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Learning from Hunger: A Communal Recipe in Contextual Theology

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Learning from Hunger:
A Communal Recipe in Contextual Theology

A Pastoral Synthesis Project by

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the Faculty of

Loyola Marymount University

Department of Theological Studies

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Date

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INTRODUCTION

“The core of liberation theology is profoundly ‘theological’ – that is, rooted in the very nature of God. You see, there’s an immediate relationship between God, oppression, liberation: God is in the poor who cry out. And God is the one who listens to the cry and liberates, so that the poor no longer need to cry out.” --Leonardo Boff¹

RESPONDING TO A CALL: THE TIMELINESS, USEFULNESS, AND NECESSITY OF A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION TODAY

In his “Letter to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference” (1986), the late Pope John Paul II reminds the Church that as disciples of Jesus Christ and baptized members of the Roman Catholic Church we are called to be “collaborators in pastoral service.”² In response to this call, we should be “giving witness to being pastors who are extraordinarily close to [our] people, in solidarity with them in joy and in suffering, ready to educate them in the faith and embellish their Christian life as well as assist them in their needs, share in their afflictions and efforts, and inspire hope in them.”³ However, this is no easy task. Becoming aware of the ever-increasing culturally, socio-politically, and economically oppressive realities faced by humanity “reflected in extensive poverty belts, in endemic diseases, illiteracy, and social marginalization”⁴ that have plagued the societies of yesterday and today, the Holy See charges us “to find *appropriate responses to the challenges*” faced within our ministries.⁵ Enter in the work of a theology of liberation, or liberation theology, which finds its roots in the two Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Conference of Bishops (CELAM) in Medellin, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979), and articulates the Church’s charge to exercise a *preferential option for the poor*.

¹ Leonardo Boff in Mev Puleo’s, *The Struggle is One: Voice and Visions of Liberation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. 166.

² Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference (Vatican City, April 9, 1986),” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*. Timothy L. Hennelly, Ed. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll. 1990. pp. 498-506). 501.

³ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 501.

⁴ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 501.

⁵ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 503. Author’s emphasis in italics.

“*Appropriate responses*” to these social realities are, according to Pope John Paul II, those responses that are “effective and constructive... and at the same time, consistent and coherent with the teachings of the gospel of the living tradition and the ongoing magisterium of the church.”⁶ If the responses of pastoral ministers can fulfill these requisites, which Pope John Paul II trusts can be done with the help of God the Creator, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then he is willing to affirm that “the theology of liberation is not only *timely* but *useful* and *necessary*.”⁷ Pope John Paul II’s assessment leaves much room for interpretation, especially today when access to employment, education, and health services is limited or barred in major cities such as Los Angeles, California. We must also acknowledge that such a reality is not exclusive to our specific time or place. We must build awareness that basic human rights, such as access to clean water and healthy foods, are denied on every continent. Pope John Paul II states that “grave problems like these cannot be foreign to the church.”⁸ As “coworkers in the vineyard,” another phrase borrowed from Pope John Paul II, pastoral ministers are called to take seriously the socio, economic, and political realities faced by our poor and marginalized brothers and sisters who “feel the urgent need for this *gospel of radical and integral liberation*” found in the cross and resurrection of Christ.⁹ This is especially true in the struggling, vulnerable, and marginalized Hispanic communities that resemble the densely populated Dolores Mission Community of Boyle Heights located in East Los Angeles, California.

Home to nearly 100,000 individuals in a mere 6.52 square mile radius (an average of 14,229 people per square mile), the Dolores Mission community is among the highest population densities for the City of Los Angeles and the entire Los Angeles County. Approximately 94%, or

⁶ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 503. Emphasis original.

⁷ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 503. My emphasis.

⁸ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 501.

⁹ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 504.

94,000 individuals, of the Boyle Heights population self-identifies as Latino, the second highest population identifies as Asian at 2.4%, and self-identified Whites follow in a close third at 2.0%. Of these nearly 94,000 Hispanics, over half, 48,566 or 52.4%, are foreign born with 87.7% of them identifying as of Mexican descent and 4.5% identifying as being from El Salvador, thus revealing that the Dolores Mission community is made up primarily of migrants.¹⁰ Perhaps one of the most staggering demographics that helps paint the picture of a community in dire need of social change are the numbers dealing with education attainment. In Boyle Heights approximately only 708 individuals have completed a Master's degree or higher, only 1,721 have obtained their Bachelor's degree, 5,317 have some college education, 7,532 have their high school diploma or high school equivalency diploma, and nearly 34,000 people have less than a high school education. It almost goes without saying that given the enormous population density and its low high school graduation rate (approximately 64.2%)¹¹ the community of Dolores Mission finds itself in the midst of a neighborhood that risks becoming prone to rising crime rates.

This is magnified by the public and communal perception of the Boyle Heights community being the self-proclaimed, “gang-capital of the greater Los Angeles area,” and the statistics above seem to support this notion.¹² This is not to say that the Dolores Mission community has not made strides in changing this reality. On the contrary, under the pastoral leadership of Jesuit Father Gregory Boyle in the mid- 1980s and mid-1990s when the Dolores

¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*. Boyle Heights Profile. <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/> Accessed November 12, 2012.

Please note that I choose the word migrants and not the term immigrants because after having come across so many migrants during my time at Dolores Mission, I have come to learn that not everyone wants to remain in the United States but are merely passing through; hence, they are but migrants if not *peregrinos*, or pilgrims.

¹¹ Howard Blume. “California Reports Eight Grade Dropout Rate for the First Time.” *Los Angeles Times*. August 12, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/12/local/la-me-drop-out-20110811>. Accessed March 11, 2013.

¹² *Los Angeles Times*. Boyle Heights Profile. <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/> Accessed November 12, 2012.

Mission community was, “according to LAPD statistics,” the leader in “gang activity in all of Los Angeles,” things have changed.¹³ Since then, the work of Fr. Boyle and Homeboy Industries – a non-profit organization that preaches “Jobs not Jails” - has provided a variety of intervention – and prevention – services that include tattoo removal, job counseling, mental health services and real work-experience at its companies, including a bakery and a successful café, for young men and women needing a second, third, fourth... chance. Homeboy Industries reports that over “8,000 gang members a year come through the program.”¹⁴ Of these 8,000, over 1,200 take part in tattoo removal, 80-85 make use of Mental Health services, 425 enroll in job development programs, and 240-280 find employment directly with Homeboy Industries. All this happens only a few miles away from the Dolores Mission Parish where Fr. Boyle got his start. While this has had positive effects on the Dolores Mission community, the Los Angeles Times reported recently that the Dolores Mission community has experienced a growing trend of violence and property crimes.

Over the span of six months from April 9, 2012 to October 7, 2012, more than 1,000 crimes have been *reported*, including 848 property crimes and 275 violent crimes in the Boyle Heights community. In the span of only one week from November 2, 2012 to November 8, 2012, twelve violent crimes were reported, including three counts of robbery, seven counts of aggravated assault, and two homicides within days of each other. These are only the *reported* crimes.¹⁵

¹³ Celeste Fremon. “Father Gregory Boyle of Homeboy Industries puts compassionate pen to paper.” Los Angeles Times. March 17, 2010. <http://www.latimes.com/features/books/la-et-father-boyle17-2010mar17.0.94359.story>. Accessed March 12, 2013.

¹⁴ Homeboy Industries. “What We Do.” <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/faq/>. Accessed March 12, 2013.

¹⁵ Los Angeles Times. Boyle Heights Profile. <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/> Accessed November 12, 2012.

During my time as a graduate student in the Master of Arts program in Pastoral Theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, I have come to understand that it is this growing rate of violence that worries the community members most. In my research and my field education courses, I was allowed access to one particular base ecclesial community known as *Divino Niño Jesus*.¹⁶ This base ecclesial community group is made up of mothers that are parents to at least one child who the mothers believe risk their lives every day as they walk to and from their elementary, middle, or high schools. Most often, because of work schedules and a multitude of other circumstances, these children, especially the older (high-school level) ones, must travel to school unaccompanied by an adult. The younger ones that go to the Dolores Mission Elementary School have the benefit of having a group of volunteers, made up of mostly mothers, to provide watchful eyes and safe passage when crossing neighboring streets (hence their name, *Camino Seguro*). However, in most cases, the high schools are blocks away from the older students' homes, pointing toward the possibility of stray bullets fired off by rival gang members piercing the walls and homes of innocent bystanders or pedestrians.

