Lectio Divina:
We Drink From Our Own Wells

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By the late 1960s the “winds of change” that British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan had prophesized to parliament of South African parliament in Cape Town in February 1960, had gathered energy, crossed the Atlantic and started to blow into Central and South America. Following the successful Cuban Revolution of 1956, the people of Latin America slowly awoke to the reality of widespread poverty, land appropriation, civil rights violations, and the politics of terror and repression taking place in their countries in order to help the ruling elites maintain power, often with the support of Western powers such as The United States of America, global industries such as DelMonte (bananas) and Proctor & Gamble (coffee), and the Catholic Church. First to feel the effects of this popular uprising was Argentina, where, in the face of unrest, the military junta instigated the so-called Dirty War during which an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 people were arrested and never seen again. Brazil was the next country to be affected by protest and crackdown, followed by Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico. Today, no major city in Central and South America is without a wall in it central square where *Las Madres de los desaparecidos* stand in silent witness in front of the fading photos of a generation that simply vanished into the night, in police or military custody, without leaving a trace.

The violence and terror of this particular Latin and South American experience in the latter half of the 20th century was so persuasive that it challenged all Latin American citizens (and some westerners) to radically question, examine and alter the comfortable ways they thought about their society, economics, politics, and church. Indeed, a growing awareness of the many ways that the Catholic Church supported the system and was complicit with the Latin American status quo of abject poverty, human rights abuses, and environmental degradation called into question many generally held western theological and ecclesiological assumptions. In
doing so, theologians such as Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Jon Sobrino of El Salvador, Óscar Romero of El Salvador, and Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay, worked to replace existing theologies that allowed for poverty, death and the impossibility of life, by creating a new theology and understanding of the church, that was life affirming, liberating and socially transformative. Their new theology looked at scripture in the context of the widespread experience of suffering in Latin America, and claimed for its own a Jesus who suffered in solidarity with all those who suffered. It pointed an accusing finger at the system of death and destruction that the Church helped keep running by turning a blind eye to reality, seeing the ideal Christian life as exclusionary and withdrawn, and spiritualizing Scripture so that it merely fed the soul, and left the body to die. Most importantly, this new theology invited all people the world over to join together with Jesus and the poor, in solidarity, and to start to work together to transform society.

One of the most famous and most widely read of these theologians is the Peruvian born, and European trained religious thinker, Gustavo Gutierrez. Indeed, it is he who gave this new theology its name and its call to action. In 1971, he coined the phrase “Liberation Theology” in his first book, *A Theology of Liberation*, and laid down what would become the slogan of the movement, “the preferential option of poor.” Unfortunately, Gutierrez’s book, and the rising tide of Liberation Theology and social reform were not well received by the organization of the Catholic Church, which feared popular proponents of Liberation Theology, like El Salvadoran Bishop Óscar Romero, and their ability to engage hundreds of thousands of Latin American’s to the cause of liberation. Hence, in 1979 the Catholic Church intervened, convening the Puebla Conference in response to what it perceived as Liberation Theology’s threat to its privileged existence in Latin America. During this Mexican meeting -- which most Liberation theologians,
including Gutierrez, were forbidden to attend -- the authority of the orthodox bishops in Latin America was upheld, as was their sacred place in the hierarchy of the very status quo that Liberation Theology called into question. Indeed, Pope John Paul II stated in his opening speech to the delegates of the Puebla Conference that Liberation Theology’s “conception of Christ, as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechisms.”

Gutierrez’s second book, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, written in 1983 is very much a reaction to this negative rhetoric. Firstly, it refutes the Catholic Church’s stance that Liberation Theology is without scriptural basis and validity. Secondly, it counters the Catholic Church’s position that Liberation Theology is so focused on the world and action, that it lacks spiritual depth. Thirdly, it rebuts the Catholic Church’s position that Liberation Theology’s message speaks only to a people in a particular place and time, and, as such holds no spiritual, theological or religious significance for most westerners. Hence, unlike Gutierrez’s earlier writings which specifically addresses the people and problems of Latin America, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, is written to a western audience that may be aware of Liberation Theology, and is curious to find ways in which Liberation Theology might make more sense to them, might deepen their spiritual lives, and might help them read scripture in new and startling ways. As such, it is a less a book about Liberation Theology than a book about Liberation Spirituality, a fact that is underscored by the fact that book’s Preface was written by popular contemporary spiritual thinker Henri Nouwen, and by its title, which echoes the words of medieval mystic Bernard of Clairvaux:

We taste thee, O thou living Bread,  
And long to feast upon thee still;  
We drink of thee the Fountain-head,  
And thirst our souls from thee to fill.
Gutierrez anchors *We Drink From Our Own Well* firmly in scripture. In Part One of the book, “How Shall We Sing to the Lord in a Foreign Land?” Gutierrez writes compellingly of the current situation in Latin America in which poverty entails death and of the many ways that this suffering and death takes place. He then points out the biblical witness to this suffering in the Biblical account of the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt, and in their later captivity in Babylonia, and Persia, showing that how many Psalms in the Bible lament this situation, yet are still often able to courageously praise God and trust in his or her promise of liberation and deliverance. The experience of Jesus as one who suffers himself, alongside his own people, and the assertion of the poverty of Jesus and the suffering of the cross as God’s final act of solidarity with all those who suffer is then discussed, using a careful analysis of the four gospels and the writings of Paul as the nexus of the book’s criticism.

