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# Critiques of Liberation Theology: A Case Study

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## **An Introduction to Liberation Theology**

Since its emergence in the mid-twentieth century, liberation theology has been watched closely under the critical eye of the Vatican. Although the phrase “theology of liberation” covers a broad spectrum of positions, it has often been treated as a unified movement and scrutinized in that way, especially under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. These critiques have been largely theoretical in nature, examining the ideological, theological, and analytical aspects of liberation theology. There is an apparent disconnect, however, between these lofty, theoretical critiques and the focus of liberation theology itself, which begins with the lived experience of the most poor and vulnerable. This paper will analyze liberation theology as it emerged in the lived practice of one Nicaraguan priest, Fernando Cardenal, who took an active role in the Sandinista revolution of the late 1970s and, subsequently, in the Nicaraguan government. In doing so, I will illustrate a claim made by many liberation theologians: the Vatican’s theoretical critique does not apply to the way liberation theology is concretely lived out.

The discussions on liberation theology and the revolutions in Latin America are many and varied. It is important to make clear what the purpose of this paper is *not*, and by doing so, clarify its aim. First and foremost, the purpose of this paper is not to “put on trial” the women and men whose writings and works will be analyzed. Likewise, I will not be discussing whether or not priests should hold positions within government. Similarly, this paper will not be an analysis of whether or not the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua would be considered a “just war” by the Catholic Church. Finally, this paper will not involve an extensive critique of Marxist thought and its numerous components.

Although many of these factors are important to the discussion in this paper, and although a more in-depth study of their role in liberation theology is needed, that will not be the focus of this paper. Thus, I will limit my discussion to exploring the disconnect between the theoretical critiques of liberation theology as presented by key members of the Catholic Church's hierarchy and the concrete methodology that liberation theologians recognize as their own. My sources will include the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's documents, reflections on these critiques from liberation theologians, and the memoirs and insights of Fernando Cardenal based on an interview conducted in January 2015. These sources will be analyzed in terms of a suggested over-politicization of the gospel message and the use of Marxist concepts.

### *Liberation Theology: A Background*

The concept of theologies based on liberation began to emerge in the middle of the twentieth century, but the term "theology of liberation" was not used until Gustavo Gutierrez's famous work, *A Theology of Liberation*, was published in 1971.<sup>1</sup> Liberation theology began to flourish most prominently in Latin America, as many countries began to seek liberation from the increasingly oppressive governments and economic conditions that surfaced after the decolonization of the continent. This approach to theology has grown to distinguish itself in its starting point, its practical applications, and its ultimate goals. Traditionally, Catholic theologies begin with the Gospel and interpret

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

experience in light of the Word of God and the tradition of the Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, liberation theology begins with the lived experience of the people, especially those who are most poor and vulnerable, and moves to an understanding of the Gospel in the context of that lived experience. Its practice involves a constant reflection and adaptation of theory based on the context in which one finds oneself, a concept known as praxis. The ultimate goal of liberation theology is to understand the Gospel in light of the lived experience of the poor and oppressed so that one may analyze that particular situation and thus work towards the elimination of oppression and a constant striving toward the Kingdom of God on earth.<sup>3</sup>

### *Critiques of Liberation Theology*

In response to the growth of liberation theology, especially in Latin America, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published an “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” in 1984, acknowledging the truth of a theology of liberation, but also pointing out the perceived shortcomings and flaws of liberation theology as it was being practiced. Just two years later, the CDF published “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation” as a follow-up to the original critique. Although this later document acknowledges the validity of a “theology of liberation” and constantly reaffirms the Church’s commitment to the cause of the poor, marginalized, and

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<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Vatican Instruction Reflects European Mindset” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. and trans. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 415.

<sup>3</sup> J. David Turner, *An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 1-16.

oppressed,<sup>4</sup> something with which both the Vatican and liberation theologians can easily agree, it maintained many of the same reservations as the 1984 document.

