GODTALK IN LATIN AMERICA

The View from the Margins

Gustavo Gutiérrez

'CHRIST IS A HOMILY GIVEN TO US BY GOD', Archbishop Romero used to say.[1] In our turn we can say that Archbishop Romero made his own life, suffering and death a homily—a shared word—given to us by Jesus. He showed us that the authentic Word is not just borne by the wind, but remains, abides. This Word never ceases to remind us of the poor, of the marginalised, of those who live under the threat of premature and unjust death—and of what they signify when it comes to talking about the God of life. Theology is a *logos*, a word, a language about God. When we articulate our faith, the whole social, cultural and psychological world implicit in this language comes into play.

In the encounter with extreme human situations, situations of suffering and injustice of the kind common in Latin America and the Caribbean, theological questions cut deep, and take us to the heart of things. Amid suffering, there can be a simple joy; even in inhuman situations the flame of hope can still burn. But unless we enter the world of daily grief—a world of consuming need, in which people's most basic human rights are violated—then our theological activity lacks any solidity. It can easily degenerate into a bureaucratic, manipulative process quite contrary to the spirit of the gospel.

In what follows, my intention is to look at some features of the language about God that arises in the world of the marginalised. I shall

[1] This article is a lightly abridged version of a talk given at a conference in 2005, marking the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

begin by examining how we should understand the challenge that extreme poverty represents to anyone wanting to talk about God. Then I shall look at how this poverty shapes what we call a preferential option for the poor. Finally, I shall touch on the different registers of language we use in connection with God, on how they are different and yet also how they hold together.

A Complex Reality

Poverty is a multi-faceted, inhuman and unjust reality; poverty is complex. Important though the economic dimension is, poverty is not simply an economic reality. In countries that are multi-ethnic and multicultural—like many of those in Latin America, including my own Peru—we can see at once that poverty is also tied up with this diversity. The point is reinforced when we see how complex the idea of 'the poor' is in both the Old and the New Testaments: it may refer to those who beg in order to survive; to the sheep without a shepherd; to those ignorant of the Law; to those called in John's Gospel 'the accursed' (John 7:49); to women, children, foreigners and notorious sinners; to those afflicted with serious illnesses.

This complexity has been present, both as a problem to be studied and as a standpoint from which to view reality, from the very beginning of Latin American theology; and ways of reflecting on it have deepened as the years passed. We came early to the expressions 'non-person' and 'person without significance' in referring to the poor.[2] These terms were an attempt to stress what was common to all those designated as 'the poor': the fact that their human dignity, their status as daughters and sons of God, was not acknowledged, for a variety of reasons—economic, racial, gender, religious or other. The poor live in conditions that are despised by the mentality dominant in our societies, and this creates a situation which is both inequitable and unjust.

Poverty is not a matter of fate, but a condition brought about; it is not a misfortune, but an injustice. It results from social structures, from personal and cultural mental habits. It is tied up with the way in which

[2] 'Non-person' designates the addressee of liberation theologies, and contrasts with the 'non-believer' of Enlightenment theologies. 'Without significance' refers to the lack of influence such people possess in society.

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society is constructed, in all its various manifestations. It is the work of human hands: of economic structures; of social greed; of the racial, cultural and religious prejudices that have accumulated over history; of ever more overweening economic aspirations.[3] It follows that its abolition lies within our power.

We now have intellectual tools which, used with proper critical rigour, will allow us to recognise the socio-economic mechanisms and categories that establish and maintain poverty. Simple honesty requires us to make this analysis. If we want to overcome a situation which is unjust and inhuman, we must go down this route. Obviously there are many factors which contribute to poverty, but, if we adopt this kind of analytic perspective, we will unmask our collective responsibility, particularly if we are among the relatively powerful in society. Despite all the evidence, however, the fruits of this social analysis have not become generally accepted in today's world, not even in Christian circles. When we talk about the causes of poverty, we are touching on sensitive, controversial questions, and all too easily we shy away.

