Hope from below

Liberation theology, which emerged in Latin America in the 1970s, has been given renewed vigour by the papacies of Francis and Leo, with a new emphasis today on synodality, women, Indigenous people, and the cry of Mother Earth / **By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE**

WHAT DOES it mean to do theology? European theologians might have been surprised by what they saw and heard at the Fourth Continental Congress of Latin American and Caribbean Theology in Lima, Peru, which I attended last month, and not just by the notices marking places safe to stand in the event of earthquakes, or warning people not to go close to the palm trees as the heavy leaves could fall on them.

The methodology was the traditional one of Catholic Social Teaching, "See, Judge, Act", with one day devoted to each stage, but that does not capture the dynamism of the experience. The work of the conference was given visual expression in the weaving of a multicoloured loom, and red thread was strung across the ceiling, symbolising the networking of the participants.

The official title of the congress, organised by the liberation theology network Amerindia, together with the Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, was "Horizons of Liberation: Weaving Hope from Below". Every day was enlivened by celebrations, and the *Cosecha* ("Harvest", or "Gathering", of each day's work) was marked by Three Cs: *Cuento*, *Cuerpo y Canción*; that is, Story, Body and Song.

On the first day ("See"), there were gasps of disbelief when the Uruguayan journalist and writer Raúl Zibechi showed maps of world trade in 2000 and in 2024. The dominance of the United States in global trade had given way almost totally to China. Within Latin America, there was awareness of the increasingly dangerous political situation in many countries, and a university student told how Lima police had shot dead a youth in a recent demonstration and arrested 11 protesters, who were only freed after their fellow students staged a 48-hour vigil.

TO ENSURE a sound theology ("Judge") we should ask: "Who do you do theology *with*?" One person answered, "a teacher and a trade unionist"; another, "a Protestant pastor in protest"; a third, "an Indigenous woman". Theology is not a matter of studying texts or doctrinal definitions, said Francisco de Aquino Júnior of the Catholic University of Pernambuco, Brazil, but of confronting and explaining the lives of the poor, to whom the Gospel is addressed. "Whoever doesn't love, doesn't know God, because God is love," he told us, quoting from 1 John 4:8, before explaining in academic-speak: "You cannot separate hermeneutics from reality, and make it something purely intellectual."

MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

Congress speaker Geraldina Céspedes: "A veritable fount of feminist energy"

Each day began with a bodily expression of prayer. On the first day, we smoothed the wrinkles on our faces, to cleanse our sight. On the second day, we raised our hands and bowed in homage to the cardinal points celebrated in Maya culture – red for the sun in the east, the origin; black in the west for completion and nightfall; white in the north for the ancestors and pioneers of liberation theology; yellow in the south for the fecundity of Mother Earth. On the third day, a group led a Quechuan celebration of the elements, again experienced in our dancing bodies: water in the liquid of our veins; the earth under our feet; the air in our breath; and the fire in our hearts. For songs, there were some old favourites, like the *Misa Campesina* Creed from Nicaragua ("I believe in you, Christ the worker"), as well as many by the Peruvian Gilmer Torres, such as the one beginning "Among the shacks of mats and sticks".

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, liberation theology was more associated with particular authors (at that time male and clerical). In pride of place was the Peruvian father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, who died on 22 October 2024, a year before the congress began, and in whose honour our meeting was held. It was predicted, convincingly, that he would one day join Aquinas as a Doctor of the Church and as a Saint. The other two names that came up again and again were two Jesuits of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in El Salvador: Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the martyrs of 16 November 1989, and Jon Sobrino, who survived the murders because he happened to be abroad that night. He is now 86, but he sent a video message.

Today, the work of liberation theology has become more participative and egalitarian, and the more than 200 participants in the congress were evenly divided among men and women, clerical and lay. It was impossible to know who was a priest or a Religious, a university professor or a leader of a basic ecclesial community, unless you asked them. The spirit was one of universal fraternity with everyone genuinely interested in each person they found themselves next to – a microcosm of the Church to come, or of the Kingdom of God, which (as the German-born Peruvian theologian Eduardo Arens maintained) is "a metaphor for community".

Although there were no big stars, two names perhaps to watch are these. Theresa Denger, a disciple of Jon Sobrino and now teaching alongside him at the UCA, is a German laywoman with a sharp analytical mind whose doctoral thesis was on resistance and martyrdom; she spoke of the Abba of Jesus as an Imma, a *madre tejedora* (a mother weaving or knitting, which was the icon of the congress). And Geraldina Céspedes is a veritable fount of feminist energy from the Dominican Republic, who did her doctorate in Spain but now lives in Guatemala and has a worldwide reach through her congregation, the Dominican Missionaries of the Rosary; she spoke of a "theology of pollination" to spread the message of hope ("Act").

> **Feminism is one of the principal ways in which liberation theology has developed this century**

Feminism is one of the principal ways in which liberation theology has developed this century, as the poor or marginalised are understood more broadly than in the initial focus on urban poor and *campesinos*. *Ecofeminismo* (the title of Céspedes' book) is a term frequently heard, linking the oppression of women with the destruction of Mother Earth – both symptoms of machismo, man's arrogant appropriation of power.

Another important connection that has been developed is between the despoiling of Mother Earth (the *Pachamama*) and the persecution of the Indigenous, who protect it. The term *teología india* is used to evoke the insights of the *pueblos originarios* ("original peoples"), which is now the preferred term for the Indigenous.

The martyrs of the last century, of which St Oscar Romero is the most famous, have been replaced by modern martyrs of the earth, though they are not yet household names: the Chilean Julia Chuñil, a campaigner against

deforestation who disappeared last November; and the Honduran Juan López, an activist against iron ore mining who was shot dead last September.

