

The Liberation Christendom in Mexico: Just a Memory or Still Valid?

Armando García-Chiang

Iztapalapa Unit/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, Mexico

The present work uses the concept of liberation Christendom coined by Michael Löwy over 20 years ago to name the broad social movement of which liberation theology is, at the same time, a component and one of the main sources. Through this concept, an analysis of the development of this current in Mexico is presented succinctly, referring to the dioceses where it was implanted and emphasizing its specificities.

Keywords: liberation Christendom, Mexico, Mexican dioceses, social movement

Introduction

As an introduction to this work, it is convenient to focus on the concept “liberation theology” because, under this designation, there is a reflection both political and religious as well as the set of writings made by theologians, such as Rubem Alves, Hugo Assman, Frei Betto, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Enrique Dussel, Rubén Dri, Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Galilea, Gustavo Gutiérrez, among others. It is also the name of a vast social movement in which various sectors of the Catholic Church, religious movements, such as Catholic Action, the Young Christian Students Movement, and the base ecclesial communities have participated (García-Ruiz & Löwy, 1997; Lampe, 2017; Löwy, 1990; 1998; 2019; Tahar-Chaouch, 2007; 2018).

The term “liberation theology” is recognized by the actors involved in this process. However, more than 20 years ago, Michael Löwy (1998) made a significant contribution by stating that the notion of “liberation theology” is reductionist and does not reflect its complexity. Therefore, it is more convenient to use the term “liberation Christendom” to refer to the broad social movement of which liberation theology is at the same time a component and one of the main sources.

In this regard, it is possible to maintain that liberation theology is, above all, a religious and social reflection that counts among its sources the popular religiosity of the different Latin American peoples and the ideas of “progressive European Christianity” (García-Ruiz & Löwy, 1997; Tahar-Chaouch, 2018). This reflection represents a novelty among religious in Latin America, insofar as the first indigenous theology.

In general, liberation theology is assigned directly to a very specific geographical and cultural space, and its paternity is attributed exclusively to Catholicism. For this reason, it is worth noting that for Michael Löwy, there are at least three attempts to explain why it was possible for liberation theology and liberation Christendom to be developed within Latin American territory.

Armando García-Chiang, Ph.D. Sociology, Full Professor, Sociology Department, Iztapalapa Unit/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, Mexico.

The first consider that the Catholic Church's needed to change and to adapt to the demands of the Latin American situation if it wanted to maintain its influence on the people of this region. The second can be considered the most acclaimed explanation of liberation theologians: It focuses on the action of people who have been able to take control of the institution and develop it for their own interests. The third is to explain the genesis of liberation Christendom as a social movement that has been the result of a convergence of changes within and outside the Catholic Church and which developed from the periphery of the institution to its own center.

However, a return to the origins of the social movement allows us to relativize these comments and it is possible to argue that the theses of liberation are born from values and social contexts that are not exclusively from Latin America (García-Chiang, 2011).

On the other hand, in addition to the three explanatory essays summarized above, it is appropriate to note a fourth. This is a point of view developed in Mexico by authors, such as Jean Meyer (1989) and Enrique Krauze (1998), for whom it is possible to draw a line of thought between social Christianity, Christian democracy, and liberation theology.

This characteristic allows us to introduce particular features of Mexican liberation Christendom that differentiate it from most countries where it has had significant development:

(a) The minimal or even null influence that the Catholic student movement had in its evolution. This situation is explained by the fact that during a period that can be considered a dirty war between the Mexican State and radical leftist groups, a large part of the members of the student movement took up arms to fight the government. As a result of the agreements reached between the Mexican state and the Catholic hierarchy, this movement was neutralized.

(b) The non-participation of Catholic Action in the development of liberation Christendom. This situation can be explained if we consider that, in Mexico, the Catholic Action was considered the secular arm of the hierarchy.

(c) The role of human rights committees as an expression and stage in the development of liberation Christendom in Mexico.

(d) The fact that the most important theologians were generally the bishops themselves and that the discussion of the relationship between Christianity and socialism gave way to the debate on the inculturation of the Gospel. Therefore, it is possible to point out that the most important characteristic of Mexican liberation Christendom is the centrality of the role played by the bishops in its formation.

In this context, the presentation of an overview of the pastoral work of the bishops close to liberation Christendom, the changes introduced within their respective dioceses and the themes that opposed them to the Mexican Catholic hierarchy are important factors in understanding the development of this trend in Mexico.

Cuernavaca, the Pioneer Diocese

The foundation of the diocese of Cuernavaca dates back to 1891 and Sergio Méndez Arceo was its fifth bishop. He was consecrated on April 30, 1952. In his Episcopal Ministry, it is possible to distinguish three phases. The first was a period of recognition and understanding of the functioning of the diocese and the clergy, and of preferential attention to the development of the Diocesan Seminary. From this period, we have to note Méndez Arceo's participation in the General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate held in Rio de

Janeiro in 1955 because it was at that stint that he encountered Bishop Manuel Larrain and Bishop Eyzaguire, who, in his own words, had an important influence on his intellectual evolution (Méndez-Arceo, 1985).

The second phase was one of transition. It began in 1957 with the remodeling of the cathedral and a process of liturgical renewal that begun six years before the Second Vatican Council. According to Macías (2000), during this period people's participation in the liturgy was sought, the translation of the biblical readings into Spanish was proclaimed, and Sacred Scripture was revalued.

The liturgical renewal of the diocese was accompanied by a significant change in pastoral work. The presence of the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIF and later CIDOC) made it possible to learn about the most contemporary theological works between 1960 and 1965, including those of the precursors of liberation theologians.

During this period, with the objective of giving better attention to the parishioners, the diocese was divided into three regions: Cañera, Oriental, and Cuernavaca. Simultaneously, there was an overflow of the Ecclesiastic Base Communities and the foundation of the Pastoral Research Center. From 1967, the study of the pastoral attention of the Sanctuary had a significant importance and most of the chaplains of the country participated in it.

