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Author(s): Joseph Pulido.

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An Historian's Pilgrimage towards Objectivity: Reconsidering the Conventional Interpretation of John Paul II and Liberation Theology

JOSEPH PULIDO

For some, the word “pilgrimage” conjures up images of the smelly, dirty, tired, yet determined pilgrims on the dusty roads of the Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain or Mecca in western Saudi Arabia. However, the term is not bound by the limits of one's physical journey to a shrine or holy place. In today's lexicon, the usage of the word is often employed to express any particular journey: the pilgrimage of life, or the fight, struggle, or pursuit that one has undertaken for a particular purpose.

Historians, too, are on a constant pilgrimage. Indispensable to the historian's pilgrimage is the concept of objectivity. The idea of objectivity is both a tool and a perennial *goal* of the historian's craft. It is a tool in that the historian employs the concept of objectivity as a crucial instrument in order to mitigate biased research practices. It is a goal in that objectivity allows for the possibility of the continual reconsidering and reconstructing of established theories and interpretations. Moreover, historians and all persons who journey to know will constantly remain on this pilgrimage of and towards objectivity. The shortcomings of our human nature will need to be constantly checked due to the tendency towards tunnel-vision and self-regard. We need others to balance and order our ideas when they go astray. Oftentimes, it is only by seeking others' objective support that we are able to see things in their true sense and true proportion, thus hopefully arriving a bit closer to the truth. But with this comes humility, which can be a very difficult virtue to acquire. Endeavoring to be objective in seeking the truth remains a noble *pursuit* and a pilgrimage that will always endure.

I myself have been on this pilgrimage of objectivity. In the following essay on Latin American liberation theology and John Paul II, I seek to bring balance and an increased sense of objectivity to John Paul II's response to liberation theology amid a conventional interpretation that has portrayed John Paul II as a determined adversary of the theology of the poor.¹

Today, there is no argument that the pontificate of John Paul II brought down the hammer of the papacy on liberation theology. For over 30 years, the conventional interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology has been principally comprised of the theological confrontation between the Wojtyla papacy and Latin American theologians seeking to develop a new theology out of the Latin American context of poverty, clerical shortage, and the violation of human rights. It is no secret that John Paul II's relationship with liberation theology was deeply contentious. By observing such moments as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's (CDF) critical responses to liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, it would undeniably appear that the pontificate of John Paul II had it out for liberation theology.

However, I argue that crucial historical pieces of the Latin American liberation theology narrative are often left out or de-emphasized in the conventional interpretation, which has invariably led to a less than objective account. In more than one place, the conventional interpretation of John Paul II and Latin American liberation theology has lacked evenhandedness and the necessary nuance of historical analysis, given the complexity of the subject. I contend that John Paul II's response to poverty and oppression in Latin America was not the simple story of betrayal to the sense of openness encouraged by Paul VI and Vatican II. By emphasizing the contentious facets, the more provocative narrative of an oppressive Vatican endeavoring to retain power over a grassroots theology and movement has taken root. At stake is the possibility for a more just interpretation, which incorporates John Paul II's commitment to the goals of liberation theology. In short, John Paul II's response to Latin American liberation theology comprised fundamental continuity of teaching with Paul VI, especially with reference to base communities. This similarity of teaching has not been given sufficient recognition over the years in the conventional interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology.

First, I will present some of the facets which make up the conventional interpretation of the relationship between John Paul II and liberation theology. Second, I will offer a critique of those facets of the conventional interpretation. Finally, I will argue that John Paul II's approach to base communities, a line that some have argued was out of step with Paul VI's sense of openness, was indeed aligned with Paul VI's teaching on base communities, a concept that

receives scant attention in the conventional interpretation of Latin American liberation theology.

