

An Interdisciplinary Theological Method from the Knowledge of the Forgotten

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NARRATIVES ARE AT THE CENTER OF PEOPLE'S HISTORICAL experiences of transcendent realities. Narratives not only give expression to these experiences with great variety of styles and languages, often full of metaphors and mysteries, they also help other people and communities coming into contact with these narratives to have their own experiences of the transcendent. This is what one finds in biblical narratives of people who experienced God within their own historical contexts. Throughout history, individuals and communities—in their particular contexts—have read these narratives in order to find God and have personal and communal encounters with the transcendent, with a God incarnate within human history. The Argentinian biblical scholar Joaquim Severino Croatto says that these narratives possess a reserve-of-meanings (*reserva-de-significados*), because they are always acquiring new meanings from the individuals and communities who read and re-read these narratives. With each and every new contact, these texts become relevant within new contexts and struggles.¹

Narratives reveal the experience of faith a community has with God who is present in its history. The Transcendent—that the Christian tradition names God, as Aquinas does (ST I q. 13, a. 1), or Trinity, Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit—is present in the immanent reality. Theology is an effort, always imperfect, to understand this experience of God's revelation, as "accepted by faith," a conviction that carries the seal of grand masters of theology, such as Thomas Aquinas:

Although those things which are beyond man's knowledge may not be sought for by man through his reason, nevertheless, once they are revealed by God, they must be accepted by faith. Hence the sacred text continues, "For many things are shown to thee above the

¹ J. Severino Croatto, "La contribución de la hermenéutica bíblica a la teología de la liberación," *Cuadernos de teología* 6, no. 4 (1985): 50. See also Tereza Cavalcanti, "Social Location and Biblical Interpretation: A Tropical Reading," in *Reading from This Place, Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 201–218.

understanding of man” (Sirach 3:25). And in this, the sacred science consists (ST I q. 1, a. 1).

As a systematic intellectual effort to understand the experience of God, abstract accounts and discussions about the mystery of God became a dominant feature in the discipline and development of Christian theology. Scholasticism was the apogee of this way of doing theology philosophically. As a result, many theological accounts were quite distant from the historical experiences of communities, leading many theologians to consider that the only authentic theologies were those that dealt with universals. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, contextual theologies such as liberation theology were dismissed by passionate defenders of this abstract way of doing theology.² One of their reasons for this marginalization was the perceived lack of universality in these contextual theological accounts. Contemporary critics of contextual theologies forget or intentionally ignore that this *supposed* universality of “non-contextual” accounts was created in Europe by individuals who possessed a European worldview grounded in Hellenistic philosophy and culture. These accounts were not universal. Indeed, they gave expression to a contextual understanding the experience of God.

There exists a colonizing mentality in Christian theology. This fact helps us understand why any attempt to advance new ways of doing theology—most of which have emerged outside of the European context—are judged to be secondary, inferior, or not really theology at all. While not the subject of this essay,³ it is important to note that a colonizing mentality dismisses anything that does not come from the so-called top, where the theological status quo is preserved with its supposed universality. Oddly enough, the very biblical narratives that serve as foundational resources for the creation of this theological status quo deal directly with the experience of a God who liberates an oppressed people fleeing slavery (Exodus) and becomes human in order to share in the historical reality of the poor and marginalized, dying on a cross as a nobody. Moreover, those who enjoy this

² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 206–254; Jorge Costadoat, “La hermenéutica en las teologías contextuales de la liberación,” *Teología y vida*, vol. 46 (2005): 56–74, DOI: 10.4067/S0049-34492005000100003.

³ There are great works addressing this issue. For example, the international journal of theology *Concilium* published two volumes on this subject: Hille Haker, Luiz Carlo Susim, and Eloi Messi Metogo, eds., *Postcolonial Theology* (London: SCM, 2013); Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez and Thierry-Marie Courau, eds., *Decolonial Theology: Violence, Resistance, and Spiritualities* (London: SCM, 2020). See also Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Latin American Liberation Theology as a Decolonial Project?: Considering the Theological Approaches of Clodovis Boff and Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Louvain Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016): 218–239, DOI: 10.2143/LS.39.3.3170047.

theological status quo did not develop their understanding of the mystery of God on the basis of an ahistorical reality, protected from any particularity created by local circumstances, a specific geographic location, or a specific language. As far as I know, they did not develop a systematization of theology from heaven, using angelical language. It is important to recognize that the theological status quo also is contextual, existing because of political, economic, and colonial powers among others. This status quo has little to do with theology or the experience of God. To be clear, I am not dismissing this theology. It is part of the Christian theological tradition and, as such, is a foundation for any new way of doing theology. For example: one of the factors that made liberation theology possible was its foundation in the theological tradition since the first centuries of Christianity. But another foundational factor was the encounter between this tradition and the reality of the people, particularly the poor and oppressed who experience God in their historical struggles. Because of this encounter, new meanings and theological reflections emerged, expanding the understanding of their experience of God, a transcendent reality in the immanent practice of a faith community. Therefore, these experiences generate narratives from the lowest strata of societies and the margins of the theological status quo.

This essay offers a methodological account of doing theology from the historical experience of marginalized communities of faith. I speak from a Latin American context, Brazil, to be more specific. I stress the need for an interdisciplinary theological method, in which the experience of the poor and oppressed, their narratives and voices, have a contribution to make to our systematic and imperfect attempts to understand the mystery of God. As reflection on the faith experience of a community, theology cannot be detached from the living faith and historical challenges faced by the latter, such as socio-economic injustices and all forms of oppression. The historicity of an experience of faith requires certain tools necessary to examine the reality in which a community experiences God. Such instruments are needed in order to cross the boundaries of the academic discipline of theology. Hence, there is a need for dialogue with other disciplines, such as the social and natural sciences, for it is through such dialogue that opportunities can be created to offer communities occasions for contemplation where theological reflection becomes an Exodus, that is, a liberating experience of historical and eschatological salvation.