It was at this time that the attacks against the bishop came from the conservative sectors. The renovation of the cathedral, the introduction of popular music in the Mass, the use of psychoanalysis in the Benedictine monastery of Lemercier, the creation of the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) and controversial declarations of its director Ivan Illich about the traditional doctrine placed the bishopric in the middle of a national controversy.

With respect to the renovation of the cathedral, it should be noted that it was revolutionary both in religious and architectural terms with an obvious intention to rebuild the temple in the manner of the early Church. However, the most relevant transformation was the restoration of a collection of frescoes that had been discovered on the walls. These frescoes represent the crucifixion of the martyrs in Japan, including San Felipe de Jesus (first Mexican saint) and covered the side walls, vaults, and naves of the cathedral (López-González, 1994).

The innovative character of the reconstruction of Cuernavaca's cathedral was far from unanimous among the parishioners. However, the controversy it provoked was eclipsed by the abandonment of traditional sacred music, the introduction of popular songs, and especially by the use of psychoanalysis as a tool able to help the development of religious vocations in the Benedictine monastery of Prior Lemercier (Arias, Castillo, & López, 1985).

The third stage of Sergio Méndez Arceo's Episcopal Ministry was characterized by a focus on the economic and social issues of Mexico and Latin America. It was at this time that Méndez Arceo became the most controversial figure within an episcopate that was considered very conservative.

The Controversies and the Neutralization of the Pastoral Work of Bishop Mendez Arceo

Despite the fact that in previous periods of the Méndez Arceo bishopric, controversies were always present, the greatest of them began in 1970, when the bishop openly declared himself in favor of socialism, affirming that this system is more in accordance with the principles of the Gospel, and ratified his position by attending the Meeting "Christians for Socialism" held in Chile in 1972 and becoming the first Mexican bishop to establish a public dialogue with the Mexican Communist Party.

In 1978, the Archbishop Méndez Arceo traveled to Cuba, where he met with Fidel Castro, one of the local bishops and many believers. Upon his return, he declared in a press conference that Cuba should be supported and defended against the imperialism of the United States and that an incremental dialogue should be held to make possible the meeting between Christians and Marxists. In February of that same year, he published a joint declaration with Ernesto Cardinal and Alfonso Comin¹ entitled “Christian Reflection in Cuba”, in which he points out that “the greatest challenge of the contemporary Church is the socialist revolution”, and that it is indispensable to confront ideas capable of forging an alliance between Christians and Marxists.

The last years of Bishop Méndez Arceo at the head of the bishopric of Cuernavaca were marked by his confrontation with the Catholic hierarchy. This situation continued until the time of his retirement in 1983. Despite his forced retreat due to his age, from the position of diocesan bishop, Mendez Arceo continued his pastoral work until his death, being considered, according to the classification of priest Charles Antoine (1991), an evangelical bishop who introduced liberation Christendom in Mexico, which was the symbol of this current and made his Diocese of Cuernavaca the first Mexican bishopric to apply the renovating ideas of Vatican II.

However, from another point of view, it is also possible to sustain that the pastoral work of the diocese never managed to change the way communities express their religiosity.

This situation makes it possible to argue that the local development of liberation Christendom was relatively superficial and rather intellectual. In this sense, using the concepts of translation and inculturation², it is possible to point out that in Cuernavaca, there existed an integration of cultural elements where the Catholic liturgy and catechesis were notoriously transformed, but where inculturation never existed that allowed for permanent changes within the diocese. This situation allowed Bishop Posadas Ocampo and Bishop Reynoso, who were the successors of Sergio Méndez Arceo, to dismantle in a few years much of the work done by the prelate known as the Red Bishop.

The election of a bishop famous for his fundamentalism and institutional orientation had announced a new pastoral orientation for the diocese of Cuernavaca. Since his arrival, Bishop Posadas Ocampo showed that he did not agree with the direction given by his predecessor to the work of the Church. Relying especially on Onésimo Cepeda (future bishop of Ecatepec, who had been ordained as a priest by Méndez Arceo and had followed his line for some years but, upon ascending in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, began to be known for a lifestyle full of luxury and for affinity with the party in power), Bishop Posadas Ocampo undertook the neutralization of Méndez Arceo’s work, emphasizing as one of his first measures to stop the stimulus to the development of the Ecclesiastic Base Communities (García-Chiang, 2011).

Juan José Posadas Ocampo remained in Cuernavaca less than five years and was appointed Archbishop of Guadalajara. In 1991, he was elevated to the dignity of Cardinal and two years later, on May 24, 1993, he was murdered at the local airport, in a crime that to this day, has not been completely cleared up.

As Posadas Ocampo’s successor, it was named Luis Reynoso Cervantes, who was considered fully identified with the pastoral line of his predecessor. This bishop was considered close to Nuncio Girolamo Prigione, favorable to the Mexican government and opposed to the liberation theology.

¹ Alfonso Comin was at that time a member of the Executive Committee of the Spanish Communist Party and the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia.

² Translation is defined as the integration into the ecclesial practice of elements proper to a culture, especially in liturgy and catechesis. Inculturation is taking into account the value of indigenous cultures and religions in order to enrich Christian revelation and discover new potentialities.

During the period from 2002 to 2009, the bishop in charge of the diocese of Cuernavaca was Monsignor Florencio Olvera Ochoa, who, in 2003, published a Decalogue of Electoral Sins, where he openly called on Catholic parishioners not to vote for political parties that promoted abortion, euthanasia and same sex marriage, violence, drug addiction, or any other destructive form. As a result, lawsuits were filed and sanctions were imposed in the electoral courts for inducing the suffrage of Morelos citizens.

