

***Caritades et Lieberatcione:***  
**The Virtues of Charity and Prudence in**  
**Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology of**  
**Liberation**

**A Dialogue of virtue with Aquinas and Liguori**

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## Introduction

The influence of Liberation Theology within the pastoral and moral tradition of the Catholic Church has been formative to the contemporary understanding of Catholic Christianity. As a Redemptorist Missionary, the rich tradition of liberation theology is significant. The Constitution and statutes (C&S) of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the guiding document of our apostolic life, explicitly embrace the concept of liberation and the preferential option for the poor. The description of the Gospel of Salvation in article one of the second section of the C&S provides the Redemptorist missionary's understanding of the Gospel of Salvation. Article one defines how the work of evangelization is to be understood. The Constitution states:

The Congregations' mandate to evangelize the poor is directed to the liberation and salvation of the whole human person. The members have a duty to preach the Gospel explicitly and show solidarity with the poor by promoting their fundamental rights to justice and freedom<sup>1</sup>.

This emphasis on the importance of the "liberation of the whole person" is presented as a foundational touchstone for the totality of the understanding of the moral and apostolic life of a Redemptorist missionary. Likewise, the social virtue of solidarity is intrinsically connected to this concept of the liberation of the whole person in the Redemptorists' work of evangelization and explicit proclamation of the Gospel.

The exploration of liberation theology is needed to integrate liberation theology into the Redemptorist's understanding of the moral life. However, there

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<sup>1</sup>Redemptorists, Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (2002), Con. 5.

are methodological challenges present in liberation theology. Specific interpretations and misunderstandings of the founding texts of liberation theology have presented theological challenges. Liberation theology's historical, social, and ideological context has been interpreted as methodological challenges. This tension in the theological discourse creates space for fruitful theological dialogue within the Catholic academic study of moral theology, specifically within acceptable moral thought and praxis methodologies.

The historical context of liberation theology coincided with a period when moral consequentialism was a popular methodology during the 1970's and early 1980's. Since that period of moral reflection, such methodologies have fallen out of favor with the magisterium. Consequentialism has been rejected as an acceptable or authentic methodology for Catholic moral thought. Since that historical period, virtue ethics have become the preferred and dominant methodology of moral reflection in the Catholic tradition. However, work has yet to be done to comprehensively and systematically examine how virtue ethics and Liberation theology can be reconciled and understood as mutually informing elements of an authentic moral system. This dialogue between virtue ethics and liberation theology will enable and empower the solidarity of God's people in living the values and virtues of the Reign of God, which manifests authentic Christian Liberation.

This brief work will examine how the theological virtue of charity and the cardinal virtue of prudence are understood and manifested in the foundational work of Catholic Liberation Theology, A Theology of Liberation, by Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., first published in 1971. I propose that the virtues of charity and prudence

operate as fundamental virtues and moral principles within Gutierrez's A Theology of Liberation. This dialogue will inform the role of virtue ethics in the Redemptorist Missionary's mandate to work for the liberation and salvation of the whole human person. This thesis is about the fundamental importance of the virtues of charity and prudence in the Church's mission to cooperate with the liberating grace of the Holy Spirit and the coming of the Reign of God in our midst.

### *Context of the Theological Lenses*

As we begin this work, the context and purpose of my theological position should be stated. As a Redemptorist missionary and priest, the above-cited Constitution five that forms and informs the Redemptorist life and mission are central to the purpose of this work. This reflection will be done in the spirit and tradition of St. Alphonsus Liguori. The Audience of this reflection is the Christian community as a whole. However, I hope that it is of some value for My Redemptorist confreres. For a Redemptorist this dialogue is particularly important in the field of moral theology, which must be directed to the work of proclaiming plentiful redemption.

Along with this missionary imperative, St. Alphonsus consistently exhorted the confreres to be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church and the Bishop of Rome. This fundamental identity of a Redemptorist is expressed in Constitution Six.

All Redemptorists, ever following the magisterium of the Church, must be humble and courageous servants among people of the Gospel of Christ, the Redeemer and Lord, who is the head and model of the new humanity. This message has for its special object plentiful redemption; it proclaims the love of God the Father "who first loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10) and through the Holy Spirit gives life to all who believe in him. This redemption affects the entire person. It brings to

perfection and transforms all human values to unite all things in Christ and thus lead them to their completion in a new earth and a new heaven<sup>2</sup>.

I write this reflection from the lens of my Redemptorist vocation and identity. As a Redemptorist, it is my vocational call to work towards the liberation of the whole person. The work of liberation is a complex concept that can be interpreted in various ways. In this work, we will approach this substantive subject through the lens of Christian praxis as a constituent element to understanding the necessary connection between virtue ethics and liberation theology.

### *Christian Praxis*

Praxis as defined by Merriam-Webster is to exercise or practice an art, science or skill, or a practical application of a theory.<sup>3</sup> Christian praxis extends beyond a theoretical or intellectual understanding of principles. Christian Praxis moves the Christian community to embody the transformative power of faith in action. Christian praxis integrates faith into every aspect of life—personal, social, and communal. The praxis on which liberation theology reflects is a praxis of solidarity in interests of liberation and is inspired by the gospel. This liberating praxis endeavors to transform history in the light of the reign of God.<sup>4</sup>

The core of Christian praxis is living out the Gospel values of charity, compassion, justice, and reconciliation. Christian praxis, particularly for theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, demands that disciples live lives of charity, service, and a

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<sup>2</sup> C&S Constitution, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “praxis,” 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/Dictionary/praxis>.

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo, Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1988), xxx.

commitment to social justice.<sup>5</sup> Christian praxis is directed to bring about positive social change and follow Jesus Christ as the exemplar by alleviating the suffering of others, particularly the suffering of the poor and marginalized members of our community. This dynamic engagement with one's faith must incorporate communal rituals and worship and a continuous personal and communal reflection on how one's beliefs inform and shape one's actions.

Gutiérrez's theology of liberation has significantly influenced the Church's understanding of Christian praxis, which bears particularly on how the virtues of charity and prudence are understood in the context of Christian praxis. Critical concepts and moral values in Gustavo Gutiérrez's understanding of Christian praxis are the preferential option for the poor, integral liberation, reflection and action, and the transformation of society. Gutiérrez emphasizes the preferential option for the poor, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Jesus that highlight care for the marginalized and oppressed. Christian praxis, for Gutiérrez, necessarily involves actively standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in society.<sup>6</sup>

Like Constitution five of the C&S, Gutiérrez advocates for a holistic approach to liberation. For him, Christian praxis involves not just spiritual liberation but also the liberation from social, economic, and political injustices.<sup>7</sup> It is a transformative process that seeks to address the root causes of human suffering.

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<sup>5</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xxx.

<sup>6</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 67.

<sup>7</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xvii.



Gutiérrez stresses the importance of theological reflection in action, a dialectical relationship between reflection and action.<sup>8</sup> Christian praxis is about doing good and critically reflecting on the social and economic structures contributing to oppression. It is a dynamic process that combines thoughtful, critical analysis with concrete efforts to bring about positive change.

In Gutiérrez's view, Christian praxis is a catalyst for societal transformation. It goes beyond individual piety to challenge and transform social structures perpetuating inequality and injustice. Praxis involves working towards building a just and humane society.<sup>9</sup> Christian praxis is more akin to an epistemology, a way of understanding our world and the complexities of human experience through the eyes of faith in action.

Flowing from Christian praxis as an epistemological position, we must answer the question of how one goes about living Christian praxis. Since the promulgation of Pope St. John Paul II's Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, an important response has been virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is prominent in Catholic moral theology due to its consistency with the Church's moral tradition. Rooted in the works of classical Aristotelian philosophy and the theology of Thomas Aquinas, virtue ethics focuses on developing virtuous character traits, emphasizing the cultivation of habits that lead to the teleological end. Within the Catholic context, virtue ethics provides a comprehensive framework that resonates with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

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<sup>8</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxx.

<sup>9</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxx.

The emphasis on personal and social transformation in moral character corresponds with the Catholic understanding of the human person as the *Imago Dei*.

Furthermore, virtue ethics offers a nuanced and flexible approach to moral decision-making, recognizing the complexity of ethical situations and the need for discernment. It provides a robust foundation for understanding the moral life not merely as rule-following but as a dynamic and intentional spiritual journey towards the Reign of God, aligning with the Catholic emphasis on forming right conscience and pursuing the good. Virtue ethics is a preferred approach in Catholic moral theology for its theological coherence, emphasis on character formation, and compatibility with the Church's moral teachings.

Virtue Ethics as the predominant school of moral thought reemerged in part due to the theological approach present in the papacy of Pope John Paul II. John Paul II's 1993 Papal Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* places virtue ethics at the center of Catholic moral theology. One significant contribution was the magisterium's reaffirmation of objective moral truths. In an era of moral relativism, the encyclical stressed the unchanging nature of certain moral principles rooted in the natural law and Divine Revelation.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most consequential effect that *Veritatis Splendor* had on Catholic moral theology was its rejection of consequentialist ethical theories, highlighting the potential ethical problem of reducing morality solely to the calculation of outcomes. It asserts that the moral quality of an action is intrinsic to the agent, not solely

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Vatican City, (August 6, 1993), Para 4.

determined by its consequences, contributing to discussions on moral methodology.<sup>11</sup>

*Veritatis Splendor* profoundly affected the direction of Catholic moral theology. It directly impacted the theological work of moral theologians with an interest in liberation theology and all critical theologies that, throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, had engaged in theological dialog with secular social sciences and social justice movements worldwide.

The theological and social context of Latin America in the 1970s necessarily formed the thought of theologians such as Gutiérrez, and the influence of consequentialism in the ethical framework of liberation theology is evident. The end goal of Liberation Theology is the total liberation of the human person. If one takes an unhealthy and narrow view of this rich theological approach, one may fall into the error of the consequentialists.

While Gustavo Gutiérrez was not a consequentialist (that the ends can justify the means of action), his theological and ethical perspectives often involved considerations that aligned with consequentialist thinking. Particularly in the context of social justice, Gutierrez's engagement of Marxist social analysis to understand and describe the suffering of the poor of Latin America and the need to transform society through a holistic popular movement of liberation has been argued as a consequentialist position.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Vatican City, August 6, 1993, para.75.

<sup>12</sup> Pieter, Villiers, Liberation Theology and the Bible, Pretoria: University of South Africa, (1987), 1.

Virtue, as an ethical methodology, can be employed in the text of Gutiérrez's liberation theology. It is the virtue language of the text itself, which is the strongest argument for employing virtue ethics as a methodology of the praxis of liberation theology. By embracing virtue ethics as the means of the praxis of liberation, the importance of the theological virtue of charity and the cardinal virtue of prudence is central to the virtue ethics approach to theology within the Christian project.

In the Thomistic tradition, the virtue of charity encompasses selfless love for God and others, transcending mere benevolence. This transcendent element of the virtue of charity marks it as the fundamental Theological virtue, or virtue that is divinely infused into the human heart and cultivated through individual and communal praxis of the virtue. Charity directs the will towards the teleological end of divine goodness, fostering a transformative love that seeks the flourishing of all.

Prudence involves practical wisdom in decision-making. Prudence is an intellectual virtue. It enables one to discern moral truths, choose virtuous actions, and navigate complex situations with foresight. Prudence is the directing virtue. It is impossible to live out the other virtues without the virtue of prudence present in the moral subject. Charity and prudence form a harmonious ethical foundation, guiding individuals to act by divine love and practical wisdom for the flourishing of self and others.

### *Systematic presuppositions and Theological approaches*

The complexities of the interplay between liberation theology and virtue ethics necessitate a brief statement on the systematic theological areas, which provide a theological foundation for this work. The systematic Theological perspectives, such

as theological anthropology, Christology, epistemology, and eschatology, are central to approaching God's revealed truth in Holy Scripture and must be introduced.

### *Imago Dei*

Theological anthropology in the Catholic tradition is rooted in the concept of the *Imago Dei*. *Imago Dei* asserts that humans bear God's image. This fundamental concept of the Judeo-Christian understanding of human nature is rooted in the creation story text of the Book of Genesis. "God said, "Let us make man in our image and likeness" (Gen 1:26)." Ancient Christian patristic theological works, like Augustine's "City of God," have defined and expounded upon this ancient anthropology. Augustine wrote, "God made man in His own image. For He created for him a soul endowed with reason and intelligence."<sup>13</sup> This anthropological understanding of self-reflective human nature empowers the person to be a moral agent; by discerning good from evil, a moral agent can cultivate a virtuous life.

### *Epistemology of Praxis*

Christian praxis can also be understood as an epistemological approach to understanding how the virtues of charity and prudence are expressed in Gutierrez's liberation theology, which will be central. This epistemological approach, however, needs to be incarnated in human experience. Orlando Espín's theological reflections on Popular Catholicism in his book *The Faith of the People* demonstrate and cultivate how Christian praxis is incarnated in the lived experience of popular religion in the Latino cultural experience. Espín explains that this epistemological understanding

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<sup>13</sup>Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (Moscow: Roman Roads Media, 2015), 305.

of Christian praxis in the Latino cultural context is a dialogical dynamic of ritual, belief, ethical expectation, and experience.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of Liberation Theology in Espín's epistemology of popular religion is evident in Espín's reflection that popular religion is an epistemology of suffering.<sup>15</sup> Espín's understanding of popular religion in the context of Latino communities, engages an epistemology of suffering because, through the praxis of popular religion, Latino communities make sense and process communally their reality of suffering and social marginalization.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this epistemology thus takes on the same theological perspective of those who have been marginalized and oppressed. Though Espín acknowledges that Liberation theologians have tended to downplay popular religion's role in the Church,<sup>17</sup> Espín's reflection on popular religion as an epistemological framework adequately expresses Christian praxis. It is an organic grassroots example of Christian praxis within the Latino communities striving to follow Christ the Liberator. Thus, Espín's approach to popular religion as an epistemology most closely describes the lived experience of Christian praxis in the Latino cultural context.

### *Christology of Liberation*

Another crucial theological lens to enter into this reflection on the vital relationship between Liberation Theology and Virtue Ethics is a Christological foundation. All Christian theology, particularly Christian ethics, flows from our

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<sup>14</sup> Orlando Espín, The Faith of the People: theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 163.

<sup>15</sup> See Espín, The Faith of The People, 156.

<sup>16</sup> See Espín, The Faith of The People, 158.

<sup>17</sup> See Espín, The Faith of The People, 64.

understanding of who Jesus Christ is. This work employs the Christological approach of the liberating power of the Christ event, or Christ the Liberator.

The idea of "Christ the Liberator" asserts that Jesus Christ, from his birth as a member of an oppressed people suffering the yoke of occupation of the Roman Empire informed his teachings and actions. Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of his own life on the cross was an act of defiance against systems of oppression. Jesus was a victim of State sponsored violence. The violence of the state against its own people has one end, to deprive an oppressed people of their social agency by depriving them of their most basic right, the right to life. Jesus' death unites the divine with the suffering of all oppressed peoples. Jesus' suffering and death was the ultimate act of self-giving love. His death was the perfect act of Charity. For Jesus said "No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13)." Jesus is our exemplar of virtue and his incarnation and death is the manifestation of divine solidarity with the oppressed.

Jesus' resurrection is the manifestation of the liberating power of God breaking forth in human experience. The resurrection of Christ liberates humanity from sin, oppression, and structures of injustice. This Christological approach emphasizes the transformative and liberating power of Christ's message, aligning with the biblical theme of liberation in Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18-19.

Together the incarnation of Jesus as a member of an oppressed community and the transformative power of his resurrection is the liberating force of God's salvific plan. In this theological perspective, Jesus is seen as the savior of individuals and the liberator of societies from systemic evils. The concept of Christ as a Liberator is

influential in addressing poverty, marginalization, and political oppression, viewing the Gospel as a call to social transformation and justice. Gustavo Gutiérrez has contributed significantly to developing this theological perspective within the context of liberation theology.