THEOLOGY: CONTEMPLATION AND DIALOGUE

Understood as an academic discipline, theology is a second act led by members of a faith community who develop a systematic reflection

on the experience of faith (the first act).⁴ Even when, as an academic discipline, it serves itself and its own progress, theology depends on the faith embodied by people who believe in the transcendent. Professional theology originates from within a community of believers who share a vocation to serve the Church as theologians. Therefore, when theology emerges from the community of faith, it serves as a reflection on the faith to which the theologian adheres, and it then returns to the same community as a gift for the faithful so that they may grow in their belief and the ways this faith is embodied in the world.

Theological reflection or studies do not simply arise from the creative mind of a theologian, but rather from an experience of contemplation of the transcendent and its ramifications in the life of a community of people who share the same faith. Any authentic theological method cannot be far from this experience. As an insider, a professional theologian lives out an intellectual and ecclesial vocation of serving the Christian community. This does not exclude objectivity and rigor while theological accounts are developed. However, the objectivity of methods cannot make a theologian an outsider, otherwise he or she runs the risk of blurring the boundaries between theology and the sociology of religion, an important discipline and necessary partner when doing theology. At the same time, it cannot replace the theological service of helping a community of believers understand their experience and grow in their relationship with the transcendent and the ethical implications this relationship entails.⁵

Theology arises from the experience of faith. In the Christian faith, everything begins with an encounter that changes people's lives; this is the first act: an encounter with Jesus Christ. The New Testament tradition shows it clearly. The gospels and other New Testament texts were written later, after a transformative encounter with the risen Jesus, when the first communities felt the need to understand their experiences and transmit them to others. All primitive communities experienced Jesus and told his story but expressed their faith differently, because they encountered an incarnate God within their own context and struggle, where Jesus became real for them. Although the four gospels have similarities and present the story of the same main character, they are different because they provide an experience of the living God in diverse contexts, with specific challenges to address.

⁴ Clodovis Boff, *Teoria do método teológico*, 4th ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2009), 24–33.

⁵ Francisco Moreno Rejon, *Teologia moral a partir dos pobres: A moral na reflexão teológica da América Latina* (Aparecida: Santuário, 1987), 82–89.

There is no revelation outside of history and the limitations created by time and space. Although the truth of God is transcendent and ahistorical, the manifestation of truth occurs in the history of a community that experiences and believes in this transcendent truth. As the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* affirms: “This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and conform the teaching and realities signified by words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (no. 2). There is a dialogical interaction between the Word of God and the realities where this Word is experienced. In a circular relationship, the Word signifies realities, and these realities confirm a teaching by helping the People of God understand the Word and its significance for an historical community. It is a dynamic movement of existential meaning and historical impact animated by the Holy Spirit. Thus, theological reflection occurs in this dynamism of a transcendent faith manifested in the creatureliness of the human history of Jesus’s disciples. Therefore, theology emerges as the outcome of contemplation and dialogue within a community that is expansive in its engagement of the world and challenges. Let us understand the ways in which this expansion of contemplation and dialogue is key for theological method.

Contemplation

Faith in Jesus begins with an encounter, a contemplation of the truth challenging us to change our life. This encounter raises questions. We see this occurring with Saint Paul: “While he was traveling to Damascus and approaching the city, suddenly a light from heaven shone all round him. He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ he asked, and the answer came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3–5). Paul did not understand this encounter at the moment it occurred. He could not see. Later, he understood it as a gift of faith: “I received it, and I was not taught it, but it came to me through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12). Then, Paul added: “When God, who had set me apart from the time when I was in my mother’s womb, called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me, so that I should preach him to the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15–16). When Paul reflected about this experience and its practical existential implications, he began to do theology. He understood that faith in Jesus was about freedom, one of the main topics of his letter to the Galatians, and the Law could not prevent Gentiles who encountered Jesus from experiencing the incarnate God within their own context.

At the Council of Jerusalem, Paul challenged leaders in that faith community, particularly Peter and James, to reflect on the faith and

consider that encounter with Jesus is a grace not restricted to those who are circumcised. What makes people followers of Jesus is their faith and the burden of circumcision should not be imposed upon a Gentile who encounters Jesus (Acts 15:19–20). As a member of the community and a theologian, Paul saw God's revelation in the history of a people who witnessed the gospel and then developed a theology given back to the community who inspired it, thereby helping the community grow in its understanding of faith.

In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI stresses the centrality of an encounter with Jesus for faith, a contemplation that becomes the source of Christian life and theology: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). The encounter with Jesus is an experience of God's love—*agape*—incarnated in history, the foundation of the Church's liturgical and ethical practices. Benedict XVI continues: "Faith, worship, and *ethos* are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 14). This leads us to reflect on those who are marginalized, like the Gentiles in Paul's context, and the poor and oppressed in our own contexts.⁶ In the midst of the marginalized, Jesus's disciples recognize God's love in history. "Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 15). Therefore, the reality where God's love is experienced and embodied as love for the other who suffers is a theological locus.⁷ Every theology is attached to the historicity of Christian experience, even theological reflection developed in the Western culture of the Global North.⁸

Every theology is contextual, yet for the most part, only theologies developed in the Global South are referred to as contextual theologies in a categorical way.⁹ These theologies address the specific challenges that exist where faith is experienced, as with liberation theology in Latin America, and those with a specific context of oppression as their

⁶ Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro, *El método teológico: fundamentos, especializaciones, enfoques* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Press, 2008), 172.

