

# PRAXIS AND THE QUESTION OF REVELATION

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Perhaps the most interesting challenge of teaching subjects about life such as psychology and sociology is that in each case the experience of the students enters into, and at times corrects and/or enlarges, the course material. Analyses of the human subject, of sociological projections, of the social principles of interaction and of similar topics must always take into consideration the ubiquitous variable of the human person presently acting. Even history is not merely a study of the past when the dynamic character of history is grasped and history is set forth as the creative efforts of individuals in society integrating their past, present and future in the effort to transform the now situation and to build a better future.

According to critics, this human variable in the present human experience is usually not accorded so prime a consideration in the doing and the teaching of theology. More frequently than not, a set of pre-givens, a search of the past, become the sole vehicles for establishing and discussing the relationship between God and the people, especially with reference to the *do's* and the *don't's* of God's laws.

For these reasons, theology is charged with being irrelevant to the times, with speaking less and less for God, and with addressing a steadily diminishing audience. Perhaps none have made these accusations as vociferously as those Latin American theologians who are developing a theology of liberation.<sup>1</sup>

There are, of course, fair and unfair features in the negative criti-

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<sup>1</sup>On the Latin American scene, J. Segundo is representative of such criticism. See his "Capitalism — Socialism: A Theological Crux," *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, Concilium v. 96 (N.Y.: Herder & Herder, 1974), pp. 110-13 and his *Liberation of Theology*. Trans. by J. Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1976). See also H. Assman, *Opresion-Liberación: Desafío a los Cristianos* (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1971) and his *Theology for a Nomad Church*. Trans. by P. Burns. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975). Others not of Latin America have made similar criticisms. For representative examples, see J. H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1969) and *God and the Oppressed* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1975); Dibinga Wa Said, "An African Theology of Decolonization," *The Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971), pp. 501-24; Vine Deloria, *God is Red* (N.Y.: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973); J. Metz "The Church's Social Function in the Light of a Political Theology," *Faith and the World of Politics*, Concilium v. 36 (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1968), pp. 2-18, and, "Political Theology," *Theology Today* 28 (April 1971-Jan. 1972), pp. 6-23.

cisms of theology by Latin Americans (and others). To analyze and discuss them, however, is not the purpose of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

What is more important for consideration is that the theology of liberation, at least that of Gustavo Gutierrez, has locked into and underscored (however unthematically) an important theological breakthrough which is crucial for bringing theology into close correspondence with people and their existential situations — a breakthrough is that the life of the Church is a *locus theologicus* because signs of the times emerge there.

This insight is a rediscovered rather than a new development in theology. As Gutierrez points out, the early Church regarded its life as a source for theologizing. Attempts to recapture this important source for theology after it had become obscured were made by leaders of the alleged "new theology."<sup>3</sup> Surely contemporary Christian eschatology, at least in the Roman Catholic view, did its part by calling attention to the active Lord of History as the future impinging on the present and by concluding, therefore, to the possibility of the *novum* in today's history.<sup>4</sup>

Still, using the life of the Church as a *locus theologicus* has not yet really come into its own in theology (and for that matter, in the Church generally).<sup>5</sup> The breakthrough apparently has not been sharp

<sup>2</sup>For a sampling of those who have discussed the criticisms of liberation and political theologies, see H. Borrat, "Liberation Theology in Latin America," *Dialog* 13 (1973) pp. 172-76; J. Hejja, "A Theology of Liberation," *Thought* 48 (1973), pp. 476-77; Marcos McGrath, "Development for Peace," *America* 118 (1968), pp. 562-67; R. J. Neuhaus, "A Theology for Artisans of a New Christendom," *Commonweal* 52 (July 4, 1975), pp. 243-46; M. J. Jones, *Black Awareness A Theology of Hope* (Nashville: New York: Abingdon Press, 1971); W. Kasper, "Zur Sachfrage: Schöpfung und Erlösung: Replik auf Jürgen Moltmann," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 153 (1973), pp. 351-552; P. Mann, "The Transcendental or the Political Kingdom, I," *New Blackfriars* 50 (1969), pp. 805-12, and "The Transcendental or the Political Kingdom, II," *New Blackfriars* 51 (1970), pp. 4-16; F. H. Mueller, "Social Ethics or Political Theology?" *Thought* 46 (1971), pp. 5-28.

