

## **Gustavo Gutierrez: Liberation for All**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes that Gustavo Gutierrez, a founder of liberation theology, who accepts and loves the poor in Latin America can challenge Christians in the USA to welcome the poor and to walk in solidarity with those experiencing trying economic times. The methodology is literature-based: the works of Gustavo Gutierrez explore both the plight and the power of the poor and are a source of wisdom for addressing poverty in the USA to do a theological analysis to benefit pastoral and educational ministries.

### **GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ AND THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION**

Gustavo Gutierrez, an indigenous priest born in 1928 in Lima, Peru, is a man of the poor and a founder of Liberation Theology. His was a life of personal suffering from osteomyelitis as a teenager, years of dedicated study followed by ordination to the priesthood, teaching laypeople at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, working as theological advisor in the fourth session of Vatican Council II, and striving to read the signs of the times in Peru and throughout Latin America. As the poor took center stage, a phenomenon known as the “irruption of the poor”, Gutierrez identified the context of Liberation Theology as “a new kind of society (characterized by justice), a new kind of human being (characterized by other-directedness), and a new kind of Christian disciple (for whom justice is a

requirement of faith) all coming into being in those whose faith in God leads them to fight for freedom and justice, that is, for a *human life*” (Nickoloff, “Introduction” 1996, 3).

Poverty was the starting point for reflection as Gutierrez explored society. His writings were pivotal for the deliberations of the bishops of Latin America in their meetings at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). CELAM [*El Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*] first identified poverty as “institutionalized violence” (Medellin 2.16) and as Gutierrez wrote, their deliberations clearly state that poverty leads to “early and unjust death” and that it is “a global human problem and therefore a challenge to living and preaching the gospel. Poverty thereby becomes a theological question, and the option for the poor makes us aware of it and provides a way to think about the issue” (Gutierrez, 2009, 322).

Poverty is spreading a wider net as nations experience a world-wide recession. In an effort to better understand how to approach this problem in the United States, I will explore two books by Gustavo Gutierrez to consider issues related to poverty and liberation. One deals with income and class disparity in XV and XVI century Spain as it sought wealth and glory. *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* introduces a Spaniard who came to love those who were poor and oppressed when he himself could have chosen riches. Gutierrez’s book, *On Job*, will examine how someone who is innocent and facing intense suffering and deprivation approaches God. Along with a discussion of the effects of the

recession in the United States, these works will guide a theological discussion on poverty and wealth.

#### LIBERATION OF THE POOR

Gutierrez (1973) argued that injustices such as poverty can be overcome by liberation and that a Christian understanding of liberation is rooted in biblical and theological tradition. Additionally he distinguished between three simultaneous and interdependent processes of liberation. First, political and social liberation works to eliminate the causes of poverty and injustice. The goal is to achieve a society based on respect for persons, which encourages people to attend to the needs of the weakest members. Second, human liberation is an attempt to work at a deeper level, by “liberating human beings of all those things—not just in the social sphere—that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity.” This is what Vatican Council II called a “new humanism,” in which men and women are defined by their responsibility to their brothers and sisters and to history (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, #55). Third, liberation from selfishness and sin will eliminate injustice at its very root. This last process of liberation relies upon God for “only the grace of God, the redeeming work of Christ, can overcome sin” (Gutierrez, 1999, 26).

Gutierrez explained the connection between globalization and poverty. He noted that the dominant policy, neoliberalism, raises the economy to an exalted plane and encourages globalization. Through multi-lateral trade agreements

global corporations supersede political power; as a result, local governments effectively lose control of business. Markets without restrictions have enormous power throughout the world. In the name of supplying goods cheaply, local businesses, including local farmers, are losers, for they cannot compete against huge international corporations. Economic neoliberalism and globalization have resulted in growing inequality. The economy may thrive, but people suffer, for there is little regard for human beings and a rapacious disregard for nature. As a result, people and the environment are treated like commodities to be used and thrown away. In Gutierrez's words, globalization has led to: "the exclusion of a part of humanity from the economic loop and from the so-called benefits of civilization" (Gutierrez, 2003, 100). Economic neoliberalism makes profits for owners and investors, but the vast majority of the population suffers as corporations show little or no respect for human life and for nature.

