

Go,  
Rebuild  
My Church!



Liberation Theology  
from  
the Franciscan  
Point of View

**Comprehensive  
Course on the  
Franciscan  
Mission  
Charism**



Lesson Unit 20

The documents of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* have deeply affected the understanding of mission. Constant efforts are being made to clarify its purpose and objectives, and to determine the most appropriate methods to carry it out. *Go, Rebuild My Church: A Comprehensive Course on the Franciscan Mission Charism*, provides a particular context to stimulate dialogue about the many dimensions of mission and the inevitable recognition of the equality, dignity and humanity of all persons. The course is unique, since it is genuinely inter-Franciscan and inter-cultural. An ongoing process for exchange among all members of the Franciscan Family from six continents provides for a creative meshing of the best in current theology, Franciscan research and pastoral practice. The vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent our search for a fuller understanding of humanity in the light of the Gospel and the Person of Jesus Christ.

As Franciscans, with the world as our "cloister," we welcome this refreshing moment of intercultural dialogue. Francis was the first among founders to situate the missionary dimension of the Gospel call clearly within his rule. This study reawakens us to the challenge and genuineness of Francis' message for our own times.



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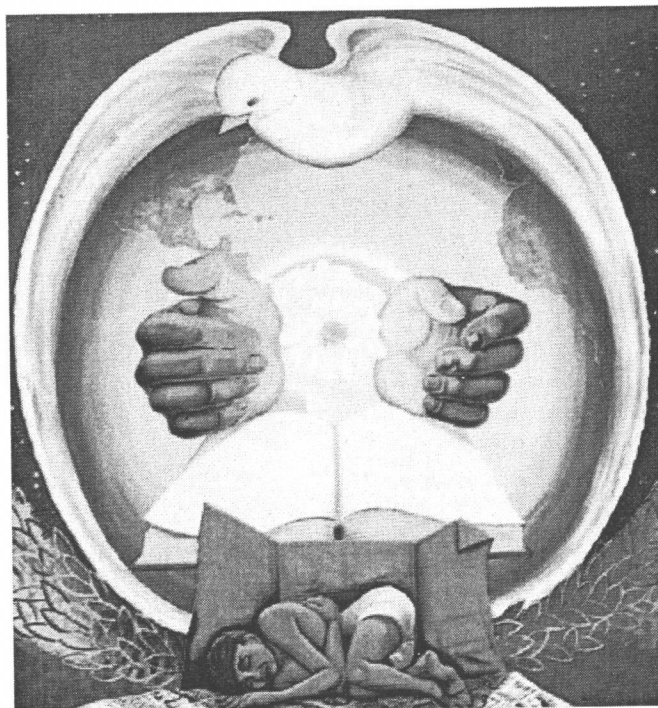
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# Go, Rebuild My Church!

*A Comprehensive  
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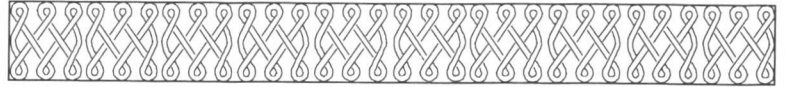
## Liberation Theology from the Franciscan Point of View



### Lesson Unit 20



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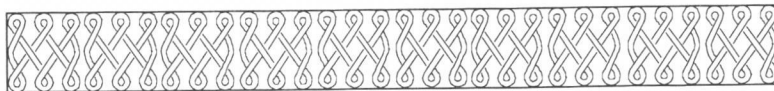
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# From the Sources



## How Francis saved the life of a lamb from the butcher

*One day a farmer was taking a lamb to the butcher.*

*Francis met him on the way and saw immediately that the days of the lamb were numbered.*

*But Francis, who loved sheep in a special way, could not accept that the poor lamb should be butchered. He said to himself, "Ways leading to death should be stopped". And so he offered his precious coat (which just before had been given to him by a rich man) to the farmer in exchange for the poor lamb. The farmer recognized the value of the coat and happily accepted it as payment for the lamb. Thus, Francis*



*saved the life of the lamb. The lamb enjoyed its life for many years, the life that Francis had saved.*

*(cf. Bonaventure, LM VIII, 6)*



# Introduction

A



## People's Theology

Liberation Theology has its origin in Latin America. In the seventies and eighties it made its deepest impact on the Churches of this continent. It exerted a decisive influence on the Church and on Theology in the whole world. Today we find it in the Churches of the Third World in many forms. More than once Liberation Theology gave rise to wrong interpretations, to strong rejection as well as to emphatic support.

Liberation Theology is not merely a theological school, differing from others only in unimportant details. It has its origin in the real lives and

struggles of theologians as well as of thousands of people, both lay and Religious. It is a theology of the people and their passionate commitment. That is why Liberation Theology does not allow people's minds and hearts to remain indifferent and unconcerned. It also asks questions and challenges. It is a reflection of a determined faith attitude and a political praxis.

As Franciscan Sisters and Brothers, a good knowledge of liberation theology should be our special concern. For in this theology we find convictions and attitudes which are in harmony with a long Franciscan tradition.

# Survey

B



## Basic Insights

The first section deals with the historical background and fundamental experiences which led to Liberation Theology. At the same time, basic insights of Liberation Theology and their contribution to theology in general will be looked at more closely. Following this the new situation in which Liberation Theology finds itself because of changed conditions will be examined: the changed basis of the Church and the

efforts of different groups to make Liberation Theology ineffective.

The second section will show the relation between Liberation Theology and the Franciscan movement. In Latin America, St. Francis has been regarded as the symbol of the liberation movement from the very beginning, as some of his basic convictions and motivations are essential for Liberation Theology.





## Liberation

### Theology and its actuality

### Fundamental experiences of Liberation Theology

#### • *Historical background*

During the last centuries there existed in most Latin American countries normal relationships between the State and the Church: their respective tasks were clearly defined and kept distinct from each other. But in many situations, it was not easy to distinguish between the political role of the Church and the party politics of the state. Apart from that, there were tendencies that ran counter to the Christian faith: for example, the freedom of the individual was emphasized so much that one forgot to assume responsibility for other people and to fight for a just distribution of goods (liberalism). In addition to this, there existed the opinion that the laws and social conditions, as they existed, were meant to be unchangeable. It never seemed to occur to the people that laws and social conditions could also be unjust and therefore needed to be changed (positivism).

Most of the time the Church resisted social developments and remained conservative towards them. Therefore, the Church also opposed, in principle, the great political movements that spread from Europe and North America to the Latin American countries. Although political independence was demanded

among others by some Religious and Priests, the Church as a whole remained loyal to the rights of the Crown of Portugal and Spain against the freedom movements.

What J. B. METZ demonstrated in his book *"Beyond a Bourgeois Religion"* for Europe, applies also to the Catholicism in Latin America: *With us, Catholicism has not only refused to accept the history of civil freedom, but has also always been fighting against it. The so-called "Catholic Times" within the European history of modern times were always the times of the "Counter": counter-reformation, counter-revolution, counter-enlightenment, the times of political restoration and romanticism.*" (J. B. Metz).

Those who dared to disagree were excommunicated from the Church, regarded as disloyal voices that endangered the system. In all the countries of Latin America, the right of patronage of Portugal and Spain remained in force, i.e., all administrative matters of the Church were in the hands of Portuguese and Spanish Kings. This was the case for the nomination of a bishop, the establishment of a parish, right down to the stipends of the missionaries and parish priests. The people looked for ways to liberate them-





