

- which this remarkable work has been subjected turns on the desirability or otherwise of formulating a single (albeit allegedly 'transcendental' or trans-categorical) method in theology. See A. Nichols OP, 'The Theological Method of Bernard Lonergan and the Counter-Claims of a Theory of Paradigms' in *Angelicum* (forthcoming).
- 14 The pervasiveness of Hegel's influence on contemporary theology, Catholic as well as Protestant, is increasingly recognised. For an early statement, see H. Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes. Eine Einführung in Hegels theologisches Denken als Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Christologie* (Freiburg 1970), pp. 13–37.
- 15 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, op.cit. X. 1.
- 16 *Ib.* VI. 8.
- 17 J. Andrew Kirk, op. cit. p. 35.
- 18 H. Assmann, *Opresión-Liberación: desafío a los cristianos* (Montevideo 1971), p. 141, cited in Kirk, op.cit. pp. 36–7.
- 19 J.L. Segundo, op.cit. Chapter 1.
- 20 E.g. J. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (New York 1974), p. xvii.
- 21 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, op. cit. X. 1.

## **Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Theology of Liberation: A letter to a young theological student<sup>1</sup>**

**Clodovis Boff OSM**

Dear friend

You are beginning to study theology and have already been confronted with the so-called 'theology of liberation'. You tell me you have professors who, in the name of Saint Thomas Aquinas, speak strongly against this trend. You are, yourself, perplexed, not knowing exactly what to think. Would the 'theology of liberation' be an alternative to the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas? You would even tend to agree with those who think so. I will tell you straight away what I think: neither the Thomists nor the anti-Thomists seem to me to be right on this question. The first ones, because they are dogmatic, and the second because they appear to be dilettantes. But I also do not want to appear to be a "recuperative" theologian, who states quickly, without a better analysis: "The 'theology of liberation' is a direct product of Thomism". No, I think the relationship between these two schools is deep, in another sense.

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I want to tell you how I view this relationship. I think it occurs , or can occur, on four levels.

Firstly, Thomas Aquinas (I mean his theology) is a *prerequisite* for the 'theology of liberation'. To my understanding, the 'theology of liberation' only exists, and only can exist, based upon the preceding theological tradition, in which the theology of Thomas Aquinas occupies a recognized and pre-eminent place.

Secondly, Saint Thomas himself as a theologian is linked to the 'theology of liberation'. He was really a 'political theologian' in his time, as the 'theologians of liberation' are today.

Thirdly, Saint Thomas is an *example* for 'theology of liberation' insofar as he confronted the cultural challenge of his time, Aristotelianism, in the interest of faith, and did it in an exemplary manner. His work is a model for the theologians of liberation, confronting their own cultural challenges, especially the challenge of the rationalistic analysis of society.

Fourthly, Thomas Aquinas is linked to 'liberation theology' because he was a *militant* theologian, because his theology was developed in connection with praxis, although this may seem surprising. And this is what a 'liberation theologian' wants to be and to do, today.

I would now like to develop each of these four points.

## I

I have stated that Thomas Aquinas is situated at the base of the 'theology of liberation'. This theology presupposes his existence. You ask me how? I will explain.

The 'theology of liberation' is the precise articulation of what the Christian base communities already practice in what one may call a spontaneous way: the confrontation of concrete practice with the Gospel. Thus, the 'theology of liberation' is a critical reflection about our situation, in the light of the word of God. This theology intends to answer this question: 'What does it mean to be a Christian in a poor and divided world, such as our Latin American world is today?'

However, it is not so simple to link the Bible to the present situation. Between them there is a gap of at least 1900 years. The Bible comes to us after having passed through many hands, many hearts, heads, lives. It was enriched in the course of those years. That is tradition. Even though the texts have remained as they were, they now carry all the resonance of the centuries. So Jesus Christ is not only the Jesus Christ of the Gospels, of Paul, of John, etc; he is also the Jesus Christ of the first great Councils, the Jesus Christ of the Fathers, of the Scholastic theologians, etc. That is why, when we say 'a reflection upon our reality based on the Scriptures', by 'Scriptures' we mean all

the Christian sensibility, based of course on the New Testament, but enriched by the reflection and the lives that came after. So, when we theologize on the Latin American question, we do it with all the resources that the tradition of our faith has accumulated throughout history. We are talking, then, not only about the Holy Scriptures, but the Christian Scriptures.

