taiwan and in Africa….

c. Liberation theology goes beyond denominational borders: from its own starting point it frequently tries to create a new universality for which the classical church divisions are supposed to have become irrelevant.

Returning to the Cardinal’s text, it is actually descriptive of the movement in some ways, though he makes a significant error in the first paragraph. To repeat, he writes: “The concept of liberation theology will be understood in a narrower sense: it will refer only to those theologies which, in one way or another, have embraced the marxist fundamental option.” That is to say, he acknowledges a range of political tendencies within the movement, but then chooses to define it only in terms of the elements that are politically most radical. He then proceeds to condemn *that* radical element by assuming that if it embraces any element of Marxian thought, it must embrace all of it, including those antithetical to the theology of which the movement was born. All progressive priests are Marxists, he asserts, and since some Marxists are atheists, all progressive priests are thereby heretics.

For many thousands in Latin America, however, the “preferential option for the poor” was simply the most appropriate way to carry out the gospel. In Cardinal Ratzinger’s own words, it is a “theology which stresses the responsibility which Christians necessarily hear for the poor and oppressed.” For these priests and the lay persons with whom they worked, the teachings of Christ required far more than charity. Writing for online magazine *The North Star* on the occasion of Pope Benedict’s resignation, author Joe Morby describes the evolution of Liberation Theology thus:

Catholicism has always been endemic to Latin America. Poverty, violence, exploitation and oppression have too. The repressions and dictatorships of the 60s and 70s spurred many of the rank and file clergy in Latin America to adapt their thinking and their methods to actively assist the poor and disenfranchised in gaining a fairer, more egalitarian, society, to exercise what they called the “preferential option for the poor”, to liberate the masses from poverty. The Church seemed to have become too comfortable working alongside repressive, corrupt regimes, and was in danger of losing its moral credibility. Working at ground level amongst the people under the cosh had made it impossible for many priests to ignore the roots and causes of poverty, particularly as described by Marxism; they realised that it was no good to merely give hand-outs and run soup-kitchens — if one really wanted the poor to be uplifted one had to challenge the social order. In the 70s, this meant solidarity and assistance to revolutionary movements such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, or even merely speaking out against state injustice and corruption in an unequivocal way that Rome did not. Many of them shared the persecution of the poor, others attracted the ire of the U.S., and some even died for their cause, such as the Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero, shot dead by regime thugs as he lifted the chalice during a mass in 1980.

The liberation theologians insisted that their work was grounded in their faith. They re-read the gospels with an eye for themes of liberation and took inspiration from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Prophets, both arousing passions for oppressed peoples and denouncing injustices. Proponents of the theology such as the Brazilian (now ex-)cleric Leonardo Boff insisted ad nauseam that their interest in Marxism was only as a way of scientifically understanding the class struggle and the distribution of power and not because they had lost faith in the traditional approach of the Church.

Inquisition-era prisons are still to be found in Latin America, including one in the form of an art gallery I visited with my family in Brazil in 2003. By the time Cardinal Ratzinger wrote these words in 1984, the name of the Sacred Congregation no longer included the word “Inquisition.” The hierarchy no longer had access to the instruments of the medieval institution, but its opposition to many of its own priests in Latin America could have the same effect. By opposing those who opposed the dictators, Rome was complicit in the repression that many of its members and priests sought to end.

This brings us back to the question of the newly-inaugurated Pope Francis, or Francisco as he is known in Latin America. What direction is the Church taking, by replacing Pope Benedict with this man, who served in the region that Benedict had seen as needing so much correction? Francisco’s identity as a Latin American has been greeted with glee – even euphoria – throughout the region. The cool relations between the cardinal and the left-leaning President Kirschner have thawed, at least somewhat, though progressives in the region remain quite concerned about his strongly-worded opposition to abortion – even in the case of rape or incest – and to contraception and same-sex marriage. The latter is now legal in Argentina, though Bishop Bergoglio had called it a “move by the father of lies.”