One issue is the global nature of mass poverty in its various forms. For a long time people were aware only of the poverty that they had near to them, in their own city, or at most in their own country. This situation has changed significantly with the media revolution. What was formerly a distant, remote reality has become something that is always under our

[3] Sometimes these postures are theoretically and explicitly rationalised, for example in the book by the US theorist Samuel Huntington (author of the controversial *The Clash of Civilisations*) on Latin American immigration to the US: *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

On the outskirts of Iquitos, Peru

noses. Moreover, statistical data on mass poverty, collected by innumerable organizations, are increasingly widely available to inform all our studies. We cannot, therefore, claim ignorance.

Another new feature is the widening of the gap between richer and poorer countries. Some economists are now speaking of 'neodualism': the world's population is clustering more and more at the two extremes of the social and economic spectrum. One of the dividing factors is that of differing levels of access to scientific and technical knowledge. Such knowledge is the driving force behind economic growth, but also behind the unrestrained exploitation—indeed degradation—of the planet's natural resources, which are the patrimony of the human race as a whole. Unequal access to this knowledge has increased the gap that we have been noting.

But the point is not confined to the economic aspects of poverty and marginalisation. The effects of this increasing disparity are also felt in relation to culture, to race and to gender. This last has led us to speak of a *feminisation of poverty*. Women are always more affected by poverty because they also experience discrimination from men, especially if they belong to disadvantaged cultures and races. The situation has now reached crisis; the reports of such institutions as the World Bank confirm it year after year. But the gap has been widening, and people have been expressing alarm about it, for decades.

Now—and this 'now' has been with us for a long time—we have no excuse for the inhumanity and injustice of poverty, or for ignorance of its causes, its complexity, its extent and depth, whether or not we have direct experience of it.

The Challenge of Poverty and the Proclamation of the Gospel

Poverty is a reality that is inhuman and unjust; it is also a reality that can be removed. Any tolerance of it, any theoretical accommodation to it, any ambiguous or 'spiritualising' attitude towards it is an insult to those who are suffering under it. Moreover, poverty—the experience of just not counting as a person, followed by an untimely, unjust death—is a condition opposed to the will for life and love that characterizes the God of the Bible.

This is a serious challenge to how we understand the faith and bear witness to it. The terms 'non-person' and 'marginalised' refer to more than just the factor which the different aspects of poverty have in common; they also point to the depth of the injustice and the seriousness of the situation. These are not problems that we can simply deal with as economic and social issues; they go much further. They are of such a complexity and extent that they invite us to read the Christian message in a quite new way.

Poverty and oppression, with their fatal consequences, raise radical and far-reaching questions for the human conscience and for how people have been living out, or trying to live out, Christianity. For Christianity sees in the refusal to love other people nothing less than sin: the ultimate root of poverty and dehumanisation.[4] However, we should not forget that the great challenges confronting Christian faith are also challenges to reinterpret the biblical message, and to discern the path to take as Jesus' disciples. It is in this perspective that we can understand the significance of a theology such as liberation theology, which seeks to take the challenge of poverty seriously in the now of our history. To put it briefly: the condition of the poor both asks searching

[4] Ignacio Ellacuría was right to note in 1983: 'The theological concept of "the poor" has in the last fifteen years taken on the exceptional level of importance that it had in the preaching of the prophets, in the Good News of Jesus and at the best moments of the Church': 'Pobres', in *Conceptos fundamentales de pastoral*, edited by Casiano Floristán and Juan José Tamayo (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1983), 786.

questions about the heart of the Christian message, and provides new ways of looking at things that enable us to respond creatively.[5]

The Preferential Option for the Poor

It is in this context that we can situate what we call the preferential option for the poor. This formulation predates the 1978 meeting at Puebla, and goes back to something like 1967, to the period leading up to Medellín.[6] It was a response to the challenge posed by poverty. One central point was the plain affirmation that the poverty lived by those whom the dominant classes regarded as 'them' is inhuman, and that it is rejected by the God of the Bible. If we analyze reality in the light of faith, poverty must be regarded as an evil, whatever form it may take. We must stop idealizing real poverty; we must make some distinctions that allow us to see what the gospel really means when it talks about 'spiritual poverty'; we also need to understand what we mean by a Christian commitment to the poor.