All this could be stated in a more formal way: the theology of the past is Theology 1 because it directly reflects on the subjects of faith. The 'theology of liberation' belongs to the category of Theology 2, because it discusses the secular and profane problems, but all the time it presupposes Theology 1. Thus, when we say, 'a reflection upon the Latin American question in the light of faith', the 'light of faith' is given primarily by the Scriptures, but made more dense by all the subsequent theological reflection.

At this point I can hear you say: But this is true for any theology, and not only for the theology of Thomas Aquinas. That is true, but Thomas Aquinas represents, in the official perception of the Church, a privileged expression of the Christian faith, even if it is not an exclusive one. I here appeal to the perception of the magisterial Church, without trying to demonstrate it. So if what was said is true for all, it is true in a special sense for Thomas Aquinas.

It is certainly possible to produce a 'theology of liberation' voluntarily leaving aside Saint Thomas. I am convinced, however, that we lose in richness and strength. Thomas Aquinas is an obligatory route for every theologian to follow. I say 'route', not destination, because Thomas Aquinas acts here as a 'foundation theology' for a 'theology of history'. That is why Vatican II, in the *Decree on Priestly Formation*, declares that Thomas Aquinas remains a 'master' in the study and organization of the mysteries of the faith. And that is the main task of the theologian.

If all this is true, here is my advice to you, my friend: whatever the subject you wish to study in the 'theology of liberation', and which is directly or indirectly linked to Theology 1, go to Thomas Aquinas and very seldom will you be disappointed. Whatever your subject: grace, justice, prudence, Christ, poverty, or the sacraments, by consulting and studying Thomas Aquinas you will enlarge your views and sharpen your theological reasoning. On the other hand, I need not tell you that you must go to Thomas Aquinas with a critical mind. Your understanding must be guided by both the requirements of our contemporary situation and those of the situation when the canonical scriptures were originally formulated.

As to this last point, it is evident that technically we are today in a better position to understand the Bible than people were in the Middle Ages. As to the first point, it must be clear that what matters is not so much the text of Saint Thomas, but the 'reading' of this text—a

reading that must be done from the viewpoint of our specific situation.

Thomas Aquinas himself is an example of the central and decisive position of the Holy Scriptures. As a university professor he used to teach with the Bible in his hand; it was his basic text-book. He undertook to read it (*lectio*) in the fuller sense of the word: interpretation, comment and discussion. This was called *expositio*. All theology was biblical theology. The medieval theologian was not called in vain “master of the Sacred Pages”, *Magister in Sacra Pagina*.

You can see, my friend, why the ‘theology of liberation’ is interested in Thomas Aquinas. In the very first place, because he is a theologian, and a great one. Of course, the ‘theology of liberation’ focuses on a specific theme (exploitation, transformation, social conflicts, etc) within the scope of a specific discipline (the social sciences). However, the root perspective is the same: the critical perspective of faith, reformulated at depth as created by and creative of our specific situation. It should not be thought that between Thomas Aquinas and the ‘theology of liberation’ there is a gap so large that it cannot be bridged: we are always among theologians. Even though there undoubtedly exists between them a discontinuity, there is also a continuity which goes deeper.

Regarding this, there is a point I want to take up which shows the interest that Thomas Aquinas holds for the ‘theology of liberation’. Here I am still concerned with theological method, and its justification. Thomas Aquinas was really founder of theology as a science. He created and demonstrated the principles of theological production, and, doing this, he broke with all past tradition, and decided the future orientation of all reasoning about faith. I mean, he effected an epistemological rupture that inaugurated theology as a science—a rupture that every theologian today must make by himself, if he wants to produce theology as a disciplined knowledge. And, if a ‘liberation theologian’ wishes to produce a genuine theology, I do not know of a better place to look for the rules for its production than in Thomas Aquinas. I am convinced that in this aspect Doctor Thomas remains unsurpassed. For this reason, the basic texts of the theological methodology of Thomas Aquinas maintain all their consistency and actuality, even though they pay their tribute—and a heavy one—to their time. I am thinking about the First Question in the *Summa Theologiae*, the first eight Chapters of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and particularly about his book, *In Boetium de Trinitate* (comments about Boethius’ book on the Trinity).