Gutierrez, in attempting to show the validity of his biblically based arguments, also points to Christian responses throughout history to the reality and belief in the suffering and poverty of Jesus, and the liberating freedom it entails. He mentions the medieval mendicant spirituality of Francis of Assisi and Dominic Guzman which called all believers to take up their own crosses and follow Jesus. As well, he mentions Ignatius of Loyola’s understanding of the importance of human freedom in the service of God and others in light of the increasingly secular modern age and its limits, suggesting that the liberation his theology calls for is not much different.

But it is Gutierrez’s writing about the truly spiritual dimension of Liberation Theology, the book’s second and main purpose, that is most fully elucidated in *We Drink From Our Own Wells*. Gutierrez starts this discussion by pointing out what he sees as the two major failings of
most western spiritual practice, namely that it posits the ideal Christian life one of exclusion, and spiritualizes scripture.

For Gutierrez, a Catholic, the prevailing ideal of Christian life he sees in society, is a life lived apart in meditation, prayer and reflection. Whether in the person of a monk or nun cloistered in a monastery or abbey, in the figure of the priest set apart, or in the caricature of the widow who veils herself and clings to her rosary, for Gutierrez, the Catholic Christian ideal he sees as persuasive is one of exclusion, and turning away from the world. For Protestant’s this idea is a little difficult to get one’s head around, but when Gutierrez points out how, even in the wider secular society, this exclusionary aspect to spirituality can be seen in self-help books, and the me-generation’s insistence that they can do it themselves, it starts to make sense. Being spiritual in community -- in public, and with others -- is something that Christian society just does not find attractive, even though as Gutierrez points out, the spiritual road we are most comfortable taking is a lonely, soul-sucking path that for leads nowhere fast.

This loneliness and isolation, is compounded by a second aspect of modern spirituality, which insists on a split between the individual mind and the body, and sees scripture, prayer and meditation as being things which only involve half of our being -- the mind. Modern spirituality for Gutierrez, then, not only takes us away from community and isolates us from one another, but takes us away from the community of mind, body, soul and heart that makes each of us human, forcing us to value and engage only one part of that community (our minds) in our spiritual life. Is it any wonder then, Gutierrez writes, that so many in western society are unhappy, and that death dealing systems of oppression are allowed to operate unchecked? Divided from one another, and divided within ourselves, we have remade ourselves into an
image that is wholly other than God, who had a body in Jesus just as we have, and lived radically in community with others.

The Spirituality of Liberation that Gutierrez goes on to detail in opposition to this western approach, is one that spiritualizes community, and seeks to reclaim a holistic understanding of the body for all Christians. As a Spanish speaker, Gutierrez reads and understands the Bible in Spanish. As such, he is acutely aware of the times when Jesus speaks to his disciples in a plural sense. For example, when Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?” Spanish (and the older Greek and Hebrew writings) clearly shows that Jesus is not asking one person this question. Jesus is not appealing to just John, or just Paul, or just Peter. He is appealing to all of the disciples. He is inviting them all to enter into discussion with him, and to share their thoughts publically with him -- in community -- together. For English speaking westerners, the lack of a plural “you” in the English language is a huge drawback. As a result, Gutierrez claims that when many westerners read the Bible, we have to be very careful not to see all dialogue with Jesus as an invitation to a personal, one-on-one conversation, and relationship with Jesus. For Gutierrez, this western one-on-one tendency to relationship with Jesus is not just without basis in scripture, but bad spiritual practice. Jesus wants us to come to him like we did in the crowds on the mountaintop when he delivered the Beatitudes. Jesus wants us to follow him in groups as we did on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. And Jesus wants us to go out into the world together, as the first disciples did following Pentecost -- in pairs -- to preach the good news to others. Jesus is not someone for each one of us alone. He is not a secret lover leaning over, nibbling our earlobes and whispering sweet nothings to each one of us. He is a radical invitation to all of us to live with him in community, which as Paul says (and Gutierrez would agree) means to “walk according to the spirit.”
The second aspect of Gutierrez’s spirituality concerns the split between the mind and the body which is so persuasive when westerners read of scripture. Again, using scripture, and most specifically the Letters of Paul (Rom 8 & Gal 5), and Paul’s concept of ‘flesh,’ Gutierrez attempts to show how misguided the prevailing angelism of western society is. This section of *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, is the most technical and demanding part of Gutierrez’s argument. Gutierrez sees flesh as being the whole of our personhood. For example, Gutierrez sees no more in Paul’s words that Onesimus is a brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord” than the fact that Onesimus is a human being and a Christian. In this view, the flesh is not a component joined to the spirit or soul in order to make up a human person. The entire human person is flesh -- mind, body, soul and heart -- and has no moral or negative connotations. Furthermore, Gutierrez sees in the Semitic outlook the idea that the flesh is something that ties people together in solidarity, allowing them to join together collectively and form the human family.

