

PERSONAL AND COMMON GOOD – PERSONAL AND COMMON EVIL. LIBERATION THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVES.¹

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Abstract. Whatever its grammatical status, the verb “to discern” has an implicit transitive element. That is to say, we always discern about something or between two options. What is the right course of action in this situation and in these circumstances? In our paper, we want to look at responses to this question from the perspective of the theology of liberation. As the name implies, this is first and foremost a theology, a way of seeking to understand and articulate the faith of the believing Christian community. But it is also necessarily political, because it seeks to contribute to the liberation of those who are not free — the poor, the oppressed, those to whom injustice is done, both negatively, by decrying the presence of unfreedom and positively by working for social transformation. It is thus a public theology, a manifestation of the ongoing power of religion to inform and motivate its adherents to engage in attempts to transform the world not only in terms of a post mortem future but here and now.

I. INTRODUCTION

In his inaugural address to the crowds in St Peter’s Square, following his election in March 2013, Pope Francis remarked that the cardinal-electors had had to search almost to the ends of the earth to find the next pontiff.² Certainly some in Europe and North America seem to wish that he had stayed there,³ and in the intervening years, the Pope has challenged some who do not like his vision of the church and inspired many more, from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds. In part this is through his insistence on the need always to discern, rather than to learn laws and impose them regardless of the reality. So, an underlying question for us in this paper is how this Pope from “almost the ends of the earth” practices discernment? In other words, what is it that we can learn from how Pope Francis, with his Ignatian⁴ and Latin American⁵ background,

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2 See the transcript of the speech in English translation, Pope Francis, “Pope Francis’ First Speech As Pontiff”, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/13/174224173/transcript-pope-francis-first-speech-as-pontiff?t=1602444954140>.

3 From our Czech context, a good example can be found in the words of an interview given by Cardinal Dominik Duka, Archbishop of Prague, in 2016, where he was very critical of the Pope’s stance towards migrants. Duka has aligned himself closely with borderline racist policies of the current Czech president, and claimed that Francis has a different sensitivity to social issues than we do in Europe, because “Pope Francis ... comes from Latin America, where the gap between the rich and poor is very broad, which is a result of Indian cultures”. Dominik Duka, “Rozhovor pro Lidové noviny”, accessed November 10, 2020, <http://www.dominikduka.cz/rozhovory-menu/rozhovor-pro-lidove-noviny>.

4 A good reflection on this topic is Thomas Rosica, “The Ignatian Qualities of the Petrine Ministry of Pope Francis”, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://spotlight.africa/2018/07/31/pope-francis-ignatian-heritage>. According to Rosica, three key words characterize the Pope’s Ignatian legacy: consolation, compassion, and discernment. See also Tim Noble, “Papež František a Latinská Amerika”, *Universum* 4 (2013).

5 It is worth remembering that there are some distinctions between the Argentinean theology of the people, which has influenced the Pope, and other streams of liberation theology. For a recent account in English of the theology of the people, see

engages in the practice of discernment, and encourages others to do the same, drawing on the riches of Latin American theology of the past fifty years.

In our paper we will concern ourselves with the practice of discernment from the perspective of Latin American liberation theology. In doing so, we hope also to contribute to a better understanding of how Pope Francis discerns — he is not simply a Jesuit, but a Latin American Jesuit, influenced by his context. Latin American liberation theology has existed as a theological and ecclesial movement for more than fifty years.⁶ It is still challenging in many ways. In particular, we will explore how it relates discernment to Christology and how it works with sin, especially the concept of structural sin, and grace as phenomena in history. In the conclusion we will look at the communal implications of the concept of discernment in liberation theology, despite the fact that at times it might appear surprisingly individualist.

Jon Sobrino remarked in the introduction to his book *Jesus in Latin America* that the volume had been requested by European readers. He says, “This indicates to me that the figure of Jesus as sketched in Latin American Christology is of genuine help to the faith of Christians there.”⁷ We hope that discernment from the Latin American perspective may be of some help as well, since it suggests how a politically- and socially-involved religious faith can offer ways of dealing with complex decisions, as well as having an impact on growth towards human and spiritual maturity.