Thomas Aquinas not only indicated the rules of theological practice, he put them into practice in a masterful way. A great Thomist of the sixteenth century, Cardinal Cajetan, talking about the

intellectual character of the great doctor, said expressively: *Semper formalissime loquitur*—he speaks always in an extremely formal manner, that is to say, distinctive, precise. Reading the works of Saint Thomas, one perceives that his reasoning is always accurate. Nothing is said gratuitously, with no reasons given, without arguments. And everything is well-articulated, well linked and constructed, exactly (and this has already been noted) as in the gothic cathedrals of the same epoch.

And even in the subjects in which Thomas Aquinas appears to be more medieval, and for this very reason seems to have been surpassed, even there one can learn from him, if not because of what he says, because of *how* he says it. He practised the holiness of thought. He was extremely respectful and honest with human reason and its demands for clearness, thoroughness and truth. He always 'played fair' with intelligence, never producing a cheap ideology, never using reason in a commercial way. He was a saint also, and precisely, as an intellectual. He gave to reason what belonged to reason, and everything that belonged to reason. He went so far that he was accused of naturalism and rationalism by his contemporaries and even by those who came after him.

If you, my friend, wish to see a demonstration of theological accuracy, open the *Questiones Disputatae*; if you wish to see clear and organic thought, you must go to the *Summa Theologiae*. Be sure of this: one always gains by frequenting, learning from and measuring oneself against the great men. You gain in intelligence and even in humility. It is always with a sense of strength and greatness that one closes a book of Thomas Aquinas. Let us then go to the masters, and not to the followers. If you want to grow, fight with the giants and not with the dwarfs.

## II

Thomas Aquinas is also allied to the 'theology of liberation' because he, during his time, confronted the social and political questions in the same manner as 'liberation theologians' do today.

In fact, Thomas Aquinas was a political theologian, just as all the great theologians of the past were, such as Saint Augustine, with his *City of God*. Unfortunately, the more recent tradition has, not innocently, forgotten this fact. We know everything about the religious ideas of the ancient Councils, the Fathers, and the Scholastic school, but we know almost nothing about their social ideas. However, we know that the Councils also dealt with the social problems of their time. For instance, around the year 500, there were 41 Councils and Synods that concentrated their attention upon the social problems of the poor. Regarding the Fathers of the Church, the

present courses on Patristics only transmit what refers to their doctrinal position, and nothing about their social doctrine, which is, in fact, very rich and strangely modern. With Saint Thomas, the situation repeats itself. If we remember the doctor's political theology, then we will not find the 'theology of liberation' so strange.

We have two political works of Saint Thomas, both incomplete. The first one is *De Regimine Principum* (Regarding the Government of Princes), that stops after the fourth chapter of the Second Book. It was written between 1265 and 1266, when the saint was 40 to 41 years old. The other book is the Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle, and it stops after the sixth chapter of the Third Book. It was written in 1272, two years before he died.

Besides these two works, in the *Summa Theologiae* we can find treatises about social and political theology. For instance, the treatise on 'laws' (I—II, q.90—97), on 'justice' (II—II, q.57—58) and especially on 'prudence', the virtue of choosing the right means, which find in 'politics' (political prudence) its highest and most ample expression (II—II, q.47—56). And in the treatise on justice you will find the question about 'poverty' in the famous question 66 of II—II (this question must be completed by reading q.32, a.5, of I—II). Nowadays research has clearly shown that for Thomas Aquinas property is originally common property. Private property only is natural when it is for each person the realization of common property. It was not understood in this way, however, by the later tradition, as we can still verify in the social doctrine of the Church.

You will forgive me, my friend, for not presenting here an explanation of the 'political theology' of Thomas Aquinas. To sharpen your interest, however, I cannot resist telling you one or two of his ideas.