Later, as the 11th bishop of the Diocese of Cuernavaca, Monsignor Alfonso Cortes Contreras was appointed to present the pastoral letter "Educating for a New Society", a document in which the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM) criticized the teaching of human reproduction in free textbooks and indicated to President Enrique Peña Nieto that the educational emergency needs to be purified. At the end of 2012, Pope Benedict XVI named him Archbishop of Leon, Guanajuato.

Currently, the heir to the diocese is Bishop Ramón Castro Castro, who was appointed by Pope Francis in 2013. For the year 2015, this prelate called for a walk called "Caminamos por la paz" (Let us walk for peace) to demand peace from the acts of violence by organized crime in the state of Morelos. Two years later, his name was again made public when Governor Graco Ramírez accused him of plotting against his government, intervening in political decisions, and enriching himself economically through a religious fair, to which the bishop replied of defamation and government persecution.

As a conclusion to this section, it should be noted that the relative ease with which Monsignor Méndez Arceo's successors managed to neutralize his work leads one to consider that, with respect to the bishopric of Cuernavaca, there was an important development of American liberation theology, but not a comparable development of liberation Christendom.

The Dioceses of Oaxaca

For the analysis of liberation Christendom, the state of Oaxaca is an interesting subject because within this territorial demarcation coincide, dioceses with an important development of this current with others dioceses that could be catalogued as eminently conservatives. The ecclesiastic entities that occupy the territory of Oaxaca are: the Archdiocese of Oaxaca or Antequera, the Bishoprics of Huajuapán, Tehuantepec and Tepuxtepec, and the territorial prelates of Huautla and Mixes.

Poverty, marginalization and a predominantly indigenous population are characteristics of this Mexican region. The State of Oaxaca is the second Mexican state according to the degree of marginality. It is possible to argue that the context fully corresponds to the preconditions for a possible development of liberation Christendom. However, of the five dioceses that exist, at least two were antagonistic to this trend.

On the side of the ecclesial divisions favorable to liberation Christendom, the Archdiocese of Oaxaca was, during the episcopal period of Bartolomé Carrasco, one of the key places of this current. However, from the moment of his retirement, the work of his successor went in the opposite direction. The diocese of Tehuantepec represents one of the best examples of the development of liberation Christendom in Mexico. The Prelatures of Huautla and Mixes can be considered favorable places for this current, but without a major development, while the two remaining dioceses, Huajuapán and Tuxtepec, can be considered antagonistic.

As a diocesan historical background, it should be noted that the foundation of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Antequera dates back to the colonial period. It was founded in 1535, being the third bishopric of the future Mexican territory and the fourth in Latin America. Its first bishop was Juan López de Zárate. In 1891, the

diocese was elevated to the rank of archdiocese and had as subordinate dioceses those of Chiapas, Yucatan, Tabasco, Tehuantepec, and Campeche.

Concerning the other dioceses of the state, it should be noted that all the dioceses of Oaxaca are the product of the different divisions of the Archdiocese of Antequera, with the exception of the Prelature of Huautla.

The first diocese of the current state of Oaxaca to emerge from the Archdiocese of Antequera was that of Tehuantepec in 1891. The second was the bishopric of Huajapan, founded in 1902 by a papal edict of Leo XIII. In 1972, the territorial prelacy of Huautla was founded, which was divided for seven more years to build the diocese of Tuxtepec.

Regarding the process that allowed the development of liberation Christendom, it is possible to point out the decade of the seventies as its gestation period. The bishops who headed the Archdiocese of Oaxaca and the Diocese of Tehuantepec, Bartolomé Carrasco and Arturo Lona Reyes, encouraged, during this decade and that of the eighties, the deployment of alternative pastoral experiences.

Braulio Sánchez Fuentes, bishop prelate of Mixes is known precisely for his moderation in pastoral matters and in his political opinions. During his long tenure at the head of the prelacy, he managed to work closely with the indigenous communities, but never encouraged the creation of basic ecclesial communities. In general, he can be considered a bishop who was respectful of institutions and the government.

The Archdiocese of Oaxaca and Monsignor Bartolomé Carrasco

With respect to the Archdiocese of Oaxaca, the process which resulted in the liberation Christendom began with the arrival of Bishop Bartolomé Carrasco to the diocese in 1976. From the beginning of his period at the head of the Archdiocese, Bishop Carrasco defined the “preferential option for the poor” as a line of pastoral work and marked a clear difference with the orientation of the work of his predecessor, Monsignor Corripio Ahumada.

According to Carlos Fazio (2000), Bartolomé Carrasco opened his participation in the movement for the liberation Christendom around 1964, because this year he met Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the context of the UMAE. At that time, Monsignor Carrasco was already Bishop of Huejutla and, three years later, he was sent to Rome, where he became rector of the Mexican College.

In 1970, he returned to Mexico as administrator of the Diocese of Tapachula, where he was appointed bishop a year later, on June 11. During his stay at the head of the diocese, Carrasco founded the Diocesan School of the Cross and elaborated the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, which was immersed in the line of the Second Vatican Council. Six years later, he was named Archbishop of Oaxaca and, on August 17, he was appointed, for the second time, Apostolic Administrator of Tapachula.

The appointment of Carrasco as Archbishop of Oaxaca meant a new impetus for the development of liberation Christendom in the South Pacific region, an event that coincides with the erection of the Regional Seminary of Tehuacan, Puebla as a formation center with a line of pastoral training based on a commitment to the poor and Indian farmers. Later, this seminary became the meeting place of the bishops of the southeast of Mexico and an important place for the diffusion of liberation Christendom.

It is in this context of regional effervescence of liberation Christendom that the third General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopate was held in 1979 in the city of Puebla, where Monsignor Carrasco was the president of the commission that worked on the document “Preferential Option for the Poor”.

Likewise, Bishop Carrasco signed with the bishops of the South Pacific region the document “Living the political commitment in a Christian way”, a document that had the merit of presenting proposals on the relationship between the Church and the State in the measure that, without validating the armed path, it recognized the legitimacy of a popular struggle against “tyranny” when legal and peaceful means are exhausted.

