

APPROACHES TO A THEOLOGY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN LATIN AMERICA

If you know anything at all about Latin American liberation theology, you have probably heard of Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo, Enrique Dussel, Ruben Alves, Jose Porfirio Miranda and Jose Miguez Bonino. But you might not have heard about theologians like Maria Pilar Aquino, Maria Clara Bingemer, Yvone Gebara, Ana Maria Tepedino, Elsa Tamez, Margarida Ribeiro Brandao, Mary Judith Ressa, and Luz Beatriz Arellano. Yet, these women and others like them are taking liberation theology into a new dimension and, in the process, are expanding the whole scope of Latin American liberation theology. Rereading and reflecting upon the Christian revelation from the perspective of their own experience as women in Latin America, these women are developing a new form of liberation theology, a Latin American feminist liberation theology. Yet, it is not an entirely new theology for it is both historically and theologically rooted in Latin American liberation theology.

Historically, Latin American Feminist liberation theology has its origins in Latin American liberation theology which began in the early 1960's. The foundations for Latin American liberation theology were laid in a series of meetings of Latin American theologians which took place between 1962-68. Gustavo Gutierrez played a leading role in these formative meetings. It was at the 1968 meeting of the National Organization of Social Information (ONIS), a group of priests working for social change in Latin America, that Gutierrez presented the basic principles of what, for the first time, he called "a theology of liberation."¹

Shortly after this meeting, the Second General Conference of Latin American bishops was held in Medellin, Columbia between August and September, 1968. At this meeting the Latin American bishops

officially adopted the spirit and many of the themes which had emerged in these earlier meetings. The documents of this conference are considered to be the constitution of Latin American liberation theology. Another high point in the development of Latin American liberation theology was the publication of Gustavo Gutierrez's book, A Theology of Liberation, in 1971. In January, 1979 the Third General Conference of Latin American bishops was held in Puebla, Mexico. Ostensively, this meeting was called to reign in liberation theology, but there are enough positive statements on liberation theology in the final documents of Puebla that they can, without difficulty, be read as an affirmation of Latin American liberation theology.²

Today, Latin American liberation theology has grown from the fundamental insights and perspectives of these formative years into a fully developed and mature theology. It has a solid epistemological basis, a well developed methodology and has systematically addressed all the major theological themes from creation to eschatology. To a great extent, Latin American liberation theology's focus on praxis and contextuality has become the model for much of contemporary theology. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff maintain that Latin American liberation theology is the theology for our times and should become the method of all theology.³

Yet, with all its emphasis on the liberation of the poor and the oppressed, Latin American liberation theology did not immediately address the specific issue of the sexual oppression of poor women in Latin America. For approximately the first twenty years of its existence Latin American liberation theology was an exclusively male theology. It had freed itself from the socio-political economic bias of the dominant Western European theology, but it continued to share the male perspective and male bias of traditional Western theology. It was not until the late 1970's to mid 1980's that women in Latin America began to become involved in doing liberation theology from the perspective of women.⁴ It was during this period that a series of meetings took place which proved to be formative in the development of Latin American feminist liberation theology.

One of the most interesting and significant of these meetings was that of the Project on Women in Dialogue (Mujeres Para el Dialogo) which took place at Puebla, Mexico in early 1979. There was a wide representation of women's voices at this meeting. Not only were women from many Latin American countries present, but there were also North American feminists (Catholic and Protestant), representatives from NETWORK, the lobby of women religious in Washington, D.C.,

representatives from the Women's Ordination Conference, as well as a group of U.S. Hispanic women. This meeting took place at the same time that the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM III) was taking place in Puebla. This group was not part of the official conference of Latin American bishops, but it became a part of what Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as the "Popular Conference" which was also meeting at Puebla at the time. These women meet and discussed theology from the perspective of women in Latin America. Their presence functioned as a lobby for Latin American Feminist interests at the Bishop's conference.⁵

According to Ruether, who attended the meeting, the Project on Women was somewhat successful in its lobbying efforts. In the preparatory document for the Bishop's conference very little attention was paid to women and their concerns. However, as Ruether points out, the final documents of the Puebla Conference make some positive statements on the role of women in the Latin American church. Women are specifically included in the preferential option for the poor. In addition, Ruether sees a new mariology emerging from the Puebla documents, a mariology that identifies Mary with the poor and oppressed and sees her as a participant in their struggle for liberation.⁶

Mary Judith Ress mentions another meeting of a small group of Latin American women which took place in October, 1979 in Mexico which she refers to as "the first time" a group of Latin American women gathered together to discuss the issue of feminist theology.⁷ This meeting was also sponsored by the Mexican-based Women For Dialogue. According to Ress, the participants at this meeting concluded that the traditional structures of the church have "reinforced women's oppression by imposing moral norms that sacralize the domination of men over women."⁸ The concluding document of the meeting pointed out that women are almost "totally excluded from the process of systematizing pastoral and theological thought."⁹ The women present at this meeting were particularly upset by the church's failure to support women's movements for liberation.¹⁰

Another formative meeting in the development of Latin American feminist liberation theology was the Second Latin American Feminist Conference which was held in Lima, Peru in July, 1983. At this conference it was pointed out that, even though male liberation theologians recognized that women are marginalized within society as poor people, they did not actively challenge the patriarchal structures in the church and society, nor the patriarchal elements in

their own practice and methodology. In short, they did not make a specific option for women among the poor and oppressed.¹¹

