

The Liberation of God's Children

Advent Penance Service

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Over the course of the past year, we have been exploring our three guiding principles at St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School. Last Advent, we talked about justice in our Penance Service entitled, 'Wrapped in the Cloak of Justice.' Last Lent, we talked about reconciliation in our Penance service entitled, 'The Ministry of Reconciliation.' Now we come to our final guiding principle, liberation, in this Penance service entitled, 'The Liberation of God's Children.' As noted previously, the ordering is important. We need justice in order to set the conditions for reconciliation, and we need reconciliation to bring people together before we have liberation. Liberation is our ultimate goal. Admittedly, we may not know much about it as Catholics and as Americans because we have so few role models of what it looks like.

This evening, modeling ourselves off of our two previous Penance Services, I have 8 points or contours about liberation to guide our reflections and help us better understand its meaning. Liberation is:

1) Patterned on the Exodus Story

In the Exodus Story from the Old Testament, God heard the cries of the enslaved people and sent Moses to Pharaoh to demand their release. It took 10 plagues and plenty of negotiation to finally escape slavery, but the people of God finally did it when they marched through the Red Sea on dry land. This story, which is so central to the Jewish people and part of our Easter Vigil liturgy each year has also become central to every other liberation movement in history, including the civil rights movement in recent times.

Without an appreciation of the Exodus story, we tend to over-spiritualize our faith by making it something about the next life of heaven or being set free from the slavery of sin. While important, liberation in the Exodus story is much more practical, physical, and even political. As Fr. Richard Rohr put it, "the Exodus was both an inner and an outer journey. If our inner journey does not match and lead to an outer journey of liberation for all, we have no true freedom or salvation. That is what liberation theology is honest enough to point out." (Daily Meditations on June 30, 2025)
Liberation is a story meant for this world, not just the next.

2) Requires first-hand experience.

Liberation cannot be done from a place of comfort, such as a library, university, or behind a desk. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, two Brazilian brothers and priests instrumental in early liberation theology state, liberation is “impossible without at least some contact with the world of the oppressed. Personal contact is necessary if one is to acquire new psychological sensitivity.” (Boff, 23) In other words, if the experience of scandal at injustice is not first-hand and felt in our guts, we are already too far removed from the source. Any work we can do from a distance may be helpful, but it will not be liberation.

In Catholicism, liberation gained momentum in the post-Vatican II Church of Latin America around the issue of poverty. The poor were suffering so much that it was sinful for the Church to remain at a distance. Many Catholics, including priests, nuns, and lay leaders, chose to speak out from a place of solidarity with the poor. Many were tortured and some were even killed for it, including Fr. Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Sr. Maura Clarke, Sr. Ita Ford, Sr. Dorothy Kasel, Jean Donovan, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria and 5 other Jesuits, all in El Salvador. That is how first-hand liberation must be.

3) Struggles

Liberation is often used as another word for freedom, but there is a key difference. One can be born with freedom, but one must work for liberation. This is especially important for us to remember. What we mean by freedom in the United States of America is being #1. This is not at all what liberation is about. Liberation is about the last and the least.

The struggle for liberation is intensified in that it is not just a fight against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities. Put differently, whole systems are in place against liberation. That is why it is neither quickly won nor readily given. As the Cameroonian liberation theologian Fr. Jean-Marc Ela observed in his book *African Cry*, "one thing is certain: countries with distortions between social classes become furnaces of repression and institutional violence." (Ela, 67) Repression and institutional violence are the signs of systems, powers, and principalities unwilling to change or give up control. Liberation will always be a struggle.

4) Favors orthopraxy over orthodoxy

Orthodoxy means right teaching, focusing on correct doctrines and dogmas. For some Catholics, this is the litmus test on whether one is faithful to the Catholic Church or not.

Liberationists, while often accused of being heretics, are not against right teachings; it's just not their primary focus. Their primary focus is on orthopraxy, which means right practice. Our actions are more important than our words. It is worth noting that the Portuguese word for 'liberation' (much of Liberation Theology is in Portuguese due to taking place in Brazil) is the combination of the words 'free action.' It literally has the word action in the name!

To be clear, orthopraxy still does definitely believe in Scripture and Tradition. As the Jesuit theologian Roger Haight explains in his book *Jesus, Symbol of God*, "the liberationist intention reaches back into a history, not to remain there, but to circle back to the present and bring Jesus into relation with the present day world." (Haight, 378) Or, in the words of the Boff brothers, "the important thing is not so much interpreting the text of the scriptures as interpreting life according to the Scriptures." (Boff, 34) Both of these theological references show us that liberation learns from Scripture and Tradition, but instead of going backward strives to apply them to the present moment. Orthodoxy can become dated rather quickly; orthopraxy is always current.

5) Moves from symptoms to the root causes

As Catholics, we have many great examples of charity. Charity reaches out to those in need to get them through emergency situations. In his latest exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo

said that we should never downplay the importance of doing charity through almsgiving. At the same time, liberation asks not only what we can do to help those in need to get through emergency situations, but also why they are in such need in the first place. As the Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camera once remarked, 'when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.' Aid or relief only deal with the symptoms. We need to not be afraid of getting to the root causes.

