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Encountering God in the Face of the Poor According to Gustavo Gutierrez

Tibur HELI

1. Introduction

There are many ways to encounter God, for instance, through the beauty of nature, through prayer and meditation, or through a tremendous moment such as St. Paul experienced on the way to Damascus. Each encounter depends on the situation in which we live and on God who wants to reveal himself to us. The Peruvian theologian of liberation, Gustavo Gutierrez's option for the poor enables him to see the Lord in the faces of the poor in Latin America. He acknowledges that "Christ hides himself behind the faces of those whom we tend to avoid because they have little importance in the eyes of the society."¹ For him, to be followers of Jesus requires us to walk with and commit ourselves to the poor. In doing so, we encounter the Lord who is simultaneously revealed and hidden in the face of the Poor.

The following essay falls into three parts. In the first part I offer a biblical foundation that explains the relationship between God and human beings. In the second, I consider the encounter with God. In this section, I will describe God as the one who takes the initiative to invite us to come and follow him. This encounter with God enables us to be in union with him and others,

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life* (trans. Matthew J. Connell), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991, 89.

especially the poor and oppressed. Union with God through the poor will transform us so that we can give witness and we can find a new way to talk about God or “do” theology. Then, in a third part I look at Gutierrez’s theological reflection on Job.

2. Biblical Foundation

Gustavo Gutierrez based his reflection about encountering God in the face of the poor in Holy Scripture. For Gutierrez, “the Biblical God is close to human beings, a God of communion with and commitment to human beings [especially the poor and the oppressed]. The active presence of God in the midst of people is part of the oldest and most enduring Biblical promises.”² In the following paragraphs I will examine Gustavo’s teaching about the poor in both the Old and New Testaments.

2.1. Old Testament

Based on the understanding that the Biblical God is close to human beings, first of all, Gutierrez reflects on the first covenant that speaks about God dwelling in the midst of his people. “God said: ‘I shall dwell in the midst of the Israelites, I shall become their God, and by my dwelling among them they will know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt. I am Lord their God’ (Exod.29: 45; cf.26: 11-12).”³ The presence and the dwelling of God among his people emphasized the relationship between God and human beings.

² Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, politics and Salvation*, (trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1973, 106.

³ *Ibid*, 107.

This relationship becomes more significant in “the history of the chosen people in which God’s self-revelation took place especially on the *mountain*. For instance, Sinai was a privileged place for meeting God and for God’s manifestations (Exod.19). Yahweh ordered Moses, ‘come up to me on the mountain’ (Exod.24: 12; Deut.10: 1), because on the mountain rested the glory of God (Exod.24: 16-17).”⁴ However, the God of Israel was not only present on the mountain, but also in the tent and the Ark. According to Gutierrez, “the presence of Yahweh came closer when it was linked to the *tent* which accompanied the Israelites on their pilgrimage through the desert. This was a place of encounter with Yahweh which Moses placed outside the camp and here he spoke with Yahweh whenever Israel needed detailed instructions (Exod. 33:7-11; Num.11: 16,24-26;Deut.31: 14).”⁵ The presence of God in the Ark is more profound because “there was even a curious identification between Yahweh and the Ark: ‘Whenever the Ark began to move, Moses said, ‘Up, Lord and may thy enemies be scattered and those that hate thee flee before thee.’ When it halted he said, ‘Rest, Lord of the countless thousands of Israel’ (Num.10: 35-36; cf. also Josh.4: 5,13; Sam.4: 17).”⁶

Besides these biblical passages, there are also many other texts in the Old Testament that talk about the presence of God in the temple, the tent and the Ark of the Covenant. In relation to the poor and oppressed, Gutierrez writes: “the Old Testament is clear regarding the close relationship between God and the neighbor. This relationship is a distinguishing characteristic of God of the Bible. To despise one’s neighbor (Prov.14: 21), to exploit the humble and poor worker, and to delay the payment of wages, is to offend God: ‘You shall not

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

keep back the wages of a man who is poor and needy...’ (Deut.24: 14-15; cf. Exod.22: 21-23).”⁷ Therefore, to love God and to love our neighbor means to do justice to the poor and the oppressed.

2.2. New Testament

The presence of God in the Temple in the Old Testament prefigured God’s presence in the New Testament, especially with the Incarnation of the Son of God: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Through this Incarnation, Christ also presents himself as the Temple of God: “‘Destroy this temple...and in three days I will raise it again.’ And John specifies: ‘The Temple he was speaking of was his body’ (2:9, 20). And Paul tells us: ‘It is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied’ (Col.2: 9; cf.Eph.2: 20-22; 1Pet.2: 4-8).”⁸ All these texts emphasize the manifestation of God in the humanity of Christ, and through this manifestation God committed himself to human history.