Spirit, for Gutierrez, is not a component, or separate part of this flesh. Indeed, spirit is not a dualistic opposite. For Gutierrez, the spirit is simply the call of Jesus, or Jesus’s invitation to all flesh to walk with him. Spirit is God’s plan for all of us, to head Jesus’ call, and walk in the flesh in community and fellowship with Jesus and each other. Sin then for Gutierrez, occurs when the flesh (the whole person) turns away from that call, and gives its life to those things that are not God’s. And, since those things that are not God, always entail death, in Gutierrez’s worldview, the flesh, when corrupted, walks a path towards death.

For Gutierrez, the dangerous split between mind and body in western culture, allows the flesh to become readily corrupted, sometimes without our even realizing it. In thinking that our bodies are bad, westerners readily allow our bodies to commit or be complicit in acts of injustice,
sin and evil, believing that our souls, minds or spirits have somehow remained pure and unsullied. In actual fact, however, the whole of our flesh (our whole being) has been dragged down. What Gutierrez calls “mammon” -- greed, the lust for money and power -- is usually the downfall of most westerners. In turning from the community, from the fellowship and solidarity that our flesh and the spirit calls us to, in order to heed the call of money, position, and power -- no matter how spiritual and deep our inner life may be -- we walk the path to death, perhaps not of ourselves, but most certainly of countless others throughout the world. This is precisely the reason that little things like buying free trade coffee, avoiding Dollar Store purchases which support sweatshop and child labour, and giving money to third-world micro-loan companies are so important to a Spirituality of Liberation. Although they may seem to be small gestures, they are acts of solidarity that bring about the transformation of the good flesh the world over that all of us share in common, and fly in the face of systemic systems that turn away from the call of the spirit to follow Jesus, and seek instead money, power and position.

Gutierrez acknowledges that the spirituality he details in *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, often means that westerners will be ostracized from their own communities, forced to undergo a process of ‘othering’, and made to suffer for their preferential treatment of the poor. Indeed, the message of the Catholic Church that Liberation Theology really only applies to the people of Latin America, and has no benefit to westerners may seem to be true, to those who step out and start to follow the Spirituality of Liberation. As Gutierrez writes, many will indeed enter a dark night of the soul as the result of following the path of Liberation Spirituality, and feel that their path has no benefit. Yet, in the tradition of many of the great spiritual mystics, Gutierrez asserts that one must be alone before one is gathered into community, that one must become as a helpless child, before one can truly grow in grace, and that one must suffer before one is
consoled. The end of the book, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, promises that this is the case. Out of sorrow will come joy. Out of privation will come plenty. Out of solitude will come comfort.

Using the works of John of the Cross as inspiration, Gutierrez writes that out of a dark night of the soul, many westerners who embrace Liberation Spirituality will come “a new encounter with oneself, and above all, a new face-to-face encounter with the Lord.” Indeed, if we are able to persevere pass the cross, we will step out of our solitude and reach the Promised Land. Although it may be baffling experience, and make no sense, this mystical journey is nonetheless true. Gutierrez assures us: “the journey through the desert creates a community flowing with the milk and honey of the fellowship of those who know God as their father.”

Although written by one of the past century’s most prominent Liberation theologians *We Drink From Our Own Wells* is a book firmly anchored in the age-old tradition of spiritual writing. Like the works of St. John of the Cross, St Theresa of Avilla, and Brother Lawrence, it is not so much a systemic Theology of Liberation as an exploration of what a Spirituality of Liberation might look like. Readers, especially many rationalistic westerners, looking for a systemic theology in its pages may be perplexed by this book, and its intent. Those with the time and inclination to engage in *lectio divina* with the text, willing to ponder its meaning, and engage prayerfully with its words, may find much bread and water in its pages. Indeed, many will find their flesh -- their whole being made in God’s image -- nourished. Even more may find themselves walking to the well in sorrowful solitude, and be pleasantly surprised to find a community gathered around it, drawing up new life from its depths.