⁷ Clodovis Boff, *Teoria do método teológico*, 157–184.

⁸ Vélez Caro, *El método teológico*, 38–39, 166; David J. Bosch, *Missão transformadora: mudanças de paradigma na teologia da missão*, 3rd ed. (São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2002), 505.

⁹ "Contextual theology" also refers to theological perspectives that emerged in the Global North to address specific issues related to injustice and marginalization, such as political theology in Germany and Black Theology in the US. See Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 30th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 1–14, 20–44.

theological locus, e.g., feminist theology and postcolonial theology. All these theologies have in common a practical aspect. They aim to give expression to the experience of liberation that oppressed communities undergo as they experience a faith of freedom in Christ Jesus who “set us free, so that we should remain free,”¹⁰ as Paul said in his Letter to the Galatians (5:1).

Grounded in a contemplation of the transcendent, theological methods also advance to contemplate the “other” who shares the same historical reality as the theologian. Within a context of injustice, these “others” are the poor and oppressed.¹¹ When contemplating them, we also are contemplating the crucified Jesus. The Latin American Bishops express this conviction by saying: “As disciples and missionaries, Christians are called to contemplate in the suffering faces of our brothers, the face of Christ who calls us to serve them: ‘the suffering faces of the poor are the suffering face of Christ’” (*Aparecida*, no. 303). Considering the challenge of oppressed communities in Amazonia, Pope Francis describes this spirituality as: “A holiness born of encounter and engagement, contemplation and services, receptive solitude and life in community, cheerful sobriety and the struggle for justice” (*Querida Amazonia*, no. 77). The historical reality and its contextual challenges are where contemplation within faith happens to foster theological reflection. This dialogue between the human and the transcendent is mediated by history.

¹⁰ Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro, “El quehacer teológico y el método de investigación acción participativa: una reflexión metodológica,” *Theologica xaveriana* 67, no. 183 (2017): 200, DOI: 10.11144/javeriana.tx67-183.qtmiaip.

¹¹ One criticism against liberation theology is that this perspective only focuses on the socioeconomic oppression of the poor, as the reality from which theology is developed. It is common to find this criticism especially coming from Global North theologians. It is fair, but this criticism might apply to the first liberation theologians of the 1970’s and 1980’s, who are the main liberation theologians read in the Global North because their books were translated into English. However, liberation theology did not stop in the 1980’s. In a Conference with Latin American theologians, US theologian M. Therese Lysaught recognized this limitation among many US theologians. Her talk, entitled “Ética teológica en América: avances y desafíos,” is available at www.polisandhope.org/post/ética-teológica-en-américa-avances-y-desafíos. Although Latin American liberation theology does not enjoy the publicity it had in the 1970’s and 1980’s, its development continues, expanding its reflection to include other oppressed and marginalized groups. Brazilian theologian Elio Gasda, for example, stresses: “The theological ethics of Latin America stands out because it includes the option of the discarded, those who are socially and culturally discriminated against. ... We are doing theological ethics in the face of world hunger, terroristic genocide toward the poor, the black, the female, the gay, the transexual, the indigenous, and the displaced populations” (“Theological Ethics from the Reality of the People,” in *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers from CTEWC 2018*, ed. K. E. Heyer, J. F. Keenan, and A. Vicine [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019], 87, 90).

Theological methods also include dialogue with God, history, and others, particularly the poor and marginalized. Furthermore, dialogue opens up opportunities for partners to help us in our efforts to understand the historical challenges faced by faith communities. These partners offer tools—that theology does not have—to examine the socioeconomic aspects of reality, tools coming from the social and natural sciences.¹²

Dialogue

Theology is a dialogue with God, others, and the world. It is challenged by an encounter with Jesus. Inclusive dialogue opens us to welcoming everyone. The need and desire for freedom is part of our human nature, a part that enables us to organize societies of justice and harmony. Considering that the message of the gospel is good news for privileged recipients, namely, the poor (Luke 4:16–18), this dialogue creates a space for the voices and visions of the poor and oppressed to be heard and seen.

Pope Francis has emphasized the Catholic Church's nature as a dialogical reality. Actually, he is recovering a perspective that guided the Second Vatican Council, expressed in *Ecclesiam Suam*, the inaugural encyclical of Pope Paul VI. In 1964, Paul VI presented dialogue as a method for the Christian apostolate, rooted in four characteristics: *clarity, meekness, confidence, and prudence*. Dialogue engages people in a way that is charitable and guides them to achieve the truth through collective construction. Paul VI said: "In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love" (*Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 82).

Gaudium et Spes expresses well the importance of dialogue in the relationship with God and the world. Dialogue with God reveals to the Church human dignity and the need to be attentive to the "signs of the times" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4). Grounded in this conviction, the Catholic Church moved from a defensive to a dialogical posture of engagement with the secular world: "Everything we have said about the dignity of the human person, and about the human community and the profound meaning of human activity, lays the foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world, and provides the basis for dialogue between them" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 40).