This kind of language is of some serious concern in Argentina, where in 1955 the church had opposed liberal reforms – such as the legalization of divorce – advocated by President Juan Perón. In that case, the church had supported the navy and army against the president, leading to a long period of military rule. Repression under that regime culminated in Argentina’s Dirty War of 1976 to 1983, in which the Bishop’s role remains ambiguous. Some have charged that he turned over two priests to be tortured by the regime, while he and his supporters assert that he worked behind the scenes to protect them, at a time when he could not do so publicly.

With respect to that history, the past may never be fully known. For those concerned about the poor of Latin America today, some positive indicators can be found in the present, in three areas. First is the personal behavior of the new pope; second is evidence from recent declarations about sainthood; third is the changed political milieu in the region.

In explaining the choice of his name as Pope, Francisco said, “Immediately with the thought of the poor, I thought of St. Francis of Assisi… Francis, the man of peace. That was how the name came into my heart. And for me, the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and guards creation-- at this time that we have a relationship with creation that is not very good, right? And the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man. How I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor!” This is consistent with the many stories of the Bishop of Buenos Aires taking the bus to work, living in an apartment rather than the palace provided, and cooking his own meals. Even in the context of the Vatican, he is wearing simpler vestments, riding in an ordinary car, and asking Argentines who wanted to visit his inauguration to instead donate their airfare to the poor.

The second piece of evidence is found in the rapidly changing position of the church with respect to the proposed sainthood of Archbishop Romero. Writing for the magazine of the North American Congress on Latin America in 2008, Nikolas Kozloff described the then Pope Benedict’s ongoing opposition to Liberation Theology in the context of proposals to beatify the Salvadoran bishop. Pope Benedict, he writes, “was pressed by reporters to comment on Oscar Romero’s tragic murder in El Salvador. The Pope complained that Romero’s cause had been hijacked by supporters of liberation theology. Commenting on a new book about the slain archbishop, the Pope said that Romero should not be seen simply as a political figure. Hoping to avoid any meaningful political discussion on the matter, Benedict said ‘He was killed during the consecration of the Eucharist. Therefore, his death is testimony of the faith.’”

The death of Romero was a tipping point in El Salvador, one of the precipitating events that tipped the country from political repression to full-scale war. More than 90,000 Salvadorans died in the war that followed his assassination, and many thousands more became the refugees I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. But neither John Paul II nor Benedict would beatify Archbiship Romero, for fear of validating the liberation movement of which he clearly was a part. Pope Francis, having already beatified several martyrs of the Spanish Civil War, has more recently indicated that he Saint Romero will soon be canonized, making official a designation already widely accepted in El Salvador.

Regarding the current political milieu, things have changed quite a bit in Latin America since the days of Cardinal Ratzinger’s efforts to purge the progressives from its churches. If it was the case that in the context of the Dirty War Bishop Bergoglio had done as much as he could for the poor and their advocates, the repressive regimes of the right are now gone, and in many countries, the allies of liberation theology lead governments. Where the church and the state were previously allied against the poor, they now are allied on their behalf, at least at a rhetorical level.

Where does all of this leave Unitarian Universalists? It leaves us in a position to grapple with the original challenge of Liberation Theology which – as Cardinal Ratzinger fretted – need not follow denominational boundaries. If the Catholic Church is heeding its own prophetic voices as it moves beyond charity to real engagement with the structural causes of poverty, we should stand ready to work with them. And if the Church is once again co-opted by the forces of repression, we should stand ready to challenge those alliances.

In today’s Latin America, the differences may be more subtle than they were during the Dirty Wars in South America and the not-so-civil wars in Central America. We live in an age when trade agreements and development deals have made some private companies far more powerful than most countries in the region. In such a world, a general and his tanks may be replaced by a banker and his fountain pen, and politicians who opposed the former may be quite cozy with the latter. The call of Liberation – which the current Pope seems inclined to heed – is to increased vigilance on behalf of the poor. May all faith communities be part of that watchfulness.

Please rise as you are able and sing Hymn number 318, “We Would Be One.”

Our final words this morning are also from Archbishop Romero.

*A final reading from Romero, without specific attribution:*

Peace is not the product of terror or fear.  
Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.  
Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.  
Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.  
Peace is dynamism.  
Peace is generosity.  
It is right and it is duty.

AMEN.