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THE CONCEPT OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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This investigation deals with the concept of the poor in the thought of Latin American Liberation theology, particularly as articulated in the context of the movement's ecclesiology.

Chap. 1 traces the historical and theological context for the emergence of liberation theology. The focus is placed first on the ecclesiological models through which the Roman Catholic Church expressed its life and mission in Latin America and how they affected the Church's social relations in the area. The impact of the ecclesiological shift of Vatican Council II, in combination with the historical situation of Latin America in the late 1960s, is seen as creating the immediate setting for the discovery and option for the poor by progressive Latin American Catholics.

Chap. 2 shows that liberation theology, in its effort to place theological reflection at the service of humanization and social changes in a context marked by massive poverty, has attempted to situate theology in history and rethink it "from below." The ecclesiological and pastoral implications of this approach are readily apparent. Demanding from the Church an effective function on the side of the oppressed determines the necessity for an analysis of the society's socio-political-economic situation. Marxist analysis of society is brought into the theological method. Thus, to avoid traditional spiritualization, paternalistic, and fatalistic approaches, the poor are identified "scientifically" in terms of the Marxist dialectic of history. This preunderstanding of and precommitment to the poor fatally shapes the liberation view of sin and salvation, its notion of the "church of the poor," and its rereading of the Bible. Biblical texts and events dealing with the poor, selectively chosen, are strongly influenced by the adopted conflictive view of society.

Chap. 3 reflects critically on liberation theology's concept of the poor as framed within the class struggle polarization. Since, when faithful to their methodology, liberation theologians see "the poor" and "oppression" exclusively in socio-economic terms, the reactualization of Christian doctrines from the "perspective of the poor" tends to replace traditional verticalism with the opposite one-dimensional approach. Option for the poor tends to be expressed as an option for the proletariat, and the "church of the poor" tends to become the church of one social class. The last part of the chapter tests the liberationist view of the poor in the light of Scripture.

This investigation concludes by affirming the biblical validity of liberation theology's concern for the poor. "Option for the poor," however,

must be cleansed from ideological ambiguities. Liberation theology could avoid the ideological trap and increase its appealing potential if its view of the poor through sociological criteria were balanced and controlled by the biblical criteria. In the light of Scripture, "option for the poor" is, in fact, option for the needy, independent of conformity with ideological demands.