<sup>3</sup>G. Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación* (Lima, Peru: CEP, 1971), pp. 20-24. (E.T.: *A Theology of Liberation*. Trans. and edited by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973, pp. 6-8). For similar observations about the "new theology," cf. Y. Congar, *A History of Theology*. Translated and edited by H. Gunthrie. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Carl J. Peter, "Why Catholic Theology Needs Future Talk Today," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 27 (1972), pp. 146-67; Carl J. Peter, "Metaphysical Finalism or Christian Eschatology," *The Thomist*, 38 (1974), pp. 125-45; Carl J. Peter, "Christian Eschatology and A Theology of Exceptions," *Wisdom and Knowledge*, v. II (Villanova University Press, 1976), pp. 283-92; Karl Rahner, "Toward A Theology of Hope," *Concurrence* (1969), pp. 23-33; Karl Rahner, "The Church and the Parousia of Christ," *Theological Investigations*, v. VI. Trans. by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), pp. 295-312.

<sup>5</sup>In their article, "Signs of the Times," (*Understanding the Signs of the Times*, Concilium v. 25 N.Y. Paulist Press, 1967, pp. 143-52). M.C. Vanhengel and J. Peters claim that signs of the times as *locus theologicus* are significant in contemporary theology (p. 145). Perhaps the case was so in 1967 but the significance did not last long. For another who would perhaps agree that these signs have not been used, see Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*. Trans. by E. Quinn. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 36.

enough to command focal attention for this source. Even the recent re-emphasis by Gutierrez is failing to make an impact.

Part of the reason for his failure is, on the one hand, the ambiguity that developed around the word *praxis* and its relationship to theology; and on the other hand, the notion of revelation merely as historical tradition handed down which consciously or unconsciously dominates in much theological discussion.

The purpose of this paper is to assist the breakthrough of Church life as a *locus theologicus* by showing (1) how Gutierrez relates theology and praxis and (2) that in the final analysis praxis challenges theology to probe more deeply the process of revelation.

### THE QUEST FOR THE ELUSIVE PRAXIS

From the time of its introduction into the theology of liberation, the word *praxis* has been slippery and difficult to manage. As H. Borrat of Latin America explains

even Gustavo Gutierrez, who observes that the role of praxis in Marx is a controversial question, alternates praxis, revolutionary praxis, historical praxis, Christian praxis without giving either the meaning of such expressions or the definition of the term. Among less sophisticated supporters of liberation theology, "praxis" seems to be at times an alternative to the faith or to the Church (as if faith and Church were not history). At other times, it is confused with *engagement*, a word that by itself has only an existential meaning and therefore could cover any political direction, from the right to the left. If "praxis" gives major patterns for theological thinking, what is it really? Where are those patterns to be found? How can we recognize a "praxis of liberation" when, as in current times, liberation still remains at the level of human expectation and when liberation movements are not only pluralistic but often in mutual opposition?<sup>6</sup>

The problem is not limited to the Latin American scene. As another critic speaking generally of political and liberation theologies observes, the present usage of the term is "simply sloppy, with 'praxis' serving as an exotic synonym for practice."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Borrat, "Liberation Theology in Latin America," p. 175.