Such was the case in May 2012 when a young man was gunned down in front of a home located directly behind Dolores Mission Elementary School in what was believed by school and parish administrators to be a gang-related incident. To this day, the bullet holes found below the front window of the home and those peppering the cement-block fence are not patched over, serving as visual reminders and symbolic wounds of a community still in need of healing. The mothers and members of *Divino* are well aware of this as it often consumes their gatherings and conversations each week as they turn their attention to Scripture, critical reflection, and sharing of their personal stories and experiences to discern practical responses to these oppressive

¹⁶ Translation: The Divine Son Jesus. Please note that this base ecclesial community will henceforth be referred to simply as, *Divino*.

realities. And it is because of this that a “theology of liberation is not only *timely* but *useful* and *necessary*,” as I hope this Pastoral Synthesis Project will help reveal.¹⁷

PART ONE: PASTORAL PROGRAM

In this section of my Pastoral Synthesis Project I would like to address the population or intended audiences, as well as the goals and methodology I will use in order to implement the project and achieve said goals. In essence, what follows is the “who, what, and how” of my Pastoral Synthesis Project.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

My development of this Pastoral Synthesis Project responds to the oppressive realities mentioned above in an effort to equip our “collaborators in pastoral service,” our “coworkers in the vineyard,” and ultimately our pastoral leaders and lay ecclesial ministers with the necessary tools to assess, discern, and respond to said realities.

The specific aim of this Pastoral Synthesis Project (PSP) is to, as its name suggests, synthesize my academic and field work during my tenure at Loyola Marymount University into a coherent pastoral project that takes seriously the methodology, pastoral theology, and pastoral ministry components that make a theology of liberation a timely, useful, and necessary tool for the Church. Ultimately, I aim for this PSP to materialize into a weekend-long intensive-conference for pastoral ministers of all levels but most specifically those in leadership positions in their parishes. In essence, what is proposed here is a project that reflects liberation theology in action. In order to make this possible, we must first teach our pastoral ministers how to *do* liberation theology.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 503. Again, my emphasis in italics.

Borrowing a metaphor from Cecilia González-Andrieu, I hope to act as the head chef teaching our aspiring chefs (pastoral leaders) how to prepare a meal for their guests (community members). The weekend will begin with a taste of the main course in the form of a case study and gradually move toward teaching our participants about the ingredients and processes to help them replicate the recipe in their own communities.

Additionally, it should be noted that this Pastoral Synthesis Project is primarily intended for those pastoral leaders serving predominantly Hispanic, Catholic, and low-income communities, such as found in the Dolores Mission Community, which will serve as my case study throughout. We will see, however, that a theology of liberation, with all its tools and insights, is capable of being translated into effective service of other non-Hispanic Catholic communities of faith.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROJECT

To begin, I would like to briefly review some of my personal, academic, and professional history to provide just a bit of background information on myself as well as some context on how I came to develop this Pastoral Synthesis Project and its goals and methodology.

Born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, California, into a family of five children under the roof of an American-born mother and a Mexican-born father, my family has had its own share of socio, economic, and politically marginalized experiences. When I was just about to turn nine years old, my parents went through a traumatic divorce. Many years and many both good and bad experiences later, I found myself on the eve of my High School graduation (the first in my family to do so) and, surprisingly for my whole family, searching for a four-year college to attend. I say surprisingly because up to this point in my family's nearly 40 years in the United States, not one person in my entire family had graduated with a high school diploma and

not one person had even filled out a Federal Application for Student Aid application (FAFSA). I am proud to say that the March 2nd FAFSA deadline has been ingrained in my mind since 2005 and I never let any of my family members, friends, or even strangers forget it either.

I began my higher education and academic career at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California the following fall and embarked on yet another path filled with socio, economic, and to some extent political, challenges that marked my graduation day in May 2009 as one of the proudest moments in my and my family's lives up to that point. A summer later, I found myself on staff for the AmeriCorps: Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program. As a VISTA, I was charged with serving low-income communities as a Community Engagement Coordinator for a non-profit organization whose mission was to take back the recess yard, improve behavioral and leadership skills, and build future citizens in predominantly Hispanic and African-American communities. In each community I was asked to serve elementary schools whose educational and social realities were, and still are, in dire need of realignment and improvement.

The following spring I returned to Loyola Marymount University for a second tour of intensive Catholic education as I enrolled in the Master of Arts Graduate Program in Pastoral Theology (again, another first for my family). It was during the ensuing three years that I learned of liberation theology and its intentional focus of enacting the Kingdom of God in the oppressed communities that closely resemble the one I sprung from and ultimately the same type of community that I have chosen to give my work to as an instrument in God's creative work. This is especially true of my ministry, accompaniment, and belonging to, with and for the base ecclesial community, *Divino Niño Jesus*. My membership in this group has truly made present and possible the doing of liberation theology.

PROJECT PARAMETERS

The project is a weekend-long intensive conference for pastoral leaders. The aim of the weekend is threefold: (1) inviting our participants, or guests, to share in a communal meal where liberation theology is our entrée, (2) learning about the main ingredients of liberation theology and their roots, and (3) taking on an active role in the weekend by taking these ingredients and recreating the meal itself. Achieving the first two goals requires an attempt at deconstructing the critiques of liberation theology that characterize it as a contextual and subjective theology which presumes that the Kingdom of God is a tangible and workable result of human hands rather than God's sovereign gift to creation. To do this, guests will be given a taste of the main course which the facilitating team will prepare for them in the form of a case study. After the case study is presented, the facilitating team will teach our guests about the roots and functions of the main ingredients and processes used to prepare our liberationist meal. Learning about our main ingredients and the processes of liberation theology will aid us in achieving our second goal of reconstructing an understanding of liberation theology that brings to light the very things that led the late Pope John Paul II to judge it as a timely, useful, and necessary tool for the Church; namely, I argue, it is liberation theology's methodology and its anchoring on the dignity of all God's creation that supports a pastoral practice grounded on the belief that all persons are worthy of salvation regardless of socio, economic, or political status. The third and final goal of this intensive-conference is to equip our guests with the necessary ingredients and knowledge of liberation theology to go out and ultimately (1) assess the socio, economic, and political needs of their communities, (2) discern pastoral and practical responses in light of critical reflection on the Word of God, the tradition of the Church, the pastoral leader's critical assessments, and the experiences of the pastoral leader amongst their community members, and finally, (3) develop

and *do* a liberation theology that embodies the social realities and biblical reflection that surface from the leader's assessments, experiences, and critical reflection. In essence, our guests will be trained to replicate our communal meal with and for their own communities so as to embody their faith and enact the Kingdom of God made visibly present during table fellowship.

CONFERENCE COMPONENTS

Human beings, in all their beauty and finiteness, are creatures of habit. As such, what follows are a set of general guidelines to help make the weekend-long intensive-conference a success. I provide guidelines on Welcome & Introduction, Hospitality & Space, Prayer, Icebreakers, Presentations/Workshops, Personal Reflection, Group Discussions & Activities, Breaks, Evaluation, and Mass (time and space permitting).

Welcome & Introduction

Making our participants feel at home by reminding them that they are in the midst of skilled individuals who want to share the desire and love for God is measurably significant. At this time, the facilitator and team members will introduce themselves. Participants will also have a chance to participate and share brief introductions before the facilitator lays out ground rules pertaining to confidentiality, silencing of cell phones, location of restrooms, the proposed agenda, logistics of the day, and so forth.

Hospitality & Space

Mística. What we hope to do with our space is build a sense of *mística* for our participants. Although difficult to describe, *mística* is at its heart the felt presence of the Divine in our midst in all its Mystery. Central to this feeling is a sense of peace, awe, reverence, and respect for the sacred space we create to call on God, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit to accompany us over the course of the intensive-conference. Doubtless our intellect and our bodies

will be challenged to keep up with the material as well as the schedule and so, naturally, through prayer (another central piece that we will touch on later) we will call on the Holy Trinity and its strength to be present with us: *Maranatha*, Our Lord Come (or Has Come). We will also take time to reinforce this notion of reverence by asking participants to silence their electronics and actively participate in making one another feel at home and in the presence of God by respecting one another's experiences, loving and caring for one another by using appropriate language, and making special use of "please," and "thank you."

Naturally, and as we will see over the course of the conference, nourishing the body and sharing food and drink will be a hallmark of our time together and so the team facilitating this conference should be attuned to the nature of table fellowship and its bountiful gifts.

Prayer

Prayer is a central component to this intensive-weekend to give participants a chance to bring to God what they are having trouble understanding, or to simply give God thanks for making their understanding possible. There will be specific times, and at times specific prayers, planned to give participants a chance to place their needs or express their gratitude before God. Additionally, team members might entertain the idea of a designated prayer space to gather everyone together or even a prayer corner where written petitions or other symbols can be offered up by participants individually and later collected to be prayed over by the community.

Icebreakers

Icebreakers are a great way of building energy, excitement, and best of all: community. Two to three icebreakers will be used during the duration of the conference as ways for participants to interact and introduce themselves to the group and as a way to help the group

recognize that they are in the midst of a room filled with some of God's most dynamic and creative works: each other.

Presentations/Workshops

Presentations resembling workshops will take up a significant amount of time during our intensive-conference in order to introduce and reinforce the principles of liberation theology, especially those of critical reflection and praxis. More specifically, workshops or presentations that require a passing on of knowledge or skills from presenters to participants will require participants to not only learn the process but attempt to lead the process in groups. This is especially true of workshops that make heavy use of Scripture and biblical exegesis.