Less expected, perhaps – in view of the hostility to so-called "gender ideology" found in many Church circles – was the support for those marginalised for sexual diversity. The Good Samaritan parable was dramatised, with a man labelled "Capitalist System" attacking and robbing a woman who is left on the ground groaning "Help!". An "Influencer" passes by, only to take a selfie with her. An "NGO" approaches with a complicated form to fill in. A "Theologian" comes to talk to her about hermeneutics and epistemology. But finally a "Person of Sexual Diversity" arrives and helps the woman to safety and medical help, with the assistance of an elderly man walking with a stick.

TWO MORE TERMS often linked were ecocide and genocide. The cry of the Israelite slaves that reached God (Exodus 2:23) is today both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Palestinians. There were repeated cries of "This isn't war, it's genocide", and in the homily of the closing Mass the preacher denounced the "genocide" in Gaza. Some were disappointed that Gaza did not appear in the final message, which expressed a general approach in a letter to Pope Leo, addressing him not as "Holy Father" but as "our brother in the faith", and ending with a blessing for the Pope: "May the Spirit bless you."

"We reaffirm our fidelity to Jesus of Nazareth and his Gospel," said the letter to Leo, as "we participate in synodal ecclesial processes … May the Spirit keep us in the footsteps of Jesus, together with the prophets and martyrs of our America, committed in the care of our Common Home, uniting the resistance and hopes of our peoples and communities to make possible a more human and fraternal world where no one remains outside of the celebration and the encounter."

There was immense pride shown in the two Latin American popes, Francis and Leo, who are seen as schooled in liberation theology, for their compassion, inclusiveness, and synodal method.

The fundamental origin of all the theology expressed was the call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. According to Francisco Aquino, "the tragedy of Christianity is when it moves away from Jesus". Theresa Denger quoted Jon Sobrino – "we should not start from the Christ of faith but from the historical Jesus" – and she interpreted John 19:25-27 ("Mother, this is your son …") as "the final will of Jesus, that we should look after one another". And Eduardo Arens explained: "Jesus is the man of compassion … He never asked 'what religion are you?', but his approach was just: 'You need me? I'm here.'"

Margaret Hebblethwaite is writing a book about women in the gospels. Twenty-five years ago she left England to work as a freelance missionary and educationalist in rural Paraguay.

ANNE BOOTH

PHOTO: LIZ SEABROOK

After a multiple book project was cancelled, I was feeling a bit wobbly about my writing

DURING the summer I went with my husband on a writing retreat at St Beuno's, the Jesuit Retreat House in North Wales. After a multiple book project had been unexpectedly cancelled I was feeling a bit wobbly about my writing. I had also interrupted an illustration course in order to do the project and pay for the fees, so I was wondering both if God was still calling me to write as a job, and if I had also got it wrong about the illustration course, but I wasn't very sure what else I could do.

By the time we set off I remember feeling a bit embarrassed and wondering if I had booked and paid for a retreat which was not really appropriate for me, but as it was in a beautiful place and it was a holiday with my husband, whom I really wanted to encourage to write, I thought I might as well go. I am so glad I did.

The retreat was wonderful and put things in perspective again. The emphasis wasn't on the content or commercial value of our writing, but on our relationship with God, and how our writing could reflect that and communicate it to others. In the daily group session we were given biblical passages to pray with and we explored and talked together about the spirituality as well as the process of writing.

IN THE EVENINGS we met again together for an examen of the day, looking back at how and where we had met God. I definitely met God in my husband and in the other writers, and in the retreat leaders, in the Masses and quiet Eucharistic Adoration we attended and in the actual physical space of my retreat – in the beauty of the location, the delicious food, and a cat basking in a ray of sunlight near the chapel.

For the rest of the day we were encouraged to spend five hours in prayer or writing. "Five hours!" I thought. "What am I going to do in all that time?" In the past that hadn't been a problem – for years I had habitually written for five or more hours in a day, especially when I was near a publisher's deadline – but my confidence had been severely dented, so I decided that my retreat time would be weighted to prayer. But five hours felt a bit much!

After a morning praying and talking about Martha and Mary with the group I decided I needed to try to listen to God. "I will try for an hour," I thought. "I will go into the chapel and I won't let myself leave until I have listened to God."

IT TURNS OUT (and I did know this before!) that really listening to God, as opposed to asking God things, moaning at God, or being quiet but emotionally blanking him while kneeling, is incredibly difficult and completely life-changing. At about 58 minutes to the hour I *finally* shut up my internal musings and left some space for God and in that final one or two minutes (maybe even only 30 seconds) something shifted in me. I couldn't say exactly what happened, or even what was said, but I felt a new peace and hope, and that I was in the right place, and that God had it all in hand, and the rest of the retreat deepened that sense.

At Mass in the chapel I felt fascinated by the rocks holding up the altar, and I was sure I could see a face in them. I took a photo, and in one of those hours of listening to God I found myself going to the art room and drawing a mountain. Both my writing block and my illustrating block were lifted. I also found myself working again on the adult book which had been cancelled, and feeling a new hope for it. I have returned to my art course and, three weeks in, the base of the altar is forming a basis for a picture book.

After the retreat I picked up a leaflet from a charity called Refugees at Home. Our children have left home, and suddenly my husband and I find ourselves asked to host the most wonderful young woman asylum seeker, someone who matches our family so well, an unexpectedly light and easy and joyful experience. Those seconds or minutes of listening to God have countered despair and opened my ears to what God *is* asking me to do, instead of what God *isn't*, or what I can't.

Anne Booth has published 25 books for children. Her second novel for adults, Sweet Mercies, is now in paperback (Vintage, £9.99; Tablet Bookshop £8.99).