<sup>7</sup>P. Hefner. "Theology Engagee: Liberational, Political, Critical," *Dialog* 13 (1973), p. 190. According to Hefner, "Praxis is action infused with and made conscious by theory. Practice-becoming-aware-of-itself and thereby contributing both to our store of knowledge and also to the humanization of the world is praxis. Practice without theory is blind, theory without practice is empty. Serious men and women of action, engaged in changing the world are eager for such praxis, the reflection that takes them seriously and to which they can contribute, even as they are illumined by it. Theology which functions as the theoretical component in such praxis is the only theology that the liberation theologians recognize as relevant." *ibid.*

Yet, according to Borrat, the "bridge between theology and the Latin American process [for liberation] is basically the notion of praxis."<sup>8</sup> But how it functions as bridge he cannot say.

There is clear evidence that a number of theologians are making serious efforts to come to grips with the elusive praxis and its relation to theology. The emphasis, however, seems to be on defining the word in terms of theory-action, on showing how theology fits into this, and on arriving at some method for achieving praxis as an application of a theology made practical and viable by taking into consideration the political exigencies of existential situations.<sup>9</sup>

Such studies are without question important and meaningful for the theologizing process. Indeed, Latin American theology of liberation demands some of this service from theology.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, if the focus of attention is directed solely to this end, then such focus can at the same time distract from the primary and foundational function of theology with reference to praxis.

Borrat's negative criticism of him notwithstanding, Gustavo Gutierrez does give some clear ideas about this function. He is not concerned with defining the word *praxis* (for him, it is activity born of beliefs and/or theory; adjectives specify the praxis to which he refers). His challenge is more profound. It concerns his understanding which provides a basis for a response to Borrat's question of how does "praxis give major patterns for theological thinking?"

#### THEOLOGY AND PRACTIS

In speaking of the role of theology in history, Gutierrez calls attention to what he considers to be two classical functions of theology: *theology as wisdom* which is a theology of the spiritual life and *theology as rational knowledge* which is theology as "an intellectual discipline, born of the meeting of faith and reason."<sup>11</sup> In Gutierrez's context, the latter function of theology reflects on past tradition.

<sup>8</sup>Borrat, "Liberation Theology in Latin America," p. 17 5.

<sup>9</sup>See for example, Charles Davis, "Theology and Praxis," *Cross Currents* 23 (1973), pp. 154-68; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 237-58; For a survey of the contemporary scene on the question of praxis, see Matthew Lamb, "The Theory-Praxis Relationship in Contemporary Christian Theologies," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 31 (1976), pp. 149-78. In his article, Davis goes beyond praxis as the practical result of theological reflection. Praxis offers something more to theology; seemingly, however, this "more" consists of social factors only. For Davis, taking praxis seriously in this light "means the destruction of theology in the current sense of the articulation of the immanent self-understanding of the faith," p. 167.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Gutierrez sees liberation on the one hand as a sign of the times (as did John XXIII); once theology interprets this sign, then a practical theology would call for involvement in liberation as a means for personal and social salvation. Cf. Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, pp. 183-230 (E.T., pp. 149-187). Cf. also authors in note 1 above.

<sup>11</sup>Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, pp. 16-19 (E.T., 3-5)

Gutierrez claims both functions are "permanent dimensions" of the theological task.<sup>12</sup>

There is, however, according to Gutierrez, another function or dimension equally important to the role of theology, namely, "theology as critical reflection on praxis."<sup>13</sup> Specifying further, Gutierrez explains "Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community. The life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church will be, for the understanding of the faith, a privileged *locus theologicus*."<sup>14</sup>

Gutierrez does not credit himself with discovering this function of theology. The antecedents of his claim are (1) the practice of the early Church reflecting on its life as a *locus theologicus*. According to Gutierrez, Augustine's theory of history in the *City of God* is a genuine attempt to analyze the signs of the times and their demands upon the Christian community; (2) the work of the pioneers of the "new theology" (so-called), especially Chenu's,<sup>15</sup> toward recovering this important source for theology; (3) the *signs of the times* theology introduced by John XXIII and Vatican II. Gutierrez observes that the signs of the times extends the theological function to reflect on praxis beyond the ecclesial community. The reference to signs of the times by John XXIII and Vatican II, according to Gutierrez, specifies the reason why life is a source for theology; (4) the discovery of the anthropological factor in the revelatory process and (5) the eschatological insight which places the encounter between God and His people in the events of history and which underscores the divine mission shared with human co-creators to transform the world in the building of the Kingdom of God.<sup>16</sup>

According to Gutierrez, theology's function to reflect on praxis for the purpose of finding the Spirit at work in the pastoral activity

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.*, p. 20 (E. T., p.6.).