Perhaps, the most significant meeting in the development of Latin American feminist liberation theology was the Latin American Conference on Theology from the Perspective of Women which was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, October 30 - November 3, 1985. Ana Maria Tepedino (Brazil) and Margarida Brandao (Brazil) speak of this meeting as a milestone for women theologians in Latin America.¹² Twenty-eight women, representing different Christian churches, from nine Latin American and Caribbean countries were present at this conference which was sponsored by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The purpose of this conference was to reflect upon the different ways in which theology is done from the perspective of women and to point out the riches present in this theology.¹³

The final statement of this conference lays the basic framework for a Latin American feminist theology of liberation. While recognizing the diversity of the experiences of Latin American women, the final statement lists some of the common characteristics of Latin American women's approach to theology. The final statement clearly recognizes that the oppression of women is based upon gender as well as class. It also mentions the importance of taking into account discrimination based upon race. The objective of Latin American feminist liberation theology is to break away from the old framework of the oppression of women based upon the categories of the patriarchal system and to build a new person (woman/man) and a new society.¹⁴

Not only does Latin American feminist liberation theology have its historical origins in Latin American liberation theology, but it also has its theological roots in Latin American liberation theology. However, this theological relationship between the two is ambivalent. As Maria Pilar Aquino (Mexico/U.S.) points out, Latin American feminist liberation theology is both set within the context of Latin American liberation theology, and, at the same time, has its own special features.¹⁵ Being set within the context of Latin American liberation theology, it accepts certain elements of this approach to theology. Yet, since it has its own special features, it is also distinct from Latin American liberation theology. In the next stage of this analysis of Latin American feminist liberation theology we will begin by examining some of the elements which it accepts from Latin American liberation theology. After that, we will examine some of the distinctive features of Latin American feminist liberation

theology.

According to Aquino, one of the major insights which Latin American feminist liberation theology accepts from Latin American liberation theology is the primacy of praxis.¹⁶ Latin American liberation theology has affirmed this from the beginning. As early as 1971 Gustavo Gutierrez defined theology as "critical reflection upon praxis."¹⁷ What this means is that the focal point of theology is not the church's theoretical teachings, but its actual practice. According to Gutierrez, it is this focus upon praxis which distinguishes Latin American liberation theology from classical theology which focused upon theology as wisdom and rational knowledge.¹⁸ Aquino agrees that this focus upon praxis is the distinctively new element in Latin American liberation theology. She goes on to write that praxis is "faith's verification principle" and the "hermeneutical viewpoint" which becomes the "structural horizon for theological knowledge."¹⁹ Latin American feminist liberation theology is not just concerned with a new theological understanding, but with developing a course of action that will liberate Latin American women from their oppression.

Another element which Latin American feminist liberation theology accepts from Latin American liberation theology is the "preferential option for the poor." This special commitment to the poor and oppressed is deeply rooted in Latin American Liberation Theology. Although the Medellin documents do not use the expression, "preferential option for the poor," they do suggest that the church ought to distribute its resources and apostolic personnel in a way that "gives preference to the poor and the most needy sectors."²⁰ The bishops go on to speak of their desire to come closer to the poor and to sharpen their solidarity with the poor, which means making the problems and struggles of the poor their own.²¹ In his book, A Theology of Liberation, Gutierrez reechoes this need for the church to make a special commitment to the poor.²² However, it was not until the Third General Conference of Latin American bishops at Puebla in 1979 that the Latin American church officially endorsed the expression. In the Puebla documents the bishops speak of the need for a conversion "on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor."²³

Latin American feminist liberation theology also understands itself as being grounded in this preferential option for the poor. Latin American feminist liberation theologians see their commitment to struggle against the oppression of poor women as a further

specification and application of Latin American liberation theology's option for the poor.²⁴ From their perspective the church's preferential option for the poor is, therefore, also a preferential option for women. Aquino reminds us that the Puebla Documents include women among the poor and makes a special reference to the double oppression of poor women in Latin America.²⁵

The theological methodology of Latin American feminist liberation theology is also modelled on the method of Latin American liberation theology. Both approaches to theology begin theological reflection with an awareness of oppression in a particular concrete situation. From the beginning Latin American liberation theology has stressed that the starting point of theology is a feeling of compassion for the poor and a commitment to work to struggle against the oppression of the poor.²⁶ Theology itself has always been spoken of as a "second step." Theological reflection flows from and follows after the living commitment and praxis of Christians on behalf of the poor.²⁷

Latin American feminist liberation theology also insists that theology begins with an awareness of an experience of oppression, but, in this case, it is not just the experience of the poor in general, but, more specifically, the experience of the oppression of poor women in Latin American. Tepedino speaks of the concrete experience of oppressed women, "my being and my acting, my seeing and my feeling, my speaking and my silence," as the starting point of Latin American feminist liberation theology.²⁸ Since the experience of oppression of women is seen as the starting point of theology, Latin American feminist liberation theology also views theology as a second step. Aquino speaks of contemplation and practice as the first act and theologizing as the second act. She views the two, praxis (the first act) and theology (the second act) as "two structural dimensions of a single movement."²⁹

Latin American feminist liberation theology also incorporates the main steps of the method of Latin American liberation theology. In their analysis of the method of liberation theology Leonardo and Clodovis Boff describe the process according to three stages, or mediations, which is the term they use. The first mediation is called the socio-analytical meditation. In this stage one tries to find out why the oppressed are oppressed. It is also called the seeing stage. In the hermeneutical mediation, the second stage, one tries to discern what God's plan is for the poor. The Christian revelation, with the focus being on the Bible, is reread from the point of view of the situation of the oppressed to see what the Word of God has to say

about it. The second stage is also called the judging stage. The third and final stage is called the practical mediation. In this stage one tries to discover the courses of action that need to be followed in order to overcome the oppression of the poor in accordance with God's plan. This is also described as the acting stage.³⁰