Some Aspects of the Conventional Interpretation

The various contributions in the construction of the conventional interpretation of the relationship between Latin American liberation theology and John Paul II—from history, sociology, theology, journalism, biography, etc.—are vast and deep. Moreover, one might argue that since the scholarly contributions which have assembled the conventional interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology are so vast, stretching across the political spectrum, it would be considered unreliable to work out a conventional interpretation on the subject. However, even in the midst of a variety of approaches, I contend that there survives a general conventional interpretation that has been communicated for the past 30 years that portrays John Paul II's response to liberation theology as his endeavor to dismantle this theology of the poor and oppressed.

Christian Smith, in *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, offers an excellent introduction to liberation theology. Smith's work provides a valuable historical account and descriptions of the key concepts, in addition to highlighting the various key personalities and events of liberation theology. In chapter 3, Smith describes the "theoretical tools" he employs in analyzing and interpreting "the forces and events that generated the liberation theology movement."² As part of his tools for analysis, Smith employs the "political process model."³ The political process model according to Smith, "specifies three key variables in the emergence and life course of social movements."⁴ They are the following: "[t]he relative availability of political opportunities in the broad, political environment; the relative strength of related organizations that can help facilitate a social movement; and the collective realization that social change is both imperative and viable."⁵

In chapter 9, "From Sucre to Puebla, 1972-1979," Smith's use of the political process model constructs an inaccurate account of John Paul II and liberation theology. Smith states that "the political process model maintains that the response of elites to the actions of challenger groups is likely to be negative, because it is typically not in the interest of elites for the challenger to succeed."⁶

In the subsequent chapter, Smith contends that the pontificate of "John Paul II and a renewed Vatican conservatism" contracted the political opportunity

of the liberation theology movement.⁷ Moreover, it would appear that according to Smith's political process model, John Paul II and the Vatican's renewed conservatism fall into the category of the elites who do not want a challenger group (liberation theology) to succeed. This idea of John Paul II and the Vatican representing the elites who do not want a challenger group to succeed does not take into account the complex nature between the relationship of the pontificate of John Paul II and liberation theology. Furthermore, I contend that this portrayal of a bullying pontificate of John Paul II wanting to crush the grassroots movement of liberation theology is part of the conventional interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology that has been unfairly communicated over the years. In the following section, I will demonstrate that even though the relationship between John Paul II and liberation theology was hostile, the argument that John Paul II wanted to crush a challenger group on the basis of Vatican elitism does not adequately reflect John Paul II's commitment to the goals of liberation theology.

Another aspect of the conventional interpretation that has been communicated is that of John Paul II desiring to dismantle base communities. Base communities emerged in the 1960s as predominantly religious lay groups within the Latin American Catholic Church that spiritually nourished the faithful amidst the lack of clergy and the lack of spiritual life. The conventional interpretation that has been constructed is that of the Vatican snuffing out Latin American base communities because the Vatican did not want to lose power to a popular lay ecclesial grassroots movement. Again, scholars who have written on the subject are not groundless in this argument. The Vatican certainly took significant measures in its relations with base communities that had disadvantageous results for certain base communities in Latin America. Penny Lernoux, in *People of God*, contends that, since ". . . Rome feared the loss of its institutional power to a democratic base, it discouraged the growth of the (base) communities."⁸

In one sense, Lernoux is correct in making this statement. The Vatican was certainly concerned over the nature and direction of base communities. Lernoux's claim that Rome was quite concerned over losing control over base communities is valid. However, that does not fully explain why Rome discouraged certain base communities. The Vatican's response to base communities was not *solely* an account of the Vatican wanting to maintain power; rather, the Vatican's response to base communities was critical due to the concern over

the nature and purpose of various base communities. Officially, the Vatican promoted and encouraged the work of base communities. The Vatican only became critical of base communities when base communities began to take on changes that the Vatican perceived as dangerous for the base communities themselves. Understanding these reasons offers a fuller picture of the Vatican's response to base communities. As I shall indicate, there was a more nuanced and fuller reason why Rome responded at times negatively to certain base communities. I contend that Lernoux goes too far in her assessment of the Vatican's response to base communities.