The “Instruction on Certain Aspects of a ‘Theology of Liberation’” lays out two main critiques of liberation theology. First, it focuses on liberation theology’s over-politicization of liberation, which makes secondary the evangelical aspect and lacks a firm grounding in the Gospel.

Faced with the urgency of sharing bread, some are tempted to put evangelization into parentheses, as it were, and postpone it until tomorrow: first the bread, then the Word of the Lord. It is a fatal error to separate these two and even worse to oppose the one to the other. In fact, the Christian perspective naturally shows they have a great deal to do with one another.<sup>5</sup>

The Congregation argues that liberation theologians place too much of their focus on political or physical liberation, allowing liberation from sin to become secondary or even ignored. Rather than focusing on changing structures, we are encouraged to emphasize evangelization to save hearts and convert those who participate in oppressive structures.<sup>6</sup>

The CDF further critiques liberation theology for one of the common routes taken in order to overcome this oppression. Although it acknowledges that the social sciences can contribute valuably to theology, it asserts that these methods must be used with great skepticism and only after a thorough reflection and study, suggesting that liberation theologians “make use of different concepts without sufficient critical caution.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, edited and translated by Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 393-414.

<sup>5</sup> CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects,” 6.3.

<sup>6</sup> CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects,” 4.3-4.15.

<sup>7</sup> CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects,” 7.10.

It goes on specifically to critique one method of social analysis that has been especially controversial in liberation theology's development: Marxism.

Many liberation theologians have been critiqued for their heavy reliance on Marxist analysis, and others even more so for their support of Marxist revolutions or regimes. According to the CDF, because the philosophical and ideological principles of Marxism precede the study of social realities, "no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology."<sup>8</sup> Skeptics of liberation theology believe that the materialistic, atheistic ideology of Marxism makes the use of its analysis incompatible with Catholic beliefs. Any acceptance of ideas that are exclusively Marxist must necessarily lead to an adoption of Marxist strategy. "And such a strategy cannot be fully understood apart from the messianic role of the proletariat which belongs to Marx's ideology and already formed part of his philosophy before he undertook his systematic economic analysis."<sup>9</sup> This ideology has allegedly led to an unnecessary emphasis on class struggle and a mindset that the ends justify the means in situations of struggle against oppression.<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to these documents as a whole, acceptance of exclusively Marxist ideas necessarily leads to an acceptance of Marxist strategy, which is inextricable from Marxist ideology, a concept that, at its core, is incompatible with Catholic beliefs.

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<sup>8</sup> CDF, "Instruction on Certain Aspects," 7.16.

<sup>9</sup> Pedro Arrupe, "Marxist Analysis by Christians," in Alfred T. Hennely, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 310.

<sup>10</sup> Arrupe, "Marxist Analysis," 310.

### *Responses to the Church's Critiques*

The various critiques of liberation theology by the Catholic Church led to a series of responses by liberation theologians. In Michael Lee's unpacking of Ignacio Ellacuría's soteriology, he discusses Ellacuría's response to the documents on liberation theology published by the Congregation of the Doctrine on the Faith.<sup>11</sup> Like many of his fellow theologians of liberation, Ellacuría found it difficult to identify with the concept of liberation theology as the Vatican presented it, and he remained unconvinced as to "whether there [were] in fact any liberation theologians guilty of the dangers named in the Instruction."<sup>12</sup> Lee points out that liberation theologians and the Vatican understand the use of the term "Marxist" differently from one another:

Sadly, in the ecclesial documents, the term, "Marxist," functions not to describe a nuanced reading of Marx and subsequent schools of Marxist thought, but rather a blanket accusation that is pejorative without exception. While this negative evaluation needs to be read against the political backdrop of fear of Soviet communism, criteria or intellectual accuracy call for a more sophisticated exposition.<sup>13</sup>

This narrow understanding of the term "Marxist" led to an extreme pushback especially by many high ranking members of the Vatican who had understandably negative attitudes toward socialistic ideologies.

