

CHAPTER 4

Karl Marx in a cassock?

Liberation theology in Brazil in the 1980s

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Introduction

The struggle for religious and political spaces within the Catholic Church emerged with considerable force in Brazil in the 1980s. We identify the relationship of forces between the Vatican, as the center of papal power, and the liberation theologians, represented by the Franciscan friar Leonardo Boff and his writings in the 1981 work Church: Charism and Power, as a watershed in this moment. More than a theological debate, we analyze this context as a political dispute between conservative and progressive forces[1] within a Church experiencing a period of change. We also note that the main historical reflection of this dialogue was the Basic Ecclesial Communities, the CEBs. These communities resignified the politics of Catholic social action. In a world in which dogmas, norms, and moral structures, shaken by wars and by the euphoria of material progress, shared space with subjective experiences, scientific experiments, and existentialism, the formalism of the catechetical action of the conquering Church, heir to the Council of Trent (1545-1563), faced great difficulties and needed an opening to listen to difference, avoiding the risk of losing itself amid this whirlwind of change.

[1] With regard to the political aspect, conservatism is always linked to an antagonism toward the historical dynamic of progressivism. However, although concepts are not immune to historical change, we can explain, based on the Dictionary of Politics, volume I, by Bobbio, Matteucci, and Pasquino (1998, p. 245-246), that while progressivism is characterized by making human history "an open and ascending process, based on a revolutionary anthropology", in which the individual is the active nucleus and political power is a limit to be overcome in order to reach human happiness, conservatism, "on the contrary, starting from the awareness of the limits inherent to human beings, distant and distancing but always present limits, recognizes in power, in political coercion, an important and necessary factor in society, intimately linked to human finitude". In this reading of the two concepts, we can state that in the twentieth century there still persists a conservatism which, having recovered its original inspiration, continues to be a reflection on the freedom-limit relation in human beings and a critique of the secular finalism of the idea of progress.

The Second Vatican Council and catholic aggiornamento

According to Oscar Beozzo (2005, p. 44-45), at the closing of the Second Vatican Council, on the morning of December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI of Rome and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople sealed, through joint celebrations, paths toward reconciliation, overcoming a centuries-old rupture consummated in 1054. In addition to taking major steps to overcome this rupture with the Eastern Church, this council approached Protestants, seeking to rebuild bridges that had been in ruins since the sixteenth century. Further, in the readings of Oscar Beozzo, who lived through this movement in Rome, we can highlight the colossal importance of this council for the Catholic Church in Brazil, reorganizing it internally and "inserting it into a complex fabric of relations with the other churches throughout the world, especially in Latin America, and redefining its relations with the Roman center" (Beozzo, 2005, p. 54). In this way, the ecumenical opening of the Catholic Church in modernity[2] had its major

[2] The ecumenical council initiated by John XXIII is recognized as an event of great importance for changes in the Catholic Church in the second half of the twentieth century. From January 25, 1959, the Pope announced that there would be a broad opening for the participation of all those who desired the aggiornamento of the

milestone in the brief pontificate of John XXIII (1958-1963). This pontificate moved Roman Catholicism not only toward dialogue with Orthodox and Protestant Christians, but also led the Council to note, or at least to take more seriously, the diversity of Christian churches in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. According to José Oscar Beozzo (2006, p. 29), during the First Vatican Council (1870) "there was no bishop born in mission territories, with the exception of the patriarchs and prelates of the Near East and the Middle East".

For Beozzo (2005), before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Roman Church was confined to Latin Europe and treated the Eastern Churches as "subordinate churches". He states that the Orthodox were subjected to "intense pressure to become Latinized" and that the churches of Asia, Africa, and America felt disrespected in their cultural diversity. The novelty introduced by the pontificate of John XXIII, still according to José Oscar Beozzo, was the opening to dialogue with other Christian churches without the condemnation typical of the Counter-Reformation (p. 47). The Church of the Council of Trent was marked by what Eduardo Hoornaert (1984, p. 32-34) called "warrior Catholicism". It was a time when the "holy war", inherited from the crusades against Muslims and Protestants, made the Roman Church much more conquering than missionary. This Catholic colonizing vision sought its foundation in interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. For the colonizers, mainly Iberians, the nation that would never be destroyed and would conquer other nations was made up of a Catholic people. This nation would endure forever, according to biblical interpretations drawn from the prophecies of the book of Daniel[3]. The Second Vatican Council of John XXIII was convened in 1959 amid the social convulsions of the contemporary world in order to give Roman Catholicism a new face: a more smiling, flexible face, open to dialogue and willing to erase the image of an oppressive and bloody medieval Church. Many Catholic clerics even believe that this change was a divine intervention (Camacho, 1995, p. 181).