This is the first one. For our author, the Common Good is the welfare of the people, which must come always before any private interest. This principle is repeated throughout all of his work. "The welfare of the people is greater and more divine than private welfare" (*De Reg Princ I, I, chap 9*). And here is a reference to the prophetic mission of the Church, regarding this point:

The salvation of the people must be preferred to the peace of some particular men. For this reason, when a few individuals, out of their iniquity, pose obstacles to the salvation of the people, the preacher and the intellectual must not be afraid of offending them, to guarantee the salvation of the people (*Summa Theol III, q.42, a.2c*).

And in this passage, Saint Thomas declares that this was exactly the behaviour of Christ regarding the Pharisees.

Politics is, for Saint Thomas Aquinas, the advancement of the Common Good. In the light of this principle, let us then see the critical

way in which he view 'sedition', what we would today call 'subversion':

The tyrannical regime (dictatorship) is unjust because it is not directed to the Common Good, but to the private interest of the person who governs. And so, to disturb this regime is not really sedition (subversion), unless it is done in such a disorderly way that the oppressed people end by being even more oppressed. On the contrary, it must be said that it is the tyrant (dictator) who is seditious (subversive) in that he fosters discord and division amongst the oppressed people to guarantee his own domination.

(II—II, q.42, a.2 ad 3).

The tyrants machinations to maintain his power, such as intrigue, suspicions, the forbidding of meetings, etc., are described in detail in the *De Reg Princ* (I,I, Chap 3). In chapter 11 there is a complete portrait of the tyrant, and there he declares:

*Regimen tyranni est pessimum, injustissimum.*

On the other hand, it is not democracy, viewed as "the power of the people who, by their number, oppress the rich" (somewhat equivalent to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'), (*De Reg Princ I, 1, chap. 1*) that is considered by Thomas Aquinas as a just regime, but monarchy, and especially monarchy tempered by elements from the aristocracy and the common people. But even having this opinion, which does not correspond to our present ideal of democracy, Thomas considers democracy "the most tolerable regime of all" (as Churchill defined it: the worst form of government except all the other forms). As for tyranny, it is not good for anyone, not even for the tyrant himself. And Saint Thomas Aquinas pronounces this terrible sentence: "Woe upon the ruler whom God, in his anger, sends to the people" (*Infelix est autem rex, qui populo in furore Dei conceditur*) (*De Reg Princ I,1, chap 10*).

It would be interesting, by the way, to examine the extent to which the theology of Thomas paid tribute to his epoch, acting as an ideology that justifies the status quo. For that it would be necessary to see what he thinks about feudal society and its social hierarchy in terms of master and serf. To what extent did he manage to separate himself from the ideas of his time and make himself heard as a prophetic and contesting voice? Even though, by his life and his ideas, he was at the vanguard of the historical process, we know he compromised with power. For instance, he spent 10 years at the court of Pope Urban IV as a consulting theologian (1259—1268). And the saint King Louis IX often asked for his advice. However, we also know that his position was progressive for that time. From the point of view of theory, Thomas, as all the Fathers of the Church, considered the social system of servitude as unnatural, and he likened

it to man's state of sin. It was, as we would say, a 'social sin' (cf *Summa Theol* I, q.96, a.4,c; I—II, q.94, a.5, ad 3, etc).

The 'political theology' of Thomas Aquinas is marked by the problematics of his time and limited by it. It is absurd to want to link the 'political theology' of Thomas Aquinas to the 'theology of liberation' as a continuity without any disruption. There is, in the first place, the evident discontinuity between the social solutions of the Middle Ages and our time. This discontinuity is enhanced by the way in which the respective situations are viewed. We approach them from the point of view of the 'social sciences', which are characterized by their positiveness, while Thomas Aquinas has an almost exclusively philosophical, and therefore abstract, understanding of social questions. However, there is a profound continuity. We should not think that Saint Thomas is completely surpassed, as though he should be relegated to a pre-scientific era dominated by ideology alone. No. Even today he can still help us meditate upon the fundamentals of politics—only philosophy can really help us here. As a matter of fact, the social scientist, as such, begins with preconceived ideas about society, man, power politics, justice, action, etc, and these ideas can only be verified by means of philosophical reflection. For instance, the current question: 'Can atheist politics be human?', cannot be adequately discussed and decided by the social sciences, but only in the context of social philosophy. Therefore, philosophical reflection is still necessary today, even though it is insufficient.