Synthesizing the documents of Medellín and Puebla, we can summarise their account of the matter as follows:

- Real or material poverty is a scandalous, unjust state. It offends human dignity, and transgresses against God's will. As such it is an evil.
- Spiritual poverty is primarily to be understood as synonymous with spiritual childhood, one of the deepest themes in the biblical message. It is an attitude of openness to God, the disponibility of the person who depends on the Lord for everything. It is lived out by those who, like the so-called 'poor of THE LORD', accept God's mysterious design for their lives. From this fundamental attitude arises a detachment from material goods.
- The word 'option' comes from a sense of poverty as provoking a 'commitment'. In the theology informing Medellín, this

[5] The focus given by the option for the poor is linked with a sense of the poor not only as objects of evangelization but also as carriers of the Good News—a point recognised by Puebla as 'the potential of the poor for evangelization' (n. 1147).

[6] *Tr*: Fr Gustavo is here exploring the history of liberation theology. Two key points were meetings of CELAM, the Bishops' Conference of Latin America, in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1978.

> commitment involves both solidarity with the poor and protest against the inhuman situation which is poverty. The Puebla document speaks of 'the gospel requirement of poverty as a solidarity with the poor and as a repudiation of the situation in which the majority of the continent lives' (n.1156). To understand the option for the poor, it is vital to keep both aspects in mind.

Clearly the approach to life yielded by an option for the poor is not, and cannot be, something proper to a particular theology. The significance and necessity of a movement towards the poor, as a consequence of accepting the gift of God's reign, are essential to the Christian message, and therefore must be in some way present in any talk about the God of Jesus Christ. One more recent authoritative source that inspired our current talk of a preferential option was a broadcast made by John XXIII a month before the opening of Vatican II: 'towards underdeveloped countries, the Church presents itself as what it wants to be, as the Church of all, and particularly the Church of the poor'.[7]

The expression 'preferential option for the poor' is a recent formula, but it is nothing more than a reminder to live out a fundamental datum of biblical revelation: the initiative of the God who loved us first (1 John 4:19). If there is a preference for the poor, it is because they are in a situation of injustice, one that is contrary to God's will for life, and as such unacceptable to a believer. The preference is a repudiation of the inequalities and marginalising factors already present in society. In a context where these are present, the slogan's aim is to avoid the affirmation of the universality of God's love degenerating into a pious mantra which drowns out what is really going on.

When we in liberation theology connect contemporary Christian experience and theology to the biblical concept of solidarity with the poor, we are not relativising the present moment, but rather articulating its full significance, showing how it at once continues previous theologies and yet represents a rupture. Today's experience,

[7] John XXIII, 'Radio Message to All the Christian Faithful One Month before the Opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council', 11 September 1962 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches /1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19620911_ecumenical-council_it.html).

A Favela in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

today's daily options taken in service of God's reign, are expressions of God's gratuitous love in Jesus Christ, *already* present in history, but *not yet* fully so, as the classical expression has it.

People often raise questions about the future of liberation theology. Such questioning needs to remember the whole range of the contemporary realities indicated by the term 'option for the poor', both in the Church's awareness and beyond. You cannot separate the theology of liberation from the theological and pastoral options that have given rise to it—along with all that they have achieved and all the difficulties that they have encountered. Talk of the option for the poor gets to the very heart of this theology.

However, we should not forget that the expression refers to something more than a pastoral strategy aimed at a few specific decisions, however important these may be. What is at stake is broader and more important. The idea of preference has to be understood in connection with the universality of God's love. Only then will its true significance become clear, and only then will an answer to certain important questions that worry some people become possible. These

questions are worthy of respect; we need to take them seriously, and they lead us back to some important issues.

Preference and Universality

Preference and universality go together. The idea of preference makes an option for the poor radical and gives it bite. Its sources are biblical, and it is for this reason that it is truly radical; these sources point us to the love of God, which is both preferential and universal at the same time. The perspective of universality sets the privileged place of the poor in a wider context, constantly correcting any tendency for preference to become restrictive; for its part, the idea of a preference for the poor focuses this universal commitment, and protects us from the danger of remaining abstract and nebulous.