Gutierrez goes on to say that liberation theology emphasizes reflection on practice and is rooted in spirituality. Discipleship, following Jesus, requires both prayer and commitment. Prayer enables disciples to open their minds and hearts to the overwhelming beauty of God's love. Prayer also unites love of God and love of neighbor. Commitment results from disciples' responding to God's love and joining together on the journey toward justice. Gutierrez wrote of the depth of this spirituality, rooted in faith in the God of life, as well as the willingness to surrender one's life for others (Gutierrez, 2003, 102).

*LAS CASAS: IN SEARCH OF THE POOR OF JESUS CHRIST*

Gustavo Gutierrez does an exhaustive study of the Dominican friar who became the bishop of Chiapas, Bartolome de las Casas (1484-1566). He examines colonization from the viewpoint of theology, that is, reflecting upon all aspects of colonization. When Las Casas, a Spaniard born in Seville and educated in Spain, first came to the West Indies in 1502 he paid scant attention to evangelizing the Indians. He returned to Rome to complete his studies and there he was ordained a priest in 1507. Upon his return to the Indies Las Casas once again ministered to the Indians. Las Casas' experience as an *encomendero* opened his eyes to the lived reality of the Indians. He considered himself "a good *encomendero*, diligent in his business affairs, and yet humane and fatherly with the Indians who worked for him" (Gutierrez, 1993, 46). His concerns were of a practical nature and only when he was refused sacramental absolution for not caring for the spiritual needs of the Indians did he begin to think more seriously about his responsibilities.

While there were no missionaries on Christopher Columbus' first voyage, by 1510 a group of Dominican missionaries from the Convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca arrived in Hispaniola. They were from a Dominican friary that emphasized contemplation and poverty. They observed how the Indians were held in low regard and treated like animals. In fact many of the Indians had been worked to the point of exhaustion, gotten sick, and died cruel deaths. The friars compared the sad lives of the Indians with those of the Spaniards who benefited

from mistreating them. The Dominicans then “set the facts of the case over against the principles of justice and right’—*juntar el derecho con el hecho*.” They based their ethical analysis on gospel reflection. Consequently as a community, they developed a sermon based on the reading that began with “I am ‘a voice in the desert...’” (Jn 1:23) for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. To show their unity each friar signed his name to the sermon, and Friar Anton Montesino was the preacher who delivered the sermon. All the notables of the island were invited and heard the preacher proclaim, “You are all in mortal sin! You live in it and you die in it!” He described their treatment of the Indians as “cruel and horrible servitude” that followed wars waged against the Indians and which resulted in their “death and ... havoc”. He noted how the Spaniards gave the Indians little food, had no regard for those who got ill, and complained when they died as if this were a disservice to their masters. Friar Montesino stated clearly that the Spaniards were also responsible for killing the Indians by forcing them to work the mines every day. They made little or no attempt to catechize the Indians. In the words of the friars, “Are they not human beings? Have they no rational souls? Are you not obligated to love them as you love yourselves?” He then compared the Spaniards to the Moors who had no faith in Jesus Christ (Gutierrez, 1993, 29) [Las Casas. *Historia de las Indias*, bk. 3, ch. 4]. The Dominicans clearly stated that when the Spaniards acted out of greed, it caused untold human suffering and death for the Indians. Based on the law of love in the Gospel, the preachers concluded that the

Spaniards were in danger of damnation because they had ignored the Christian obligation to love the Indians as they loved themselves. This sermon was the first of many that aroused the wrath of the settlers who complained first to the preachers and then wrote to church and political authorities in Spain. Words of reproach delivered publicly by the friars were a threat to those who were profiting at the expense of the Indians. While the Spaniards could no longer claim ignorance of the effect of their actions, their hearts were hardened and their minds closed to change. Despite criticism from King Ferdinand and their provincial, Alonso de Loaysa, in Salamanca, the Dominican missionaries under the leadership of Pedro de Cordoba, continued to defend the Indians against the abuses of the Spaniards.

Shortly thereafter Las Casas served as chaplain on the campaign to take control of the island of Cuba. The Caonao massacre of 1513 was etched in his memory and he wrote about it years later in his *History of the Indies* citing it as an example of injustice, of something contrary to God's will because so many lives were lost. Nevertheless when Cuba was conquered, Las Casas was rewarded with land rights and natives to work the land. He had firsthand experience of conquering the Indians, taking possession of land, having the natives work for him, later having slaves, and traveling through the island so he observed how the Indians and slaves were mistreated.