Marxism has had a significant impact on Christian theological exploration in recent decades, despite the aversion to this ideology on the part of many in the Catholic

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Edward Lee, "Transforming Realities: Christian Discipleship in the Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría," (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2005), 51-73.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, "Transforming Realities," 71.

<sup>13</sup> See Lee, "Transforming Realities," 53, footnote 55.

Church's hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Even Pope John Paul II's definition of the human as worker<sup>15</sup> was remarkably similar to that of Marx.<sup>16</sup> Arguably one of the most significant impacts on Christian theology by Marxism is the concept of praxis. This idea suggests an "ongoing interaction between theory and practice, that is, between theoretical knowledge and practical experience."<sup>17</sup> The interaction is dependent upon a mutual and consistent relationship between the two. Thus, it is impossible to analyze or critique liberation theology by solely examining one or the other. As mentioned before, this concept is a core part of liberation theology. It allows theologians to begin their analyses with the lived experience of those who are poor and oppressed, followed by examining this

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory Baum, "The Impact of Marxist Ideas on Christian Theology," in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 173-185.

<sup>15</sup> "And yet, in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum*, in the terminology of Saint Thomas, this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man's dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being.'" From John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Vatican Web site, 1981, 9, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html).

<sup>16</sup> "It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as *his work* and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species-life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his *species-life*, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him." From Karl Marx "Estranged Labour" in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Mulligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Baum, "Impact of Marxist Ideas," 182.



experience in light of the Gospel, and continuing to allow the practice and theory to inform one another.

Initially, the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, had a positive reaction to the documents published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, praising the fact that the Vatican had acknowledged the theology of liberation as a valid form of theology. Later, however, he began to publish work that defended liberation theologians against the abuses of which they had been accused by the Congregation. Gutierrez touched specifically on the CDF's discussion of the use of the social sciences within theology. First, he clarified that the use of social analysis "does not mean a permanent commitment to it. In the context of theological work, it is simply a means of better understanding social reality."<sup>18</sup> He refuted the CDF's suggestion that "the preliminary critical study [i.e. a careful epistemological critique] is missing from more than one 'theology of liberation.'"<sup>19</sup> He asserted that theologians, from the beginning, needed to be critical of the social sciences and use them critically. Moreover, although he admitted that he could only speak for himself, Gutierrez did not believe that this blasé acceptance of social analysis is prevalent among liberation theologians. Despite the necessity of skepticism with regard to social analysis, he remained firm in the belief that it is necessary to use whatever tools are available to help us understand social reality so that we may go about improving that reality to the best of our abilities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 61.

<sup>19</sup> CDF, "Instruction on Certain Aspects," 7.4.

<sup>20</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "Criticism Will Deepen, Clarify Liberation Theology," in Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990), 421.

Furthering this argument, some would suggest that liberation theology, by turning Marxism to Christian use, does not subordinate Christianity, but rather strengthens it.<sup>21</sup> In order to understand this perspective, however, it is important to recognize that there are many different types of Marxism. Various concepts of Marxism emerged, divided on what the fundamental issue facing the working class was.<sup>22</sup> Most simply, however, any understanding that “grows out of the concrete historical situation, and illumines that situation in such a way as to make possible revolutionary change...is ‘Marxist’—by definition.”<sup>23</sup> Through this understanding, it is possible that liberation theology can “desacralize” Marxism, using only the analysis at its simplest form in order to understand better the lived experience of those who are most vulnerable and oppressed.

In addition to the defense of the use of Marxist elements in liberation theology, Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, responded to the differences in understanding between that of the Vatican and his peers. Boff’s response, which was published less than a month after the CDF issued its “Instruction,” outlined the differences in approach to theology by the Vatican and liberation theologians.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> James V. Spickard, “Transcending Marxism: Liberation Theology and Critical Theology,” *Cross Currents* (1992): 326-341.