The actions of Bishop Carrasco provoked a certain indisposition in the Catholic hierarchy, which reacted with the appointment of a coadjutor bishop, Héctor Gonzáles, with special powers, which significantly undermined the authority of the archbishop and prevented a greater local development of liberation Christendom.

The Diocese of Tehuantepec and the Process of Popular Organization

According to Victor Gabriel Muro-González (1972), the diocese of Tehuantepec was created in 1891 as an attempt to strengthen the presence of the Catholic Church in the area. From that moment on, temples and convents were built to increase the secular clergy. However, this attempt was thwarted by the 1910 Revolution and the religious persecution of the 1920s and 1930s.

It was not until 1960 that it had a new impulse in the evangelization of the area. This process began with the demarcation of the diocese in the territory of Oaxaca, which allowed pastoral workers to reconnect with the inhabitants of an area where Catholicism had lost much of its influence. However, it was not until the early 1970s that a substantial change began in pastoral work, based on the configuration of traditional cultural patterns (López Monjardín, 1972; Warman, 1972).

The construction of large infrastructure projects, such as the Benito Juárez dam or the Pan-American and Transisthmian highways, and the installation of large public and private companies encouraged a change in all economic aspects that led to the counting of the land of poor peasants. This situation provoked popular discontent that was manifested in the municipal election of Juchitan in 1968, where a group opposed to the ruling party nominated an independent candidate who was defeated by means of electoral fraud, resulting in a broad and lasting social protest mobilization.

Another important factor in the process of politicizing the local population was the proliferation of higher education institutions and the return of young professionals who participated in the student movement of 1968. These two elements are important because they were the cradle of the main cadres of the movement (Muro-González, 1972).

In 1971, the election was won, for the first time, by a candidate from an opposition party. The following year the Student Peasant Coalition of Juchitán (Coalición Campesina de Estudiantes de Juchitán) was founded, which later became the Student Peasant Workers Coalition of the Isthmus (COCEI).

That same year, Archbishop Arturo Lona Reyes arrived in the diocese and with him a process of renewal of the ecclesial structures where he highlighted the creation among the local peasants of autonomous organizations, the formation of catechists and lay promoters and the break with the local power groups.

The year 1978 marked the beginning of a process of expansion of pastoral work in the area through the organization of community work, the creation of savings banks, cooperatives, and rural clinics. At the same time, there was an important flow of missionaries, the formation of a community promotion center and the multiplication of Ecclesiastic Base Communities. It is also in this year that the diocese adopts four priority pastoral lines: (1) analyze critically the social reality; (2) create a Native pastoral for a native people; (3)

develop ecclesiastic base communities where the laity are the center of evangelizing action in a new society; and (4) train pastoral agents of the people and for the people.

In 1980, the diocese stimulated a more political practice through the realization of a Diocesan Evaluation and, a year later, the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region (UCIRI) was created which represents one of the greatest economic successes at the level of peasant organizations emerging from the base of the Catholic Church.

The pastoral work of the diocese continued in the same vein throughout the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. It was at this time that the Catholic hierarchy and especially Nuncio Girolamo Prigione showed a first adverse gesture against Bishop Arturo Lona by organizing an apostolic visit and a second in 1996 when, without the knowledge of the titular bishop, Felipe Carrillo Corona was named coadjutor bishop of the Diocese of Tehuantepec.

Two years later, Lona was asked to resign. This request was an unusual gesture insofar as Bishop Lona was 73 years old and, according to Canon Law, still had two years left before presenting his resignation to the Pope, a situation which, according to Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño, testifies to the animosity that existed in the Catholic hierarchy towards those who tried to encourage the preferential option for the poor (Mayorga-Hernández, 1998).

The clergy loyal to Lona reacted by launching a hunger strike on August 5, 1998, while their opponents allied themselves with the Coadjutor Bishop and accused Monsignor Lona of having excluded them from the diocesan Synod and encouraged the persecution of groups such as the Charismatic Renewal, the *Cursillos* in Christianity, the Schools of the Cross, Night Adoration and Catholic Action.

In addition, there were also direct conflicts with the Coadjutor Bishop. One of the most important was the construction of the Seminary of the "Immaculate Conception" which was for Arturo Lona a sumptuary expense and a waste of money in a diocese that had a majority of parishioners in poverty (Matías & Morita, 2000).

The subsequent bishopric headed by Oscar Armando Campos (2010 to 2017) had as a characteristic feature of his management, the conflict that he had with the priest Alejandro Solalinde, when the bishop asked Solalinde to resign to the direction of the migrant shelter called *Hermanos en el Camino*. This priest has been a reference point in the defense of the human rights of migrants from Central and South America on their way to the United States.

Currently, Bishop Crispin Ojeda Marquez has taken charge of the diocese as of 2018. The pastoral plan of the diocese is based on two parts, the social field where four factors are integrated: history, economy, politics and culture, and the ecclesial field that integrates five factors: the prophetic dimension, the liturgical, the social, the communion, and the vocations, seminaries and presbyteries.

As for the social field, they use the historical aspect to recognize that they are a people who are the fruit of an interesting past, but who need to recover their mother tongue. With respect to the economy, they recognize that there is high unemployment among the population, so they are betting on self-sustainability so as not to depend on welfare programs, in addition to generating a commitment to Mother Nature. In the political ground, they recognize that the government is looking out for their interests, so they encourage the promotion of a social conscience above the political parties. And in the cultural issue, they recognize that there is a loss of values and customs of the original cultures, so they encourage the valuation and promotion of community work.

