

Attending to the Needs of the World Because of the Recognition of Divinity Incarnate: A Response to Gustavo Gutiérrez's "Faith as Freedom"

Theology must be less interested in setting boundaries of belonging and more interested in attending to the needs of the world because of the recognition of divinity incarnate. This statement may seem lofty; it is, however, how I imagine a summary of Gustavo Gutiérrez's article "Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Futures" nearly fifty years later. In response to this wisely written article, I will focus upon three major areas. First, attention will be paid to the impactful theological contributions in the article, which seem ever more timely and relevant today. Second, the shortcoming on Gutiérrez's part regarding the role of women as well as using the nation-state as the central political framework will be raised. Third, an analysis of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the first session will tease out connections to Gutiérrez's thought today.

Impactful Theological Contributions

Gutiérrez writes from a Peruvian context and includes broader Latin American perspectives, especially those of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM, hereafter). He challenges Christian thinking to be focused within the world. He places himself within the work of Bloch, Moltmann, Metz, and Pannenberg to focus on the "implications of eschatology and hope for political life," on questions of freedom,⁴⁹ not to create a new theological discipline. In other words, liberation exists where a deprivatization of faith life raises the question of journey within history. Therefore, a better understanding must exist among faith, life, and social practice.

Gutiérrez departs from these thinkers and argues that theology needs to attend to the nonperson rather than the nonbeliever as numerous theologians working in the realm of political theology focused at the time. For Gutiérrez, the nonperson does not have an individualistic understanding. Instead, the nonperson is [he] "who is not recognized as such by the existing social order: the poor, the exploited, one who is systematically deprived of being a person, one who scarcely knows that he or she is a person. The non-person questions before anything else, not our religious world, but our *economic, social, political, and cultural world*..."⁵⁰ For Gutiérrez, the focus of thinking with the

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 31.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 43.

church is from those who have been purposefully ignored by social systems toward justice for the world. Gutiérrez draws not only on the current context of CELAM's Medellín but also of the Valladolid debate of the mid-sixteenth century.⁵¹

Gutiérrez articulated these changes, but Christian base communities have lived them for years, maybe since the early church, the French Revolution, or the conquest and colonization of the American continents. Thinking from the categories of systematic theology, the focus of theological thinking is then based in this world. The major categories of systematic theology greatly shift in focus from a metaphysical place to a historical, physical, and contextual place. To think with Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians means that the areas of eschatology, Christology, soteriology, and sin shift in foci. Very briefly, eschatology is no longer about a hypothetical end time or an individual after-life, eschatology becomes about dreaming of future possibilities and creating the systems and abilities for living into those futures on Earth. Christology shifts from an individual spiritual relationship with Jesus to acknowledging an incarnational God who continues to live, suffer, die, and thrive in one another. Gutiérrez places Christianity in general and Catholicism specifically as an incarnational faith.⁵² To see Christianity as incarnational via Gutiérrez's thought raises questions of the claim made by *Lumen Gentium* of the vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationship with humans/creation.⁵³ If we think of Christianity as an incarnational faith, then God among us and our own incarnations mean that union with God is union with humanity/creation.⁵⁴ The vertical and horizontal are much more pieces of relational movement in many directions,⁵⁵ which relates to his use of the term "radical." Faith moves to an incarnational perspective. Concern for one's relationship with God and one's God-talk (theology) directly connects to concern for life and the creation of systems that help support life. Soteriology then becomes concerned with salvation based on salvation within the historical realm in a socio-sacramental manner. Gutiérrez claims, "Faith, being an acceptance of and response to the Father's love, penetrates to the last root of social injustice: sin, the break in our friendship with God and in our fraternity

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 43.

⁵² Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 31, 34, 39, 57.

⁵³ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 31, 34, 39, 57.

⁵⁴ See Neomi De Anda, "Cristologia Encarnada," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Latinox Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín, 2nd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2023), 162–81.