<sup>22</sup> “It made a difference...whether the key problem of the working class was ‘oppression’ (a political concept), ‘exploitation’ (an economic concept), or ‘domination’ (a cultural concept). The first implied a struggle for political democracy and was championed by the revisionist Social Democrats. The second implied a struggle for socialist economy and was championed by Lenin and the International’s left wing. The third suggested a campaign against false consciousness, and was championed by the Hegelian Marxists: Georg Lukacs and the Frankfurt School... All have Marxist roots, but only the second—as developed by Lenin and his followers—is considered ‘orthodox’ Marxism today.” Spickard, “Transcending Marxism”, 326-327.

<sup>23</sup> Spickard “Transcending Marxism”, 338.

<sup>24</sup> Boff, “Vatican Instruction,” 415-418.

Traditionally, theology begins by researching scripture, tradition, and church teachings, which then allows the theologian to “systematically reconstruct the idea of liberation and to establish a critical grounding of the topic.”<sup>25</sup> Liberation theologians, on the other hand, begin by analyzing the lived experience of the oppressed. Thus, Boff emphasizes the importance of having first-hand experience of the oppressive situation before even attempting to analyze it. Failing to do so would result in “a theology of the consequences deduced from principles and doctrines,”<sup>26</sup> which is precisely what liberation theology attempts to avoid.

After outlining the variations in approach, Boff states three consequences of these differences.<sup>27</sup> First, liberation theologians find it difficult to identify with the theology of liberation that is presented in the Vatican’s “Instruction” because the two parties have such different concepts of liberation and its theology. Second, most of the claims that the Vatican made against liberation theology do not actually apply to this type of theology. Finally, the dissimilarity in approach leads to a difference in understanding the use of Marxist analysis, a misunderstanding that has led to a very critical evaluation of liberation theology by the Vatican.

### **A Case Study of Nicaragua**

The current discussion on the critiques of liberation theology, as mentioned previously, has been highly theoretical. Those who critique liberation theology have explored the ideological aspects of this approach, but very little has been done in the

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<sup>25</sup> Boff, “Vatican Instruction,” 415.

<sup>26</sup> Boff, “Vatican Instruction,” 417.

<sup>27</sup> Boff, “Vatican Instruction,” 417-418.

way of studying specific manifestations of a practice of liberation theology. This section of the paper includes a case study of one Catholic who took an active role in the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua during the late 1970s, namely, Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit priest. The story of his life, as well as the many other Catholics who chose to involve themselves with the Sandinistas, provides us with a unique opportunity to demonstrate further the discrepancy between the Church's understanding of liberation theology and its practical implications. As a priest, Cardenal had a firm grounding in the teachings of the Catholic Church and the message of the Gospel. This faith, understood through direct experience with the poor, ultimately led him and many others to actively support the Sandinistas—a group founded on Marxist ideas. Cardenal was asked to leave the priesthood after refusing to give up his post in the Sandinista government, stating that he was doing so in order to be of most benefit to the Nicaraguan people. Since then, Fernando Cardenal, S.J., has been readmitted to the priesthood.<sup>28</sup>

The analysis that follows will be done in light of the Vatican critique of liberation theology, taking into account its theoretical concerns regarding the use of Marxist analysis, especially Marxism, and the suggested overemphasis on political liberation rather than liberation from sin. The reflections and lived experience of Fernando Cardenal, S.J., as well as the Nicaraguans who were directly affected by the revolution and Sandinista government of the 1980s will be crucial in understanding the nature of liberation theology's practical application.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael J. Gillgannon, "D'Escoto's restoration gives hope for promising future," *National Catholic Reporter* (August 11, 2014).