II. CHRISTOLOGICAL DISCERNMENT

Several specific aspects of discernment can be found in Latin American liberation theology. One important strand concerns the centrality of Jesus as, in the words of the Gospel of John, “the Way, and the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). What is this way, and in what sense is it truth and life? We begin by one attempt to respond to these questions in the theology of Jon Sobrino. Sobrino is a Jesuit theologian of Basque origin, born in Barcelona in 1938. Since 1957 — with initially long periods away for study — he has lived in El Salvador in Central America. His theology, and especially his Christology, is widely read throughout the world and he may thus be considered as a representative figure of the first generation of liberation theologians.⁸

For Sobrino Christian discernment means “the particular quest for the will of God”⁹ This wording reminds us of the Ignatian legacy¹⁰ in Sobrino’s thought. Discernment is not, in the first place, about looking for impersonal and abstract good and evil, right and wrong.¹¹ Rather, it is a quest happening within a relationship between human beings and God. But Sobrino develops this idea, drawing on an aspect which is already quite typical of liberation theology: we look for the will of God “not only to un-

Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Orbis Books, 2017). See also Emilce Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco: Teología, ética y política* (Manantial, 2016). On the influence of Pope Francis on liberation theology, see the papers from a conference held in the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá in 2016, published as Hermann Rodríguez Osorio, S. J., *Interpelaciones del Papa Francisco a la teología hoy* (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2017).

6 The name “theology of liberation” was first used in a Latin American context by Gustavo Gutiérrez in July 1968. For an introduction to the history and theology of liberation theology, see, for example, Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America — and Beyond* (Temple Univ. Press, 1987); Leonardo Boff — Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Orbis Books, 1987); David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Brill, 2002).

7 Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Orbis Books, 1987), xv.

8 On Sobrino, see Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Orbis Books, 1994), 1–11; Vera I. Bombonato, “The Commitment to Taking the Poor down from the Cross”, in *Getting the Poor Down From the Cross: Christology of Liberation*, ed. José Maria Vigil; Martin Maier, “Zur theologischen Biographie von Jon Sobrino”, in *Die Freiheit der Theologie: Die Debatte um die Notifikation gegen Jon Sobrino*, ed. Knut Wenzel (Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2008); Robert A. Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit martyrs of the University of Central America* (Orbis Books, 2014). For a recent more personal account see also Charo Mármol and Jon Sobrino, *Conversaciones con Jon Sobrino* (PPC, 2018).

9 Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 131.

10 We do not have the space here to give a detailed account of Ignatian discernment. For an excellent introduction, see David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

11 “The urgency of the task requires not vague determinations of what is good or bad but the quest for the particular act that truth requires to be performed.” Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 131.

derstand it but also to carry it out.”¹² The moment of praxis is a substantial part of the process of discernment. For Sobrino this moment of praxis is also always a moment of practicing love. He understands love as mercy and in the historical socio-political realm love becomes justice demanding the practice of liberation.¹³ Thus in liberation theology the practical moment of discernment in fact equates with liberation itself. A Christian looking for the will of God may then ask: How does this decision of mine lead to the liberation of the victims of sin?

Sobrino believes that our discernment should be oriented less to ecclesiology and more to Christology. He says, “traditional ecclesiology does not seem to offer an adequate response to the radical challenges posed to Christian life.”¹⁴ Christians today can hardly deduce appropriate ways of Christian life from what he calls “the inertia of the old structures”.¹⁵ His suspicion regarding the role of the Church in discernment relates, it would seem, to certain out-of-date ecclesiologies rather than to the Church as such.¹⁶ Sobrino, however, proposes a Christological turn. We should go to the very roots of Christian life, that is to Jesus, and to the Trinitarian reality which Jesus experienced.¹⁷ In this sense, the following of Jesus means re-creating “the structure of Jesus’ discernment ... throughout history according to the Spirit of Jesus”.¹⁸