Although John XXIII gained many allies through his charisma, progressive ideas were unable to echo with much freedom in the Vatican's spaces of power for long and would encounter strong resistance until the pontificate of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013). Shortly after the Council, the Roman Curia, or papal court, having been defeated in its proposals during the Council, "began to undermine the conciliar reforms by adopting an interpretation and regulation of the constitutions, decrees, and declarations" from a more conservative perspective (Beozzo, 2006, p. 45). For Beozzo, there was strong conservative resistance to change, and "the major question concerning the poor entered the agenda with difficulty" (2006, p. 49). One month before the opening

Church. In other words, the objective of the Second Vatican Council was the renewal of the Catholic Church. Many Brazilians were present in the preparation of this council (Beozzo, 2005, p. 128).

[3] Literally, the biblical passage in Daniel 2:44 says: "In the time of these kings, the God of heaven will bring forth a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be conquered by another kingdom; on the contrary, this kingdom will put an end to all the others and will last forever". In contemporary theological interpretation, this kingdom is eschatological, coming from God, from the Messiah Jesus, and not from an earthly kingdom (Bíblia Sagrada, 1998).

of the Council, John XXIII had already said that the great theme was the Church of the poor and that the Church's position before the exploitation of human beings was the central question.

During the Second Vatican Council, the level of discourse was quite aware of the reality of the modern world. The encyclicals of John XXIII — *Mater et magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in terris* (1963)[4] — brought, in their rhetoric, great hope for a renewal of Roman Catholicism. The guiding discussion would therefore be the social question in poor countries.

In John XXIII's discourse, despite the criticism of his opponents, we can see that he was not as naive as they claimed[5]. His discourse suggests that he had a vision of the greater problem confronting the Church: the need for a new order in human relations. Judging by the signs of the times, either the Church renewed itself or it would be doomed to become lost in this period of change. It was necessary to learn from history. In the pope's discourse, the Church genuinely needed a renewal in its relationship with the other. This renewal included abandoning the controlling, persecutory, and condemnatory attitude of that state-centered and legalistic Church, which approached the poor more through charitable works than through a project of struggle against social inequality.

The progressive project, through the struggle of many Catholic clerics, resisted the conservatives both during the Second Vatican Council and after it. Its best representation was the most militant version of the post-Council period: the Church of Latin America, where Liberation Theology was developed. Many clerics, such as Dom Helder Câmara of Brazil[6], returned from this event intending not to frustrate the new path that Pope John XXIII had opened in order to respond to the aspirations of the world. Through the launching platform constituted by the Second Vatican Council, numerous formative events and debates were held in different regions of Latin America, especially in Brazil, for the implementation of this conciliar project (Delgado, 2003, p. 102). Without allowing the proposals to cool down, and taking advantage of the path opened by the Pope, they

[4] The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church designates the set of writings and messages in letters, encyclicals, exhortations, pronouncements, and declarations "that make up Catholic magisterial thought" regarding the so-called "social question." The social encyclicals of the popes on social issues gained force with Pope Leo XIII in 1891. The two encyclicals cited, Mater et magistra (1961) and Pacem in terris (1963), have a fraternal tone directed toward the construction of peace in the world and the sharing of the goods of progress, calling the world of differences and war to dialogue (CNBB, 2004, p. 84, 49).

[5] According to Thomas Cahill, the announcement of the Council stirred tempers among the cardinals, and even the more liberal ones, such as Cardinal Lercaro, became angry and called the Pope "reckless and impulsive". He even asked: "How does he dare to convene a council after 100 years and only three months after his election?" Others called him inexperienced and an "old boy" who did not realize that he was stirring up a "hornet's nest" (Cahill, 2002, p. 221-222).