Although they do not use the same language as Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Latin American feminist liberation theologians also describe their understanding of theological method according to three steps. Tepedino presents an outline of the three steps of Latin American feminist liberation theology.³¹ According to Tepedino in the first stage one seeks to know life through personal experience as well as through the human and social sciences.³² It would seem that this stage includes a socio-analytical analysis in search of the causes of oppression similar to the one described by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff. Aquino gives a lengthy description of the analysis of the causes of the oppression of women in Latin America. In describing this analysis as an interdisciplinary work, she draws upon history, sociology, political science, as well as feminist theory, in her analysis of the causes of the oppression of women in Latin America.³³

The second stage of the method of Latin American feminist liberation theology, according to Tepedino, focuses upon interpreting the life situation of women in the light of the Bible. She writes, "we have to discover the sense that the Spirit reveals to us today through the ancient text of the Bible."³⁴ In the theological interpretation of their situation, Latin American feminist liberation theologians clearly give the priority to scripture. Aquino supports this view, but she also includes the church's living tradition, the systematic formulations of theology, and the teachings of the church as sources for this theological process of interpretation.³⁵ Tepedino describes the third stage of the method of Latin American liberation theology as the process of retrieving and naming the "experience of women in a patriarchal society in order to redeem the past, transform the present, and prepare for tomorrow."³⁶ Although it is not that explicitly stated in this analysis of the method, it is clear that the ultimate goal is action in behalf of struggling for the liberation of oppressed women.

As has been seen, Latin American feminist liberation theology and Latin American liberation theology both give priority to the scripture in their theological interpretation of Christian revelation. However, it should be pointed out that Latin American feminist liberation theology adds a new element to the process of biblical interpretation.

Although Latin American liberation theology has interpreted the scripture from the perspective of the poor from the very beginning, Latin American feminist liberation theology has pointed out that it cannot be taken for granted "that reading the Bible from the viewpoint of the poor and reading it from women's point of view automatically correspond."³⁷ The reason for this is because the scriptures, including those passages which speak out against the oppression of the poor, are written from a patriarchal perspective which itself oppresses women by subordinating them to men. The language of the Bible itself often expresses an androcentric point of view which condones the oppression of women. Therefore, as Aquino points out, in interpreting the Bible the interests of poor oppressed women must be made explicit.³⁸

The recognition of the role of the Base Ecclesial Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base, BEC) in the evangelization and liberation of the oppressed is another element that Latin American feminist liberation theology has inherited from Latin American liberation theology. The BEC are small communities of Christian lay women and men (15-20 families) whose members are primarily the poor and people from the lower classes of society. In their meetings the people read the Word of God from the perspective of their situation of oppression. They share their common problems and attempt to solve them through the inspiration of the Gospel.³⁹ In their origin the BEC can be traced to the early stages of the development of Latin American liberation theology. The BEC came into existence in Brazil in the 1960's. Alvaro Barreiro says that the appearance and expansion of the BEC are contemporaneous with Vatican Council II.⁴⁰

The significance of the role of the BEC in the Latin American church was affirmed at Medellin in 1968 and was acknowledged by Pope Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi in 1975. At Puebla in 1979 the BEC were given official approval by the bishops of the Latin American Church. The significance of the BEC for the church in Latin America is summarized in a statement from the Puebla documents. The BEC are described as "centers of evangelization and moving forces of liberation."⁴¹ From the point of view of Latin American liberation theology the BEC are the places where the evangelization and liberation of the oppressed is becoming a concrete reality in the Latin American church. Not only are the poor themselves evangelized and liberated, but the hope is that the whole Latin American church will be evangelized and liberated through what takes place in the BEC.

Latin American Feminist liberation theology also sees the BEC as centers for evangelization and liberation but, for feminist theologians, the focus is on the evangelization and liberation of oppressed poor women in Latin America. Luz Beatrix Arellano (Nicaragua) points out that women were involved in the BEC from the beginning and, in fact, that when the first BEC were organized in the 1960's more women were involved than men.⁴² The BEC provide Latin American women with the opportunity to participate actively in the life of the church and to speak out as equal members of the church. As Aquino puts it, even though women are excluded from full participation in the church, their participation in the BEC allows them to experience a new way of being church. For the first time in the history of Latin America women can formulate for themselves what they consider to be the church's mission and their own role in it.

As a result of women's participation in the BEC new ministries are being created. Some of these ministries have received official sanction, some have not.⁴³ Ivone Gebara (Brazil) points out that, even though all the new ministries are not sanctioned by the official church, they are recognized and accepted by the people, the poor. She goes on to add, "Women's ministry is shaking up men's ministry, challenging their practice and the exercise of their authority."⁴⁴

Of course, as Aquino observes, women still do not have access to all levels of the church. The sacraments, priesthood and decision-making are, at present, closed to women.⁴⁵ Aquino sees the ordination of women to the priesthood as essential to providing women full participation in the church.⁴⁶ Even though progress has been made, sexual discrimination and certain forms of machismo still survive in the BEC. Ress points out that women are not always included in planning the course and direction of the BEC. Women are often excluded when the community is being represented at larger meetings. Ress adds that women are still, at times, second-class citizens in the BEC, where male centered traditions still continue to persist.⁴⁷ Yet, in spite of the problems, the BEC provide women in Latin America with the space to become conscientized, as Aquino says, to "form a conscience in two dimensions of oppression: as poor and as women."⁴⁸ The BEC are the places where the evangelization and liberation of women are taking place in Latin America today.⁴⁹