Not only is Christ the Temple of God, but all people who believe in Christ also become a temple of God. Gutierrez describes the connection between Christ and the Christian as the temple of God in the following words: “the Christian community is a temple of living stones, and that each Christian, a member of this community, is a *temple of the Holy Spirit*: ‘Surely you know that you are God’s temple, where the Spirit of God dwells. Anyone who destroys God’s temple will himself be destroyed by God, because the temple of God is holy; and that temple are you’ (1 Cor.3: 16-17).”⁹ The reality that every

⁷ Ibid, 110.

⁸ Ibid, 109.

⁹ Ibid.

Christian is the temple of God helps us to understand better the closeness of God to human beings.

Furthermore, Gutierrez underlines that “not only is the Christian a temple of God; every human being is.”¹⁰ As evidence for this Gutierrez cited the episode of Cornelius in Acts where it is written that “the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). “For this reason”, says Gutierrez, “the words of Christ apply to everyone: Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him (John 14:23).”¹¹ Here the emphasis is on loving and keeping the word of Jesus. In order to do this we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Holy Spirit does not only work in the Church or Christians, but also outside the Church. In this sense, Gutierrez is right to say that the temple of God is not only the Christian, but also every human being.

This biblical foundation helps us to understand the relationship between God and human beings. In the Old Testament the relationship between God and human beings occurred on the mountain, in the temple and through the Ark of the Covenant. In the New Testament God becomes present in the Incarnation of the Word. Through the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh, every person is the presence of God. Gutierrez notes: “Since the incarnation, humanity, every human being in history, is the living temple of God.”¹² This is the key element for speaking about an encounter with God. Gutierrez puts it this way: “If humanity, each person, is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with others; we encounter God in the commitment to the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 110.

historical process of humankind.”¹³ I will explore this topic in more detail in the next section.

3. Encountering God

3.1. Christ Initiates the Encounter

Encountering the Lord does not occur by our own effort, but it is an initiative from God. The Lord is the one who takes the initiative to invite us to come and follow him. Gutierrez correctly says: “to encounter the Lord is first of all to be encountered by the Lord. ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit’ (John15: 16). In this encounter we discover where the Lord lives and what the mission is that has been entrusted to us.”¹⁴ Although Gutierrez points out other Gospel passages that speak about encountering Jesus¹⁵, in this paper I only focus on the text of John 1:35-42 because it is “penetrating and rich in meaning.”¹⁶ In this text, there are some key elements such as the questions, answer, and the time when the disciples encountered Jesus. Jesus begins by asking his disciples: “What do you seek?” (John 1:38). Gutierrez notes: “This formal question, direct and unavoidable, is meant to sound out the quality of the initial adhesion that the disciples of John have just given to the following of Jesus. Jesus puts them in the critical position of defining themselves from the outset.”¹⁷ In other words, this question challenges the disciples and helps them to be aware that it is not enough to just follow Jesus, but rather it requires something more, that is, to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Well: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (trans. Matthew J. Connell), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1984, 38.

¹⁵ For more detail see pp, 38-53.

¹⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹⁷ Ibid, 40.

bear witness to life. It is interesting that in their response to the question of Jesus, the disciples also ask a question: "Where are you staying?" (John 1:39). Interpreting this question, Gutierrez writes: "The disciples here are 'inviting themselves' to intimacy with Jesus. Their question expresses their desire to be taught through sharing in the life of Jesus. Their intention to follow him is now clear."¹⁸

The dialogue between Jesus and his disciples is short, but complete. In that dialogue Jesus clearly emphasizes the "call to follow him; he invites the disciples to enter his own sphere, to come and see where he is staying, and to accept the consequences of such a coming and seeing."¹⁹ In addition, another important element is the time when the disciples met Jesus. "It was the tenth hour" (John 1: 39).²⁰ According to Gutierrez, "the tenth hour conveys a profound message, for we all have a 'tenth hour' in our lives, intense moments of encounter with the Lord in which our spiritual lives are nourished."²¹ In conclusion, Gutierrez emphasizes, "The following of Jesus is not, purely or primarily, an individual matter but a collective adventure. The journey of the people of God is set in motion by direct encounter with the Lord but it is an encounter in community: 'We have found the Messiah.'"²² The experience of finding the Messiah will lead us to bear witness and to proclaim what we have found.