[6] Archbishop emeritus of Olinda and Recife, Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara, of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), was one of the most important clerics of the Brazilian Church. He was born in Fortaleza, state of Ceará, on February 7, 1909. He was one of the main organizers of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), created in October 1952, and joined the Commission for the Discipline of the Clergy, a preparatory body for the Second Vatican Council. He played a fundamental role in the defense of human rights, especially during the military dictatorship in Brazil. He died on August 27, 1999, in Recife, Pernambuco (CPDOC, 2022).

organized the Second Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín, Colombia (1968)[7]. At that meeting, "some of the issues that had failed to advance at the Council gained substance and response" (Beozzo, 2006, p. 54). This event brought the problems of Latin America to the surface and guided its methods of analysis by articulating the historical situation of this side "del" world with the Catholic faith.

One response to the pending issues of the Second Vatican Council that Medellín made possible through its Latin American rereading of social problems was the reorganization of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs)[8]. They emerged in Brazil in the 1950s as a religious movement with the characteristics of Christian communities linked to religious and political actions. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Brazilian Catholicism moved closer to popular sectors and to groups seeking social transformations. At a time when social conflicts segmented Brazilian society into more defined groups and interests, there emerged "lay people, priests, and bishops who sought other steps, favoring a broader dialogue with history [...]" (Delgado, 2003, p. 98).

[7] After Medellín (1968), there was also the Third Conference in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. This conference ensured the implementation of the conciliar reforms in Latin America (CNBB, 2004, p. 51-54).

[8] Dom Agnelo Rossi, a bishop from Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s and 1960s, is identified as the main organizer of the CEBs in Brazil. He is considered a "pioneer in the diocesan experience of small Christian communities focused on the binomial of faith and politics, which would later become the basic ecclesial communities (CEBs)" (CPDOC, 2022). These communities, which began their activities in Barra do Piraí, Rio de Janeiro, according to Almir Ribeiro Guimarães (1978, p. 20), were initially formed as a kind of reaction to the advances of other religious denominations in the region.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities and the new way of being church

João Batista Libâneo (2005) says that this rapprochement between the Church and its grassroots, as in the case of Catholic Action[9], before the Second Vatican Council, facilitated the introduction of ideas, theologies, and cultures of modernity within it. Such interaction lies in the nature of the formation of the CEBs. Almir Ribeiro Guimarães, in his research, states that the first records of what came to be called CEBs in Brazil date from 1956, in Barra do Piraí, Rio de Janeiro, in the Diocese of Dom Agnelo Rossi, encouraged by him to combat "the Protestant sects active in the region" and because of the Catholic Church's need for parish priests in many localities (Guimarães, 1978, p. 18). Thus, according to him, the so-called "popular catechists" were born, gathering the people for prayer, worship, and Bible reading.

In Puebla, Mexico, the Third General Conference of CELAM, held from January 27 to February 13, 1979, during the papacy of John Paul II, recognized the importance of the CEBs for Catholic evangelization. For that conference, the Church had become more present in many remote places and hard-to-reach areas for clerics, while also discovering the potentialities, gifts, and ecclesial charisms of lay people (Moreira, 2009, p. 84).

[9] Founded in nineteenth-century Europe, Catholic Action would only become official in Brazil in the 1930s as a school of apostolate and militancy. During this period, tensions arose between right-wing and left-wing forces. It was the arm of the Church hierarchy seeking to exercise social control (Delgado, 2003, p. 101).

Ecclesial activities in the communities developed and created tactics for achieving the Catholic evangelization of a community. This "novelty" of the CEBs refers us to the form of intervention of a Belgian vicar named Joseph Cardjin (Ferreira; Reis, 2007), who worked alongside workers in Brussels in the first half of the twentieth century, linking religious concerns to the social question. Cardjin created the "see-judge-act" method, widely used in Brazil, including by the CEBs of Piauí. For him, the faithful should know reality by identifying the problem (see); make judgments about the situation in which they are inserted based on Christian values (judge); and act to solve the problems (act). On the other hand, many European intellectuals brought to Brazil the debate on the social sciences, which became part of the studies within Brazilian Catholic orders such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits[10]. Thus, intellectuals of great stature emerged in the Brazilian Catholic Church, such as Leonardo Boff, Frei Betto, and Clodovis Boff. Many devoted themselves to investing in the formation of the CEBs, intending to innovate the Church and direct it toward effective action for social transformation. Brazilian Catholic seminaries became seedbeds of ideas, directing Catholic orders toward the communities. Many leaders emerged within the dynamics of these communities. These leaders played a crucial role in struggles through social movements, political parties, and trade unions. On the other hand, the 1980s were years of intense debates between liberation theologians and the Vatican under the papacy of John Paul II. The theological dispute was very tense and reached the point where the pontiff activated the tribunal of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an updated Holy Office.