Michael Novak, in *Will It Liberate?*, asserts that "from the beginning of his pontificate, step by step, piece by piece, Pope John Paul II has built a theological case against 'liberation theology,' so conceived."⁹ The tone of writing that Novak creates in his account of liberation theology and John Paul II is that John Paul II had it out for liberation theology from the very beginning. There are two unsettling parts to Novak's statement. Firstly, by Novak contending that from the opening of his pontificate John Paul II had it out for liberation theology, Novak appears to create the idea that *right from the beginning* John Paul II wanted to convict liberation theology. The reality here is not that simple to ascertain. John Paul II's first international trip as pope was to Mexico in order to be a part of the third CELAM at Puebla. At Puebla, as seen with Cardinal Ratzinger and the CDF, John Paul II criticized certain aspects of liberation theology but never condemned it. Novak, in stating that John Paul II was building a theological case against liberation theology, creates the image of John Paul II condemning liberation theology as a *whole*. Novak's version is another example of the sort of unclear accounts that have created the conventional interpretation of John Paul II attacking liberation theology. John Paul II's stance on liberation theology was far more complex and nuanced than what the conventional interpretation has produced.

Critique of Some Aspects of the Conventional Interpretation

Christian Smith's interpretation of John Paul II's response to liberation theology as an elitist group responding negatively to the actions of a challenger group because it is not "in the interest of the elites for the challenger to succeed" does not reflect John Paul II's advocacy of liberation theology's general goals. Smith's use of the word "elitist" and "challenger group" represent

a sociological analysis of the liberation theology situation that does not fully capture the reality at hand, thus altering the historical record. This “elitist” and “challenger group” theory does not echo John Paul II’s actual response to liberation theology. In a letter given on April 9, 1986 to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference, John Paul II related the following:

We are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely but useful and necessary. It should constitute a new state . . . of the theological reflection initiated with the apostolic tradition and continued by the great fathers and doctors, by the ordinary and extraordinary magisterium and, in more recent years, by the rich patrimony of the church’s social doctrine, expressed in documents from *Rerum novarum* to *Laborem exercens*.¹⁰

John Paul II’s words on liberation theology appear a far cry from an elitist group desiring to terminate a challenger group. John Paul II, in stating that liberation theology “is not only timely but useful and necessary” challenges Smith’s interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology. Furthermore, Smith’s contention that “it is typically not in the interest of the elites for the challenger group to succeed” does not resound with John Paul II’s interpretation of liberation theology, namely that it constitutes “a new state of the theological reflection initiated with the apostolic tradition and continued by the great fathers and doctors.” In John Paul II’s statement that liberation theology is a continuation of the apostolic tradition regarding poverty appears to falsify Smith’s elitist theory. The goal of liberation theology to alleviate the suffering of the poor and oppressed is not a contradiction to the Church’s social doctrine, as promulgated by the Wojtyla papacy. The pope sees the goals of liberation theology as part of the mission of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church since *Rerum novarum* (RN). However, John Paul II makes it clear that liberation theology must work within the framework of the Church’s “living tradition” and “magisterium,” thus adding nuance and distinction to any interpretation. Again, it is well documented that John Paul II and liberation theology certainly had very strained relations at times due to John Paul II’s criticism of *particular* aspects of liberation theology. Nevertheless, arguing that John Paul II was critical of certain aspects of liberation theology does not mean that he

wanted to dismiss the goals of the theology of liberation on the grounds that it was a challenger group.