*Demonstrations of landless people in north-east Brazil.*

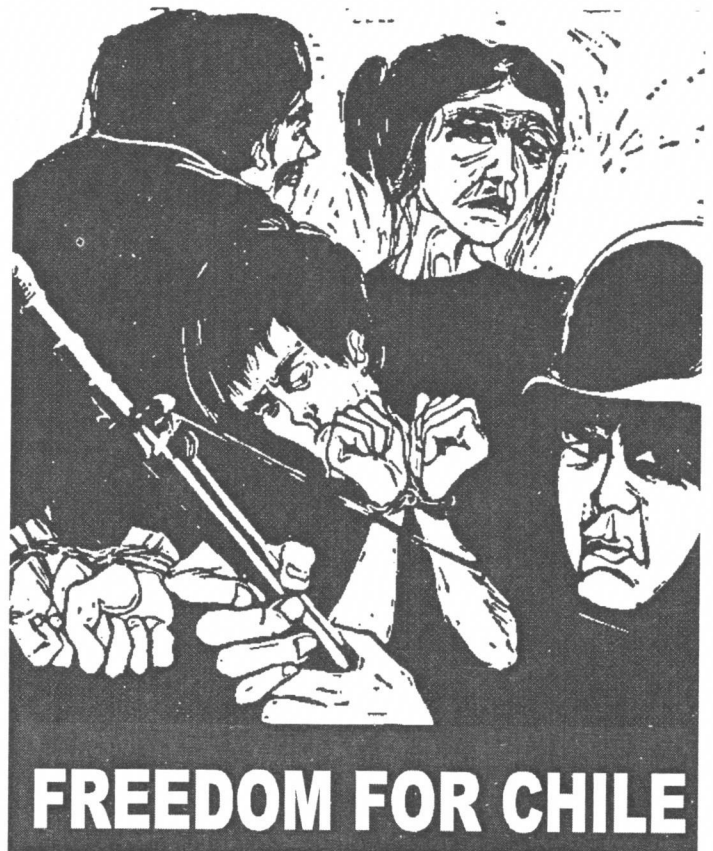
selves from this system, which resulted in a number of liberation movements still existing today. These include uprisings of Amerindians, of slaves and farmers; wars of independence and spontaneous revolts with various objectives; strikes of workers and students; peoples' revolutions throughout the continent. The 'patronage-right' however, outlasted the wars of independence. It was taken over by the new ruling powers and has been in force right into our century.

With the coming of industrialisation during and after the Second World War, the cities were growing at an ever increasing pace in Latin American countries; particularly in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Mexico. This had immeasurable social consequences. In the sixties a political climate developed on the whole continent, which demanded liberation from the military and economic dependency on foreign powers, the so-called *imperialism*, and social reforms. In this

context must be seen, not only the Cuban revolution and the underground struggle (Guerrilla) in Bolivia, but also the intervention of the United States of America in the Dominican Republic. In addition to this, strong Trade Union Movements in Chile, Brazil and the other countries came into being. The so-called "dependence theory" and the vision of a society that would be committed to justice, made an important spiritual contribution to the will for change.

The dependence theory originated from the studies of some experts in economics, who had been meeting in Chile since the beginning of the fifties. Within the framework of the economic commission for Latin America (CEPAL) they had been given the task by the UN to explore the difficulties which Third World countries encounter in their economic development. They reached the conclusion that the misery of the poor countries was caused by their dependency on the rich industrial nations.

Based on the result of their research, they proposed solutions. Consequently, the dependence





theory was vehemently criticized. Above all else it was accused of ignoring the causes that lie in the poor countries themselves, i.e. misuse of power through an elite who violate human rights through wastefulness and corruption, oppression and violence. The theory was also attacked because it was feared that it would curb the spreading of western capitalism by entering bilateral contracts. Despite justified criticism that the dependence theory has experienced, its essential insights are still valid.

At the end of the sixties and through the seventies, the reactions to these social and political developments were marked by dictatorships and military coups in the whole of Latin America. All of them were characterized by the so-called "doctrine of national security" that had been developed in the USA out of fear of Communism, and was practised particularly in Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Thousands of people were arrested, tortured, sent into exile or declared as "disappeared." The accusation was the same everywhere: "A Danger for the Regime and for the order of Christian values."

The abolition of constitutional laws, oppression, press-censorship, control of the Trade Unions and supervision or abolition of political parties were the means by which the governments consolidated their power. The dictatorships adopted and supported capitalism and destroyed the civil society.

Foreign capital, gladly granted, made industrial giant projects possible and at the same time increased foreign debts enormously. From such projects the rich who had given the capital and the local rich profited much, but poverty took on disastrous proportions on the whole continent. Through the rise of the price of oil and the high profits of the multi-national firms in the seventies the US dollar flooded the international financial market. This enabled the realisation of ambitious large-scale projects with easily accessible and favorable credits. Foreign debts increased without limit. Enormous interest rates and capital repayments increased social misery and were co-responsible for the abyss that

opened between the rich and the poor in the whole continent.

In this phase, economical liberalism forced its way with the help of the authority of the dictatorial state. Much energy and money goes into the necessary infra-structure: oil refineries, roads, shipping companies, power stations, telecommunication.

Even though the capitalistic system depends no longer on the state, it is the state that is held



*Home on the street: Calcutta.*

responsible for every evil in the economy. This is the philosophy that rules the whole world today. The solution to all problems lies in the withdrawal of the State from economy. Everything should be left to private initiative. Presumably all problems could be solved in this way: unemployment, material and mental misery, lack of schools and hospitals. "The free market regulates everything by itself" is a dogma of capitalism. There is something like an "invisible hand," that is said to create a balance in the free game of supply and demand.

Neo-liberalism, as this type of economy is called, demands a blind faith: that market economy is capable of providing people with everything they need. But in reality this has never happened, not even once in the time of economic



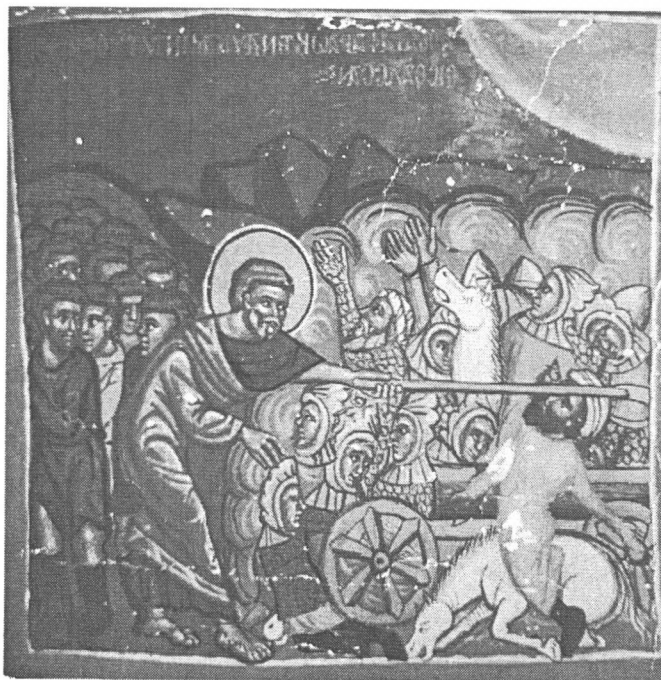
prosperity. Just the opposite: uncontrolled privatisation and the sale of public property to private individuals at ridiculously low prices, both inside and outside the country. This led inevitably into a dependency on the international market and its fluctuations. Above all else, even more people were pulled into increasing impoverishment. Millions of people live in the streets, in slums; the number of unemployed people and of homeless children keeps growing.

Yet the representatives of this economic model see no reason to examine their system. In their opinion, the great social misery is to be attributed to the fact that the economy is not yet fully free and open and is still subject to too many social regulations: The market is not yet what it should be!

Thus neo-liberalism continues its victorious march through the world with self-confidence, without concern for the fate of millions who cannot share the affluence. Neither is there concern about the ecological consequences of economic progress. In the seventies an historical opportunity was lost to develop an alternative economic model (cf. LU 21).

#### • *A new political stance of the Church*

At the end of the fifties the so-called "*Social Catholicism*" came into being in most of the Latin



*Moses leads the Israelites through the Reed Sea.*

American countries. "*Catholic Action*" and various youth organisations dared to resist social injustices. The call for social change became louder. These critical Christians developed new forms of organisation by venturing into new areas of society, spreading liberating political views and fighting for human rights. Then came the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops' Conference of Medellin (1968). Liberation Theology grew out of these basic experiences.

