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MARY IN LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

Introduction

At first sight, it would seem that the recent Latin American theologians of Liberation have spoken little of Mary. This is true in general; however, during the last decade, a good number of Latin American theologians have written on Mary. Their production is even so abundant that we will be able to retain only some aspects of the thought of the following seven theologians, coming from different intellectual horizons—some more speculative, others more pastoral:

- Leonardo Boff, O.F.M., from Brazil;
- Roberto Caró, S.J., from Colombia;
- Victor Codina, S.J., the only one not born in Latin America, but residing in Bolivia;
- Virgil Elizondo, from Mexico and the USA;
- Javier Lozano Barragan, now Bishop of Zacatecas, Mexico;
- Segundo Galilea, from Chile;
- José Marins, from Brazil.

For your benefit, I have assumed the delicate task of arranging and organizing their remarkable material in the following way:

- In our *first* part we shall consider the peculiar relation obtaining, up to now, between Mary and Latin America.
- The *second* part will present Mary's option for the poor as a complementary principle of intelligibility of her life, mission and privileges.
- The *third* part will detail its applications from the Immaculate Conception to the Assumption.
- The *fourth* part will consider the present and future role of Mary as a symbol of Liberation and Reconciliation.
- In the *fifth* part and conclusions, we shall briefly indicate some

of the limitations and some of the merits of these Liberation Mariologies, presenting some personal suggestions for their deepening in harmony with Vatican II and with the whole Catholic tradition.

Additionally, I offer here some last methodological observations:

- Though several of the theologians cited* wrote after Puebla, we shall manifest periodically the echoes provoked by the themes of Liberation Mariology in the Puebla document.
- Only in passing shall we mention any aspects of feminine theology within these Liberation Mariologies, because this theme remains minor in them.

I.

1. *Mary and Latin America*

Victor Codina:¹

If we take as our point of departure an analysis of the popular Latin American understanding of Mary, we perceive that for Latin American men and women Mary is not only the glorious Mother of God, but also the Mother of all men, the Advocate of the Poor, a Woman of the People, who has known, with the People, suffering and oppression. In the context of human injustices, Mary is a sign of hope. In Marian devotion, there is an implicit criticism of society. All this can be seen in the prolongation of the historical role of Marian devotion in Latin American independence movements, for example in Mexico or Bolivia. As *Puebla*² declares: Mary belongs

*Preliminary observation: we sometimes quote texts in an order different from the order of the author and, in some cases, our translation corresponds more to the meaning than to the letter of the text.

¹ Victor Codina, S.J., "Mariologia desde los Pobres," *Christus* (Mexico) 48, no. 567-568 (Agosto-Septiembre 1983):72-78. All quotations of Codina in the following pages are taken from this article.

² III Conference of Latin American Bishops, *Puebla*, official English translation, Washington DC, 1979.

to the identity of Latin American nations, especially in situations of peril and oppression (no. 283).

Javier Lozano Barragan:³

Mary is the Latin American way to Christ. United with God in Christ, Mary not only constitutes a model of Liberation, but she also produces, as an instrument, this Liberation: she bears the only Mediator. She is a model precisely insofar as she actualizes union with Christ in our humanity and, in this way, shares in the salvation of us all. She generates a conversion inside the motivations of economic production, overcoming exploitation, and realizing communion between Latin Americans; as she once united God and man in Christ, so she now unites Latin Americans among themselves. This thought is echoed in *Puebla*, no. 293.

II.

MARY AND THE POOR:

2. *Mariology from and for the Poor*

Victor Codina:

The Mariology of Vatican II was more preoccupied by dialogue and relations with Protestants than with the simple people and popular Mariology. What is important now is to prolong the deep and rich Mariological affirmations of Vatican II by a popular Mariology,⁴ a renewed Mariology corresponding to a renewed ecclesiology, a Mariology from the Poor. This is what *Puebla* did, completing *Medellin* which had had nothing to say about Mary.

The basic idea of this renewed Mariology is that Mary is the sign and sacrament of the motherly mercy of God towards the Poor, of the tenderness of God Who loves and defends the Poor. (*Puebla*,

³ Javier Lozano Barragan, "María en la historia de la salvación en América Latina," in *La Señora Santa María* (Bogota: CELAM, 1977), 83-92.