¹⁸ Ibid, 41.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ New American Bible translated "the tenth hour" with "four in afternoon."

²¹ Ibid, 42.

²² Ibid.

3.2. Union with God through the poor

According to Gustavo Gutierrez, “to be followers of Jesus requires us to walk with and be committed to the poor because when we do this we will experience an encounter with the Lord who is simultaneously revealed and hidden in the face of the Poor.”²³ Since God is hidden in the face of the poor, we cannot encounter and be united with him without our relationship with the poor. The great mystic St. John of Cross, when he discussed the nature of union with God, emphasized that “God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially”, therefore, “the soul’s union with and transformation in God is through love.”²⁴ In other words, John emphasizes a personal relationship between the soul and God. Gutierrez, on the other hand, stresses the relationship between God and his people especially the poor. For him, “the human person is destined to total communion with God and to the fullest fellowship with all other persons.”²⁵ Gutierrez says: “we find God in our encounter with others, especially the poor, marginalized, and exploited ones. An act of love toward them is an act of love toward God.”²⁶ In emphasizing these words he continues, “our encounter with the Lord occurs in our encounter with others, especially in encounter with those whose human features have been disfigured by oppression, despoliation, and alienation and who have ‘no beauty, no majesty’ but are the things from which men turn away their eyes’ (Isa.53: 2-3).”²⁷ It is clear that our solidarity and commitment to the

²³ Ibid, 38.

²⁴ A, 2, 5, 3. This quotation taken from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 163.

²⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 113.

²⁶ Ibid, 115.

²⁷ Ibid, 116.

poor and the marginalized enable us to encounter God who identifies and reveals himself in them.

In order to commit ourselves to the poor and oppressed, “we need a vital attitude, all embracing, synthesizing, informing the totality as well as every detail of our lives; we need a ‘spirituality.’”²⁸ Gutierrez notes that “spirituality,” in the strict and profound sense is the dominion of the Spirit. If ‘the truth will set you free’ (John 8: 32) the spirit ‘will guide you into all truth’ (John 16:13) and will lead us to complete freedom, the freedom from everything that hinders us from fulfilling ourselves as human beings and offspring of God and the freedom to love and to enter into communion with God and with others.”²⁹ This spirituality will guide us “along the path of liberation because ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ (1Cor.3: 17).”³⁰ Here Gutierrez speaks about the “spirituality of liberation” in which the Spirit inspires us to live out the Gospel in solidarity with all human beings, especially the poor and the oppressed.

For Gutierrez, “a spirituality of liberation will enter on a *conversion* to neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor.”³¹ The conversion he talks about is “a radical transformation of ourselves” that includes “our thinking, feeling and living as Christ – present in the exploited and alienated persons.”³² Gutierrez asserts that “to be converted is to commit oneself to the process of liberation of the

²⁸ Ibid, 117.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 118.

³² Ibid.

poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely”³³ that requires generosity, an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action.

Based on the statement that we find God in our encounter with the others, Gutierrez describes the union with God as follows:

...if it is true that, one must go through humankind to reach God, it is equally certain that the ‘passing through’ to that gratuitous God strips me naked, universalizes my love for others, and makes it gratuitous. Both movements need each other dialectically and move toward a synthesis. This synthesis is found in Christ; in the God-Man we encounter God and humankind. In Christ humankind gives God a human countenance and God gives it a divine countenance. Only in this perspective we will be able to understand that *‘the union with the Lord’*, which all spirituality proclaims, *is not a separation from others; to attain this union, I must go through others and the union, in turn, enables me to encounter others more fully.*³⁴ (Italics mine)

This description is very profound and full of meaning because it emphasizes two things. The first is that “one must go through humankind to reach God.” The second is our union with God must help us “to encounter others more fully”, especially the poor and the oppressed. Put in another way, we cannot love God without loving our neighbor. Therefore, the experience of encountering God and union with God leads us to serve others perfectly.

Clearly, this union can only happen if we have really converted ourselves to others. In this sense, Gutierrez affirms that “the conversion to one’s

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 119.

neighbors, and in them to the Lord, the gratuitousness which allows me to encounter with others fully, the unique encounter which is the foundation of communion of persons among themselves and of human beings, with God, these are the source of Christian *joy*.”³⁵ In other words, Gutierrez says that one cannot find true joy unless he or she converts to the Lord as well as to the neighbor especially the poor and the marginalized.