### *Liberating Virtue and the Bible*

The term liberation theology links the work of liberation or calls attention to the state of oppression, which cries out for relief, and theology, which refers to Scripture, the Word of God, and *Theou Logos*.<sup>18</sup> A chief concern of liberation theology is understanding what the Word of God has to say to people suffering under oppression today. The Gospel message is the fount and loadstar of Gutierrez's approach to Liberation Theology. It could be said that the scriptural starting point for entering into Biblical exegesis and its intrinsic connection with Liberation Theology is God's message to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The Lord said, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know about their sufferings. I have come down to free them from the hands of the Egyptians and to lead them from that land to a beautiful and spacious land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has come up to me, and I myself have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians torment them. Now go! I send you to Pharaoh. Lead my people, the Israelites, from Egypt (Ex. 3:7-10).

The liberating power of the Word of God has been a universal message of hope in the Christian context, transcending time and culture. The Biblical message of liberation points to a God who is not deaf to the cries of the poor. God enters into

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<sup>18</sup> See Villiers, Liberation Theology and the Bible, 6.



their experience of alienation to lead to spiritual and physical freedom from oppression.<sup>19</sup>

Christian praxis calls the reader of Scripture to reflective action. Like Moses at Sinai, the Christian disciple is called and sent to work for their liberation and the liberation of the least in our midst. Lúcas Yin Sing Chan, S.J., in his seminal work *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*, provides a bridge from Biblical exegeses and Moral hermeneutics to Christian praxis through virtue ethics. For Chan, virtue ethics is more interested in the affairs of ordinary life than abstract intellectual exercises. Virtue ethics concerns what a person should do in daily life. This dynamic moves the moral agent from asking, "Who am I," to "Who I ought to become."<sup>20</sup>

Chan's insight into Scripture is a scripted script that is to be reflectively lived out by emulating the moral exemplars found in Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, the person of Jesus of Nazareth provides a lens for Christian praxis working towards the incarnation of the eschatological realization of the message of Christ the Liberator in our everyday lives. Through this lens, we will reflect on the relationship between Gutierrez's work and the virtues of charity and prudence.

### *The Eschatological Promise*

Realized eschatology is a theological perspective that emphasizes the fulfillment of specific eschatological promises in the present rather than in a future apocalyptic event. It proposes that the Reign of God, salvation, has been realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The theological position Gutiérrez argues

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<sup>19</sup> See Villiers, *Liberation Theology and the Bible*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Lucas Yin Sing Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life*, (New York: Sheed & Ward Book, 2012), 10.

<sup>21</sup> See Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*, 4.

that believers can experience the benefits of eschatological hope,<sup>22</sup> such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, in the present age. This perspective contrasts with traditional eschatology, which anticipates the fulfillment of these promises in a future, final consummation.

In the context of Liberation Theology, realized eschatology offers a distinct emphasis on the tangible transformation of societal structures in the present. Influenced by this perspective, liberation theologians have highlighted that God's promised future of justice and liberation is not merely a distant hope but is actively unfolding.<sup>23</sup> Gutiérrez sees the struggle for social justice, the liberation of the oppressed, and the pursuit of a more equitable society as integral components of realizing eschatological promises in the here and now. In this framework, the Christian community is called to engage in transformative praxis that contributes to the fulfillment of God's liberating promises on Earth.<sup>24</sup>

The eschatology in Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* does not ignore the reality of oppression and human suffering. On the contrary, it is the eschatological hope of the Gospel that compels the Christian to engage in the political struggle and social movements of marginalized peoples to live out the message of the Reign of God in this present age and to bear witness to the Reign of God that is here in our midst yet not fully understood or lived due to the social sin of injustice. Gutierrez presents through this lens a realized eschatology in *A Theology of Liberation*, which

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<sup>22</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 123.

<sup>23</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 122.

will be employed in this reflection to understand the Reign of God as the fundamental liberating force in the human experience.

*The Experience of the Oppressed*

As we begin this reflection, of the four theological loci of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason (which inform all theological dialogue), experience, particularly on the experience of the poor and marginalized, will be the first point of reference and will be given a place of privilege in this reflection. The experience of the oppressed as a theological locus is central to the Liberation Theology of Gutiérrez.

This theological locus of reflection asserts that the daily struggles and suffering of the oppressed provide a profound starting point. Gutiérrez argues that understanding God's presence and justice requires engaging with the lived experiences of marginalized communities.<sup>25</sup> This theological locus shifts the focus from abstract doctrines to the concrete realities of poverty, oppression, and injustice. By prioritizing the perspectives of the oppressed, it advocates for a theology grounded in social justice and the transformation of unjust structures.

Likewise, the experience of the poor and abandoned will be given a place of privileged insight into understanding how the Christian praxis of the virtues of charity and prudence is explored in this work. In this reflection, we will place the experience of the oppressed as a starting point for understanding the dialogical relationship between the theology of liberation and the virtues of charity and prudence. How a Redemptorist missionary conducts his pastoral ministry and the

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<sup>25</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxi.

theological reflection informed by and informs their missionary charism must be based on the experience of the poor, whom the Redemptorist is called to evangelize.

### *Our Road Map*

As we continue in this examination of the important work of Gustavo Gutiérrez it is necessary to briefly describe what the following chapters will address. In Chapter one we will examine the theory of Liberation Theology presented by Gutiérrez. In that discussion, important concepts, such as theological praxis, virtue ethics and the important influence of Thomism and the legacy of virtue theory in the Catholic tradition will be presented. We will also bring into the dialogical dynamic what contemporary virtue theory brings to the context of liberation theology. It is through this dialogue of tradition and contemporary critique and response that we will roughly sketch the context of our theological discourse.

Chapter two will engage the virtue of Charity as the foundational virtue of Gutiérrez's theology of liberation. Here we will engage how Thomas Aquinas' presentation of the virtue of charity and Alphonsus Liguori's pastorally practical approach to the virtue of charity illuminate how Gutiérrez engages the virtue of charity in his theology.

This chapter will take these three theological points of reference to present how Gutiérrez understands the connection between the virtue of charity and Christian praxis. Through this necessary connection of charity, Christian praxis we will examine Gutiérrez's understanding of political charity, and how Christian spirituality is a constituent element of political charity and how political charity becomes a eschatological prophetic witness to the liberation of the whole person. It

is through this eschatological spirit of political charity that charity becomes epistemological praxis.

Chapter three will follow the structure of chapter two by dialogically engaging Aquinas, Liguori and Gutiérrez's praxis of the virtue of prudence. We will also examine how prudence is reflected in scripture and how the formation of conscience in the Alphonsian tradition helps us to understand how Gutiérrez's theological perspective uses the virtue of prudence through the relationship between conscientization and prudence in the context of liberation theology. The conscientization of a community is the manifestation of prudence as a social virtue. Thus, we will discuss how this dynamic demonstrates the virtue of prudence as a cultural action and a radical form of Christian praxis, which consequence is a metanoic movement of conscience through prudence.

The final chapter will conclude this work by examining the implication of political charity and the heuristic praxis of conscientization of prudence, particularly in the context of the Redemptorist missionary. It is towards this end, the practical application of these theological reflections where the fruit of this theological dialogue will find value and will hopefully be an aide to the movement towards the liberation of the whole person.

## **Chapter One**

### **Liberating Virtue**

Significant socio-political upheavals marked the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America. The era witnessed the rise of leftist movements, responding to economic inequalities, authoritarian regimes, and U.S. influence. Revolutionary fervor, exemplified by the Cuban Revolution in 1959, inspired social justice movements across South America. Political instability, military coups, and repressive regimes characterized the period. In Chile, A right-wing military junta deposed a legally elected socialist government in 1973. Salvador Allende, the legitimate Chilean president, was assassinated. Liberation Theology emerged, connecting the Christian faith with social justice, responding pastorally and theologically to the region's tumultuous political landscape.

#### *The Theory of Liberation Theology*

Liberation Theology rediscovered the importance of social justice for the Christian faith, particularly addressing poverty and oppression. Influenced by Latin American realities, it gained prominence in the 1960s-70s. Political contexts, like critical analyses of societal structures, shaped theologians' and pastoral ministers' consciousness. Though rooted in the Latin American socio-theological perspective, theologies of liberation spread globally, impacting the development and direction of theological discourse.

By 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, Leonardo Boff's *Theology of Human Hope*, and Jon Sobrino's *Christology at the Crossroads* began to form the theological groundwork for the various theologies of liberation that were coalescing in the theological zeitgeist emerging in the developing world.

An essential element to the ecclesial context of Liberation Theologies development was the Medellín Conference of Latin American Bishops, held in 1968. Medellín was a pivotal moment in Latin American Catholicism. It responded to social injustices by endorsing a preferential option for the poor. Embracing Liberation Theology's principles, it emphasized the Church's duty to engage with societal issues and championed the rights of the oppressed. The conference marked a departure from traditional ecclesial conservatism, influencing subsequent efforts to align the Church with social justice causes in Latin America, making it a landmark event in the history of liberation theology and the Church's engagement with socio-political realities.<sup>26</sup>

The Puebla Conference of Latin American bishops, held in 1979, building on the Medellín Conference's legacy, addressed the continuing social and ecclesial challenges. Emphasizing evangelization and human development, it sought a balanced approach to Liberation Theology, affirming its principles while cautioning against ideological excesses.<sup>27</sup> Puebla underscored the Church's commitment to social justice, Indigenous rights, and the poor. This conference contributed to shaping the Church's stance in the region, fostering a nuanced relationship between faith and socio-political engagement while acknowledging the complexity of Latin American realities. The emergence of the liberation theology movement in the developing world elicited a formal response from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its head, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

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<sup>26</sup> Galilea Segundo, Liberation Theology & The Vatican Document, (Claretian Publications, Quezon City, 1984), 4.

<sup>27</sup> See Galilea, Liberation Theology & The Vatican Document, 5.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1984 "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation" expressed concerns about Marxist influences on Liberation Theology.<sup>28</sup> The document acknowledged liberation theology's positive contributions but cautioned against potential distortions and political alliances that might compromise the Church's mission. While affirming a commitment to social justice, it emphasized the primacy of faith and the dangers of reducing theology to sociopolitical ideologies.<sup>29</sup> The Instruction prompted ongoing dialogue within the Church on balancing liberationist concerns with doctrinal fidelity, shaping subsequent discussions on the theological and political dimensions of social engagement as theorists of Liberation Theology continued to develop and define the theological boundaries of the movement.

The most distinctive element of Liberation Theology is its theological point of departure, which is Latin America's ecclesial and social reality. Liberation Theologians, such as Segundo Galilea, would point out that this distinct point of departure for theological reflection differs from European and North American thinkers in that it is derived from the experience of the oppressed and marginalized, not from a place of material affluence and social privilege.<sup>30</sup>

A critical aspect of Liberation Theology, as seen by Gutiérrez, is the place that Liberation Theology has in developing the people of God's understanding of what theology is and its function in the human experience. Gutiérrez points out the three significant developments in the Christian understanding of the role and function of

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<sup>28</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instructions on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation' (Rome, August 6, 1984), VII. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instructions," I. 2.

<sup>30</sup> See Galilea, *Liberation Theology & The Vatican Document*, 13.



theology. He points out three historical developments of theology in the Christian tradition: spirituality/wisdom, rationality, and theology as a critical reflection of the experience of the ecclesial community.<sup>31</sup>

Theology as spirituality in the wisdom tradition of the Catholic faith appeared in the first centuries of the Church. Reflecting on the Holy Scriptures was the focus of this period of theological development. This theological movement, in dialogue with the secular non-Christian world around them, was directed toward spiritual growth. This development used Platonic and Neo-platonic categories for Christian metaphysics using the philosophic parlance of their time. The Council of Ephesus recognized that transcendent realities bore out the early monastics and patristic theological works such as Augustine's *City of God*. This spiritual/wisdom-orientated approach to theological reflection is a permanent and constituent function of Christian theology today.<sup>32</sup>

Gutiérrez's understanding of the function of Christian theology next recognizes the central influence of scholasticism on the development of the work of theology. In the Twelfth century, theology began to be understood as a "subaltern science" and embraced Aristotelian categories for its insights. Theologians such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas approached their theological work as an exercise of rational knowledge. For Gutierrez, the essential feature of St. Thomas Aquinas's work is that theology is an intellectual discipline born of the meeting of

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<sup>31</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 3.

<sup>32</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 4.

faith and reason. This use of rational knowledge is a permanent function of theology.<sup>33</sup>

The third significant development of Gutiérrez's work is using theology as a critical reflection on praxis. Gutiérrez sees this concept of theology as a critical reflection, less as a development and more as a reclamation of a Christian theological tradition rooted in the first centuries of the Church. Gutiérrez proposes that one of the great fruits that has come out of critical theological reflection is the rediscovery of Charity being at the center of Christian life. Gutiérrez sees this development as embracing the Pauline approach to Christian reflection centered on a commitment to God and neighbor.<sup>34</sup>

The critical reflection of Liberation Theology engages dialogically modern social sciences such as anthropological and sociological, political, and philosophical studies to understand better the human context, which liberation theologians seek to engage in their critical approach.<sup>35</sup> It is also this critical engagement with social sciences, which liberation theology critics point out, as the source of Marxist influence in the liberationist approach to theology. Gutiérrez describes this approach as a "Christian confrontation with Marxism,"<sup>36</sup> which may produce a fruitful dialogue in the Christian work of liberation. Within the socio-historical context of Latin America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, it would be difficult to argue that Catholic theology could not acknowledge the influence of Marxist revolutionary thought if theology is to reflect signs of the times critically.

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<sup>33</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 6.

<sup>35</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 6.

<sup>36</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 8.

The concept of critical reflection stems from the development of the concept of critical theory in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The philosophical concept of critical theory is attributed to Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer was a German philosopher and sociologist. Critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt School, a group of intellectuals who developed critical theory.<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School used the term in their interdisciplinary approach to social theory to provide a critical analysis of society, culture, and politics. Critical theory, as developed by thinkers like Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others, encompasses a range of perspectives that examine and critique power structures, ideologies, and social norms. The Frankfurt School's work laid the groundwork for various strands of critical theory that have since emerged in fields such as sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies.<sup>38</sup>

It is this critical approach to the social sciences, which Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians are striving to work out, in the light of the Word of God accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose, which indissolubly links the work of theology to historical praxis.<sup>39</sup> For Gutiérrez, a critical approach seeks to understand the social causes of poverty and oppression.<sup>40</sup>

Another theological theme that liberation theology engages is the theme of eschatology and how this central Christian theological message must be engaged in a critical theological reflection. Gutiérrez points out that rediscovering the

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Biro, "Critical Ecologies : the Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises," (Toronto [Ontario]: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3–11.

<sup>38</sup> Biro, "Critical Ecologies," 3-11.

<sup>39</sup> Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 9.

<sup>40</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xviii-xxi.

eschatological dimension of the Christian theological reflection in Liberation Theology is the central role of historical praxis. For Gutiérrez, this dialogical dynamic of theological reflection and the lived experience of the faith create a “theologico-pastoral epistemology,”<sup>41</sup> which has formed other theologians such as Orlando Espín’s epistemology of popular religion.<sup>42</sup>

Every day, Christians engage in this eschatological dimension of Christian praxis. In the Lord’s Prayer, Christians pray for the coming of the Reign of God and the realization that God’s will be done. However, theologians often overlook or downplay this apocalyptic theme in Christian theology. This most fundamental prayer of Christian thought and identity is the desire for the realization of the Reign of God, which is paired with the immediate need for the basic material human needs, our daily bread.

The movement toward reconciliation is linked to this Christian vision of the Reign of God, where God’s will is done, and the basic needs of human dignity are realized. Reconciliation demands mutual responsibility for the scandal of human sin. The embracing of the eschatological dimension in the moral life of Christians and the role of theology in critically engaging the realities of human experience is a necessary aspect of critical Christian praxis in the framework of Liberation Theology. The Church’s call for the liberating force of the Reign of God to deliver us from all the world’s evils provides both a theological and a moral impetus.

An essential element of Liberation Theology is the emphasis on orthopraxis (right action) over orthodoxy (correct belief). Gutiérrez notes that a focus on

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<sup>41</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 8.