This dialogical posture was a new orientation that had a profound impact on the Church's way of engaging historical challenges, which

¹² The help that these tools provide in support of theological endeavors is not structural, as suggested by Consuelo Vélez Caro: "In theological knowledge, all social scientific methods have supported contextual theologies, such as liberation theology, with an auxiliary service, but they are not structural in the theological endeavor" ("El quehacer teológico," 190).

now has resulted in dialogue becoming a key methodological aspect of ecclesial engagement. Maciano Vidal interprets *Gaudium et Spes* as the document that best expresses the spirit of the Council:

The Second Vatican Council, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, determined a new orientation. This orientation can be expressed by a term of great semantic and symbolic meaning, especially in the historical phase of this conciliar event: *dialogue*. This word acquired Catholic citizenship during the pontificate of John XXIII. Then dialogue was embraced and enriched by Paul VI. Sometimes, one does not have in mind how important the first encyclical of Papa Montini, *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964), was as a text about dialogue, oriented to support the shift of perspective from the Church towards the world.¹³

This shift impacted not only the Church's relationship with secular realities, but also the Church's way of doing theology. According to Vidal, *Gaudium et Spes* was the most cited document in the post-conciliar period.¹⁴

In an effort to bring the innovations of Vatican II to the Latin American context, the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) embraced this dialogical perspective during the Conference of Medellín (1968) and then expanded its use at Puebla (1979). CELAM meetings opted for following this spirit of dialogue, by encouraging a liberating education based on critical dialogue because "Latin America needs to redeem itself from unjust servitude and, above all, from its own egoism" (*Medellín*, no. 4.8). Puebla affirmed that the Catholic community must be a "bridge of contact and dialogue" (*Puebla*, no. 1226). Then it added: "In an attitude of sincere listening and welcoming, in this contact and dialogue we must address issues that are raised from their own temporal environment" (*Puebla*, no. 1227). The last meeting of CELAM in Aparecida, Brazil (2007), also embraced dialogue as a way of announcing the good news and denouncing social sin, "a dialogue from different cultural worldviews: celebration, inter-relationship, and revival of hope" (*Aparecida*, no. 97).

Cardinal Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio—who attended Aparecida and served as chair of the writing commission responsible for drafting the Final Document—exercised his ministry in the streets and slums of Buenos Aires using this dialogical posture. Then, as Pope Francis, he brought it to his pontificate, returning to Vatican II's spirit of dialogue and collegiality.¹⁵ He usually begins texts and documents

¹³ Maciano Vidal, "*Gaudium et Spes* y teología moral: A los 50 años del Concilio Vaticano II," *Moralia* 35, no. 134 (2012): 109.

¹⁴ Vidal, "*Gaudium et Spes* y teología moral," 105.

¹⁵ João Décio Passos, *A igreja em saída e a casa comum: Francisco e os desafios da renovação* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 2016), 67–69.

by affirming that he is offering a reflection to “enter into dialogue with all people” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 3). In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis argues that social dialogue is important to construct peace (nos. 238–258). He says: “Evangelization also involves the path of dialogue. For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society—including dialogue with cultures and the sciences—and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 238). In his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Francis further stresses: “Today in view of the common good, there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life” (no. 189). Moreover, in his last encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Francis shows his identity as a person who speaks from his experience with Jesus in order to dialogue with everyone: “Although I have written it from the Christian convictions that inspire and sustain me, I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will” (no. 6). Dialogue became a mark of Francis’s ministry as the Bishop of Rome as well as his methodology for doing theology.

The dialogical method proposed by Pope Francis goes beyond having only secular society and its natural and social sciences as interlocutors. He clearly recognizes that these interlocutors are necessary mediations if theology is to contribute to an integral development of the world in which all participate in the common good with shared responsibility. The natural and social sciences are mediations for doing theology as developed for over fifty years by liberation theology. Moreover, Pope Francis brings other interlocutors into this dialogue: the poor and the marginalized, thereby expanding the perspective that became the heart of liberation theology—the preferential option for the poor—an “ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 158).

The poor and the marginalized have “much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198). Other traditions, such as those from indigenous peoples, also have something to teach us and a contribution to make to the world. In Francis’s mission to address the global issue of the ecological crisis, he recognizes: “The wisdom of the original peoples of the Amazon region inspires care and respect for creation, with a clear consciousness of its limits, and prohibits its abuse. To abuse nature is to abuse our ancestor, our brothers and sisters, creation and the Creator, and to mortgage the future” (*Querida Amazonia*, no. 42). Dialoguing with the wisdom of indigenous peoples of Amazonia as well as the wisdom of other religious traditions, Francis articulates

a theology that has ethical consequences: “If God calls us to listen both to the cry of the poor and that of the earth, then for us, the cry of the Amazon region to the Creator is similar to the cry of God’s people in Egypt (cf. Ex 3:7). It is a cry of slavery and abandonment pleading for freedom” (*Querida Amazonia*, no. 52).

Theology is an encounter of contemplation and dialogue in which the transcendent is present in the immanent. The experience of faith occurs within historical reality. In attentiveness to the historical and contextual issues that impact people’s lives, the mystery of the incarnate God is revealed as God’s presence manifested in people’s lives and their journeys towards liberation. This reality is a theological locus, always existing in time and space, and revealed in human faces, most of which are the faces of those who suffer. Although being local and historical-contextual, this reality discloses some universal aspect of God’s revelation in the history of salvation that needs to be interpreted, as it gives rise to new historical meanings in different places and times. People in each place and time have their own struggles and experiences, all of which require tools and interlocutors for the development of a theology that unfolds through contemplation and dialogue.

