RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

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The concept of salvation is a basic one in the entire christian theology. It is in fact the synthesis of revelation itself. God has wished to open a dialogue with man in order to "save" him. For this purpose God has sent his only-begotten Son, who became man in order to save the world and reconcile man with God. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, vivifies the Church and dwells in the faithful, in order to turn the community of Christians into a sacrament of salvation for the entire world.

Thus the plan of salvation is as eternal as God himself, having eternally existed within the Trinity to be realized in time as a new dimension of human history and the supreme fulfilment in the life of each individual human person.

But what is in fact salvation? Divine revelation, as it is now generally admitted, has been progressive and dynamic over the centuries. "At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son"[1]. Christ is the fullness of revelation not only in the objective sense, having regard to its content, but also chronologically, for He has fully manifested and fully realized in Himself the fullness of God and of his salvific plan[2].

By way of a quick glance at the multiple aspects of this dynamic progress already before the first coming of Christ, one notices several shifts of emphasis in the message of salvation: from a predominantly material and temporal content to a more spiritual and religious one; from an individual personal salvation to a collective and social one; from a this-worldly background to an eschatological tension; from liberation from evils to a fullness of life; from a totality of messianic goods to a personal and beatifying union with God himself[3].

This gradual and multiple development is to be found already in the

1. Hebr. 1, 1.
2. *Dei Verbum*, n. 4.
3. Cfr. M. Eminyan, S.J., *The Mystery of Salvation* (Malta: University Press, 1973), pp. 7-41.

Old Testament, but it reaches its ultimate realization and confirmation in the New, with the Christ event and its culmination in the Paschal Mysteries. We must not think, however, that the process of development in the concept of salvation has stopped here. It is true that the Deposit of Faith, as it is usually said, has been closed and completed with the death of the Apostles, who were the immediate and official witnesses of what Christ did and said. But this same content of revelation, being infinitely rich as God himself is infinite, could not be fully exhausted during the time of the early Christians as far as its comprehension and realization was concerned. While the early Christian communities were growing in number and consistency throughout Palestine and the surrounding areas, and as these communities were confronted with new difficulties in their efforts to provide for the needs of the faithful and to defend the Faith against creeping errors, the salvific message of Christ gradually became the object of deeper reflection on the part of the pastors and the faithful alike. Thus new ways were being discovered to render this same message ever more actual and relevant. This is precisely what the Fathers of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils have achieved, and this is also what the Magisterium of the Church and Christian theologians have always done and are still doing.

While admitting the existence of a continuous conceptual development in the very content of salvation, a development which was uninterrupted and is still going on, it is not difficult to detect certain particular phases and tendencies within this same continuous development. This has also been the case, after all, with other areas in the field of dogmatic theology, and in fact also with moral and biblical theology, It could be said, however, that in regard to the theology of salvation these orientations have been particularly strong and evident. It suffices to recall, for instance, the decisive change of approach towards the end of the 16th century, at the time of the great geographical discoveries and after the Council of Trent, when the theologian was confronted with an entirely new situation and had to find a solution regarding the possibility of salvation for the many millions of inhabitants in the New World whom the message of the Gospel had not yet reached.

Today we can say that the decisive event has been Vatican II. Shortly after the first theological reflections upon the various Documents of the Council, the notion of "salvation" and the entire problematic related to it has come up again to the surface. Witness to this are the numerous theological works, dealing directly or indirectly with the topic of salvation,

which have seen the light during the past ten or fifteen years[4].

One common thread, so to speak, running through most recent theological works on salvation, is the consideration that salvation is not directly or explicitly related to life after death. Thus K. Rahner defines salvation as the fullness of one's existence, or as the realization of one's authentic and complete existence[5]. Along these lines we have Y. Congar's description of salvation, as one's discovery of the meaning of life[6], or the one proposed by G. Gutierrez, as the communion of men with God and of men among themselves[7]. The concept of fullness of life or perfection of one's being is, indeed, not entirely absent from classical theology, and certainly not from the context of man's ultimate end which we see defined, for example looked upon in St Thomas Aquinas[8], as "the summit of one's perfection" **(consummata perfectio)**. Among contemporary theologians, at any rate, this category of salvation is looked up on without explicit reference to one's ultimate end, but with special regard to one's existential situation and historical environment. Within this perspective one could, no doubt, remark that the Johannine conception of "eternal life" is neither too different from that of "fullness of life", nor does it exclude a reference to life this side of death[9].