Interestingly, even though Smith, in Chapter 10, "Liberation Theology since Sucre," builds the theory of John Paul II's renewed conservatism after Paul VI, even including the quote of Michael Novak, "from the beginning step by step, piece by piece John Paul II has built a theological case against liberation theology," Smith concludes in his endnotes that Novak's quote is an "exaggeration."¹¹ In addition, Smith also mentions in his endnotes that "the Vatican issued a second, more conciliatory document entitled *Libertatis conscientia* (LC), which held a more favorable view of liberation theology."¹²

This is precisely the point of this essay. The conventional interpretation is that John Paul II wanted to snuff out liberation theology. Smith employs Novak's quote in a chapter arguing that political opportunity had been contracted with the advent of the pontificate of John Paul II. Upon examining Smith's interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology in the *main* text of Chapter 10, the conventional interpretation is maintained. Yet, in the *endnotes*, Smith insufficiently mentions extremely crucial elements crediting John Paul II's commitment to the goals of liberation theology, which, if more fully explored, would provide a more balanced and accurate interpretation.

Moreover, the opening paragraphs of LC states that:

The Instruction "Libertatis Nuntius[LN]" on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation stated the intention of the Congregation to publish a second document which would highlight the main elements of the Christian doctrine on freedom and liberation. The present Instruction responds to that intention. Between the two documents there exists an organic relationship. They are to be read in the light of each other.¹³

Here the CDF explains that LN (1984) and LC (1986) need to be taken together. They exist in an "organic relationship." The content of LC covers themes on liberation, justice, development, solidarity, base communities, labor, revolution, and poverty, all of which are important themes in liberation theology and for John Paul II. Smith's treatment of the 1984 and 1986 Instructions disproportionately draws significant attention to John Paul II's criticisms towards liberation theology, focusing only on the 1984 Instruction, thereby creat-

ing an imbalance of interpretation by de-emphasizing John Paul II's advancement of liberation theology. Furthermore, even in the so-called critical 1984 Instruction, the CDF made it clear that:

This warning should in no way be interpreted as a disavowal of all those who want to respond generously and with an authentic evangelical spirit to the "preferential option for the poor." It should not at all serve as an excuse for those who maintain the attitude of neutrality and indifference in the face of the tragic and pressing problems of human misery and injustice. It is, on the contrary, dictated by the certitude that the serious ideological deviations which it points out tends inevitably to betray the cause of the poor.¹⁴

Again, the narrative of John Paul II and liberation theology is not a clear-cut, open and shut case as the conventional interpretation has constructed over the years. The pontificate of John Paul II maintained a condemning position towards those who would view the CDF's specific criticism of liberation theology as a justification for indifference to the poor. The situation was much more nuanced. On the one hand, the CDF encouraged many to

...become involved in the struggle for justice, freedom, and human dignity because of their love for their disinherited, oppressed, and persecuted brothers and sisters. More than ever, the Church intends to condemn abuses, injustices, and attacks against freedom, wherever they occur and whoever commits them.¹⁵

However, on the other hand, the CDF was critical of the means by which the faithful were to get involved in the struggle for justice, an idea that will be more fully explored later with base communities.

In short, the fact that Smith included an exaggerated quote as part of the content of his Chapter 10, only to qualify it, in addition to sidelining encouraging aspects of John Paul II's response to liberation theology in the endnotes, begs the question: why cache critical facets of John Paul II's more encouraging responses for liberation theology in the endnotes? I contend that such unbalanced practices have been employed over the years because they fall in line

with maintaining the conventional interpretation of John Paul II being opposed to liberation theology, an interpretation that has been unfairly sustained across the political spectrum. John Tosh cautions against this type of uneven weighing of sources in that the procedure should be the following:

To amass as many pieces of evidence as possible from a wide range of sources—preferably from all the sources that have a bearing on the problem. In this way inaccuracies and distortions of particular sources are more likely to be revealed, and the inferences drawn by the historian can be corroborated. Each type of source possesses certain strengths and weaknesses; considered together, and compared one against the other, there is at least a chance that they will reveal the true facts—or something very close to them.¹⁶

In creating a just and fair interpretation of the relationship between John Paul II and liberation theology, it is incumbent upon the scholar to fairly consult all the sources that have a “bearing” on the issue, even if certain sources do not fit with one’s interpretation. Time and again, in the interpretation of John Paul II and liberation theology, certain relevant and foundational sources are drowned out or relegated to the endnotes in order to produce the more attractive narrative of an overbearing elitist Vatican endeavoring to maintain authority. Certainly the Wojtyla papacy was very critical towards liberation theology. However, very frequently have interpretations not given a fair hearing to John Paul II’s efforts in affirming the goals of liberation theology.