### *A Brief History of Nicaragua*

In order to understand how liberation theology came into play in Nicaragua, it is important to understand its history—in particular, the events that led up to Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution in 1979. As with much of the rest of the continent, the area that is now Nicaragua was discovered and conquered by the Spanish in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The number of indigenous people quickly dwindled as disease and repression from the Spaniards fell upon them. Shortly after its discovery, Nicaragua was given its name, derived from the indigenous chief, Nicaro. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British plundered and exploited the people of Nicaragua, especially those on the Caribbean coast. Finally, in 1821, Nicaragua became partially independent, but was now considered part of the Mexican empire. Just two short years later, Nicaragua became a member of the United Provinces of Central America along with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. It was not until 1838 that Nicaragua became completely independent.<sup>29</sup>

The Nicaraguan people's freedom within their newly independent nation was short lived. Before the turn of the century, this newly developing country elected a man who would become the first in a lengthy line of dictators. In 1893, the liberal General Jose Santos Zelaya gained power and established himself as Nicaragua's first dictator. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, the United States, working to protect its own interests, tried to depose Zelaya, finally succeeding in 1909. Following this success, the United States began to establish military bases throughout Nicaragua.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Nicaragua Timeline," BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1225283.stm>.

<sup>30</sup> Harry E. Vanden and Garry Prevost, *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 36.

In 1937, General Anastasio Somoza García was elected by the people of Nicaragua. However, the Somoza family's stint in power exceeded the Nicaraguan's expectations by decades. As the Somoza dictatorship emerged, Somoza steadily increased his own personal power and fortune. He exiled anyone who dared to oppose him and took over large areas of land for his own personal profit. Although the economy of Nicaragua was diversified under Somoza rule, the economic growth was limited to a select few and did not benefit the country as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

With an economy that supported only an elite few, the living conditions for the vast majority of Nicaraguans under the Somoza dictatorship were tragic. The majority of Nicaraguan people lived in great poverty, which they had little hope of escaping. There was a large disparity between the people who lived in cities and had access to education, and those who lived in the countryside and were almost completely illiterate. As in many other countries in Latin America at the time, the living conditions were so desperate that it was common to find children searching through the garbage just to find food for their families. Fr. Fernando Cardenal experienced this poverty most directly during his time in Jesuit formation in Medellín, Colombia. On his return to Nicaragua, he found almost identical living situations in his home country.<sup>32</sup>

It was in this state of injustice and inequality among the Nicaraguan people that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was formally launched in 1961, named

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<sup>31</sup> "Somoza Family: Nicaraguan Family," Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/554159/Somoza-family> (accessed April 20, 2015). See also Toma Borge, *Los Primeros Pasos: La Revolución Popular Sandinista* (5<sup>th</sup> ed. México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> Fernando Cardenal, *Together with My People and Their Revolution: Memoirs of Fernando Cardenal*, unpublished translation by Kathleen McBride. See Fernando Cardenal and Sergio Rez, *Junto a Mi Pueblo, Con Su Revolución: Memorias* (Madrid: Trotta, 2009).

after Nicaraguan national hero, Augusto César Sandino, who led a group of guerrilla fighters in resisting the National Guard and US Marines in the 1920s and 1930s and was subsequently assassinated.<sup>33</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge Martínez founded the Sandinista party with a commitment to socialism and the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Despite initial failure in attempting to gain popular support from the Nicaraguan people, the Sandinistas slowly but surely began to increase in numbers, connecting especially well with students, peasants, and those of the working class. As the FSLN's influence steadily increased, they began to attract the attention of the Somoza government, which retaliated, killing Fonseca and Mayorga in 1976. After the death of these two founders, the FSLN divided into smaller factions that disagreed on how best to move forward with their revolutionary agenda.<sup>34</sup>

Although the FSLN is typically categorized as a Marxist group, this revolutionary front drew on influences from many different political and economic models. Under the Somoza government, wealth was being generated for Nicaragua, but it was not being properly distributed among the people. The Sandinistas believed that independence could only be achieved if the economy were diversified. They sought to develop a mixed economy based on the Scandinavian model that would balance exports and imports to and from a variety of different countries. In addition to a modified economy

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<sup>33</sup> Vanden and Prevost, "Democracy and Socialism."