To re-create the structure of Jesus’ discernment incorporates two interrelated facets. It includes both “the quest for the very reality of God and the place where this quest could mean finding God.”¹⁹ In the life of Jesus we can see certain moments when his understanding of God — and also of “how to do the right thing”²⁰ — deepened. We may recall those stories to which the evangelists attached so much importance, such as the temptations in the desert, the crisis in Galilee, the prayer in the garden and Jesus’ death on the cross. All of these present God as transcendent, the One who is greater (perhaps here too we see the importance of the Ignatian *magis*),²¹ yet not distant. Sobrino believes that “Jesus found the prime setting for discernment in his radical openness to this greater God; this setting is love of us, and in this sense the greater God appears as the lesser God.”²² The great and transcendent God lets us discern who God is and what the will of God is in the service of love to the poor, the little ones, the oppressed, that is, in those who represent the privileged face of God in history. They are, as Sobrino argues, “the primary and irreplaceable setting for finding the will of God.”²³

Getting even closer to the particular structure of Jesus’ discernment, with Sobrino we can see that Jesus discerned the love of God as unconditionally placed between a “yes” and a “no”. In a way, the “yes” and “no” represent two steps towards discernment. Firstly, we can hear “the clear ‘no’ given by God to the world of sin that dehumanizes human beings” and it is our task to carry on this “no” throughout history. Secondly, we can hear “God’s ‘yes’ to a world that has to be reconciled”, and again the Utopia of this “yes” has to be carried on.²⁴ All that destroys the human communion of brothers and sisters which

12 Ibid., 131.

13 Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 27–46.

14 Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 131.

15 Ibid.

16 Arguably, the recent efforts by Pope Francis to restore synodality in the service of the communal quest for the will of God would be appreciated by Sobrino. See the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, dated 15th September 2018, which among other things makes the final document of a Synod of Bishops, if expressly approved by the Bishop of Rome, part of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Catholic Church (see Article 18, paragraph 1 of Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (2018).

17 Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 132.

18 Ibid., 132.

19 Ibid., 134.

20 Ibid., 133.

21 “(...) desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created” (*The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, art. 23).

22 Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 133.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 135. Sobrino relates utopia with Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God and its realization in history: “The Kingdom of God is a utopia that answers the age-old hope of a people in the midst of historical calamities; it is, then, what is good and wholly good.” Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Orbis Books, 1993), 72.

we express in the *Our Father* must be strongly opposed. On the other hand, all that promotes life and hope must be encouraged.

Saying “no” to the world of sin arouses conflict. Sobrino believes that “conflict is intrinsic to the love of Jesus”.²⁵ Since Jesus conceived his universal mission from the particular standpoint of those to whom injustice is done, conflict becomes part of Jesus’ discernment and, consequently, belongs also to the discernment of his followers. In the world of sin conflict verifies the radicality of that discernment. Of course, conflict is not an end. Rather, openness to a conflictive love means being honest to reality on the way to our humanization, to a fellowship of brothers and sisters.²⁶

Finally, Sobrino refers to the Spirit in the process of discernment. The role of the Spirit is not independent of Jesus. Sobrino speaks about discernment in the Spirit of Jesus. It is the Spirit that “compels us to continue our discernment in history”.²⁷ The Spirit represents continuity in the discernment of Jesus in history within the Christian community. Despite his stress on continuity between the work of Jesus and that of the church in history, Sobrino also makes space for disruptions. He believes that the Spirit crosses the boundaries of what we can expect. “One cannot speak a priori and in abstract of what discernment should be today, since this would be setting limits to the activity of the Spirit and denying the greater being of God for our own history.”²⁸ We will later return to the Spirit when we speak about the role of discerning grace.

III. DISCERNING SIN

We have just looked at discernment in liberation theology as a commitment to a particular way of following Jesus, a specific form of Christian discipleship. We have seen also that discernment is always of something. So now we turn to looking at a particular instance of discernment. Liberation theology, despite its reputation for radicality, is in many ways a conservative theology, in as much as it works with the totality of the theological tradition and seeks to preserve it for the context of oppression and exclusion within which and against which it operates. It is therefore no surprise that, as heir to the Western theological tradition, the role of sin, as already alluded to above, has long played an important part in liberation theology. This is already present in Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*, where he points out that liberation from sin is fundamental.²⁹

But, given that sin might be regarded as something that is obvious, why does it need to be discerned and what can liberation theology contribute to this discernment? To examine this briefly, we turn to an essay on sin by José Ignacio González Faus in *Mysterium Liberationis*, the two volume “Summa” of liberation thought published in the early 1990s.³⁰ In trying to develop a distinction between Latin American and

25 Ibid., 136. Elsewhere he identifies conflict right in the very crucifixion: “The cross as history is the history that led to the cross, and this is well known: Jesus defended the weak against those who were oppressing them, came into conflict with these, remained true to his cause, and was killed because he was a nuisance. The cross came about, therefore, for defending the weak, and this makes it an expression of love.” Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* (Orbis Books, 2001), 305.