As a result of this, the political role of the Church changed fundamentally in different countries. What the Bishops began in Medellin, they confirmed in Puebla (1979). From then on, they condemned with prophetic clarity the dreadful poverty and marginalisation which affected large parts of the population. Since then, the proclamation of the Good News has gone hand in hand with the condemnation of the injustice experienced especially by the rural population and workers. But the indigenous peoples, the Afro-Americans, and women as special victims of unjust structures, do not yet come into the range of vision of Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology examines poverty and misery under two aspects:

- ➔ from a mystical theological point of view, poverty is considered a blasphemy. Liberation Theology develops out of a particular experience of God. Poverty is compared with the servitude in Egypt, where God sees people's misery and leads them into freedom (cf. Ex 2,23; 3,7-10). We meet this liberating God in the poor and excluded people. Their situation is the result of an unjust system, which must therefore be condemned. This system lives on an accumulation of wealth in the hands of very few people. The great majority has no share in the goods of this world and is condemned to a life of abject poverty and marginalization. For this reason, the Bishops in Medellin adopted with prophetic courage the option for the poor, a decision for those who cannot benefit from the affluence. If





God makes a preferential option for the poor, then the Church must do the same (cf. LU 19). This option means:

- **Priority:** In the order of values and in the behaviour of the Church, the poor take the first place.
- **Solidarity:** The Church may not only express it simply in beautiful words but must take its place at the side of the poor and show it in attitude and in action.
- **No exclusiveness:** There should be no discrimination, not even against the rich; however, the rich are called both to conversion and concern for the poor.

*We confirm the need for the conversion of the entire Church in the sense of a preferential option for the poor, envisaging their complete liberation (Puebla 1134; cf. 1144, 711, 1165).*

➔ The poor are not to be regarded as objects, as people to whom the Church is giving attention, or as an object the Church is taking care of. The poor themselves are part of the new evangelizing and political power. They are the new subject in the Church and in society: people with their own power and dignity, with initiative and responsibility. They organize themselves to fight for their rights, and they evangelize by bringing the Good News of Christ into the Church. Only when the Church becomes poorer, simpler and more prophetic through the poor, will she be what Jesus wants her to be (cf. 1 Cor 12; Medellin 2,9; 5,15; 10,2; 12,13; 14,7-10; Puebla 96; 485; 622; 629; 640; 1134; 1142; 1147; 1177; 1309; Santo Domingo 178ff, 296).

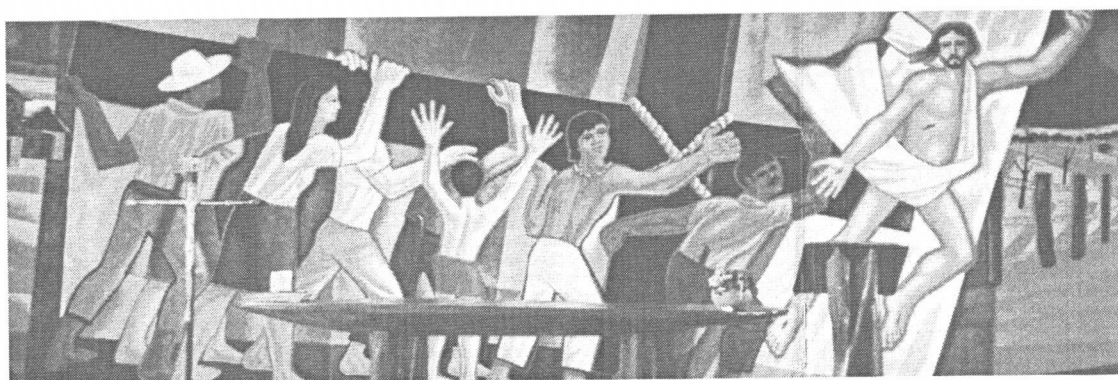
## Fundamental Convictions of Liberation Theology



### • God on the side of the poor

The perception of Liberation Theology is to understand that the cause of the poor and the oppressed is the cause of God Himself. Unjust poverty and misery is something that concerns

thing to do with the will of our Creator God, and with Jesus Christ's presence in the world. It is the greatest challenge with which the liberating God confronts us. But it is not about solving



*Children, Women and Men of all races carry the cross of the risen Christ.*

not only the politicians and economists but everyone. The right of the poor to live has some-

problems for the poor or in their name. The challenge rather consists in expressing our concrete



solidarity with the intentions of the poor and in nurturing their hopes for freedom and life.

### • The basic question

How can one convince the suffering people of Latin America that God loves them? How can we live our faith in a God of life and truth in a context where the powers of death dominate? What is the meaning of faith in a living God, when the poor and the little ones, who are His favourites, are excluded and even killed? This was the basic question the first Catholic and Protestant Liberation Theologians asked themselves. This question has not lost its importance and is relevant not only for Latin Americans. Capitalism has infiltrated the whole world and therefore challenges Christians and the Franciscan Family everywhere. The issues of poverty, injustice, the environment and inter-cultural dialogue (cf. LU 14) are global questions. They can be solved only through international co-operation.

### • The vision of God's Reign

God is the one who saves; his liberating action transcends earthly reality. But he liberates through people and in the midst of our history. This is a basic conviction of Liberation Theologians. Therefore, the criticism that Liberation Theology like Marxism, speaks only about the worldly reality and leaves the imponderability and mystery of the Reign of God outside, is completely unfounded. It does not apply to Liberation Theology, this is too one-sided and moreover, lacks responsibility for the world.

All historical liberation activities support and hasten the coming of the Reign of God, which Jesus Christ proclaims and establishes. But they are not found on the same level: God's liberating action goes much further. It has a final, world-transcending character. This means a change in theological thinking: Liberation Theology takes the obligation of Christians to change unjust and inhuman living conditions seriously.

### • The prophetic obligation

Liberation Theology will always be a prophetic theology, i.e. it must point out injustice in the name of God. The factors that once caused it, still exist: the number of the poor of the world has not become less, on the contrary, it is growing day by day. To recognize this as a betrayal of human beings and of the Reign of God will remain a responsibility of the Church. Therefore there will always have to be Christians who understand their faith and their experience of God as a challenge for the liberation of the poor. For this reason, the lessening concern about this problem is not only something to regret, but is also a sign of infidelity to the Gospel.

### • Liberation as a new paradigm of theology

Liberation Theology is not a concept of theology which reflects only a few themes. It wants to reflect anew the whole theology under the keyword *Liberation*, and to re-formulate it from the viewpoint of the oppressed who seek freedom and fight for it.

It aims at an integral liberation: a personal, emotional, spiritual, political, economic, social and sexual liberation. Liberation Theology, in this sense, is not only different, but unique among the various currents of theology. It is pursued from grassroot level at the side of the oppressed and amidst the events of history. Liberation Theology subjects to a critical reflection every Theology that gets stuck in generalities and does not start from concrete life situations. Liberation Theology places every theological thinking before a "*different theological horizon*" (L. Boff). It is a "*new way of theologizing*" (new paradigm), a critical reflection on the liberating praxis in the light of faith (G. Gutierrez).

The subject of Liberation Theology is the oppressed people, "*the poor*" in their struggle against unjust power structures. Liberation is a process, in which the poor themselves are active agents and for which they take responsibility. They outline the type of action and fight for necessary changes in society. Poverty is not only economic destitution. According to the Bib-



lical understanding, the poor are those who have become victims of injustice, the exploited, the excluded, those who live at the fringe of society, those who have been forgotten, the politically oppressed and the sick, the lonely... (cf. LU 19). They are people who become conscious of their poverty and therefore – like Moses – take the risk to become agents of their personal and social history of liberation.

Certainly, there are also different forms of poverty among the rich: an increasing depression,

loneliness, loss of meaning in life, despair, inability to relate to others. They, too, like the poor, have become victims of mechanisms that produce poverty and misery. For this reason, a spirituality of resistance is needed everywhere, but just as much, hope that counts on the promises of the liberating God. Wherever people come together inspired by their faith, fight for their possible liberation and unite in solidarity with the oppressed, there happens Liberation Theology.

## Pastoral consequences

1.3.