Scripture

Scripture will play another major role in our intensive-conference and so participants will be asked to bring a Bible with them, preferably a contemporary translation such as NRSV, NIV, or NAB, in either English or Spanish (or other languages depending on the communities served). Pastoral leaders will be encouraged to critically engage and reflect on the Word of God in their preferred language of worship. We will see throughout the conference that using a multitude of translations will add depth to our conversations as well as allow us to engage the Bible from multiple perspectives. In addition, it is highly preferred that at least one member of the pastoral team is fluent in the appropriate languages as a means of establishing an awareness of the diverse communities we are serving.

Personal Reflection

Participants will be given time to specifically reflect critically after each workshop so that they can gather their thoughts and process any lingering questions. As such, notepads and pens

should be provided to participants so they may give life to their reflections and at the same time be able to draw on them throughout the duration of the weekend.

*Comunidades*¹⁸

*Teología en conjunto.*¹⁹ This is one of the hallmarks of most Latino-based theology as it invites all to the table to share in its bounty. Participants will be asked to share their personal reflections as well as engage in group, or *comunidad*, activities and exercises that enact this notion of *teología en conjunto*. There will no doubt be a multitude of professional, academic, and personal experience present and so participants are encouraged to share these gifts with one another. The naming of the *comunidades* by the community members themselves is also of high priority so as to encourage participants to own their identities.

As part of this diversity building and recognizing, the facilitating team should be intentional in their group building, being sure to invite the accompaniment of allies²⁰ of our communities at the grassroots level. This is suggested as a contingency to ensure that we move away from personal voices and move toward communal voices that recognize and highlight our ability and desire to co-exist.

It should be the facilitating team's aim to ensure that all participants are given a chance to speak either in front of the group or personally to a team member so that praise and appreciation might be communicated for their contributions to the community. Small groups will be created in numbers of 5-6 people per group depending on the size of the wider group of participants. Ideally there would be four to five groups in total, approximately 24-30 participants. In some cases, a member of the facilitating team will lead a small group.

¹⁸ Translation: Communities

¹⁹ Loose Translation: Doing theology together.

²⁰ The term allies, in this context, refers to those individuals who seek to understand and accompany members of our marginalized-Hispanic-Catholic communities and ultimately work alongside these communities to foster a more just reality for us, others like us, and the wider human community from the ground-up.

Breaks

There will be breaks after each presentation/workshop where participants will be able to make use of designated eating areas (breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner), or simply to grab a snack, use the restroom, or continue socializing with other participants.

Evaluation

In order to gauge the quality and success of the conference, evaluation forms pertaining to all the above-mentioned components of the conference will be prepared for participants to provide feedback for the facilitating team before the end of the conference.

Mass

As ministers, it is our hope that all participants would wish to celebrate the Eucharist together. If possible, a special commissioning and blessing ceremony should accompany this celebration as we send forth our, hopefully inspired, coworkers in the vineyard to their communities to love and serve them.

PROPOSED AGENDA

This weekend-long intensive-conference is proposed as a three-day-long conference beginning mid-morning on a Friday and ending in the early afternoon on a Sunday. A proposed agenda can be found in the Appendix 1.

PRESENTATION OUTLINES

Throughout the weekend the facilitating team will present a total of six talks on liberation theology, its three mediations, and situations where it has flourished. The goal is to give participants a general, yet insightful overview of these mediations so that they can integrate them into their own ministerial work in hopes that they will yield fruitful results for their communities. Presentation outlines are provided in Appendix 2.

“Theology is a ‘critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word... ’” -- Gustavo Gutiérrez²¹

PART TWO: PASTORAL THEOLOGY

In the Pastoral Theology piece of this Project, I would like to address and elaborate on the key pastoral theologies and practical tools of liberation theology that inform and constitute the focus of this weekend-intensive conference for pastoral leaders. Before doing so I feel it necessary to deconstruct and contextualize the early critiques of liberation theology so as to better understand how and, perhaps more importantly, why the content and methodology of liberation theology arose.

CONTEXTUALIZING AND DECONSTRUCTING EARLY CRITIQUES OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

One of the major critiques of liberation theology is that it is characterized as a contextual and subjective theology that presumes that the Kingdom of God is a tangible and workable result of human initiative rather than God’s sovereign gift to creation. Among some of its most notable critics we find Cardinal Joseph A. Ratzinger, recently retired Pope (and now Pope Emeritus) and the late Pope John Paul II.

Writing as a Cardinal, Ratzinger specifically critiques narrow visions of liberation theology that embrace “the Marxist fundamental option,” and reduce the efforts of the Church to social, economic, and political works.²² In this sense, Ratzinger judges liberation theology to view “all reality [as] political” and of being overly concerned with the material realities of a world that seemingly expresses hope as an empirical “confidence in the future.”²³ We must note that Ratzinger is formulating such critiques of liberation theology nearly 15 years after the Conferences at Medellin and Puebla, which publicly denounced institutionalized violence

²¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll. 1988.XXIX.

²² Cardinal Joseph A. Ratzinger. “Preliminary Notes on Liberation Theology,” 1984. <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm>. I. Accessed March 12, 2013.

²³ Ratzinger. “Preliminary Notes.” III.

permitted (if not enacted) by Latin American governments and demanded defense of basic human rights by these same parties for their citizens. It is this context, which demands political action for a right cause, that undergirds liberation theology. Indeed, it is his lack of contextualizing that leads Ratzinger to his critique.

Pope John Paul II, initially introduced as a supporter of liberation theology in this project, is also one of its major critics. In an “instruction” ordered by Pope John Paul II, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (headed by Cardinal Ratzinger), challenged liberation theology to move past what the CDF considered the “secularization of the Kingdom of God and of its absorption into the immanence of human history” by attempting to redirect the attention of the faithful.²⁴ Namely, in the CDF’s interpretation, liberation theology challenges and denounces the Church’s hierarchal structure and authority. It does so, Pope John Paul II argues, by reducing the Church’s hierarchal structure and claim to authority to a classist culture that is guilty of fostering a “relationship between the hierarchy and the ‘base’” categorized by a “relationship of obedient domination.”²⁵ In turn, this relationship is equated to the Marxist “law of the struggle of the classes” and brings Pope John Paul II to judge liberation theology as guilty of “setting aside the authoritative interpretation of the Church,” and “at the same time departing from tradition.”²⁶ Additionally, Pope John Paul II believes that critiquing the Church and its authority in such an extreme way leads liberation theology to welcome “the most radical theses of rationalist exegesis,” such as returning “to the opposition of the ‘Jesus of

²⁴ Pope John Paul II. “Instruction on Certain Aspects of ‘Theology of Liberation,’” Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 6, 1984. X, 6.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II. “Instruction on Certain Aspects of ‘Theology of Liberation.” X, 15.

²⁶ Pope John Paul II. “Instruction on Certain Aspects of ‘Theology of Liberation.” X, 15.

history' versus the 'Jesus of faith.'"²⁷ We will see later that such an extreme is definitely not the case for liberation theology.

Ultimately, Edward A. Lynch, a professor of political science at Hollins University, in an analysis of the Church's changing stance on liberation theology entitled, "The Retreat of Liberation Theology," states that Church officials "took issue with what liberation theology tried to say about the basic meaning of human life and what is most important to living that life."²⁸ In the Church's judgment, it was not our temporal and oppressive realities that should be our focus but Christ and the carrying out of the mission of the Church to evangelize and lead all to salvation. Lynch notes that "liberation theology clearly rejected what it constantly called the traditional Church's preoccupation with matters of faith, morals and getting to heaven."²⁹ In this relatively early claim by liberationists, Lynch says, liberation theology rejected, "with disdain, the notion that getting people to heaven is more important than getting them tolerable living conditions," especially as relates to the social, economic, and political structures that maintain those conditions and make possible social sin.³⁰ More on this later as we turn our attention to the very living conditions that marked the timeliness, usefulness, and necessity for the rise of liberation theology.

We cannot overlook the events of the many years leading up to 1971 when the Dominican priest and Peruvian theologian we know as the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, wrote that liberation theology, is "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God."³¹ Gutiérrez's thesis sprung out of a context plagued with social injustice,

²⁷ Pope John Paul II. "Instruction on Certain Aspects of 'Theology of Liberation.'" X, 8.

²⁸ Edward A. Lynch. "The Retreat of Liberation Theology." CatholicCulture.org. *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*. Ignatian Press. 2013. <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=643>. Accessed March 15, 2013.

²⁹ Lynch. "The Retreat of Liberation Theology."

³⁰ Lynch. "The Retreat of Liberation Theology."

³¹ Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. XXIX.

economic exploitation, and political oppression and liberation theology's concern for these temporal realities are duly marked by such a world.