26 Reflecting on conflict in the church Sobrino also writes: “Conflict may be a good thing. It may be the unpleasant, but necessary, historical path to a higher form of church unity, a oneness based on a greater truth and greater holiness.” Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, ed. Robert R. Barr (Orbis Books, 1988), 136.

27 Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 137.

28 Ibid., 138.

29 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Orbis Books, 1988, 1973), 24 on the social and individual dimension of sin, and p. 85 on sin and salvation. Sin is described on p. 24 as “to refuse to love one’s neighbours and, therefore, the Lord himself. Sin — breach of friendship with God and others — is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which persons live... things do not happen by chance... behind an unjust structure there is a personal and collective will responsible — a willingness to reject God and neighbour. It suggests, likewise, that a social transformation, no matter how radical it may be, does not automatically achieve the suppression of all evils”.

30 José Ignacio González Faus, “Pecado”, in *Mysterium liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (UCA, 1991). The work came out after the martyrdom of Ignacio Ellacuría in 1989, and covers a huge range of topics, viewed from the perspective of liberation theology. It serves still as an excellent summary of the initial insights of liberation theology, with contributions from most of the leading names of the first generation of liberation theologians. There is

European understandings of sin, González Faus notes that for the former it is not enough to say that human beings sin, but that human beings are sinners. In other words, too quick an emphasis on “works” can lead to excusing sin as an occasional act that does not define the person. But he insists, though without using the precise term, on what we might term, with reference to Rahner, with whom González Faus studied, the presence of concupiscence as an integral part of human existence.³¹ For Rahner, this meant that there is at least the possibility of a tendency towards sin within us, which is in conflict with the call to turn to God. We constantly struggle between who we are and who we yearn to be. But this means that we cannot avoid sin, understood as the failure to be what we in and before God most fully desire to be. Thus it is the person, not the work that is the focus.

This, though, may still not be entirely a matter of discernment. So more fundamentally González Faus speaks of sin as “the masking of the truth with unjust egoism.”³² Thus the task of discernment is essentially one of unmasking. The particular contributions of liberation theology are twofold. The first is the re-introduction of the notion of structural sin. The “unjust egoism” that masks the truth is never a purely individual one, because people are everywhere in relationships and societies develop stories and modes of behaviour that create situations of injustice.³³ González Faus offers a brief definition that gets to the heart of what structural sin is: “human beings, in sinning, create structures of sin, which in turn make human beings sin.”³⁴

But for our purposes the important point is the need to search out and make manifest (that is, discern) these structures. Because, as González Faus points out, sin is ultimately about what God rejects,³⁵ and thus it is necessary to name that which is unacceptable to God. In the words of Hosea (6:6), twice repeated by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (9:13 and 12:7), “I demand mercy, not sacrifices.”³⁶ The need for discernment is because of the way in which social structures mask the truth, in order to make the unnatural appear natural. González Faus spells this out, noting how, what were at the time when he wrote this chapter the two major ruling systems in the world, capitalism and communism were based on falsehoods. For capitalism, “the false truth is that a human being *is not worth anything*”, whilst for communism it is that “a human being is *always an enemy*.”³⁷

To live in a society that sees the other as either worthless or enemy leads to forms of behaviour that reinforce such views. So, even if an individual might not agree in all cases that the other is truly worthless or an enemy (Havel’s greengrocer knew full well that the regime was not interested in the unity of

an English translation, most easily available as José Ignacio González Faus, “Sin”, in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology Readings from *Mysterium Liberationis**, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Orbis Books, 1996).

31 Karl Rahner, “The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia”. In *Theological Investigations 1* (Darton, Longman & Todd; Seabury Press, 1961), 347–382.