<sup>14</sup>"La teología no engendra la pastoral, es más bien reflexión sobre ella; debe saber encontrar en ella la presencia del Espíritu inspirando el actuar de la comunidad cristiana . . . La vida, predicación y compromiso histórico de la Iglesia será para la inteligencia de la fe un privilegiado lugar teológico," Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, p. 29 (E. T., pp. 11-12).

<sup>15</sup>Quoting Chenu, Gutierrez observes: "A propósito de la participación de los cristianos en los grandes movimientos sociales de la época, M.D. Chenu escribía, perspicazmente, hace más de 30 años: 'Son tantos lugares teológicos en acto, para la doctrina de la gracia, de la Encarnación, de la Redención, además expresamente promulgados y descritos a medida por las Encíclicas de los papas. Malos teólogos, los que, encerrados en sus in-folios y sus disputas escolásticas, no estén abiertos a esos espectáculos, no sólo en el piadoso fervor de su corazón, sino formalmente en su ciencia; dato teológico en pleno rendimiento, en la presencia del Espíritu,'" Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, p. 23 (E.T., p. 8). Cf. also Y. Congar, *A History of Theology* p. 9 for remarks on Chenu's efforts.

<sup>16</sup>Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, pp. 20-27, (E.T., 6-10).

of the people incorporates another function. That function is the prophetic one. As Gutierrez puts it:

Theology thus understood, that is to say as linked to praxis, fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning. According to Cullman, this is the meaning of the prophetic role: "The prophet does not limit himself as does the fortune-teller to isolated revelations, but his prophecy becomes preaching, proclamation. He explains to the people the true meaning of all events; he informs them of the plan and will of God at the particular moment."<sup>17</sup>

It is in its context as a place where signs of the times emerge that contemporary ecclesial praxis can be understood as providing major patterns for theology. It is this same context which gives meaning to Gutierrez's observation about the order of precedence in the relation between theology and praxis: "Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step."<sup>18</sup>

Gutierrez qualifies this priority of praxis, however, by noting that other functions of theology are forerunners. In his words, "theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather, it presupposes and needs them."<sup>19</sup> If such reflection is to be *critical* in the light of the Word, it is obvious that the theological reflection on the Christian Event down through the ages enjoys an indispensable priority.

In the final analysis, however, the relation among the various functions of theology remains for Gutierrez one of mutual conditioning. Praxis as *locus theologicus* influences the content and under-

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<sup>17</sup>"la teología considerada de este modo, es decir en su ligazón con la praxis, cumple una función profética en tanto que hace una lectura de los acontecimientos históricos con la intención de desvelar y proclamar su sentido profundo. En eso consiste, precisamente, para O. Cullman, el papel profético: 'contrariamente al adivino, el profeta no se limita a transmitir revelaciones aisladas: su profecía se hace predicción, mensaje; él explica al pueblo la verdadera significación de los acontecimientos, él le hace conocer a cada instante el plan y la voluntad de Dios,' Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, pp. 30-31, (E.T., p 13). Gutierrez should not be misunderstood here as placing the prophetic charism solely within theology. His context is an address to theology, a consideration of problems which beset it. Gutierrez uses *Gaudium et spes* no. 44 in speaking of signs of the times (fn. 16 above) which includes a reference to theologians' role concerning signs of the times.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*, p. 28, (E.T., p. 11).