The idea of a preference in no way represents a watering down of the clear demand for commitment and for solidarity with the poor. It was a term used during the particularly creative times for the Latin American Church before Puebla; it drew on John XXIII, on Medellín, and above all on biblical sources. It was not a surreptitious afterthought introduced in order to broaden, and thereby nullify, a more radical, exclusive option for the poor. When Puebla called one of its documents 'the preferential option for the poor', this was because people had begun to speak in that way in many grass-roots Christian communities, and many theologians had begun to write in such terms. The document itself is quite clear on the urgent need, without any compromise, for a commitment to those who are poor and on the margins.

But there are also those at the opposite end of the spectrum who are concerned that 'preferential' implies an undue restriction: to talk in this way is to forget, so they think, the fundamental affirmation of God's love as universal, and to claim that it addresses only one section, however numerous, of humanity. The objectors therefore think that we must qualify 'preferential', and make it clear that it is not exclusive.

This fear is groundless, at least as regards the text itself (whatever might be said about some interpretations of it). The very word 'preference' bespeaks merely a priority in our care (of a thoroughly biblical kind). 'Preference' refers to something which is first in our concerns rather than our only concern, to predilection rather than exclusion.

The phrase 'preferential option for the poor' steers a middle course between two unacceptable positions. It neither diminishes the radical need for solidarity and justice implicit in the option for the poor, nor does it simply ignore those who do not count socially as poor. When people make such criticisms, they are ignoring, it seems to me, the history and the true meaning of the formula.

Moreover, we should avoid making too much of the terms we use in such discussions. They merely point us in an important direction. You cannot talk about a preference in the context of God's universal love without using an anthropomorphic expression—what else is there to use? The phrase emerges from a humble, limited approach to the mystery of God's love. It is not to be read as though it were saying everything there is to say on the subject. The words we use are but signs that point us—not without some deficiencies—towards the reality they signify, a reality which we cannot contain in words and concepts. They are the pathway, not the goal. It is those who, like Archbishop Romero, have risked their lives and made the option for the poor a matter of daily practice who speak to us of its full extent.

The words we use are but signs

What is essential in making a preferential option for the poor is to enter into the world in which the poor live, to live in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised, to repudiate the injustice of the situation in which they are living, and to share in their demand to be considered as truly human. On that basis, and out of that experience, you can and must then proclaim the gospel to every human being. An authentically Christian universality has its historical roots in this kind of partiality. The proclamation of the Good News has to go 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). But it begins, so the Gospels say, in the particular situation of Galilee, a place marginalised and despised by those living in Judaea, the district containing Jerusalem, where political and religious power was concentrated in Jesus' time. It is from the forgotten ones, the mistreated ones, that Jesus Christ's message of God's universal love comes to us. We cannot separate universality from this kind of partiality.

Obviously the specific ways of living out the preferential option for the poor vary. They depend on particular situations and on the courses that history takes, and must therefore be reviewed and renewed constantly. But you diminish it if you lose sight of its ultimate *raison d'être*, and see it simply as the response to a particular situation. If that

is how you present the option for the poor, then of course some can now claim that it was the product of a moment that has now passed. Such objectors can obviously still be criticized for their poor social, economic and cultural analysis. But the main problem with their position is different and more fundamental: its failure to understand what the Bible says about God's justice and love.

Two Languages

Nothing is more challenging to our faith than the suffering of the innocent. How are we to understand a God who is love in a world seared by injustice, genocide, terrorist violence, and the violation of basic human rights? The question is both simple and pressing, and its answer clearly lies beyond theology's power. Nevertheless, we cannot simply evade the question, especially in countries that are poor and on the margins. In dealing with this question, the Bible—the Book of Job and other texts—draws on two registers of language about God. These discourses acquire their full significance only when they are taken together, in such a way that they both challenge and nourish each other.