I do not think that we must simply return to the philosophers, and so to Thomas Aquinas, and even less must we remain there. What I say is only that we must pass through them, because only an arrogant person can believe he is the single one who exists and thinks, and that truth was born with him—to repeat an expression from Thomas himself in his *De Aeternitate mundi contra murmurantes*. By the same token, I don't say that it is *necessary* to pass through Thomas Aquinas, but that it is an *advantage* to do it, and, for this reason, it is perfectly compatible to produce a 'theology of liberation' appealing to the 'political theology' of Thomas Aquinas. That is the least that can be said here on this topic.

### III

We come now, my friend, to the third point. I declare that Thomas Aquinas serves as a model for the 'liberation theologian', for the dialogue between theology and the culture of our time. You have frequently heard this slogan: what Saint Thomas did to Aristotle we must do today to Marx. Let us then talk about the relations between theory, culture and theology. Thomas was an example in the way he presented questions and resolved them; and also because of the

reaction his work produced from those around him.

You must note, firstly, that Saint Thomas was very brave in his handling of Aristotle's writings. The dominant cultural climate was one of suspicion about this philosopher. Thomas was not afraid to provoke the opposition of more traditional thinkers, represented by the Augustinian monks and the Franciscans. They were afraid that the Christian faith would lose its identity. More than one Pope condemned the dialogue between theology and Aristotle. Gregory IX in his letter to the Paris theologians, on July 7, 1228, even talked about the condemnable "philosophizing theology", just as today they say "marxising theology". Even during his life there were unsuccessful attempts to condemn Saint Thomas for his theoretical intent. It seems that these controversies made him leave Paris for Naples (1271). It was only three years after his death that Paris and Oxford managed to condemn many of his propositions—and this seems to have made Saint Albert the Great come on foot, from Cologne to Paris, to defend his condemned disciple.

But, in reality, St. Thomas was inventing nothing new: he only wished to make the aristotelian reasoning serve faith. His originality lies in the synthesis he achieved. His biographer, William De Tocco, reflects the amazement of the people of his epoch, caused by the originality of the theologian's ideas:

Father Thomas, in his courses, posed new problems, discovered new methods, used a new structure of proof. To hear him thus teach a new doctrine, with new arguments, no one could doubt, because of the irradiation of this new light, and the novelty of this inspiration, that God granted him to teach new ideas by his discourses and writings.

Observe, my friend, the frequent use of the word 'new': eight times. Thomas was not afraid to teach new ideas, though he did not run after them.

On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas did not give up his faith; not for anything! In this he differed from some followers of Augustine who fell for 'Averroism', so-called after the greatest commentator on Aristotle, the Arab Averroës. One of them was Siger of Brabant. Thomas, on the contrary, always maintained faith at its own level—the level of excellence, with its own irreducible principles, not anti-rational, but supra-rational. He had the highest regard for theology: he considered it the queen of the sciences, putting them at theology's service, but not however dominating them in a despotic way. He was convinced that to degrade the creature is to degrade the Creator, as he often repeats in Chapters 3 and 69 of *Summa contra Gentiles, Book 11*. He has a deep respect for the autonomy of the orders of being and of knowledge and, specifically, for the rational

order with its logic, rules and principles. He learnt from his professor, St Albert, the lesson:

In questions of faith and custom, you must pay more attention to Augustine than the philosophers, whenever they disagree. But on medical questions, I make use of Galen and Hippocrates. And in philosophical questions, I go to Aristotle or some other expert.

It is evident how mindful Thomas is of the order regulating what we now call empirical matters in the positive sciences; what he called 'secondary causes'. He admits, though—the very name shows this—that secondary causes are subordinated to God, the primary cause. "Grace does not abolish nature but enobles it", he used to say. Thus human action within history does not compete with the action of divine providence, since both work in different, though interlaced, fields with one receiving and redeeming the other. Thomas Aquinas avoided a reactionary position as well as a merely vanguard one. He maintained a superior position, as he stated himself: "A small spirit falls naturally into a position that is opposed to its adversary, and is unable to take its stand upon truth". Marx said the same: it is necessary to be dialectical enough to criticize a position without falling into the opposing one.

