Fordham Center on Religion and Culture
Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies

The Imperative of Hope:
Recovering the Prophetic in Christian Life Today
A Conversation with Gustavo Gutiérrez

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JAMES McCARTIN: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.
I am Jim McCartin, Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. On behalf of Christine Firer Hinze, Director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies, this evening’s co-sponsor, I am delighted to welcome all of you to Fordham University for this year’s Russo Family Lecture.

For many years now, the Russo Family Lecture has served as an arena in which truly distinguished visitors to Fordham have enlightened and challenged us. So it gives me great pleasure to offer a special welcome and acknowledgement to Bob Russo and Arlene Russo, whose family so generously supports this annual event in honor of their parents,
Robert and Wanda Russo. I am grateful to you, Russo family, and so evidently is the Fordham community.

Before we start, I will take one brief moment to ask that during our program each of you who wishes to pose a question write out that question or questions for our guests on the card provided at your seat, hold up your completed card, and a student assistant will come and collect it and bring it forward.

Also, must I remind you to turn off your cell phones? Please do. I heard one just go off. Thank you.

Tonight I am so pleased to have on the stage my esteemed colleague from the Fordham Theology Department, Professor Michael Lee. He is an award-winning theologian, a fine theologian, whose work focuses on theological reflection as it is undertaken in Latin American contexts.

With him it is for me a great privilege to welcome Professor Lee’s beloved friend, our honored guest, Father Gustavo Gutiérrez. They like you.

You know, of course, that Father Gutiérrez is among the most influential figures in the history of contemporary Catholicism. He has written many books — too many to list here — and he has studied and taught at an array of distinguished universities in Latin America, Europe, and the United States. But what makes Father Gutiérrez distinct, what has made him so influential I think, is the generosity and gentleness and serenity that he has demonstrated through his persistent and courageous leadership in calling the Christian community to authentic solidarity with the poor and marginalized. It seems to me, perhaps, that Pope Francis may have learned a few lessons from Father Gustavo before his arrival in Rome, and for that I think we can all be grateful.

And we are, of course, most grateful to Father Gutiérrez for gracing us with his presence tonight to discuss, among other things, the imperative of hope and how we can recover a truly prophetic sensibility in the Christian community today.

Without further ado, I ask you please to join me in welcoming Michael Lee and Gustavo Gutiérrez.

MICHAEL LEE: It is a great honor to have you here, Father Gustavo, at Fordham.
University, the Jesuit University of New York City.

True to our Ignatian spirit, let me begin our conversation by talking about a Jesuit, the current Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis. If there is someone who has embodied hope in the Catholic Church in the last year plus, I think it has been the excitement that he has generated.

Francis said, “How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor.” I wonder, what are your thoughts and reflections on Francis and about a line like that?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: I think we are living in a very interesting moment today in the Church, which for many persons is to reprise this moment and the witness given by the Pope. But the moment is very interesting.

I was a young person, more or less, fifty years ago, and fifty years ago we had a Pope, John XXIII, speaking about the church of the poor. I think it is very interesting for me. I was finishing my studies in theology and I was ordained at that time. I was in the Council after. It was a beautiful moment — again, different certainly.

But I think his witness is very refreshing. It is going back to the Gospels. We can take conscience of this moment.

I am very happy, as are so many persons, with his presence in Rome today, at the same time a little concerned by the difficulties also in these two years, above all in the last months. We are listening to some things about difficulties.

I think he is a very, very strong personality. Always in the history of the Church we have the moments different between them certainly, but similar. We have the moments, as John XXIII, Pope Francis today, and many, many other moments, when it is a difficult way.

But, above all, it is a call for us. We must avoid to be persons expecting these as more or less neutral persons. I think the witness of Francis is a call for our commitment, in this perspective so fresh and so evangelical.

MICHAEL LEE: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about these difficulties that
you mention, and what strengths do you see in Francis, and what do you think this moment is calling from Christians today?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: The difficulties are in the media. My idea was to mention this because his presence is in the whole world today.

Well, he is very critical. Speaking about the poor, he is starting from the experience of the commitment to the poor in the history of the Church, not only in this century. It is a reason to be very criticized, because the powers in the world, different powers — economic, political — are in another context. I think it is the main reason for these difficulties and, at the same time, I think we are conscious about this question.

He has said several times he needs our prayers, for example. He is a Christian, a Catholic person, in the Church, and one of the Christians in the world with very high responsibilities. But we cannot think he is to be alone in front of this fight for going back to the Gospel and it must be also our commitment.

MICHAEL LEE: A hope that some have seen, and a change that some have seen, is an openness toward liberation theology. Many people were astonished to see the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith co-author a book with Gustavo Gutiérrez. How did you get to know Gerhard Müller?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: I met him in the last century [Laughter] when he was a professor in Munich. He was in Peru with another theologian from Germany to know this world, and who has theological interests also. We had one week dealing with liberation theology. It was in 1988, a long time ago now. He was there.