In addition, I subject Michael Novak’s quote, “From the beginning of his pontificate, step by step, piece by piece, Pope John Paul II has built a theological case against ‘liberation theology’ so conceived,” to the previous quote of John Paul II to the Brazilian Bishops Conference, in which John Paul II states that liberation theology is “timely,” “useful,” and “necessary.” The image that Novak creates that “from the beginning...step by step, piece by piece” John Paul II had “built a theological case against liberation theology,” does not match up with John Paul II’s encouraging words about the mission and nature of liberation theology. Novak creates an interpretation that adheres to a stark, definite, and calculating John Paul II, who might be similar to a district attorney building a case in order to prosecute a criminal. Yes, John Paul II criti-

cized liberation theology; however, the tone and style of Novak's quote does not capture the nuanced and complicated approach of John Paul II concerning liberation theology. Novak's statement does not take into account the developing nature of liberation theology and even the Vatican's ongoing relationship with individual liberation theologians. Novak's statement does not nuance the phenomena of the CDF individually working with liberation theologians and their specific liberation theologies. For Novak to make such a decisive general statement does not recognize the complicated and ever-changing relationship between John Paul II and liberation theology. The relationship between John Paul II and liberation theology was certainly one of conflict and misunderstanding at times; however, there was also the presence of continual attempts of understanding and clarification that John Paul II sought.

Paul VI and John Paul II: Continuity in Teaching

There is a general interpretation that the pontificate of Paul VI fostered a sense of openness to the modern world, especially as it related to being open in promoting the idea of de-centralizing certain elements of governance in the Catholic Church. Paul VI related in *Octogesima adveniens*:

In the face of such widely varying situations, it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and put forward a solution which has universal validity . . . It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action for the social teaching of the Church.¹⁷

Whereas Paul VI encouraged the notion of allowing certain decisions to be made within particular regions of the world in light of the challenges facing specific geographic situations, thus encouraging a more de-centralized Catholic Church, John Paul II's pontificate is noted for taking up a more centralistic and authoritarian approach. Yet, in light of the apparent conceptual differences in the tone over church governance between Paul VI and John Paul II, I contend that the portrayal of the tension over church governance between the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II drowns out the similarity of teaching between

these two popes on liberation theology, especially in the case of base communities, a prime example that exemplifies the church governance issue. In the following, I will demonstrate that in reference to liberation theology, Paul VI and John Paul II had very similar teachings on base communities. This similarity of teaching has not been given sufficient recognition over the years by the various interpretations of John Paul II and liberation theology.

Throughout the 1980s, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the CDF, became the central figure from the Holy See to critique liberation theology. He was appointed as the prefect of the CDF by John Paul II in 1981, and remained until he was elected Pope Benedict XVI in April 2005. As previously mentioned, in 1984 and 1986 with Cardinal Ratzinger at the helm, the CDF produced two instructions concerning liberation theology. The first, *Libertatis nuntius*, (LN) has been traditionally interpreted as a critical analysis of liberation theology, whereas the second instruction, *Libertatis conscientia* (LC), has been viewed as taking a more temperate view of liberation theology. Cardinal Ratzinger's responses to liberation theology have been perceived by many as Cardinal Ratzinger and John Paul II cutting off the spirit of Vatican II and Paul VI. Although the pontificate of John Paul II took up a strong stance in the maintenance of orthodoxy, especially as it related to liberation theology, this does not necessarily mean that the pontificate of Paul VI was not equally critical of certain aspects of liberation theology. My contention is that on crucial aspects of the liberation theology account on which John Paul II receives immense criticism, that Paul VI had similar, if not more severe responses to significant aspects of liberation theology and base communities, a reality that has not been adequately acknowledged.