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THEOLOGY

The title of this essay includes “from the knowledge of the forgotten.” After proposing that theological methods need to be grounded in contemplation and dialogue, I now focus on forgotten people who also possess knowledge that they are positioned to offer as a contribution to the development of academic theology, locally and globally. Of course, in the presentations of Pope Francis, we witness his recognition of the fact that the traditions and experiences of the poor and marginalized have something to teach us. The “forgotten ones” in theology are those on the bottom rung of society and/or at the margins of the Western theological status quo.

For the latter, I will say something very simple because I think what is above shows the contribution from theology matured outside the Global North and its traditional theological methods. With his own method and theology, Pope Francis presents this contribution better than my own attempt. I only add that there are prejudice and ignorance—mostly shaped by a colonizing mentality in the Global North that still sees the rest of the world as servants—which prevents most Northern theologians from engaging with theologies and methods developed in the Global South. Things have improved over the last few years. Francis has contributed to that. But we are still far from an authentic dialogue among peers with significant collaboration. I am a Latin American theologian, who reads and values the theological production in the Global North. I even write in English and Italian, dominating languages in the North and the hierarchy of

the Church. This is a common approach for most Global South theologians. They have interest in the theological material created in the Global North and, of course, in the classical texts from the Tradition. But there is no reciprocity from the North. The Catholic Church is universal, a global Church; so is theology. The development of theology cannot be done without a global dialogue where people from all over the world can sit around the same table as peers.¹⁶ Theological methods must liberate themselves from a colonizing mentality towards fruitful dialogue.¹⁷

However, theologians should not only dialogue among themselves. They need to include the poor and oppressed who possess knowledge and wisdom that must be received and included. In the Gospel of Matthew 11:25, Jesus says: "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children." In this narrative written for the Matthean community, Jesus acknowledges with sensitivity that the poor and little ones have understood God's revelation. Similarly, in Luke's Gospel (4:18), Jesus inaugurates his mission with a text from the Prophet Isaiah, as he affirms: "The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor ... and free the oppressed." It is evident that the poor are the privileged hearers of the Word and the first to receive the good news. They are the little children of God who have something to teach us.

Theology cannot dismiss the contributions of the poor and oppressed and their understandings of their experiences of God, specifically, the encounter with the transcendent which occurs in their historical reality of poverty and suffering.¹⁸ If theological methods are

¹⁶ The initiative of the network of Catholic theological ethicists promoted by Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) is a great example of interaction and peer-dialogue between the Global North and South. CTEWC has promoted actions, events, publications, and other collaborative works with great international diversity, exchange, and mutual support. See CTEWC mission, events, publications, and other initiatives at www.catholicethics.com.

¹⁷ Liberation from this colonial mentality, colonizing for the oppressor and colonized for the oppressed, is fundamental to the process of re-creating the world. This liberation impacts not only theology, but all aspects of our society. Paulo Freire deeply understood this oppression, colonization of people's minds, by recognizing that for anyone to be free all must be free to create the ways of justice (*Pedagogia do oprimido*, 59th ed. [Rio de Janeiro: Paz & Terra, 2019], 51, 60, 80–81, 94; *Education for Critical Consciousness* [New York: Continuum, 2005], 15, 39–40).

¹⁸ Commonly, this contribution comes from narratives that express the experience of suffering of victims of oppression and injustice. The contact with narratives and, at the same time, experience of sharing lives once the theologian is a member of the same community, becomes a resource for the theologian to develop his or her reflection the faith grounded in the reality. An example of this process is found in Maria Inês de Castro Millen's essay "Violence against Women: The Macabre Face of Every Day." Castro Millen begins with a narrative from her community when she

to be truly dialogical, they must include the poor as interlocutors precisely because their experiences and realities matter in our efforts to receive and understand God's revelation. Here it is very important to understand who the poor are for liberation theology. Maria Clara Bingemer is one of the Latin American liberation theologians who best present the concept of poor:

In liberation theology, the concept of "poor" corresponds to the "wronged," the "oppressed," "victims" of a world structure that is not fair. Therefore, this structure does not correspond to the justice wished by God. Theologically speaking, the recipients of this Option for the Poor cannot be simply identified with the "economically poor," nor with the "good poor" or with those who are "poor" in any sense, or those who are "poor in spirit." ... But rather with the "wronged," whether or not they are economically or metaphorically poor. All human problematic that can become injustice—even when it is not related to "poverty" in literal or economic meanings—is object of the Option for the Poor, because this is an option for justice. Hence, ethnic, gender, and cultural discriminations among others—as forms of injustice that they are, and even when they do not necessarily occur in a context of economic poverty—are an object of the Option for the Poor. They are an object, not because they are forms of poverty ... but rather because they are forms of injustice.¹⁹

learned that a 15-year-old girl, leader of a Catholic youth group in the diocese, was a victim of femicide, killed by a man who did not accept that she did not want to date him. The narrative of this death and the community's process of awareness and reconciliation made Castro Millen rethink the theology she was developing about the experience of women in Brazil. She stresses that the poor include women victims of violence because the poor refer to those who are weak, the little ones of the gospel. She concludes by suggesting this exercise: "If we return to Pope Francis's words ... and replace the words 'poor,' 'weak,' and 'little ones' by 'women,' we will be surprised. We will realize the urgent need to revise the Church's way of relationship with women" ("Violência contra as mulheres: a face macabra do cotidiano," in *A moral do Papa Francisco: um projeto a partir dos descartados*, ed. R. Zacharias and M. I. de Castro Millen [Aparecida: Santuário, 2020], 166. The experience of women and their narratives challenge not only patriarchal societies, but also the structure of the Church in its ecclesial organization and way of doing theology.