[10] The French thinkers Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Teilhard de Chardin were important for the discussion of faith-history-science, as well as the relationship between Catholicism and ecumenism. They forged the so-called Nouvelle Théologie. A new way of seeing the Catholic faith in the public sphere was among the concerns of lay thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, who were widely read during this period (Costa, 2007).

Liberation Theology in the dock

In 1984, Alexandre Porro's report in Veja magazine stated that the friar Leonardo Boff got up on Friday at 7 a.m. at the Franciscans' residence in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, and that at 9:30 a Volkswagen Golf GL from the Congregation of the former Holy Office arrived to pick him up. His sister Maria Lina and his brother Clodovis Boff, both also religious, wanted to get into the car, but the prelates who came to collect the friar prevented them. There was a brief argument that ended with the warning in Italian from one of the prelates: "Please, let us keep to what was agreed" (Porro, 1984, p. 98).

September was the month that had been agreed upon for the interrogation at the Vatican. But since the beginning of the year there had already been an exchange of correspondence between Leonardo Boff and the prefect of the Congregation, Joseph Ratzinger. The reason, as we have already reported, was the repercussion of the friar's work Church: Charism and Power, published in 1981. In that work, there are criticisms

of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and indications of the CEBs as the renewal of this Church, where, according to the author, there is liberation of the oppressed and the true celebration of faith and life (Boff, 1994). The Vatican learned of the repercussion of this work through a denunciation letter that reached Ratzinger's hands.

The article in ISTOÉ magazine (1984, p. 34-39) shows that the Franciscan friar was not alone on his inquisitorial via crucis. In addition to his sister Maria Lina and his brother Clodovis Boff, both members of Catholic orders like Boff, as soon as news of the fact spread, nuns, male and female theologians, Protestants, political parties, rural and urban workers, and part of the episcopate in Latin America came to his defense. This fraternal support was related to Leonardo Boff's intense work both in advising the CEBs and in his active participation in academic and ecumenical events.

In the very writing of his work Church: Charism and Power, Leonardo Boff explains this theological choice for the "humiliated majorities":

> The object of theology is God and the God who is revealed, but not only that; it is also all things insofar as they are contemplated in the light of God. This is what St. Thomas Aquinas taught in the Summa Theologica and what the entire theological tradition teaches (cf. S. Theol., I, q. 1, a. 7). This means that theology is also entitled to speak of history, politics, economics, sociology, and whatever else, provided that it speaks in the light of God. I believe I have preserved this theological pertinence with great awareness. In my study How to Do Theology from Captivity and Liberation, I state clearly: "Liberation theology starts decisively from faith. This is its first word; in the act of grasping reality in its iniquity and in the option for the humiliated majorities, the horizon of faith is present, within which the Christian moves vitally" (Boff, 1994, p. 303).

Leonardo Boff's declaration of Liberation Theology's preference for the poor did not greatly disturb conservatives, but the accusation fell mainly on what they saw as the scientific method used to reach these revolutionary conclusions. For Joseph Ratzinger, the reading of Scripture from the perspective of Marxist revolutionary liberation, an accusation he makes against Boff's writings, is essentially political. According to the cardinal, for some people the people even become an "object of faith" in the effort to obtain the social liberation of the "new man" through the destruction of perverse structures. For him, this "materialist anthropology is an illusion", since the source of all injustice is in the "human heart", and perverse structures will only be destroyed through conversion and human solidarity awakened in the sense of personal responsibility (Aquino, 2003, p. 49-50). Ratzinger states that, in the theological interpretation of liberation, the "sacramental and hierarchical structure of the Church" is called into question by being replaced with "ministers of the people" according to the historical revolutionary mission:

