



FRIENDS

The Missionary Society of St. James
the Apostle

January 2025



"Our God is a God of Love"...

Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino O.P

June 8, 1928 – October 22, 2024

Dear Friends,

Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, described by Time Magazine in 2020, as one of the most influential theologians of the 20th Century, went home to God on October 22, 2024, aged 96. I met Padre Gustavo for the first time in Lima, Peru, in October, 1968, after I completed my first year in the Parish of Cristo Rey, Villa María, a shanty town, on the south side of Chimbote, a six hour drive north of Lima, with a population of some 35,000, mostly poor and all very young, who had come from the High Andes looking for work. My pastor was Fr. Ed Roche, from Brockton, MA. I had more questions than answers about how to accompany our people who were living in absolute poverty in a country where there was great inequality. Ed invited me to a meeting of a group of priests working in parishes

Diocesan priests serving the poorest of the poor in Latin America since 1958.

all over Peru, of which he was a member. The meeting was organised by ONIS, (National Office for Social Information,) a group of diocesan priests from Lima, the majority of whom had studied in Europe, under such renowned theologians as Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Marie-Dominique Chenú, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri de Lubac, who all had important theological roles at Vatican II. There was great excitement in church circles, an air of expectancy. This group of friends were trying to apply the teachings from Vatican II to the Peruvian reality, in line with the theology they had studied in Europe. They were open to sharing their knowledge and reflections with those of us who had come from abroad to work in Peru. Each week, they met with priests from the Lima area, and priests living in the provinces would join the Lima group for a week-long meeting, twice a year. We were all seeking ways through which we could bring the Good News to the people in a way that was relevant to their lives.

A young theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, already recognised as an outstanding scholar, was a vital presence in this group. Gustavo was born in Lima in 1938. As a child he was afflicted by osteomyelitis, an infection of the bone marrow, and he was frequently bedridden. Gustavo was confined to a wheelchair for six years, during which he graduated from high school with honors, even though he had missed most of the classes. He then decided to study medicine, at San Marcos University, Lima. Halfway through this course, he decided to become a priest. He was a brilliant student. As a seminarian, he made a great impression on his theology professors, so much so that he was given a scholarship to do post-graduate studies in Leuven, Belgium. He then went on to do further studies and he completed a Doctorate in Theology at the Catholic Institute, Pastoral d'Études Religieuses, in Lyon, France. Gustavo returned to Peru in 1959 and was ordained priest. He was appointed Pastor of a parish in Rimac, a shanty town on the outskirts of Lima, where, he began to reflect on what he was witnessing in the lives of the people to whom he was ministering. Gustavo also taught theology at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima. Rather than view poverty as a virtue, Gustavo remarked that poor people were dying before their time. Poverty was an injustice. His big question was "how does one tell the poor that God loves them if they are dying before their time?" Poverty and inequality were not from God. These were structural issues.



Frs: John Ahern, Gustavo Gutierrez, Joe McCarthy



Frs: Gustavo Gutierrez, Jack Davis



Cardinal O'Malley with Gustavo Gutiérrez, 2018



Gustavo often cited the gospel passage from Matthew 25, where Jesus tells the people that he is present in those who are poor, hungry, homeless, or in prison.

Reflecting on the bible and on documents from Vatican II, Gustavo began to rethink his theology. Gustavo brought together, priests, who were facing the same challenges as himself, to reflect, discuss and support each other. They reflected on their reality in the light of the Word of God and would ask what would God say to the “*poor, those who had become invisible people.*” They were victims of the institutionalised violence, which prevailed all over the continent of Latin America.

At the meetings we did a lot of listening to each other, going deeper into the themes in small groups. Gustavo was a perfect listener, and was even better at summarising the reports from the groups. While most of us may not have realised it, we were witnessing theology being elaborated in a whole new way. At the beginning, Gustavo called it a Theology of Development, but that soon changed to “*A Theology of Liberation*” where the option for the poor was front and center. This was the beginning of a major change in how theology was developed and understood throughout Latin America.

However, Liberation Theology was not always universally accepted. Gustavo was denounced, either for being too political, or as a communist, by Church people, who were not in favor of changing anything in the Church. They denounced Gustavo to the Commission on Doctrine and Faith in Rome. It took him over 15 years to explain to the Holy Office how he was doing theology.

Finally, the President of the Commission on Doctrine and Faith, a German theologian, Cardinal Ratzinger, (later Pope Benedict XVI,) declared, that Gustavo’s way of doing theology was completely free from error. He had read ALL the books Gustavo had written, which was more than can be claimed by his accusers. The present Cardinal of Lima, Carlos Castillo, stated in an article in the Spanish Newspaper “El País,” on October 18, 2024, that “*...Gustavo was attacked for being a communist, while the truth of the matter was simply, that Gustavo was a man of GOD, open to the Scriptures, and to the Signs of the Times, who updated the faith for our poor and profoundly believing continent.*”



Gustavo was prolific writer. His books have been translated into many languages. They are, and have been read by many, as well as being used in many theological courses all over the world. He taught theology courses in the U.S., at Notre Dame and Boston College, for many years, and at different universities in Europe. In 1974, Gustavo founded the Bartolomé de las Casas Institute, in his parish, in Rimac, its name a homage to the 16th century Dominican friar, who became bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, and defended indigenous rights against Spanish colonial excesses. The IBC, which still operates today, in a different location, is home to Gustavo's personal library. The center aims to contribute to freedom and human development in Peru, from the Christian perspective of a preferential option for the poor. Gustavo was a friend and a mentor for many of us in the St. James Society. He loved being with people and especially the people of his parish in the Rimac. He suffered much criticism but he would always have a sense of humour and remind us that God is Good, life is beautiful. Our God is a God of love, freely given, and, most of all, God has a preference for all those on the margins, the poor, the forgotten ones. We are all called to denounce what is not life-giving, and above all, we must be creators of hope because, *"hope does not drop from the sky in a parachute."* As Christians, we must be creators of hope.

Our dear friend will be missed. Gustavo lit a torch of liberation that shed it's light worldwide, on the conditions of poverty, oppression and liberation. May we continue to keep this torch alight until all people are free from the structures of oppression.

Sincere thanks to Fr. Joe McCarthy, Society Alumnus, for the above article.

With Every Good Wish in Christ,

Rev. David Costello, Director



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24 Clark Street • Boston, MA 02109 • (617) 742-4715 • e: office@socstjames.com • socstjames.com