<sup>42</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 8.

orthopraxis does not negate or dismiss the importance of orthodoxy in Christian theology. Orthopraxis aims to balance and even reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness that doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life. Most importantly, orthopraxis modifies the emphasis upon attaining a theological orthodoxy that is often no more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable theological interpretation.<sup>43</sup> Orthopraxis is when the human experience and nature meet the revealed and rational truth in a moral moment.

Orthopraxis reflects on the development and formation of the foundational concepts that have formed the thought of liberation theology. Now let us reflect on how liberation theology has developed over the past 50 years, which will help us engage how the virtues, particularly how the virtues of charity and prudence, form and inform theologies of liberation.

### *Theological Praxis*

Liberation theology, a dynamic theological movement rooted in the socio-political context of Latin America, introduces the concept of praxis as a central pillar of its philosophical and theological framework. Derived from the Greek word for "action," praxis in liberation theology transcends a mere theoretical engagement with faith; it calls for the active, transformative engagement of individuals and communities in the struggle against oppression and injustice.<sup>44</sup>

In liberation theology, praxis represents the inseparable unity of reflection and action. It emphasizes a transformative cycle where critical reflection on marginalized communities' socio-economic and political realities informs concrete

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<sup>43</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxx.

actions aimed at liberation. This concept rejects passive acceptance of oppression and advocates for a proactive, liberating engagement.

In the praxis-oriented approach, theology is not confined to the academic sphere but becomes a lived experience. As a participant in the struggle for justice, the theologian engages in a dialectical process of reflection and action. As praxis seeks to empower the oppressed and dismantle systems of inequality, this integration of theory and practice aligns with the movement's commitment to the preferential option for the poor. As a driving force in liberation theology, praxis resonates beyond Latin America, influencing diverse liberationist movements globally. Its enduring relevance lies in its insistence that genuine faith demands an embodied commitment to justice, challenging individuals and communities to be active agents in the ongoing pursuit of liberation.

### *Contemporary landscape*

Theology during this period was deeply connected to the social and political struggles in the region, emphasizing the preferential option for the poor and critiquing oppressive structures. Because Liberation Theology is a relatively recent theological development in the Christian tradition, distinct phases have yet to be distinguished. Some original theorists, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, still write, teach, and speak in the field.

However, Liberationist thought has spread far beyond the original Latin American context from which it was born. This phase involves the evolution and diversification of liberation theology. Scholars and theologians engaged with new

contexts have expanded liberation theology's scope to include gender, race, ecology, and global justice.

Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian feminist theologian, has contributed to liberation theology by integrating feminist perspectives, ecological concerns, and a commitment to justice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, primarily known for her work in feminist theology, has engaged with liberation theology themes, advocating for justice and equality within the Church. Liberation ethicist Miguel De La Torre has developed a moral theory rooted in liberationist work and has critiqued Virtue Ethics as incompatible with the liberationist critical theory.<sup>45</sup>

### *Virtue ethics*

Virtue ethics, rooted in classical philosophy, has deep historical roots within the Catholic Church. In the early centuries, figures like Augustine and Aquinas integrated virtues into their moral theology. Historically, however, the Church primarily relied on deontological and teleological approaches until virtue ethics experienced a revival in the 20th century. The Thomistic tradition, particularly the works of Thomas Aquinas, remains influential in shaping Catholic ethical thought.

### *Thomism and The Virtue Tradition*

The importance of Thomas Aquinas's virtue theory in Christian theology cannot be overstated. It has been the basis for Western moral thought that must be contended with in any contemporary ethical inquiry in the Western tradition. Let us now briefly discuss how Aquinas understood a virtue and its types. Then, it is essential to reflect on how

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<sup>45</sup> See Vic McCracken, "Christian Faith, and Social Justice: Five Views" (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 166.

Aquinas understood how a person comes to be virtuous or possesses virtues, including how virtues function in the moral life within Aquinas's theory of virtue.

It is essential to understand that Aquinas's ethical system is rooted in teleology. All of creation is directed towards an end or the good. For Aquinas, a Christian, that end is God.<sup>46</sup> All creation is directed towards God; all good things reflect God's ultimate and perfect goodness. It is in God that humanity finds happiness.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, living a virtuous life is the means to happiness. The quintessential Thomistic moral truism, avoid evil, do good, and strive for the perfect, describes this teleological viewpoint of natural law and how rational human nature functions.<sup>48</sup> For Aquinas, rationality is what makes human nature distinct in creation. It is within this epistemological, anthropological, and cosmological framework that Aquinas's virtue theory operates.<sup>49</sup>

Aquinas defines virtue as a good quality of mind by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, and of which God works in and without us.<sup>50</sup> For Aquinas, there are three species of virtue: moral, intellectual, and theological. Moral virtues and intellectual virtues are rooted in rational human nature itself. Moral and intellectual virtues are acquired and integrated into a person's character through habits, which are actions of the human will and the reason. Aquinas follows Augustine's understanding of a habit as possessing a disposition. If a person does virtuous actions, then a person possesses that virtue. For Aquinas, as a person continues in the habit of a

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.II.1.1.

<sup>47</sup> See ST, I.II.4.4.

<sup>48</sup> See ST, I.II. 94.2.

<sup>49</sup> See St, I.II.94.2.

<sup>50</sup> See ST, I.II.55.4.



particular moral or intellectual virtue, that virtue is more thoroughly integrated into that person's character. They become what they possess, that is, a virtuous person.<sup>51</sup>

Let us examine the moral virtues and how they function in Aquinas's virtue theory. The moral virtues are the virtues that we most commonly associate with ethics. Moral virtues help us moderate our passions so we can act through reason and find the meaning of a given situation, avoiding the vices of deficiency and excess. For Aquinas, four cardinal, or hinge virtues, enables a person to act rightly in any particular situation. The moral agents as the subject of the moral virtues correctly employ reason.<sup>52</sup>

Each moral virtue has an object, subject, and role in the moral life. The cardinal virtues are justice, temperance, fortitude, and prudence. Justice's object is to give another what is due to them.<sup>53</sup> The object of justice is the will. The role of justice is to seek the common good.<sup>54</sup> Fortitude's object is the resolve to achieve a good that is difficult to obtain. The subject of fortitude is one's irascible appetite. Its role is bravery in the face of adversity. Temperance's object is moderating our desire for food, drink, and sex. The subject of temperance is one's concupiscent appetite. In Thomistic virtue theory, the most critical intellectual virtue in the moral life is prudence. Prudence's object is the right reason concerning action. Prudence's role is to direct the use of the other moral virtues. The subject of prudence is the practical intellect,<sup>55</sup> i.e., reason.

Like moral virtues, the intellectual virtues are possessed through the habit of studying the principles of a subject matter, or science, to seek the truth of that subject. The

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<sup>51</sup> See ST, I.II.49.1.

<sup>52</sup> See ST, II.II.56.3.

<sup>53</sup> See. ST, II.II. 58.1.

<sup>54</sup> See. ST, II.II. 58.1.

<sup>55</sup> See. ST, II.II. 56.4.

intellectual virtues are understanding, knowledge, and wisdom. Understanding is possessing knowledge of the principles of a subject matter.<sup>56</sup> Knowledge is possessing all the truths of a subject matter in light of the principles. Wisdom is the intellectual virtue that can see the first principle of reality.<sup>57</sup> Aquinas is following Aristotle's metaphysics in his understanding of the intellectual virtues. For Aquinas, human reason has a natural inclination for understanding. We learn about our world through these virtues.<sup>58</sup>

The final type of virtue in Aquinas's virtue theory is theological virtue. The theological virtues are distinct from the moral and intellectual virtues in obtaining them. God infuses the theological virtues into a person. That is, a person cannot possess them through habit or acts.<sup>59</sup>

For Aquinas, the theological virtues are stable powers of the soul.<sup>60</sup> These virtues allow a person to encounter the divine truth. Divine truth cannot be known through the natural world alone. The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity. The object of the theological virtues is God himself, and we have come to know about the theological virtues through divine revelation in sacred scriptures, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup>

The subject of the theological virtues is our will.<sup>62</sup> They enable us to unite our will with the will of God. The role of the theological virtues is to live in divine happiness. The theological virtues are infused into a person by God's grace. These theological virtues can

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<sup>56</sup> See ST, II.II. 56.5.

<sup>57</sup> See ST, II.II. 46.2.

<sup>58</sup> See ST, I.II. 57.3.

<sup>59</sup> See ST, I.II. 62.1.

<sup>60</sup> See ST, I.II. 62.2.

<sup>61</sup> See ST, I.II. 62.2.

<sup>62</sup> See ST, I.II. 62. 3.

increase through an increase of grace, which God pours into us about our openness to cooperating with God's grace.

For Aquinas, the most essential theological virtue is Charity.<sup>63</sup> Even in the Kingdom of Heaven, the virtue of charity endures. For a Christian, the theological virtue of charity should infuse all other moral, intellectual, and theological virtues so that we may love like Christ, unite ourselves with him, and thus realize the *telos*, i.e. the meaning and ultimate end of human existence.

### *Contemporary Virtue Ethics*

In the late 20th century, scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre contributed to the renaissance of virtue ethics within Catholic moral theology by making the claim that “it is only possible to understand the dominant moral culture of advanced modernity adequately from a stand point external to that culture.”<sup>64</sup> That stand point that transcends the particularity of culture and can be approached as a teleological moral project is virtue ethics.<sup>65</sup> John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* engaged with virtue ethics, reaffirming the importance of moral virtues in ethical decision-making.<sup>66</sup> Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, emphasizing mercy, compassion, and encounter, further underscores the relevance of virtue ethics in addressing contemporary moral challenges.<sup>67</sup>

Virtue ethics, as a moral framework, focuses on developing virtuous character traits in individuals and the implications of these virtues for social and

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<sup>63</sup> See ST, I.II. 62.4.

<sup>64</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ix.

<sup>65</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 184.

<sup>66</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Rome, August 6, 1993, 4.

<sup>67</sup> See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Rome, March 19, 2016, 3-6.

communal life. It contrasts with deontological ethics, which emphasize rules and duties, and consequentialist ethics, which evaluate actions based on outcomes. In virtue ethics, the moral framework of individuals and the moral life of communities are engaged.<sup>68</sup>

At the individual level, Virtue Ethics emphasizes cultivating virtuous character traits such as honesty, courage, compassion, and justice. Individuals are encouraged to develop good habits and internalize virtues to guide their actions.<sup>69</sup> Virtue ethics values practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the ability to discern the morally correct course of action in particular situations. A nuanced understanding of virtues and how to apply them contextually must be present.

Virtue ethics focuses beyond individual character to the virtues that contribute to a flourishing community. Shared virtues within a society, such as justice, cooperation, and solidarity, contribute to the common good. Virtue ethics considers the role of institutions and societal structures in fostering or hindering virtuous behavior. It emphasizes the importance of creating environments that encourage the development and expression of virtues.<sup>70</sup>

Virtue ethics is agent-centered, meaning it emphasizes the individual's moral character rather than just focusing on the morality of specific actions. Ethical decisions are evaluated based on whether they express virtuous character.

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<sup>68</sup> See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 185.

<sup>69</sup> See ST, I.II.55.4

<sup>70</sup> See Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 117.

Virtue ethics critiques purely rule-based ethical approaches, arguing that rigid adherence to rules may not capture the complexities of moral situations.

Virtue Ethics does not ignore outcomes. Virtue ethics suggests that moral evaluation should go beyond merely assessing consequences to considering the character and motivations of the moral agent as equally if not more important.

In summary, virtue ethics encourages individuals to strive for excellence in character and, by extension, contribute to creating virtuous and flourishing communities. It provides a holistic and nuanced perspective on morality that addresses life's personal and social dimensions.

Two of the most influential proponents and theorists of Virtue ethics are Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. These two thinkers have brought Virtue Ethics into the contemporary theological discourse and provided philosophical and theological frameworks for how virtue and Virtue Ethics can move beyond the personal, spiritual, or pious approach to virtue of the past to a viable moral theory today.

MacIntyre through the more secular approach of philosophical ethics, and Hauerwas through a Protestant Christian context, both engage the concept of virtue in distinct ways. What binds both thinkers is their acknowledgement that modern moral philosophy has neglected the virtues in the moral life of society.<sup>71</sup> What distinguishes them is the scope that virtue can play in the moral formation of society and how they systematize their understanding of virtue.

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<sup>71</sup> Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 117.

Let us begin with the similarities of MacIntyre and Hauerwas' thoughts on virtue. As stated above, both thinkers acknowledge that virtue has been neglected in modern philosophies of ethics. The result has been the problem of moral relativism. The challenge of cultural and moral pluralism can be vexing in establishing a coherent virtue ethic. The way that both MacIntyre and Hauerwas address this social challenge is by the development of virtue through community traditions and narrative. This dynamic of creating a coherent and cohesive story of morality within a community would be the concept of tradition in MacIntyre.<sup>72</sup> Thought and narrative create a sense of the unity of the self in Hauerwas.<sup>73</sup>

What these concepts do is to orientate the human understanding of moral reality.<sup>74</sup> Hauerwas agrees with MacIntyre that the discussion of virtue involves an analysis of the nature of the self or human person.<sup>75</sup> For Hauerwas, the ethic of virtue depends on the historical and cultural aspects of human experience within the narrative context and the nature of human existence within the traditions of a particular community.<sup>76</sup> Following MacIntyre's preposition, narrative history is the primary and essential genre for characterizing human actions.<sup>77</sup> These familiar historical narratives of human action create a common virtue theory framework.

MacIntyre and Hauerwas see this dynamic between the community narrative, its traditions, and establishing a coherent understanding of virtue as key in their theories. They both see this understanding as the central challenge within the post-

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<sup>72</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204.

<sup>73</sup> See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 147.

<sup>74</sup> See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 147.

<sup>75</sup> See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 112-113.

<sup>76</sup> See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 125.

<sup>77</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208.

modern moral context, which struggles to form coherent community structures and, thus, coherent virtue structures.<sup>78</sup> Hauerwas and MacIntyre propose virtues as a means for the moral growth of individuals and communities. However, there are differences and distinctions between these two thinkers in the analysis of virtue and its scope in the moral formation of a wider society.

A fundamental difference between MacIntyre and Hauerwas is their understanding of the relationship between virtue and virtues and how, or if, these concepts are defined. MacIntyre defines virtue "as an acquired human quality, the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such good."<sup>79</sup> Hauerwas, conversely, does not attempt to define what virtue is, pointing out that there has been such a multiplicity of definitions of virtue that, within the complexity of human experience, such an endeavor would be unfruitful.<sup>80</sup>

Hauerwas also does not attempt to suggest how the relationship between the concept of virtue and the virtues should be understood.<sup>81</sup> For MacIntyre, the relationship between virtue and virtues is rooted in his concept of practices, which he defines as:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result the human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 117.

<sup>79</sup> See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 191.

<sup>80</sup> See Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 112.

<sup>81</sup> See Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 113.

<sup>82</sup> See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187.

These practices of a community form tradition and, when done with excellence, constitute virtue.

Hauerwas leaves this dynamic more ambiguous and focuses his understanding of the development of virtue within the context of the Christian community. For Hauerwas, virtues are moral skills to live faithfully the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup> Unlike MacIntyre, Hauerwas does not aim his virtues towards a *telos* but towards Christian discipleship and fidelity to the actual narrative of Jesus Christ. This reflects the different social scope of these two thinkers' virtue theory. MacIntyre's teleological approach makes the formative community much more expansive than Hauerwas's. For Hauerwas, the Christian community has no role in changing society; it is only to be faithful to the Gospel.

Hauerwas and MacIntyre have contributed a great deal to the discourse on how virtue ethics can inform the formation of communities. They both value the importance of narrative, tradition, and seeking moral truth. The contrast between them is also stark. MacIntyre's approach is more systematic and universal, while Hauerwas is more narrative-based and particular towards a worldview of Protestant Christianity. Both bring critical value to understanding and living the ethics of virtue.

### *Contemporary Critiques of Virtue Ethics*

When moral casuistry fell from favor in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethicists turned to Virtue Ethics as a viable moral methodology. However, Virtue Ethics has yet to go without criticism. Some theologians from two critical theological perspectives,

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<sup>83</sup> See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 126.



Liberationist and Critical Race Theorists, have questioned the value and efficacy of Virtue Ethics.