With respect to the ecclesial field in the aspect of prophetic ministry, they recognize that catechesis is limited to the obtaining of the sacraments and that the greatest participation is in the patron saint's feasts, for

which reason they promote workshops and meetings for evangelization. With respect to the liturgical ministry, they recognize that there is a lack of knowledge about the celebration of the sacraments, so they promote the experience of encounter with the Lord. With regard to the social ministry, they recognize that there is indifference and disorganization in the collective life of the faithful, which is why they promote solidarity with their more needy neighbors (Diocese of Tehuantepec, 2017).

Finally, it should be noted that the bishop emeritus of the diocese of Tehuantepec, Arturo Lona Reyes, known as the “Bishop of the Poor”, died on October 31, 2020.

The Diocese of Tarahumara and Its Bishop Jose Alberto Llaguno

The history of the development of the liberation of Christendom in the mountains of “Sierra Tarahumara” is intrinsically related to the pastoral work that José Alberto Llaguno carried out in the area for 17 years.

The region known as the Sierra Tarahumara is located in the southwest of the northern state of Chihuahua and has an extension of 33,000 km². This area includes ten municipalities: Batopilas, Bocoyna, Chínipas, Guachochi, Guarachas, Maguarichi, Urica, and Uruachi. Its population is made up of two distinct ethnic groups, the mestizos, who represent 63% of the total population and the natives, who represent 37%. These two social groups are immersed in a system of social, cultural, political, economic, and religious interrelationships that are clearly advantageous to the mestizos.

The largest concentration of the indigenous population is found in five municipalities: Batopilas, Bocoyna, Guachochi, Guazaparez, and Urique. These municipalities are home to 52% of the state’s indigenous population, including the ethnic Tarahumara, which represents 96%, and the Pimas, Tepehuanes, and Guajiros, which represent 4%. The Sierra Tarahumara has high rates of marginality and extreme poverty and the standard of living is twice as low as the national average. It is in this region that the Apostolic Prefecture of Tarahumara was created in 1950, which became a Vicariate in 1958 and a Diocese in 1993 (CEM, n.d.).

José Llaguno arrived in the region of Tarahumara in 1952, when he was about 20 years old. During his formation in the Society of Jesus, the mission “Sui Iuris” of Tarahumara had existed for two years. Llaguno stayed for two years with raramuris and when he was ordained priest, he returned to Tarahumara, where he was appointed bishop in 1975.

For María Berta Arrollo (1996), this bishop is a good example of the prelate who makes a preferential option for the poor whose language, culture, and rituals he adopts. In this sense, it should be noted that Monsignor Llaguno advocated for an indigenous church where the native could become an active member. This model of church implies an evangelization of culture that, in the case of Tarahumara, is faithful to the precepts of the Mexican and Latin American Church. In this sense, two good examples of José Llaguno’s commitment to the development of an indigenous church are: (a) the encouragement of the insertion of pastoral agents in the life and culture of the Tarahumara people; and (b) the ordination of the only native priest that existed (from the Del Campo, n.d.).

Bishop Llaguno participated in many meetings of the group of bishops considered progressive. His most notable contribution to this movement and to liberation Christendom in particular was his participation in Puebla during the Second Assembly of Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) as the person responsible for writing the final chapter on “the preferential option for the poor”. He was also one of the initiators of the human rights movement in Chihuahua and the pioneer in the Tarahumara region. He is the founder of the Commission for Solidarity and Defense of Human Rights (Comisión de Solidaridad y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, CA).

His death in 1992 at the age of 66, when he was at least nine years old as a bishop, prevented this prelate from playing a more important role in the development of Christian liberation in Mexico.

Upon the death of Bishop José Alberto Llaguno, the Vicariate became a Diocese and Bishop José Luis Dibildox Martínez was appointed as its first bishop. Dibildox's appointment was a matter of conflict with the Jesuits. Insofar as this region had been entrusted to them since the beginning of the 20th century, the attribution of the bishopric to a non-member of the Society of Jesus was considered a gesture aimed at reducing their influence since in most parishes there were Jesuits who occupied the posts of priests. This situation forced Bishop Dibildox to temporize with his clergy.

On the other hand, it was the bishop himself who created another internal controversy by moving the episcopal see from Sisoguichi, located until then in an indigenous area, to Guachochi, located in the mestizo sector of the diocese (Macias, n.d.). However, with respect to the relationship of Bishop Dibildox with the State, it can be argued that this prelate criticized the situation of marginality and poverty that prevailed in the Tarahumara and did not agree with the actions that the government had undertaken to combat it.

Later, Bishop Rafael Sandoval Sandoval (2005 to 2015) arrived in the diocese and in 2013 he was sued by Senator Javier Corral of the PAN for violating the articles related to the secular state in the constitution and the Law of Religious Associations and Public Cult. In 2015, the Pope designated him Bishop of Autlan, Jalisco and named Juan Manuel Gonzalez Sandoval as his successor in 2017.

Samuel Ruíz and the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas

To the extent that the history of the bishopric of San Cristobal de las Casas is closely related to that of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who was its creator and first bishop, it seems to me indispensable to present a summary of its bibliography.

Samuel Ruiz was born in 1924 in the city of Irapuato and lived the first years of his life in the region of Bajío, cradle of the "Cristiada". The family of the future bishop had suffered all the effects of the Mexican revolution. His parents knew each other in the United States where his mother worked as an illegal in the California vineyards.

At the age of 13, he returned to the Seminary of the city of Leon, where he remained for ten years. In 1947, he returned to the Colegio Pio de America Latina in Rome, which was run by the Jesuits. During his formation, Samuel Ruiz remained in Rome for five years. His specialty was biblical exegesis and, according to one of his biographers, it was precisely from his studies of the Bible that Samuel Ruiz became convinced that the sacred book of Christianity was the only work in the world written for a people, *Poor in Search of the Promised Land* (Krauze, 1998).

Back in the city of León, he was appointed rector of the seminary. In 1959, Ruiz García was named Bishop of the Diocese of Chiapas, and on January 25, 1960, he was consecrated in the Cathedral of San Cristóbal. Four years later, on the initiative of the bishop, the diocese was divided and the diocese of Tuxtla was created.