<sup>19</sup>*ibid.*, p. 31, (E.T., p. 13)

standing of the theologies of wisdom and of rational knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This does not negate the priority of Christ and the development of His message through time. It merely calls attention to the fact that the other functions of theology cannot arbitrarily dismiss signs of the times. The reason is this: the Holy Spirit is active there.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Gutierrez recalls for Catholic theology once again that there is a Divine Saving Presence operating in human history, specifically in praxis. Consequently, a theologian coming to grips with praxis needs to do more than merely understand the social, economical, political forces in society and seek to influence them — important as all this is. A theologian must also endeavor to discern in praxis the divine creativity at work in human events, attempting to discover the meaning of that work for the transformation of people and the world. In short, just as Jesus Christ challenged Old Testament theology and expectations without destroying all that went before Him, so in *analogous* fashion do contemporary signs of the times render a similar service to today's Christian theology.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between theology and praxis, therefore, is not merely that of applying theology (however reflexively) to the life situations of people (an important function in its own right, of course). The relationship is also (and more fundamentally) one of mutual interaction wherein the Christian Tradition interprets and is interpreted by contemporary signs of the times.

Taken in this perspective, questions about the patterns given by praxis for theological reflecting are, in the final analysis, challenging

<sup>20</sup>In Gutierrez's context, the relationship among the various functions of theology with reference also to praxis is one of mutual conditioning. In his words: "No se trata, en efecto, de una simple yuxtaposición. El quehacer crítico de la teología lleva necesariamente a una redefinición de esas otras tareas. En adelante, sabiduría y saber racional tendrán, mas explicitamente, como punto de partida y como contexto, la praxis histórica. Es en obligada referencia a ella que deberá elaborarse un conocimiento del progreso espiritual a partir de la Escritura; y es en ella, también, que la fe recibe las cuestiones que le plantea la razón humana," pp. 31-32 (E.T., pp. 13-14).

<sup>21</sup>In effect, this is another call to find transcendence in human history, i.e., transcendence understood as God's active presence. The same concern seems to be the main thrust of the Hartford Statement. This is not a case of *either* transcendence or the world but rather a case of *both-and*. As H. Küng puts it, "In the light of Jesus' teaching, against all these premature identifications, it must be observed that the kingdom of God — the consummation — *does not come about either through social* (intellectual or technical) *evolution or social revolution* (of the right or left). The consummation comes by *God's action*, which cannot be foreseen or extrapolated. It is an action of course which does not exclude but includes man's action here and now, in the individual and the social sphere. At the same time, just as formerly a false 'interiorizing' of God's kingdom had to be avoided, today there must be no false 'secularizing' of God's kingdom," *On Being A Christian*, p. 224. For Küng, "we are speaking of *transcendence*" properly understood. *ibid.*

questions about present public revelation. Factors such as presence of the Spirit, Spirit inspiring the pastoral activity of the community, signs of the times, *locus theologicus* in Gutierrez's thought suggest such is the case.

But, can praxis present questions about such revelation? To deal with this question, and thus to deal with praxis, it would seem that theology must probe deeper into the process of revelation. At least, such seems to be the challenge of praxis in Gutierrez's thought.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT REVELATION

To meet this challenge, theology must give its attention to a number of questions about revelation. Two of these questions are especially crucial here because they are fundamental for understanding and evaluating (1) Gutierrez's claim about pastoral activity as *locus theologicus*, and (2) his claim about the relationship between theology and praxis.

The purpose here is not to attempt an answer to these two questions. Rather, the purpose is merely to state them with some context. It should be noted, however, that neither question can be answered by itself in isolation, for each interacts with the other.

The *first* question is: does the fact that Jesus Christ is the definitive fullness of revelation (the fact which must be held) necessarily conclude to the axiom that all public and official revelation is closed?