⁵⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

with humans.”⁵⁶ This connection between the relationship between friendship with God and fraternity with humans presents another point in the complexification of *Lumen Gentium*’s understanding of the horizontal relationship with God and vertical relationship with one another as humans. For Gutiérrez, all sin is social sin because it is a break in that friendship that cannot be separated between the horizontal and the vertical. These few lines summarize Gutiérrez’s theological perspective well through the lens of sin:

[Sin is found] in the socio-political analyses of historical realities. Sin is found in the refusal to accept another as a brother or sister, in oppressive structures built up for the benefit of a few, in the despoliation of peoples, races, cultures, and social classes. Sin is basically an alienation, and as such, it cannot be found floating in the air, but is found in concrete historical situations, in individual and specific alienations.⁵⁷

Within this discussion of sin, one finds echoes of CELAM’s Medellín document in that sin is social and at the root of the creation of injustices.⁵⁸ Gutiérrez then offers “radical liberation” as the remedy for sin. Gutiérrez’s use of the particular to address the whole is core to the use of the word “radical” in this phrase. Radical in a number of disciplines means root. Radical liberation then means finding the root causes of sin toward liberation from sinful relational structures.

Shortcomings

Gutiérrez’s writings in “Faith as Freedom” are still extremely applicable today. As a way of transitioning between significant and lasting theological contributions from this article and implications for Gutiérrez’s work in the current context, particularly from the lenses of global climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Synod on Synodality, I turn to two major topics of shortcoming in Gutiérrez’s article: on the centrality of the nation-state and on women.

Gutiérrez frames his social understanding within the focus of the nation-state and liberation within this nation-state framework where some countries exist as wealthy countries and other countries exist as poor countries.⁵⁹ He does give a nod to the complexities of the nation-state boundary model when

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 48.

⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 48–49.

⁵⁸ II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, Documentos Finales de Medellín, part 2, §1.

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 29, 33, 37.

he calls for a need for voices from various continents as well as marginalized in “developed countries.”⁶⁰ The nebulous relationship of nation-states and the political borders of countries, however, have always been in flux, and the understanding of the social fabric via capitalism, trade agreements, communication, and migrations seems more nebulous than in the past. So, Gutiérrez’s framework of rich and poor nations reveals shortcomings. In 1973, the international narrative of wealthy and poor nations may have been strong. Work in decolonial studies has raised questions, though, about the simplicity of these categorizations based upon capitalist endeavors from the sixteenth century between Europe and America. Today, there are “more Facebook users in the world than citizens of any country, or even adherents of any religion.”⁶¹ The basis of the nation-state and the divide between rich and poor countries has far more complexities with both current trade agreements and the movement of currency and peoples, even digitally, in the current age.⁶² Some argue that international human rights cooperative agencies with more teeth are necessary to address the places of broken social structures, read sinfulness via Gutiérrez.

A second point of limitation in Gutiérrez’s thought is the topic of women. Although I am not the first to point out that Gutiérrez misses significant engagement with the scholarship of women in his work, I find this point important to keep raising because groundbreaking scholars often write as though few women have written on important and significant topics. Gutiérrez does write in a gender binary⁶³ and mentions women.⁶⁴ However, because women scholars are missing from the theological frameworks and history presented by Gutiérrez, women are understood as absent from the history of thought, including theological thought. Gutiérrez is not the only writer to commit this sin of omission. Nearly fifty years after the publication of this article, many books, articles, and syllabi still continue to omit women and nonbinary peoples from the history of scholarship, including theology. The writings of church mothers, women doctors of the church, and women and queer theologians must be included in theological thought. This lacuna is no longer acceptable. To give just one example, multiple women have written within the last fifty years about incarnational Christologies.⁶⁵ The argument could be made

⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 33.

⁶¹ Nathan Schneider, *Everything for Everyone: Radical Tradition That Is Shaping the Next Economy* (New York: Nation Books, 2018), 219.

⁶² Schneider, *Everything for Everyone*.

⁶³ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 36.

⁶⁴ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 37.

⁶⁵ For more specifics see Neomi De Anda, “Cristologia Encarnada.”

that Sor María Anna Águeda de San Ignacio and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz both wrote from an incarnational Christological lens. Queer scholars have questioned and critiqued the Christological project in general.⁶⁶

Gutiérrez's article not only misses historical women thinkers, church mothers, and women doctors of the church, it also silences a very strong woman's voice in Christianity, especially Catholicism. The article uses the Magnificat as a way to address the preferential option for the poor.⁶⁷ The way Gutiérrez writes about the Magnificat omits the acknowledgement that Mary speaks the words to Elizabeth. Instead, the article lifts the Magnificat as if the author of the Gospel of Luke or any other figure in this Gospel could have been thinking and speaking these words. The omission of Mary's presence and agency highlights the omission and silencing of women. The omission of women's scholarship and the omission of attribution of the Magnificat to Mary in Gutiérrez's article from fifty years ago gives an interesting entry into connections between images and the theology of Mary used today and the theology about women in Catholicism today. This last point will be picked up later in this response under the section of the connection between Mary feeding Jesus and the work of the church being one that feeds.