¹⁹ Maria Clara L. Bingemer, "A desventura e a opção pelos pobres: Simone Weil e a teologia da libertação latino-americana," *REB* 69, no. 276 (2009): 789. Liberation theology approaches that reflect the concept of option for the poor described by Bingemer are found in a new generation of Latin American theologians engaged in the areas of sexual ethics, gender studies, bioethics, race, ecology, and indigenous studies. See, for example, Ronaldo Zacharias, *Ética e direitos sexuais* (São Paulo: Ideias & Letras, 2021); Cássia Quelho Tavares, "A voz das mulheres como interpelação à teologia moral: A 'igreja em saída,'" in *Teologia moral: fundamentos, desafios e perspectivas* (Aparecida: Santuário, 2015), 223–250; Luiz A. de Mattos, "O cuidado da casa comum: os desafios éticos e espirituais de uma ecologia integral," in *A moral do Papa Francisco*, 229–256; Marilú Rojas Salazar, "Tendências interculturais para uma espiritualidade ecofeminista libertadora" and Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, "*Extra victimas salus non est* ou da vigência da teologia da

For the powerful and privileged, dialogue with the poor (the wronged) is an exercise in humility that demands engaging in the reality of the poor, listening to their voices and sharing their experience. It begins with a preferential option for the poor that involves concrete commitment to be a companion of the unfortunate,²⁰ celebrate faith with them, and witness firsthand their oppression. In describing the method of liberation theology, Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff stress that the first step of its method is participation in the faith and liberating praxis of the poor and oppressed. Theologians join the poor in their suffering and struggle for liberation and justice in an experience of community.²¹

This method, which began with the poor, those oppressed socioeconomically, expanded to other oppressed and marginalized groups, resulting in other liberating and contextual perspectives.²² According to the feminist theologian Vélez Caro, they are “from the historical praxis of liberation, but they focus on particular realities and concrete agents who, from their living experience, make theology shed light on their realities from the perspective of faith in order to transform situations incoherent with God’s will.”²³

libertação em tempos pós modernos,” in *A teologia da libertação em prospectiva* (São Paulo: Paulus/Paulinas, 2013), 313–321 and 323–341; Alejandro Castillo Morga, “Ante la Pandemia: Pensar los Desequilibrios Ambientales como Reacción Ética ante la Acción Humana,” *Journal of Moral Theology*, Special Issue (Spring 2021): 52–66.

²⁰ Alexandre A. Martins, *The Cry of the Poor: Liberation Ethics and Justice in Health Care* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020). In this book, I present the knowledge of the poor from their narratives as partners of my dialogue to develop a theological ethics towards justice in health care. See also Vélez Caro, “El quehacer teológico,” 59–72.

²¹ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Como fazer teologia da libertação*, 8th ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001), 41–42. They suggest that the novelty of liberation theology is the root of its theological act. According to them, the first step is something “pre-theological,” that is, the encounter with the poor and its implications.

²² I am not claiming that other liberating perspectives historically originated from Latin American liberation theology. Many other liberating perspectives emerged organically within the same time period of the 1960’s (e.g., Black liberation theology in the US and Protestant contextual theologies in the Global South), and in some cases earlier. Sidney M. Sanches, “A contextualização da teologia: conceitos, história, tensões, métodos, e possibilidades,” *Revista Tecer* 2, no. 3 (2019): 1–20, DOI: 10.15601/1983-7631/rt.v2n3p1-20. My point here is that liberation theology has expanded to use the same liberation method to address other situations of oppression beyond socioeconomic injustice. Maria Clara Bingemer argues that today the concept of poor in liberation theology is understood as a broad, inclusive category that includes not only the socioeconomic poor, but also other people and groups victim of oppression and injustice (“A desventura e a opção pelos pobres,” 772–791).

²³ Vélez Caro, “El quehacer teológico,” 200. Vélez Caro affirms that liberation theology is plural, that is, liberation theologies use liberating approaches in different contexts of oppression. This has led to new theological developments, such as feminist theology, Afro and Afro-American theology, Amerindian theology, ecological and

Engaging with the poor and the oppressed, we recognize realities incompatible with God's will for abundant life with dignity and justice for all.²⁴ Hermeneutical mediations are required to understand the structures that prevent societies from realizing God's desire for justice. One mediation is the poor themselves, who reveal the concrete impacts of violence created by injustices against them. Another mediation is the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition that help us read the world and the signs of the times in light of God's revelation. The third mediation is those sciences necessary to examine the mechanisms and phenomena responsible for injustice and oppression. Traditionally, liberation theology has used social sciences²⁵ as a mediation to understand the existence of institutionalized violence against the poor.²⁶ But this mediation is not restricted to social sciences. Pope Francis, for example, includes the natural sciences in his examination of the reality and impact of the ecological crisis. By way of a personal example, in my sub-discipline of theological ethics and my main focus, which is health care, I use health sciences and public health studies as mediations in my engagement with the experiences of the poor and their vulnerability to falling ill and dying prematurely because of lack of health care.²⁷

Listening to the poor as a mediation leads us to learn about their suffering and knowledge. This leads to the need for an anthropology of suffering to support justice in health care as a human right from the

holistic theology, postcolonial theology, and religious pluralist theology ("El quehacer teológico," 200–201).

²⁴ See the work of Brazilian theologian Elio Gasda from his engagement with the Amazon indigenous group Yanomami, especially with the Yanomami mothers and their experience of losing children to COVID-19. Gasda considers their experience of suffering because of children deaths and their cultural tradition related to funerals, a narrative that interacts with Gasda's Catholic social theology ("Los Muertos no Son Números: Gestión Política de la Muerte en Tiempos de Pandemia," *Journal of Moral Theology*, Special Issue (Spring 2021): 22–32.