The Language of Justice

Justice is one of the great biblical themes. Often it appears in connection with law. The need to make justice the central value governing the life of God's people is one that is rooted in God's will. The prophetic strand in the Bible—which does not just appear in the books named after prophets—is full of reminders of how faith in God is linked to the establishment of justice and righteousness. Indeed, what is at stake is ultimately an action undertaken by God's own self: 'righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne' (Psalm 89:14). Justice is an expression of God's holiness. It is not that God acts justly and for that reason is regarded as just; it is rather that God's own self is just, and as such acts justly.

To practise justice and to establish righteousness are requirements rooted in God's holiness. These activities bespeak God. It is in order to establish 'justice in the earth' (Isaiah 42:4) that THE LORD anoints His servant, placing His spirit upon him (42:1). The nature of the task here is expressed by the prophetic language—the *dabar*, both event and word—the language of justice that helps us penetrate God's love

for every human being, particularly for the poor and excluded. A preference for those who are history's losers is a response to the God of the Bible whose unnegotiable demand is for justice—a justice which opposes the unjust inequalities to be found in our society.

This is why God's justice and the requirement laid on believers to practise it are always presented in the Bible in connection with the poor. When we defend the poor, when we protest against the obstacles placed in their path, when we repudiate what they have to suffer, when we enter into solidarity with their cause, our actions are not just accidental expressions of that divine justice, but rather its actual manifestation and authentication. It is out of this practice, this obligation, that a language arises that permits us to speak of God. Job discovers it little by little. He begins to move out of a world of rewards and punishments that was closing him in on himself, and was preventing him from speaking correctly about God.

The foundational source for talk about God is God's self-communication, the Good News. But Godtalk also arises—inevitably—from the ways in which this self-communication is given in particular historical circumstances. The situation of poverty and injustice in Latin America and in the Caribbean gives to our Godtalk a distinctive stress and a tone of urgency that cannot be avoided.

The Language of Gratuity

However, this urgency must not lead us to avoid the other dimension of our talk about God. Here I mean what we find at the very heart of the biblical message: the gratuitous love of God outstripping our deeds and merits. Obviously, this is a theme for Christian contemplation and prayer, and it is therefore a favourite theme in Christian mysticism, as we can see from the history of spirituality. But it is also a powerful demand. Nothing, in fact, is more demanding than God's gratuity. God's loving initiative demands a response. After all, it says in the Gospel: 'you received without payment; give without payment' (Matthew 10:8).

The preferential option for the poor is not based on a belief that the poor person is necessarily better in a moral or religious sense than the person who is not poor—that would be a quite misplaced idealization. What matters, rather, is that the poor person is in an inhuman and unjust situation which is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis of the preference lies in God, in God's gratuitous and

Fr Gustavo Gutiérrez renewing Dominican profession in 2004

universal love. It is a matter of justice, as we have said—but not of a justice governed by external laws, of the kind we often find in civil society and in religious contexts. The justice at stake here is radical, demanding: it addresses injustice and the human condition at their hearts. I have been speaking of the gratuity of God's love, the love that 'loved us first'. There is obviously nothing arbitrary or capricious about this. Sometimes ordinary language uses 'gratuitous' to mean 'arbitrary', but this sense of the word is excluded when it comes to God.

It is useful, then, to speak of the understanding of the faith having two dimensions, of two languages for referring to God and expressing Jesus' gospel: the prophetic in connection with justice, and the contemplative in connection with gratuitousness. But we must repeat that the two cannot be understood apart from each other. If the connections are cut loose, the languages lose their content, and become inauthentic, denatured.

The language of gratuitousness recognises that *tout est grâce*—'everything is a grace', as Thérèse of Lisieux memorably said.[8] The

[8] St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*, translated by John Clarke (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Sources, 1977), 57.

prophetic word protests against injustice, against the exploitation of the poor, and against the conditions which cause these things. Unless the demand of justice is there, the language of gratuitousness runs the risk of not really touching the history in which God is present, and indeed of avoiding it. For its part, the language of gratuity protects the language of justice from the temptation of a too narrow vision of history and of God. Both languages are rooted in the life-conditions, in the sufferings and in the hopes, of the marginalised, whether in Latin America and the Caribbean, or in any other place where human beings live in poverty. When the two come together and enrich each other, then one single language comes forth.

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