<sup>34</sup> "Sandinista: Political and Military Organization, Nicaragua," Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/522138/Sandinista> (Accessed April 20, 2015), 318-22.

for Nicaragua, the FSLN sought political pluralism that would allow small parties to form and take office—even more easily than in a democracy like the United States.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to a government that politically and economically supported those who had been oppressed or forgotten under the Somoza regime, the Sandinistas also supported the popular religion of the country's people—a practice that was not common among governments with Marxist tendencies. In a statement published by *Envío* magazine, the Sandinista party expressed a great deal of respect for the popular religion of the Nicaraguan people—Christianity. This document recognized the active role that many Christians had played, some even as part of the FSLN, in working toward the betterment of the lives of the Nicaraguan people.<sup>36</sup> This sense of tolerance toward religion by a Marxist regime demonstrated the adaptability of Marxist beliefs and teachings.

As mentioned previously, the deaths of Fonseca and Mayorga left the FSLN divided in their approach to taking down the Somoza regime. This continued for about two years until the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, who was a prominent figure of the Democratic Liberation Union party, another group in opposition to Somoza. His assassination sparked the reunion of the various factions of Sandinistas and brought the FSLN and moderates together in a united front against Somoza. Chamorro's assassination inspired popular rebellion against the government that continued throughout Nicaragua through the end of 1978 and into 1979. Finally, in July

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Lester in discussion with the author, January 4, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> "Communiqué of the National Directorate of the FSLN Concerning Religion" in Alfred T. Hennely, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990) 318-22.



of 1979, FSLN forces successfully took Managua. Somoza fled to Miami and was eventually exiled to Paraguay where he was assassinated shortly after.<sup>37</sup>

After ousting the dictator and taking control of the capital city, the Sandinistas were left with a broken government and almost no money. Somoza had taken almost all of the money in the national reserve, and the victorious FSLN was now left with an incredible task—fulfilling all of their promises of improvement and justice for the people of Nicaragua—with no money. Although the process was not easy, the Sandinistas worked hard to keep the promises they had made to the Nicaraguan people. It was at this time that Fr. Fernando Cardenal was asked to launch a literacy campaign—something that had been promised to the *campesinos* (peasants) by the Sandinistas during the revolution. Cardenal miraculously assembled 60,000 young volunteers to go out into rural areas of Nicaragua for five months. During these few short months, literacy in Nicaragua increased by more than 40%.<sup>38</sup>

### Over-Politicization of the Gospel

Through Cardenal's actions during the Sandinista revolution, we see a perfect example of how one might use the Gospel, after recognizing the lived experience of the poor and oppressed, to better understand their plight. As Cardenal walked the streets of Medellin, Colombia, during his Jesuit novitiate, he found a single thought running constantly through his head: "Unbearable. The lives of these people are unbearable. As a human and as a Christian, I cannot accept this."<sup>39</sup> As he returned to Nicaragua

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<sup>37</sup> "Nicaragua Timeline," BBC News.

<sup>38</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*.

<sup>39</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 9, 2015.

after his time in Medellin, he began to realize that this unbearable reality was not only present in Colombia, but was a widespread phenomenon across Latin America.

During this time, Cardenal turned to the Gospel to better understand this situation:

My reflections during those months led me to rediscover the God revealed in Jesus who is the God that heard the cry of the oppressed and who freed the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. This is how God appears in the book of Exodus. I began to understand more clearly that that same God continued listening to the cry of the oppressed, and that Jesus had come to reveal that same God to us—a God who is not neutral in the face of this situation of destitution, but rather One who has taken the side of the poor, of the smallest ones, of the weakest, of the marginalized, of those excluded from society.<sup>40</sup>

This message was not one that promoted lavish, earthly comforts, but rather one that focused on attaining basic necessities for those who were poor and oppressed.