Up to this point we have been focusing on those elements that Latin American feminist liberation theology shares in common with Latin American liberation theology. We will now examine some of the features which distinguish Latin American feminist liberation theology from Latin

American liberation theology. One of the most obvious new features of Latin American feminist liberation theology is that it is a theology that is being done by women. In Latin American feminist liberation theology women are no longer simply objects of theological reflection, but they are involved as theologians doing theology.⁵⁰ Latin American feminist liberation theology criticized Latin American liberation theology before the late 1970' and early 1980's, as well as traditional theology, for being exclusively male theologies. The most evident truth in this criticism is the fact that most theologians in the past have been men.⁵¹ But the criticism goes much deeper. Not only have men monopolized theology, but, in the past, theology has been done exclusively from the perspective of men. As a result, the perspective of women has been excluded from theology. As Maria Clara Bingemer (Brazil) puts it, the voices of women have been excluded in the theology of the past.⁵² Aquino points out that it is not surprising that women see theology as a sexist profession, because women have been excluded from theology simply because they are women.⁵³

According to Latin American feminist liberation theology this male-dominated theology has supported the oppression of women in Latin America. Aquino describes this absence of women from theology as another expression of their subordinate condition.⁵⁴ Since theology has been dominated by men, there has been a lack of awareness of women's oppression and struggles in theology, and they certainly have not been addressed from the perspective of women. Aquino speaks of the machista and androcentric nature of this male-dominated theology.⁵⁵ Not only is an exclusively male theology oppressive, it is also an inadequate and incomplete theology. Aquino writes, "To the extent that theology excludes women, it becomes a partial and abstract discourse, based unilaterally on the masculine and ignoring humanity's intrinsic quality."⁵⁶ Echoing similar thoughts Bingemer states that it is not possible for only one of the sexes "to do justice to and encompass the whole mystery of being human," nor to fully express the revelation of the divine in the human.⁵⁷

Also, the theological reflection of women in Latin America is being done primarily by educated middle-class women, not by poor women. Gebara says she recognizes that she lives in privileged conditions, but she also believes that she can speak for poor women on the basis of her concern for her own liberation as well as theirs, and on the basis that they share they same human condition of being women in Latin America.⁵⁸ The importance of this solidarity between the Latin American women who are formally doing theology and poor oppressed women is stressed by Bingemer. She writes

Through sharing in the aspirations, the organization, and the faith-lives of these oppressed persons, the theologian finds her raw material, which she then returns to them in the form of a worked out, systematic argument; for they have helped to bring it to birth and, along with her, are creators and theologians.⁵⁹

Women theologians are doing theology in communication with poor women who are involved in the struggle for liberation. As we have seen one of the main sources for Latin American feminist liberation theology is the experience of poor women in the BEC who are actively involved in the struggle for liberation.⁶⁰

Latin American feminist liberation theologians do not view their involvement in the process of doing theology as setting them in opposition to Latin American male theologians. Bingemer points out that Latin American feminist liberation theologians are not trying to engage in a power struggle with men, nor to replace the male model of theological reflection with a female model.⁶¹ Tepedino and Brandao state that Latin American women do not place on men the whole weight of responsibility for the oppression of women, nor do they regard men as insuperable obstacles to their liberation.⁶² On the contrary, Latin American feminist liberation theology is looking for a new theological synthesis in which men and women will work together for the liberation of both women and men in Latin America. Bingemer describes the goal of Latin American feminist liberation theologians as a "new synthesis" that will include the female-male dialectic without destroying any of its vital components.⁶³ Referring to the goals of the Buenos Aires Conference, Elsa Tamez (Mexico) says that the purpose of the conference was to "invite our male colleagues to produce theology with us, their female colleagues."⁶⁴

Finally, the one thing that seems clear is that the very act of women doing theology is itself an act of liberation. Aquino states that by doing theology women are overcoming "the sub-humanity to which they have been condemned" and are canceling "subordination and machista prejudices in the interests of real human liberation."⁶⁵ Not only are women liberating themselves, but, in the process, men are also being liberated from their machista prejudices.

Is important to point out that the really distinctive element which women's theological reflection is adding to liberation theology

is the experience of oppressed women as women. Aquino states that the originality of Latin American feminist liberation theology is that women are starting from their own problems and concerns.⁶⁶ Women in Latin America are no longer waiting for others to define their experience of life and death. They have decided to define themselves. This means that women's rights as women have to be incorporated into the process of theological reflection. Aquino says that there is still a reluctance in Latin American liberation theology to recognize the importance of working for women's rights. She maintains that there is a "sort of mental block - produced by an androcentric machista culture - against the acceptance of women's own interests as women."⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Ress states that, while liberation theologians recognize that women are marginalized within society as poor people, they do not address the problems presented by the patriarchal structures in the Latin American church and society.⁶⁸ She goes on to add that it is imperative for liberation theologians to "actually challenge the structures of patriarchy in both their own practice and their methodology, and [to] make a specific option for women among the poor and oppressed."⁶⁹

Latin American feminist liberation theology sees this absence of the reflection on the oppression of women as women in liberation theology as a fundamental lack. Aquino describes this lack as a contradiction because liberation theology claimed to be concerned for the total liberation of the poor and oppressed, yet, the concerns of poor and oppressed women were not being explicitly and fully addressed.⁷⁰ In the beginning Latin American liberation theology felt that by grouping women together with the poor as a class this would sufficiently address the needs of women in Latin America. Today, Latin American feminist liberation theologians disagree with this. Aquino points out that the Marxist analysis of the oppression of the poor class does not do justice to women's concerns. Women suffer not only from economic exploitation and socio-political and cultural oppression, but also from androcentric racial and sexual oppression. Failure to recognize this, according to Aquino, leads to a tendency to view women's subordinate condition as a non-fundamental, a non-central, or a secondary concern.⁷¹ Therefore, from the perspective of Latin American feminist liberation theology it is essential that the gender aspects of the oppression of women in Latin America be an integral part of the theological reflection in liberation theology. Ress argues that the very methodology of liberation theology demands that the situation of women be a constitutive element within liberation theology rather than just another theme. Making the situation of poor women a central concern is indispensable to liberation.⁷²

