

Liberation and Evangelization

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

January 23, 2022

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In today's Gospel, Jesus proclaims his mission. A significant part of that mission, quoting the prophet Isaiah, is 'to let the oppressed go free.' Today, we would call this aspect of his mission liberation theology. Liberation theology resurfaced in the modern church thanks largely to Latin American theologians in the 20th century. Liberation theology considers all the ways people experience oppression. This could be due to economic, social, or political injustices, being caught in war-torn areas, or being discriminated against for a wide variety of reasons. Liberation theology seeks to hear these suffering voices, raise them up, and change structures so that these people may experience authentic human freedom. The ultimate motivation behind all of this is not politics, sociology, or any other theory, but the God of love and justice.

As followers of Jesus, 'letting the oppressed go free' has always been part of the mission of the church. At the same time, so has evangelization. Evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel to every creature so that they might be converted to Jesus Christ. Ideally, these two dimensions of our mission, liberation and evangelization, would work together and be mutually enriching, as they were for Jesus. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case historically. Truthfully, our evangelization as a church has sometimes oppressed people. Perhaps the most obvious example is the colonization of the Americas and the impact that had on the Native American population. To this

day, we still struggle to find the balance between liberation and evangelization. We need both, but they both need to work together.

So, what is a proper way of understanding evangelization and liberation? How do we evangelize in a way that doesn't oppress? In his book *Barking to the Choir*, Fr. Gregory Boyle recounts a comment from an aboriginal woman from Australia that is insightful on this dynamic. She said to some "well-intentioned missionaries: 'If you're coming to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.'" (174) In other words, if this is a monologue in which you are going to tell me what I need to do, I don't want it. But if this is a dialogue in which we can discover our shared humanity and move forward together, let us get started. The first instance is evangelization alone, which can be hurtful, condescending, and patronizing. The second instance is evangelization and liberation together and it is something beautiful.

To carry out Jesus' mission, we must not simply impose our beliefs on others, but also let the oppressed go free.

Am I sensitive towards those who are oppressed? Do I share my faith through monologue or dialogue?

As a Church, may our words be Spirit and life. May we both liberate and evangelize. Like Ezra in our First Reading, may we say to those who are oppressed, "go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks...for today is holy to our LORD. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!" That is God's freedom.