## CONVERSION IN THE LIFE OF LAS CASAS

As he dedicated his life to evangelizing the Indians, Las Casas would experience two conversions: the first as he prepared his sermon for the feast of Pentecost in 1514. The words from Sirach caused him to examine his life.

Tainted his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods!  
 Mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor.  
 The Most High approves not the gifts of the godless.  
 [Nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins.]  
 Like the man who slays a son in his father's presence  
 Is he who offers sacrifice from the possessions of the poor.  
 The bread of charity is life itself for the needy,  
 He who withholds it is a person of blood.  
 He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living;  
 He sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages.  
 (Sirach 34:18-22; in the Vulgate, 34:21-27)

His reading of Scripture in the context of the suffering of the native peoples opened his mind and heart to the reality that he had benefited from the slaughter of innocent people. Even if he were kind to his servants, he still shared responsibility for conquering a peaceful people. His privileges were the direct result of oppressing people, robbing them of life, redistributing their land, and forcing those who survived into slavery. The violence of war that included kidnapping, rape, and splitting family members apart led inexorably to the cruelty visited on those who survived to live a life of forced labor (Gutierrez, *Las Casas*, 47-48).

As an *encomendero* Las Casas was in daily contact with the indigenous people so he came to know their strengths and their suffering. He learned

firsthand that the killing and pillaging perpetrated by the *conquistadores* claimed the lives of the indigenous people and deprived them and their descendants of their land. Gradually Las Casas came to view the Indians as persons in their own right, persons worthy of respect but for whom respect was denied, life was interrupted and often taken prematurely, leadership wrested from the hands of their leaders and forcefully assumed by the Spaniards. He realized that he had to act on the preaching of the Dominicans and his prayerful reflection on the gospel. He would have to reject his position of power and its path to wealth to be a disciple of Jesus.

Preaching on the feast of the Assumption, Las Casas' words cut through any illusions the Spaniards may have entertained that they were on moral high ground. As Gutierrez reports, Las Casas' sermon contrasted the works of charity required of a Christian with the cruelty exhibited by the *encomenderos* who neglected their obligations to the people they controlled and whose "blindness, injustices, and tyrannies—the cruelty they were committing against those innocent, meek people, and how they could not be saved if they continued to hold them, neither they nor those who had distributed them to them". It must have seemed strange that this priest who was amassing wealth would reject all of this. In a spirit of restitution Las Casas renounced his right as an *encomendero* to control the lives and direct the work of the native peoples in his care. It had to upset the Spaniards for by his actions this priest was calling into question the

goods that they had acquired as a result of this system and the wealth that they hoped to amass. [Gutierrez, *Las Casas*, 53 based on *H.I.*, bk. 3, ch. 2, *O.E.* 2: 36b].

When his preaching had little effect in changing the minds of the *encomenderos*, Las Casas traveled to Barcelona to make a formal presentation to King Charles in December 1519. He went as a witness of all that the Spaniards had visited on the Indians: cruel wars, slavery and death for those who survived. In Las Casas' words, "I was moved, not because I was a better Christian than anyone else, but by a natural, most pitiful compassion for people who had never deserved this from us, suffering such terrible wrongs and injustices" [*Historia de las Indias*, bk. 3, chs. 148-149] (Gutierrez, Las Casas, 54).

Las Casas was a witness to the atrocities visited upon the Indians at the hand of the conquistadors, the Spaniards who used war to conquer and the *encomienda*, the system used to subjugate and enslave the Indians by usurping the Indians' lands and resources. He sought a different route to evangelization. In 1521 he used a land grant in Cumana, Venezuela for "a peaceful colonization and evangelization, with Indians and Spanish peasants sharing a common life." There had been conflict between Spaniards and the Indians in a nearby settlement. While this was a worthwhile endeavor, it ended in "heartbreaking defeat" (Gutierrez, Las Casas, 55). Shortly after this failure, Las Casas underwent a second conversion when he became a Dominican friar in 1522. He withdrew for

some years to live the common life of the Dominicans and dedicate himself to prayer and study. It was then that he realized that brute force was antithetical to evangelization. He acknowledged that only peaceful means could effect evangelization. It was Las Casas' heartfelt conviction that "the gospel must be proclaimed by persuasion and not by force" (Gutierrez, 1993, 307). Las Casas had a burning desire for all to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but the means had to be peaceful, mindful of the dignity of each person, and respectful of the Indians' freedom to choose how they would worship God. This he viewed as a matter of justice which meant "respecting the rights of all, building a social order calculated to protect and promote all persons as human beings—indeed, to make them agents of their own destiny." The Dominican friar was convinced that the right "to the life and liberty of persons" was "trampled underfoot in the Indies by the wars of conquest and the system of the *encomienda*" (Gutierrez, Las Casas, 235).