### *The Liberationist Critique*

The liberation ethicist Miguel De La Torre rejects Virtue ethics as irreconcilable with liberation theory.<sup>84</sup> His three central critiques of virtue ethics are that it is too individualistic, lacks a praxis theory, and is Euro-American-centric.

Of the critique that virtue ethics is fundamentally too individualistic,<sup>85</sup> liberation ethicists and feminist ethicists note a common point. De La Torre proposes that virtue ethics lacks a communitarian theory.<sup>86</sup> This critique centers on the locus of where ethical reflection begins. De La Torre's understanding of virtue ethics is that it is the locus of the individual seeking, in the Thomistic virtue tradition, the perfection of the personal characteristic of virtue and thus places the communitarian aspect of ethics as a secondary consideration. This dynamic would privilege the individual over the whole.

De La Torre's assertion that virtue ethics lacks praxis would also make it incompatible with a liberationist ethic since theological praxis lies at the heart of the liberationist methodology. De La Torre states that the individualism of virtue ethics is internal and only addresses moral inclinations and aptitudes, not actual praxis.<sup>87</sup> A liberationist approach demands a prophetic ethic that challenges unjust social and economic structures. For De La Torre, virtue ethics has an antipathy in establishing

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<sup>84</sup> Vic McCracken, "Christian Faith, and Social Justice: Five Views," (New York, Bloomsbury, 2014), 166.

<sup>85</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 167.

<sup>86</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 167.

<sup>87</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 166.

justice-based principles to foster praxis.<sup>88</sup> De La Torre's understanding of liberation ethics is fundamentally action-oriented and actively challenges the unjust structures of society that marginalize communities of color. For him, justice is actualized through the process of theological ethical praxis.

The liberationist critique of virtue ethics by De La Torre of individualism and a lack of communitarian prophetic praxis is rooted in his observation that virtue ethics has been developed primarily by Euro-Americans. The Eurocentric worldview of Virtue ethics, in De La Torre's opinion, blinds virtue ethics to the realities of oppressed and marginalized peoples of color. For De La Torre, this privileging of the European Christian worldview, at best, allows the oppressor to ignore their responsibility for structural change and, at worst, justifies oppressive systems. De La Torre uses the example of the Protestant work ethic as a virtue to illustrate how the virtue of white privilege justifies the unjust characterization of people of color as viciously slothful.<sup>89</sup> This Euro-American centrism confuses white cultural norms with universally normative virtues.<sup>90</sup>

### *Critical Race Theory's Critique*

Critical race theory critiques virtue ethics through the lens of understanding the way race colors how virtue ethics is understood. Maureen O'Connell's essay "After White Supremacy" asks the question of the viability of virtue ethics for racial justice. O'Connell proposes that the pervasiveness of white supremacy, particularly in the social structures present in the United States, challenges how virtue ethics can be an effective methodology of moral formation. O'Connell's critique notes that virtue theory is largely

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<sup>88</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 167.

<sup>89</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 168.

<sup>90</sup> See McCracken, "Christian Faith," 168.

Euro-American in perspective, is individualistic in its understanding of moral goodness, operates in the moral framework of whiteness, does not adequately illuminate this moral problem, and is not critical of its inherent whiteness.

For O'Connell, the problem of white supremacy in virtue ethics is fundamentally epistemological. When the entire mode of knowing and understanding reality is internalized and influenced by white supremacy, the common good becomes challenging to articulate objectively. Whiteness thus becomes the "gatekeeper" to moral goodness.

The Euro-American centric individualistic focus on personal agency, emphasis on choice, and a linear moral development in virtue ethics give cultural privilege to the cultural value of autonomy of the moral agent, which is a cultural value of whiteness.<sup>91</sup> This understanding of the moral good contrasts a more socially orientated and externally motivated notion of the right.<sup>92</sup>

For Maureen O'Connell, if virtue ethicists do not critically examine the inherent whiteness of virtue ethics, the methodology will have a limited ability to undo the dominant culture of whiteness nor be able to construct an alternative to the white racial frame of epistemology as long as socially formative narratives, moral goodness, and the fittingness of actions are determined and controlled by the dominant white culture.<sup>93</sup>

### *Virtue Responds*

The fundamental problems of Euro-American centrism and individualism that critics of Virtue Ethics have pointed to must be acknowledged. Not that Virtue theory in and of itself is necessarily Euro-American-centric and individualistic, but that many of its

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<sup>91</sup> Maureen O'Connell, "After White Supremacy? The Viability of Virtue Ethics for Racial Justice," *Journal of Moral Theology*, 3.1 (2014), 93.

<sup>92</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 95.

<sup>93</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 96.

proponents are indeed from the global north. It is the original sin of racism that is most problematic with how virtue ethics is employed, not the theory of virtue ethics itself. Virtue ethics' flexibility and cultural malleability allow virtue to transcend cultural myopia.<sup>94</sup> The concept of moral formation as a process of virtue ethics offers the possibility of personal moral growth and social liberation through a gradually transformative conversion.<sup>95</sup>

O'Connell's proposal for new cardinal virtues beautifully responds to these fair critiques of virtue ethics. Vigilance makes the invisibility of whiteness and socio-economic injustice visible and allows individuals to be vulnerable to each other.<sup>96</sup> The virtue of counter-framing is the epistemological point of view to disrupt habits of white supremacy.<sup>97</sup> The virtue of "sitting with it" is the disposition and praxis of recognizing the effect of white supremacy on our individual and collective identities.<sup>98</sup> The Liberationist critique and a Critical Race Theory critique of virtue ethics is not a critique of the virtues but of the vices of social structure and individuals that virtue ethics seeks to reform through the praxis of the virtues, personally and collectively.

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<sup>94</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 99.

<sup>95</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 100.

<sup>96</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 101.

<sup>97</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 102.

<sup>98</sup> See O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?" 102.

## **Chapter Two: Charity The Foundation of Liberation**

In the Catholic tradition, charity holds a central and elevated position among the theological virtues. Charity is the highest form of love—an unselfish, self-giving love that mirrors God's love for humanity—rooted in biblical teachings, especially in passages such as 1 Corinthians 13. Charity is the virtue that animates and gives life to all other virtues. St. Paul writes:

If, in speaking, I use human tongues and angelic as well but do not have love, I am nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and the ability to understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have all the faith necessary to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned but do not have love, I achieve nothing (1 Cor., 13:1-3).

The widespread use of this text from St. Paul in the context of Christian marriage highlights the centrality of Charity in the context of the most basic human relationships that form communities. However, Paul did not write this text with weddings in mind. Paul was addressing the whole of the Christian community. The praxis of charity is at the heart of Christian discipleship.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines charity as the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for His own sake and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.<sup>99</sup> It extends beyond mere acts of kindness to embody a transformative, sacrificial love that reflects Christ's teachings and example. Charity involves benevolent actions and an interior disposition of the heart. It emphasizes a genuine concern for the well-being of others, encompassing compassion, forgiveness, and a willingness to alleviate

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<sup>99</sup> Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2000), 1822.

the suffering of those in need. In Catholic moral theology, acts of charity are understood as cooperating with God's grace and participating in the divine life.

Drawing from St. Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians, charity is patient, kind, and seeks the good of others. It goes beyond legalistic observance of commandments to embrace a radical love that mirrors the boundless love of God. Through prayer, works of mercy, and a commitment to justice and solidarity, Christians are called to embody and express the virtue of charity in their daily lives, recognizing it as a critical pathway to holiness and communion with God. In charity, we live the Reign of God manifested in Jesus Christ.

### *Thomas Aquinas and Charity*

In Catholic theology, especially within the Thomistic tradition, the idea that charity is the form of the virtues and gives life to them is fundamental. St. Thomas Aquinas explained that charity is the form of all virtues because it orientates them towards its own end, the *Telos*, which is union with God. In his Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas explores the nature of charity and its role in the Christian life. The central virtue that Aquinas explores in his theological framework is the virtue of charity. In Aquinas' view, charity holds a preeminent position among the theological virtues, as it is intimately tied to the love of God and neighbor, reflecting the essence of both Christian ethics and spirituality.<sup>100</sup>

The virtue of charity, according to Aquinas, is rooted in divine love.<sup>101</sup> Aquinas' understanding of the order of charity describes the relationship between love of God, love

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<sup>100</sup> See ST, II.II.23.1.

<sup>101</sup> See ST, II.II.23.1.

of self and love of neighbor manifested in the infused theological virtue of charity. He writes:

The order of charity must needs remain in heaven, as regards the love of God above all things. For this will be realized simply when man shall enjoy God perfectly. But, as regards the order between man himself and other men, a distinction would seem to be necessary, because the degrees of love may be distinguished either in respect of the good which a man desires for another, or according to the intensity of love itself. On the first way a man will love better men more than himself, and those who are less good, less than himself: because, by reason of the perfect conformity of the human to the Divine will, each of the blessed will desire everyone to have what is due to him according to Divine justice. Nor will that be a time for advancing by means of merit to a yet greater reward, as happens now while it is possible for a man to desire both the virtue and the reward of a better man, whereas then the will of each one will rest within the limits determined by God. But in the second way a man will love himself more than even his better neighbors, because the intensity of the act of love arises on the part of the person who loves. Moreover it is for this that the gift of charity is bestowed by God on each one, namely, that he may first of all direct his mind to God, and this pertains to a man's love for himself, and that, in the second place, he may wish other things to be directed to God, and even work for that end according to his capacity.<sup>102</sup>

Charity is an infused virtue, meaning it is a gift from God. Infused virtue transcends human capacities. Infused virtue is granted to the soul through divine grace.<sup>103</sup> This divine charity differs from natural love or human affection, as it enables the soul to love God and one's neighbor above all things for the sake of God.<sup>104</sup> It is a selfless and unconditional love that seeks the good of the other for the sake of the other's well-being and spiritual growth.<sup>105</sup> It is this impulse towards the transformative love in Charity that Gutiérrez will interpret as the revolutionary dynamism of charity.

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<sup>102</sup> ST. II.II.26.12.

<sup>103</sup> See ST, II.II.23.2.

<sup>104</sup> See ST, II.II.23.3.

<sup>105</sup> See ST, II.II.23.6.

Aquinas highlights the three essential acts of charity: to love God above all, to love one's neighbor as oneself, and to love oneself for the sake of God.<sup>106</sup> These acts express the intrinsic relationship between the love of God and the love of the neighbor, as they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In Question 25 of the *Secunda Secundae*, Aquinas explores the precepts of charity, emphasizing that love of God should lead to a love of neighbor, and this love for neighbor should extend to all, without distinctions based on social or cultural factors.<sup>107</sup>

Aquinas underscores the indispensable role of charity in fulfilling the law, as he discusses in Question 44 of the *Secunda Secundae*.<sup>108</sup> He argues that charity is the form of the law, encapsulating and guiding human actions to fulfill the moral and divine law.<sup>109</sup> Through charity, one is motivated to observe the commandments, not out of mere obedience but out of genuine love for God and neighbor.<sup>110</sup>

Aquinas also addresses the issue of the relationship between charity and faith in his theological framework. He posits that faith is a precondition for charity, as it allows one to know God and believe in His existence.<sup>111</sup> Faith informs the intellect, while charity directs the will toward God. As elucidated in Question 62 of the *Secunda Secundae*, these two theological virtues work in harmony to shape a person's moral and spiritual life.<sup>112</sup>

Charity is the animating force of all other virtues and fulfills the law. Charity forms a solid foundation for the Christian life. With this foundational understanding of Aquinas's

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<sup>106</sup> See ST, II.II.25.1.

<sup>107</sup> See ST, II.II.25.12.

<sup>108</sup> See ST, II.II.44.4.

<sup>109</sup> See ST, II.II.44.1.

<sup>110</sup> See ST, II.II.44.4.

<sup>111</sup> See ST, II.II.62.2.

<sup>112</sup> See ST, II.II.62.2.



theological virtue of charity, Alphonsus Liguori would develop his pastorally and spiritually focused lens on the virtue of charity in the eighteenth century.

### *Liguori and Charity*

Alphonsus always understood the work of a theologian to be, first and foremost, a tool for the pastoral and spiritual development of the people of God. Theologians and the great spiritual writers of the Christian tradition were prolifically cited in his devotion to the pastoral care of the poor and the most abandoned. Arguably, his most definitive work on the virtue of charity is his classic *Praxis Charitatis de Jesu Christi* or, in English, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*. Alphonsus wrote:

Some.... say perfection consists in an austere life; others in prayer; others in frequenting the Sacraments; others in alms-deeds. Nevertheless, they deceive themselves: perfection consists of loving God wholeheartedly. Charity keeps united and preserves all the virtues that render a man perfect.<sup>113</sup>

For Alphonsus, the praxis of the virtue of charity provides a moral underpinning for an ethical framework based on virtue. According to St. Alphonsus, this praxis of charity involved contemplation of Christ's life, teachings, and sacrifice. This contemplation is not a mere intellectual exercise but a means of igniting a fervent love that would inspire virtuous living. St. Alphonsus encouraged regular prayer, reflection on the Scriptures, and participation in the sacraments as essential components of this transformative journey. As we continue this reflection, we will hear a theological parallel in Gutiérrez's understanding of praxis.<sup>114</sup>

Alphonsus underscored the significance of cultivating a personal and affectionate love for Jesus as the core of a happy Christian life. Alphonsus ending thought in The

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<sup>113</sup> Alphonsus Liguori, The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ (Liguori Publications, Liguori, 1997), 1.

<sup>114</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 11-12.

Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ are: “Happy are those who can say from the heart: “My Jesus I want you alone, and nothing more...” Those who love God will find happiness in everything; those who do not love God will never find true happiness in anything.<sup>115</sup>” This affectionate approach to his spirituality is evident in Alphonsus’ most prolific popular devotion, “Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary.” He writes in the first visit:

My Jesus, I love you with all my heart. I know have displeased you often in the past, I am sorry. With your help I promise never to do it again. I am only a miserable sinner, but I consecrate myself to you completely I give you my will, my love, my desires, everything I own. From now on do what you please with me. All I ask is that you love me.<sup>116</sup>

Alphonsus’ affectionate and intimate tone of his devotions is often attributed to his Neapolitan manner, but his use of such an affectionate tone in this popular text reflects his desire for all to have such a familiar and tender relationship to Jesus in their spiritual lives. Alphonsus’ teachings emphasized a spirituality grounded in both devotion and moral living. He urged believers to embrace a continuous awareness of God’s presence, fostering a deep and sincere love for Jesus daily. For Alphonsus, the love of Jesus was not abstract but had tangible implications for how individuals treated others. Charity and compassion were natural expressions of an authentic love for Christ.<sup>117</sup> In essence, St. Alphonsus’ teachings on the practice of the love of Jesus Christ provided a holistic framework for integrating spirituality, moral conduct, and selfless love into the fabric of daily existence.

Alphonsus, like Aquinas, draws from Scripture and the Pauline tradition in his understanding and approach to understanding the virtue of charity. Alphonsus’

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<sup>115</sup> Liguori, Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ, 216.

<sup>116</sup> Alphonsus Liguori, Visits to The Most Blessed Sacrament and The Blessed Virgin Mary, Liguori Publications, Liguori, 1976, 4-5.

<sup>117</sup> Liguori, Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ, XV.

understanding of the virtue of charity as a Christ-centered total gift of self drinks deep from this ancient Christian tradition. Alphonsus writes:

Whoever desires to love Jesus Christ with their whole heart must banish from their heart all that is not God, but is merely self-love. This is the meaning of those words, "seeks not her own," not to seek ourselves, but only what pleases God. Moreover, God requires this of us all when he says: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.*<sup>118</sup>

Alphonsus understands two necessary movements of the Christian praxis of Charity. The first is to strive to clear one's heart of materialistic distractions and false gods. His words were to "clear it of earth." The second is to allow our hearts to be filled with "holy charity."<sup>119</sup> For Alphonsus, this charity is the person of Jesus Christ, and when we love as Christ, we practice and possess the virtue of charity. Loving as Christ does is the Christian praxis of the virtue of charity.