⁴ Such is in part the intention of John-Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater*, especially in nos. 21 and 37.

no. 291: Mary is the “sacramental presence of the maternal features of God.”)

Mary personifies the preferential option of God for the Poor, for the weak, and for those who suffer; above all, says Codina, Mary personifies the preference of God toward those who suffer from the injustice of the powerful; she personifies the triumph of God in human weakness and His preference for the humanly insignificant.

Let us simply recall here that this is a constant attitude of God in the Biblical History of Salvation. It culminates in God’s choice of Mary as Mother of His Son: He chose Mary, a woman of the people, poor and unknown, a virgin.

So the fundamental principle of Mariology is not only Divine Motherhood, but also this Divine Motherhood in the concrete and historical form that God has given to it:⁵ inside a small, despised people, the people of Israel, in poverty and in insignificance, in a marginalized powerlessness. From this new angle of vision, the mysteries and dogmas concerning Mary receive a greater light.

Javier Lozano Barragan:

Mary proclaims in the *Magnificat* that she has nothing, is poor, is “beneath and not above.” Only God is strong, powerful; only God saves. The “rich”—that is, those who think that they are able to save others by themselves—will be left without anything.

In other words, Redemption is hetero-redemption; yes, man saves himself and others, but solely through union with Christ. Outside of Christ—affirming one’s own strength—one just affirms oneself in one’s own solitude, as in an insane and alienating richness. Whereas, the saving arm of God operates prodigies of liberation.

Today, the different ideologies—from national security to Marxist socialism—present themselves as self-redeeming, as the only salvation; in that way, they are “the opium of the people.” The *Magnificat* proposes God as the only Saviour and, through Christ, guarantees

⁵ Guy de Broglie, S.J., offers a basis for such a consideration in: “Le ‘principe fondamental’ de la théologie mariale,” in *Maria* (Du Manoir), 6: 297-365 (1961).

the “salvific being with the brothers,” that is, the commitment with them in the struggle against all sorts of injustices, both economic and non-economic. (*Puebla*, no. 297, makes a thought-provoking distinction: Mary proclaims that God is the avenger of the lowly and that He will, *if need be*, depose the mighty from their thrones.)

III.

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN THE LIFE OF MARY:

3. *The Plenitude of Grace of Mary Immaculate, the New Eve*

Victor Codina:

The Immaculate Conception does not mean merely the absence of sin in Mary or only a simple plenitude of static grace in her, but also her dynamic insertion in salvation history from the very beginning of her existence. This Marian plenitude of grace manifests itself in a constant struggle against sin—against the sin of the world—in cooperation, at her level, with the work of the Atonement of the Lamb Who takes away the sin of the world.

In other words, Mary fights against the structures of sin in her world, against oppression, against everything which could pose obstacles to the realization of God’s plan. If grace is a participation in the justice of God Who sanctifies us, it is also, logically, opposed to human injustice which is itself opposed to the plan of God.

The faith of Mary expresses itself in opposition towards everything that is sinful. (*Puebla*, no. 281, stresses that Mary’s “powerful intercession will enable the Church to overcome the ‘sinful structures’ in people’s personal and social life and will win for it the ‘authentic liberation’ that comes from Jesus Christ.”)

4. *The Virginity of Mary*

Victor Codina:

Mary’s Virginity is not simply a sexual issue, nor does it mean a contempt for sexuality. It is the historical and carnal expression of God’s constant way of acting; He acts gratuitously, taking human poverty and powerlessness as a point of departure.

The Spirit of God comes down on a Virgin to manifest that the fruit of her womb shall be not only a great Prophet, but also the Son of God, the new Adam. Virginity, despised in Israel, indicates a radical disproportion between human action and the gift of the Spirit at the Incarnation.

Virgil Elizondo:⁶

For us, today, this virginal conception of Jesus by Mary, under the action of the Spirit, is a marvelous event. For Mary, it was an occasion of anxiety. How could she explain it to her relatives? Joseph, a just man, seemed shocked. Would she, Mary, be stoned to death? Would she be insulted and considered as a prostitute?