At this juncture, it is essential to note that Cardinal Ratzinger and John Paul II, through the two Instructions, publically maintained an identical teaching on liberation theology. In a letter to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference, John Paul II affirmed that "an expression and proof of the attention with which the Holy See participates in those efforts are the numerous documents recently published, among them the two Instructions provided by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with my explicit approval."¹⁸

Moreover, this point is made in light of the reality of the differences of opinion that at times exists amongst the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Since Cardinal Ratzinger played a major role in the Holy See's response to libera-

tion theology, it is essential to note that John Paul II explicitly approved of the two Instructions that became the key official public response of the Catholic Church on liberation theology—the two Instructions that I will employ as the chief documents in comparing and contrasting John Paul II with Paul VI’s response to certain aspects of liberation theology.

In Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Libertatis conscientia* (LC) and Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN), base communities are seen as signs of great hope within and for the Catholic Church. Both documents highlight base communities as positive instruments to enrich the life of the Catholic Church. The spirit of optimism that both documents uphold on behalf of base communities is a far cry from the interpretation of Lernoux, who saw the Vatican as discouraging base communities over fear of losing institutional power.

Again, the story is far more nuanced. Concerning base communities, the pontificate of Paul VI, in EN, specified that:

In some regions [base communities] appear and develop, almost without exception, within the Church, having solidarity with her life, being nourished by her teaching and united with her pastors. In these cases, they spring from the need to live the Church’s life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity. Such communities can quite simply be in their own way an extension on the spiritual and religious level – worship, deepening of faith, fraternal charity, prayer, constant contact with pastors—of the small sociological community such as the village etc... Or again their aim may be to bring together, for the purpose of listening to and meditating on the Word, for the sacraments and the bond of the agape, groups of people who are linked by age, culture, civil state or social situation: married couples, young people, professional people, etc.; people who already happen to be united in the struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, human advancement. In still other cases they bring Christians together in places where the shortage of priests does not favor the normal life of a parish community.¹⁹

Concerning base communities, Cardinal Ratzinger, in LC specified that, “[t]he new base communities or other groups of Christians which have arisen to be witnesses to this evangelical love are a source of great hope for the Church.”²⁰

In both EN and LC, base communities are praised as vehicles of tremendous hope for the Catholic Church in Latin America. Cardinal Ratzinger in LC affirms that base communities have come to be “witnesses to this evangelical love,” whereas Paul VI in EN relates that base communities bring various groups of people together not only to enrich the spiritual lives of each other but also to promote social justice in poor struggling communities. Moreover, Paul VI recognizes the good base communities do for the spiritual, social, and economic health of marginalized sectors of Latin American society. In the documents, both pontificates affirm the goodness of base communities.

However, both documents are critical about the nature, development, and goals of certain base communities. In both EN and LC, Paul VI and Cardinal Ratzinger promote the advancement of base communities, only on conditional terms.

In EN, Paul VI stated the following:

In other regions, on the other hand, Base Communities come together in a spirit of bitter criticism of the Church, which they are quick to stigmatize as “institutional” and to which they set themselves up in opposition as charismatic communities, free from structures and inspired only by the Gospel. Thus their obvious characteristic is an attitude of fault-finding and of rejection with regard to the Church’s outward manifestations: her hierarchy, her signs. They are radically opposed to the Church. By following these lines their main inspiration very quickly becomes ideological, and it rarely happens that they do not quickly fall victim to some political option or current of thought, and then to a system, even a party, with all the attendant risks of becoming an instrument. The difference is already notable: the communities which by their spirit of opposition cut themselves off from the Church, and whose unity they wound, can well be called Base Communities, but in this case it is a strictly sociological name. They could not, without a misuse of terms, be called ecclesial Base Communities, even if, while being hostile to the hierarchy, they claim to remain within the unity of the Church. This