The question is obviously large and of paramount significance. While this paper is no attempt to answer the question, it might be helpful to include here two considerations — one from an address by Karl Rahner; the other, from a commentary on the second chapter of *Dei Verbum* by Walter Burghardt. Together, these two ideas might well serve as a basis for viewing the question in a new way.

To pinpoint Rahner's idea, it is first necessary to provide the context of his address.

Rahner observes that the axiom of a closed revelation is difficult to accept today. The modern person, conscious of human creativity and openness, finds the axiom incredulous because it "seems to deprive history of its ultimate depth and dignity, if the history of revelation is at an end."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Rahner reminds his hearers, the

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<sup>22</sup>Karl Rahner, "The Death of Jesus and the Closing of Revelation," *Theology Digest* 23 (1975), p. 322. Rahner delivered this address on Oct. 14, 1975 to the International Congress "La Sapienza della Croce oggi" in Rome under the title "Tod Jesu und Abgeschlossenheit der Offenbarung." The address appears in full in *Theology Digest* 23 (1975) pp. 320-29.



axiom while open to critical questioning is regarded as a "Christian/Catholic dogma."<sup>23</sup>

According to Rahner, the answer for making the axiom more acceptable to the modern person lies in showing that the revelation in Christ is insurpassable. As he puts it:

If one says that the axiom teaches an insurpassability of the revelation in Jesus Christ rather than an 'ending' (the official German translation of *Dei Verbum* translates the "*oeconomia Christiana. . . numquam praeteribit*" with "The Christian dispensation is insurpassable" *unüberholbar*), then an aid to understanding the terms of the axiom is offered to contemporary man; for it is easier for him to see that there can be an historical occurrence fixed in time that can be decisive for all succeeding time, but oriented toward a genuine future, than that an historical occurrence itself could simply be finished and not ongoing, and still claim a meaning for subsequent ages.<sup>24</sup>

In Rahner's opinion, theologians have done much work in showing the insurpassability of Christ's revelation. They have yet to relate and clarify sufficiently, however, how such insurpassability can be used to explain the axiom of a closed revelation.

Rahner's address is an attempt to make this relation and clarification. His answer includes moving the point of ending from "the death of the last Apostle" to the "successful death of Jesus, the crucified and risen one."<sup>25</sup> Revelation "closed. . . with the cross because there God has pledged Himself irrevocably to history. Beyond this final Word of God, God can say nothing more. . . ."<sup>26</sup> Rahner expands to some detail why the cross contributes to the insurpassability of Christ's revelation and to the meaning of the latter for today's people. As usual, he is incisive.

According to Rahner, Jesus Christ is *the* eschatological Word of God's promise to the world. In Him, "a victorious presence of the Kingdom of God is given" in a way never to be surpassed. Now it remains only to realize this Kingdom or plan of revelation by deeds and words. From the perspective of Jesus, revelation is closed in Him; from the perspective of the Church's efforts to realize the Kingdom, revelation is ongoing. Thus it is possible to include the history of the

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<sup>23</sup>*ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>25</sup>*ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*

Church "rightly understood" as part of the history of Christ's revelation.<sup>27</sup>

Rahner does not say explicitly if the phase of realizing the Kingdom involves a public revelation. He merely states that revelation is ongoing in the history of the Church because that history is part of the history of Christ's revelation. Can it be assumed from Rahner's statement that *new* revelation, public and official in character, therefore, also continues?

It is difficult to answer this question because Rahner does not address it. He does not say specifically what he means by "revelation is ongoing in the history of the Church" because of the relationship with Christ. Does he mean reutterance of what has already been said in Christ? Does he mean new revelatory insights (public ones) because Christ still speaks in the Church? Rahner himself will have to say.

Still, there is something else in Rahner's address which might serve as an element in the discussion of a possible new revelation which would be public and official in character. Rahner does not develop this point; indeed, he might object to this use of his ideas. Still, the development seems latent in his own ideas.