Through his reflection, Cardenal realized that one could not hope to spread the message of the Gospel without living out the values that are highlighted so frequently throughout it. Although evangelization and the salvation of souls are extremely important, charity, service, and justice are necessary precursors to the spreading of the Gospel when interacting with poor, vulnerable, and oppressed populations.

After Cardenal was ordained a Jesuit, he continued his commitment to working for justice as a professor at the University of Central America in Managua, Nicaragua. During this time, he began to think more critically about the situation of poverty and oppression of the people of Latin America.

Without changing the fundamental orientation of my life, I began to think about salvation more holistically—salvation meant freedom from sin, but also freedom from destitution... No Jesuit should be working only on the propagation of the faith, without also working on the defense of justice, and similarly, no one should

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<sup>40</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*, Chapter. 1, p. 4.

be working only on the promotion of justice, without also working on the propagation of the faith. Faith and Justice—always together.

Cardenal, along with many other Jesuits, continued putting their education and academic resources to good use by studying the situation of the poor while continuing to spread the faith.<sup>41</sup> It was this commitment, to both faith and justice, which caught the attention of the FSLN. Cardenal's presence was requested at a meeting with the Sandinistas, and he was asked to join them in their efforts to overthrow the Somoza regime in order to create a better Nicaragua for the people.<sup>42</sup> Again, Cardenal turned to the Bible for guidance.

I immediately thought of the Gospel passage where Jesus shares the parable of the Good Samaritan. I imagined that the man who had been assaulted by thieves and left wounded along the path, represented the people of Nicaragua, wounded by the repression of Somoza, by injustice and abject poverty. I remembered that Jesus talked about a Jewish priest who saw the wounded man and continued on his way. A Levite, a man who was of lower standing than the priest and whose principle task was to offer sacrifices in the temple, also saw the wounded man and passed him by. Later a Samaritan appeared and he stopped... This Samaritan, Jesus tells us, saw the wounded man, began to wash his wounds with wine, soothed them with oil, and placed him on his mule, took him to a guesthouse and left money so that the owner would continue to care for the man. Jesus ends the parable by saying that we must act like the Samaritan. The lesson is clear—love which serves the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded of society is the most important. It is this love that he wants us to practice, a love far more important than the holy rituals of the priests.<sup>43</sup>

Looking back on Cardenal's reflections, it is important to recognize that they did not *directly* necessitate political involvement or action. These reflections on biblical texts reaffirmed Cardenal's commitment to bettering the lives of the poor and oppressed, a commitment that was essential in the effort to live out and spread the

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<sup>41</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*.

<sup>42</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*, Chapter 4, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*, Chapter 4, p. 1.

message of the Gospel. From here, Cardenal had to determine how best to live out that commitment. Before agreeing to join the FSLN struggle Cardenal considered how this opportunity would allow him to live out his commitment to the poor, the way in which Catholics and Sandinistas had interacted in the past, and used the Gospel to further reflect on the opportunity. It was a combination of the opportunities presented to him, his commitment to the poor, and his reflections on the Gospel that convinced Cardenal that participating in the Sandinista revolution would best help him serve the people of Nicaragua.

When asked to comment on the suggestion that a theology of liberation over-politicizes the message of the Gospel, Cardenal commented that, “if we are completely following the Gospel, we are going to work for the poor. There is no contradiction between the message of the Gospel and working for the poor. It is ignorant to say there is a contradiction there.”<sup>44</sup> He appealed to the sentiments of Helder Camara, a bishop from Brazil who reflected, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Cardenal suggested that it is not care for the poor in the form of charity that causes controversy within the Catholic Church, but rather those who try to take this care one step further. It is the suggestion of understanding the reality of the poor, and working at a systematic level to improve that reality, which causes controversy. This, Cardenal believes, is the ignorance that allows poverty to persist.