Two of the specific elements which the theological reflection upon the experience of women as women have added to liberation theology are the awareness of the triple oppression of women and the importance of considering the dimension of daily life in the process of liberating women in Latin America. Early on the focus of Latin American feminist liberation theology was on the double oppression of women, oppressed because they are poor and oppressed as women. Today, however, Latin American feminist liberation theologians speak about the triple oppression of women. Aquino speaks about the three dimensional character of the oppression of women in Latin America. Not only are women oppressed on the basis of class and gender, but they also suffer racial oppression, because they are indigenous, black or mestizo.⁷³ Ana Maria Bidegain (Columbia) writes, "Racial discrimination, sexism and capitalist exploitation in Latin America constitute the triad that keeps women in subjection."⁷⁴ In order to effectively work for the liberation of women in Latin America all three dimensions must be taken into consideration. Aquino supports this position when she writes, "Processes of social change that do not include the three dimensions do not fully understand liberation in a way that meets the needs of the people concerned."⁷⁵

Latin American feminist liberation theology's emphasis on women's experience of oppression also highlights the importance of the dimension of daily life. Not only do Latin American women experience the oppression which stems from unjust political, social and economic structures, but they also experience oppression in terms of their personal relationships in everyday life. Tamez views the daily life experience of women as the basis and point of departure of Latin American women's theological work.⁷⁶ Aquino speaks of the centrality of daily life for the liberation of women in Latin America.⁷⁷ It is in their daily life encounters that unequal relationships between men and women are produced and reinforced. Women experience this inequality in the home, the family, and in the way that men and women relate to one another in the arena of domestic life.⁷⁸ In every moment of the day women encounter the stereotypes of male superiority and the discrimination and sexism which are ingrained in the daily life relationships between men and women in Latin America.

Today Latin American feminist liberation theologians are insisting that these oppressive elements of the dimension of daily life have to change.⁷⁹ It is not enough to change the socio-economic, political structures of society. The political, social and economic structures could change so that it would be possible for women to be liberated in the structural sphere. Yet, if daily life relationships

remained the same, then, men would still maintain their privileged positions and the liberation of women would not be complete. It is not that Latin American feminist liberation theology sets daily life and social transformation in opposition to one another. Rather, as Aquino expresses it, daily life is seen as an "analytic category for understanding social practices and the processes of oppression-liberation."⁸⁰ Tamez speaks of everyday life as the focal point for "reestablishing a new relationship that will have its effect in the public sphere".⁸¹ There is an integral relationship between the transformation of the daily life experience of women and the transformation of the structures of society. The liberation of women in Latin America requires a transformation in both areas.

From this insistence upon both personal and structural liberation it becomes clear that Latin American feminist liberation theologians are concerned with the liberation of the whole person. According to Aquino, liberation for women in Latin America would not be total if it focused solely on changing the socio-economic structures of society.⁸² Women must be liberated in their total personalities. Latin American women need to recover self-esteem and self-identity. They must be emancipated from their repressive attitude toward themselves. The goal is personal integrity. As Aquino sums it up, a woman needs to experience and understand herself as a "physical, psychological and spiritual whole."⁸³ Latin American feminist liberation theologians suggest that the inclusion of women's experience also has larger significance for the overall direction of Latin American liberation theology. Aquino maintains that the inclusion of women indicates the need for a more holistic human understanding of the process of liberation, rather than a man/woman understanding.⁸⁴ Aquino also states that the recognition of the role of women in the struggle for liberation points to the need for a change in the traditional ways of thinking about social transformation. Up to now, she states, the process of social change has been thought of exclusively from the androcentric point of view.⁸⁵

The content of theology is another area in which Latin American feminist liberation theology has added some new and distinctive features to Latin American liberation theology.⁸⁶ Latin American women's theological reflection has added new dimensions and nuances to the expression of traditional theological concepts such as God, revelation, faith, trinity, christology, ecclesiology, mariology and eschatology, just to mention a few. Women's theological views have deepened the understanding of some of Latin American liberation theology's fundamental categories.⁸⁷ As Aquino states, theological

expression "is altered when the life of faith is celebrated through the eyes of women, because that celebration requires a rethinking of the theological task, freed from the macho culture that has molded both the men and women of Latin America."⁸⁸ In order to illustrate some of these new and distinctive features which have been added to the content of Latin American liberation theology, we will look at some recent approaches of Latin American feminist liberation theology in the areas of christology and mariology.