> The partisan conception of truth, which manifests itself in the revolutionary praxis of class, corroborates this position. The theologians who do not share the theses of "liberation theology", the hierarchy, and above all the Roman Magisterium are thus discredited a priori, as belonging to the class of the oppressors. Their theology is a class theology. [...] The Church's social doctrine is rejected with disdain. It proceeds, it is claimed, from the illusion of a possible compromise proper to the middle classes, which lack a sense of history. [...] it is in this way that the greatest importance is attributed to the event of the Exodus, as liberation from political slavery (Aquino, 2003, p. 44-46).

For the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the most serious aspect of the new theological interpretation lies in its Marxist essence, which denies, in its exclusively political reading of the Scriptures, the salvific value and the economy of redemption, thereby neutralizing the Christian mystery. For him, the heresy becomes more complete when the sacrament of the Eucharist is treated as a celebration of the people's struggle, wounding the greatest pillar of the Catholic Church and radically denying the "unity of the Church" in Christ (Aquino, 2003, p. 47). With this concern, Joseph Ratzinger states that the Church is not against the liberation of the poor, but in its struggle for justice he assures that

> All those, priests, religious, and lay people, who, listening to the cry for justice, wish to work in evangelization and human promotion, will do so in communion with their bishop and with the Church, each according to the line of his or her specific ecclesial vocation (Aquino, 2003, p. 48).

It is thus understood that the Church continued to ensure that only the Catholic clergy could dispense the grace of Christ, in an effort to control the religiosity of the communities out of fear that it might lose the true meaning of the Gospel. For this reason, there was great care not to abandon the communities to communists and evangelicals, who had already been spreading through Brazil since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the wake of the establishment of the Republic in Brazil. After all, a Church that claims to be universal will seek to involve all communities in its sacred organization, to the detriment of a few chosen ones. It is an "ecumenism" submitted to clerical illumination that, on the other hand, reaffirms the most universalist and centralizing dogma of this institution: the sacrament of the papal order. This medieval tradition, one of the greatest ultramontane[11] achievements of the pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878) through the First Vatican Council (1969), follows the affirmation of the doctrine of the "absolute truth" of the popes, obtained by 533 votes to 2 in that Council (Willison, 1981, p. 289). This doctrine consists of considering the father of the Catholic Church infallible when supported by ecclesial tradition.

Although liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff insisted on demonstrating what they saw as the important role of theological action for a more egalitarian society,

[11] The term ultramontane refers to the development of the Roman Church in the nineteenth century. At that moment, the ideology of papal supremacy was followed as a bond of unity among Catholics throughout the world. The Vatican was the irradiating center of Catholic doctrine. That is, the Catholic expansion that went "beyond the mountains" of Italy was to reach the world through this papal doctrinal centralization (Willison, 1981, p. 287).

many conservatives fought what they called the "perversion of the Christian message" and blamed progressives for it. They maintained that progressives had taken advantage of the opening provided by the Second Vatican Council, in the nobility of John XXIII and Paul VI, whose intention was to use "more appropriate expressions for Christian living in our days", and not to submit Christ's saving message to Marxist revolutionary formulas (Aquino, 2003, p. 79-80).

However, much of the intelligentsia in the 1980s analyzed Liberation Theology as theologically legitimate, although others criticized its methodology and purpose. As a major example, we can cite Frei Clodovis Boff, Leonardo Boff's brother, who accompanied and advised the CEBs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the period of greatest effervescence in the meetings and demonstrations of these communities in Brazil. He became one of the main theologians and philosophers representing progressive ideas in Catholic theology in the 1980s.

The case of Clodovis Boff is emblematic because, although he spent a long time supporting and fighting for the CEBs' "new way of being Church", he would later become the main critic of Liberation Theology and, consequently, stopped assisting the CEBs, claiming that the struggles of these communities had diverted the focus of the Catholic mission, making them function more like an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) than like the Catholic Church. He also began to criticize the communities' direction toward what he saw as Marxist ideology.