All the biographers of the future "Táctic" agree that at that time he was a pastoral bishop, quite traditional and orthodox³, who had a paternalistic attitude towards the natives. From this perspective, the creation of two diocesan schools in 1962: the Mission for Men of Guadalupe and the Spring time for Women.

³ For Jean Meyer, Samuel Ruiz has always been a traditional Catholic, Orthodox and absolutely faithful to Rome.

It is a consensus among scholars that the report of the Second Vatican Council was a milestone in the life of Samuel Ruiz from which a process of change in his pastoral attitudes and actions began (Fazio, 1994).

Since Ruiz's return to Mexico, he made efforts to apply the Council's ideas in Mexico and founded with Alfonso Sánchez Tinoco, Prelate of Papantla and Adalberto Almeida of Zacatecas Asociación de Ayuda Mutua Episcopal (UMAE). In 1968, he participated in the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín, and was also named President of the Department of Indigenous Missions of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). From that moment on, Samuel Ruiz gives a different direction to the work of his diocese, which will become one of the most complete examples of liberation Christianity in Latin America.

According to Gustavo Ituarte, former vicar of the diocese, it is in the following year, in 1971 and during a training course in Ocosingo, that the foundations for a new orientation in native catechesis emerge. This new orientation was rooted in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, and advocated the appropriation of the word as the beginning of liberation. This method was adapted to Chiapas where it took the name "The Word of God". The application of this method proved to be quite adequate to develop a new catechism in accordance with the Second Vatican Council, in which the book of Exodus played a central role and contributed along with the transformation of the role of the catechists into "tijuanejs" or community animators to the creation of the text "We Are Seeking Freedom". The Tzeltales of the forest announce the good news, which is a founding document in the development of an autonomous form of Liberation Theology (Krauze, 1998).

The Indigenous Congress, the Peasant Movement and the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas

In 1974, the famous Indigenous Congress took place in San Cristóbal de las Casas, which would change the future of the peasant movement, but especially that of the indigenous movement, on a national level. The symposium was promoted by the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of Bartolomé de las Casas and, according to an expression attributed to Samuel Ruiz, it was to hold a congress of natives for the indigenous (CENCOS, 1974).

In this way, an Indian congress appeared which, from the beginning, struggled with the attempts at co-optation and mediatization by the State and which, in spite of its short duration, opened the spaces that gave impetus to the peasant movement of Chiapas grouped around the struggle for land and allowed the constitution of a native movement independent of official indigenism.

On the other hand, in the context of the changes in agrarian policy during the period of López Portillo (1976-1982), Samuel Ruiz met with a group of Maoist activists whose leader was Adolfo Orive who had created, in union with some priests, two organizations dedicated to the defense of agrarian rights and the economic and social development of the communities: the Union of Ejidos of the Glens of Ocosingo, Ta Lecubtesel, and the Union of Ejidos of Peasant Struggle. Impressed by the work done by these activists, Ruiz invites them to work in his diocese where they meet with groups of activists from the Universidad Agrícola de Chapingo. However, the agreement between the newcomers and the diocese was short-lived and two years later, in 1978, the activists from the north were expelled from diocesan territory.

In 1979, the second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate was held in Puebla, where a series of attacks by traditionalist sectors against Samuel Ruiz took place during the preparatory stage. These attacks were centered on the supposed Marxist family of the bishop and came close to accusations against Ruiz to prepare an armed revolt.

A year later, events, such as the death of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero in 1980, the victory of the Sandinistas and the military repression in Guatemala contributed to the radicalization of Samuel Ruiz and his closest associates (de la Grange & Rico, 1998; Krauze, 1998).

By 1983, according to Ma Del Carmen Legorreta, the diocese was in the midst of a real, but undeclared, dispute between the pastoral agents of the “cañadas” and the consultants of the region’s largest organization. The Union of Unions is created, which is the organization SLOP (Raíz), which can be considered the “militant arm” of the diocese.

Likewise, according to this author, from 1983 to 1988, the most striking phenomenon in the “cañadas” is the participation of the great majority of the population in the process of formation of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. However, in 1989 a rift emerged between the pastoral agents of the diocese of San Cristobal and the leadership of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) caused, according to one version, by the intention of the pastoral agents to set themselves up as the main ideological influence and political communities without having the capacity to respond to the concrete problems of the population, and according to a second version by the opposition of Samuel Ruiz and his pastoral team to an armed revolt. This situation culminated in 1993 with a total rupture between the diocese and the Zapatista army.

The outbreak of the Zapatista rebellion, a year later, will make Samuel Ruiz play a central role in Mexican public life. First as one of the accused of organizing the so-called revolt and, shortly afterwards, as the inescapable mediator between the State and the Zapatista Army, a function in which he remained as president from 1994 to 1998.

Towards the end of the following year, on November 3, 1999, Samuel Ruiz resigned as Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Three months later, San Cristobal held the Pastoral Meeting “From the Second Vatican Council to the Third Millennium” in which, according to Luis Del Valle, he demonstrated that the local diocese fulfills the real challenge it has in America. Latin, that is, the inculturation of the Gospel, and that it fulfilled this task by respecting the peoples and their cultures (Comunicación Diocesana, 2000). The next day, Samuel Ruiz García celebrated the 40th anniversary of his appointment as bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas in a ceremony that was at the same time his farewell to the diocese he had governed since its creation.

Months later, John Paul II appointed Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel as the new bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. The pastoral work carried out by this bishop from 2000 to 2017 was focused on adapting and shaping the theological precepts of liberation to the official Catholic doctrine of Rome, not without generating conflicts between pastoral agents and the diocesan hierarchy. At the age of 75, Arizmendi presented his resignation to Pope Francis, which was accepted, and Rodrigo Aguilar Martinez was promoted as the new bishop.