name belongs to the other groups, those which come together within the Church in order to unite themselves to the Church and to cause the Church to grow. These later communities will be a place of evangelization for the benefit of the bigger communities, especially the individual Churches. And, as we said at the end of the last Synod, they will be a hope for the universal Church to the extent: that they seek their nourishment in the Word of God and do not allow themselves to be ensnared by political polarization or fashionable ideologies, which are ready to exploit their immense human potential; that they avoid the ever present temptation of systematic protest and hyper critical attitude, under the pretext of authenticity and a spirit of collaboration; that they remain firmly attached to the local Church in which they are inserted, and to the universal Church, within themselves, then of believing themselves to be the only authentic Church of Christ, and hence of condemning the other ecclesial communities; that they maintain a sincere communion with the pastors whom the Lord gives to His Church, and with the magisterium which the Spirit of Christ has entrusted to these pastors; they never look on themselves as the sole beneficiaries or sole agents of evangelization – or even the only depositories of the Gospel – but, being aware that the Church is much more vast and diversified, accept the fact that this Church becomes incarnate in other ways than through themselves; that they constantly grow in missionary consciousness, fervor, commitment and zeal; that they show themselves to be universal in all things and never sectarian. On these conditions, which are certainly demanding but also uplifting the ecclesial Base Communities will correspond to their most fundamental vocation: as hearers of the Gospel which is proclaimed to them and privileged beneficiaries, they will soon become proclaimers of the Gospel themselves.

In LC, Cardinal Ratzinger specified that:

If they really live in unity with the local Church and the universal Church, they will be a real expression of communion and a means for constructing a still deeper communion. Their fidelity to their mission will depend on how careful they are to educate their members in the

fullness of the Christian faith through listening to the Word of God, fidelity to the teaching of the Magisterium, to the hierarchical order of the Church and to the sacramental Life. If this condition is fulfilled, their experience, rooted in a commitment to the complete liberation of man, becomes a treasure for the whole Church.²²

Paul VI and Cardinal Ratzinger's critical approaches to base communities in EN and LC unequivocally reveal continuity in teaching between the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II. Both documents require that Catholic base communities be ordered within the structure of the institutional Catholic Church. Both EN and LC contend that base communities must remain faithful to the Magisterium and hierarchy of the Church, thus contributing to the unity of the Catholic Church. Paul VI in EN criticizes those who criticize the Catholic Church's institutional and structural aspects, setting themselves outside the structure of the Church. Moreover, Paul VI considers those base communities who work outside the unity of the Church to be mere secular groups, groups that can fall victim to the social and political environment of the day. He further contends that, "[t]hey could not, without a misuse of terms, be called ecclesial Base Communities, even if, while being hostile to the hierarchy, they claim to remain within the unity of the Church." Paul VI is very precise on the necessary conditions that base communities need to observe to remain within the unity of the Catholic Church. Even if certain base communities claim to be in unity within the Church, if they are "hostile" to the hierarchy, Paul VI refuses to give them the name of a base community within the Catholic Church.

Paul VI in EN relates that base communities can be social agents for positive change in struggling Latin American communities. It would appear that the emergence of this lay popular movement in the Catholic Church resounded with Paul VI's encouragement of Christian communities examining their specific "situations" in the Church, and responding accordingly. Moreover, the conventional interpretation depicts the pontificate of John Paul II as simply undoing the sense of openness brought on by Paul VI, especially when it came to de-centralizing church authority. However, Paul VI in his treatment on base communities was very critical over the nature and organizational structure of Christian communities who were responding to his call to address regional issues in light of their particular situations. Paul VI's sense of openness to de-

centralizing church authority did not equal a *carte blanche* to popular Christian democracy.

Since many base communities endeavored to work within the context of Roman Catholicism, the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II deemed that it was the Holy See's obligation to ensure that the essence, means, and goals of base communities properly embodied Catholic teaching. Moreover, as strongly articulated by Paul VI, the Holy See was concerned over base communities' vulnerability and potential for political exploitation due to their organizational strengths. Since certain Latin American base communities developed within particular countries which were experiencing periods of turbulence and violence, the Catholic Church remained very critical over the nature, development and purposes of certain base communities. Many contend that base communities' support in the late 1970s contributed to the Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN) efforts in overthrowing the Somoza family in Nicaragua.