Gutiérrez's nods to the Latin American Bishops Conference's Medellín document provide a base for a documental genealogy that is now influencing the thinking of the entire Catholic Church for the Synod on Synodality. In this article, Gutiérrez turns to the writings from the Medellín gathering of CELAM.⁶⁸ Gutiérrez is not writing out of a vacuum in establishing the difference of theological focus away from the nonbeliever to the nonperson.⁶⁹ It is no coincidence that a theological focus on the "nonperson" can be seen in papal documents now as well as in multiple undercurrents of the Synod on Synodality. Just as Gutiérrez in "Faith as Freedom" places himself in the conversation with CELAM, his writings belong to a long trajectory influencing Catholic theology today. Rooted in relationships between humans and God and humans with one another, the writings of CELAM continued to carry the

⁶⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Sharon Jessop, "How Modernity's Futurism Puts Children in the Front Line," *Childhood* 25, no. 4 (June 28, 2018): 443–57; Danika Medak-Saltzman, "Coming to You from the Indigenous Future: Native Women, Speculative Film Shorts, and the Art of the Possible," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 139–71; Kaelyn Danielle Rodriguez, *Afro-Latinx Futurism: A History of Black and Brown Arts from 1781–2018*, (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020).

⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 41.

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom," 29.

⁶⁹ II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, Documentos Finales de Medellín, introduction, §6.

themes that Gutiérrez builds upon in this article. Some of these themes include sin, liberation from sin as sibling justice, and Pueblo de Dios. The Aparecida document further extrapolates these themes. Cardinal Bergoglio chaired the drafting committee for the final Aparecida document. The theologies whose roots can be seen in the Medellín document referenced by Gutiérrez in “Faith as Freedom” are now part of papal documents. The themes of a church in motion as a Pueblo de Dios, the focus upon an incarnational Christianity that unites the human/God relationship, and the human/human relationship where sin is that which breaks these relationships and justice that which binds them tighter are now undercurrents of the Synod on Synodality.

Connections to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Thought Today

Leo Guardado wrote in “50 years later, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s ‘A Theology of Liberation’ remains prophetic”

To be Christian, to be church, the book argued, is to live permanently a process of liberation whose referent is always the mystery of God made flesh, who in radical freedom chooses what is insignificant for God’s own revelation.⁷⁰

To take Gutiérrez’s thought seriously, the question becomes, How much is Catholic thinking attending to the needs of the world? The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod on Synodality 2023 becomes an important document to entertain this question. Communion, mission, and participation are the three main guideposts for understanding a synodal church according to this working document. Communion that radiates is named as the first of three guideposts for a synodal church in this *Instrumentum Laboris*. The document places communion within a Trinitarian theological realm of a never-exhausted building of the Pueblo de Dios, which resonated with Gutiérrez’s thought as well as the Medellín and Aparecida documents.⁷¹ Unlike Gutiérrez’s thought of unifying the relationship with God and the sibling relationship with humans, the *Instrumentum Laboris* keeps the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *Lumen Gentium* while bringing them together “in a strong eschatological dynamism.”⁷² The following quote connects communion to liturgy,

⁷⁰ Leo Guardado, “50 years later, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s ‘A Theology of Liberation’ remains prophetic,” *America Magazine*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/08/17/theology-liberation-gustavo-Gutiérrez-245850>.

⁷¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session, §46, https://www.usccb.org/resources/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf. References to this document hereafter referred to as *Synod*.

⁷² *Synod*, §46.

especially eucharistic liturgy: “First and foremost, it is through shared liturgical action, and in particular the Eucharistic celebration, that the Church experiences radical unity, expressed in the same prayer but in a diversity of languages and rites: a fundamental point in a synodal key.”⁷³

Instead of turning to liturgy in paragraph 47, I wish this document would have made the connection between a communion that radiates as the source of mystery in the daily life of humans who need to eat to survive and the source of mystery in the liturgy.⁷⁴ Perhaps it could have made a statement to the effect that communion is best understood as a gift of the triune God that gleams its sacramentality because eating is a common and essential part of human existence. Here I turn to Gutiérrez’s words on “Theology from and on the Praxis”:

Theology, in this context, will be a critical reflection from and on the historical praxis confronted with the Word of the Lord lived and accepted in faith; this faith comes to us through the multiple, and at times ambiguous, historical mediations which we make and discover every day. . . The understanding of the faith will proceed from . . . a real and effective solidarity with discriminated races, despised cultures and exploited classes . . . flows from a commitment to create a just and fraternal society, and to contribute to making it more meaningful, radical and universal.⁷⁵