²⁵ On the relation between theology and social science in liberation theology, see Francisco de Aquino Júnior, "Teologia e ciências sociais," *Horizonte* 10, no. 28 (2012): 1324–1349, DOI: 10.5752/P.2175-5841.2012v10n28p1324.

²⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología da libertação*, 4th ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1983), 98–99.

²⁷ Martins, *The Cry of the Poor*. See particularly the first chapter of the book, entitled: "Prolegomenon of a Project: Hermeneutical and Methodological Lines."

perspective of the poor.²⁸ Hence, a liberation ethics²⁹ is developed from the praxis of the poor, their faith, and the support of the sciences needed to understand the reason for their vulnerability. Liberation ethics is a process of mutual learning, the result of an exercise of the transcendental spirit in the midst of the historical praxis of the poor. It is a dialogical movement of listening to the poor and being opened up to learn from them. Far from a romantic vision of the poor, liberation ethics is the fruit of practical engagement in the life, suffering, faith, hopes, and struggles of the poor. Therefore, liberation ethics is grounded in an interdisciplinary method of doing theology with two dimensions that reflect the hermeneutical circle of liberation theology.³⁰

The first dimension is the reality of the poor and their historical praxis of faith and liberation. They do not develop an ethics as a systematic reflection upon the moral act. They simply act morally, and this act is shaped by their historical experience.³¹ The biblical mediation brings the preferential option for the poor “implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198). This option is a theological principle grounded in anthropological and sociological features that see the poor as privileged recipients of the gospel and suffering as victims of violence against their dignity.

The poor live an experience of being poor as victims of social violence. This experience shapes their worldview and faith. Consequently, this generates an historical praxis that is a liberation

²⁸ The philosophy of Simone Weil on affliction and the liberation theology perspective of the suffering of the poor provide foundations for the development of an anthropology of suffering able to respond to the deepest questions of our societies marked by the unfair suffering of the marginalized. Considering global health challenges, this articulation has been developed in Martins, *The Cry of the Poor*, 1–98. See the works of Simone Weil where she develops her account of affliction (*malheur*) and the suffering of the unfortunate (*malheureux*): “L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” in *Œuvres* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1999), 693–715; *Œuvres complètes V, 2: l’enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

²⁹ The systematic basis for a liberation ethics was developed by Francisco Moreno Rejon (*Teología moral a partir dos pobres*, 121–139).

³⁰ Boff and Boff, *Como fazer teologia da libertação*, 26–26, 41–42.

³¹ A clarification: I am not using “acting morally” in the narrow sense of good acts based on principles and values. There is no implication or judgment of good and evil in moral acts of the poor. I am using this expression in a simple and preliminary sense that all action is a matter of ethical reflection. I clarify this point to avoid a common critique that liberation theology makes the poor a moral option in the sense that “being poor” necessarily means to perform good moral acts. In Puebla, the poor are defined from their history of deprivation of basic needs for their flourishing. This situation is a scandal of structural factors (*Puebla*, nos. 1135, 1159–1160, 1209). See also Rejon, *Teología moral a partir dos pobres*, 140–150. Rejon examines the social aspect of the option for the poor and its ethical implications.

ethic of resistance, struggle, and hope. The experience of the poor provides them existential protection and knowledge that those outside this reality cannot understand. The same occurs for Black theology in the US that names *Black experience*. The Protestant theologian James H. Cone develops this concept in the context of US racism, as an experience of suffering within the Black community under white supremacy. He stresses the suffering of Black people as victims of white supremacy and their identification with the cross of Jesus. He presents a theology grounded in the *Black experience* and the cross of Jesus, a paradoxical religious symbol that inverts values. According to him, the Black experience is marked by suffering and the presence of Jesus's cross among them that leads them to struggle for justice.³² Cone argues that whoever does not have this experience or is distant from it cannot understand the suffering of Black people³³ and their liberating knowledge grounded in the Black experience of faith in the crucified Jesus.³⁴

I only mentioned Cone as a matter of illustration of an experience in the US context that has similarities with the Latin American one presented in this essay. Returning to Latin America, Argentinian liberation theologian Emilce Cuda, in her account of Theology of the People, an Argentinian branch of liberation theology, affirms that this theology is situated in a cultural ethos that is historical with a practice of the people for liberation, but also transcendent because it seeks salvation. Sharing this cultural ethos, historical and marked by faith and struggle for justice, "The theologian and the poor constitute identity and knowledge at the same time, and in that theological and sapiential moment, the way of salvation takes place."³⁵ Similar to the *Black experience*, the cultural ethos in which the Theology of the People is inserted leads to a "Theological ethics [that] asks us to build bridges, to seek conversion, to practice compassion, and to do theological ethics incarnating in a culture that is the victim of those unjust relationships that promote accumulation and consumption as the only good, causing some to fall into selfishness and idolatry, and others into need and agony."³⁶ This is a liberation ethic of resistance, struggle, and hope embodied in the practice of the poor.

³² James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 2–3.

³³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 151.

³⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 132. Catholic theologian Bryan N. Massingale expands Cone's reflection by applying it in the context of the Catholic Church in the US and its struggle to assume an anti-racism agenda that is, according to him, indispensable for social justice in the US. See Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

³⁵ Emilce Cuda, "Theology of the People as Theological Ethics," in *Building Bridges in Sarajevo*, 83.

³⁶ Cuda, "Theology of the People as Theological Ethics," 85.