4. God – Talk

If we accept Gutierrez’s statement “to attain [union with God], I must go through others and the union, in turn, enables me to encounter others more fully”; here I think that this statement means we have to give witness and also to find a new way to speak about God. Therefore in this section, I will focus on the new way to speak about God and will refer to Gutierrez’s theological reflection on Job.

4.1. Suffering of the innocent.

Reflecting on the suffering of the innocent, Gustavo Gutierrez notes “the book of Job is important and classic [because] central to the book itself is: *the question of how we are to talk about God*. More particularly: how we are to talk about God from within a specific situation – namely, the suffering of the innocent?”³⁶ Job’s cries are the cries of suffering and oppressed persons everywhere; his protestations of innocence illumine “the innocence of an oppressed and believing people amid the situations of suffering and death that

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (trans. Matthew J. Connell), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1987, xviii.

have been forced upon it.”³⁷ From the concern of the innocent’s suffering, Gutierrez then develops two kinds of theological method to talk about God.

The first is the relationship between *revelation and gratuitousness*. The fact is, Christ is God’s revelation because he came to reveal God’s love as a universal mission. “This revelation assigns a privileged place to the simple and despised.”³⁸ In Matt. 11:25-26, Jesus thanks God for hiding the truth from the wise and the learned, but revealing it to the “little children.” Gutierrez describes the meaning of the text as follows: “The words wise and [the learned] refer to a social and religious minority in Israel: the teachers, or doctors, of the law, the high priest, and the scribes... The ‘little children’ is related to the poor, the hungry, and the afflicted (Luke 6:20-23).”³⁹ Further, Gutierrez goes on to explain the fact that “God hides ‘these things’ from the wise [and the learned] and reveals them to the simple is the concrete occasion for grasping what is behind this behavior and gives it its meaning – namely, *the free and unmerited love of God* for every human being and especially for the poor and forgotten.”⁴⁰ The interpretation of this passage is the key element of Jesus’ message because it shows us the Father’s goodness and love that reach out to the poor and give them preference.

The second connection has to do with *the way or method of speaking about God*. Reflecting on this theme, Gutierrez emphasizes the importance of silence in the first place, and only next comes speech. He says: “Contemplation and practice feed each other; the two together make up the stage of silence before

³⁷ Ibid. See also Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutierrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1990, 76.

³⁸ Ibid, xi.

³⁹ Ibid, xii.

⁴⁰ Ibid, xiii.

God. In prayer we remain speechless; we simply place ourselves before the Lord. To a degree, we remain silent in our practice as well, for in our involvements, in our daily work, we do not talk about God all the time."⁴¹ Further, silence can also become a good time for us to meet and to experience God's presence. Gutierrez writes: "The time of silence is the time of loving encounter with God and of prayer and commitment; it is the time of 'staying with him' (John 1:39)."⁴² Finally, he concludes his discussion about these two kinds of theological methods in the following way: "Gratuitousness and revelation, silence and speech: these are two presuppositions of the effort at understanding our faith."⁴³ These two theological methods are the key elements to talk about God in prophetic language and in mystical language.

4.2. Prophetic Language

The prophetic language emerges from Job's struggle with his friends who tried to comfort him with the doctrine of temporal retribution that "God punishes the wicked and rewards the upright."⁴⁴ Because of this doctrine, his friends believed that Job has done something wrong or committed sin; that is why God punished him. Yet, this explanation does not convince Job, who continues to assert his innocence in the face of his suffering. He does not claim to be sinless, but "he finds no sin that merits so great a punishment."⁴⁵ Gutierrez affirms that "Job likewise feels sure, not of a doctrine but of his own experience of life. However much he roots around in his conscience and his

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, xiv.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 24. Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, 80.

past life, he cannot find a sin that deserves the terrible suffering he is enduring.”⁴⁶ It is clear that the theology of his friends does not help Job because their theology “does not take into account concrete situations, like the suffering and hopes of human beings.”⁴⁷ Further, Gutierrez argues that “the friends believe in their theology rather than in the God of their theology.”⁴⁸ In other words, the friends of Job only focused on the doctrine of temporal retribution and forgot to see God who is love and who has always suffered with his people.

Yet, even though the theology of his friends does not help him, their dialogue does help Job to “see more deeply into his own experience and refines his thinking. An important point is reached in this process when he realizes that he is not the only one to experience the pain of unjust suffering...[Here] Job begins to free himself from an ethic centered on personal rewards and to pass to another focus on the needs of one’s neighbor.”⁴⁹ In doing so, Job finally realizes that “poverty and abandonment are not his lot alone. For he sees now that this poverty and abandonment are not something faced, but are caused by the wicked, who nonetheless live serene and satisfied lives...The wicked are both rejecters of God and enemies of the poor – two sides of one coin.”⁵⁰ This is another way that Job finds to account for the misery of the poor and oppressed.