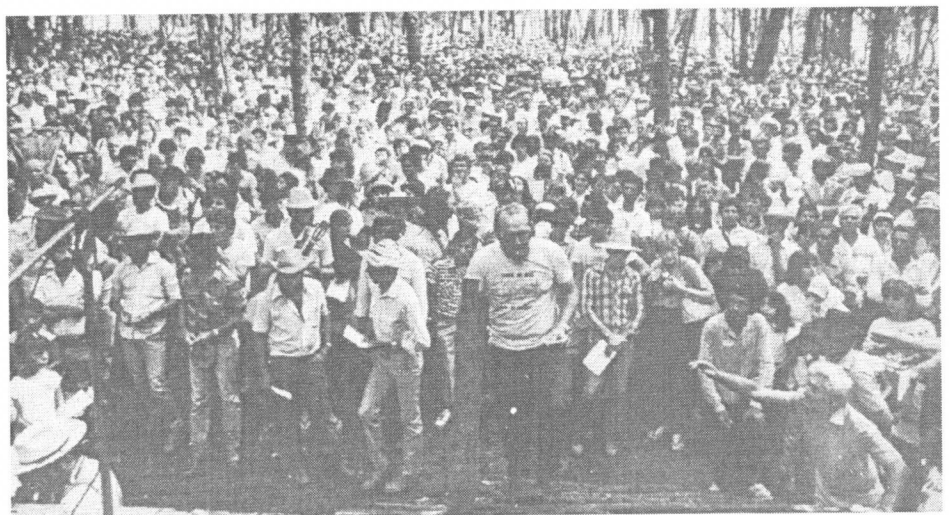
As a consequence of liberation processes, the forms of pastoral care in the Church have changed, and even the self-understanding of the Church has changed as well. Everywhere Bible-sharing groups, Basic Christian Communities, and neighbourhood associations were formed as well as unions of agricultural workers (Campe sinos), fishers, prostitutes, street children, slum dwellers.

A new form of missionary presence among the indigenous peoples emerged (cf. LU 18). Everywhere people began to reflect on their history and the colonial heritage of Christianity. They looked at the way the Good News has been proclaimed in the cultures of Latin America, and they did not shun self-criticism. This reflection continues today in the discussions of inculturation of the faith within the various cultures that exist side by side even within a single state (cf. LU 17).

Liberation Theology sought dialogue with the social sci-

ences. Many research institutes, study and educational centres were established. Already existing centres received new momentum and many courses were conducted. A wide range of issues were themes for discussions, e.g. the wisdom of the Book of Job, the parables of Jesus on the Reign of God, unemployment and public health care, the election of the President and the world-wide enforcement of capitalism.

*Communion* (living as a community) and *participation* become more and more meaningful words. This had a number of practical conse-



*Meeting of Basic Christian Communities in Brazil.*





quences: everywhere new forms of community leadership took shape, like parish councils, diocesan assemblies, meetings of Basic Christian Communities (BCC). The people were all included in each activity, in the initiatives, the planning, the implementation and critical evaluation of Church activities. Priests and bishops are not any more the only ones who have a say and are responsible for everything; they become animators and links between the communities.

Dialogue with the social sciences was sought. It should promote the effectivity of the transformation process. Social scientific studies helped the Latin American bishops formulate critically the Church documents on the existing economic model.

Liberation Theology produced many charismatic and prophetic lay people. In the spirit of Medellin and Puebla community leaders, movements, associations and unions joined forces in order to be able to act critically and effectively in Church and society. Today many of them are heading the most important trade unions, political parties, ecological groupings and people's organisations.

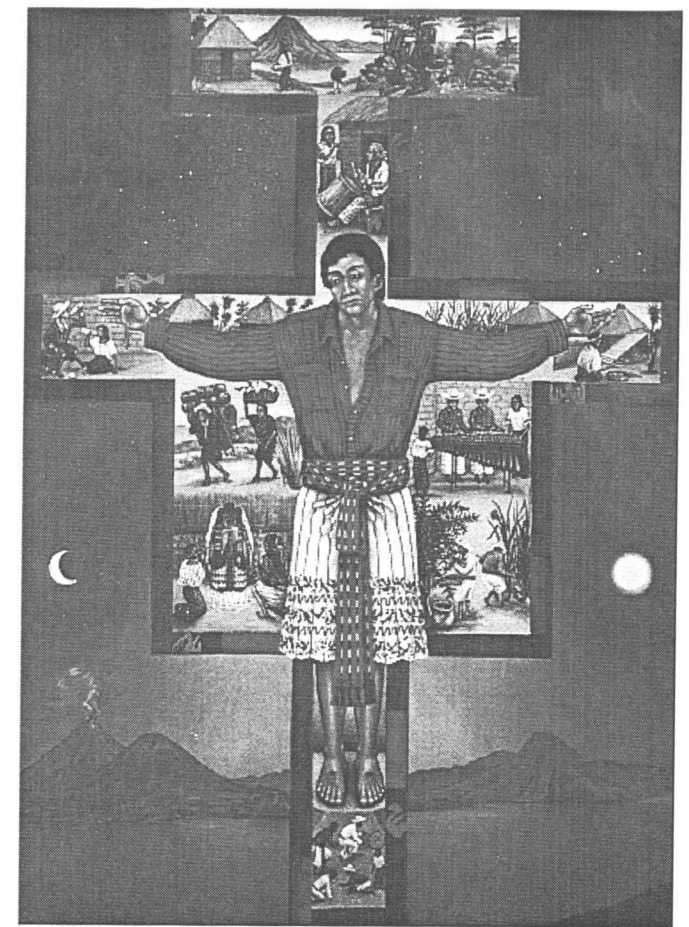
The contribution of the local churches to the democratisation process in Latin American societies was of great significance.

## The Martyrs

1.4.

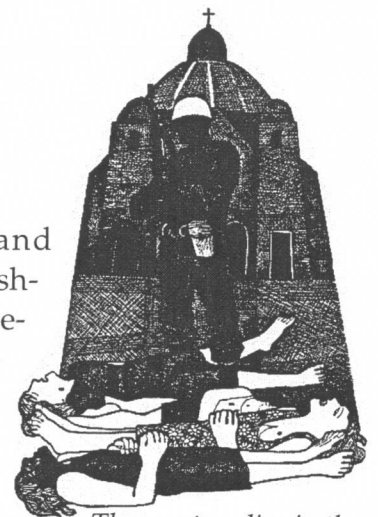
This transformation process also demanded a costly sacrifice. Many paid for their commitment with their lives. The memory of these sisters and brothers is celebrated; hundreds of Latin American martyrs are called on in liturgical worship. They remain always present to their fellow Christians in their journey of faith.

Every day of the year, the Latin American Register of Martyrs evokes the memory of young



*Christ in the eyes of the people of Guatemala.*

people, women and men, priests and bishops. Many of them belonged to the Franciscan Family and died for showing solidarity with God's cause and the cause of the poor.



*The martyrs live in the hearts of the people.*



## A new discovery of the Church

1.5.

Without exaggeration we can say that Liberation Theology has stirred the Latin American Church to greater life. In many places, it has led to a new discovery and rebirth of the Church. One can live one's faith and Christian commitment in a different way: at the side of the poor and against poverty, in solidarity with the economically and politically marginalised and united with the despised ones. Clergy and the laity, including bishops and cardinals moved where the Church was unknown. It was a time of deep pastoral creativity and great prophetic courage, political holiness and spiritual growth.

This renewal saw many initiatives in the areas of inculturation (cf. LU 17), and a reaching out to indigenous people and those of African descent as well as women and minority groups. Liberation Theology has shown not only an understanding of social problems, it also encountered, with respect, the variety of cultures and traditions both Christian and non-Christian.

In this way, Liberation Theology brought forth from its own roots a number of different theological currents: an indigenous theology, a femi-



*Liberation Theology reached out to indigenous people and those of African descent.*

nistic theology, a Biblical theology, a theology which studies the relation between faith and economy, and even an environmental theology.

## Liberation Theology under changed circumstances

1.6.

From the beginning conflicts, resistance and persecutions occurred because of Liberation Theology. They continue even today in the Church and even within the Franciscan family. It cannot be denied, that viewpoints were presented that were not in keeping with Church teaching. Liberation Theology itself may be guilty of the over-simplification of complicated contexts. One cannot simply divide the society into oppressors and oppressed. Some of the

theological formulations could have been more exact and may have needed to be explained in greater depth.