It was not only to the participants at Medellin and Puebla to which Cardinal Ratzinger and Pope John Paul II needed to address their critiques of liberation theology. Instead, the Church of the 19th century and its steady development of Catholic Social Teaching demanded that action be taken by and for the oppressed. The emergence of the Catholic Action Movement in the 1920s sought similar goals. Vatican II's charge to exercise a preferential option for the poor and Pope VI's 1967 encyclical on the expense of economic progress brought attention to the need to give a voice to the silenced, poor, and disenfranchised. Finally, the oppressive and exploitive realities of the Latin American Church and its people demanded that action be taken against these oppressive realities. Pope Leo XII's (1878-1903) 19th century endorsement of Catholic Social Teaching defending the rights of the working class laid a foundation for the partnerships of the clergy and laity that develop into the Catholic Action Movement. Vatican II explicitly turned the attention of the Church to the needs of the poor. Pope Paul VI, in "*Populorum Progressio*," criticized the widening gap between rich and poor noting that "the disparity between rich and poor nations will increase rather than diminish; the rich nations are progressing with rapid strides while the poor nations move forward at a slow pace," or move backwards in many cases.³² In every sense of the phrase, "the plight of the poor was worsening," in Latin America as over 70% of the population were at or below the poverty line. These were the realities of the Church's faithful that were in desperate need of social change.³³

On the eve of Medellin, it was not as if our Papal critics, Pope John Paul II and then Cardinal Ratzinger, were not aware of these situations. Instead, in the very same letter to the

³² Pope Paul VI. "*Populorum Progressio*: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Development of Peoples," March 26, 1967. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/. Accessed March 15, 2013. 8.

³³ Thomas P. Rausch. *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*. Liturgical Press: Collegeville. 2003. 57.

Brazilian Episcopal Conference where Pope John Paul II praises liberation theology he notes the stark “contrast between two Brazils: one highly developed, dynamic, thrusting toward progress and affluence the other, reflected in extensive poverty belts, in endemic diseases, illiteracy, and social marginalization.”³⁴ He adds that “it is part of the church’s mission to *concern itself in a certain way with questions relating to the human person* from womb to tomb, questions of a social and socio-political nature,” and this is precisely what occupies the praxis of liberation theology!³⁵ Liberationists are credited with coining the phrase and call to exercise a “preferential option for the poor” and yet their critics do not agree with the way in which this call is answered. Perhaps Pope John Paul II has a different definition of what it means to effect social and socio-political change as liberation theology proposes, but in any case, liberation theology brings to the forefront that a Kingdom or Reign of God cannot quite possibly be one that allows our fellow brothers and sisters to lead daily lives that include “the experience of flagrant injustice, political manipulation, and paralyzing corruption” at the hands of the elite.³⁶ Enacting the Reign of God requires that we embody the Kingdom of God as Christ embodied it: by loving our neighbor. It is in the simple acts of caring for, expressing interest in, and empathizing with one another that we can embody this call from Christ and it is a theology of liberation that can show us how to effectively do so; but first, we must re-appropriate the tools and terms of liberation theology that may move us toward successful mediation of the Reign of God and embodiment of the Kingdom.

RECONSTRUCTING AND RE-CONTEXTUALIZING LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Let us develop a theology of liberation that brings to light the very things which I believe led the late Pope John Paul II to judge it as a timely, useful, and necessary tool of the Church.

³⁴ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 501.

³⁵ Pope John Paul II. “Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference,” 500. Author’s emphasis.

³⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen. Foreword, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Gustavo Gutiérrez. Orbis Books: Maryknoll. 2011. XIV.

Before I begin, though, it is necessary to recall that the intended audience members of this project are those pastoral leaders working in predominantly Hispanic Catholic communities that are socially, economically, and politically marginalized. I choose this specific audience and community because it is precisely the community that I have had extended experience with academically and personally. For Gutiérrez, the living with and writing from is essential to doing theology. Being a native Los Angelino, I feel that the Los Angeles Hispanic Catholic community is a community in need of a specialized version of liberation theology that meets its dynamic and multi-faceted realities. It is my hope that this project will be the path through which I can effectively do so and that other pastoral leaders can translate into their own unique communities. To guide us in the task of equipping our pastoral leaders with the necessary tools, I enlist the aid of Vietnamese theologian and liberationist, Peter C. Phan.

THE THREE MEDIATIONS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Returning to our cooking metaphor briefly, the recipe we will follow is one developed and passed down to us by Gustavo Gutiérrez, synthesized into a reader-friendly list of general ingredients by Peter C. Phan, and prepared by participants in this project under my guidance. As such, we must remember that Gutiérrez, Phan, our aspiring chefs, and I, all come from different backgrounds and experiences and so we will each have our own native spices to contribute to this communal meal.

Despite the many critiques of the magisterium and political authorities, liberation theology “has been practiced in different contexts and continents,” including North, Central, and South America, Africa, and Asia.³⁷ It has attracted the attention of a number of various arenas of oppression including gender (*mujerista* and womanist theology), sexual orientation (queer

³⁷ Peter C. Phan. “Method in Liberation Theologies.” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000). 41.

theology), race (Black theology), culture (African theology), religion (Asian theology) and class (Latin American theology) to name a few.³⁸ Above all, these instances seek “effective solidarity with victims of all forms of oppression.”³⁹

Peter C. Phan, a Vietnamese priest and scholar familiar with the diversity and hybridity of the U.S. community we hope to address, urges us to be conscious of the growing number of contemporary and diverse forms of liberation theology in the 21st century. In a constructive piece by Phan, he surveys the methodological tools of liberation theology and seeks to “focus on what binds liberation theologies together, namely, the essential elements of their method,” which include the analytical, hermeneutical, and practical mediations of liberation theology.⁴⁰ It is this threefold methodology that brings Phan to judge that liberation theology will no doubt be judged as “the most influential movement of the twentieth century, possibly ever since the Reformation.”⁴¹

SOCIAL-ANALYTICS: ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

Phan notes that the expression: “preferential option for the poor,” is fundamental to the work of liberation theology, but “to know who the poor are in our society and the causes of their poverty” requires a type of “socio-analytic mediation.”⁴² Central to exercising this socio-analytic mediation for one’s community is the necessary aspect of immersion and solidarity with a particular community. To even attempt to assess the needs of a community that we are not a part of distances us and makes difficult our listening to the very voices that we seek to project. The socio-analytical method is considered to be the systematic interpretation of the data gained from professional and personal experience. This provides a person with a deeper understanding

³⁸ Phan. “Method...” 41.

³⁹ Phan. “Method...” 41.

⁴⁰ Phan. “Method...” 42.

⁴¹ Phan. “Method...” 40.

⁴² Phan. “Method...” 44. A term Phan borrows from Clodovis Boff.

of the issues confronting the different sectors of a given community by using tools borrowed from the social sciences. A few examples are: tracking national and local unemployment and its effect on the economic climate, the election of Hispanic and non-Hispanic political figures and its effect on the morale of a community, and similar cases that systematically analyze existing issues or realities faced by the community that one seeks to serve. It is the immersion aspect of the socio-analytic mediation that moves us from taking a bird's eye view of a situation to placing our feet on the ground to march in solidarity with a community.

Gutiérrez offers a detailed account of the priority and significance of solidarity with the poor in, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, highlighting the reflections from his experiences of struggle, oppression, suffering, pain, humility, gratitude, conversion, joy and inspiration among the poor and with the poor.⁴³ By privileging the perspective of the poor we grow privy to their experiences while sharing in them. Phan holds that the social sciences and their emphasis on data collection (such as the examples I shared above with regards to the educational, criminal, and demographic attributes of the Dolores Mission community), should be treated as partners with theology in order to ground our claims in informed and educated experience. Phan highlights that political theology has benefited from the use of socio-analytical data noting that “Black theology has traced the roots of African American’s social-political and economic oppression back to racism and the ideology of white supremacy,” and Asian feminist theologians have singled out that “capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, and religion-cultural ideologies work together to escalate the degree of women’s oppression.” Black theology and Asian feminist theology provide two examples where theology

⁴³Gustavo Gutiérrez. *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People. 20th Anniversary Edition.* Orbis Books: Maryknoll. 2011.

and the social sciences build on one another.⁴⁴ Similarly, it is in the identification of the social, economic, and political structures causing discrimination, poverty, and oppression that liberation theology is most effective.

Ultimately what Phan seeks to uncover with the help of the socio-analytic mediation tool of liberation theology is its focus on the concept of structural sin that plagues our marginalized communities. Liberation theology clearly outlines that further investigation into the social, political, and economic realities communities face is necessary to round out the picture of the experiences and root causes of the realities we are exposed to. To become painfully aware of these situations we must immerse ourselves in the realities of our communities. When we do this we are more able to develop and analyze our experiences into socio, economic, and political data that grant us the experience and credibility to make claims and demand actions that are grounded in the experiences of our communities. These experiences grant us the authority out of concern for an actual living community to denounce what we judge to be oppressive structures and to announce our demands for realities that, to our tired and tried eyes, more fully resemble the community of the Kingdom of God.