Another aspect, always within the framework of human personality, is to be found among some specialists of the human sciences, for whom man is "potentiality of personal being" actuating itself progressively through a series of historical choices[10]. What is interesting, however, is the fact that a similar terminology has penetrated into theological usage. Thus J.H. Walgrave finds no difficulty in affirming that salvation means "integral and definitive realization of one's being"[11]. Along the same line of thought L. Boff defines Christ as "the archetype of the most perfect

4. See e.g. R. Laurentin, *Developpement et Salut* (Paris: Seuil, 1969): *Mysterium Salutis: I/1, Histoire du salut et Révélation* (Edit. du Cerf, 1969); John L. McKenzie, "The Meaning of Salvation", *The Way* (Oct. 1970); L.S. Chafer, *Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Charles Journet, *Per una teologia della Storia della Salvezza* (Napoli: D'Auria, 1972): D. Jenkins, "What does Salvation mean to Christians Today?", in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals* (Edit. by S.J. Samartha), (Geneva 1974), 33-44.
5. K. Rahner, "The Christian in his world" in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Herder, 1971), 7:88-99.
6. Y. Congar, *Ma paroisse mon vaste monde* (Paris, 1966).
7. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974).
8. I — II, q. 1 a. 6.
9. John 3, 15; 17, 3.
10. This approach is very common in contemporary philosophy and finds its theological application in the considerations on the Theology of Death and the Fundamental Option: see e.g. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961): M. Eminyan, *op. cit.*, 164-171; L. Boros, *The Moment of Truth* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965); L. Monden, *Sin, Liberty and Law* (London: Chapman, 1966).
11. J.H. Walgrave, *Un salut aux dimensions du monde* (Paris 1970).

individualization,... the most perfect and fully-integrated being that has ever appeared in the world"[12].

Now man cannot realize himself fully if not in terms of the relationships he is capable of establishing with the others and with the world around him. A healthy society is the proper place for a progressive personification, where each one gives to the other a fragment of his own personality, finds an enrichment for his own personality, and discovers the proper ground for his own full maturation[13].

Such categories, again, have easily found their place in the theology of salvation. Thus, for instance, the ecclesial communities are "sacraments of salvation" or places where one develops and matures his own christian personality. Salvation itself, in fact, being communion of man with God and of men among themselves, is something real and concrete already now, something which pervades human reality, transforms it and brings it to its fullness in Christ"[14].

Salvation as "liberty" is a frequent theme in contemporary theological writings. Freedom here is described as integral mystery over one's life, a radical ability to decide about one's own person and one's concerns, a readiness to make choices in full freedom regarding one's own identity and to actualize them in one's history. Hence salvation, in this context, means promotion or completion of freedom in all its various aspects[15]. This way of theologizing is made in regard to peoples as well as individuals, and perhaps to the former more than to the latter, as it is in the community that the individual conquers his own liberty through a series of liberating relationships.

The ideal of unity between the various components of the human person, or between the various social classes in the same nation, or between the various peoples of the world, is also looked upon as an absolute and universal value and therefore as salvation. It is true to say that man is experiencing today a profound conflict within himself, within his own thoughts and desires, a conflict between these and his actions, between what he thinks is right and what he is inclined to do. Such a conflict is so universal today, that one could almost call it a "dimension" of modern man. The unification of man's resources and of all human efforts is, according to many, the only thing that can "save" mankind from total catastrophe. And the proclamation of the good news of Christianity in-

12. L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 179f.; N.N., "Salvezza cristiana e liberazione umana", *Civiltà Cattolica* (5 October 1974), 3-10.
13. Cf. Eric Fromm,*Psicanalisi della Società Contemporanea* (Milano 1970); also E. Fromm (ed.), *The Nature of Man* (London: Collier- Macmillan, 1968).
14. G. Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
15. Cf. M. Merlé, *Idéologie de liberation et message du salut* (Strasbourg, 1973).

tends precisely to announce the possibility and the initial realization of this unity in man and between men. This is, indeed, what is suggested by **Gaudium et Spes**[16] as regards personal unity, and by **Lumen Gentium**[17] as regards unity between classes and nations.