The experience of the poor and their knowledge cannot be understood far from them, without breathing their cultural ethos. In a paradoxical relationship between suffering and faith, this experience constitutes a twofold liberation ethics: one is the existential protection that their faith provides by encountering Christ amidst suffering. So, their moral action is in the atmosphere of this existential protection which includes their values, principles, struggles, fragility, and hope. This is their *ethos*, but it is necessary to clarify what this means. Ethos is the transliteration of two Classical Greek words ἦθος (spelling with eta) and ἔθος (with epsilon). Although the meaning of these words is connected, they differ in their origin. Ethos (with eta) goes beyond the Latin translation *mos*, from which comes the modern meaning of ethic and moral. Ethos (eta) means the house of humankind. It is a place of permanent and habitual protection as a *praxiological framework* shaping a style of life and action. Henrique de Lima Vaz defines this ethos in this way: “The space of ethos, while human space, is not given to man, but it is built by him or unceasingly rebuilt. The house of ethos is never finished and ready. ... The space of ethos soon becomes comprehension and expression of the being of man as a radical requirement of duty or of good.”³⁷ Ethos (with epsilon) is the behavior resulting from constant repetition of the same acts. It could be translated by habit. It is the ethos expressed by any individual acts that translate the ethical personality. This expression articulates ethos (eta) as character and ethos (epsilon) as habit.³⁸

The ethos of the poor is their existential house where they live as a suffering people journeying in faith and hope. It is paradoxical because, even in the midst of their vulnerability and oppression, they know how to survive and where to find their praxiological framework. This leads us to the second aspect of their liberation ethics: historical praxis. This praxis is an action of liberation from their ethos through resistance to the dominant status quo and struggle for justice. Just as Antonio Gramsci says: the dominant culture is not passively absorbed by the popular culture.³⁹ There is a process of recreation of the dominant culture through the ethos of the poor, or their hermeneutical lens. The knowledge of the poor is also part of their historical praxis of liberation. This knowledge is sometimes confused and fragmentary. Whoever is not among the poor nor in the atmosphere of their ethos cannot understand this knowledge, or recognize that they have

³⁷ Henrique C. de Lima Vaz, *Escritos de filosofia II: ética e cultura* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1998), 13.

³⁸ Lima Vaz, *Escritos de filosofia II*, 14.

³⁹ Antonio Gramsci, “Problems of History and Cultures,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International, 1971), 3–43.

something to contribute in the process of liberation and justice. Gramsci was aware of this when he proposed the idea of the *organic intellectual* that later was embraced by liberation theology, particularly in the experiences of intentional communities (*comunidades inseridas*) in Latin America.⁴⁰ Therefore, among the poor, the dialectic occurs as ongoing construction of a liberation ethics grounded in the experience of the poor (their ethos) and their historical praxis.

When one transcribes this experience from contemplation and dialogue with these mediations (knowledge of the poor, Scriptures and Tradition, and sciences) into systematic writing, we have a theological product showing elements of the transcendent present in the history of the poor and oppressed. It is a local understanding of God's revelation and its ethical implications,⁴¹ which cannot be simply imposed as universal or automatically translated into other contexts. The dynamism and challenges of each context requires discernment with contemplation and dialogue. However, a local understanding has elements of the universal that can dialogue with any context and theology in their effort to understand God's mystery in history.

CONCLUSION

Narratives have a power to lead us to discover the beauty and challenges of believing in an incarnate God while living in a reality full of contradictions. It seems that the more spontaneous a narrative is, the more meaningful it is for people and communities. In *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis says:

Popular poets, enamored of its immense beauty, have tried to express the feeling this river evokes and the life that it bestows as it passes amid a dance of dolphins, anacondas, trees, and canoes. Yet they also lament the dangers that menace it. Those poets, contemplatives and prophets, help free us from the technocratic and consumerist paradigm that destroys nature and robs us of a truly dignified existence (no. 46).

⁴⁰ João B. Libanio, *Cenários da igreja*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Loyola, 2000); 101–118. See also José Comblin, who presents the development of Catholic communities in Latin America as an embodiment of Vatican II's concept of Church as People of God. This perspective came to expression in the Latin American ecclesiology of a horizontal community of faith in a praxis of liberation. Part of this experience as intentional communities where Catholic leaders, members of the clergy, religious men and women, and theologians were to live in communities marked by poverty, experiencing the struggle of the poor, and their liberation praxis (*O povo de Deus*, 3rd ed. [São Paulo: Paulus, 2011]).

⁴¹ In the US, Marcus Mescher develops an approach that favors this dialogical method from a theological ethics grounded in the theology of encounter promoted by Pope Francis (*The Ethics Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020]).

Then Francis quotes Vinicius de Moraes, a Brazilian poet known and criticized for his Bohemian lifestyle and not one whom a traditional theologian would expect to be quoted by a pope:

The world is suffering from its feet being turned into rubber, its legs into leather, its body into cloth and its head into steel. ... The world is suffering from its trees being turned into rifles, its ploughshares into tanks, as the image of the sower scattering seed yields to the tank with its flamethrower, which sows only deserts. Only poetry, with its humble voice, will be able to save this world (no. 46).

A mystic certainly sees God as a poet with a humble voice. The prophet Elijah had difficulty recognizing God because God did not manifest Godself in a hurricane, but rather in a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:11–13). Sometimes, theological endeavors and methods get lost in the technicalities, bureaucracy, and assumptions, thus forgetting to listen to the humble voices that point to the presence of the Transcendent in the immanent reality of the little ones. Contemplation and dialogue: theology. **M**

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