32 González Faus, “Pecado”, 97.

33 Ibid., 98.

34 Ibid., 99. Although it is sometimes claimed that Pope John Paul II was opposed to the idea of structural sin, this may not be very far from what he meant when he spoke of structures of sin, whilst emphasising that sin is always a personal act. See, for example, his 1984 post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Pope John Paul II, “Reconciliatio et Paenitentia”, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html, 16, and Pope John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis”, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html, 36. On this, see John M. Breen, “John Paul II, the Structures of Sin and the Limits of the Law”, *St Louis Univ. Law Journal* 52, no. 317 (2008).

35 González Faus, “Pecado”, 100.

36 Here we can also see one of the influences on Pope Francis, who has frequently, like Jon Sobrino, stressed the importance of mercy and compassion. This can be summed up in his famous image of the church as a field hospital, where all who need cure and treatment are welcomed. The image is one that Francis returns to frequently. See, for example, a report on a General Audience in August 2019, where he once again uses the image: Devin Watkins, “Pope at Audience: Church a ‘Field Hospital’ that Cares for Sick”, *Vatican News*, 2019.

37 González Faus, “Pecado”, 101. If this sounds harsh, in capitalism the person as such has strictly no value. Their value is in terms of their labour or their purchasing power, but not in themselves. For a powerful narrative portrayal of the truth that for communism the human being is always an enemy, consider Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck’s 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others), which of course also shows how discernment can work and structures of sin can be resisted.

the workers of the world),³⁸ they will often act as if this were true. In the context of liberation theology, the recovery of the concept of structural or social sin grew out of a need to explain why people in the predominantly Christian context of Latin America could carry out acts of brutality, exploitation and oppression, and why there was such blatant inequality.³⁹

Related to this readily observable reality is the other dimension of sin to which González Faus draws attention, namely that sin ultimately causes human damage. In saying this, he wants to go beyond seeing sin as a transgression of law. Laws, he says, are made by the powerful, so much of what is termed sinful, because it goes against the law, is in fact a way of maintaining the status quo. But what sin does is cause harm. Although perhaps not sufficiently emphasised, it is this recognition that lies behind the sacrament of reconciliation in the Roman Catholic tradition — the need for reconciliation with God through the ministry of the church is because in sinning against God both self and other are harmed and need restoration. More recently, liberation theologians have also come to expand this idea of the harmfulness of sin to include the effects on the rest of creation.⁴⁰

IV. DISCERNING GRACE

Thus far we have looked at the question of discernment as living out the practice of Jesus and then at the discernment of sin, the unmasking of that which seeks to mask the truth. But discernment, as we mentioned briefly above, is also about what the Ignatian tradition has called the *magis*, the search to do not just the good but the better, the attempt to become ever more attuned to performing the will of God.⁴¹ Another, perhaps more theological way, of phrasing this point would be to say that it is about discerning the grace of God at work in the world. From a liberation theology perspective we can turn now to a brief contribution in *Mysterium Liberationis* from José Comblin (1923–2011), a Belgian-born Roman Catholic theologian, who worked mostly in Brazil, with some time in exile in the 1970s in Chile.

Comblin begins by insisting that grace “must in some way be bodily and material”.⁴² God at work in the world has an effect on the world, and human beings are such in relation to their work and to each other.⁴³ Sin, said González Faus, harms human beings, and we could say with Comblin that grace is the healing of human beings, in the social structures of relation to the material, and in relation to one another. In the first instance, grace “enters into conflict with ... all regimes of alienation and exploitation at work”.⁴⁴ God’s grace is also about the construction of new relationships between humans in specific places and settings. To discern grace is to discern something that has concrete — praxic, we might say — implications.

38 See Václav Havel, “Moc bezmocných (“The Power of the Powerless”); accessed October 13, 2020., https://web.archive.org/web/20160907045251/http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_eseje.html&typ=HTML. The essay was written in October 1978. In it Havel refers to a greengrocer who puts a sign between the onions and carrots reading “Proletarians of the World Unite”. Havel’s point is that the greengrocer does not believe in this, but does it for a quiet life. For more on this, see also Tim Noble, “Living in the Truth in the Past and the Present in the Czech Republic”, in *Forum Mission* 10 (2014): *Reconciliation – Justice – Peace*, 151–168.

39 The election and subsequent behaviour of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil have brought this problem back to the fore once again.