The insight he provides is this: his use of Vatican II to distinguish between *completed* revelation in Christ which establishes the Kingdom victoriously and the *ongoing* revelation in the Church realizing that Kingdom in deeds and words. Can this distinction be further developed to say (1) from the perspective of Christ, revelation is closed because He is the definitive utterance in every way of God's plan and (2) from the side of the Church receiving that utterance and realizing the meaning of Jesus in history, additional public and official revelation of practical guidance is needed to assure the building of the Kingdom and not some false idol?

Such a distinction would enable theology to do justice to *two* facts: the fulness of revelation in Christ and the presence of the Spirit leading a people (who seemingly would *need* public direction) to the completion of Christ's revelation.

Walter Burghardt calls attention to a possible point of departure for a theology of revelation. His remarks appear in the context of a discussion on the issue of God revealing *now* in public fashion. Burghardt puts the question well. The passage from his commentary is lengthy but his insights warrant quoting it in full.

Speaking of his dissatisfaction with parts of the second chapter in *Dei Verbum*, Burghardt states:

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<sup>27</sup>*ibid.*

My uneasiness stems not from Vatican's basic conception of tradition as the unfolding of God's revelation within the Church, but from the Councils restricted vision of what revelation is and when God reveals. It may be that in 1962-65 a conciliar assembly could only have addressed itself to a historical revelation that came to term in Christ and the apostles, so that "we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ." (no. 4). Today, however, the question of revelation has assumed a new dimension. "The religious question today," Gabriel Moran insists, "is not whether there is revealed data but whether there is a God who reveals. A God who once spoke but now speaks no more is not only uninteresting but unintelligible. . . . If one really wishes to say that revelation is an event, then one must say that revelation exists today as a present event."

My disquiet stems from the fact that Catholic theologies of revelation have traditionally failed to stress a God who reveals *now* — perhaps because such continuing revelation, if not rigorously restricted to some few controllable "private" revelations, might imperil the uniqueness and definitiveness of the once-for-all-given-in-Christ. . . .

In its naked, unrefined form this view of revelation is theologically untenable. The reason why Christianity is ceaselessly contemporary is the thrilling fact that God is disclosing himself now — to the individual believer and to the whole People of God. We need a more expansive vision of revelation that would include (1) God's personal self-disclosure not only then but now as well; (2) God's self-disclosure now to each human being who responds in faith, and to that extent a revelation that is "private"; (3) God's self-disclosure now to the whole Christian community, and to that extent a revelation that is "public." Such a perspective on revelation would modify Vatican II's concept of tradition, which stresses the transmission of a once-for-all-given, a revelation restricted to apostolic times, with no clear provision for a present act of revealing, for a God still speaking, endlessly acting.<sup>28</sup>

Burghardt adds that perhaps the Council Fathers may have provided a richer meaning of revelation than is presently realized. He

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<sup>28</sup>W. Burghardt, "Constitution on Divine Revelation: Chapter II," *The Bible Today* (March, 1968), pp. 2428-29. Gabriel Moran, to whom Burghardt refers in his remarks, is vocal on the reality of revelation in the present. For a discussion of his work, see A. Dulles, "The Problem of Revelation," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 29 (1974), pp. 77-106; Myles Bourke, "Response to Professor Dulles," pp. 107-116 in the same *Proceedings*; G. Moran, "Response to Professor Dulles, II," pp. 117-123 in the same *Proceedings*; and Michael E. Quigley, "Revelation and the Problem of Historicism," *Heythrop Journal* 17 (July, 1976), pp. 293-308.

refers to paragraph eight of the document which states: "God uninterruptedly converses with the Bride of His beloved Son," and which calls attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in that conversation. According to Burghardt, "We may have here the springboard for a theology of revelation more responsive to the personal presence of God and His Christ in a world ever in need of redemption, ever in need of revelation."<sup>29</sup>

Without question, the issue presented here is fundamental to understanding and evaluating the concept of praxis and theological function in Gutierrez's theology of liberation.