*"The social and political liberation must in no way cover the final and radical meaning of liberation from sin, because this can only be obtained through forgiveness and the mercy of God" (G. Gutierrez).*

The problems with the theological formulations, however, have had little significance in the over-

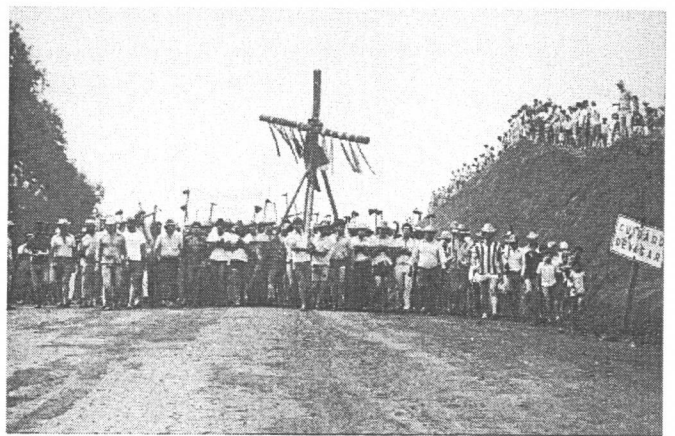
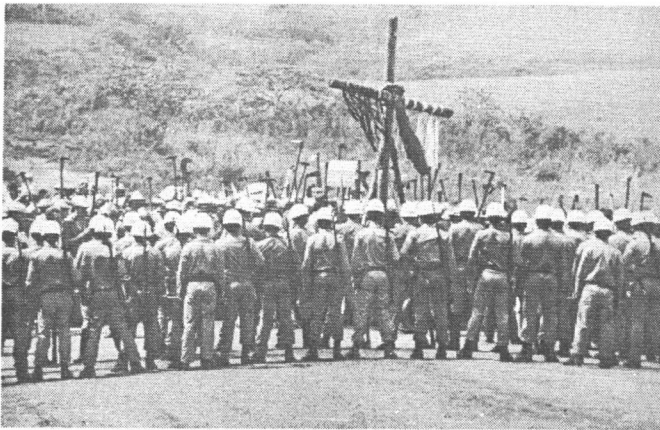


all argument. The conflict was essentially caused through political decisions and different concepts of society. The opponents of Liberation Theology stick to the "status quo", i.e. they want to preserve society as it is. They have a different concept of what the Church ought to do, and of the meaning of the Franciscan Charism in the midst of deep-rooted social injustice.

Today, the power (political) and control lies, by and large, again in the hands of conservatives. This has caused many people and communities to be disappointed and discouraged. Most people have reverted to a type of private religion that supports capitalism. Faith must not inter-

moted in the cultural sphere. All this is certainly a very positive concern, but it is not enough to activate real "communion and participation" in the life of the Church or in society. The long-standing traditional belief that the clergy are the main agents remains unchanged. Other aspects of communal life (political solidarity, the tackling of economic, social, ecological, sexual and gender-related problems) are completely omitted, and answered only in a very one-sided way or only with a pitying smile.

In many Churches and communities, the fatigue of the Church leadership, both clergy and lay, becomes obvious. The systematic suspicion and



*Confrontation between Military Police and Members of the Movement of the Landless during a land occupation.*

fere with social and political questions. The politics of bishops' nominations and the election of most of the bishops' conferences point also in this direction, as well as some documents of the Holy See. This applies also to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference, which was known worldwide for its progressive line. The Church decides on a large-scale programme, which puts more emphasis on the inner conversion of the individual and shows less concern for social conditions (re-evangelisation). The Church gives precedence to the area of culture and refrains from demanding fundamental social changes.

The participation of the faithful in Christian life is restricted to the liturgical areas: Church services, by organizing more lively and friendly prayer meetings. "Christian values" are best pro-

persecution of Liberation Theology influences the life of the communities and the behaviour of the bishops. Committed Christians are disappointed that the social changes they had hoped for did not happen. In this respect the breakdown of the socialist system or the unrealized utopia play a lesser role than the fact that capitalism has proved to be more resistant than expected and has even flourished. Nevertheless, Liberation Theology remains the most significant source of inspiration for many people. Communities, parish councils, bishops, whole dioceses and many theologians continue to be guided by it.

Many Christians establish a close relationship between faith and political commitment; therefore they risk conflicts with the authorities. The





need for theological reflection on these issues becomes an existential question for many people and especially for Franciscan sisters and brothers.

Many things have made them feel insecure, for example, the conservative course that the central authorities of the Church followed in the past; the decline of pastoral zeal in many parish communities; the failure of socialist experiments in Latin America (the end of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the calcification of the Cuban Regime); the irrevocable breakdown of Eastern European Regimes; but above all else, the worldwide changes of economic conditions (cf. LU 21). This means that Liberation Theology has to be evaluated anew and its validity shown with even greater determination. A number of centres and unions in many countries of Latin America are taking up the challenge of this endeavour. The effects can already be felt world-wide. We ourselves feel the need to rep-

resent Liberation Theology, self-critically, yes, but without forgetting its real and original intentions. The theme remains: the Gospel and the transformation of society, faith and engagement for the poor.

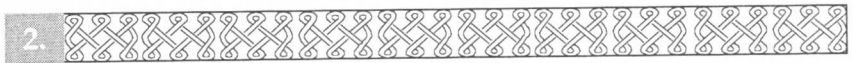
*If something is to remain from this epoch of Latin America and the Church for which people should go on engaging themselves, then it is just this option for the poor, the source of a never-ending love, the turning point of a new evangelization of the continent. This option should also be the basis of our spirituality, of our following Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14: 6) (G. Gutierrez).*

*The poor of this country, the poor of this continent are the first who are highly conscious of the urgent need of the radical message of the Good News and complete liberation. To cover this up means deceiving and disappointing the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (John Paul II, Letter to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference, April 1986).*



The Franciscan

## Movement and the search for Liberation



### Francis and Clare: Symbols of a liberating Church

Many years ago, Dom Helder Camara declared St. Francis as the symbol of the liberating Church and the patron saint of the poor. It is not without good reason that frequently Franciscan sisters and brothers were the ones who identified themselves with the praxis of liberation and with the reflection that deals with this liberation. Not only in Latin America, but also in other continents of the world, have



they contributed to the realization of the objectives of Liberation Theology and have lived them. The Franciscan Charism promotes creativity and a conscious participation. As Leonardo Boff stated, the members of the

Franciscan Family need not decide on the option for the poor in order to live what Liberation Theology preaches; it is enough, if they live their Franciscan Charism in a radical way.



Liberation Theology also received a strong impulse from Franciscan sisters and brothers: it was inspired by their work, by the way of living and thinking of those who had chosen the life style of St Francis and St Clare and therefore had committed themselves to the poor. One can even speak of a Franciscan way of living Liberation Theology, of putting it into practice. It may be good to remember that some of the most outstanding representatives of Liberation Theology are members of the Franciscan Family. The sisters and brothers of the Franciscan communities are familiar with the ideas of Liberation Theology and are actively involved in applying them.

The strength of Liberation Theology does not lie in the books that were written by its theologians, but rather in the daily spirituality of many people and communities. In this respect the following questions and problem areas are relevant:

#### • **Politics and economy**

Francis lived in a time in which participation in the shaping of political and economic life was accessible only to a few. But some aspects can be mentioned that might still be decisive even today.

Francis and his brothers refused to take on functions in society and the economy. Medieval city-states often employed members of Religious Orders as treasurers, secretaries and department leaders, because they were known as trustworthy. But this was just what Francis excluded from his communities on principle (Rule of 1221; 7,1). Everything that led closer to money and power should be refused even in its very beginning. On the contrary, Francis looked for the menial jobs of the lowest classes of society and resorted to begging when he did not receive any pay for his work. Fraternity was his answer to the need for basic necessities, and not the *poisonous* money:

*And each one should confidently make known his need to the other, so that he may find what he needs and minister it to him. And each one should love and care for his brother in all those things in which God will give him grace, as a mother loves and cares for her child (Rule of 1221; 9,10f).*

For the political sphere, Francis made use of the possibilities of direct influence that were available to him. So he writes “*to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and rulers throughout the world*” asking them to establish a humane order, which is determined by the awareness of God’s presence in his Incarnation. One cannot think of a greater political prophecy than “*the Letter to the Rulers.*” One must only try to understand the language of the 13th century. In the context of God’s Incarnation, in the Christmas celebration, Francis even wanted to bring about laws in favour of the poor and all creatures (cf. 2Cel 200; LP 14). Francis transformed his faith experiences into political and social action, in a way which anticipated today’s basic attitudes of Liberation Theology.

#### • **Changes of life and thought patterns**

Francis feels fraternally united with all living beings. He knows the hardship which many have to suffer; he opts for solidarity with all the people, but especially with those who have to live on the margin of society.