The Alphonsian understanding of the virtues and how the theological virtue of charity and cardinal virtue of prudence were emphasized in the lives of the Redemptorists, both personally and communally, directed how Redemptorist missionaries engaged the people of God. This praxis of pastoral gentleness and virtue was ever-present. The Alphonsian theological/pastoral approach to understanding the virtue of charity is incarnational and Christocentric. Charity is Christ. To have Christ in one's heart is to have the transformative power of the virtue of charity present in the *pneuma* of a person.

#### *Gutiérrez Liberating Charity and the Message of James*

Gutiérrez places charity at the center of Christian life, like Aquinas and Liguori. Gutiérrez characterizes this center as a rediscovery of the virtue of charity rooted in Scripture. This Scriptural foundation of how charity is the necessary pillar of Christian life draws from the apostolic tradition, particularly in the writings of St. James. Gutiérrez, like

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<sup>118</sup> See Liguori, The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ, 1.

<sup>119</sup> See Liguori, The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ, 1.

Aquinas and Liguori, approaches charity through the apostolic tradition. The view is that the virtue of charity is the disposition for the actualized total self-gift to God and neighbor. From the very foundations of the Christian community, the connection between faith professed and faith practiced was concretized. From St. Paul to St. James, the ancient apostolic tradition holds the profession of Jesus as the Messiah, and the praxis of charity in works of self-giving love to neighbor has always been present in the orthopraxis of Christianity.

Gutiérrez proposes that the Christian faith can only be lived through charity.

Gutiérrez follows in the scriptural tradition of the Apostle James. When he teaches:

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves, for if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets his appearance. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction (James 1:23-24, 27a).

The Apostle James demonstrates that the fundamental character of the Christian identity is the living out of faith through charity, particularly charity towards the most marginalized members of society. This scriptural and apostolic foundation makes the fundamental connection, which Gutiérrez embraces, between the Christian religion and the necessity of incarnating the virtue of charity. Simply put, a Christian can only be recognized by others as such by the praxis of charity. The scriptural tradition makes the unalienable link between Christian identity and the praxis of charity. Again, the Apostle James writes:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works is dead (James: 2:14-17).

### *Charity and Christian Praxis*

Gutiérrez understands charity as the foundation of the praxis of Christians and their active presence in history.<sup>120</sup> A Christian cannot claim to be living the faith nor a moral life if the virtue of charity is not at the core of their faith. It is the virtue of charity embodied in the Christian community and, more importantly, *in* the Christian community, which is the instrument of the liberating power of Jesus Christ in the world.

Gutiérrez places his understanding of the virtue of charity within the context of biblical tradition and reaffirms through two millennia of Catholic tradition that a living faith in Christ is not a simple affirmation of statements of the truths of faith but of an overall attitude and commitment to living out the total gift of self.<sup>121</sup> The Christo-centric understanding of the virtue of charity as faith in action is the cornerstone of the Christian understanding of the virtue of charity.

Gutiérrez, following Liguori, makes an essential theological step by connecting Christian spirituality to theological reflections on the virtue of charity. Gutiérrez's approach is distinct from Liguori's in that he shifts the emphasis from the individual spirituality of the praxis of charity to the communal. For much of the history of Catholic theological reflection, mainly through the scholastic tradition, spirituality has been relegated to simply pious works for the personal edification of the faithful.

St. Alphonsus' classic *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* is classified as an ascetical work rather than a work of classical scholastic theology. Gutiérrez rejects the scholastic artificial separation of Christian spirituality from theology. For Gutiérrez, the praxis of charity and Christian faith, more broadly, necessitates the integration of

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<sup>120</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 6.

<sup>121</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 6.

spirituality and charity into a single coherent posture towards life rooted in the life and message of Jesus Christ.<sup>122</sup>

Gutiérrez sees the development of Christian spirituality and the Christian understanding of sanctity as closely linked to the Christian praxis of charity. He notes that the contemporary sensitivity to the anthropological aspects of biblical revelation and spirituality has synthesized how the virtue of charity is lived out.<sup>123</sup> Gutiérrez links the contemplative life to the apostolic/pastoral life through charity. This mendicant approach to Charity is rooted in what would become his Dominican identity and reflects the Thomistic influences in his theological approach and formation.

#### *Charity Rediscovered*

When Gutiérrez writes about a “rediscovery” of charity as the center of Christian life,<sup>124</sup> He offers a reflection of the movement of the people of God. Particularly in the Latin American context, Christian communities are beginning to reject the materialistic errors of some philosophical movements of the modern and post-modern Euro-centric eras of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fallacy of radical individualism and the global acquiescence to unencumbered free market capitalism has demonstrated that the material and social alienation, in which the vast majority of humanity still suffers, cries out to heaven for redress.

Alasdair MacIntyre wrote in *After Virtue*, "The self is now thought of as lacking any necessary social identity because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is now thought of as without criterion, because the kind of *telos*, in terms

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<sup>122</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 6.

<sup>123</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 6.

<sup>124</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 6.

of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible.”<sup>125</sup> Gutiérrez would argue that this loss of social identity in the Western zeitgeist has affected the lives of the poor and marginalized in the global south, bringing forth a socio-political and theological/spiritual rejection of the capitalist-centered socio-political structure of Western philosophical constructs. Liberation theology articulates the collective challenge of people experiencing poverty to the philosophical, political, and economic project of Euro-centric post-modern materialism by the marginalized.

Though approaching the fundamental moral problem of post-modernism, both MacIntyre and Gutiérrez point to the praxis of virtue, and for Gutiérrez specifically the praxis of charity, as a way forward past the moral relativism and emotivism that paralyzes the moral conscience of the contemporary ethical landscape. Having a critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues in life, particularly the life of the Christian community, necessitates a much more expansive understanding of the virtue of charity beyond oneself and the narcissism of radical individualism that contemporary North American and European societies suffer. The Western idealization of individualism has caused untold suffering for those the capitalist system has marginalized from the fruits of the industrial and digital revolutions.

Gutiérrez rightly points out that avoiding the pitfalls of an individualistic charity is necessary.<sup>126</sup> The modern individualistic perversion of the virtue of charity constrains our understanding of Christ’s command to the love of neighbor. Gutiérrez understands that the divine mandate of the love of neighbor is beyond an individual-to-individual dynamic. For Gutiérrez, the concept of neighbor refers to a person in the fabric of social relationships. It

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<sup>125</sup> See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 33.

<sup>126</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 116.

refers to a person in economic, social, cultural, and racial coordinates. It refers to the exploited social class, the dominated people, and the marginalized.<sup>127</sup> For Gutiérrez, charity is not only a social virtue manifested in the praxis of the Christian community, but it is also necessarily political.

### *Political Charity*

Gutiérrez uses the phrase "political charity." Gutiérrez understands political charity as the means to transform a society structured to benefit a few who appropriate to themselves the value of the work of others.<sup>128</sup> For Gutiérrez to offer food or drink in our day is a political action.<sup>129</sup> Political charity moves the heart to a radical eschatological understanding of the virtue of charity. Political charity is not the charity of pietistic quietism but of activism and social transformation. Political charity is an understanding of the virtue of charity that is the breaking forth of the Reign of God in the lived experience of the poor and the abandonment of our social status.

Further Gutiérrez, employing the critical theory of Marxism, sees this transformation manifested in the political-economic sphere, moving toward a radical change in the foundation of society by abandoning the private ownership of the means of production.<sup>130</sup> Gutiérrez's use of Marxist terminology, such as political and social praxis in his critical analysis should be understood in the context of his time.<sup>131</sup> Many may react to this understanding of "political charity" by rejecting it out of hand as synchronism with Marxism as a kind of pseudo-religion. However, a more nuanced understanding of

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<sup>127</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 116.

<sup>128</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 116.

<sup>129</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 116.

<sup>130</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 116.

<sup>131</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 122.



Gutierrez's approach can be understood in the Thomistic tradition of the universal destination of created goods.

### *The Universal Destination of Created Goods*

The "Universal destination of created goods" asserts that all created things are ultimately ordered toward the common good of creation and God. The common destination of created goods means that every created being has a role in contributing to the harmony and order of the universe. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

. In the beginning, God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits. The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race... Christian life strives to order this world's goods to God and fraternal charity.<sup>132</sup>

A Christian's relationship with creation is always about our relationship with God and one's relationship with our neighbor. The praxis of charity, particularly about oppressed peoples, is central to a Christian understanding of how we relate to created goods.

In Saint Pope John Paul II's address at the opening of the Third General Conference of the Latin-American Bishops in Puebla, Mexico, the Pope said: "*Sobre toda propiedad privada grava jan hipotacea social* [All private property involves a social mortgage.]."<sup>133</sup> John Paul II's message is clear: the right to private property is not absolute. Creating goods to meet the needs of human flourishing supersedes

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<sup>132</sup>CCC, 2402.

<sup>133</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address at the Opening of the Third General Conference of the Latin-American Bishops, Puebla, México, January 28, 1979, [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_spe\\_19790128\\_messico-puebla-episc-latam.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf_jpii_spe_19790128_messico-puebla-episc-latam.html), III.4.

private ownership.<sup>134</sup> Those who would unjustly deprive their brothers and sisters who need access to created goods are guilty of a lack of charity and theft.<sup>135</sup>

This understanding of the relationship between created goods and political policy towards material possession is an ancient theme in the Christian tradition. Saints Clement of Rome and Ambrose of Milan used natural law to address the issue of personal property and Christian praxis. They both preached that the use of all things ought to be common to all, and no one may call his own what is common.<sup>136</sup> This vein of theological thought in reaction to private property draws from The Acts of The Apostles:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them according to each one's need (Acts, 2:42-45.).

The devotion to what Gutiérrez calls the praxis of political charity inspired the early Church to a radical new way of understanding human relationships with God and neighbor. In and through the virtue of charity, our relationship with the created world becomes more harmonious with natural law.<sup>137</sup>

Human beings, by nature, employ reason and free will to discern and act by this natural order, seeking the common good rather than purely self-serving ends. This concept has important ethical implications, as it suggests that individuals and societies should act in

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<sup>134</sup> See Matthew P. Whelan, “‘A Shadowy Sort of Right’: The Ius Necessitatis and Catholic Moral Theology.” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, SI2, (2022): 7–32, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.39707>, 4.

<sup>135</sup> See Whelan, “A Shadowy Sort of Right,” 5.

<sup>136</sup> See Whelan, “A Shadowy Sort of Right,” 6.

<sup>137</sup> See CCC., 341.

ways that promote the well-being and flourishing of all of creation rather than pursuing their own interests.<sup>138</sup> This is the essence of the praxis of political charity.

When Gutiérrez is read in the light of Clement of Rome, Ambrose of Milan, and Thomas Aquinas' theology of the universal destination of created goods, his eschatological understanding of political charity departs from Marxist atheistic and purely materialistic project that caused the human catastrophe of the Marxist experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its violent revolutionary attempts to eliminate the private ownership of the means of production.

Political charity must be understood through an authentic Christian spirituality of encounter with God and neighbor. Without eschatological vision and a deep spiritual relationship with God understood and entered into through Jesus Christ, the concept of political charity would be a contradiction. The theological nature of the virtue of charity opens the possibility for the human community to participate in the eschatological promise of Christ. The Holy Spirit infusing the Christian community of disciples with the authentic love of God and neighbor gives animus and guidance to the Christian community towards this eschatological view. In order to understand how political charity can manifest, it is essential to understand Gutiérrez's approach to Christian spirituality in liberation theology.

### *The Spiritual Heart of Charity*

At the heart of the spirituality of liberation theology is the preferential option for the poor. This principle asserts that Christ is present in and to the marginalized and oppressed in a particular way.<sup>139</sup> Gutiérrez say “for this reason, Puebla reminds us that the service of

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<sup>138</sup> See ST, II.II.1-5.

<sup>139</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 34.

the poor is the privileged, though not exclusive, means for following Christ."<sup>140</sup> It calls on Christians to prioritize the well-being and dignity of the poor, aligning their actions and advocacy with those suffering the most. Liberation theology expands the concept of salvation beyond individual redemption to include social, economic, and political liberation. It sees salvation as a personal and communal experience, emphasizing the transformation of societal structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality. The lens of realized eschatological salvation is central to the spirituality of liberation.<sup>141</sup>

By framing Christian spirituality through a realized eschatological lens, the community of believers embraces its prophetic office instituted in the sacrament of baptism. Liberation theology not only encourages prophetic voices within the Church, calling for justice, accountability, and societal transformation, it necessitates a prophetic position. It calls for active engagement in social and political struggles, advocating for the rights and dignity of the oppressed through the praxis of political charity and solidarity.

Solidarity, as a manifestation of the praxis of political charity, is a fundamental aspect of liberation theology's spirituality. It calls for empathetic identification with those who suffer and emphasizes collective action for social change. The spirituality of Liberation theology empowers individuals and communities to become agents participating with Christ in their liberation. Gutiérrez's engagement in a contextual interpretation of Scripture, drawing upon the Bible to address contemporary issues of injustice, weds the scholastic, pastoral, and political elements of the virtue of charity into Christian spirituality,

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<sup>140</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009), 319.

<sup>141</sup>See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 92–93.

a spirituality of liberation using Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of the poor as a guide for action.

### *Epistemological Praxis of Charity*

The spirituality of liberation theology manifests in various ways within Christian communities and individuals. Liberation theology emphasizes "praxis," the integration of theory and practice. It encourages believers to apply their faith through the praxis of charity to social and political contexts, engaging in actions that promote justice and solidarity. This praxis bridges the gap between theology and activism.

Liberation theology's spirituality often leads to communal worship that reflects its commitment to justice and solidarity. Liturgies, rituals, and the Church's sacramental life are adapted to address the experiences and struggles of the poor and marginalized, creating a more inclusive and socially conscious form of worship. The spirituality of liberation theology is a new way for the Christian community to interpret their experience of reality. The spirituality of the praxis of charity proposed in Gutiérrez's A Theology of Liberation has inspired a generation of Latino theologians, such as Orlando Espín, to explore how the praxis of a liberating spirituality has formed new ways to understand and interpret the experience of oppression and how the virtue of charity works to interpret this reality. Orlando Espín, in his work on popular religion, has explored the theological connection between the praxis of charity in the spirituality of liberation and epistemology.<sup>142</sup>

Espín's proposal of popular religion as an epistemology is vital for the people of God to consider as a legitimate epistemological alternative because it departs from the

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<sup>142</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People, 3.

hegemonic epistemologies of contemporary Euro-American Anglo-Saxon protestant theologians and social scientists that have utilized Marxist and positivist epistemologies to analyze the context of the Latino communities' worldview.<sup>143</sup> Espín posits that theologians and social scientists have dismissed popular religion as a "folk" practice or even an obstacle to the liberation and struggle for justice within the Latino community.<sup>144</sup> This sentiment echoes some post-Vatican II reformers who have insisted that the faithful abandon their traditions and devotional practices of popular religion as the Catholics became more educated and "enlightened" in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>145</sup> Espín points out that these biases against the practice of popular religion as an epistemology are intellectually myopic.<sup>146</sup>

Espín's structure of the epistemology of popular religion consists of mutually informing "nodes" that form a matrix of relational loci of knowing and understanding of reality. These are beliefs, ethical expectations, rites, and shared experiences. Beliefs refer to a common understanding of God, the sphere of the Sacred, and human social and familial roles. Ethical expectations form the moral/immoral evaluation of individual and social behavior to the manners in which these evaluations are communicated in families and communities (e.g., popular wisdom, sayings, counsel, shame). The third node in Espín's epistemology of popular religion is the concept of rites, which range from individual /familial rituals to very public ceremonies. Finally, we have experiences from encounters with the Sacred and the sphere of the Sacred, trusting that one's prayers have been heard

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<sup>143</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People, 163.

<sup>144</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People, 163.

<sup>145</sup> Robert, E. Alvis, "The Tenacity of Popular Devotions in the Age of Vatican II: Learning from the Divine Mercy," Religions, Vol. 12 (2021), 1.