Saint Thomas always sought truth more than worrying about his opponents; in this way he was a true philosopher. He used to say: "As to the different theories, you must not regard the persons propounding them, but the truth". Everything that appeared as truth he kept, as the bee keeps honey, disregarding the flower. He repeated a phrase that people in his time attributed to St Ambrose: "All truth comes from the Holy Spirit, no matter who pronounced it". He was convinced that "even thinkers who erred deserve our honour, gratitude and esteem, because they have helped to discover truth". "He refutes an adversary as he would instruct a student", says his biographer de Tocco, referring to this special kind of charity, namely intellectual charity: "the most difficult form of charity", writes Chenu.

Saint Thomas applied to every system the principle from the New testament: "Try everything and retain what is good" (I Thess. 5:21). He corrects Aristotle on many points, precisely those on which people accused him of following blindly, e.g.: the determinism of nature which led to the denial of divine providence and personal freedom; the impersonality of spirit, which led to the denial of personal immortality; the eternity of the world, which led to the denial of God creating the world.

Thomas Aquinas is not solely concerned with the divine, nor is he a pure humanist. He never poses an opposition or dichotomy between God and Humanity, Faith and Reason, Providence and Freedom,

Theology and Philosophy, Soul and Body, Eternity and Time. He had an anti-dogmatic and dialectical spirit, in the best sense of the word; what Maritain defined in the well-known formula: 'distinguish to unite'. He was as equally opposed to dualism as to a confused unity. Finally, my dear friend, you must note that if, towards the end, Thomas Aquinas was able to make himself heard in the Church, against all the traditionalist tendencies, it was in great part because of the support of Rome, which—in this case—played a progressive role. Also important was the support he received on many occasions from the Faculty of Arts in Paris.

Don't you think that is all very significant and has a lesson for us today, in our cultural debates? If we had the spirit of Thomas Aquinas we would have fewer intellectual cramps over marxism and other schools of thought. This also shows how untraditional are the traditionalists; true Tradition laughs at traditions.

#### IV

Let me now my friend, develop my last point on this question of the relation between Saint Thomas and 'liberation theologians'. I wish to discuss something about which present day theologians are very sensitive: the vital link between the theologian and the reality of the oppressed. One talks in this sense of the 'militant' or 'contextual scholar'; Saint Thomas was as much a militant theologian as anyone could be in his time.

Early in his life, Thomas, against the wishes of his family, who were part of the feudal aristocracy, became a Dominican, a mendicant friar. Mendicancy was the most advanced and challenging movement of the epoch. The life style of mendicants was the opposite of the feudal system: instead of large monasteries in the country, they lived in small simple houses in the cities; instead of addressing the rich they preached to the poor; instead of receiving rich benefices, they lived in strict poverty; and instead of maintaining the hierarchical structure of other religious orders, they adopted the ideal of fraternity and full participation in decision making.

You cannot imagine, my friend, how this new proposal attracted the youth and scholars of that time; in such numbers that "the parishes were deserted" as Innocent IV lamented in 1254, "and the priests were left in their churches as solitary crows, without the consolation of their parishioners and their regular contributions".

As might be expected, the reactionaries in Paris, where Thomas and Bonaventure were lecturing, organized a strong attack against this daring new life project. Remember the expressive title of the pamphlet that was repeatedly published by a terrible professor in Paris, William of Saint Amour: "About the perils of the present time". He calls the

mendicants ‘false preachers’, preachers of a ‘new gospel’, namely ‘the Eternal Gospel’ of Joachim of Fiore. Thomas Aquinas, usually so peaceful and reserved (he wasn’t nicknamed ‘the ox’ for nothing) didn’t remain silent in the face of these attacks. Twice he came to the defence of his mendicant brothers against the calumnies of the traditionalists. The polemical titles of his books reveal how much he was involved in the controversy: “Against those who contest the worship of God and Religious Life” written in 1256; and “Against the pestiferous doctrine of those who prevent others entering Religious Life” written in 1270. In this last instance, as had already happened in the polemic against Averroism, he had to defend himself without going to the other extreme, represented by the Franciscan Gerald of Saint Donnino, whose exalted Joachimism had been condemned in 1255 by Alexander IV.