Aquino presents a summary of some of the main features of contemporary Latin American feminist christology in her book, Cry For Life. She begins by pointing out some of the inadequacies of Latin American male approaches to christology. According to Aquino, Latin American male approaches to christology have not given sufficient attention to such issues as women's active participation in Jesus' movement, their full membership in his community of disciples, women's equal discipleship with men, Jesus humanizing attitude toward women, Jesus' criticism of patriarchal social and religious institutions and the prophetic wisdom traditions on Jesus. Aquino further maintains that Latin American male christology has failed to give the relationship between Jesus and oppressed women the importance it should have in liberation hermeneutics. Latin American feminist liberation theology gives these elements priority in its christological reflections. For Aquino these omissions of Latin American male christologies highlights the realization that christology is not automatically inclusive. For it to be inclusive one must consciously choose that it be so.⁸⁹

Aquino mentions some of the elements that characterize a Latin American feminist approach to christology. The most distinctive characteristic of Latin American feminist christology is its contextual nature. It is a christology that arises out of Latin American women's experience of being triply oppressed. The experience of oppression out of which a feminist christology emerges is not just a theoretical awareness of oppression. It is an experience which includes a commitment to work with women in their struggle against oppression and for liberation. As a result, one of the major sources for Latin American feminist christology is the liberating actives of women in the BEC.⁹⁰ The christological statements in scripture and the tradition of the Christian churches are, of course, also a major source for Latin American feminist christology, but not without being read from the perspective of the experience of women in Latin America. As Aquino expresses it, "Both the women seeking knowledge and Jesus Christ are significant in this process; they relate in such a way that

if either is left out the very identity of the other is radically affected and will have to be reformulated."⁹¹ Latin American feminist christology arises out of a dialogue between the text and the situation of the reader.

According to Aquino, another element which characterizes Latin American feminist christology is its transformative nature. As she puts it, a feminist christology "requires responsible human action for the transformation of the reality that produces inhumanity and oppression."⁹² Christology must change the unequal relationship that exists between men and women both in the structures of society and in the sphere of daily life.⁹³ A christology that does not empower Christians to work for liberation cannot be an adequate expression of Christ's liberating message of salvation. It is not possible to think that God's salvation is being realized when the great majority of women in Latin America continue to occupy a subordinate position in the church and in society.⁹⁴ A third characteristic element of Latin American feminist christology is that it finds support for its claims in the life of the historical Jesus. Aquino points out that the historical Jesus did not view women as belonging to the impoverished masses, but simply as women. Jesus did not see women simply as passive receivers, but as actors contributing to the spread of the good news and as full members of the community he founded.⁹⁵

In outlining the direction that a Latin American feminist christology should take Aquino mentions three tasks which it needs to undertake. The first is that it needs to work to overcome the problem of the patriarchalization of christology. According to Aquino, both the New Testament and later Christian tradition are notorious for their elaborations of this patriarchal christology. This christology, she says, not only placed women in a subordinate position, but also distorted the understanding of the God of Jesus Christ.⁹⁶ Drawing upon the work of Bingemer, Aquino maintains that there are two basic problems associated with this patriarchal christology. The first is that it excludes women from the ordained ministry on the basis of the argument that they, as women, cannot act in "persona Christi." The second problem is that this christology makes women second class citizens in the order of creation and salvation. As a result, many women find it difficult to see the man Jesus as God's salvation for all of humanity. According to Aquino, Latin American feminist theologians are seeking ways to solve these two problems in order to develop a christology that will be liberating for Latin American women.⁹⁷

The second task of Latin American feminist christology is to develop an understanding of the incarnation based upon the link between Jesus and the poor and oppressed. According to Aquino, the really significant aspect of the incarnation is not that Jesus became human, but that he took on the humanity of the poor and oppressed, identifying with them in their life, destiny, and hope.⁹⁸ Since poor and oppressed women are part of the poor and oppressed humanity which Jesus took on, then, in becoming human, Jesus takes on both male and female humanity. Therefore, in becoming human God chooses both men and women as God's human dwelling place, not exclusively men. Based upon this perspective, Aquino goes on to add, Latin American women will be able to understand that Jesus' good news to the poor and oppressed is not given to women in addition to men, but because God has taken on their flesh and their cause.⁹⁹

The third task, which Aquino suggests, is that Latin American feminist theology needs to incorporate into christology the realization that Jesus' understanding of the reign of God was inclusive of women. Not only were women included in Jesus's liberating plan, but Jesus treated women as persons and from the beginning of his ministry women formed part of the community that followed him. Furthermore, women were not accepted merely as accidental components or passive listeners, but as active participants. They were an integral and principal part of the vision of Jesus and his preaching of the coming of the reign of God.¹⁰⁰ The direction in which all three tasks are moving is the realization that both men and women constitute the new humanity and the body of Christ. Women are also identified with the risen Christ. Consequently, women, as well as men, can speak, live and act in the person of Christ. They too can be other Christs.¹⁰¹

Latin American feminist liberation theology also has significant consequences for the content of mariology, the theology of Mary. From the perspective of Latin American feminist theologians there is a great need for contemporary reflection on Mary because of the inadequacies of traditional mariology. According to Latin American feminist theologians, traditional mariology has used Mary to justify and support the patriarchal mentality that marginalizes and oppresses women, both in the church and in society in Latin America.¹⁰² According to Aquino, there are two main features of this traditional model of Mary which contribute to the continuation of the oppression of women in Latin America. The first is that traditional mariology views Mary as obedient and passive, resigned and suffering, a woman dedicated to domestic tasks in accordance with the role that is

naturally hers. As Aquino points out, this view of woman as weak and submissive becomes a "symbol of the subordinate position women should occupy in the church and society."¹⁰³ A second feature of traditional mariology is that it presents an exalted and idealized image of Mary as the supreme symbol of purity and virginity, which tends to neutralize her human integrity and her sexuality as a woman. This idealized image becomes the basis for the values that the patriarchal mentality ascribes to women. According to Aquino, both of these features are supported by an androcentric anthropology which supports that subordination of women to men and both prejudicial to the human dignity of women.¹⁰⁴

Because it supports the passivity of women and their subordination to men, traditional mariology is being questioned by women in Latin America. In the BEC Latin American women are reflecting upon Mary from the perspective of their experience of oppression and their struggle against it. Aquino points out that this reflection of women in the BEC is the starting point for Latin American women's thinking about Mary. In the light of this reflection Mary is being reinterpreted and a new image of her is emerging. This new image is an image of a Mary who identifies with poor oppressed women and who is an active participant in their struggle for liberation.¹⁰⁵ It is the image of Mary as the prophet of the Magnificat who speaks out against oppression and gives women the strength to fight and struggle against oppression.¹⁰⁶ Bingemer points out that this Mary who is committed to justice and the struggle for liberation takes on many faces in Latin America. Some of these liberating faces which Mary takes on include the Morenita of Guadalupe who appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico, the black Aparecida of Brazil, Nicaragua's Purisima and Cuba's Virgin of Charity. In all of these Mary inspires the women in Latin America to struggle for liberation.¹⁰⁷ Mary, like Jesus, is a liberator.