The Synod on Synodality emphasizes a people of God/Pueblo de Dios, which accompanies one another. The guidepost of communion that radiates described etymologically emphasizes the following theological conceptualizations. “Com” points to a desire for coming together, something common to all, and *koine*—to feel at home. “Munis” adds a sense of public service that acts to move and change communities. “Radiates” connects to the word “radius,” which also may mean root, and connects to “radical” as used by Gutiérrez. Communion that radiates then looks for a coming together of all and a place that feels at home. It stems from a root or multiple roots outwardly. For Gutiérrez, the notion of radical is also tied to the root of sin. Therefore, “radical” emphasizes the need to change structures away from sin (with sin read as the breaking of relationships with God and humanity and deeming some nonhuman). A community that radiates emphasizes a movement from a core coming together for something that is common to feeling like home for all.

⁷³ *Synod*, §47.

⁷⁴ *Synod*, §20, 40, 59, 60.

⁷⁵ Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom,” 47.

Why would a connection to eating and global hunger be important in the *Instrumentum Laboris*? Theology from praxis connects with the particularity of daily life. That particularity exemplifies the sacred within each moment, especially beginning from those places and moments where human lives have been deemed disposable. Those living with hunger around the world are among those lives who have been judged, to use Gutiérrez's term, nonhuman and have been designated for death.⁷⁶

The following points provide support for this conviction of the need to connect the centrality of eucharistic liturgy with world hunger. First, the Eucharist is set as an institution because Jesus used food to connect to humans. Humans must eat to survive. This sacramental connection could be an incredible asset to the Catholic Church when linked to the daily need for food. The church connects humans with God as we learn of Jesus doing in the gospels through daily life. The Christian scriptural stories of the Last Supper, wedding feast at Cana, loaves and fishes, the Beatitudes—they all include food. Jesus connects himself to food because of a profound mystery based upon something so essential for much of life, not only human life. Human survival, however, based upon food insecurity has become bleaker in recent history. According to *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)* report, "The challenges to ending hunger, food insecurity and all forms of malnutrition keep growing. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the fragilities in our agrifood systems and the inequalities in our societies, driving further increases in world hunger and severe food insecurity... This report repeatedly highlights the intensification of these major drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition: conflict, climate extremes and economic shocks, combined with growing inequalities."⁷⁷

Second and returning to the earlier point of women missing from Gutiérrez's thought, as well as so much other Catholic theology, women are disparately impacted by hunger. According to the same SOFI report, maternal anemia continues to be alarming.⁷⁸ Mobilizing efforts to share the care and stop toxic masculinity are yielding impacts around the world, but the majority of childcare still remains the work of women. Therefore, the connection between global hunger and women and children is important. According to

⁷⁶ Neomi De Anda, "Together en la lucha," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 21, no. 2 (2019): 1–7.

⁷⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)*, 2022, vi, https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000140990/download/?_ga=2.92043354.1198005303.169480315-44550720.1692197228. Hereafter referred to as SOFI.

⁷⁸ SOFI, vi.

the World Health Organization, “an estimated 45 million children under the age of five were suffering from wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition, which increases children’s risk of death by up to 12 times.”⁷⁹ Also, 188 million children lack essential nutrients in their diets—malnutrition that leads to both stunted growth as well as too much weight.⁸⁰

Third, the Synod on Synodality has allowed space for wounds of the Catholic Church to be more overtly exposed. The *Instrumentum Laboris* reports:

The desire to offer genuine welcome is a sentiment expressed by synod participants across diverse contexts:

- a) the final documents of the Continental Assemblies often mention those who do not feel accepted in the Church, such as the divorced and remarried, people in polygamous marriages, or LGBTQ+ Catholics;
- b) they also note how racial, tribal, ethnic, class or caste-based discrimination, also present in the People of God, leads some to feel less important or welcome in the community;
- c) there are widespread reports of a variety of practical and cultural barriers that exclude persons with disabilities, which must be overcome;
- d) concern also emerges that the poorest to whom the Good News is primarily addressed are too often on the margins of Christian communities (for example, migrants and refugees, street children, homeless persons, victims of human trafficking, and others);
- e) the documents of the Continental Assemblies note that it is necessary to maintain the link between synodal conversion and care for survivors of abuse and those marginalised within the Church. The Continental Assemblies place great emphasis on learning to exercise justice as a form of care for those who have been wounded by members of the Church, especially victims and survivors of all forms of abuse.
- f) listening to the most neglected voices is identified as the way to grow in the love and justice to which the Gospel calls us.⁸¹

Healing of wounds is an important focus for the Catholic Church today. Francis’s image of the church as a field hospital has become famous. He states “that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and

⁷⁹ World Health Organization “UN Report: Global hunger numbers rose to as many as 828 million in 2021,” <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-07-2022-un-report-global-hunger-numbers-rose-to-as-many-as-828-million-in-2021>.