40 This is seen especially in the numerous works of Leonardo Boff, which informed Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* on climate change and inequality (and the linking of the two is perhaps the major contribution of liberation theology).

41 See on this concept, Fr. Barton T. Geger SJ, “What Magis Really Means and Why It Matters”, *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 1, no. 2 (2012).

42 José Comblin, “Grace”, in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Orbis Books, 1996), 205.

43 Work is an important theme for Argentinean theology of the people and for Pope Francis. On this, see Emilce Cuda, “Trabajo y dignidad humana: un impulso ético-teológico del Papa Francisco” *Medellín* 44, no. 172 (2018) and on the importance of work (or labour) more generally in liberation theology, see Élio Estanislau Gasda, *Cristianismo e economia: Repensar o trabalho além do capitalismo* (Paulinas, 2014).

44 Comblin, “Grace”, 205–6.

Moreover, the grace of God is necessarily transformative — we look for a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and for a new humanity (Eph 2:15 and 4:22–24) in a community of free persons in relation. For Comblin, influenced as he was by Juan Luis Segundo and Nikolai Berdyaev,⁴⁵ the search for freedom — “freedom”, he says, “is not just given; freedom must be conquered or it does not exist”⁴⁶ — is key. Thus he also points out the close relationship between grace and forgiveness of sins. Following on from the masking of truth that González Faus claimed was at the heart of sin, Comblin argues that “[g]race... is liberation from sin and the achievement of freedom”⁴⁷.

In terms of discernment, for Comblin and other liberation theologians, this will mean searching for the will and action of God in the work of concrete human liberation, from sin, from oppression, from injustice. But this work is always dependent on and stems from the initial presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, and thus discernment is a “spiritual” matter, for it consists in seeking out and following the Holy Spirit, wherever it blows. Thus also ultimately freedom is a “spiritual” matter, since it comes through the Spirit. But precisely for this reason, given that the Spirit breathes life into creation, it is a “material” reality. For some, liberation theology can thus seem overly utopian, promising an unrealisable ideological vision. That this is a temptation is, it would seem, true. But it is precisely in this context that the task of discernment, central to liberation theology, becomes so decisive.

It is not by accident that liberation theology has been constantly reinventing itself over the past fifty years, as it responds to the changing contexts and demands that surround its practitioners. The fact that “You always have the poor with you” (Mark 13:7) is a challenge and a condemnation that liberation theology seeks to respond to in appropriate ways. But behind the utopian dreams is an eschatological hope,⁴⁸ and thus an insistence on the presence of God’s grace at work in God’s creation, transforming it and restoring it, because “with all wisdom and insight, [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:8–10).

V. CONCLUSION

One last issue needs to be addressed as we come to the end of our article. In our introduction we noted that liberation theology offers a way of discerning not just individual actions as evil or contributing to the common good but also social structures. Yet it may appear that in many ways liberation theologians seem to offer a form of discernment that is rather individual, or at least, there is very little said about the one who discerns. Is this a task for the theologian, the Christian, the human being, or the community, the society, the church? To find a response to this, we can turn to another element of liberation theology or at least its praxis, namely the importance of base ecclesial communities. In the work we have looked at, by authors who have frequently been involved with these communities, there is very little direct reference to their role as discerning communities. However, the way in which, at least in theory and frequently in practice, these groups operate makes them actually discerning communities.⁴⁹

To follow Jesus in the very specific circumstances of life is to follow Jesus in denouncing sin, by unmasking it in its selfishness and rejection of God. Thus, base communities seek to bring their reality under the light of the Word of God, to unmask what is contrary to the will of God, and to discern the

45 On Segundo and the influence on him of Berdyaev, see Tim Noble, “Whose Liberation? Whose Freedom? Nikolai Berdyaev and Juan Luis Segundo on Freedom as the Key to Human Identity”, in *Identitary Temptations: Identity Negotiations Between Emancipation and Hegemony*, ed. Judith Gruber (Verlag Mainz, 2019).

46 Comblin, “Grace”, 209.

47 *Ibid.*, 211.

48 An important distinction made by João Batista Libanio, “Esperanza, Utopía, Resurrección”, in *Mysterium liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (UCA, 1991)(= João Batista Libanio, “Hope, Utopia, Resurrection”, in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Orbis Books, 1996)).