Theological reflection upon our technological age and its dangers and responsibilities has also contributed some important elements to the problematic of salvation. The technological civilization of our time has, in a way, turned upside down our human existence and has led to the disappearance of some points of reference which had been traditionally vital. Thus the man of our time has gradually lost the meaning of life itself. Recent changes in almost every aspect of human life have been so rapid and all-embracing, that man has indeed lost his sense of direction. Hence, one notes not only a lack of clarity in man's ideas, but a devastating confusion and lack of logic in his thinking. The man of today does not really know what he wants or where he is going. He is contradicting himself all the time, he is undoing in a day what has taken him ages to build. According to some thinkers, men cannot be saved from this deleterious situation unless the meaning of his existence is indicated to him[18]. Typical in this trend of thought is Y. Congar, who identifies salvation with the ability to discover the meaning of life, which can be achieved fully only in Christ through the Church. "Losing one's salvation means in actual fact missing the whole meaning of life"[19].

As in classical theology, negative aspects in regard to the concept of salvation are not lacking in contemporary theology. Salvation, in other words, can be considered not only as an attainment of something positive, but as freedom from what is negative and harmful. Foremost in this line of thinking is the idea of liberation from the frustrations and privations which beset modern life and which are the source of much unhappiness and despair. Many of these frustrations are due to isolation and loneliness: inability to accept oneself and others invariably leads to inability to communicate with others. It is from situations like these that so many people of today, especially youths, need to be saved. Hence, salvation in these cases means freedom from the chains of one's selfishness and greed, liberation from enslaving anxiety and fear[20].

There is then freedom from alienations, which tend to divert man from his real fulfilment and slow down his personal growth. Depth psyschology has in recent times singled out the numerous factors which

16. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 10.
17. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1.
18. H. and S. Raths, *Values and Teachings* (Columbus, Ohio, 1966) pp. 15-17.
19. Y. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
20. Cfr. Ch. Bonnet, *Politique, Eglise et Foi* (Paris, 1972); A. Dumas *Political Theology and the Life of the Church* (London: SCM Press 1978).

keep an individual unduly tied down to other persons; similarly the sociological sciences, and to some extent also marxim itself, have described the various mechanisms of alienation in contexts of work, politics, education, entertainment, etc.[21] In this context, therefore, salvation consists in the help one can give to the alienated man of today to realize himself by fully accepting himself, but especially by eliminating from his life, even if gradually and by pacific means, all undue influences, distractions and preoccupations. Modern theology has become aware of the critical task which is hers today in this regard, not in the name of an ideology or of a historically-oriented exigency, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God, which has its roots and must propagate itself in this world before it finds its eschatological fulfilment in the world to come. This is the basis of the so-called "Theology of Liberation", which knows its birth in the Catholic Church in the sixties and has contributed much to clarify many issues coming from the Theology of Progress and of Human Realities. Thus one could also speak of the social and political aspect of salvation[22].

The classical theme of salvation as liberation from sin has not indeed been absent from post-conciliar theological reflection. It is,in fact, bound to remain in the centre of one's consideration, if one is to remain faithful to the Gospel. The tendency, however, is to place this kind of salvation on the collective and social level rather than on the individual one. It is, indeed, a matter of emphasis. Hence sin is often considred as a "collective" evil, or "sin of the world". One often meets the expression "structure of sin", or "sinful institutions", with special reference, of course, to social injustice and the oppression of one people by another, or of one class by another. In other words, modern theology tends to focus upon the "historicity" of sin, understanding by this the fact that sin is not only an offence against God and an obstacle of union with him here on earth and in heaven, but a self-limitation and a self destruction of man himself[23]. The Good News of the Gospel proclaims that, in the fullness of time, God has sent to us his own Son, so that by becoming man, he might set free all men from all kinds of slavery to which their own sin and the sin of others keeps them bound: ignorance, hunger, misery and oppression; in other words, from injustice and hatred, which owe their origin to man's self-love. Sin is, therefore, the fundamental alienation which cannot really be reached in itself and attacked directly, but only in its various

21. Cfr. e.g. A.G. Gish, *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970).
22. Cr. E. Dussel, *Histoire et Théologie de la liberation* (Paris, 1974); J. Metz, *Theology of the World* (London, 1969); G. Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, and by the same author, "The Poor in the Church", in *Concilium: The Poor and the Church* (New York, The Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 11-16.
23. Cfr. Helder Camara, *Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1971).

historical concretizations and articulated expressions, namely in other particular forms of alienation. It is impossible to understand the fundamental alienation of sin without grasping the particular ones.