One example of looking beyond the symptoms to the root causes of injustice is poverty in the Third World countries. Looking only at symptoms, we would say that it is a sad situation and that wealthier nations should do charity to help them. But looking to the root causes, history tells us a different story. The Boff brothers reveal an uncomfortable truth when they write, "the poverty of the third world countries was the price to be paid for the first world to be able to enjoy the fruits of overabundance. (68) In other words, there is so much poverty in the third world at least partly because of the greed of the first world. Charitable giving can cover over this fact, but cannot hide this truth. Even though it hurts to hear, we need to be willing to look at root causes more than symptoms, even when it implicates us.

6) Moves from the peripheries to the center

Being called a liberationist has not been seen as a compliment in the Roman Catholic Church, even though the movement is very catholic in its origins and has largely been sustained by priests and nuns. Even until recent times, the canonization of St. Archbishop Oscar Romero has been a cause for disagreement within the Church and it took nearly 40 years to declare him a saint. Those against him thought he abandoned the dignity of his ecclesial office and they continue to think that those with power- political or religious- should remain at the center.

Beginning shortly after his election to the papacy in 2013, Pope Francis began speaking about going to the peripheries. As a Latin American bishop, he knew what he was referring to, but it took the universal Church a while to fully understand. Without getting into the controversies surrounding liberation theology, he was affirming one of its basic principles – go to the margins. People on the margins usually understand the good news better because they so often receive bad news. Liberation starts at the grassroots and moves towards the center, not the other way around.

7) Frees both oppressed and oppressor

This point is the decisive Christian factor to liberation that makes us unique. From the perspective of justice alone, the offended need to be set free and the offenders punished. But liberation for a Christian is not ultimately a win/lose situation. Someone doesn't have to lose for liberation to occur. In fact, since every person has human dignity, Christian liberation seeks to raise up all people to a new hope.

One of the greatest practitioners of Christian liberation in recent times was Dr. Martin Luther King. King was firm in demanding justice and an expert in creating dramas that showed the scandals of injustices present in our country. At the same time, he always insisted on showing respect towards those who were oppressing others. To give two examples:

1. Dr. King was involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which lasted over 1 year. That year was full of tension, hurt feelings, discriminatory practices, and hatred. The day that the boycott achieved its purpose, Dr. King was the first one on a bus and told his people "I would be terribly disappointed if any of you go back to the buses bragging. Let's go back to the buses in all humility in with gratitude to a mighty God for making this decision possible." (Martin Luther King Jr on Leadership, 16)

2. In 1962, Dr. King got involved in the segregation issues in Birmingham. As part of the training in non-violence for 250 volunteers, he made them take a Pledge that included 10 commandments. The second commandment stated this: “remember always that the nonviolent in Birmingham seek justice and reconciliation – not victory.” (Martin Luther King Jr on Leadership, 122)

At St. Josephine Bakhita Parish, we, too, seek a justice and reconciliation (our first two Guiding Principles) that does not lead to victory in which some win and other lose. We seek justice and reconciliation that leads to liberation, our third guiding principle in which everyone wins. As one who also loved her oppressors, St. Josephine Bakhita herself would agree with this vision.

8) Is the Kingdom of God

It is interesting to note that the original Liberation theologians, who have always been criticized for being too political and this worldly, always emphasized the kingdom of God. For them, they did not only work for the Church, but for the Kingdom. Not all of us understand this difference.

The Kingdom of God is a much broader category than an institution. While it does include the Church, the Church must be humble enough to realize that it doesn't exist for itself. Jesus

himself lived the same way. He rarely pointed to himself and always pointed to the Father and to the Kingdom. To understand liberation, as Fr. Jean-Marc Ela puts it, we “must move beyond the problems of the parish. The church is not defined in terms of clerical questions. It is defined in its dynamic relationship to crucial existential situations in which women and men think, struggle, and dream.” (Ela, 136) In other words, liberation broadens our horizons beyond internal matters of the Church to the ‘joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties’ (Gaudium et Spes, 1) of people. That is why the Boff brothers conclude, “no other theological or biblical concept is as close to the ideal of integral liberation as this concept of the kingdom of God.” (Boff, 52)

Much more could be said about liberation than what has been included in this reflection. Liberation takes many forms and is alive in many diverse marginalized groups across the globe. For all of them that are Christian based, liberation is patterned on the Old Testament Exodus Story, requires first-hand experience, struggles, favors orthopraxy over orthodoxy, moves from symptoms to the root causes, moves from the peripheries to the center, frees both the oppressed and the oppressor, and is the Kingdom of God. Full liberation may never take place in this world, but every time we pray ‘thy kingdom come,’ we are pressing forward in calling for the liberation of God’s children.

Citations

- Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*
- Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*
- Donald T. Phillips, *Martin Luther King, Jr. On Leadership*
- Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*