HERMENEUTICS: MEDIATING THE VANTAGE POINT OF THE OPPRESSED

In the case of the hermeneutical mediation, Phan reminds us of Gustavo Gutiérrez's thesis that liberation theology is "a critical reflection on Christian praxis *in the light of the Word*," calling "each new reality... to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again," and again, and again...⁴⁵ Highlighted in this hermeneutical mediation is the call to engage the Bible in

⁴⁴ Phan. "Method..." 45-46.

⁴⁵ Phan. "Method..." 51.

conversation with the data provided by our lived experiences and the social sciences, these are then a means of interpreting the Bible.

A number of landmark findings of difficult issues hidden in Christianity have been uncovered thanks to the liberative feminist readings of patriarchy and androcentrism. Likewise, Asian liberation theologians insist on reading the Bible in the post-colonialist context, and Black theology's revealing of racial motifs in the Bible are all results of this method.⁴⁶ Phan asserts that the dialogues between the social sciences and the Bible and Christian tradition and between our present social location and the realities found in past Christian writings warrant a myriad of interpretations, but we must always be cautious to avoid drawing direct correlations or equivalence across times, cultures, experiences, etc.. Instead, Phan holds that our "Christian writings offer us not a what, but a how – a manner, a style, a spirit," to guide us.⁴⁷

This method is not without its critics as many liberation theologians themselves "tend to deny the normativeness of the Christian Scriptures," treating it with a hermeneutics of suspicion.⁴⁸ Phan adds that this does not obstruct the unity of liberation theologies, but calls us to continue to "transform the unjust world," and leave no stone unturned or any voice unheard.⁴⁹ This is very much in line with Gutiérrez's foundational understanding of liberation theology as not merely a theoretical tool but as something one *does*.

With this determination to *do* liberation theology, we are encouraged to lend an ear to every voice, to take notice, to take responsibility, to take action, and to, in the words of Cuban-American United Methodist historian and theologian, Justo L. González, constantly be,

⁴⁶ Phan. "Method..." 52.

⁴⁷ Phan. "Method..." 56.

⁴⁸ Phan. "Method..." 56.

⁴⁹ Phan. "Method..." 56.

“reminded of [our] bodily existence by [our] aching bones,”⁵⁰ and, I would add, our warm embraces of one another.⁵¹ As such, we are called to employ what liberation theology refers to as the “hermeneutical privilege of the poor,”⁵² or in the words of González, “[read] the Bible in Spanish.”⁵³

Accompanying the mothers of *Divino Niño Jesus* during the second and third years of my graduate studies allowed me to share in what I personally consider to be some of the most profound conversations that engage and reflect critically over Scripture. This, I trust, is due to being able to “[read] the Bible in Spanish.”⁵⁴ González clarifies that reading the Bible in Spanish does not literally mean reading a Spanish translation of the Bible, though that too has its advantages, but instead refers to the process of interpreting Scripture from a Hispanic perspective. Engrained in this U.S. Hispanic experience and perspective, González writes, is a responsibility to constantly remind us of our “immigrant beginnings, of the Indian massacres, of the rape of the land, of the war with Mexico, of riches drawn from slave labor, of neocolonial exploitation, and of any other guilty items that one may be inclined to forget in an innocent reading of history.”⁵⁵ This, González adds, is a means of “inserting [ourselves] into that history,”⁵⁶ and acting as subjects of history rather than objects and innocent bystanders of history.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Justo L. González. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Abingdon Press: Nashville. 1990. 29. Let me note also here that González’s own context of this being reminded of aching bones is meant to afflict the comfortable, or in the words of Gutiérrez, denounce them.

⁵¹ While I applaud González’s rich acknowledgement of our humanity here, I hope to supplement it by reminding readers that our joyful experiences of our bodies (warm embraces) reveal just as much about our humanity as our painful experiences of our bodies (aching bones).

⁵² González. *Mañana*. 129.

⁵³ González. *Mañana*. 79.

⁵⁴ González. *Mañana*. 79.

⁵⁵ González. *Mañana*. 80.

⁵⁶ González. *Mañana*. 80.

⁵⁷ This notion of subjects of history and objects of history I borrow from the work of Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum: New York. 2000.

The *Divino* members believe that Scripture was not simply written *for* them, but *about* them. While the number of passages we have gathered to reflect over numbers in the dozens upon dozens, there are two Biblical themes and their ensuing conversations that I find to be critical to the development of the identity of the *Divino* group and our understanding of our purpose in gathering together each week. These themes include the notion of a people in exile and the gathering of the disciples found in the Book of Exodus and the Gospel narratives respectively.

A People in Exile

In the Book of Exodus, the *Divino* members find not just their ancestors who escaped the bondage of Egypt, but themselves. It is not just their foremothers and forefathers who are exiled in Babylon, it is them. And it is not just their ancestors enslaved to Rome, but they are also being subjugated to servitude!⁵⁸ “*Estamos perdidos. Estamos desterrados.*”⁵⁹ As members of a community socially, economically, and politically disenfranchised, the *Divino* members often see themselves “as exiles, as members of a powerless group, as those who are excluded.”⁶⁰ They also see themselves as persons who closely resemble both the caretaker of the Divine Child Jesus (his Mother) and the Divine Child Jesus himself.

It is no coincidence that a group of women has banded together and named their small faith group after the Divine Child Jesus. Already rich in its Christological overtones, the *Divino* name is one chosen primarily because each of the women is mother to at least one child who they hold as their very reason for being and for leaving the countries they once called home. They have travelled far and wide to provide their children with the best possible chance at leading safe and prosperous lives, much like the voyage of Mary and Joseph found in Luke 2. In the words of

⁵⁸ González. *Mañana*. 79.

⁵⁹ Sofi. CEB Leader, *Divino Niño Jesús*. November 21, 2012. Translation: We are lost. We are exiled.

⁶⁰ González. *Mañana*. 85.

Divino member, Anita, “*Mi familia es mi fuerza y mi razón de vivir.*”⁶¹ González believes that the Exodus is best understood by the exiled, by those who have made the “long trek through the wilderness,”⁶² and have arrived in a land no longer their own. The *Divino* members, as self-identified exiled persons from their native countries, find themselves in an age where deportation threatens breaking apart their families and sending them back to the “modern-day Galilees – ghettos, barrios, and the misdeveloped countries,”⁶³ they escaped. In order to keep their families safe in good health and good fortune, Sofi reminds us that: “*Tenemos que encontrar a nuestro Dios.*”⁶⁴ As Hispanic Roman Catholics we are invited by our Christian tradition to follow in the footsteps of the Divine Child Jesus and the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospel narratives to find God and to discern options to lift our oppressive realities informed by a *Spanish* reading of Scripture, the Church’s traditions and teachings, reason, and experience, and working toward mediating the Kingdom of God.⁶⁵ This is especially true for the *Divino* community as they seek to live out their Roman Catholic tradition.

⁶¹ Anita. CEB Participant, *Divino Niño Jesús*. November 21, 2012. Translation: My family is my strength and my reason to live.

⁶² González. *Mañana*. 49.

⁶³ González. *Mañana*. 50.

⁶⁴ Sofi. CEB Leader, *Divino Niño Jesús*. November 21, 2012. Translation: We need to find our God.

⁶⁵ A note, on the page limits of this project regarding the social, economic, and political realities of the *Divino* community: discovering and naming the roots causes of these realities has not been the topic of many of the *Divino* gatherings in the past two years that I have accompanied them. The *Divino* members have been more concerned with the practical, immediate responses to said realities rather than uprooting their causes. While ideally they would do so, I prefer, for the sake of maintaining an authentic and organic grassroots action, to refrain from naming and exploring plausible root causes in this essay, though I have done so in a previous essay named. In this work I explore what I feel may be the cause for the oppressive realities present in the lives of the *Divino* members. See, “The Suffering of *Divino Niño Jesús* in Conversation with U.S. Latina/o Theology,” written by Daniel Méndez for Dr. Cecilia González -Andrieu’s, “THST 698: U.S. Latino/a Theology” Course in Fall 2011. Loyola Marymount University. Similarly, an expanded version of *doing* liberation theology from a *Divino* perspective is offered in, “Developing and Doing a *Divino Niño Jesús* Theology: A Liberation Theology Out of the Realities of the Dolores Mission Parish’s Base Ecclesial Community Known as *Divino Niño Jesús*,” written by Daniel Méndez for Dr. Allan Deck, SJ’s, “THST 698: Liberation Theologies” Course in Fall 2012. Loyola Marymount University.