<sup>146</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People 163.

and one's life/family protected, and that discovers deeper and more humanizing levels of social and familial relationships.<sup>147</sup>

These four nodes mutually inform each other. However, the communal experience of the Latino community's expression of popular religion holds an incredibly formative position in this epistemological approach. Espín understands that Latino communities serve as the formative matrix of these loci and for their mutual relating as plausible assumptions about the substance, nature, and configuration of all reality.<sup>148</sup> For Espín, this epistemology of popular religion is self-evident within Latino communities but may not be for those outside the *Latinidad experience*.<sup>149</sup> Gutiérrez's use of critical theory and the concept of orthopraxis about a Christian spirituality manifested in political charity helps those outside of the Hispanic and Latin American context to conceptualize how the lived faith of the poor people, through their praxis of popular religion, creates a window of understanding for the implications of political charity.

Espín's epistemology of popular religion empowers the poor and marginalized to understand their spiritual praxis as a revelatory and transformative force for liberation within the context of a secular and dominant power structure that liberation theologians seek to overturn through the praxis of political charity. Epistemologies, spiritualities, and Christian praxis from below, when formed and informed through Jesus Christ, the exemplar of the virtue of Charity, the eschatological promise of liberation begins to break through the structural sin of a wounded world. This dynamic empowers the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

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<sup>147</sup>See Espín, The Faith of the People, 164.

<sup>148</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People, 164.

<sup>149</sup> See Espín, The Faith of the People, 164.

*Charity: the Spirit of the Eschaton*

Gutiérrez's spirituality of liberation actively engages the religious experiences of people experiencing poverty in social and political movements, advocating for the rights and dignity of marginalized communities. This involvement includes participation in protests, community organizing, and the promotion of human rights in and through the spirituality and religious praxis manifested in the incarnation of the virtue of charity in the poor and marginalized and those of us who stand in solidarity with them.

The spirituality of liberation theology manifests and cultivates the virtue of charity in a deep sense of empathy and solidarity with those who suffer. It challenges individuals and communities to step into the shoes of the marginalized, understand their struggles, and stand alongside them in their pursuit of justice. In and through the virtue of charity, the praxis of the total gift of self to the other, authentic Christian solidarity is realized in the spirituality of liberation. Gutiérrez acknowledges this spiritual dynamism of the virtue of charity in the human experience of love. Gutiérrez writes:

In human love there is a depth, which the human mind does not suspect: it is through it that persons encounter God. If utopia humanizes economic, social, and political liberation, this humanness in the light of the Gospel reveals God. If doing justice leads us to knowledge of God, to find God is in turn a necessary consequence. The mediation of the historical task of the creation of a new humanity assures that liberation from sin and communion with God in solidarity with all persons manifested in political liberation and enriched by its contributions does not fall into idealism and evasion, But at the same time, this mediation prevents these manifestations from becoming translated into any kind of Christian ideology of political action or a politico-religious messianism. Christian hope opens us, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to the gift of the future promised by God.<sup>150</sup>

The spirituality of liberation theology is a profound and transformative approach to the Christian faith that emphasizes justice, solidarity, and the Reign of God on Earth. It

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<sup>150</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 139.



challenges the human heart to prioritize the well-being and dignity of the poor and marginalized, to engage in prophetic and activist actions, and to interpret Scripture in light of contemporary social injustices. Liberation theology's spirituality, rooted in political charity, is a call to action, a demand for a more just and equitable world, and a reminder of the Christian responsibility to pursue and live the Reign of God through acts of love, solidarity, and justice.

For Gutiérrez, this spirit-led eschatological praxis of political charity finds its locus and dynamism in the sacramental and spiritual life of the Church of the Poor.<sup>151</sup> In the Mystery of our sacramental lives, we act out the script of the Gospel and the person of Jesus, the exemplar of perfect charity, who in the sacraments liberates the Christian community and all of creation from sin, personal, social, and structural. When the Church's sacramental life becomes more fully actualized through the outpouring of the virtue of charity by the Holy Spirit, manifested in solidarity, the spirituality of political charity becomes concrete. This spirituality of the praxis of political charity opens our human experiential horizon to the eschatological liberation of the whole person.

Only when this profound prophetic praxis of political charity is placed in the context of a vibrant spirituality can authentic liberation be realized. The absence of spiritual praxis concepts, such as political charity, can quickly become a rationalization for political violence and oppression in the name of liberation.<sup>152</sup> Gutiérrez states that a spirituality of liberation is centered on the conversion to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, and the dominated country. The

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<sup>151</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 147.

<sup>152</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 55.

spirituality of liberation is rooted in our conversion to the person of Jesus Christ, who liberates us from sin in all its manifestations.<sup>153</sup>

As we conclude our reflection on the praxis of the virtue of charity, let us reflect on the main points from this chapter. The first is to place the importance of placing the theological virtue of charity at the center of Christian praxis. For Gutiérrez, charity is the heart of Liberation theology.

A Christian disciple needs to understand the historical theological development and the dynamism of the virtue of charity in the Catholic moral tradition. From Thomas Aquinas to today, charity has been an animating force in Christian theological reflection. Also, drawing from theologians such as Alphonsus Liguori, a passionately practical and pastoral approach to the praxis of the virtue of charity is critical. Alphonsus invites individuals to clear their hearts of material distractions that keep them from an authentic praxis of charity.

The takeaway from Gustavo Gutiérrez's approach to the virtue of charity follows from and builds upon a traditional theological understanding of charity. Gutiérrez emphasizes that charity must be not only a personal virtue but also a communal/social virtue. The orthopraxis of the social virtue of political charity is manifested in the struggle for political and spiritual liberation. This orthopraxis of political charity springs forth from the fountain of Christian spirituality, creating the epistemological viewpoint Orlando Espín describes in his theology of popular religion.

Through the orthopraxis of political charity, manifested in an authentic Christian spirituality and manifested through the lived experience of the oppressed, the movement

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<sup>153</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 118.

towards the liberation of the whole person becomes, and the values of the reign of God are realized.

## Chapter Three Prudence

The cardinal virtue of prudence is not the first virtue that may come to one's mind when the subject of liberation theology is discussed. Of the cardinal virtues, it would be easy to assume that the virtue of justice is most relevant to the discussion of radical and revolutionary Christian praxis. Similarly, the critical and necessary virtue of justice can often manifest as an emotive manifestation of the collective frustration of injustice, lacking a methodical and sustainable movement in the struggle of the oppressed for complete liberation.<sup>154</sup> The directing presence of the virtue of prudence in the life of the Christian disciple is necessary for the proper application of the virtues to work towards the Easter promise of a radical eschatological movement.<sup>155</sup>

For Gutiérrez, radical evangelical charity is the heart of the Christian faith and the moral life.<sup>156</sup> Gutiérrez's reflection on the necessity of political charity as a social virtue inspires and impels the Christian believer in living the Reign of God is constituent.

We will now examine the crucial pillar of theological reflection: Scripture. Mainly we will look at how Gutiérrez reads the Bible through the lens of liberation and how this interpretation gives an essential insight into how the Word of God shapes our understanding of the virtue of prudence.

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<sup>154</sup> Paulo Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," Religious Education 79, no. 4 (Fall, 1984), 525.

<sup>155</sup> Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," 528.

<sup>156</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 9.

### *Liberating Prudence in the Scripture*

Prudence is a crucial element of Christian praxis. Throughout the story of salvation history, the working of divine wisdom in forming the moral consciousness of the faithful comes about in the virtue of prudence. Exploring the importance of prudence in Gutiérrez's theological perspective helps connect the biblical narratives in Gutiérrez's work and the exegesis employed.

Gutiérrez, like many liberationists, uses a materialistic exegesis of the biblical texts. In a critical materialist hermeneutic of Scripture, the focus is on the plight of the oppressed in the narrative. Following this hermeneutic, God's salvific actions manifest in the material reality. Materialistic readings of the Bible became prominent after 1974 in liberationist thought.<sup>157</sup> It was in 1974 that Fernando Belo published his book of the materialistic exegesis. Belo endeavored to illustrate the relationship between political and radical Christian praxis. He focused on the economic, political, and ideological class struggles and how they influenced the reception of biblical texts.<sup>158</sup>

A materialistic exegesis of the Bible has three goals:

1. To Show that the Bible does not simply contain scattered expressions on the poor and the oppressed but that the poor are the real subject;
2. To rescue the Bible from church officials and theologians who have wrongfully neglected the poor;

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<sup>157</sup> Pieter Villiers, Liberation Theology and the Bible, (University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1987), 33.

<sup>158</sup> See Villiers, Liberation Theology and the Bible, 34.

3. To read the Bible in such a way that, in its light, our present political practice will receive new clarification and that we shall find proper socio-economic models in the Bible.<sup>159</sup>

Gutiérrez's approach to historical materialism also brings a narrative element to understanding how God speaks to his people in the sacred texts. He accomplishes this metaphysical pivot through a Christological lens of human relationships and God's covenant of salvation.<sup>160</sup>

For Gutiérrez, two scriptural texts stand out as moral narratives of the struggle for liberation by oppressed peoples: the Exodus narrative and the Gospel of Luke.<sup>161</sup> Exodus relates directly to a narrative of the ancient Hebrew people's journey toward salvation, beginning with their liberation from slavery and their cultural and material oppression and exploitation under Pharaoh. Gutiérrez, reading the text of Exodus with a critical historical materialistic lens, begins from an anthropocentric stance relating to God as being located amid the experience of oppression suffered by the ancient Hebrews.<sup>162</sup>

Gutiérrez's reading of the Gospels uses the anthropocentric image of the neighbor to understand the human encounter with Christ.<sup>163</sup> Christ in the present in the poor is an archetype of the new humanity in each other.<sup>164</sup> From this incarnational lens of Scripture, we can draw insights into the fruitful aspects of how the virtue of prudence is exemplified in the humanity of Christ and provides for us a

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<sup>159</sup> Villiers, Liberation Theology and the Bible, 33.

<sup>160</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 114.

<sup>161</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 257-259.

<sup>162</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 106-107.

<sup>163</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 115.

<sup>164</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 115.

way beyond the purely materialistic analysis towards liberation that is transformative in the concrete lives of the oppressed. Gutiérrez also embraces the metaphysical nature of prudence and the eternal truth of Divine revelation.

A Liberationist reading of Scripture often uses materialist lens. The critical materialist hermeneutic challenges more traditional approaches to the text. Thus, Gutiérrez challenges many aspects of traditional Church exegesis of Scripture. Understanding Gutiérrez's theological anthropology and Christology in his approach to Scriptural exegesis is crucial for understanding the praxis of prudence, because it grounds our understanding of prudence anew in the Christian faith tradition. Theological anthropology and Christology are our understanding of the human person's nature, and how we know the person of Jesus Christ and his message are central to the Christian process of making sound judgments and forming a right conscience.

Gutiérrez utilizes Scripture to support his anthropocentric and incarnational perspective on how discernment and conscience interplay with the work of liberation of the oppressed classes as a basis for how prudence operates in the Scripture's message of salvation.<sup>165</sup> In his work, Gutiérrez employs biblical passages like the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-8) to emphasize prudent planning and resourcefulness in the pursuit of justice for the marginalized.<sup>166</sup> Once again, Gutiérrez opts for an exemplar as an archetype of the praxis of prudence.

Gutiérrez embraces the biblical understanding of poverty and its implications on human dignity as a hermeneutical key to a biblical vision of

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<sup>165</sup> See Villiers, Liberation Theology and The Bible, 6.

<sup>166</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 167.

liberation for contemporary contexts.<sup>167</sup> By doing so, Gutierrez connects prudence with the Scriptural tradition of the Exodus story, the prophets, wisdom, and Jesus' Gospel message of caring for the oppressed while working towards transforming the social order in the eschatological vision of the Reign of God.

From a Liberationist perspective, prudence is not merely a virtue but a fundamental principle. Prudence guides moral decision-making within the framework of faith and reverence for the God who liberates from the oppression of the systemic structures of injustice.<sup>168</sup>

The Bible speaks of positive and concrete measures to prevent poverty from becoming established among the People of God.<sup>169</sup> Through habituation of the wisdom of the divine law into the character of the whole community, prudence liberates and fulfills the law, thus the virtue of prudence constitutes part of living out the divine commandments by determining what needs to be done.

A liberationist reading of the Bible demonstrates that the liberating virtue of prudence is an essential point of reflection for Christian praxis, enabling communities, particularly oppressed communities, to make judgments that are not only morally sound but also reflect the eschatological vision of liberation of the whole person.

Let us now look to the insights of Aquinas, Liguori, and Gutiérrez for a richer understanding of the virtue of prudence in the work of liberation.

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<sup>167</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 165.

<sup>168</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 165.

<sup>169</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 167.



### *Thomas Aquinas and the Virtue of Prudence*

Aquinas defines prudence as *Recta ratio agibilium* or the right reason about things to be done.<sup>170</sup> Prudence is an intellectual virtue, distinguishing it from the moral virtues of temperance, fortitude, and justice that primarily pertain to the will. Prudence engages the intellect and involves the process of reasoning and judgment. From judgment, prudence is the virtue of command, which results in the act of free will.<sup>171</sup>

Prudence as the directing or commanding virtue is necessary for ordering a moral life and which necessarily brings a communal element to its manifestation in Christian praxis. Prudence necessitates relational dialogue in the first movement of prudence, engaging in and accepting council. This dialogical movement is the first of the three movements of the virtue of prudence. It is then internalized through habituation, which can be understood as the right formation of conscience at the individual level.

Within the context of Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology, the dialogical movement of council present in the virtue of prudence for a community of disciples dedicated to the praxis of Christian liberation is fundamental for understanding the virtue of prudence in the Christian praxis of liberation.<sup>172</sup> Aquinas provides this vital connection between the formation of conscience and the virtue of prudence.

An important insight Thomas Aquinas gives in understanding how the virtue

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<sup>170</sup> See ST, II.II.47-56.

<sup>171</sup> See ST, II.II.47-56.

<sup>172</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 57.

of prudence is manifested in the Liberation Theology of Gutiérrez is the understanding of the relationship between the conscience and prudence. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., in his work on Aquinas's metaphysics, focuses on Aquinas's work on prudence and conscience; he writes:

The treatise on conscience as it pertains to particular matters is found in the *Summa Theologiae* in its legitimate place, namely in the treatise on prudence, for right and certain conscience, is nothing other than an act of prudence, which takes counsel [or deliberates], practically judges, and commands.<sup>173</sup>

Following Garrigou-Lagrange's insight and reflection on conscience will directly, by the nature of the human conscience, affect one's perspective on the virtue of prudence, since a well-formed conscience is the actualization of the virtue of prudence.

#### *Alphonsus and the Formation of Conscience*

Liguori's approach to the virtue of prudence follows the tradition of Aquinas as a cardinal virtue of utmost importance.<sup>174</sup> Liguori's theology is characterized by a deep appreciation for the practical aspects of moral decision-making, and his understanding of prudence reflects this emphasis. Alphonsus' approach to moral truth is divided into two parts: the theoretical study of prudence in the Thomistic tradition and the examination of new moral experiences. This approach, called pastoral prudence, arises from Alphonsus' belief that there is a single moral truth

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<sup>173</sup> Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., and Matthew K. Miner, "Remarks Concerning the Metaphysical Character of St. Thomas's Moral Theology, in Particular as It Is Related to Prudence and Conscience." *Nova et vetera* 17, no. 1 (2019), 252; <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2019.0012>.

<sup>174</sup> See Raphael Gallagher, C.Ss.R, Writings From Moral Theology by Saint Alphonsus Liguori, (Liguori Publications, 2019), 163.

but that its application depends on perceiving it in very different circumstances. The truth that is of interest to Alphonsus is that which leads to salvation, and for him, prudence is fundamentally pastoral because it serves the purpose of salvation.<sup>175</sup>

In his moral *Theologia Moralis*, Liguori offers a practical understanding of pastoral prudence. He defines prudence as the virtue that enables a person to recognize what is truly good and to choose the most fitting means to attain it.<sup>176</sup> Liguori's emphasis on pastoral prudence as a cognitive virtue underscores its role in moral decision-making. Prudence is not a mere skill but a virtue that requires acquiring knowledge about what is right and good to be acted on. This knowledge is essential for recognizing a situation's moral dimensions and judging the appropriate course of action.

Liguori's understanding of pastoral prudence, like Aquinas's, is closely related to the formation of a right conscience but, in practical application, flows and interacts closely together from the Alphonsian perspective.