#### LAS CASAS: PROTECTOR OF THE INDIANS

While Las Casas became known as a Protector of the Indians, an honor earned after years of ministering to the native peoples, preaching the love of Christ, and traveling to the Spanish court to intercede for and defend the Indians, it is important to note that Las Casas saw Christ in each Indian. Because they were made to suffer at the hands of the Spaniards, Las Casas related their suffering with the agony and death of Jesus. Las Casas worked to have the royal

authority protect the rights of the Indians and was vocal in defending them. Such was the case when he critiqued what he considered as unjust the sections of the Burgos Laws promulgated in December 1512 that effectively condoned the continued exploitation of the Indians. Las Casas opposed these laws on many counts: primarily for upholding the *encomienda* for it was a system that would lead inexorably to the death of the Indians and the destruction of their way of life; the laws gave credence to calumnies leveled against the Indians by colonists; they made it impossible to instruct the Indians in the Christian faith when they were condemned to experience only abject servitude and bitter exploitation; and because the Indians, who were most affected by the laws, were not consulted before these laws were approved (Gutierrez, 1987, 280-283). It took many years of advocacy before the New Laws were approved in 1542-1543. These revoked the hereditary nature of the *encomienda* system, but the *encomenderos* reacted so violently that King Charles V revoked that portion of the law. Las Casas seemingly at the height of his power and influence at the court once again experienced how those with money were able to control the lives of the poor. It was as he first thought: gold was more important than the gospel. The *encomenderos* had made gold an idol. Their greed for gold made them deaf to the cries of the poor. Both the colonizers and the Spanish crown shared guilt for benefiting from usurping the land and resources of the Indians. The good news of the gospel was undermined and blunted by the unjust deeds of those who made

Christianity appear to be a message of violence and hatred. Las Casas, however, never wavered in his love of God and his love for the Indians. His writings, *Historia de las Indias* and *Brevisima relacion de la destruccion de las Indias* (1542), record the wars waged to conquer and subdue the Indians, how they were forced to work and reap the wealth of gold and silver for the Spaniards, and the destruction of the native population.

*ON JOB: GOD-TALK AND THE SUFFERING OF THE INNOCENT*

In a continent plagued by poverty long after the conquistadors searched for gold and silver and in the process caused untold numbers of indigenous to die, Gustavo Gutierrez turns to Wisdom literature to address the concerns of people who suffer so deeply that one questions where God is and how God can allow such anguish to be their daily experience. The story of Job, an Oriental chieftain, of good character and endowed with all earthly blessings is the guide to explore the impact of innocent suffering. When a series of calamities befall his flocks and his children, leaving him destitute, Job prostrates himself upon the ground and in his grief still praises the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). When his body is covered with boils, Job sits among the ashes and reminds his wife, “We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?” (1:10). Illness adds to his suffering for he has become an outcast shunned by society.

His friends having heard of his afflictions come from afar to offer comfort. Overcome with grief they sit speechless for seven days as if they were sitting

shiva for one who had died. Job's friends finally begin to speak and their words are aimed at convincing him to acknowledge his wrong-doing and to ask God's forgiveness. Their speeches indicate their deepest beliefs: God rewards the upright with prosperity and punishes those who err to move them to repentance. They present for Job's edification a theology of retribution. Job, a man of peace, rejects the reasoning of his friends; he knows from his own experience that suffering is not necessarily the result of wrong-doing. Gutierrez identifies Job as "a rebellious believer" whose "rebellion is against the suffering of the innocent, against a theology that justifies it, and even against the depiction of God that such a theology conveys" (Gutierrez, 1987, 14). Job struggles to reconcile the suffering of the innocent with his belief in God. He calls upon God, requesting that God be both his judge and his protector for who can stand up to God and prevail?