Currently, the pastoral lines of the diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas are Shared and joint pastoral responsibility, insertion of the social reality and in history, incarnation in the indigenous cultures, communion with the Catholic Church, unity in diversity and reconciliation in the communities.

As a conclusion to this section, it should be noted that the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas is the ecclesial district where liberation Christendom reached its greatest development in Mexico. In that diocese, unlike Cuernavaca’s, there was an inculturation of a libertarian gospel that profoundly changed the way the Catholic religion was lived by the inhabitants, especially those of indigenous origin, which has meant that the pastoral orientation developed by Samuel Ruíz is still in effect in many communities in the region.

Saltillo, the Last Diocese Within Liberation Christendom

The Diocese of Saltillo is part of the state of Coahuila which is located in the center of the northern part of the Republic, in the so-called Mexican high plateau, made up of desert and semi-desert plains. The Diocese belongs to the Northeast Pastoral Region of the Republic, together with the Archdiocese of Monterrey and the Dioceses of Linares, Matamoros, Ciudad Victoria, Tampico, Ciudad Valles and Nuevo Laredo. It borders to the north with the Diocese of Piedras Negras; to the west with the Archdiocese of Chihuahua; to the southwest with the Diocese of Torreon; to the south with the Diocese of Zacatecas; to the southeast with the Diocese of Linares; and to the east with the Diocese of Nuevo Laredo and the Archdiocese of Monterrey.

The Bishopric of Saltillo and the Work of Fray Raúl Vera López

Fray José Raúl Vera López, OP was born in Acámbaro, Guanajuato, Mexico on June 21, 1945. He graduated as a Chemical Engineer from National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1968 and entered the Order of Preachers (Dominican Friars) in the Province of Mexico in November of that year. He studied Philosophy in Mexico and Theology in Bologna, Italy (1968-1976). He graduated with a degree in Theology from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas in Rome in 1976. He was ordained priest by Pope Paul VI on June 29, 1975. He served as Chaplain of students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (1976-1981; 1985-1987). He was Master of Novices of the Mexico Province of the Order of Preachers, combining his work as formator with preaching to groups in the Casa de Agua Viva, attached to the Novitiate Convent. During this time, he organized pastoral work with university students and peasants (1977-1985). He was a member of the Provincial Council of the Dominicans in Mexico (1981-1987). He was a member of the Prior Provincial of the Dominicans in Mexico and Coordinator of the Dominican Family in Mexico (1985-1987).

In 1987, John Paul II appointed him Bishop of Ciudad Altamirano, Guerrero, Mexico. He was ordained bishop by John Paul II in Rome on January 6, 1988 and assumed his work in the Diocese on January 21, 1988. He served the peasants and inhabitants of the marginalized areas of the towns of that Diocese. He founded the “Juan Navarro” Social Center to attend to the poor of the Diocese, thus beginning his defense of human rights. In the Conference of the Bishops, he served as a member of the Permanent Council for two periods, President of the Commission for Consecrated Life, Member of the Commission for Social Pastoral and of the Episcopal Commission for Peace in Chiapas, beginning on January 10, 1994, to support the process of pacification in the face of the insurrection of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

On August 14, 1995, Raúl Vera was named Coadjutor Bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, to work alongside Don Samuel Ruiz, the Diocesan Bishop. He arrived in the Diocese on October 4 of that year. He worked in the realization of the III Diocesan Synod and in the formation of the Permanent Deacons; he collaborated in the elaboration of the Directory for the Permanent Indigenous Diaconate. He supported the Process of Peace and Reconciliation between the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and the Federal Government, together with Monsignor Samuel Ruiz, the Diocese of San Cristóbal and the bishops of the Commission of Bishops for Peace in Chiapas. It contributed to creating conditions for dialogue between the Zapatista Army and the Mexican Government, so that fairer living conditions would be guaranteed for the indigenous Mayan peoples of the region. From his stay in San Cristobal until today, he is a member of the Board of Directors of the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center in Chiapas. He is also President of the International Christian Service in Solidarity with the Peoples of Latin America “Oscar Romero” (SICSAL).

On December 30, 1999, Raúl Vera was named Bishop of Saltillo, Coahuila by Pope John Paul II and began his pastoral work in that diocese on March 19, 2000. Under his direction, the diocese has worked for the implementation of an Organic Pastoral Plan, which promotes an integral evangelization of the men and women that make up the circumscription; at the same time, the clergy and the people are encouraged to integrate themselves into a process of Church that influences a profound change in the social reality towards justice and peace.

In 2004, Raúl Vera founded the Diocesan Center for Human Rights “Fray Juan de Larios”, in Saltillo and accompanies the coal miners in the defense of their labor rights, especially the safety conditions for their work, justice for widows, orphans, and families; in relation to the accidents before and after the accident on February 19, 2006, in which 65 miners died in the Pasta de Conchos mine.

Since the state of Coahuila is a territory of passage for migrants, especially from Central and South America, Bishop Vera is promoting the foundation of two migrant houses: in Ciudad Acuña, “Casa Emaús” and in Saltillo, “Belén Posada del Migrante”. The first is now under the responsibility of the Diocese of Piedras Negras. With the team of the House “Belén Casa del Migrante” and the Center “Fray Juan de Larios”, it carries out a defense of the Human Rights of migrants, with national and international incidence (Diócesis of Saltillo, 2018).

On the other hand, in 2002, the community “San Elredo” was founded, to accompany pastorally young members of a collective that promotes sexual diversity. This community seeks to promote the dignity and defense of human rights, as well as full integration into society and the Church. Since 2005, Raúl Vera and the pastoral agents have been facilitating the development of a project to promote the dignity of children and adolescents in marginal neighborhoods in Saltillo, called “Los Grafitos”. In this context, in July 2006, Bishop Vera assumed the responsibility of denouncing and supporting women prostitutes who were raped by elements of the Mexican Military Army in Castaños; in his lawsuit against the Army and the State.