In this virginal conception of Jesus, God affirms a fundamental truth: what the world ridicules and condemns, God keeps holy. If the unbelieving world easily condemns Mary as a prostitute, God acclaims her as the Virgin Mother of His Son. (Personal observation: here Elizondo unconsciously echoes John 8:41, alluding to Jewish calumnies about Mary, as Cyril of Alexandria had already stressed—PG 73:881, etc.)

The Virginity of Mary, continues Elizondo, is in opposition to the scandal of violated womanhood.⁷ Jesus, to many of His contemporaries, appeared to be a bastard. In this context, the Church's understanding of the Virginity of Mary is "seen as the total rehabilitation of a ruined reputation."⁸ (Personal observation: Elizondo makes no comment about the virginity of Mary as meaning that she was never physically violated.)

⁶ Virgil Elizondo, *Virgen y Madre: Reflexiones bíblicas sobre María de Nazareth*, (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1983), 19-20.

⁷ Virgil Elizondo, "Mary and the Poor: A Model of Evangelizing," in *Mary in the Churches*, Concilium 168 (New York: Seabury, 1983), 62.

⁸ Virgil Elizondo, "Mary in the Struggles of the Poor," *NCWorld* 229 (1986): 245-246.

José Marins:⁹

The Virginity of Mary is not sterility. It teaches the “basic ecclesial communities” the impossibility of living virginity other than for the building up of fraternity among men. Nor can human love—in the context of the Virgin Mary—be reduced to a carnal exaltation. Virginity is a sign of total fraternity between human beings. (*Puebla*, no. 299: “Mary is the guarantee of woman’s grandeur,” spiritualizing the flesh, fleshing out the spirit.)

5. *Mary—from the Annunciation—Model of Our Commitment in Faith and Discipleship towards Christ*

Victor Codina:

The faith of Mary is the faith of Israel. Mary is conscious of her solidarity with the salvation history of her people. Her faith is a total self-gift to the God of Israel, to the God of the promises, to the God Who exalts the poor. Her faith in the liberating and saving God makes her whole life fruitful. She is not a “possessive mother,” trying to retain Jesus in her protective bosom. Rather, she lets Him be free and collaborates with Him in His task of liberation, culminating in His death on the Cross.

Segundo Galilea:¹⁰

For this reason, Mary experienced poverty, suffering, flight and exile. The Gospel accounts of her humiliation in Bethlehem, of her persecution by Herod, of her exile in Egypt, and of her suffering on Calvary—all are signs of her faithfulness to the commitment she accepted at the time of the Annunciation.

Today, Mary accompanies all Christian communities who, full of hope, struggle for the coming of the Kingdom of God. She accompanies them as a fellow pilgrim, since she also walked on the

⁹ José Marins, “Dinamismo Mariológico en las comunidades eclesiales de base,” in *La Señora Santa María* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1977), 187-208.

¹⁰ Segundo Galilea, “Mary, Follower of Jesus,” in *Following Jesus* (New York: Orbis, 1981), 110-119. All references to Galilea’s thought are based on this chapter.

road of exodus and like them grew in faith, hope and love.

On this road, the word of Jesus was her comfort and her guide. Mary, contemplative pilgrim, lived thus in a constant "review of life," keeping in her heart the words and deeds that she shared with her Son. Her option for the poor is an option of faith.

Roberto Caro, S.J.:¹¹

Caro stresses precisely the link between Mary's faith and her commitment. Faith was a characteristic trait of the Poor of Israel, who hoped, in total disposability, for salvation. Caro shows—in what is an implicit and antecedent answer to Codina's comments about Vatican II—that this Council took up again the intuitions of Irenaeus and other Apostolic Fathers (later partially lost by the Greek and Syrian traditions), that primitive Tradition which stressed the importance of Mary's faith. In that way—here, I am merely making explicit the thought of Caro—Vatican II provided a deeper foundation for participation in Mary's Option for the Poor: the contemplation of her faith, a mystery.

This leads Caro to a criticism of a certain tendency in contemporary Latin American religiosity: the trend toward a purely individualistic religion, one without concern for the anxieties of others, or towards a moralistic religion, one anxious about a legal or ritualistic purity, evoking the heights of Pharisaism. The Christian living his faith in such a manner cannot recognize that Mary, the committed woman, is a model for him.