The *second* question is: what is the meaning of the term *sign of the times*?

The question appears ridiculously simple. Yet the fact remains that the meaning is not without ambiguity.

For example, in *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II states: "The church must continually examine the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel" (no. 4; cf. also no. 44). A footnote reference to this article observes: "Signs of the times was a phrase frequently used by John XXIII. It won special attention when employed as the heading for several notable passages in his *Pacem in Terris*. Though some professed to find the usage disturbingly unfamiliar or misleading, it is now obviously a part of the Christian vocabulary as a result of this usage by the Council. Indeed, its source is ultimately biblical."<sup>30</sup>

But neither John XXIII nor Vatican II defined the term or indicated its implications for the Church. Apparently, neither has anyone else to a marked degree. As Gutierrez rightly observes: "Despite its great interest, the notion of the signs of the times is far from being a clear and well-defined area."<sup>31</sup>

It might well be that the failure to define the term is not a case of neglect. It might well be that the omission is indicative of no need to define the signs of the times because its meaning as a biblical idiom is already clear. Specifically then, signs of the times would have the connotation of salvific actions by God in the events of history, revealing Himself to His people.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*The Documents of Vatican II*. Edited by Walter M. Abbot and Joseph Gallagher, pp. 201-02, fn. 8.

<sup>31</sup>Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación*, p. 24, fn. 29 (E.T., p. 17, fn. 29). This footnote includes a select bibliography of writings on signs of the times. For another such bibliography, see Vanhengel and Peters, "Signs of the Times," p. 143, fn. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 48:35; 44:110 (49-56); 80:27-29. For those who write on signs of the times (see fn. 31) the biblical understanding of the terms seems to be operative. Certainly it is in Gutierrez. It would seem the biblical meaning is the correct understanding—why introduce a biblical idiom if its meaning is not included?

If such is the case, can it be concluded that contemporary signs of the times are indeed revelatory events of the present salvific activity of God in history which become, in and with Christ under the guidance of the Spirit, directive for the people of God as a practical public revelation of guidance for realizing the meaning of Jesus in history? Such signs of the times would have an indispensable place for keeping the meaning of Jesus historically dynamic in all ages.

It is not clear, however, whether such assumptions can be made. As the footnote reference cited above indicates, some find the use of signs of the times *disturbingly* unfamiliar or misleading.

There is need, therefore, to clarify the term and with that, to determine what, if any, implications it might have for a possible additional revealing of a public character. This clarification is essential for understanding and evaluating what Gutierrez has to say about theological function and praxis.

In summary, the relationship between theology and praxis is, according to Gutierrez, not only that found in making theology practical. More fundamentally, praxis challenges theology to reflect critically on the pastoral activity of the people in order to discover the inspiring presence of the Spirit. In effect, praxis in this context of ecclesial community (and other communities also) is a *locus theologicus*.

This relationship between theology and praxis necessarily brings a theologian in close correspondence with the life of a people, making theology indeed a *Lebenstheologie*. Such involvement is not merely, as noted, a case of applying theological pre-givens (though such applications certainly have a place) but also a learning experience for theology. It is the latter because of the movement of the Spirit, directing a people. Accordingly, theology remains a critical reflection on revelation. Its function on the present scene is to discern the *genuine* signs of the times, interpreting them and incorporating their meaning into the life of the Church.<sup>33</sup>

Taken in this context, praxis challenges theology about the meaning of revelation. Only by coming to grips with the latter can theology evaluate and understand praxis and the theological function set forth by Gutierrez.

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Gaudium et Spes no. 44 for a reference to the prophetic dimension of theology (which does not, of course, imply that all who do theology are or will be prophetic). It should be noted here also that specifying the task of theology as a reflection on revelation in the text is not meant to imply that theology needs only spiritual helps and the use of a theological science. Close correspondence with the people, searching for the genuine signs would also have to include the use of the social sciences as tools, also.

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