To the surprise of many intellectuals of Liberation Theology who had lived alongside Clodovis Boff, he radically changed his position and now maintains that Joseph Ratzinger's criticisms, in the clashes of the 1980s and 1990s, were valid, and that he and his brother Leonardo Boff should have heeded the voice of the cardinal who led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time. In an interview with the newspaper Folha de São Paulo on March 11, 2013, he recalled the discussions with Cardinal Ratzinger and, when asked whether the cardinal had been the greatest enemy of Liberation Theology, he promptly replied:

> That is a caricature. In the two documents he published, Ratzinger defended the essential project of Liberation Theology: commitment to the poor as a commitment of faith. At the same time, he criticized Marxist influence. Incidentally, that is one of the things I also criticize. In the 1986 documents, he points to the primacy of spiritual, perennial liberation over social liberation, which is historical. The hegemonic currents of Liberation Theology preferred not to understand this distinction. This meant that theology often degenerated into ideology (Boff, 2023, p. 164).

In defending the Vatican, at the time under the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005), Clodovis Boff refers to the document Libertatis Conscientia, published in 1986 by the Congregation, in which Ratzinger proposed, through the Church's magisterium, to exhort especially the theologians who were militants of Liberation Theology in Latin America. At the time, the Boff brothers responded to the prefect of

the Congregation with considerable irony, saying that the document used "language that was 30 years out of date[12]".

The reporter Alexandre Gonçalves of Folha de São Paulo, provocatively, insists on asking Clodovis about the hostility between the Vatican and Liberation Theology, questioning him about the inquisitorial proceedings against theologians in the past. But, determined to assume his mea culpa, Clodovis continues to embrace his defense of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and accepts without reservation Joseph Ratzinger's inquisitorial decision against many theologians, even though among those proceedings was that of his brother, who in 1985 was condemned to remain in obsequious silence, a kind of Vatican censorship that prohibits the condemned person from publicly expressing his ideas (Boff, 2023, p. 164). The conflict with the Vatican led Leonardo Boff to resign from the Franciscan order in 1992, when he was again threatened by the Vatican. He abandoned the cassock and declared himself a layman. His phrase "I changed trenches in order to continue the same struggle" became famous. His brother, on the other hand, abandoned the trench and moved to the adversary's side.

In this position in favor of the conservatives, which did not spare even his brother Leonardo Boff, Clodovis shows that he had to make theological choices that contradicted many companions along the way. According to him, during this journey with the ecclesial communities he always viewed Liberation Theology with suspicion. He noticed that the dominant discourse of this social theology always placed faith in Christ in the background. Clodovis maintains that, although he noticed the theological deviations of the theology, he reacted with condescension, hoping that in the process of maturation of the ideas everything would correct itself. But time passed and, according to him, things became more complicated (Boff, 2023, p. 165). For this reason, he decided to "abandon ship".

Rereading the Vatican's criticisms of Liberation Theology in the 1980s and 1990s, Clodovis Boff says that theologians confused what belongs to the "historical man" and what belongs to the "eternal man". For him, this is the great danger for the Catholic Church in contemporary times. For this theologian, this was quite symptomatic in Latin America, because the personal and spiritual centrality of the human being became, in this way of theologizing, a social centrality. He assures us that, over the years, this difference still has not been perceived, and that the Church cannot lose its role as a spiritual force for leading the human being toward eternity. For this reason, he makes a point of clarifying the difference:

> Indeed, while personal questions belong to the "historical man", existential questions belong to the "eternal man". The former are physical and transitory; the latter are metaphysical and recurrent. The "eternal man" is this restless being, ceaselessly seeking meaning, fullness, God.

[12] In this letter, Ratzinger historicizes human freedom and criticizes individualism and collectivism as ways of combating oppression, but at most they create other forms of oppression. He mainly criticizes totalitarianism, a clear reference to the Marxist ideology that, according to the cardinal, influenced Liberation Theology (Boff, 2023, p. 163).

> To say that this is no longer the case, and that today's man is undergoing an "ontological" mutation or that the "human condition" has changed, is great foolishness, as we said above. The human being, from the "caveman" to today's "influencer", is always this poor devil, dealing with his unrest and anxieties, always dissatisfied, capable of the best and the worst. Such is the "existential constant" that throbs at the depths of every person, whatever the historical period in which he lives (Boff, 2023, p. 56).