6. *The Compassion of Mary at the Foot of the Cross*

Victor Codina:

Mary suffers seeing her Son persecuted, tortured and publicly executed as a criminal, but she maintains herself, faithful to His cause and fully penetrated by His fidelity to His own mission. Mary's *Fiat* to the God of the Poor prolongs itself in her *Yes* to the actions of

¹¹ Roberto Caro, S.J., "María, maestra de la fé para el mundo de hoy," in *La Señora Santa María* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1977), 131-143.

Jesus, to the very end, to the apparent failure of the Cross, till Easter and beyond. Her presence at Pentecost is her Yes to the Church as a community entrusted with the mission of pursuing the task of Jesus—in poverty, weakness and persecution.

Leonardo Boff:¹²

Mary shares the pain unjustly imposed on Jesus; she freely shoulders it all with Him, in order to bring about redemption, expiation and liberation. The powerful, the rich and the proud will be toppled from their places. Thus will they be able to cease their inhumanity. Freed from the schemes that made them oppressors, they too will have a chance to share in God's new order.

Virgil Elizondo:¹³

Mary remained silent at the foot of the Cross. Conscious of the collective experience of other women who had passed through similar trials, she knew that she was powerless.

In the person of the "Madre dolorosa," we see millions of poor people, especially those in Latin America. They see their loved ones condemned by the unjust world of the powerful, and the only thing they can do is accept their suffering in silence. Mary teaches the power of a supportive presence when no concrete action is possible. Mary wanted to protest strongly against the condemnation of her Son; she remained silent.

From the Cross, Jesus told John, "Here is your Mother," and John took her into his home. The only disciple who did not abandon Jesus, John remained with Him till the end. It is impossible to be a true and faithful disciple, a beloved disciple of Jesus, if one does not take Mary, our Mother, into one's home as its central treasure.¹⁴ In so doing, one will receive the strength and support necessary to

¹² Leonardo Boff, O.F.M., *Way of the Cross—Way of Justice*, trans. by John Drury (New York: Orbis, c1980), 29-32 (Fourth Station).

¹³ V. Elizondo, *Virgen y Madre*, 95-97.

¹⁴ This means, at least implicitly, through faithfulness to one's conscience.

remain with Jesus till the end, even till martyrdom and the Cross. Without her, even the best and strongest among us would abandon Jesus, in order to seek easier ways of salvation, just as Peter did.

During his lifetime, Jesus had given us the "Our Father." Then, at the time of His "hour" of glorification, He gave us His Mother, our Mother. The new creation "is consummated" (cf. John 19:28).

7. *The Assumption*

Victor Codina:

The Assumption of Mary is a participation in the glorious victory of the Resurrection of Jesus, the triumph of divine justice over human injustice. She—who had given birth to the Son of God near a manger, whose heart had been transpierced by swords of sorrow, who suffered the first persecutions with the Apostolic Church—was, after a humble and unknown death, assumed into Heaven.

The Assumption is the glorious culmination of the mysterious predilection of God for the poor, for the little ones of this world—a sign of hope for all the poor and for all those who join themselves in solidarity with the poor.

Some of the powerful in every age—just like the Sadducees—deny the Resurrection; they want to extinguish the desire for justice among the poor and to kill their hope of changing this world. The Assumption shows us that the executioners are vanquished by their victims; it is the confirmation of the way of Mary, of the ways of God.

IV.

8. *Mary, Symbol of Liberation and Reconciliation in Latin America*

Segundo Galilea:

We understand better, now, that the people of Latin America have been able to identify themselves with the Mother of God. They have seen in her a woman of the people, poor and united with their aspirations. They have gone beyond the sociological poverty of Mary to see her radical interior poverty.

Delving into the message of the poor Virgin, those who look for

their own liberation and development will be able to avoid the ambiguities of materialism and of alienation, taking upon themselves the demands of an interior liberation. For them, Mary means: “a new human being is possible.”

Because the eschatological horizon and finality of Christian commitment was always latent in her, Mary incarnates hope in the triumph of justice, peace and reconciliation over division and enslavement for all suffering generations.

The religiosity of Mary is not in the least alienating (from earthly duties) for, in the hope born of her commitment, she is aware that justice and reconciliation imply the vindication of the poor and of the oppressed.