*The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them, that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. And afterward I lingered a little and left the world (Test 2:3; RegNB 9:3; cf. 1Cel 17; cf. LU 19).*

From this text we can derive at least three basic statements:

- Francis knows himself called by God; that is: his faith experience is comprehensive, the horizon of his understanding is indivisible, filled with God’s loving presence. Francis is not a prophet nor a social reformer, but a poet and a mystic and, above all, a man of faith.
- His spirituality and his mysticism do not separate him from the people, from their pain and suffering. On the contrary, his simplicity enables him to act in solidarity (compassion) with them, which, compared to the models of his society, is offensive.



➡ This experience made him change his social viewpoint:.. "and left the world."

Francis turned away from the bourgeois "world," and therefore also from the way of thinking of the aspiring middle class (bourgeoisie) of Assisi; he turned away from the logic of the class consciousness of his time, from not wanting to see the social misery, from wealth and power, from safeguarding of one's possessions and the readiness to use violence. Francis and Clare began a new life filled with joy. They did things that must have appeared useless in the eyes of the world which they had left.

### • A community of sisters and brothers with the poor

*The father of the poor and the poor Francis, who identified himself with all the poor, could not see somebody poorer than himself, not because he desired for glory, but only because he had compassion for them (1Cel 76).*

Francis' desire is not only to be in solidarity with the poor, he wants to live for the poor and with the poor, he wants to become like them and be their brother. His passionate desire to follow in the footsteps of the poor Jesus leads him to the poor and the lepers. He wants to live with them in a fraternal communion. He even demands from each of his brothers that he spends the time of his novitiate among the lepers. This means for the lepers, true liberation that gives them back their dignity and self-respect. The Franciscan movement understands itself from its beginning not as a welfare organisation for the poor, but seeks

the liberation of the poor; it believes in the poor and associates itself with them.

### • Vision and praxis of a changed world

Peace-loving and non-violent, Francis chooses to live with his brothers a way of life different from the society of his time. In Assisi, two social classes of society determine the social life: the nobles or *majores* (the higher ones) and the citizens of the city, who have become rich, the so-called *minores* (the lower ones). Besides these, there are the great masses of the poor, who have nothing to say and nothing to eat.

Francis confronts this society with a new order: relating to one another as sisters and brothers, an order that has its origin in the Gospel (cf. Mk



*Solidarity demonstration for the landless in Brazil.*

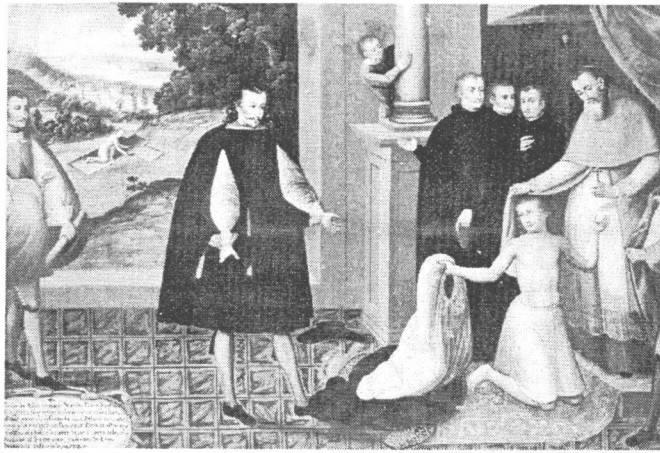
10 and Mt 10), a life in consistent solidarity with the poor, nowhere at home, always in the street or on the margin of society. This vision was for Francis so decisive that he internalised it even to the smallest details and wrote it down in his Rule (RegNB 14 and 16).

Francis founded a new way of life that is in agreement with the logic of the Reign of God. This Reign will be recognized above all, when it proclaims "Good News" to the poor (cf. Lk 4:18; 7:22).





This form of life is as radically different as are the socio-political changes of today. Francis expressed his change of direction through body language and symbols. He took off his clothes and gave them back to his father.



He chose a hermit's tunic, but abandoned it soon and was satisfied with a sack-like garment which did not allow one to be assigned to a particular social class. He embraced beggars and nursed lepers; he invited thieves to his table; his way of greeting was the kiss of peace, which became for him a sign of friendship and closeness to people. Francis did not want only social justice but demanded concrete and lived solidarity.

#### • Creativity and the use of peaceful means

Francis and Clare encountered the injustice of their day with political farsightedness and creativity, with wisdom and courage. If they were alive today, they would certainly encourage their sisters and brothers, religious and laity, to risk the difficult and conflict-laden struggle for socio-political change.

The legend of the Wolf of Gubbio shows us how Francis deals with a difficult conflict. It is important to notice that this conflict had a personal and a structural character. Francis shows that one cannot hide or suppress a problem. One cannot solve it either "from outside" as an uninvolved spectator.

One must get involved in the problem without allowing one's feelings to run high. One must side decidedly with the afflicted people. Our solidarity with the poor will bring us inevitably into confrontation with the modern *wolves* of our society: unjust economic systems and political regimes, violent police, authoritarian governments, drug dealers, private armies and Neo-nazis, ethnic groups that fight each other, all political and social powers which threaten life and oppress the freedom of people.

Violence and aggression is not often solved by individuals, considering their concrete political scope of action. Aggression has got something totalitarian. It is generated by the self-preservation and self-assertion instinct of people. It expresses itself in informal, social and erotic relationships; often through a destructive attitude towards things and nature. There is also structural violence; it shows itself in inhuman working conditions, in violence against women, in a glorification of power, in the field of emotional and psychological, ethnic, political and economic oppression. There is much that is unacceptable and inhuman in the lives of women in many regions—problems that have become an accepted part of their everyday life and cultural tradition.

To highlight this and to change it is a political and a Franciscan task. Meanwhile the women of Latin America have been developing their own Liberation Theology.



## Liberation Theology challenging the Franciscan Movement – new ways of action

2.2.

Liberation Theology has recognised the necessity to look for new fields and forms of liberating activities, without losing its option for the poor. Today, many Trade Unions and Parties have lost their influence, and many other Action Groups have gained political strength and social significance: e.g. the environmental movements, feminist movements, common and landless people movements, the movements of ethnic minorities and the movements of indigenous people, the international peace movements, Amnesty International, Green Peace, Religious Orders, ministries of the Church (pastoral ministry for human rights, street children, women, agricultural workers, Justice and Peace).

These movements are organised well and are developed with successful working methods in the field of public work. They render thereby, an important contribution towards a new orientation of political life. Provided their interests are not too restricted to a specific group or union, they can integrate towards a significant realization of their social goals. Numbers of women and men from the Franciscan Movements who identify themselves with Liberation Theology, have found an essential framework for action in these groups and movements.

These organisations also counteract the increasing indifference and apathy in society and justify a new political culture. These movements are made up of: political activists, environmentalists, artists, intellectuals and those from different walks of life. With them a new common force comes into existence supported by representatives of sciences, professions and various religious denominations. New areas of operation and political action are also open for those who are guided by the Franciscan Charism.

*The new social movements criticize in a radical way political power, manipulation and corruption. The final goal of the social movements is not the take-over of power, but the creation of a new political power, a power from below, from the basis (P. Richard).*

To translate this into action, one should use the political channels available. Obviously, these differ from country to country and the approach should be decided accordingly. In democratic systems, for example, there are political parties, the media, organisations for human rights, women's movements, minority associations, and many other international organisations.