PRAXIS: MEDIATING THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITH PRAYER

The practical mediation of liberation theology calls liberation theologians to “do” liberation. That is, theologians ought to commit themselves to participate in base communities and their activities, to have a practical component of field work in the midst of their scholarly work, or to living and working permanently in solidarity among the people.⁶⁶ Liberation theology holds that without praxis, theory will not abound, and vice versa. Phan, quoting Clodovis Boff, adds that “‘pistic truth – a truth of praxis – and theological truth – a truth of theory – call for each other, and interact upon each other.”⁶⁷ They are distinct, and yet complementary because, when “praxis exerts pressure on theory to critically examine itself... theory, in turn, reacting, modifies praxis.”⁶⁸

Although the *Divino* community identifies with the people of Israel in exile, the *Divino* group differs from them in that they hold strong to what their Roman Catholic tradition has taught them about finding peace, namely that peace is something we must work for as a community. The *Divino* members are confident and faithful that embodying and practicing the religious customs and expressions that have been passed down to them will lead them into the Promise Land. Raised as Christians in the Catholic tradition, we believe that if we truly seek deliverance and salvation from our suffering, the Good News found in our Scriptures demands a response of us. However, as Nancy Pineda-Madrid writes, “suffering brought on by collective evil and our corresponding drive for release from such suffering, reveals that *community* is a necessary condition for the possibility of salvation,” and cannot be fully achieved individually.⁶⁹ Given Pineda-Madrid’s thesis, we are called as Christians to respond as *ecclesia*, as a Church gathered together in

⁶⁶ Phan. “Method...” 57.

⁶⁷ Phan. “Method...” 60.

⁶⁸ Phan. “Method...” 61.

⁶⁹ Nancy Pineda-Madrid. *Suffering & Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 2011. 1.

loving community to confront the collective evils that perpetuate suffering in our present reality. Thus, a community in solidarity is the well from which we must draw our praxis of living our tradition and so we turn our attention to the power of prayer and a community in action as practiced by the mothers of *Divino*.

THE ESSENTIALNESS OF PRAYER

The fact that 33% of all families in the Dolores Mission community live at or below the poverty line, that “a disproportional number of students dropout [of school] and only 3% are eligible for college,” and that Boyle Heights serves as home to “the highest concentration of gangs in the nation (more than 34 gangs)” in the six-and-a-half square-mile radius, reveals that there is an urgent need for helping hands in this community.⁷⁰ How, though, is a marginalized community of little means supposed to respond to these needs when they themselves can barely afford to support their own families? For the community of *Divino*, there are two things that come to mind: *orar y caminar*; pray and march.

Pray. When asked what we can or should do to alleviate the suffering of our community and our group members, prayer is often one of the group members’ first responses. There is a deep conviction held by all the *Divino* members that prayer *can* and *does* change things. Part of this praxis stems from the group members being rooted in humble beginnings that include impoverished upbringings and humble realities where rent and utility bills go unpaid and ends do not always meet. For this reason, the *Divino* members recognize that it does not cost anything to pray but a moment of our time, faith, and our bodily selves. It is one of the many privileges, as González says, of ““reading the Bible in Spanish,””⁷¹ that is, bringing a particular perspective to the interpretation of Scripture as well as a particular way of making ends meet when we believe

⁷⁰ Proyecto Pastoral. <http://www.proyectopastoral.org/domains/proyectopastoral.org/html/BHPN.php>. Accessed November 28, 2012.

⁷¹ González. *Mañana*. 75.

that all our own efforts have born little to no fruit. It is in prayer that we enact the notion of letting go and letting God. In the words of community member Mago, we bring ourselves to prayer when we have had enough, and then leave it to God. But there is more to prayer than its personal uses. Prayer for the *Divino* members is, first and foremost, most effective in community because it is most often all they can afford to give.

“*No tengo grados académicos, pero si tengo oraciones. ¡Si sabes rezar un Padre Nuestro, rezalo por el mundo! ¡Si solo sabes una Ave María, reza una Ave María por el mundo! Lo poquito que tengo lo doy a la comunidad.*”⁷² However, these prayers are more than just the repeating of words. They are calls to action that are magnified in the coming together of the eight other base ecclesial communities supported by Dolores Mission, plus the homeless men who take refuge in the Parish’s chapel night after night and in the wider Boyle Heights community, to march into the streets and engage in prayer for peace in the lives of one another.

The *Divino* members have made use of celebrating mass to live out their tradition in unique ways, namely, celebrating mass in public places such as on basketball courts, parks, and even streets during peak hours of traffic. In October 2012, only two days after three young men, boys really, were shot at and wounded at the park located directly across the street from the Dolores Mission Parish, one of these actions became terribly necessary. A *Caminata por la Paz*⁷³ was organized, as was the planning for a *Misa en el Barrio*.⁷⁴ *Misa en el Barrio*, or Mass in the neighborhood, is often preceded by a public march, or *caminata*, around the entirety of the *Pueblo del Sol* and *Pico-Aliso* communities, the Dolores Mission Parish and Elementary School, and the places where violent crimes have been committed. This, the community believes, is the

⁷² Mago. CEB Participant. November 21, 2012. Translation: I do not have degrees, but I do have prayers. If you know how to pray an Our Father, then pray it for the world! If all you know is a Hail Mary, then pray a Hail Mary for the world! The little that I have I give to the community.

⁷³ Translation: March for Peace.

⁷⁴ Translation: Mass in the Neighborhood.

only effective way to stand in the face of injustice and reclaim the space that has been taken away from us.

Prayers for hope, peace, strength and liberation from the oppressive circumstances that have made the shooting possible populate the pauses between the rosaries we recite as we go from landmark to landmark on our *caminata*. Blessings for the victims, their families, and the community are given over the spot where you can still see dried blood from six months ago. It is highly reminiscent of the efforts of the mothers, friends, other loved ones, and activists who have protested the femicide of Juárez as outlined by Pineda-Madrid. What we find in the Dolores Mission community is, much like the activists in Juárez, the use of “songs, rituals, laments... religious symbols... anguished cries for justice... [and] marches demanding a more just world.”⁷⁵ It is the practicing of our faith that bears “a theological wisdom that sheds light on the nature of God’s saving presence,” a salvation made impossible without the coming together of a community sharing in the suffering.⁷⁶ It is the primary aim of these practices of resistance “to come to grips with [the] horrific tragedy and extreme loss,”⁷⁷ that is faced by the mothers of *Divino* and their wider Parish community. However, it is a reality which the *Divino* community has grown weary of and now demands change through their prayers, their marches in the streets during peak traffic hours, and their public celebrations of mass over the scenes where injustice has reared (or raised) its ugly head.

“*Yo necesito la compañía de ustedes. No puedo seguir sin ustedes,*” shares Sofi, the *Divino* group leader and mother of three children, one of which was “*taken back*” from her

⁷⁵ Pineda-Madrid. 98.

⁷⁶ Pineda-Madrid. 98.

⁷⁷ Pineda-Madrid. 108.

almost five years ago.⁷⁸ Sofi tells us that her five-year-old son was too precious for this world, which is why God wanted him back. And while she has struggled with this every day for the past five years, she has come to accept it as truth because she has learned it from her *Divino* members. This is never truer than when Sofi came face to face with Karla, one of the mothers of the three boys who were injured at the park that day. Sofi recounted that when she heard about the shooting her heart sank and a flood of pain entered it as she remembered her son passing away only five years before on that very same day that Karla's son was shot. "*Yo estaba en la iglesia rezando y yo ¡ni siquiera podía mantenerme en pie! Creo que Dios sabía que yo debería estar allí orando por Karla porque lo único que podía pensar era en cómo yo estaba devastada cuando mi hijo murió.*"⁷⁹ While Sofi ultimately lost her son due to complications of pneumonia, she shared in the joy of Karla's son survival. It is in these profound moments of empathy, sympathy, and solidarity that peace is built and we begin to usher in the Kingdom of God.

As a member of a Catholic and Apostolic Church, it gave me, and surely countless other Catholics, great delight and inspiration when the newly elected Pope Francis requested that before we pray for the church, we pray for him. This man who has been endowed with authority over 1.2 billion faithful as the 266th Pontiff *asked* that we pray for him to be strengthened to carry out the duties necessary of his position, ultimately sharing with us an expression of upmost humility. That 1.2 billion people recited an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and two Amens in hopes that that this one individual might strengthen the sharing in our humanity by praying together so that he might be able to lead the Church toward Christ who is our salvation as a community is a clear example of this world's profound need for prayer.

⁷⁸ Sofi. CEB Leader, *Divino Niño Jesús*. October 3, 2012. Translation: I need your (the Divino members') company. I cannot go on without you all.

⁷⁹ Sofi. CEB Leader, *Divino Niño Jesús*. October 3, 2012. Translation: I was at church praying and I couldn't even stand up! I guess God knew I should be there praying for Karla because all I could think of was how devastated I was when my son died

*“Lord, lift up our hearts that we may
see your face,
hear your call,
do your will.*

Amen.”