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<sup>44</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 5, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Francis McDonagh, *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 2009.

## Use of Marxist Analysis

One of the first things that Cardenal highlighted in the interview was the difference in the relationship between Christianity and Marxism in Latin America, and specifically Nicaragua, compared to the rest of the world. He pointed out that almost “all of the [Marxist] revolutions in history have been done without Christians, in spite of Christians, or against Christians.”<sup>46</sup> However, in Nicaragua religion did not act as “the opiate of the people,”<sup>47</sup> but rather “Christianity was the spark of the revolution.”<sup>48</sup> The strength of this relationship was furthered by the FSLN’s openness to and appreciation of the Christians who were also working toward justice in Nicaragua.<sup>49</sup> Although some might suggest that the Catholics had to sacrifice some of their goals in order to work with the Sandinistas, Cardenal pointed out that “there was not an ‘alliance’ between Christians and the revolution, it was pure unity. Alliance suggests that each side had to make sacrifices. This was not the case.”<sup>50</sup>

In fact, when Cardenal first joined with the FSLN, he was not well-schooled in the teaching of Karl Marx. “I had never read a book by Marx or Lenin but I had read the Gospels and I had read the Latin American reality. My motivation for accepting the participation in the Front was profoundly religious, inspired by the words of Jesus and by the promise I had made in Medellin.”<sup>51</sup> After extensive discussion with key players in the FSLN, Cardenal found his aims, as a Catholic priest who strives to work for the

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<sup>46</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 9, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (February 7, 1844).

<sup>48</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 9, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> “Communiqué of the National Directorate” 318-22.

<sup>50</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 5, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Cardenal, *Together with My People*, Chapter 4, p. 2.

poor, to be aligned with those of the Sandinista Party. It is important to recognize, as many liberation theologians have pointed out, that Marxism is not necessary to practice liberation theology. In the times where Marxist analysis is utilized or liberation theologians have aligned with Marxist regimes, it is because this is the best avenue to live out the Catholic mission to help the poor.

After his initial interaction with the FSLN, Cardenal did more research into the teachings of Karl Marx. In doing so, he was able to maintain his beliefs as a Catholic priest through his differentiation between the philosophical aspects of Marx and his sociological, political, and economic analysis.

I distinguish in Marx's doctrine the political and economic analysis, for example, which are historical. Marx has other parts of his writings like his dialectics, where there is atheism... I use Marxist analysis to understand reality, not as a philosophy... Marx's book is called Capital and there are things in there that Christians cannot accept. It's a critical analysis of capitalism... So, we don't have any contradiction with the economic and political analysis of Marx. In Latin America in Medellin, they talked about using Marxist analysis because it's a sociological, political, and economic analysis *not* because it's part of the philosophy of Karl Marx. That's something we cannot accept, but Marx as an economist, we can.<sup>52</sup>

As was suggested by the scholars before him, Fernando Cardenal found that he was able to utilize the tools of analysis developed by Karl Marx while maintaining his Catholic values and beliefs.

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<sup>52</sup> Fernando Cardenal, S.J. in discussion with the author, January 5, 2015.

Fortunately, over the past few years the Vatican has shown more openness to theologies of liberation; Gustavo Gutierrez was even invited to visit the Pope and Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the current prefect for the CDF. Despite this openness and the length of time that has passed since the initial publication of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's critique of liberation theology, these criticisms are still called upon today. Most commonly used are the arguments that liberation theology over politicizes the message of the gospel, referring solely to earthly salvation rather than a salvation from sin, and that it relies too heavily on Marxist ideas. It is important the liberation theology is recognized for what it is—not in the way that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith described it. Liberation theology is still applicable to the poverty and oppression we find in our world today and a greater openness to this branch of theology could create great positive change in our world.

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