

Part 2

A Prism *for* Liberation Theology

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One key aspect of Paul Farmer's vision and work was the use of liberation theology which he carefully studied. Insights from "lib theo," as he liked to refer to it, informed his understanding of the problems surrounding deep poverty on a large scale. He also judiciously applied the tenets of liberation theology to his work as a physician, believing that the principles of liberation theology would improve the quality of the delivery of medical care in resource poor settings. In Part 2, "A Prism for Liberation Theology," we explore how he received and refracts the gospel light of this important theological movement. Here scholars detail the historical nexus of liberation theology and health care that preceded Farmer—a tradition still largely unknown in the US. Where Part I locates Farmer's life as a theological text, here we explore his conviction that the lives of the poor and suffering were key 'texts.' He learned from liberation theology that, as one author notes, "listening to the poor and destitute sick provides an opportunity to learn what social analysis cannot show." And to do that, one must be close enough to hear their stories. From his first major book, Farmer's work is replete with the stories of his patients and pervaded with a spirituality and theology of liberation that "invite[s] his readers to contemplate, medically and theologically, their place in the ecologies of injustice that ravage the life of the poor."

But the poor were not simply data sources nor patients to be cared for—they were brothers and sisters whose dignity confronted him and called him into the contemplative practice of loving attention, the often-silent gift of presence. His praxis of attending to story after story after story (what anthropologists call 'thick ethnographic description') pressed him deeper into theological mystery. In doing so, his work served as a prism, contributing to the ongoing development of liberation theology through his relentless attention to the realities of structural violence. This attention to the structures that created sickness among the poor—especially for poor

women—was the vital means for reimagining and redesigning medical interventions that not only challenged the beliefs of the medical community in the US and Europe but transformed the practices of global health.

As Alexandre A. Martins recounts in Chapter Five, “Liberation Theology and Public Health Ethics,” there is a tradition behind Paul Farmer. He was not the first person to bring a liberationist lens to health care delivery. Rather, behind the English texts he consumed, and with which US readers are largely familiar (e.g., the work of Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff) stand decades of Portuguese and Spanish language theology as yet little accessed in the US. Moreover, as Martins narrates, there is a long and robust tradition of physicians living and practicing medicine out of a liberationist framework. His stories of Adolf Serriperro, Raul Matte, and Zilda Arns stand as a witness for theologians, bishops, pastors, lay ministers—in fact, for the church as a whole. CELAM’s Conference at Aparecida is clear: “In the face of the poor, we contemplate the face of the crucified Jesus.” Farmer’s witness asks: do we really believe this? Yet while he situates Farmer’s work and witness within this tradition that preceded him, one from which he learned and to which he then contributed, Martins also articulates how Farmer’s practical and scholarly work contributed to liberation theology’s development and global expansion—particularly in articulating the conceptual contours of structural violence in its manifestation in the field of health care.

Farmer and others witness to what liberation theology looks like when lived as a framework for practicing medicine. In Chapter Six, “Theologians in the Field: ‘Dices que eres un teólogo, ¿cuál es tu practica?’”, Leo Guardado turns the tables and asks: what does liberation theology look like as a framework for the practice of theology? Where Martins challenges US theologians for their failure to engage Latin American scholarship, Guardado likewise challenges US theologians on a number of points. He critiques the false dichotomy between “academic” and “pastoral” theology—reinforced by binaries of studying/doing, theory/practice—

that plagues the US academy. He calls us to center friendship (a theological, gospel category) and fieldwork or “lo pastoral” as the foundations for generating both a theory and theology that is at the service of a suffering world. For Guardado, a contemporary mode of such a method integrating friendship and “lo pastoral” is the practice of participatory action research. What if the ‘method’ of theology was actually, as Gutiérrez has argued, “a lifestyle, a way of life, a way of being and becoming a disciple of Jesus” that required dwelling with Jesus by making one’s home among the poor and insignificant because it is in the fractures and fissures of the world that we encounter the presence of God? Such a practice also captures Lutz’s insights about the primacy of listening to what communities themselves actually want and need.

A key insight Farmer gleaned from liberation theology is another methodological plank generally obscured from academic analysis: attention to the economic dimensions of illness, death, poverty, suffering—in short, the economic dimensions of reality. In Chapter Seven, “Liberating Theological Ethics from the Invisible Hand: Paul Farmer, the World’s Poor, and the Quandaries of the Fortunate,” M. Therese Lysaught highlights this aspect of his work. Drawing on his twin critiques of neoliberal economics and bioethics, she foregrounds how our conceptual categories have become thoroughly economized and asks the pointed questions: whether bioethics was created as a neoliberal project and how deeply co-opted US theological discourse has been by its economic social location. What, we might ask, is the political economy of US Catholic theology? At the same time, she argues that Farmer’s life and witness embody a crucial economic alternative—neither the anthropology of neoliberalism nor a distorted, reductive, economized notion of ‘charity’ that is the heritage of capitalism, but an anthropology of *caritas*. Farmer helps us see how traditional Christian practices—presence, friendship, solidarity, hospitality, and other crucial ways of embodying *caritas*—are at the same time deeply “economic.”

This theme of economics continues in Chapter Eight, “Confronting ‘Structures of Violence’: Women’s Empowerment and the Legacy of Paul

Farmer.” Here Suzanne Mulligan expands on Martins’s insight that develops the tradition of liberation theology, further articulating the category of structural sin into a more three-dimensional account of structural violence. Mulligan explores the relevance of this concept for helping advance Catholic theological analysis not only with regard to the poor, but equally with regard to women. Thickly displaying how structural violence plays out in health sequelae via concrete impacts on real bodies, Farmer regularly highlighted the specific impacts of structural violence on women, especially in terms of morbidity and mortality. Narrating what those structures of violence look like globally, Mulligan provides a context for asking: what would it mean concretely to advance the integral human development of women? Within a theological context, she pointedly asks: “For Farmer and others, recognizing the political, economic, and social participation of women, as well as their leadership roles in society, lies at the heart of any credible way forward. However, this needs greater affirmation by Church leadership and must find more prominence in official teaching. It remains one of Farmer’s most vital contributions to global health debates.”