In the *Magnificat*—in continuity with Isaias and the Prophets, and anticipating the Beatitudes—she hopes in a God Who will exalt the poor and the lowly. Mary thus takes on the historic and conflictive conditions of her commitment. Her hope is not only personal and eschatological, it extends also to a hope for change in the structures impeding the historic realization of the promises of God.

The Marian shrines in Latin America are meeting places for Mary and the people, places where their unity becomes “event.” Mary reveals herself to the poor in poor places; she uses the poor to evangelize the rich and the powerful. Among the poor, shrines give security to the oppressed, status to the humble. They dispose the powerful to hear: “He has put down the mighty and raised up the lowly.”

The neglected of society have no means to make themselves heard or to be taken seriously. Therefore, their message is: Mary. The message of the poor and committed Virgin is: evangelization *for* and *from* the poor. The understanding of this message by the rich is the source of the liberation of the poor. It enables the rich to discover the world of the poor and to become sensitive to their need for justice and reconciliation. It challenges their “right” to make themselves a “dominant center.”

The symbol of this reconciliation can be found in the pilgrimages of rich and poor together to the places of devotion to Mary. The

movement towards Mary obliges the rich to go out of themselves and to meet the poor. It gives the poor a sense of security and allows them to meet the rich without apology, on an equal footing. Mary is then one of the rare symbols of integration in Latin America—a symbol of a form of religious liberation, popular and possible in any political contingency [allusion was made here to the Chilean military regime]—a liberation achievable by way of reconciliation with our own values, identified in Mary.

She is a symbol also, because, for the evangelization of the rich through service and “pilgrimage” toward the poor, a purely material journey is not enough. Every journey toward understanding the place of Mary among the neglected involves a change of attitude, constitutes an interior journey. It demands that one should make oneself poor with Mary and, then, that one should accept—like her—participation in Jesus’ work of liberation.

V.

CRITIQUE AND APPRECIATION

9. *Negative Aspects*

These globally beautiful contributions of Liberation theologians are obviously unequal in quality and depth. Certain omissions are noticeable: a) I see an insufficient deepening of the understanding of Mary’s role (under Christ) in the spiritual liberation of sinful mankind, though this point is present; b) I fail to see the compatibility with the Catholic faith of certain affirmations made (elsewhere) by some of the authors mentioned here (e.g., when V. Elizondo writes that “poor women . . . forced into prostitution . . . are kept virginally pure by the all-protecting Virgin-Mother”¹⁵). Other more or less unacceptable affirmations could be quoted, but I deliberately avoided this in my desire to show that one can build up, using many of the materials offered by the theologians quoted here, an orthodox Liberation Mariology which is in full harmony with Catholic Tradition,

¹⁵ V. Elizondo, “Mary and the Poor” (Concilium 168), 63.

just as John Paul II has encouraged the Brazilian and other Latin American bishops to do.

10. *Positive Aspects*

The extracts and summaries offered here have abundantly demonstrated that a Liberation Mariology avoids, more easily than other branches of Liberation Theology, the use of Marxist dialectics and analysis. Liberation under Mary becomes, without alienation, reconciliation; Mary as Mother reconciles the members of her family, the brothers of Jesus.

Liberation Mariology may become a great force able—in the context of the social doctrine of the Church—to overcome the opposite idolatries of liberal and Marxist capitalisms, and, perhaps more importantly, able to help the baptized masses to persevere in their adhesion to Jesus within the Catholic Church.

As Elizondo has recognized, Mexican Christianity's focus on Our Lady of Guadalupe's option for the poor and for the suffering—on the message of Guadalupe as destined for the whole of Latin America in its totality—can prolong in a new direction the role of Hellenized Christianity and open up new horizons for the Universal Church in its understanding of the ways of God.

The message of Guadalupe is one of universal reconciliation, attainable only through the preferential option for the poor. Let us recall here Mary's main declarations to Juan Diego:

I am your merciful Mother, the Mother of all of you who live united, and of all mankind, of all those who love me; here I will hear their weeping, their sorrow, and I will alleviate their suffering, their needs and misfortunes.

This beautiful message touchingly elaborates the words of the *Magnificat*.