*The call to think globally and to act locally means for us a new challenge in our endeavour to create a New World... During the Meeting in RIO (Ecological Summit in Brazil, June, 1992) I have become more conscious of the great potential of our Franciscan Families as well as the great deficit it reveals in our action when they have to play a significant role for our world.*

*Our co-operation with the United Nations follows a practical logic: they offer us the possibility of connecting all the people of good will, to join together in order to overcome injustice and suffering in this world. We must do together, what one cannot do alone (Hermann Schalück, Before the United Nations on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1993).*

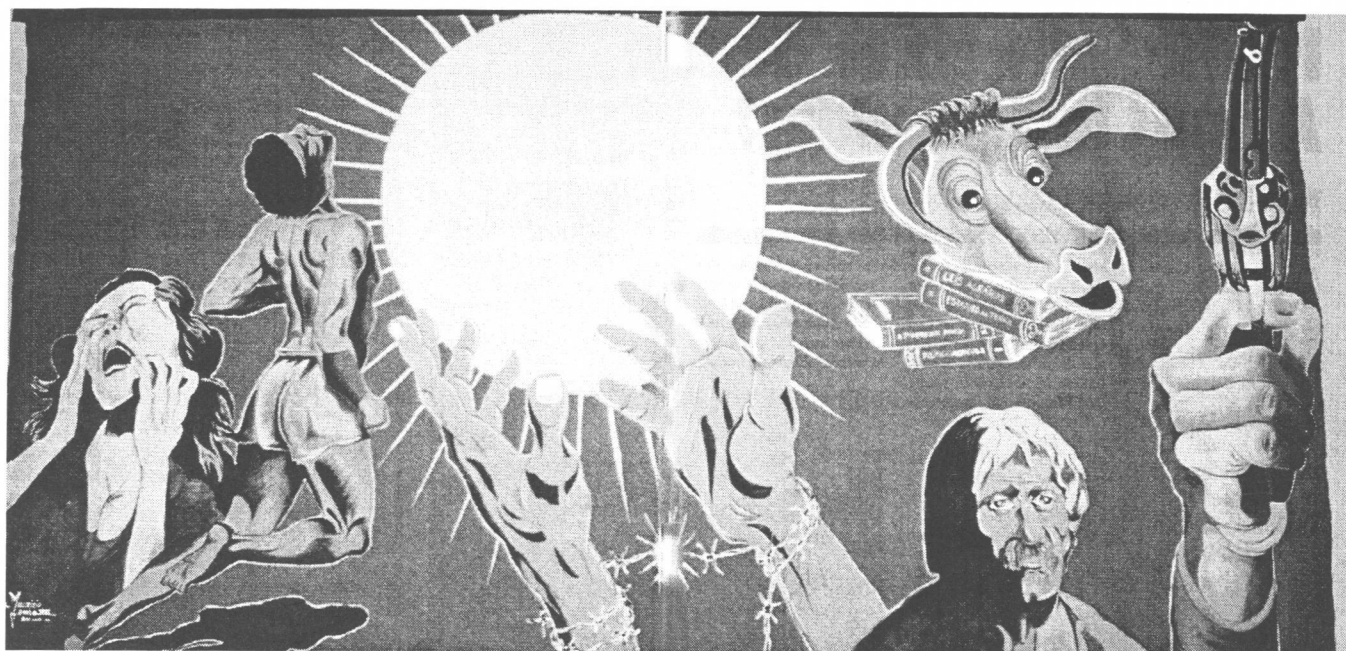
It would be a great mistake not to use one's political influence to the fullest. For example, one can engage oneself with the International Franciscan Movement for the enforcement of concrete goals within their reach. This understanding lies also as the basis of the General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor:



Since many human beings are still victims of dehumanising poverty, injustice and oppression, the brothers should devote themselves, with all people of good will, to restoring the social order, so that it can be based on justice, liberation and peace in the risen Christ. After weighing the causes of the injustice in each situation, the brothers should participate in activities that build up charity, justice and international solidarity (Article 96,§2).

- ⇒ networking with people and groups from different social backgrounds and countries,
- ⇒ mobility and ability for communication on intercultural and international levels,

This will result in behaviour patterns and action perspectives:



Wall painting in the office of the "Commission for Rural Pastoral", São Luis, Brazil.

Our political actions will not remain ineffective, but instead lead us with other social powers to:

- ⇒ a deep Franciscan and mystical awareness,
- ⇒ a knowledge of the most important Franciscan texts,
- ⇒ personal motivation and preparation,
- ⇒ a good knowledge of the historical and economical development in the society,
- ⇒ knowledge of competing conflicts within organisations,
- ⇒ alliance with various organisations,
- ⇒ Dropping out of a system that generates so much poverty
- ⇒ Getting closer to the poor, following the living example Francis and Clare gave us.
- ⇒ Accompanying people on their journey and sharing with them in solidarity: faith, symbols and hope of liberation.
- ⇒ Co-operation and collaboration with the People's Movements, in order to share our faith and Charism.
- ⇒ Re-discovery of life-oriented values, refusal of wasteful consumerism, responsibility for the protection of creation, development of a creation spirituality.





Thanks to Liberation Theology and its commitment to the cause of God and the poor, thanks to the martyrs, prophets and poets, thanks to the many members of the Franciscan Family, we can see Christianity with different eyes today. Nevertheless, the danger of losing sight of the poor still remains with the Church and all Franciscans .

We are aware that the twenty-first century more than ever needs people and religious models who are filled with a deep and sound spirituality; persons who are able to combine the holiness of life and politics. We need people whose faith has grown strong in the struggle against

all forms of dehumanization. We need people whose ethical attitude is transparent and who have great hope for the future. Such people who remind us of Francis and Clare, serve as examples and inspire our action. They represent a power of purpose and resistance in a society which seems to have lost its sense of solidarity and deep human values.

But in all this, as daughters and sons of St. Clare and St. Francis, we must not lose sight of the Universal Church. What matters is that all of humanity together will find a place at the table in the Reign of God.

### Church and Franciscan Sources

Scripture	Ex 1-3; 2,23; 3,7-10; Mt 5,1-12; 10; Mk 10; Lk 4,16-30; 7,22; 1Cor 12.
Church Documents	Puebla 96; 485; 622; 629; 640; 711; 1134; 1142; 1144; 1147; 1165; 1177; 1309. Medellin 2:9; 5:15;10:2; 12:13; 14:7-10. Santo Domingo 178 ff., 296. John Paul II: Letter of April 1986 to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference; Speech in Santa Cecilia, Mexico, 1979.
Franciscan Sources	2EpFid 75-85; 1 & 2EpCust; RegNB 7:1; 9:3. 10f.; 14; 16; CL 14; TestCL 2:3; 22; UltVol 1 ff.; 1Cel 17; 76; 2Cel 73; 84f.; 87; 200; 1LAg 4; 4 LAg 15-24; RCI VI:3; LP 14; Fior 21; LM VIII:6.
Inter-Franciscan Documents	Speech of OFM Minister General, Hermann Schalück before the United Nations in New York on 27 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 1993.
OFM – OFMCap – OFMConv	OFM General Constitutions: Art. 96, § 2.
Poor Clares	
Third Order Regular	
Secular Franciscans	
Supplements	

*Note: The participants may add their own to the given source materials.*



# Exercises

D



## Exercise

Read the Bible texts on the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt and the vocation of Moses (Ex 1-3) together with Lk 4, 16-30 and Mt 5, 1-12.

### Questions

1. What kind of obligations emerge from these Bible passages for a commitment to the poor and against injustice?
2. What have we already done? What is still to be done?



## Exercise

### The Legend of the Wolf of Gubbio

#### Step One

*Reflect on the reality in which we live:*

#### Step Two

*Read the story of the Wolf of Gubbio*

*At a time when Francis was staying in the town of Gubbio, something wonderful and worthy of lasting fame happened. For there appeared in the territory of that city a fearfully large and fierce wolf that was so rabid with hunger that it devoured not only animals but also even human beings. All the people in the town considered it such a great scourge and terror because it often came near the town – that they took weapons with them when they went into the coun-*

### Questions

1. Which situations of suffering and injustice do you know?
2. What are the conflicts in your surroundings and at your work?

*try, as if they were going to war. But even with their weapons they were not able to escape the sharp teeth and the raging hunger of the wolf when they were so unfortunate as to meet it. Consequently everyone in the town was so terrified that hardly anyone dared go outside the city gate.*

*St. Francis had pity on the people and decided to go out and meet the wolf although the citizens discouraged him. Arming himself with the Sign of*



the Cross, he bravely went out of the town with his companion. With great faith in God's help Francis went out to meet the wolf. Some peasants accompanied for a while but with hesitation. However, Francis went alone towards the place where the wolf lived.

Then, in the sight of the many people who had come out and climbed onto places to see this wonderful

of the Cross, the wolf closed its terrible jaws and stopped running. As soon as he gave it that order, it lowered its head and lay down at St. Francis' feet, as though it had become a lamb.

And St. Francis said to the wolf as it lay in front of him: "Brother Wolf, you have done great harm in this region, and you have committed horrible crimes by destroying God's creatures without mercy. You have been destroying not only irrational animals, but you even have the more detestable brazenness to kill and devour human beings made in the image of God. You therefore, deserve to be put to death just like the worst robber and murderer. Consequently everyone is right in crying out against you and complaining, and this whole town is your enemy. But Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and them, so that they will not be harmed by you anymore, and after they have forgiven you all your past crimes, neither men nor dogs will pursue you anymore."