--The Sursum Corda Prayer

PART THREE: PASTORAL MINISTRY

In the final section of this project I offer a personal reflection on my time at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), paying special attention to my experiences as a student and as a pastoral minister. I offer up these reflections as a means of synthesizing my personal, academic, and pastoral ministry experiences into a coherent theology of pastoral ministry rooted in the methodology of a theology of liberation.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FOR A PASTORAL VISION

I have already briefly touched on my arrival at LMU in the fall of 2005 as an undergraduate studying Economics with a minor in Theological Studies and my return in the fall of 2010 to the Master of Arts in Pastoral Theology program, but I would like to briefly reflect again on my undergraduate years as they provide the foundation for what I understand pastoral theology to be.

When I was only a month away from celebrating my 18th birthday as a freshman at LMU, I was invited by a friend to join her on a weekend long service trip to Tijuana, Mexico, sponsored by the Social Justice Department of Campus Ministry at LMU and named *De Colores*, after the Spanish-folk-song. I had never been out of the country, but service trips were something I had heard about and her invitation peaked my interest. It was not the typical college birthday weekend I had imagined, but it is likely the weekend that propelled me to integrate the notion

and practice of serving others, and more specifically hands-on or face-to-face service, into my vocabulary and very *being*.

After my weekend of cement-mixing to pave the foundation of a new school in El Florido, Mexico, tortilla-making for the feast we prepared to celebrate being together, and critically reflecting on why I had initially joined the service trip to begin with and what I thought of the program after, I was not only addicted but committed to giving my eyes, ears, hands, and heart to the service of others.

Soon after my first trip, the same friend that extended the invitation to me to join her asked me if I was interested in serving more than once-a-month. Naturally, I said yes and joined the co-ed community service organization known as Sursum Corda. It was during my three years in the Sursum Corda service organization that I learned the value of not only serving as part of a community, but becoming part of the same community we served. It is in the same year that I joined Sursum Corda that I was introduced to the Dolores Mission Community, meaning that my pastoral experiences with this community stretch from 2006 to present day. However, it is not solely the serving aspect of Sursum Corda that grounds my notion of pastoral ministry. Critical to my experience in Sursum Corda were the weekly exercises of prayer, especially the Sursum Corda Prayer which was drafted by a member of the service organization long before my time and is recited at the culmination of each gathering. This reflection provided the time, space, and community to truly reflect critically on my weekly service at the Guadalupe Homeless Project. I trust that it is during this time that I was introduced to base ecclesial communities, however, neither Anselm's notion of "faith seeking understanding," or theology, or Gutiérrez's idea of liberation theology, were part of my vocabulary. Yet I could not escape the feeling that I was being called to learn more not just about my faith but the source of this wonderment.

In the first semester of my junior year I enrolled in my first theology class entitled “Belief and Unbelief,” taught by Dr. John Connolly, an expert in pneumatology and whom I thank for introducing me to the study of theology at a very critical stage in my faith journey. Up to that point, I had not celebrated the Christian Rite of Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church, in great part because I was not sure what to make of my faith, much less understand what it meant to be a person of faith. Soon after this class, I chose to add a minor in Theological Studies to my undergraduate degree track and was graciously exposed to courses such as “What is Faith in Jesus?,” taught by Dr. Connolly, “Meeting Christ in Faith and Art,” taught by Dr. Cecilia-González-Andrieu, and “Ignatian Spirituality,” taught by Dr. Wilkie Au. I must say that these four courses are what propelled me into even considering a Master’s degree in theology, but it was my service experiences that lead me to enroll in the Pastoral Theology program.

Before I touch on my graduate work, I think it is necessary to speak about the academic gap I experienced from 2009-2010 when I worked as a Community Engagement Coordinator (an AmeriCorps VISTA) for a non-profit organization in Inglewood, California, that served low-income and low-performing public schools in the area. During this time, I engaged in several weeks of simply assessing the needs of my community by way of personal interviews, surveys, and site visits. I was also responsible for helping meet these needs by recruiting, training, and placing volunteers throughout Los Angeles County but I feel that what I appreciated most was my time immersing myself within the community and listening to its members voice their concerns and needs themselves. Again, at this time, I had not yet been introduced to Gutierrez’s notion of liberation theology, much less Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s charge to let the community

members “speak for themselves.”⁸⁰ Nonetheless, I trust that this was more of God’s seed planting as these professional experiences helped me fine tune the necessary listening and responding skills for my graduate work.

My return to LMU for the MA in Pastoral Theology program is one marked by academic emphases in Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, Pastoral Minister Formation, and a constant drawing on of my personal, professional, and pastoral experience that have layered my understanding of pastoral theology as one that requires a holistic approach to all areas of ministry and academia.

Critical to doing theology, and specifically liberation theology, is knowledge of the Bible, which undoubtedly serves as the literary source of our faith story. Schooled in the field of a critical approach to the areas of New Testament Studies under the careful guidance of Dr. Jeffrey Siker (with specific attention to the Gospel of John and the Letters of St. Paul the Apostle) and Dr. David Sánchez (an expert in apocalyptic texts such as the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of Mark), I have developed a foundational understanding for reading Scripture, and all literary works for that matter, *in their context*. Or, as Dr. Siker prefers to put it: *learning to read the Bible in color*. This same critical approach is one I have applied to my field work in the Dolores Mission community and especially as a member of the *Divino* base ecclesial community, which served as the very community that welcomed me to *do* theology.

In courses such as Dr. Wilkie Au’s, “Spiritual Formation for Pastoral Ministers,” Dr. Michael Horan’s, “Foundations of Pastoral Ministry,” Dr. Douglas Christie’s, “History of Christian Spirituality,” and Fr. Brett Hoover, OSP’s, “Supervised Pastoral Field Education,” I was provided, again, with the time and space to delve into critical reflections on my academic

⁸⁰ Quotation from Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s, “*Mujerista* Theology’s Method.” 1992, found in Eduardo C. Fernández’s. *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology* (1972-1998). The Liturgical Press: Collegeville. 2000. 66.

and pastoral work. Dr. Au, a leading expert in spiritual direction, challenged me to take a long, hard, and loving look at myself in the mirror while training me to listen intently to God's call in my own life and through the lives of others. Dr. Horan, an expert in catechesis and religious education, introduced me to a relational approach to ministry that challenged me as a pastoral minister to recognize that I am not the only one called to work with God, but that I am one of many and must treat my co-workers in the vineyard as such. Finally, Fr. Hoover, a social-analyst by training, challenged me to go from being the person who stood back and assessed the community to becoming a part of a community in a concrete way by providing a pastoral presence and receptiveness to the *Divino* base ecclesial community.

According to my mentor Dr. González-Andrieu, I am a trained systematic theologian, and I don't even know it. I have often strayed away from understanding myself as a systematic theologian, however, my academic training has been substantial in "U.S. Latino Theology," by Cecilia González-Andrieu, "Foundations of Systematic Theology," and "Christology," by Fr. Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, and "Liberation Theologies," by Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ. I was formally introduced to the notion of *doing* theology in my coursework with Dr. González-Andrieu and it was under her direction that I was trained to recognize and use the language of theology to name the oppressive social and structural realities of communities such as the poverty found in the Dolores Mission community. At the same time, she trained me to use the richness of our Church's tradition and teachings, Scripture, reason, and experience to hermeneutically deduce a response to such injustices. In Fr. Rausch's courses I was explicitly exposed to "the building blocks of our faith," a helpful image provided by Dr. González-Andrieu, to help make sense of the Church's understanding of our faith while at the same time being given the forum to critically and reverently assess the Church's approach and response to

injustice and social sin, especially in the primordial example that is Jesus' ministry. Finally, in Fr. Deck's course, I became versed in the explicit methodological tools of liberation theology and exposed to the increasing number of contextual theologies that have utilized the tools of liberation theology in fruitful ways to give voices to silenced communities. In addition, it was in Fr. Deck's class (in collaboration with Fr. Brett Hoover, CSP's Field Education course) that I was able to use these methodological tools to *develop* and *do* a contextual theology myself.⁸¹ These systematic and methodological skills are ones that I trust have spilled over into the PSP presented here.