The Thomistic distinction between the virtue of prudence and a well-formed conscience differ only in their terminations. Conscience terminates in an intellectual judgment about moral truth as accurate, and prudence terminates in a judgment about moral truth as a good to be acted upon.<sup>177</sup> Prudence necessarily relates to action, while right conscience may not. Though Liguori does not contradict or object to the Thomistic distinction, he maintains that a well-formed conscience is the

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<sup>175</sup> Gallagher, *Writings From Moral Theology*, 38.

<sup>176</sup> Liguori, Alphonsus, *Theologia Moralis*, Bk. 3. Ch. VIII, Para 114, (Typis, Polyglottis Vaticanis, Rome, 1912).

<sup>177</sup> See ST, I.II.79.17.

essence of prudence. In his work, he highlights the role of conscience as the "witness of God Himself" within the human heart.<sup>178</sup>

Liguori's teachings on conscience reflect the Catholic tradition's emphasis on the moral duty to follow one's conscience.<sup>179</sup> A well-formed conscience, guided by prudence, is a reliable moral compass, enabling individuals to navigate complex ethical situations and make choices consistent with their faith and values.<sup>180</sup>

Alphonsus underscores the role of prudence in discerning God's will in one's life. He acknowledges that discernment is an essential aspect of the Christian journey, and prudence plays a central role in this process. In Liguori's theology, discernment is not limited to major life decisions but extends also to everyday choices.

He encourages individuals to approach discernment with a sense of inner peace and the guidance of a well-formed conscience. Liguori's understanding of prudence emphasizes the need to seek God's will in all things, aligning one's choices with God's plan.

Alphonsus Liguori's approach to prudence, like any theology, is rooted in a particular context for a particular audience. For Liguori, his *Theologia Morales* was written for young men preparing to be Redemptorist priests who would become confessors and pastors for the poor and the abandoned.<sup>181</sup> For Liguori, this context necessitated that any understanding of prudence should never be abstract but

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<sup>178</sup> See ST, I.II.27.

<sup>179</sup> Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Freedom, (December 7, 1965, Rome), Ch. 1, Para, 3.

<sup>180</sup> Gallagher, Writings From Moral Theology, 10.

<sup>181</sup> Gallagher, Writings From Moral Theology, xiii.

deeply practical. He provides a framework for exercising prudence in the everyday life of the people of God and for the Redemptorist priest who was to give counsel and assist in forming their conscience.

This pastoral approach offers guidelines for confessors assisting a community suffering from a lack of primary education, near total political alienation, and absolute poverty to be spiritually empowered through the right formation of their conscience to make prudent moral decisions in their complex and challenging lives. This Alphonsian method is characterized by a systematic approach that aligns with Liguori's emphasis on practical reasoning and pastoral empathy.

Liguori suggests that individuals carefully consider their situation, recognizing their actions' moral dimensions and potential consequences. Prudence, in Liguori's view, is not solitary. He encourages individuals to seek advice and guidance from others, particularly a confessor, especially in complex or uncertain situations.<sup>182</sup> Liguori underscores the importance of prayer in the process of the formation of conscience and prudential decision-making. Seeking God's guidance through prayer is an integral part of prudence for Liguori. Individuals are encouraged to contemplate the potential outcomes of their choices, weighing their actions' moral and practical implications. Finally, based on carefully examining the situation, counsel, prayer, and reflection, individuals are to choose the course of action most aligned with moral principles and the pursuit of the good.

Alphonsus' system is focused on the personal conversion of individuals. He does not address social changes, as understood in liberationist theology, but rather

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<sup>182</sup> See Liguori, Theologia Moralis, Bk. 3. Para 114.

advocates for restructuring personal identity. This restructuring is only possible if one allows the love of God to play the leading role in one's life. He preaches the importance of seeking God's forgiveness and pardon instead of punishment and judgment. In his pastoral approach, Alphonsus emphasizes the mercy and love of God as central elements of moral truth.<sup>183</sup>

Liguori's treatise on conscience as the doorway for any ethical system provides an essential insight for understanding how prudence is actualized in the theology of Gutiérrez by focusing our understanding of the human conscience in practical, actionable human experience. Alphonsus follows Aquinas in acknowledging a distinction between conscience and prudence. In Liguori's treatise on conscience, prudence and conscience are closely linked, so much so that any reflection on a rightly formed conscience connects to the virtue of prudence.

### *Gutiérrez's Liberating Prudence*

Prudence does not appear in Gustavo Gutiérrez's A Theology of Liberation in the same manner as Aquinas or Liguori. That is to say, Gutiérrez does not reflect explicitly on the virtue of prudence using a Thomistic, Aristotelian vocabulary in his understanding of Christian praxis. However, Gutiérrez consistently brings the importance of practical wisdom and the formation of conscience via the lived experience of the poor as a constituent part of Christian praxis. Gutiérrez borrows from the philosophy of the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the

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<sup>183</sup> See Raphael Gallagher, C.Ss.R. L'actualité de la théologie morale de saint Alphonse de Liguori », Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale, vol. 268, no. 1, 2012, 57.

Oppressed the concept of " "conscientization."<sup>184</sup> Conscientization provides a window into how the collective formation of a community's conscience of the experience of oppression becomes a practical application and a manifestation of the virtue of prudence as a directing force for radical and revolutionary social and structural change. In this context, fruitful reflection on the virtue of prudence is in dialogue with the theological project of Liberation Theology.

Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization is the process in which the oppressed reject the oppressive consciousness that dwells in them and become aware of their situation.<sup>185</sup> In this context, prudence involves listening to and following one's well-informed, liberated conscience. Freire's methodology of conscientization can be understood as the praxis of a radically communal and revolutionary modus of the virtue of prudence.

The radical praxis of a communal prudence brings to the fore the lived realities of oppressed peoples in moral discernment. Foregrounding is what theologian Alejandro García-Rivera defines as "the lifting up of a piece of background and, then giving it value, therefore foregrounding' it."<sup>186</sup> It is when previously unseen moral agents and unheard voices are given space for their experience to be incorporated into the moral discernment that the exercise of the virtue of prudence is transformed. For Gutiérrez, this process of conscientization is not primarily an individual virtue but is actualized at a communal level within the context of the oppressed struggle for liberation.

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<sup>184</sup> David Brondos, "An Ever More Critical Dialogue: Table-talking with Paulo Friere on Education and Liberation," Dialog: a journal of Theology, 61.2, (2022), 141.

<sup>185</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 57.

<sup>186</sup> See Hosffman Ospino, "Our Catholic Children: Ministry with Hispanic Youth and Young Adults," Our Sunday Visitor (Nov, 2018), 47.

The process of conscientization is a three-step dynamic that begins with a dialogue within an oppressed community in order for them to achieve a greater awareness of the oppressive conditions that they have been subjected to. The second movement of the process is when the oppressed peoples, through this dialogical dynamic, can understand the ‘why’ of the conditions of their oppression and how these conditions are maintained systemically. The third and final step of conscientization is to make practical and concrete collective actions toward liberation through deconstructing systemic systems of oppression.

Freire’s methodology of conscientization mirrors closely the Aristotelian understanding of the formation of moral virtues via habituation.<sup>187</sup> Habituation, when acquired through dialogue, is described as a dynamic dialogical process within Christian praxis, following a similar pattern of thought as Aquinas’ description of the integration and actualization of the virtue of prudence into three movements: counsel, judgment, and command.<sup>188</sup>

The dialogue of the oppressed can be construed as the consultative movement. The emergence of the awareness of oppressive structures is the collective judgment that the dialogue produces, and the praxis of the people is the command for the practical and collective reflection of social and political action. The process of conscientization is then cyclically repeated as an oppressed community continues the struggle for liberation.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Book Two*, Trans. Martin Ostwald (Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 1999), 33.

<sup>188</sup> See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., and Matthew K. Miner. "Remarks Concerning the Metaphysical Character of St. Thomas's Moral Theology, in Particular as It Is Related to Prudence and Conscience." *Nova et vetera* 17, no. 1 (2019): 252.

<sup>189</sup> See Brondos, "An Ever More Critical Dialogue," 142.



Conscientization becomes the *synderesis*, or the habit that shapes the consciousness of the everyday collective experience of the oppressed.<sup>190</sup>

Though Freire's philosophical work began within the context of addressing the failure of an educational system for people experiencing poverty in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro,<sup>191</sup> his philosophical framework can be read as a tautology of the Thomistic understanding of the manifestation of the virtue of prudence. This interpretation of conscientization as a manifestation of the virtue of prudence in the work of Gutiérrez, provides an understanding of the virtue of prudent conscientization and how it can function in the context of liberation

### *Prudence and Cultural Action*

Gutiérrez incorporates Freire's conscientization into his theology by using it as an unalienating and liberating "cultural action," which links to his theory of Christian praxis.<sup>192</sup> With this pedagogical turn, the oppressed can systematically understand and change their relationship with the world, other persons, and God.<sup>193</sup> It can be argued that Gutiérrez's theological use of conscientization is a radical shift in not only a personal perspective of reality but also that of the ecclesial community's awareness of the material and spiritual interpretation of the reality of systems of oppression and how the virtue of conscientization is conceptualized as a force for liberation of the consciousness of the oppressed. Gutiérrez writes:

Thus (the oppressed) make the transfer from "naïve awareness" which does not deal with their problems, gives too much value to the past, tends to accept mythical explanations, and tends toward debate and moves to critical

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<sup>190</sup> See Gallagher, Writings from Moral Theology, 169.

<sup>191</sup> See Brondos, "An Ever More Critical Dialogue," 141.

<sup>192</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 57.

<sup>193</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 57.

awareness which delves into problems, is open to new ideas, replaces magical explanations with real causes and tends to dialogue. The oppressed reject the oppressive consciousness that dwells in them, become aware of their situation, and find their language. They become, by themselves, less dependent and freer, as they commit themselves to transforming and building up society.<sup>194</sup>

Gutiérrez's use of conscientization as a pedagogy reflects his embrace of critical historical materialism. He uses this process as a lens in his theological reflection and as a method for the historical interpretation of society towards a revolutionary praxis of communities of the oppressed.<sup>195</sup> Conscientization as the collective manifestation of a radically communal expression of the virtue of prudence is of particular importance when placed in the context of the construction of an ecclesiology of liberation and the role of the Church in the movement of the oppressed towards liberation.

Gutiérrez acknowledges that the process of conscientization is complex and that the contexts of the faithful are rapidly changing and evolving. The importance of the participation of the people in this process is critical.<sup>196</sup> The conscientization of the virtue of prudence must first be manifested within the community of the marginalized and oppressed, that is, within the laity, which will then necessarily move to engage the clergy and the institutional Church in the process of conscientization: the habituation of radical prudence.

The challenge that liberation theology presents to the institutional Church is the call to orthopraxis and not simply unreflective intellectual assent to orthodoxy.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 57.

<sup>195</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 56.

<sup>196</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 58.

<sup>197</sup> MT. Dávila, "Building a Church of Liberation: Orthopraxis as the Public Shape of the Church's Common Good," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2022): 266.

### *The Metanoia of Prudence*

Conscientization, understood as the collective manifestation of the moral virtue of radical prudence within the Christian praxis of liberation, implies a radical break with the institutional status quo. It calls for a social revolution of consciousness.<sup>198</sup> In theological terms, it calls for metanoia. Conscientization as the communal praxis of radical prudence follows Gutierrez's understanding of the praxis of political charity. They are both constituents of the Christian praxis of pilgrim people moving towards the eschatological promise of Christ.

This shift in awareness of how the power of Christ is manifested in our midst is communicated to us in the eschatological Judgment of The Son of Man in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25. The image of Jesus' presence in the least among us, the oppressed, is an inversion of the structures of oppression that the poor and abandoned suffer. Jesus modeled this when he said: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me (Mt 25: 35-36)." When reading these words of Jesus through the lens of conscientization as a social virtue, the profound shift in one's awareness of how Jesus made himself known in the world challenges the understanding of Christ coming in his glory and how the Church has historically been an instrument of unjust structures of oppression in the Church's iconography of power.

Conscientization is one of the critical pillars of the work of liberation.

Conscientization, as a praxis of prudence by oppressed peoples, can challenge the Church

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<sup>198</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 59.

and other social structural injustices.<sup>199</sup> When confronted by the radical nature of metanoia for liberationist thinkers such as Freire and Gutiérrez, it would be illusionary for society to believe that solely through the means of preaching, humanitarian works and the encouragement of vague transcendent values can alone be a means to change people's consciousness and transform the world. For Freire and Gutiérrez, this mode of thinking exists only in those who are termed 'naïve.' For the liberationists, the prudent are well aware that such action can slow down the radical conversion process to the eschatological hopes of Jesus in present social structures.

Conscientization is a metaphysical movement of radical change; it is a metanoia, a precondition for the awakening of consciousness and the correct mode of capitalization of prudence, by a process that is neither automatic nor mechanical.<sup>200</sup> Through the process of conscientization, a praxis of radical social and community prudence can be articulated and put into practical application.

Conscientization, as a manifestation of prudence, can be defined as the habit of moral excellence of a community to integrate, via dialogue, to come to an integrated critical conciseness of their political context and empowerment to understand and liberate themselves from systems of oppression. Conscientization, a social virtue, requires the actualization of moral virtue at the level of the individual moral agent and, more importantly, within the aggregate of the whole of an oppressed community.<sup>201</sup> The formative process of acquiring and integrating prudence as a social virtue is analogous to

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<sup>199</sup> José María Vigil, "Descubrir la Originalidad Cristiana de la Iglesia Latinoamericana," *Revista Electrónica Latinoamericana de Teología*, n.029, (May, 2017) accessed Nov. 14, 2023, <https://www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/029.htm>.

<sup>200</sup> Paulo Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," *Religious Education* 79, no. 4 (Fall, 1984): 525.

<sup>201</sup> Meghan J. Clark, "Anatomy of a Social Virtue," *Political Theology*, 15:1, (2014), 30.

the process within the individual. However, one must embrace conscientization as the manifestation of the moral virtue of radical prudence within a liberationist framework. In that case, the revolutionary awakening of societal consciousness becomes a necessary constituent element.

Moral virtues within the Catholic social teaching are framed within the call to realize more fully human lives within a human community. The concept of social virtue extends these moral questions of identity and becomes communities of free persons fully liberated and moving towards a Christocentric eschatology.<sup>202</sup>

### *The Radical Praxis of Social Prudence*

Within this theological perspective of Gutiérrez's A Theology of Liberation, radical social prudence, realized through conscientization, rooted in the experience of people experiencing poverty, plays a crucial role in guiding ethical and moral decision-making in liberation theology. In Gutiérrez's theology of liberation prudence is manifested in the pursuit of justice and solidarity. Simply put, the virtue of radically experientially communal prudence is necessary for Christian praxis within the ecclesial context and lived experience of the poor.<sup>203</sup>

Unlike Liguori and Aquinas, Gutiérrez's prudence is not merely a matter of individual prudential judgment but a social virtue manifested in the process of conscientization that guides communities and societies in their quest for justice and liberation. Prudence, for Gutiérrez, is a virtue that enables individuals and

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<sup>202</sup> See Clark, "Anatomy of a Social Virtue," 29.

<sup>203</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 73.

communities to navigate complex social, economic, and political realities and make decisions that uphold human dignity and promote the common good.<sup>204</sup>

Gutiérrez's theology of liberation necessitates solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Within this framework, prudence is intertwined with the concept of solidarity and the metanoia achieved through conscientization. It calls for prudential judgments prioritizing the needs of the poor and oppressed, recognizing their inherent dignity and the structural injustices they face.<sup>205</sup>

Prudence guides individuals and communities to act in solidarity with people experiencing poverty, seeking to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. Like Liguori, conscience is a critical aspect of Gutiérrez's theology and how prudence enters a theological dialogue of liberation. Gutiérrez emphasizes the role of conscience and social awareness as a moral compass, particularly in the face of social and economic injustices.