Once we deal with the temporal aspect of salvation, we must also revise, so to speak, our thinking in regard to the "means" of salvation. There is still insistence upon the need of personal conversion and reconciliation, but more often than not on a social background. Hence the need is felt to reawaken the social consciousness in a community and to revitalize the communitary habits, a need which is much insisted upon among the theologians and the bishops of Latin America, where the term "conscientization", very often used by Helder Camara, has its origin. This conscientization is not a purely passive attitude of awareness before an oppressive reality, neither is it one of critical opposition only, but rather one of initiative and reformative action[24].

Agreement is not always found in theological writings in regard to the way of assessing revolutionary movements and struggles for freedom. On the one hand we have the supporters of a "Theology of Revolution"[25] or indeed of a "Theology of Violence"[26]. These, while specifying that fighting does not necessarily mean hating, assert that in certain circumstances institutionalized violence cannot be overcome except by violence. Those particularly who adopt terms and concepts suggested by Marxism in their analysis of the social situation, justify their support for class struggle advocated by Marxism as only a phase in the process of liberation, and therefore as an aspect of salvation as understood today[27]. Others prefer to speak about revolution and violence in more nuanced terms to avoid the risk of presenting their ideas as an ideology and their "means" of salvation as unevangelical[28].

24. One should note here that the idea of social reform is coextensive with the world influenced by Christianity. In Japan, for instance, the trade union movement was begun by a Christian called Kagawa. In China, the father of the social revolution was the Christian Sun Yat-sen. Even Gandhi confessed that he thought up the idea of a pacifist revolution while reading the Sermon on the Mount. Cfr. L. Boff, *op. cit.*, p. 321.
25. J. Moltmann, *Religione, Rivoluzione e Futuro* (Brescia: Quereriniana, 1971); A.G. Gish, *op. cit.*; P. Bigo, *The Church and the Third World Revolution* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977).
26. J. Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (London: Mowbrays, 1978); cfr. also Martin Luther King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (London: Herder & Stoughton, 1968) and R. Schultz, *Violent for Peace* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970).
27. Thus, for instance, G. Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity* (Dublin: Gill, 1968). and, by the same author, *Cristianesimo. Liberazione, Lotta di Classe* (Assisi, 1979); J.M. Diez Alegria, *La Teologia di fronte alla società storica* (Assisi, 1973).
28. See, for instance, the excellent article by S. Rayan, S.J., "Christian participation in the struggle for Social Justice: Some theological reflections", in *The Clergy Monthly* (Aug. 1974), 282-296; cf. also A. Saldanka, *In the Service of Liberation* (St. Mary's Town: Bangalore, 1974).

It goes without saying that the salvific action on the part of God is considered as basically indispensable in modern theology no less than in classical theology. Even those who, more than others, underline the earthly aspect of salvation and man's individual commitment to it, explicitly affirm that, in every case, salvation is from God. The illuministic myth, in the sense that the diffusion of knowledge is sufficient by itself to liberate man, as Hegel had suggested, no longer influences Catholic theologians. Also without real influence upon theologians today is the myth which presents progress and economic development as a necessary condition for man's salvation. The theologians of today, however, have felt the need of clarifying the role of faith in the process of salvation, underlining always that God does not operate man's total salvation without the cooperation of other fellow men[29].

The Christological dimension of salvation is also present, more than ever before perhaps, in modern theology. Christ's own experience on earth has, so to speak, an anticipatory function, in the sense that both the possibility and the validity of certain human attitudes (such as loving oblation on the Cross leading to the Resurrection) are vindicated[30].

The foregoing are, in our view, the main traits which characterize the theology of salvation in recent times. There is continuity with preconciliar and classical soteriology, because the Christian message is one; but there is also development, in as much as the anthropological approach, considering man in his totality as an evolving being in a rapidly changing world, is predominant. The Kingdom of God, in which man attains his salvation, is indeed an eschatological reality, but it is also being established here and now, and indeed within us, proclaiming the Good News that all men are children of God the Saviour, who has sent his Son on earth in order to set them free in a world of truth, justice and love, and to share with them his own eternal happiness.

29. Cf. e.g. M. Eminyan, S.J., *The Mystery of Salvation* (Malta: University Press, 1973), pp. 89-99.
30. Most important here is L. Boff, *op. cit.*, and J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1970).