Taking the seminal and highly theoretical work of Gustavo Gutierrez's scholarship in one hand and the distilling and methodological approaches shared by Peter C. Phan in the other, this PSP is a practice of liberation theology developed as a pastoral tool meant to be internalized and contextualized by our pastoral leaders. The metaphor of the head chef teaching the aspiring chefs is one chosen to convey the primacy of making the self, its experiences, and its community, a subject capable of producing a meal worth eating. The interactive components of this project seek to reflect the liberationist principle of a circular hermeneutics. Namely, if we are willing to learn how to cook a meal, then we can teach others. I have shown that this meal is one that takes much planning, preparation, and patient hands. By getting to know our chefs and their kitchens (immersing ourselves into our communities) we also learn what ingredients and kitchen utensils they have to offer (social-analytics). Out of these experiences we often learn that hunger is present and so is the need to cook. Why else do we prepare a meal if not to feed the hungry? But first, we must identify the hungry and number ourselves among them. When we learn what it is

⁸¹ See "Developing and Doing a *Divino Niño Jesús* Theology: A Liberation Theology Out of the Realities of the Dolores Mission Parish's Base Ecclesial Community Known as *Divino Niño Jesús*," written by Daniel Méndez for Dr. Allan Deck, SJ's, "THST 698: Liberation Theologies" Course in Fall 2012. Loyola Marymount University.

we hunger for, we can turn to our list of ingredients (Scripture, tradition, doctrine, reason, and experience) and reflect on which ingredients can produce the desired meal. When we have established what it is we wish to cook, it is then that the gentle hands of a hungry community prepare the meal together so that all the hungry may be fed (praxis). And just as we often gather around the table to discuss how good (or bad) the food is, so too do we offer one another suggestions on which pots to use, what spices go best with which meats, and the last good meal we had and who and how it was prepared. Such has been the aim of this project: giving our pastoral leaders a taste of a good meal, teaching them about its ingredients and the tools used to prepare it, and patiently watching over them as they attempt to replicate the recipe in their own communities with their own unique flavors. This is what sociologists, and former Community Engagement Coordinators like me, call *building capacity*.

All in all, my professors and mentors have provided guiding principles and the space to test the theories of theology in and out of the classroom. The notion that all theology is practical theology (or pastoral) is one that I have come to understand as true so long as it is qualified by the intent to serve the people of God. The project I have developed here is thus the culmination of my training and experiences in the field of theology and one I wholeheartedly offer as a timely, useful, and necessary pastoral tool for my fellow pastoral leaders.

CONCLUSION

We are not “self-sufficient” but are radically dependent on the love of our neighbors that constitute our community.⁸² A world filled with injustice is not simply “a social disorder or an offense to the poor, but a violation of the divine law and an insult to the holiness of God.”⁸³ We cannot ignore the social dimension of sin and suffering, nor can we ignore that, as Nancy Pineda-

⁸² Nouwen. Foreword. XV.

⁸³ Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. 98.

Madrid says, “suffering brought on by collective evil and our corresponding drive for release from such suffering, reveals that *community* is a necessary condition for the possibility of salvation.”⁸⁴ These are just some of the landmark claims made by a theology of liberation and they are claims that I trust are valid ones.

None of the insights of liberation theology are possible without immersing ourselves in our communities, listening, and being open to experience as our community members’ experience. These experiences give us the raw, untainted data that speaks volumes to the realities faced by our communities and they are necessary components for making sense of the contexts we serve in. When we can defiantly name that which oppresses us, be it poverty, legal hurdles on the path toward citizenship, or the social institutions that promote these situations, we can at the same time begin to hold these structures accountable for their actions or inactions. It is then that we can make practically and pastorally informed judgments as to how to teach our communities how to move toward *una vida mejor*.

⁸⁴ Pineda-Madrid. *Suffering & Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*. 1.

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APPENDIX 1

Proposed Agenda

Below readers will find a proposed agenda for the weekend. Participants should be informed that the agenda is subject to change with due notice. When reviewing this agenda, it is important to take note of the language used to describe some of the activities that participants are invited to partake in. This is especially true of the word *convivencia* which is literally translated as coexistence, but has deeper connotations of enjoying each other's company and engaging one another in table fellowship.⁸⁵

Day One

10:00 AM	Gathering, Welcome, and Hospitality
10:30 AM	Opening Prayer
10:40 AM	Icebreaker I – Uncovering Group Dynamics: Who is here? From where do you come?
10:55 AM	Presentation I: Deconstructing and Contextualizing Early Critiques of Liberation Theology
11:45 AM	Personal Reflection – Who do you say you are?
12:05 PM	Large Group Sharing – Highlighting the Uniqueness of Personal Perspectives
12:30 PM	Lunch
1:30 PM	Welcome Participants Back – Getting Ready for Our <i>Comunidades</i>
1:35 PM	Activity in <i>Comunidades</i> : Getting to Know Your <i>Comunidad</i> and Sharing What You Learned
2:05 PM	Presentation II: The Three Mediations & the Development of Base Ecclesial Communities
3:00 PM	Activity in <i>Comunidades</i> : A Taste of Being a Part of a Base Ecclesial Community <i>Led by Member of Facilitating Team</i>
4:15 PM	Activity in <i>Comunidades</i> : Naming Our New <i>Comunidades</i>
4:30 PM	Large Group Sharing – Sharing Our Community Names and Their Dynamics
5:00 PM	Break
5:30 PM	Dinner – Prayer & Table Fellowship within <i>Comunidades</i>
6:30 PM	<i>Convivencia – Tiempo Social</i> ⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Another note regarding the preparation of this agenda: following the guidelines of other pastoral ministers with experience in preparing agendas for retreats and/or conferences, I initially found it rather difficult to capture the essence of the intended atmosphere and activity I was hoping to facilitate for participants. After reviewing first drafts of the agenda, paying particular attention to language, I found that it lacked the Hispanic *sabor*, or flavor, of the Hispanic community and required revisiting. Hence the use of the Spanish terms and ways of relating such as *convivencia* (in place of individual reflections and journaling), *comunidades* (as opposed to small groups), and *fiestas* (as opposed to structured social times). In truth, the process felt like an inculturation of the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture into an existing framework that calls to attention the need to recognize a shift in paradigms caused by the growth of multilingual communities and the multicultural realities they represent. See Cecilia González-Andrieu, "Building the Community of Theology and the Arts: Part 1, The Borderland," in *Arts, the Journal of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* (September 2012) Vol. 23, no. 3, 23-26.

"Building the Community of Theology and the Arts: Part 2, Bilinguality," in *Arts Online* Vol. 23, no. 4.

⁸⁶ Translation: Social Time.

Day Two

7:30 AM Wake-Up Calls
8:00 AM Morning Prayer
8:15 AM Breakfast within Our *Comunidades*
9:00 AM Ice-Breaker II – Roll Call
9:25 AM Presentation III: Social-Analytics: Effectively Mediating an Assessment of Community Needs
10:15 AM Activity in *Comunidades*: Case Study Reviews
10:45 AM Large Group Activity: Presenting Case Study Reports
10:50 AM Activity in *Comunidades*: Preparing Case Studies of Our Home *Comunidades*
11:20 AM Large Group Activity: Presenting Case Study Reports
12:00 PM Break
12:15 PM Lunch y *Convivencia*
1:15 PM Welcome Participants Back
1:20 PM Presentation IV: Hermeneutics: Mediating the Vantage Point of the Oppressed
2:20 PM Personal Reflection: Journaling
2:40 PM Sharing in *Comunidades*
3:00 PM Activity in *Comunidades*: Critical Reflection on Specific Scripture Passages
3:50 PM Large Group Sharing: Insights and Oversights
4:20 PM Break
4:30 PM Small Group Activity: Locating Ourselves in Scripture
5:00 PM Large Group Sharing
5:30 PM Dinner – Prayer & Table Fellowship within *Comunidades*
6:30 PM *Fiesta y Convivencia*⁸⁷

Day Three

7:30 AM Wake-Up Calls
8:00 AM Morning Prayer
8:15 AM Breakfast
9:00 AM Presentation V: Praxis: Mediating the Kingdom of God
9:50 AM Activity in *Comunidades*: Returning to the Base Ecclesial Community Model
10:10 AM Activity in *Comunidades*: Creative Creatures, an Art Project on Symbols of Resistance
10:30 AM Large Group Sharing: The Pastoral Ministers Art Show
11:00 AM Large Group Activity: Praying for Each Other
11:50 AM Break
12:00 PM Lunch within *Comunidades*
1:00 PM Presentation VI: The Significance of Prayer: The *Sursum Corda* Prayer
1:50 PM Individual Activity: Writing Prayers for Our *Comunidades*
2:10 PM Praying with Our *Comunidades*
2:30 PM Mass followed by Commissioning and Blessing Ceremony
4:00 PM Adjourn/Dismissal

⁸⁷ Translation: Party.

APPENDIX 2

Presentation Outlines

Deconstructing and Contextualizing Early Critiques of Liberation Theology

What are some common misconceptions about Liberation Theology?

What gave rise to Liberation Theology?

Reconstructing and Re-contextualizing Liberation Theology

How and why is Liberation Theology relevant for Pastoral Leaders today?

Social Analytics: Assessing the Needs of the Community

What is social analytics?

How can the social sciences improve our ministerial work?

Hermeneutics: Mediating the Vantage Point of the Oppressed

Reading the Bible in Spanish? *¿Que quiere decir eso?*⁸⁸

How can we read the Bible critically, and still reverence it?

Praxis: Mediating the Kingdom of God

What is the Kingdom of God?

What is our role in it?

The Significance of Prayer: The Sursum Corda Prayer

Laboring with God.

⁸⁸ Translation: What does this mean?