49 One place to start with reflections on base communities is Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Orbis Books, 1986).

action that will right this wrong. It nevertheless remains surprising that liberation theologians have not devoted as much attention to the nature of communal discernment and the structures of discernment as they have to the negative structures of sin. Sobrino's insistence on following the "structures of Jesus" would lead in this direction.

It may also be that the influence of Pope Francis will have an effect in this regard, leading to a greater place for discernment as an ecclesial activity, in which the whole church participates. The second part, the participation of the whole church, is emphasised again in Francis' recent apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* on synods, where he stresses the need for all the faithful to be involved in preparing the synods.⁵⁰ The first part, the importance of discernment, is also an integral feature of Francis' theological method, at least according to a recent book by a Brazilian theologian, João Décio Passos. He writes about the relationship between the normative and discernment, saying that "Discernment is necessarily the proper Christian way of engaging with norms"⁵¹ and that "discernment is an inseparable position from the norm,"⁵² because norms always have to be applied in a way that is consistent with mercy, with what liberation theologians would often call "the God of life".

What, then, does Latin American liberation theology have to contribute to the understanding of the process and practice of discernment? First, it notes that discernment is indeed a practice, something that must be done. This is obviously not new, but it comes with a commitment to the urgency of historical transformative praxis that the church in Latin America, as evidenced by Pope Francis, has made a central part of Christian life and faith. Secondly, liberation theologians have insisted on the importance of the place from which discernment happens, from the side of the poor, those to whom injustice is done.

A good example of this can be found in the documents prepared around the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, which is going on in Rome at the time of writing. The preparatory document for the Synod utilizes the See—Judge (or Discern)—Act method which is fundamental to liberation theology, and the second part is entitled "Discernment. Towards a Pastoral and Ecological Conversion". Paragraph 9 of this Second Part, drawing on Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*, notes: "'The kingdom, already present and growing in our midst, engages us at every level of our being and reminds us' (EG 181) that 'everything in the world is connected' (LS 16) and that, therefore, the 'principle of discernment' in evangelization is linked to a process of integral human development (cf. EG 181)".⁵³ And the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the working document for the Synod, also sees the need for discernment in the Church's engagement with the world, presenting the need for "A Church with the capacity for discernment and audacity in the face of the abuses of peoples and the destruction of their territories, which responds without delay to the cry of the earth and of the poor."⁵⁴

We hope, then, that, if nothing else, our article has made clear that to discern is, ultimately, to take sides, to be partial — it is to take the side of the common good, the side of the poor, the side of God. Discernment is not simply about deciding what to do, but it is also about unmasking and naming the presence of sin and promoting and being incorporated into the presence of grace. And finally liberation theology

50 Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (2018), Article VI. A good question is to what extent this allows for contributions from outside the Roman Catholic Church. The phrase used in the document is "the People of God", which both of course echoes the theology of the people and also can be taken to be broader than simply members of the Roman Catholic, or more broadly Catholic Church (the Pope being, it needs to be remembered, the Pope of more than just the Roman Catholic Church, but of other Catholic churches in full communion with Rome, such as the Greek Catholic Church). One would like to think that there is a deliberate ambiguity in the use of the term "People of God", and at least we might assume that members of the Church must be heard, and others have the possibility to be heard if they so desire.

51 João Décio Passos, *Teologia do Papa Francisco: Método teológico* (Paulinas, 2018), 32. This is one of a series of books published by the Paulist Sisters editions in Brazil, looking at different aspects of Francis' theology.

52 Ibid., 34.

53 Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Pan-Amazon Synod, "Preparatory Document for the Synod for the Amazon", accessed October 13, 2020, <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/preparatory-document-for-the-synod-for-the-amazon.html>, 9.

54 Pan-Amazon Synod, "The Working Document for the Synod of Bishops", accessed October 13, 2020, <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/pan-amazon-synod--the-working-document-for-the-synod-of-bishops.html>, paragraph 42.

reminds us that discernment always has an eschatological dimension, opening up new ways towards the fullness of life in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This very openness allows a freedom before political powers and enables, at least in principle, the church to follow in the footsteps of Christ, knowing that its fidelity is worth whatever the cost.

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