It should be noted that when Job begins to focus himself on the need of one’s neighbor, he eventually “realizes that his own situations is that of the

⁴⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid.,

⁴⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 32. Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, 80-81.

poor” and “to be related to God also means to be related to the poor and to struggle on their behalf: God wants ‘uprightness’ or justice (*sedekah*) and judgment (*mishpat*), and Job always practices these in relation to the unjust situation of the poor of the land. He sees the poor as God’s friends; ‘to give to the needy is therefore to give to God.’”⁵¹ Moreover, the understanding of “the poor as God’s friends”, also leads Job to acknowledge that “God does justice to the poor; that is why those who oppress the poor turn their backs on God and understand so little of God’s ways – that is, of the conduct that God requires of believers.”⁵² Gutierrez affirms that “this relationship with God and the poor is at the very heart of the prophetic message. The Lord is ever watchful and ready to hear the voice of the poor, even though attentiveness to them may at times take an unobtrusive form.”⁵³ In fact, Job has allowed himself to doubt this concern on God’s part, but the dialogue with his last friend (Elihu) has prepared him to listen to God. Through this dialogue, Job finds the way to talk about God in prophetic speech as follows:

To get out of himself and help other sufferers (without waiting until his own problems are first resolved) is a way to find God...He now begins to see that he may not yet let his own unjust situation be an obstacle to immediate commitment to the poor. The needs of others cannot be left in abeyance until everything has become clear.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Robert McAfee Brown, 81.

⁵² Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*, 47.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 48. Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, 81.

Job's understanding of the need to get out beyond his own suffering and commit himself to the poor is an important advance in talking about God. Yet, it is still not enough. In other words, Job needs another language to help him address himself to God. That language is called "the mystical language."

4.3. Mystical Language

If in the prophetic language Job argues with his friends, in the mystical language on the other hand, "he enters into a spiritual struggle with God." In this struggle, "he finds that he needs God in three ways."⁵⁵ First, he needs an *arbiter* who can mediate between himself and God, but the only such arbiter can be God himself, because Job is instituting a "lawsuit" with God. Second, he needs a witness because in that spiritual struggle it will be a direct debate between himself and God. Since the witness is in heaven rather than on earth, [third] he finally needs "a liberator or defender, a *go'el*, through whom Job can hope to receive vindication."⁵⁶ These three ways explain that Job's faith and hope are gradually increasing. He started from the need for the presence of an arbiter, then he continues to the need for a witness, and finally he arrives to the need of a liberator who will come to rescue him from his suffering. Gutierrez describes the situation: "The spiritual struggle with himself, with his friends, and above all, with God brings him to a conviction, that for the time being, amounts to no more than a cry of hope: that he will see his liberator, his *go'el*, with his own eyes, and will be able to look upon him as a friend."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, 82.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*, 66.

Furthermore, Gutierrez continues to discuss the idea of God as *a liberator* at greater depth in “The Mysterious Meeting of two freedoms.”⁵⁸ These two freedoms can be summarized as follows:

The first is *God’s freedom*, God’s gratuitousness, God’s freedom from human constraints, and God’s freedom to love indiscriminately in working for justice. The second is *human freedom*, which establishes Job’s freedom to complain and rebel. Job is free to encounter God directly, without the need of intermediaries; God is free to exercise the gratuitous love that is the foundation of the world, within which justice must be exercised.⁵⁹

It is clear that these two kinds of freedom emphasize the link between justice and gratuitousness. Gutierrez asserts that “the true relationship ...between *justice and gratuitousness* ...is the key to the interpretation of the Book of Job.”⁶⁰ To clarify his statement, he reflects on the final speech of Job in 42:1-6, and affirms four things as a conclusion of Job’s encounter with God. That is, “an acknowledgement that God has plans and these are being carried out; a discovery of previously unrecognized aspects of reality; a joyous encounter with the Lord”, and “the abandonment of his attitude of complaint and sadness.”⁶¹ Gutierrez concludes that these four elements “give a better understanding, represent a high point in contemplative speech about God.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid, 67-81.

⁵⁹ Robert McAfee Brown, 83.

⁶⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*, 82.

⁶¹ Ibid, 83.