Michael Dodson remarks that

At the level of CEBs many church people moved into open and direct support of the FSLN. Their support was clearly a valuable resource to the FSLN, which found the work of organizing people in the insurrection to be much easier in areas where CEBs were firmly rooted. These institutions of religious inspiration were, in short, effective vehicles of grass-roots political action in revolutionary setting of the popular insurrection.²³

That Rome was critical towards certain base communities on account of Rome's sincere fear of base communities being politically exploited by popular Latin American revolutionary movements is a valid account that has received insufficient attention in the conventional interpretation. The discomfort that base communities caused Rome subsequently made Rome critical and discouraging of certain base communities; again, only in light of their development as political and social instruments of change, a change that was occurring in sudden and often times violent ways whereby Rome was very cautious over the direction of such perilous developments. The notion that Rome desired to snuff

out base communities simply out of its apparent desire to retain political power must be re-examined.

In conclusion, it appears that the conventional interpretation of John Paul II taking up reactionary measures against base communities and liberation theology in general and going against the spirit of Paul VI requires a more nuanced account. The pontificate of John Paul II as witnessed in LC had a very similar (if not identical) teaching on base communities as did the pontificate of Paul VI. Critics who cite the pontificate of John Paul II taking up a reactionary stance against base communities need to take into consideration the stance that was taken by the pontificate of Paul VI, one that is regarded for its openness for a de-centralized Catholic Church, and yet, maintained an equally, if not more critical response to the de-centralized popular lay movement of base communities as did John Paul II.

As for liberation theology in general, John Paul II's response to the theology of the poor must be viewed through an honest and critical lens that fully explores the Wojtyla papacy's nuanced approach towards liberation theology. Scholars of liberation theology will need to continually weigh all the sources in a fair and balanced way, in the pursuit of the elusive goal of objectivity.

In short, as mentioned in my introductory remarks, this essay is an example of the constant pilgrimage of historians and all those who are on the quest to know. I myself have the utmost respect of the scholars whom I have included in writing this essay. When critical, I was attempting to give credit where credit is due. In addition, in writing this essay, I am in no way attempting to diminish or "clean-up" in piecemeal the perennial problem of the abuse of power within the Catholic Church. The abuse of power has remained a serious issue which has obstructed the flow of the Spirit within the Catholic Church. Renewal and reformation need to be constantly present in order to bring about the individual and common good. However, in this particular instance, I feel that it is important to let surface certain sources that have many times been de-emphasized in the conventional interpretation and to bring a bit more balance, objectivity, and light to the narrative of John Paul II and liberation theology.

NOTES

- 1 Discussion on the topic of a conventional interpretation between John Paul II and Latin Liberation will be explored specifically within pages 3-7, and in general throughout this paper.
- 2 Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion And Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 51.
- 3 Ibid., 57-68.
- 4 Ibid., 58.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 189.
- 7 Ibid., 222.
- 8 Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1989), 153.
- 9 Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate? Questions About Liberation Theology* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991), 26.
- 10 John Paul II, "Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference" in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 503.
- 11 Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, 267.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia*, (2), Holy See, March 22, 1986, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.
- 14 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis nuntius*, (Introduction), Holy See, August 6, 1984, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 103.
- 17 Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, (4), Holy See, May 14, 1971, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html.
- 18 John Paul II, "Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference" in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 503.
- 19 Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, (58), Holy See, December 8, 1975, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.
- 20 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia*, (69), Holy See, March 22, 1986, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.
- 21 Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, (58), Holy See, December 8, 1975, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.
- 22 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia*, (69), Holy See, March 22, 1986 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.
- 23 Michael Dodson, "Nicaragua: The Struggle for the Church," in *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*, ed. Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 86.