Two major shifts occur as Job considers the doctrine of retribution. The common belief elucidated by Job's friends was rooted in a system of cause and effect: those who believe in God are rewarded with riches and good health, a reassuring thought for those so endowed; those afflicted with poverty and sickness need to acknowledge their guilt for transgressions and resign themselves to punishment. Job rejects the doctrine of retribution when he steps away from his individual agony and identifies the real issue as "the suffering and injustice that mark the lives of the poor". Belief in God leads to a believer's trying to "lighten the burden of the poor by helping them and practicing solidarity with them".

When God speaks, Job realizes that “the world of justice must be located within the broad but demanding horizon of freedom that is formed by the gratuitousness of God’s love” (Gutierrez, 1987, 16).

#### PROPHECY AND CONTEMPLATION

Gutierrez identifies two types of language about God that are used in the book of Job: the language of prophecy and the language of contemplation. These two languages are sometimes separate and at other times intertwined for this is a rich and nuanced, poetic book. “Talk about God presupposes and...leads to a living encounter with God” that occurs in a particular time in history. Writing from a Christian perspective, he says that, “It requires, therefore, that we discover the features of Christ in the sometimes disfigured faces of the poor of this world” all of which occurs within the framework of active “solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are wretched, abandoned, and deprived”. The mystery of God is so deep and wide that, “Love, the virtue...that will win out in the end, stirs us even now to a spirit of joyous thanksgiving for the gift of God’s love” (Gutierrez, 1987,17).

Job’s sudden change from one who is gifted to one who suffers is exacerbated by his experience of feeling so alone. He comes to identify with the “the poor and marginalized (who) have a deep-rooted conviction that no one is interested in their lives and misfortunes” or worse, those who make false expressions of concern and in the process make their problems worse. Those who

are poor and marginalized hunger for someone to listen to and care about them as persons; then there would be space and an opportunity for them to receive “the word of the Lord” and to become “active in their own history” (Gutierrez, 24). When his friends criticize him, Job is willing to acknowledge that he is human and has failings; but he knows that the depth of his suffering far exceeds his wrongdoing. As an upright man undergoing torments, Job recognizes that his suffering is unjust. His friends who hold firmly to the doctrine of retribution and for whom his protestations of innocence could clearly lead to question if God has acted justly are scandalized by Job’s sense of injustice (25). As Job refutes the arguments of his friends, he is not questioning God, but rather the arguments of their theology. Job rejects the theological method of his friends which he contends, “leads nowhere but to contempt for human beings and thus to a distorted understanding of God” (30). He chooses to continue to search for ways that he can rectify his belief in God with his concern for those who suffer. His prophetic message was that God was a lover of the poor and marginalized. Job asserts that he had defended the poor and liberated them from oppressors (Job 29: 12, 17). By his words and actions Job recognizes God as one who has a preferential love for the poor and only by honoring God’s love by easing their suffering would justice be served (Gutierrez, 1987, 43, 48).

Throughout his afflictions Job repeatedly acknowledges the supremacy of God (Job 1:21). Despite his friends’ arguments that he is guilty of wrong-doing,

Job maintains his innocence. As he and his friends dialog, Job is searching for an answer to his suffering and finally acknowledges that he needs to speak with God. When he identifies with those who are poor and oppressed, he realizes that resignation is insufficient. As Gutierrez points out, “His full encounter with his God comes by way of complaint, bewilderment, and confrontation” (Gutierrez, 1987, 55).

#### ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Job’s spiritual struggle leads him to proceed in his journey to God, a journey in which he is ever-mindful of the suffering of all who are poor and oppressed. It leads him to question God boldly in words reminiscent of Psalm 73 in which the psalmist notes how the wicked are free to act with impunity and increase their riches at the expense of other people while they question God’s knowledge of their misdeeds (Ps 73:2-14). As Job continues to maintain his innocence (Job 10:7, 27:5; 31:6), he becomes convinced that he must speak with God. Aware of the risk he faces in engaging God, the source of his blessings and his afflictions, Job admits that he needs an arbiter. Job wants to speak without fear as he confronts God (Job 9: 32-35). With scant comfort from his friends, Job is convinced that he needs to speak and reason with God directly (13:3) so he can present himself before God and defend his case (31: 35-37).

In the midst of bitter lamentation, Job cries out,

I know that I have a living Avenger (*Go’el*)

And that at the end he will rise up above the dust,  
 After they pull my flesh from me,  
 And I am without my flesh, I shall see God;  
 I myself shall see him, and not as a stranger,  
 My own eyes will see him.  
 My heart is bursting within my breast [19:25-27].