⁶² Ibid, 87.

Therefore, “the truth that [Job] has grasped and that has lifted him to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God.”⁶³ Here Job has moved beyond justice and begun to learn “to situate justice within the framework of God’s gratuitous love.”⁶⁴ Because only through accepting this gratuitous love can it become possible to understand God’s preferential option to the poor, which is “a key factor in authentic divine justice.”⁶⁵

4.4. One Language, not two

In explaining the connection between justice and gratuitousness, Gutierrez also emphasizes that “two languages – the prophetic and the contemplative – are required, but they must also be combined and become increasingly integrated into a single language...Both languages are necessary and therefore inseparable; they also need each other.”⁶⁶ In particular, Gutierrez strongly demonstrates these two languages in a negative and positive way. In a negative way, he says:

Without the prophetic dimension, the language of contemplation is in danger of having no grip on the history in which God acts and in which we meet God. Without the mystical dimension, the language of prophecy can narrow its vision and weaken its perception of the God who makes all things

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 88.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 94. Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, 84.

new (Rev.21:5). Each undergoes a distortion that isolates it and renders it unauthentic.⁶⁷

And in a positive way he writes:

The language of contemplation acknowledges that everything comes from the Father's love unmerited by us, and opens up 'new horizon of hope' (Puebla, #1165). The language of prophecy attacks the situation – and its structural causes – of injustice and deprivation in which the poor live, because it looks for 'the suffering features of Christ the Lord' in the pain-ravaged faces of an oppressed people (Puebla ##31-39). Both languages arise, among the poor in Latin America as in Job, out of the suffering and hopes of the innocent.⁶⁸

It is important to notice that Gutierrez's theological reflection on Job also leads him to see the connection with the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. He writes: "For poverty and unjust suffering are in fact the situations of the majority in Latin America. Our theological reflection thus starts from the cross and death as well as from the joy of resurrection and life."⁶⁹ In this sense, Gutierrez claims that the prophetic language and the contemplative language are "the language of the cross that Jesus, prefigured by Job, uses in speaking of the Father's love...The author of Job directs us toward that gratuitousness of the Father's love that will be the heart of the proclamation and witness of Jesus

⁶⁷ Ibid, 96. Also see Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free Confrontations*, (trans. Matthew J. Connell, Orbis Books, Maryknoll), New York, 1990, 17. Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, 84.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 97; Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free Confrontations*, 16; Robert McAfee Brown, 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Christ.”⁷⁰ Moreover, Gutierrez also notes “the language of the Cross, which is a synthesis of the prophetic and the contemplative and [is] the only appropriate way of talking about the God of Jesus Christ.”⁷¹

Finally, Gutierrez concludes that “the aim of these two languages is to communicate the gifts of God’s reign as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is the heart of the message we are now discovering in the setting of our own reality. It calls us together as community, a church, within which we attempt to think our faith.”⁷² As a community we are called to bear witness to the resurrection of hope and the victory over the premature and unjust death of the poor. This is the meaning of doing theological reflection or talking about God in the situation of suffering, marginalization and oppression.

5. Conclusion

Gustavo Gutierrez’s teaching on encountering God in the face of the poor is very profound and full of meaning. Based on the understanding that the Biblical God is close to human beings, he explicitly points out the centrality of the poor in the Bible’s teaching. In the Old Testament the relationship between God and human beings took place on the mountain, in the temple and the Ark of Covenant. In the New Testament God becomes present in the Incarnation of the Word. Thus through the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh, every person is the God of presence.

In this sense, Gutierrez helps us to recognize the presence of God in the faces of the poor and the innocent. Since God is hidden in the face of the poor,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 100.

⁷² Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free Confrontations*, 17.

he also invites us to union with him through the poor and the oppressed. This union will lead us to love God more and to encounter others more fully. This union also will enable us to bear witness and to find the new way to talk about God. Gutierrez names this new way the prophetic language and the mystical language, or action and contemplation. "Without contemplation, prayer, thanksgiving to God, there is no Christian life, any more than there is without commitment, solidarity and love of neighbor."⁷³ These two ways are not separated and they need each other. The integration of these two approaches is the best way to link justice and spirituality. Since we cannot approach God without carrying the longing of our brothers and sisters with us.

⁷³ Gustavo Gutierrez, "From Exclusion to Disciples", in *Mysticism and the Institutional Crisis* (ed. Christian Duquoc and Gustavo Gutierrez), SCM Press Ltd and Orbis Books Maryknoll, New York, 1994, 81.