What is significant about this process is that the traditional symbols and devotions to Mary are not being thrown out, but are being reinterpreted in the light of Latin American women's experience of their situation of oppression. One book which is a classic illustration of how the traditional mariological symbols and devotions are being reinterpreted in Latin American feminist theology is the work co-authored by Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer entitled Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor.¹⁰⁸ Gebara and Bingemer reinterpret the Scriptural symbols of Mary and the traditional dogmatic statements on Mary from the perspective of the image of Mary as liberator. In speaking of Mary's role in the reign of God Gebara and Bingemer maintain that Mary's actions, like Jesus' actions, "make

the presence of salvation in human history manifest."¹⁰⁹ Such language seems a little reminiscent of the traditional image of Mary as co-redemptrix. Aquino seems to be a little reluctant to use such language. However, she is open to considering new lines of thought on Mary's role as long as mariology does not lose its fundamental relationship to Jesus Christ.¹¹⁰

What this survey of Latin American feminist liberation theology demonstrates is that there is a new revolutionary force in Latin America. It is a force that is growing daily. It is here to stay. It will never go away. Women in Latin America have been conscientized. They are doing theology and are actively participating in the struggle for women's liberation. In describing what is happening to Latin American women today Gebara speaks of "the irruption of history into the lives of women." According to Gebara, this does not simply mean that women are entering history, but it means something qualitatively different and new. It means that millions and millions of women in Latin America are being led to the liberation struggle by means of an active participation in areas of church and society from which they have been previously absent.¹¹¹

A new understanding of reality is emerging from this new revolutionary force of Latin American women theologians. It is an understanding of reality that enables women in Latin America to know that change is possible. Aquino points out that, as women become more aware of their oppression as women, they force a change to occur in their understanding of reality and introduce a new and different meaning for humanity and its destiny. As a result of this awareness, women realize that they can overcome inequality, subordination and oppression.¹¹² Gebara expresses a similar view when she writes that, "The condition of women is the result of an evolution: it has been different, and it can be different."¹¹³ Therefore, in spite of the situation of oppression, women can, as Gebara adds, "conquer spaces in which to express her word and her being."¹¹⁴

This new understanding of reality also includes a vision of hope that enables Latin American women to endure in the struggle for liberation. Aquino sees hope as crucial to the liberation movement. Hope, she writes, give the liberation struggle energy and gives women the certainty that God is on the side of the oppressed. It is not a far out ideal or a palliative, but a deep spiritual force that encourages the poor and oppressed in their daily struggles. Hope serves as a weapon against those who create pessimism, sadness and nightmares. Although hope does include pain and suffering, it also

brings joy because women know that by struggling for liberation they are restoring life to the whole of humanity. Hope is realized in actions, attitudes, in everyday language, even in the midst of great hardship and suffering. In concluding her comments on hope, Aquino states that it is a necessary condition for women doing theology in Latin America.¹¹⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Robert McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutierrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 34.
2. Ibid., 38-39.
3. Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 70-73.
4. Maria Pilar Aquino, Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 2 and 63. Aquino states that since the end of the 1970's women have been working on liberation theology. She goes on to point out that their work became more widespread in the middle of the 1980's. Aquino also mentions that Elsa Tamez was one of the first Latin American women to call attention to the need for theology to be done from the perspective of women. Ana Maria Tepedino and Margarida L. Ribeiro Brandao indicate that women have been doing theology from the perspective of women in Brazil since 1985, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J., eds., Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 226.
5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Consciousness-Raising at Puebla: Women Speak to the Latin Church," Christianity and Crisis, 39, (April 2, 1979), 78 and 80.
6. Ibid., 78-80. Rosemary Ruether also attributes the development of this new Mariology to the speeches which John Paul II gave in Mexico around the time of the Puebla Conference.
7. Mary Judith Ress, "Feminist Theologians Challenge Churches," (May 31, 1984), Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J., ed., Liberation Theology: A Documentary History (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 386.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 387-88.
12. Tepedino & Brandao, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," 227.
13. "Final Statement: Latin American Conference on Theology From the Perspective of Women," (Buenos Aires, Argentina, Oct. 30 - Nov. 3, 1985), Virginia Fabella, M.M. & Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 181.
14. Ibid., 182.
15. Aquino, Cry For Life, 1 & 9.
16. Ibid., 11.
17. Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, ed. & trans. Sister Caridad Inda & John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 9-10.
18. Ibid., 4-5 & 11-12.
19. Aquino, Cry For Life, 12.
20. Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council," (August 26 - September 6, 1968, # 10), Hennelly, Liberation Theology: A Documentary History, paragraph # 9, 116.
21. Ibid., paragraphs 9 & 10, 116-117.
22. Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 70-71.
23. John Eagleson & Philip Scharper, eds., Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 264, # 1134.
24. Aquino, Cry For Life, 112-113. See also Maria Pilar Aquino, "II. A Catholic Perspective," Fabella & Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion, 160.