In this passage the arbiter is identified as his defender or avenger. The verb *ga'al* means “to liberate, ransom, redeem” and signifies the obligation of the nearest relative to help a family member who is in danger of losing his possessions, his freedom, or his life. This rescuer is called a *go'el*, an ‘avenger of blood’ (2 Sam 14:11).” Gutierrez points out that, “as a result of the covenant God has become part of the family of the people. God is thus the nearest relative, the one who takes responsibility for the people, the one who rescues them if necessary.” According to Gutierrez, Job overcomes the limitations of theological thought of his time by identifying God as both his judge and his defender; “a God whom he experiences as almost an enemy but whom he knows at the same time to be truly a friend” {Gutierrez, 64-65}. The one God has two seemingly contradictory sides. Job unites two antithetical ideas: the God who persecutes him is the just God who does not want humans to suffer.

Job’s deepest hopes are realized when God addresses him twice in ways that he could not have anticipated. The level of discourse is raised as God speaks of his plan (*esah*)—evident in the wonders of creation (Job 38:4-20) and God’s just governance of the world (40:7-41). God’s words and actions thrust the

argument onto a cosmic plane and show the power and concern of the creator which contrasts with the opening question addressed to Job,

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, since you are so well-informed! (38:4)

Throughout this interchange God appears as one intimately involved with all of creation, surpassing human efforts, even those of Job when he managed his lands and flocks. God knows and cares for animals and all of creation in ways no human could devise. God's actions are gratuitous as God acts freely and powerfully in creating. God delights in the works of creation knowing that the "creative breath of God is inspired by beauty and joy" (Gutierrez, 75). In all the works of creation God allows creatures freedom to be and to act: God respects their freedom to do good as well as their ability to refuse to do good. The love of God is gratuitous and far surpasses the reasoning of humans who try to control and super manage as Job's friends did.

In the second speech God addresses "God's just government of the world, God's justice, judgment (*mishpat*)". God desires justice but it can only be achieved by respecting human freedom. "God's power is limited by human freedom; for without freedom God's justice would not be present within history" (Gutierrez, 76-77). Freedom empowers people to act for the good and allows for the possibility of conversion for those who act unjustly. Each day dawns with the invitation for people to work with God in establishing justice (Job 38:12-15).

This encounter with the living God touches Job deeply. Job is humbled by his interchanges with God and stands in awe. He is moved to acknowledge that God is all powerful and has a plan that Job does not fully comprehend. Job states that, “I once knew you by hearsay, now my eyes have seen you” (42: 5). Job confirms that the language of prophecy in which he spoke the truth and upheld his innocence before God needs the language of contemplation whereby humans behold God and the wonders of creation and welcome the invitation for human and divine action to work together to achieve justice in the world.

#### THE ECONOMY AND ITS EFFECT ON THE POOR

The economy has captured the attention of people and is a major concern for most people. The effects of a worldwide recession are evident in devaluation of stock markets and of home values, decrease in sales and production, an increase in unemployment and indebtedness, and home foreclosures and businesses’ failing. “The Employment Situation—July 2009” released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has two graphs that show the severity of the recession for U.S. workers. It shows that the unemployment rate for May 2009 rose to 9.4 percent. The unemployment rate has grown by 4.5 percent and the number of unemployed persons reached 7 million since the recession began in December 2007. “Unemployment rates rose in May for adult men (9.8 percent), adult women (7.5 percent), whites (8.6 percent), and Hispanics (12.7 percent).” The jobless rates for teenagers remained at 22.7 percent and for blacks at 14.9 percent

at about the same rate as in April. As unemployment increases, the media report about professionals who earned high salaries with good benefits and how difficult it is for them to find a job with comparable compensation, but they seldom speak of those who are poor making them invisible.

For those who consider a period of joblessness a temporary inconvenience, there is a study of workers who lost their jobs during the recession in the early 1980s that shows that most never regained their earning power. When work was unavailable, they were faced with the consequences of lower incomes that dramatically changed their lifestyles, forcing them to work at jobs unrelated to their skills, accept lower pay, cope with long bouts of or intermittent unemployment, and rely on spouses' income. (Michael Luo, "Income Loss Persists Long After Layoffs" *The New York Times*, August 5, 2009.)