Clodovis Boff seeks to demonstrate the separation of the material world from the spiritual world in order to criticize historical materialism. Against ontological progressivism, he sets a "constant existential" that, in his analysis, is inherent to every human being. His anthropological analysis presents an ahistorical homo, created by God and uprooted from his spiritual habitat by sin. In his conservative theology, which incorporates much of Cardinal Ratzinger's criticism of Marxism, he criticizes the methodology of Liberation Theology, showing what for him would be a theology limited to the "historical man" and impoverishing spirituality.

Nevertheless, Clodovis Boff states that Liberation Theology's "option for the poor" is theologically grounded in the Bible and in the tradition of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, however, he denounces the place of the poor in this theology (Boff, 2007, p. 1002). He offers sharp criticism of what he sees as a certain anthropocentrism within it. This theologian, living in the time of his repentance, even calls the epistemology of Liberation Theology a "fatal ambiguity". For him, this theology lacks rigor and clarity in its epistemology. Without that foundation, he asserts, it operates through ambiguities that compromise Christian principles.

In the 1980s, when Leonardo Boff and other liberation theologians were being investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Brazilian clergy was divided in its opinions about Liberation Theology, the main theme of ecclesiastical discussions during that period. Although many conservatives saw Marxism as a sociological methodology capable of addressing social problems in a more "broad and demanding" way, they noted difficulties in using this methodology with Christianity. For them, these were two worldviews that, despite having something in common, operated from different perspectives. One encompasses the study of society in its material condition, while the other deals with the soul without class distinctions.

Final considerations

During the 1980s, the voice of Catholic conservatism did not rise only against other religious confessions in an effort to preserve the status of the Vatican Church as the "mother of the churches"; it also made serious criticisms of the new theology that had taken shape in post-John XXIII conciliar Latin America. Liberation Theology, accused of being too political, did not pass the scrutiny of the Catholic clergy and was replaced by another theology that brings liberation closer to the human soul than to social structures: salvation would come from above downward, not the reverse. Catholic

theology coming from the Vatican remained dogmatic and orthodox in maintaining that the seed of evil lies in the human being himself. Its entire theological framework resides in this and in Christocentric liberation. In his renewed position, Clodovis Boff rejects a Liberation Theology that encompasses and remakes the entire Catholic dogmatic framework. Conservatives, through the illumination of the Vatican, defend another theology of liberation that centralizes Christ and combats what they call Marxist theology. Social works are important for conservatives, but the Catholic magisterium remains grounded in dogma and teaches that the Church has a spiritual foundation that cannot be replaced by a "statute of the poor".

However, for theologians of a more progressive liberation, one thing does not exclude the other. For them, Christian commitment leads to political commitment. For CEB militants, this political direction is grounded in the motivation born from concern for one's neighbor. From this communal motivation toward social praxis, the base communities seek to fit community problems into a broader plan: the journey toward the "Definitive Kingdom". Sensitivity toward the excluded is something they seek to achieve in Catholic grassroots contexts. For them, this is a communal exercise that would be impossible in a hierarchical and dominating Church that reflects social inequalities. The liberation of the human being in the CEBs must be complete, in works and in faith; salvation is transmuted into liberating praxis. For progressives, the reading of the Holy Scriptures must respond to the longing of the excluded. Theologically, for the tradition of the Catholic Church, what seems truly strange is to limit the salvific work of Christ to the service of liberation from poverty; for conservatives, this goes against the preaching of the Catholic ecclesiastical magisterium.

Faced with a liberating proposal, many abandoned Catholicism and traditional Protestantism to immerse themselves in this movement of life. From this perspective, human anguish does not cease with a formalist religion that guarantees nothing more than a few symbols of eternity. This formalism often deprives people of direct participation in the meaning of earthly life. The heart and the body are domesticated so that they do not feel indignation, the thirst for justice, and the material and spiritual poverty of the other. Everything becomes merely a question of fulfilling religious duty in a sacramentalized and lifeless space. Temples became the prison of the religious being to the detriment of the movement of life. Here lies the dilemma between what is conservative and what is progressive in the Christian religion: a question of alignment between the movement of life and the longing for eternal life.

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