25. Aquino, Cry For Life, 49. Aquino quotes from the footnote to number 1135: "The poor do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in sociopolitical life... In this category women in these social sectors have a very special place because they are doubly oppressed and marginalized." Eagleson & Scharper, eds., Puebla and Beyond, 264.

26. Boff & Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 2-3. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff speak of compassion, "suffering with," as the starting point of liberation theology. Without this compassion, they write, "liberation theology can neither exist nor be understood."

27. Ibid., 22-23. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff state that before one can "do theology" one has to "do liberation." The first step of theology is "trying to live the commitment of faith," which means, "to participate in some way in the process of liberation." Gustavo Gutierrez also describes theology as a "second step" which follows after a living commitment and praxis in behalf of the poor, A Theology of Liberation, xxxiv-xxxv & 9-10.

28. Ana Maria Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," Fabella & Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion, 165.

29. Aquino, Cry For Life, 10-11.

30. Boff & Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 24. See pages 24-42 for an extended explanation of this analysis of the method of liberation theology.

31. Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," 166. Drawing upon Tepedino, Maria Pilar Aquino presents a similar analysis of the method of Latin American feminist liberation theology. Aquino, Cry For Life, 117-119.

32. Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," 166.

33. Aquino, Cry For Life, 26-41, see also 115-117.

34. Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," 166.

35. Aquino, Cry For Life, 117.
36. Tepedino, "Feminist Theology as the Fruit of Passion and Compassion," 166.
37. Aquino, Cry For Life, 125.
38. Ibid.
39. Leonardo Boff, Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 125.
40. Alvaro Barreiro, S.J., Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor, trans. Barbara Campbell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 3 & 6. Barreiro states that several reports cite the council as one of the determining factors in the creation of the BEC. Although he goes on to add that, on a purely historical basis, no causal relationship between the two can be proven.
41. Ibid., 1,2,28 & 67-69.
42. Luz Beatriz Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," Fabella & Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion, 138.
43. Aquino, Cry For Life, 161.
44. Ivone Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," Fabella & Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion, 133.
45. Aquino, Cry For Life, 54-55.
46. Ibid., 61. In another work Aquino points out that priesthood for women in Latin America is, as she puts it, posed in different terms than in other latitudes. She goes on to add that concern for the ordination of women is not seen in terms of "righting a massive wrong," but the concern is with priesthood "as a presence, service, and option for the aspirations and struggles for the poor." Maria Pilar Aquino, "II. A Catholic Perspective," Fabella & Oduyoye, eds., With Passion and Compassion, 161.
47. Ress, "Feminist Theologians Challenge Churches (May 31, 1984)," 387.

48. Aquino, "II. A Catholic Perspective," 161.
49. Ibid., 160-61.
50. Elsa Tamez, "Introduction: the Power of the Naked," Elsa Tamez, ed., Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 5.
51. Maria Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," Marc H. Ellis & Otto Maduro, eds., The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 480, and Tamez, "Introduction: The Power of the Naked," 3.
52. Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 474-75. Bingemer adds that including women under the generic category of man, as theology in the past has done, is not sufficient to address the concerns of women.
53. Aquino, Cry For Life, 66.
54. Ibid., 65-66.
55. Ibid., 66.
56. Ibid.
57. Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 480.
58. Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 126.
59. Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 476.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 480.
62. Tepedino & Brandao, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," 224.
63. Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 480.
64. Tamez, "Introduction: The Power of the Naked," 8.

65. Aquino, Cry For Life, 96-97.
66. Ibid., 95.
67. Ibid., 24.
68. Ress, "Feminist Theologians Challenge Churches (May 31, 1984)," 388.
69. Ibid.
70. Aquino, Cry For Life, 64, see also 113.
71. Ibid., 62-63, see also 204, note # 52. Aquino points out that even some Latin American feminist theologians accept this view.
72. Ress, "Feminist Theologians Challenge Churches (May 31, 1984)," 387.
73. Aquino, Cry For Life, 37.
74. Ana Maria Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," Tamez, Through Her Eyes, 31.
75. Aquino, Cry For Life, 38.
76. Tamez, "Introduction: The Power of the Naked, 4.
77. Aquino, Cry For Life, 39.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 4.
80. Ibid., 41.
81. Rual Vidales, "Interview," Against Machismo: Interviews, by Elsa Tamez (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 119.
82. Aquino, Cry For Life, 29.
83. Ibid., 182.
84. Ibid., 161.
85. Ibid., 22.

86. Ibid., 109.
87. Ibid., 192.
88. Ibid., 161.
89. Ibid., 140-41. Aquino adds the following comment, "Those who believe that the new era of the reign of God initiated by Jesus implies the end of women's oppression must deliberately include this objective in their theology and make plain that the good news also announce the end of women's current subordination."
90. Ibid., 139-40.
91. Ibid., 140.
92. Ibid., 141.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid., 149.
95. Ibid., 141. This focus on the historical Jesus is not only a common feature of Latin American feminist liberation theology, but is a characteristic element of most forms of liberation theology.
96. Ibid., 142.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 143.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid., 143-44.
101. Ibid., 149.
102. Ibid., 172. See also Bidegain, "Woman and the Theology of Liberation."
103. Aquino, Cry For Life, 173.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., 174.

106. Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," 35.
107. Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 483.
108. Ivone Gebara & Maria Clara Bingemer, Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).
109. Ibid., 33.
110. Aquino, Cry For Life, 141.
111. Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 43.
112. Aquino, Cry For Life, 27-28.
113. Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 43.
114. Ibid., 44.
115. Aquino, Cry For Life, 107-108.