While a recession of this magnitude affects all strata of society, those who suffer the most are the chronically poor and those who are on the verge of poverty. Families who invested in buying their own home discovered after a few years that their monthly mortgage rates jumped precipitously. Many were sold a sub-prime mortgage with starting rates they could afford, but within a few years the rate doubled. Individuals who had little capital and who would not have gotten a mortgage in former times were given mortgages without their applications being evaluated to determine if they had adequate income to pay the mortgage. In addition to poor lending practices, the housing boom had encouraged home

owners to borrow money against the value equity of their home. After a rash of foreclosures the housing bubble burst, prices declined, and home equity decreased. Many home owners realized that their indebtedness far exceeded the value of their home. They were trapped in a Sisyphus-journey to indebtedness for there was no possibility of repaying what they owed. Even if they continued to pay mortgages that had risen to exorbitant rates, they would never realize any profit when they sold their home. It made more sense to walk away from the house than to continue paying. As a result of sub-prime mortgages, many neighborhoods had “For Sale” signs on multiple properties. Vacant houses sent the wrong message to anyone visiting the neighborhood: they attracted vagrants and criminal activity, became infested with vermin, all of which effectively caused the devaluation of other houses in that neighborhood. With the decreased monetary value of houses and the loss of the daily interaction of homeowners in the neighborhood, communities withered and small businesses closed their doors for want of customers.

Other factors fatally wounded ordinary citizens. Oil prices rose causing a spike in gasoline prices and home heating bills. These increases limited funds for essentials such as food, clothing, and housing. Even public transportation cost more as a result of increased energy prices. Consumers saw price increases on food and beverages, clothing and shoes. Everyday expenses crept up precipitously as people’s income stagnated or ceased.

While current data show that 12.5 percent of the US population lived below the official poverty level in 2007, the number of those who are poor is expected to be considerably higher when the US Census releases its latest report for 2008 in mid-September. The number of those living in poverty is expected to increase because joblessness has increased and home foreclosures have resulted in people moving as they try to find affordable housing. The domino effect works in a recession. As workers in big business receive pink slips, many small businesses such as food vendors and service industries are affected. With a loss of income, people spend less on food, entertainment, travel, gifts, clothing, and home improvement.

Local and state governments also suffered when the housing bubble burst. Each empty home represents a loss of taxable income and a possible source of increased expenditures to protect emptying neighborhoods. Lower tax revenues from home or income jeopardized the government's ability to continue to deliver services as normal. Cities and states have staggering deficits that have caused law-makers to cut budgets. Human services are among the first to be cut resulting in cuts to children's healthcare, education, police and fire departments. Budget cuts jeopardize public safety and build resentment among the citizenry. Persons without jobs are forced to draw on funds set aside for retirement such as 401k and IRAs. They also resort to using credit cards to pay for daily expenses such as food, clothing, education, and transportation. When they are unable to pay credit

card debt in a timely fashion, the bank imposes a late fee and increases the interest rate for balances owed. Failure to pay credit cards can also result in other companies being notified so the penalty spreads across the spectrum of creditors. This is true even when the debt is incurred for a necessity like a medical emergency or payment of doctors' fees. Loss of job frequently results in loss of medical coverage so credit cards may be the only way to cover a medical emergency, a visit to a doctor, or treatment for chronic diseases such as cancer or diabetes.

Of special concern is the effect of food insecurity for very young children. Children's HealthWatch released a policy brief in June 2009 in which it summarized the findings of a study of families. They found that in a five-city sample food insecurity for children under the age of three was 22.6 percent 2008, up from 18.5 percent in 2007. Food insecurity or hunger is directly linked to poor health, increased risk of developmental delays, iron-deficiency anemia, and more frequent hospitalizations. They cite research that shows that poorly nourished children entering school are at a disadvantage and struggle to keep up with their better nourished classmates. Poor nourishment continues to have a negative impact on cognitive and academic development throughout the school years. Children who are food insecure and hungry are "twice as likely to be in special education classes and to repeat a grade" and in their adult life to have "diminished job prospects".