⁸⁰ SOFI, vi.

⁸¹ *Synod*, B 1.2, 29.

to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle . . . You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . . And you have to start from the ground up.”⁸² In the current state of the world, the increase of global hunger should raise extreme concern for an ecclesial body that centers its liturgical action around eating, consuming, and being nourished by unleavened bread turned Body of Christ. Furthermore, when humans cannot physically eat due to difference in ability, medical professionals quickly respond with solutions. So too, should the Catholic Church respond to make the connection between the extreme rise in global hunger and the rise of those who feel less connection with the Catholic Church due to its focus on eucharistic liturgy and taking of the Eucharist as central to Catholic life.

Finally, Jesus needed to eat. Summarizing the kenotic thought of Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, God could have chosen any way to enter the world. God chose to enter the world as a vulnerable child. God emptied God’s self in the person of Jesus to be filled with the milk of a woman, Mary.⁸³ God chose to need to eat like humans need to eat. The long devotional tradition to nursing Madonnas honors this very notion. The Capilla de Nuestra Señora de Belén in Iglesia San José de Viejo San Juan, Puerto Rico, the second oldest church of the American continents, holds an image of Nuestra Señora de Belén as a nursing Madonna just above the tabernacle. The connection between Jesus’s need to eat and Jesus being eucharistic source and sacrament exists daily in this church building. The connection between world hunger and eucharistic liturgy pulls together one simple but very important way of attending to those whom Gutiérrez names as nonpersons and with whom the Catholic Church needs to contend more directly in deep theological understanding between the daily historical life of people and the mystery that is Divinity Incarnate.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* makes an interesting connection between the work of the church and the needs of the world in the following paragraph:

To the intercession of these sisters and brothers, who are already living the full communion of saints (cf. LG 50), and especially to that of she who is first in their ranks (cf. LG 63), Mary Mother of the Church, we entrust the work of the Assembly and the continuation of our commitment to a synodal Church. We ask that the Assembly be a time of outpouring of the Spirit,

⁸² Antonio Spadaro, Interview with Pope Francis, August 19, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

⁸³ Neomi De Anda, “A Woman’s Leadership in Seventeenth Century Mexico,” in *Daughters of Wisdom*, ed. Ahida Pilarski (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 48.

but even more that grace accompanies us when the time comes to put its fruits into action in the daily life of Christian communities throughout the world.⁸⁴

This paragraph connects Mary as the first among the communion of saints with those fully living in the communion of saints with the work of the church. It also blurs the vertical and horizontal notions of *Lumen Gentium* for a connection between those fully living the communion of saints and the outpouring of the Spirit and the desire of the work. The word “fruits” makes the connections among the human need for food, the work of the Spirit, the intercession of Mary, and the work of the daily life of Christian communities. The other connection to be made here is the dating of the document on the twenty-ninth of May of the year two thousand twenty-three, the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church. This title is changed from the title given in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 8 of The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the church. In the latter title, the connection is made between Mary as Mother of Jesus, among whose work it was to feed Jesus and to feed the church and the world. In the former title, the one used in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, a stronger connection could exist between the one who attends to Jesus and the one who attends to the church; just as a stronger connection could exist between the human need for food and the eucharistic liturgy.

Gutiérrez’s thought reminds readers to begin within the world and with those made nonhuman by human created systems. Taking Gutiérrez and other Latin American thinkers seriously means attending to the wounds of the world today. Global hunger is such a place and should at least have a mention in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on Synodality as a way for the Catholic Church to show its efforts to be relevant for the world, not only for those who are able to meet all of the strictures of fully participating in eucharistic celebration. The fine understanding of Gutiérrez’s self-situation in the Latin American Bishops Conference continues to provide a path for the people of God to journey in this world with freedom in the act of faith in deep and messy relationship with God and humanity.

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⁸⁴ *Synod*, §8.