It is possible to maintain that the actions of Raúl Vera promote the struggles for human rights of diverse social movements and that his presence in different cities has encouraged just causes, such as the case of the political prisoners in Oaxaca, San Salvador Atenco, and Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero. The bishop has also been part of the National and International Campaign “Freedom and Justice for Atenco” (2009-2010), and has participated in movements in defense of biodiversity. I and has promoted dialogue and ecumenical solidarity with the peoples of the world by being a member of the International Committee for the Peace Council.

Liberation theology has led to an intercultural, interreligious, interethnic, interdisciplinary, intersectional and counter-hegemonic theology of liberation in the ethical-praxis horizon, from a gender perspective.

As conclusion: Towards a Revision of the Mexican Specificities of Liberation Christendom

The processes that took place in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have important similarities with the Chiapas expression of the process that took place in Mexico, in relation to the development of liberation Christendom. These similarities are: the existence of a significant percentage of a population of indigenous origin; the intermediary role played by the Catholic Church in these regions in the face of the withdrawal or absence of the State.

Likewise, the outbreak of armed rebellions in which militants from grassroots organizations of the Catholic Church participated, which was involved in and conditioned by these processes, causing ruptures and

internal confrontations, but also new types of social action and commitment in the construction and consolidation of democracy.

Regarding the specificities of this current in Mexico, it should be noted that, unlike most countries where liberation Christendom has had an important development, in this country the Catholic student movement had minimal or even no influence on its evolution, the participation of Catholic Action as a secular arm of the hierarchy and its use as a base for offensives aimed at neutralizing bishops considered as progressives, the central role in the development of liberation Christendom, although, its contribution to the Mexican process has been more discreet than elsewhere, with the exception of the Tarahumara region, which was an apostolic prefecture at the expense of the Jesuits.

It is also important to note the role of human rights committees as an expression and stage of development of liberation Christendom in Mexico. Its consideration as an expression is possible if we take into account that, in all the dioceses participating in this movement, the creation of this type of organization was one of the actions that managed to bring together a large part of the population regardless of their religious affiliation. These committees can also be considered a step in the evolution of liberation Christendom because they have been present as an organizational embryo in a large percentage of the municipalities where the Catholic Church has encouraged the formation of peasant organizations.

This is the case of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights “Fray Bartolomé de las Casas”, which belongs to the Diocese of San Cristóbal, the Committee for Solidarity and Defense of Human Rights, AC founded by Monsignor Llaguno in the region of Tarahumara, the Center for Human Rights Tepeyac of the Diocese of Tehuantepec and the Committees for Human Rights of Tabasco and Sierra Norte of Veracruz.

There are also other institutions that have links with liberation Christendom. Among these organizations are research centers, such as the Center for Ecumenical Studies, the Center for Theological Reflection (CTR), the Antonio Montesinos Center (CAM), the Mexican Social Secretariat (SSM), and the Processed Information Services-Prodato (SIPRO).

In another register, this time related to the popular movement, there are organizations, such as Convergence of Civil Organizations for Democracy, Citizens’ Movement for Democracy (MCD), Movement of Christians Committed to the MCCLP of Popular Struggles, and the Movement of Peoples and Colonies of the South.

Finally, there are also ecclesial groups among which are the National Movement of Ecclesiastic Base Communities (Movimiento Nacional de Comunidades Eclesiales de Base [CEB]), and some sectors of the Conference of Religious Institutes (Conferencia de Institutos Religiosos [CIRM]).

In the theological side, it should be noted that the most important theologians were generally the bishops themselves and that the discussion of the relationship between Christianity and socialism gave way to the debate on the inculturation of the Gospel. Among the most famous Mexican theologians, Enrique Dussel is known for his work on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity. Sergio Méndez Arceo had also developed such ideas in these writings and especially had made numerous statements in favor of a dialogue between socialism and Christianity. However, it is difficult to find similar ideas in the writings of bishops such as Bartolomé Carrasco, Arturo Lona, José Llaguno and Samuel Ruiz, who rather developed the question of indigenous theology and the inculturation of the Gospel.

With respect to theological development, it is also possible to maintain that in Mexico, unlike Brazil, the birth of liberation theology preceded that of liberation Christendom. This affirmation is possible if one takes

into account that the first series of significant liturgical changes took place in the diocese of Cuernavaca starting in 1957, and that it was until 1969 that liberation theology officially arrived (Del Valle, 1996). In considering the situation presented throughout this work, it is possible to argue that the most striking characteristic of Mexican liberation Christendom is the centrality of the role played in its formation by the bishops.

Taking into account the use of the concept of “liberation Christendom” to call the broad social movement of which liberation theology is, at the same time, a component and one of its main sources. It can be argued that in the diocese of Cuernavaca there has been a remarkable development of liberation theology, but not of liberation Christendom, because this theological development did not have an equivalent organizational expression. Although there has been a significant deployment of basic ecclesial communities within the diocese, and these communities have tried to create alternatives for economic and social development, after 30 years, it is not possible to discern any organization. This has been inspired by the pastoral work of the diocese.

In a different register, where if there was a notable impulse of “liberation Christendom” on a par with the development of a theology of liberation, were the cases of the dioceses of Tehuantepec and San Cristóbal de las Casas where today one can find, in many communities, characteristics of “liberation Christendom”. In this sense, it is possible to maintain that the greatest development of liberation Christendom in Mexico occurred in the diocese of San Cristóbal de las casas in the state of Chiapas.

Finally, the case of the Diocese of Saltillo should be pointed out, where Bishop Raúl Vera brought with him the pastoral orientation he acquired in San Cristóbal de las Casas, which he has adapted and modernized to be in tune with the 21st century by addressing issues, such as gender, homosexuality, migration, and indigenous cultures.

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