7.7.2012 - National Catholic Reporter

Jesuit: Liberation theology will endure and grow

MUNICH, GERMANY -- There is a general view in the church today that liberation theology, which shone so brightly for a while after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), is dead. The declaration against it issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1984, it is thought, killed it off. But the reality is different. Certainly this movement as a force around which to organize in favor of the poor is less prominent today. But its inspiration is still very much alive.

Such is the message of this interview given recently in Munich by the rector of the Jesuit community there, Fr. Martin Maier, former editor in chief of the celebrated monthly magazine Stimmen der Zeit.

Maier was in El Salvador in 1989 when six Jesuits and two women were murdered by army assassins at the University of Central America. The murdered men had been a team developing and applying the insights of liberation theology. Maier remained in El Salvador for two years, and ever since has returned regularly. He has a close friendship and intellectual partnership with Fr. Jon Sobrino, the leading Jesuit liberation theologian, and is one of the many influenced by the witness of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, who found the face of Jesus in the face of the poor.

NCR: Liberation theology burst onto the scene after Vatican II. How does this theology relate to the council?

Maier: I see liberation theology as one of the council's fruits. One of the great theological steps forward taken at Vatican II was to replace the Neo-Scholastic model of nature and grace as separate from each other. The council came to a new conception of a unity between them. This had many consequences for theology and the church itself: a new unity between the history of salvation and profane history, a new unity in understanding the love of God and love of neighbor, a new unity between faith and society.

Just six weeks before the council began, Pope John XXIII made a radio speech in which he set out his vision of what Vatican II could and should achieve. He said that the Catholic church understood itself to be the church of all, but especially of the poor. So he anticipated the preferential option for the poor, which is a basic thrust of liberation theology. When the Latin American bishops met in Medellín [Colombia"> in 1968, they applied the council to their local situation and the option for the poor and liberation theology was the consequence.

The Vatican became very critical, though. What were Pope John Paul II's views?

You have to see him in context as a pope from Poland, a communist-dominated country of Eastern Europe. When elected, he did not have a developed understanding of liberation theology. He saw it as leftist and, given his experience of the Soviet system, he was very critical and suspicious that Marxism should play an important role in it.

But as he came to know the universal church more fully, there was an evolution. You can see this working out in the personal story of his relations with Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador. Romero came to see him for the first time in April 1979. The pope urged him to seek a better understanding with the government, and to be careful about the social commitment of the church. But there was another meeting in January 1980 where John Paul had reached a much better understanding of the archbishop's situation. Romero felt consoled.

Two months later, Romero was dead -- assassinated in the Divine Providence Hospital chapel in San Salvador while celebrating the Eucharist. John Paul II was convinced that he was a martyr. He gave Romero a special place during the jubilee year 2000, when he led an ecumenical commemoration of the witnesses to faith in the 20th century. As the roll call of honor was read out continent by continent, Romero was mentioned by name. It was an exception, for it happened only with him, and that was at the pope's insistence.

In 1984 Joseph Ratzinger's office [the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith"> issued a very critical assessment of liberation theology. Two years later, in 1986, a second document was published which to some degree corrected and softened the first. I understand that John Paul II, among others, was behind this second document, and just at this time he sent a letter to the Brazilian bishops in which he accepted that under certain conditions liberation theology is not only necessary but valuable. You note he says, "under certain conditions" -- he always warned that liberation theology can be dangerous if it goes too far.

Joseph Ratzinger, John Paul's right hand, is pope now. What did he think?

You can find his standpoint articulated in an address he delivered at a conference in Germany in 1983, when he was cardinal prefect of the CDF, entitled "Let me explain liberation theology to you." Liberation theology is dangerous, he says, because it mingles politics and social analysis with theology, whereas these spheres should remain distinct. He criticizes four particular theologians -- Hugo Assmann, [Dominican Fr."> Gustavo Gutiérrez, [Jesuit Fr."> Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. Elements of this address appear in the 1984 document of the CDF which was very critical of liberation theology.

You pointed out that John Paul's assessment of liberation theology evolved. Did anything similar happen with Joseph Ratzinger?

Yes, even with him. There was a private meeting in Germany in 1996 when a group of theologians came together, starring Joseph Ratzinger and Gustavo Gutiérrez. A dialogue took place between them, and understanding grew.

As pope, he delivered a remarkable speech at the opening of the Latin American bishops' conference at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007. He reflects there on the divine "self-emptying" as expounded in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, and draws out from it a wonderful foundation for the option for the poor, rooted in God's decision to become a human being in Christ. In his address he explicitly points out that the option for the poor is at the heart of the Christian faith, at the heart of the mystery of God. So in spite of the difficulties Jon Sobrino experienced in that same year, 2007, when the doctrinal congregation criticized his work, I would say that a certain convergence has taken place.

Joseph Ratzinger has always professed to take the side of the simple believers against overmighty theologians. The church must guard the faith of the little people, he says. In countries like El Salvador one has heard the criticism that the liberation churches catered for activist congregations, whereas the ordinary churches held the ordinary people, so in effect the church there became divided between the two. I don't think the criticism is just. On the contrary, at the core of liberation theology is precisely el pueblo, the poor, the little ones. Thus Jon Sobrino insists that it is a fundamental duty to listen to the poor, to give them a voice, to be their voice, as Romero used to put it.

Does liberation theology still have life in it? Inevitably the early enthusiasm has faded. But that was inevitable. The hopes and promises were also somewhat exaggerated.

There were other pressures, too. There was persecution of the part of the church in Latin America that took up this theology. In part this hostility came from military dictatorships in cooperation with the administrations in

the United States. ... And there was opposition within the church from very conservative bishops. It is obvious that during past decades many bishops were appointed to fight against liberation theology and the spread of the base communities. One of the prominent opponents is Cardinal [Juan Luis"> Cipriani, archbishop of Lima, a member of Opus Dei. Romero's second successor in San Salvador, [Archbishop Fernando"> Sáenz Lacalle, also a member of Opus Dei, is another opponent.

I would mention one other consideration. Perhaps liberation theology didn't progress sufficiently, remaining to an extent in the categories and theoretical framework of the '60s and '70s. True, there have been important contributions such as the two volumes of the Christology of Jon Sobrino, and there is a new generation of younger theologians who go on in this line, without attracting the notice that their predecessors did. But I think that liberation theology also has to respond to the new challenges and the new context of globalization, and this work partly still has to be done.

John Wilkins is former editor of The Tablet, a Catholic weekly published in London.

Editor's note: This is part of an occasional series appearing in NCR leading up to the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. In October, NCR will publish a special edition devoted solely to the council's 50th anniversary. For details see NCRonline.org/council.

http://ncronline.org/news/theology/jesuit-liberation-theology-will-endure-and-grow
Zuletzt geändert am 17.07.2012