In a study, “The Long Term Effects of Recession-Induced Child Poverty” First Focus, a bi-partisan advocacy organization, reports that children who fall into poverty during a recession have worse outcomes throughout childhood and into adulthood. They analyzed data from the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID) for four cohorts: children who were between the ages of five and nine years old in 1970, children between the ages of ten and fourteen years old in 1970, and children from the same age groups in 1979. The study examined outcomes for the children beginning at ten years and then at five year intervals after the end of the recession. [Recessions occurred in 1973-1975, 1980-1983, 1990-1993, and 2001-2004.] The study considered three groups for each cohort: those who always were in poverty, those who fell into poverty during the recession, and those who never fell into poverty. They compared the cohorts with regard to income, employment, education, and health. Their analysis of the data showed that the children who fall into poverty during a recession continue to fare worse into adulthood. The summary reports that, “These children will live in households with lower overall income, they will earn less themselves, and they will have a greater chance at living in or near poverty. They will achieve lower levels of education, and will be less likely to be gainfully employed.” They will “even report poorer health than their peers who did not fall into poverty during the recession. These differences will persist for decades into their adult lives.” While these outcomes are consistent with research on the impact of poverty on children,

the surprising outcome is that those who experience “only recession-induced poverty fare markedly worse than those who did not fall into poverty, despite the fact that both groups of children start off in the same place.” First Focus concludes that “policymakers should make it a priority to prevent additional children from falling into poverty during the current recession. Given that some three million additional children are predicted to be on the verge of dropping below the poverty line, the matter takes on even more urgency.”

When Gustavo Gutierrez wrote of liberation, he envisions it as liberation for all people, especially the poor and oppressed. How might his ideas on liberation apply to the current economy? As both books cited in this paper indicate, poverty and oppression diminish the opportunities for living a good life and lead to early death. While the living conditions of North Americans far exceed those of many poorer nations, job loss and inability to pay for housing, food, and healthcare can disrupt the lives of people, lead to anger and frustration, and cause physical and mental disease.

Gutierrez is firmly convinced that poverty is “more than a social issue. Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology as well.” He goes on to say that theology occurs within a particular historical context and that, “Our context today is characterized by a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor.” Poverty is more visible today as many more millions feel its sting. “The faces of the poor must now be confronted. And

we also understand the causes of poverty and the conditions that perpetuate it...Now we know that poverty is not simply a misfortune; it is an injustice” (Hartnett, 2003).

In the same interview Gutierrez explained the preferential option for the poor as concern for those who suffer from material poverty which could lead to “premature and unjust death”. He goes on to say that, “God’s love has two dimensions, the universal and the particular; and while there is a tension between the two, there is no contradiction.” God’s love includes everyone, but God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life.” The option for the poor has a stronger meaning in Spanish according to Gutierrez who said that *opcion* “evokes the sense of commitment...and is incumbent upon every Christian.” The option for the poor “involves standing in solidarity with the poor, but it also entails a stance *against* inhumane poverty.” (Hartnett, 2003) In a recent article Gutierrez quotes Pope Benedict XVI who said in his opening address to the CELAM meeting in Aparecida, Brazil in May 2007 that, “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9),”

Solidarity with the poor implies a communal spirituality as disciples of Christ journey toward God. Theology as Gutierrez wrote is “a hermeneutics of hope, an understanding of the reasons we have to hope.” As a gift from God, hope

“opens followers of Jesus to the future and to trust.” He notes that theological work “becomes more demanding when it begins with the situation of the poor and continues in solidarity with them.” As difficult and fragile as such hope appears, it nonetheless offers creative possibilities in a world of crisis for “hoping is not waiting; rather it should lead us actively to resolve to forge reasons for hope.” Like the prophetic talk of Job, the gospel needs a prophetic proclamation including the “connection between justice and God’s gratuitous love.” Proclaiming the kingdom of God is proclaiming the love of God. God’s reign is “‘already’ present but ‘not yet’ fully realized.” The kingdom of God is both a gift and grace as it is also a task and responsibility.

At a conference of ACHTUS [Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the U.S.] in Chicago, IL on “Doing Public Theology: Immigration Reform in the U.S.,” Gutierrez shared his ideas as the conference drew to a close on June 3, 2009. He spoke of poverty and the call to the preferential love for the poor. He said that friendship with the poor is a necessary part of solidarity [*“No hay solidaridad con los pobres sin la amistad.”*]. The transformation of history is central to the gospel: changing non-human conditions and announcing hope. “The human aspect of the Christian message is terribly important.” Concern for others includes pondering how to say to a poor person, God loves you. For theology is connected to spirituality and proclaiming the gospel and ultimately, to finding

reasons for hope. In his words, “To do theology is to write a love letter to my God, my friends.”

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