The wolf showed by moving its body and tail and ears and by nodding its head that it willingly accepted what the saint had said and would observe it. So St. Francis spoke again: "Brother Wolf, since you are willing to make and keep this peace pact, I promise you that I will have the people of this town give you food everyday as long as you live, so that you will never again suffer from hunger, for I know that whatever evil you have been doing was done because of the urge of hunger. But, my Brother Wolf, since I am obtaining such a favour for you, I want you to promise me that you will never hurt any animal or person. Will you promise me?"

The wolf gave a clear sign, by nodding its head that promised to do what the saint asked. And St. Francis spoke further: "Brother Wolf, I want you to give me a pledge so that I can confidently believe what you promise." And St. Francis held out his hand to receive the pledge, the wolf also raised its front paw and meekly and gently put it in St. Francis' hand as a sign that it was giving its pledge.

Then St. Francis said: "Brother Wolf, I order you, in the name of the Lord Christ, to come with me now, without fear, into the town to make this peace pact in the name of the Lord." And the wolf immediately began to walk along beside St. Francis, just like a very gentle lamb (Fior 21).



Francis and the wolf of Gubbio.

event, the fierce wolf came running with its mouth open toward St. Francis and his companion.

Seeing the wolf coming near, Francis made the Sign of the Cross toward it. Then calling to it, St. Francis said: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt me or anyone." It is marvellous to relate that as soon as he made the Sign





## Questions

1. What does this text say?  
Who are the persons in this story?  
What happens between the two main figures?  
How can the reality (background) be described that has brought forth this text?
2. What feelings do the involved persons show? Why?  
What are the conflicts and interests that are at stake in this play?  
Why do they appear?
3. What does St. Francis do?  
What does he say?  
What is his attitude towards the people of Gubbio?  
What leads to the relationship between Francis and the citizens of Gubbio? And to the wolf?

## Step Three

*Message of the story for our time.*

## Questions

1. What does the text say to us today?
2. What is our attitude towards those responsible for the conflicts, and what is our attitude towards the victims of the conflicts?
3. What contribution can we make towards liberation from situations of conflict in our society?



## Exercise

**The following text is an attempt to actualize the Letter of St. Francis to the Rulers of the People in our situation today:**

To all, in the whole world, who exercise power and authority,  
to the kings and presidents of the peoples,  
to chancellors and ministers,  
to parliamentarians and experts,  
to directors and governing boards  
and to everyone who reads this letter,  
Brother Francis,  
your little worthless servant wishes  
peace and all good things.

There is something  
that you must also integrate  
in your political perspective:  
the certainty  
that death will come to all of us.

I therefore beg of you, with all the reverence  
I am capable of:  
do not forget God  
in your political actions.  
Let his commandments guide you,  
when you shape this world.



For all who forget God and *turn away from his commandments* (Ps. 118:21) *shall be forgotten* by him too (Ez. 33:13).

And at the moment of death,  
everything falls away into nothingness,  
and we must let go  
all our securities.

And the more knowledge and power  
you store up  
and use against others,  
the greater will be the torments  
you will have to endure in hell.

For this reason  
my Lords,  
I say this to you:  
the important principle  
of your political dealings  
becomes tangible  
in the symbol of bread and wine –  
the Holy Body and Blood of Jesus.  
In the crib God takes the side  
of the poor and weak  
in an attitude that  
renounces power and domination.

This you should acknowledge publicly

through signs that one can see and hear,  
through laws and norms,  
through structures and institutions,  
through officials and executive boards.

Your intentions should be: to promote God's  
love and commitment to Him by Your people.

Praise and thanksgiving to Him  
not only through one or two,  
but through all,  
because it is only  
by fixing our eyes on Him  
that we can live a truly human life.

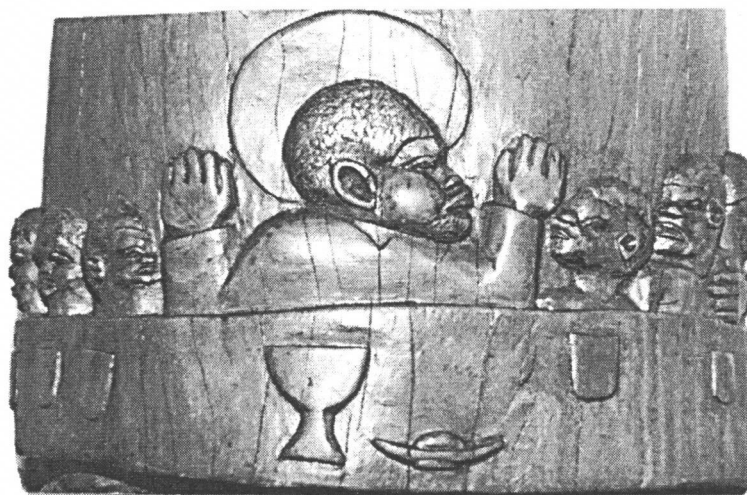
If you refuse to do this,  
you will be held responsible for it  
on the day of God's judgement.

Those who keep a copy of this letter  
and act upon it,  
may know  
that they receive God's blessings.

(Anton Rotzetter)

#### Assignment

Write a similar letter to the politically  
responsible persons in your country.



*"I firmly advise you receive with joy  
the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ  
in holy remembrance of Him" (Ltr 6).*



# Applications

E



## Application

**During his visit in Santa Cecilia in Mexico in 1979, Pope John Paul II personally adopted one of the central concerns of Liberation Theology:**

*With great joy I have been looking forward to this meeting with you, because I feel joined in solidarity with you all. As poor people, you demand my special vigilance. The reason for this is the following: The Pope loves you, because you are all God's privileged ones. When God founded his Family, the Church, he had the poor and needy of humanity in view as his special people. For their salvation he sent his Son, who was born poor and lived among the poor and*

*through his poverty made us rich (cf. 2Cor 8:9) [Speech in Santa Cecilia, AAS, LXXI, p. 220].*

### Questions

1. In what way does this text express the basic concerns of Liberation Theology?
2. What connection does the Pope make between the Church and humanity?
3. How are salvation and human well-being related to each other?



## Application

**Express in about ten sentences the basic concepts of Liberation Theology.**

### Questions

1. How far do you recognise in your list of these basic concepts your Franciscan vocation?
2. How can one counteract the discouragement and depression of the poor in the spirit of the Franciscan charism?





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"Go two by two" for if one falls down the other raises him/her up.

Malgache Proverb



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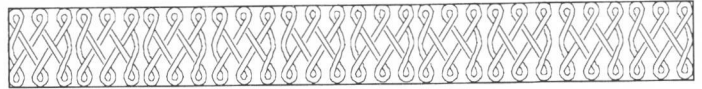


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**Bottom:** Illustration by Maximino Cerezo Barredo, 1982.
- P. 15** From: Adveniat, "Continent of Hope." Photo: Gerard Klijn.
- P. 16** **Both pictures:** Photo: Daniel de Andrade.
- P. 17** Francis and Clare. Umbrian Master.
- P. 19** Photo: Daniel de Andrade.
- P. 20** **Top:** Oil painting of about 1670, Convent of the Franciscans, Santiago, Chile.  
**Bottom:** Women in Surinam. From: Adveniat, "Continent of Hope", Photo: present.
- P. 22** From: ITE, 88/3.
- P. 25** A drawing from Latin America.
- P. 27** Last Supper. Detail. OFM – Chapel, Nairobi. Photo: H. Gockel, OFM.
- P. 29/30** Drawings by Poor Clares, Madagascar.
- P. 31** Lino-cut by Jacob Matrose.



# Thoughts for reflection



salm 126

When the day comes,  
on which our victory will shine  
like a light in the night,  
it will be like a dream.

We will laugh and will sing for joy.  
Then the other nations will tell of us:  
God has done marvellous things for them.  
Yes, he does great things for us;  
Therefore, we are glad even amidst sufferings.

Lord, shatter the chains of humiliation  
and death,  
as you did it on the glorious morning  
of your resurrection.  
Let those who scatter in tears  
the seeds of justice and freedom,  
with joy harvest peace and reconciliation.  
Those who go out weeping  
as messengers of your love,  
will come back singing for joy,  
because they will witness  
how in your world  
hatred will be overcome by your love.

*Zephanja Kameeta*