At the heart of Liberation Theology is the preferential option for the poor. This theological principle underscores the Christian obligation to prioritize the well-being and dignity of the poor and marginalized. In Gutiérrez's approach to understanding the dynamic communal dialogue between praxis and conscientization, prudence and practical wisdom play a vital role in actualizing this option for the poor. The virtue of prudence placed in the context of the conscientization of the poor is the praxis of making moral decisions that reflect a commitment to justice and the liberation of the whole person through a transformative encounter with Christ. This conceptualization of the virtue of

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<sup>204</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 73.

<sup>205</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 68.

prudence is particularly imperative when such decisions challenge existing power structures and economic inequalities.

Gutiérrez sees this dynamic stemming from the experience of the poor and the oppressed, who perceive their reality and modify their relationships. Thus, the transfer is from a "naïve awareness" that does not deal with problems to critical awareness. This stirs debate within a community and creates a "critical awareness" that delves into problems, is open to new ideas, and tends to dialogue.<sup>206</sup>

Gutierrez's theology of liberation incorporates a structural analysis of society, which examines how economic and political systems contribute to poverty and exploitation. Prudence, within this framework, involves a careful discernment of the structural injustices that perpetuate poverty. It calls for critically examining societal structures and a commitment to addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality. In this context, prudence is not merely an individual virtue but a collective discernment that leads to collective action through conscientization.<sup>207</sup>

Gutierrez's theology of liberation provides a theological foundation for the virtue of prudence in relation to collective social action. It is rooted in a deep understanding of God's preferential love for the poor and the prophetic call to seek justice and liberation. Prudence, within this theology, is guided by a sense of divine justice and a commitment to bringing about the Reign of God on earth. It reflects the theological belief that human beings are called to participate in God's plan for the redemption and transformation of the world.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 73.

<sup>207</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 31.

<sup>208</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 171.

To illustrate the practical application of prudence in Liberation Theology, we can look at specific examples from the experiences of communities and individuals committed to pursuing justice and the preferential option for the poor. For instance, in land reform, prudence may involve the allocation of land to marginalized communities and the promoting of sustainable agricultural practices that empower people experiencing poverty.<sup>209</sup> In economic policies, prudence may lead to the radical shift of economic systems that prioritize the welfare of the most vulnerable, providing opportunities for dignified work and addressing issues of income inequality.<sup>210</sup> In both cases, prudence guides decision-makers to act by the values of justice, solidarity, and the preferential option for people experiencing poverty. Most importantly, through conscientization, prudence directs the oppressed in the struggle to deconstruct systems of injustice and social structures that perpetuate classism that is in direct contravention of the liberating law of God for his people.<sup>211</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology of liberation places prudence at the center of Christian praxis's ethical and moral decision-making process. In the context of social, economic, and political injustices, prudence guides individuals and communities to prioritize the needs of people experiencing poverty and liberates their moral voice through conscientization. It calls for solidarity, a commitment to justice, and a well-informed conscience.

Within this theological framework, prudence is not a passive virtue but an active and transformative force that seeks to address the root causes of poverty and

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<sup>209</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 17.

<sup>210</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 17.

<sup>211</sup> See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 167.



inequality.<sup>212</sup> While Liberation Theology and its understanding of prudence have not been without controversy, they represent a profound and impactful approach to Christian ethics that places the pursuit of justice and solidarity at the forefront of theological reflection and action.

### *A Comparative Analysis of Prudence*

Prudence holds a fundamental place in ethical and moral discourse in all Christian communities, particularly those who suffer oppression and the injustice of social marginalization. It guides us in making sound judgments, leading to virtuous actions. The theological insights on prudence offered by Thomas Aquinas, Alphonsus Liguori, and Gustavo Gutiérrez present similarities and differences in their understanding of this essential virtue. Together in a dialogical praxis of how prudence is understood and incarnated in faith communities, these theological perspectives work towards liberating the whole person.

One significant commonality among the three theologians is their recognition of prudence as the directive virtue. They all emphasize the role of prudence in directing moral decisions and actions. Aquinas asserts that prudence governs and perfects all moral virtues, Liguori's view of prudence is as the virtue that enables individuals to choose the most fitting means to attain the good, and Gutiérrez's understanding of prudence is a guiding force in the pursuit of justice and liberation manifested in the praxis of conscientization. All of these thinkers have shared recognition of prudence's role as the guiding light in moral life.

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<sup>212</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 139.

Aquinas, Liguori, and Gutiérrez all emphasize the practical aspect of prudence. Prudence, in their view, is not a mere theoretical knowledge of moral principles but involves practical reasoning. Christian disciples must apply ethical knowledge to real-life situations and make well-reasoned decisions through praxis. The common thread of practical reasoning underscores their commitment to applying moral principles to the complexities of human existence.

Another commonality is the importance attributed to a well-informed conscience. Aquinas, Liguori, and Gutiérrez all underscore the role of conscience in prudential decision-making. They recognize that a well-formed conscience is a moral compass, guiding individuals to make choices consistent with their faith and values. This shared emphasis on conscience reflects the Catholic tradition's emphasis on the moral duty to follow one's conscience.<sup>213</sup>

Aquinas' moral philosophy, Liguori's moral theology, and Gutiérrez's theology of liberation all emphasize that prudence should be exercised to promote the common good. Prudence benefits the individual and society as a whole, aligning with the Catholic Church's social teaching on solidarity and justice.

While the theologians share common ground on many aspects of prudence, they have differences in their understanding of how it is habituated and manifested in Christian life. Aquinas defines prudence as a moral and intellectual virtue that involves practical reasoning. Liguori concurs with the practical aspect but emphasizes the role of a rightly formed conscience in choosing the morally upright course of action. In contrast, Gutierrez's theology of liberation highlights prudence

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<sup>213</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Freedom, (December 7, 1965, Rome), Ch. 1, Para, 3.

as the conscientization of the oppressed. This radical revolutionary stance flows dialogically from the experience of the oppressed classes. Prudence as conscientization addresses social, economic, and political injustices, framing prudence as a collective social virtue that guides communities towards a revolutionary transformation of society.

The context in which prudence is applied differs significantly among these theologians. Aquinas provides a more generalized framework of prudence applicable across various life domains. On the other hand, Liguori offers a practical approach to prudence and its close connection to forming the right conscience in the individual. Gutiérrez's context is unique, as his theology of liberation places prudence via conscientization to address social injustices.

Though there are distinctions between these three theological perspectives, their distinct cultural and historical contexts reflect the evolving nature of theological thought within the Catholic tradition and the adaptability of the virtue of prudence to address various moral, ethical, and social issues. Whether in the Scholastic framework of Aquinas, the practical moral theology of Liguori, or the social justice focus of Gutiérrez, prudence remains a central virtue guiding individuals and communities in the pursuit of moral excellence, the common good and ultimately towards the eschatological promise of liberation.

**Chapter Four, Conclusion:**  
**Insights and Application of Liberating Charity and Prudence**  
**For A Redemptorist Missionary**

This thesis proposes that the virtues of charity and prudence operate as fundamental moral principles within Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*. These principles inform the role of how virtue ethics in the Redemptorist Missionary's mandate to work for the liberation and salvation of the whole human person.

We have seen that liberation theology uses a critical method in its analytical approach to the human experience. Liberation theology, like all critical theories, contains an activist dimension. It tries not only to understand our social situation but also to change it. Liberation theology, like all critical theories, questions the very foundations of the liberal order in the foundational texts and cultural norms of Euro-centric society.<sup>214</sup> Gutiérrez's theological understanding of political charity and conscientization in the context of virtue theory raises such challenges from the context of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America in a theologically fruitful way.

We have addressed central philosophical problems within Liberation theology. Key among these issues are the theological anthropology, epistemology and methodology of historical materialism in Gutiérrez's work. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith wrote:

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<sup>214</sup>See Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, Critical Race Theory, An Introduction, (New York, New York University Press, 2017), 3.

This all-embracing conception thus imposes its logic and leads the “theologies of liberation” to accept a series of positions which are incompatible with the Christian vision of humanity. In fact, the ideological core borrowed from Marxism, which we are referring to, exercises the function of a determining principle. It has this role in virtue of its being described as “scientific,” that is to say true of necessity.<sup>215</sup>

Ratzinger points out that historical materialism must not be the only fountain of truth. This is the reason a teleological position must be taken in a Catholic approach. Likewise, historical determinism cannot be employed in a Catholic understanding of anthropology. An authentic Catholic anthropology must be based on the *Imago Dei*, lest we fall into the fallacy of the eternally malleable human nature of historical materialism.<sup>216</sup>

Following the epistemological correction against historical materialism, from the Congregation of the Doctrine of The Faith, The suggestion that the popular religion of oppressed peoples be viewed as an epistemological approach that avoids historical materialism and embraces the lived experiences of the oppressed as they make sense of the truth of their lived reality.<sup>217</sup> By incorporating popular religion as an epistemological approach to understanding how virtue theory can operate in liberation theology, we also avoid the condescension of some theologians who view popular religion simply as “magical” explanations, or unimportant responses to systems of oppression.<sup>218</sup>

We have explored the function of charity and prudence within Gustavo Gutierrez's book, *A Theology of Liberation*, in dialogue with the Gospel teaching of

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<sup>215</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instructions on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology*, Rome, August 6, 1984.  
[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html), VIII, Para. 1.

<sup>216</sup> See Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 19.

<sup>217</sup> See Espín, *The Faith of the People*, 157.

<sup>218</sup> See Espín, *The Faith of the People*, 156.

care for the least in our midst (Mt. 25:40) and Alphonsus Liguori's moral tradition that emphasizes practicality in the individual moral life. We have brought into our reflection the Church's moral tradition in Thomistic virtue theory. These sources of theological reflection offer a thorough framework, contextualizing Gutiérrez's theological reflection on the preferential option for the poor and emphasizing the intrinsic connection of his theology of liberation with prudence and charity.

The manifestations of the virtues of charity and prudence, in Gutierrez's theology, reflect the continuity of teaching and theologically challenging growth in the context of the Church's emphasis on charity and discerning prudence.

Drawing from the Gospel, the thesis found resonance in Jesus' teachings, particularly in Matthew 25:40, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." This Gospel reference underscores the centrality of charity and the preferential option for the marginalized, providing a biblical foundation for the theological principles examined in this thesis. In essence, this theological foundation offers a holistic guide for Redemptorist missionaries, fostering both spiritual guidance and active participation in the broader discourse on social justice within the Church.<sup>219</sup> The implications of political charity and conscientization of prudence for the pastoral ministry of Redemptorist missionaries and virtue ethics is indeed challenging at a personal and community level.

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<sup>219</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel, Rome, November 24, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), chp. 2 sec. I, Para, 57.

### *Implications of Political Charity*

Gutiérrez's employment of the orthopraxis of political charity provides an important perspective on the virtue of charity that emphasizes the communal and social aspects of charity. Gutiérrez's communal perspective stands in contrast to Liguori's emphasis on the individual praxis of charity. Gutiérrez's perspective moves beyond Aquinas's theoretical approach, calling for charity to be a form of political action in the Christian context.

For Gutiérrez the orthopraxis of political charity avoids the pitfalls of individualistic charity. This communalization of the virtue of charity expands the notion of neighbor beyond the individual. This situates our neighbor interseccionally with the social fabric of political, economic, social, cultural and racial coordinates.<sup>220</sup> The implication of the moral challenge of the orthopraxis of political charity as a socially transformative movement is complex, yet eschatologically profound. For Gutiérrez's political charity is an encounter with Christ the Liberator. Though Gutiérrez views this in a revolutionary<sup>221</sup> context it is more appropriate, in a theological context, to view this as an experience of eschatological metanoia.

Metanoia is the transformation of the heart.<sup>222</sup> For a Christian, metanoia goes beyond a simple change of actions and involves a holistic transformation of one's inner self. Gutiérrez invites us to reflect upon the transformative metanoia of

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<sup>220</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116.

<sup>221</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 59.

<sup>222</sup> Merriam-Webster, *English Dictionary*, (2023) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metanoia>

social structures by the orthopraxis of political charity in and through a Christian community's evangelizing eschatological spirituality. This will provide fertile space for much more theological reflection on what the virtue of charity implies for the Christian experience.

### *A Heuristic praxis of Conscientization and Prudence*

The virtue of prudence as presented in dialogue with the conscientization of oppressed communities can be formulated as a heuristic of moral praxis. For Redemptorist missionaries this praxis must be deeply rooted in the Catholic moral tradition and embraces the ever-expanding landscape of the diversity of Catholic moral thought.

Conscientization of prudence empowers a community to act well for the sake of liberation, both in ordinary and extraordinary situations. The virtue of prudence completes the moral virtues by orchestrating their movements. Prudence tells us what virtue to use and how to use that virtue in any given situation in order to bring the human will into line with the *telos* of humanity.<sup>223</sup> Gutiérrez's liberation theology creates a theological space for the conscientization of prudence to become a virtue of collective liberation for the oppressed. Prudence in this context enables the Redemptorist missionary, in solidarity with oppressed communities, to not only become aware of the realities of oppressive and unjust systems and structures, but through Christian orthopraxis challenge and reconstruct systems that reflect the Christian eschatological

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<sup>223</sup> James Keenan, S.J., "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies*, 56, (1995), 718.



hope of the Resurrected Messiah.

Virtue, in the classical and most contemporary overstated, is finding the mean of extremes between virtuous and vicious systems of oppression. In the context of liberation theology, the conscientization of prudence is necessary to discover the moral mean. Conscientization of prudence along with a Redemptorist's open heart to hear the truth of the lives of the marginalized gives space for the voices of the marginalized to be heard and empowered. These formative moral encounters are how a Redemptorist missionary learns heuristically through continual dialogical orthopraxis, which strives for the liberation of the whole person.

Prudence not only directs the moral virtues,<sup>224</sup> but also, through dialogical praxis, prudence teaches the Redemptorist missionary what are the distinct virtues of any particular community's moral life. The dynamic of the dialogical praxis of prudence can then be a key to bring both an individual within a community and the community together to reflect on how Gospel values are lived out in their particular socio-cultural context.

A heuristic praxis of the virtue of prudence brings foregrounding into moral reflection. When previously unseen, unheard and oppressed moral agents are given the space for their experience to be incorporated into the moral discernment, there the process of conscientization of prudence occurs and the heuristic praxis can be actualized. This foregrounding is an important element of the conscientization of prudence.

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<sup>224</sup> See Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," 718.

Prudence directs the moral agents choice by means of counsel.<sup>225</sup> Listening and dialogue are necessary for one to receive good counsel. The dynamic between conscientization and prudence for the Redemptorist missionary is to always listen to God who speaks to the human heart. That is to listen to the poor and abandoned to which the Redemptorist is sent. To receive good council and to embody the virtue of conscientized prudence the necessity to dialogue with cultures and communities cannot be understated. In doing so the Redemptorist authentically accompanies the poor and the marginalized and encounters their lived realities. It is in this encounter in which the liberating power of Christ is brought to actualization in his church, that the people of God strive, in communion with Jesus Christ, towards the eschatological promise of the Reign of God.

Redemptorists are constitutionally mandated by their rule of life to work for the liberation and salvation of the whole human person. This missionary mandate, coupled with the theological insights from Gutierrez's work, equips Redemptorist missionaries in their evangelizing mission. This interdisciplinary approach, grounded in virtue ethics, empowers missionaries to navigate diverse contexts with discernment and to embody the virtues of charity and prudence in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalized individuals and communities. The thesis critically examined how these virtues are reflected both in Gutiérrez's theological framework and in his understanding of orthopraxis.

Liberation theology gives a great gift and moral challenge to the Church and society as a whole. Liberation theology is a critical theology, its role in the theological discourse is to challenge the status quo of the theological dialectic and

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<sup>225</sup> ST, II.II.47.2.

expand our theological and moral conscience. The eschatological challenge that theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez have given to all peoples is the challenge to expand our moral horizons. Liberation theology's placement of how the virtues of charity and prudence are manifested in the experience of oppressed peoples' encounter with Jesus Christ is now part of Christian discourse. The presence of the voice of the oppressed in theological, pastoral and moral dialectic is anthropologically epistemologically, christologically and eschatologically transformative. This transformative encounter is incarnated in the collective orthopraxis of the virtues of political charity and conscientization of prudence.

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