It was the mendicant movement, open to new ideas, that interested Thomas in Aristotle. The mendicants did not wish to be cloistered in the “school for the service of the Lord”, as St Benedict had defined monastic life. They went to Paris, the intellectual centre of the age, “the oven where the bread for all Christianity is baked” as their contemporary, Gregory IX used to say. This openminded behaviour scandalized the traditional religious, such as Rupert of Deutz, who complained against their abandonment of the ‘blessed school of Jesus Christ’.

You can see, my friend, that Thomas Aquinas led the vanguard of his time; you must not think that he was, as a theologian, a stranger to the reality or the disputes of his time. He was involved in two decisive socio-cultural disputes, namely concerning the introduction of Aristotle’s writings and the controversy over the mendicant movement. Because of historical distance we are not really aware of the seriousness of these disputes. Thomas was a good fighter. His *Summa contra Gentiles* was written against the background of the Arab presence in Spain and the attraction that Graeco-Arab culture exercised upon the minds of his contemporaries.

You must not suppose, however, that Thomas never undertook any pastoral work. You know that the medieval theologian, *magister*, had not only to teach, but also to preach. That is why we keep many volumes of St. Thomas’ sermons, which influenced the debates of his time. He did not think the contemplative life to be the best, but rather the ‘mixed’ life which unites theory and practice, according to the celebrated formula: *contemplata aliis tradere*—pass on to others your own reflections.

Concerning what we today call ‘the option for the poor’, I would like to transcribe for you this testimony given by Thomas’ biographer:

He had an admirable compassion for the poor. He used to give them his clothes and things.... He kept nothing

superfluous for himself, because he knew that, by the Lord's order, it should be given to provide for the needs of others.

Bearing on this point, during the Middle Ages a strange story about his death was prevalent; Dante alludes to it (*Purgatorio XX*, 67–69) and it is told by Boccaccio. According to it, he died from poison administered by a doctor whom King Charles of Anjou had sent to accompany him to the Council of Lyons. The king was afraid Thomas would denounce his violence against the people of Naples to the Pope. Legend or not, this story does show that Thomas was really involved in the reality of his world; something that brings him close to the model of the present day theologian.

On the question of his being a 'militant theologian', I think it important to tell you that Thomas consistently refused to be seduced by power. He always refused to enter the system; if he hadn't he would not be regarded today as a doctor and a saint. First of all he refused to become the abbot of Monte Cassino Monastery; this position was offered him by Innocent IV at the instigation of Thomas' own mother, who wanted to improve the fortune of her impoverished family. Later on he refused Clement IV's offer of the archiepiscopate and the rich benefice of the abbey of St Peter in Naples. Finally, he was just as determined to refuse the cardinal's hat that would be offered him and Saint Bonaventure at the Council of Lyons. When his companion and secretary told him about this forthcoming offer, he said he wanted to die as a simple friar: "You may be sure I will not change my state".

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My friend, I will stop here. I hope my arguments were clear. Take them for what they really are: a first and modest attempt to relate Thomas Aquinas to the 'theology of liberation'. As you must have noticed through this explanation, the 'theology of liberation' must not be viewed as a special kind of theology, as something rare and original that has nothing to do with former theologies. It must not be opposed to scholastic theology as if it were a new kind of science. The 'theology of liberation' is the theology that needs must be done in Latin America today, if you want to remain faithful to the demands God makes on us in and through our own history and life today. The title 'theology of liberation' is *still* useful as it draws serious attention to our contemporary world; something that many 'contemporary theologians' overlook. In my opinion it is merely a temporary and convenient title. It helps distinguish this approach to theology from others that exist today but are neither truly contemporary nor concerned with the poor. That is why I was always careful to put this

designation between quotation marks. It is quite simply the theology that Saint Thomas would most certainly produce if he were a Latin American of the 20th century. From everything I have said, it must be clear to you that I do not consider Saint Thomas as unable to be advanced on. Neither do I regard his theology as the only one. He is surpassed today, not because he is disregarded or even less valued, but precisely because he is on track: we pass along and go beyond him.

Yours truly,  
CLODOVIS BOFF

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### Correction

In our October issue, in Professor Kenneth Grayson's review of *The Old Testament Pseudepigraphs Vol. 1* ed. J.M. Charlesworth, p 442, 12 lines from the bottom: "of 150" should read "of 15C".

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