CONCLUSIONS

11. *Suggestions Inspired by the Message of Guadalupe*

The Message of Guadalupe encourages me to conclude with some suggestions for a new deepening of Liberation Mariologies.

a. The first great task of Liberation theologians would seem to be to distinguish better between, on one side, Mary's primary role (in dependence on her Son) in promoting spiritual liberation from sins and vices and, on the other side, her secondary and conditioned role in temporal liberations. Let us here recall the definition given by *Libertatis Conscientia* (no. 31): "Temporal liberation is that process having as its object the obtaining of the conditions required for a more harmonious exercise of human freedom." The Instruction of the Holy See recalls that in this context "personal freedom is never destroyed," but can be excessively conditioned in its exercise. This means that even when corporal liberation is not immediately possible, spiritual liberation is always possible.

In other words, Mary mediates, under Christ and in a more remote way, our temporal and corporal liberation and, in a more proximate and universal way, our spiritual liberation. While the former is not always necessary (we all have to die, which is the supreme liberation from time itself!), the second one is always indispensable for our eternal liberation.

b. Furthermore, Liberation Mariologies will have to show that these two liberations—while always to be distinguished, as we distinguish soul and body—cannot be separated. Vatican II has enunciated the decisive principle in this connection: "In fulfilling the mandate she has received from her divine Founder to proclaim the mystery of salvation to all men . . . the Church must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the earthly part of it, *insofar as (quatenus)* that has bearing on his heavenly calling" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, Prologue).

This means that the Church has decisively rejected a purely spiritual understanding of the mission of Christ and of His Church, whose Mother is Mary. Messianism is inseparably temporal and

spiritual. Thus, Mary is concerned not only with our eternal happiness, but also with our temporal destiny in view of (*insofar as it concerns*) our eternal salvation.

This clearly means that all orthodox Liberation Mariologies are called to share the following convictions: Mary distinguishes, in her beatific vision, our temporal and our spiritual liberations, without separating them one from the other; she unites them in her intercession; and—as her Son did in the Gospels—Mary subordinates her concern for our earthly liberation to her major preoccupation: our physical and spiritual salvation in eternity.

In other words, there is a necessary hierarchy of truths inside the fundamental unity of our liberation. Mary seeks first, in us and for us, the Kingdom of God and its justice. Moreover, she is disposed to give us everything that would really, in the eyes of her Son, lead us to eternal life: “They have no more wine.”

We can see a reflection of these fundamental options of Jesus and Mary in this lapidary sentence of Aquinas: “God gives just men so much in the way of *temporal goods and evils* as will profit them on the way to eternal life” (*Summa Theol.*, I.II.114.10). At the same time, we believe that Mary helps us to see her Son Jesus—still hungry, still thirsty, still naked, still isolated in so many human beings—and that she wants to alleviate, through us, His continuing Passion.

c. Finally, let us recapitulate the beautiful truths we have here considered, thanks to Latin American Liberation Mariologies, in the following prayer:

Immaculate Virgin Mary, we recognize in you the Mother of a God
Who wanted to share our poverty and our weakness.

You are, after Jesus, the major sign and sacrament of the motherly mercy
of God our Father towards the Poor and the Suffering.

We thank you, our Sister and Mother, for having accepted to suffer
poverty, calumnies, flight, exile, so as to save us. We thank you for hav-
ing been, in our name, faithful to Jesus up to His ignominious and
glorious death on the Cross.

We recognize that, without your help and intercession, we cannot lovingly and supernaturally fight against injustices and divisions.

We are happy to see in your triumphant Assumption a heavenly reward of your whole earthly existence of justice and of courageous struggle against injustices.

Virgin Mother, spiritually liberated by your eternal Son from the moment of your Immaculate Conception, corporally liberated mainly in your Assumption, we confess and proclaim your prayerful power over the rich and powerful. Without forgetting that each one of us is in some way rich and powerful, we beg you to convert the rich and the powerful, through the poor and the lowly, to a loving option for these poor and lowly ones, especially in the context of your Latin American shrines.

Remembering also that the rich are often the poorest among the poor, we consecrate ourselves to your commitment for the poor and place ourselves at the disposal of the option of your Immaculate Heart for the lowly. Amen.

BERTRAND de MARGERIE, S.J.
Paris, France