At the end of this week, he has presented this question, asking for this. We were in this week speaking about the relevance of practice, commitment to the lost persons in our societies. But we are theological professors. We need to take another way, or to be committed in some way, even in Germany, not only in my country or in Latin America. But his decision was this. From this date in 1988 until his ordination as a bishop in Germany, in the south, he was during fifteen years going to the seminary of Cusco, Cusco is in the Indian area, and some seminarians are there teaching them theology. You know, they are very simple persons, the seminarians of Cusco. Fifteen years he went there; every summer in July and August he was there.
He had to stop when he was appointed bishop. He speaks very well Spanish for this reason, and a little bit of Quechua, the Indian language also. For him there was a decision after our seminar on liberation theology, one manner to change. It was the beginning of our friendship.

He knows very well liberation theology. Among European theologians, he is one of the best in knowing and understanding this perspective. At the same time, you know in theology we have several other points, not only the question of the poor.

We discussed. We have different views about other points, normally. I don’t know really theologians thinking exactly the same things. We are discussing. But it is a reason. For these questions the books — because now there are two books we have done together — are about the question of the poor. The second book is about the sentence of Pope Francis, “a poor Church and for the poor.”

It is the beginning of the friendship. The gesture of this man — I have never seen one European theologian going for their vacations to teach there in an Indian area. Many Peruvians are not going there. Well, it is a question. It is very simple.

MICHAEL LEE: Just because you’re friends, that doesn’t mean you agree on everything, as you pointed out. I can imagine he had a few in his ear asking about his friendship with you. But I could also imagine those who might make you feel you need to defend your friendship as well with him, even on points on which you may not agree.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: Well, different points. [Laughter] Today in the Church you have discussions on several points. You know some of his positions. But at the same time, he is in agreement certainly with the Pope. He is one person working with the Pope also on several points.

But the coincidence is in the central question from the beginning, from the last millennium. It is the reason of this. The books are about this person. In this case, it is clear, this coincidence.

On many, many other questions I have normally differences with other theologians. I like
very much many other persons. At the same time, it is not the same position, normally.
It happens to me, except some of my old professors. But for the others I oppose on other
questions.

MICHAEL LEE: I think that raises this question. On the one hand, we speak about
liberation theology, singular; when, at the same time, in reality, there are liberation
theologies, very many different contexts, different themes, that are being emphasized,
addressed, etc.

If you were to try to identify, to name, the family resemblances of liberation theology,
what do they have in common? What is essential to a theology of liberation?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: Well, first of all, a previous question. Theology is only
theology. It is only a language on God. Any theology is a language on God. The
differences are coming from the context, because theology is linked to the unknowns of
the Christian message, the Gospel. Theology is not another kind of religion, is not one
kind of Christianity. It is an intellectual work reflecting about several points in this
moment.

You know, liberation theology has arrived at very strange things sometimes. For
example, once I had received a visit of a theologian from this country, an evangelical, a
Protestant theologian, very kind person. He arrived to Lima and met me. His first
question was, “What is the position of liberation theology in front of the question between
the Jewish people and the Palestinian people?”

I said, “My friend, do you think liberation theology is a political party and I am the
general secretary?” [Laughter] “You know nothing. As a theologian I have some ideas,
as a citizen of this world I have some ideas — very confused, but I have some ideas. But
nothing.”

You know, to ask a theologian answers to questions in the world — I need other
theologians in order to be Christian, not only liberation theology. Until my forties, I was
not speaking about liberation theology, and I think honestly I was Christian. [Laughter]
It was possible for me to be Christian before liberation theology and I hope to be
Christian after liberation theology.
It is a tool. It is important, honestly, very important. The central point there is the place
of the least person, the last persons, in the Christian message. Certainly, it comes from my experience in a poor country, from a poor family also in my case, and I evolved my context.

But not only this, I think if we are taking the Bible, the question of the poorest soul who is strong. In the first testament, the Old Testament, and the New Testament also, or second testament, it is very clear. We have the parable of the Samaritan or the tale about the Last Judgment. It is very clear. The poor were always important in the history of the Church in different manners.

But, you know, in humanity, in the last century, a little more maybe, we have one different perception of the meaning of poverty. It is not exactly the same as in the first centuries, for example. There is a sentence of a Jesuit French person affirming this. He has affirmed this: If one theology is not actual, present, it is false. Theology is marked by history, by the moment.

Do you know how many theologies we have had in the Church? I don’t know. [Laughter] Thousands. And for good reason, because the question is to understand Christianity, the Christian message, is a question of life, is a question of practice, is a question of love. And theologies are very important. I adore really theology, to do theology. I am very linked to these facts. It is not only one question. What is important is the daily life of persons and their reflection about this. In order to be efficacious, when we take the point of the poor, it is not one obsession; it is only to underline, as any theology, one point — for example, political theology, moral man, and so on. They are underlying some important points.

The central question, maybe the contribution, of liberation theology to the Church was to say the point of view of the poor, to read the Christian message as starting from the experience and for the situation of the poor, is very relevant. I am convinced about this. But I am dealing with other points in the missal also.

The central point is exactly the question of the Church of everyone and, especially, the Church of the poor. It is the sentence of John XXIII before the Council and the meaning of the sentence of Francis, a poor Church entered for the poor.
I think liberation theology is not the only one dealing with the question of the poor. You asked me about other theologies. When black theology in this country, to speak about at the same time in the 1960s, there were a born liberation theology in Latin America, a black theology in this country, and a feminist theology, a Latino theology. You know, the name liberation theology, maybe no, we don’t need it. Liberation theology means salvation because the Hebrew and Greek terms translated as prevention* and salvation are related also to liberation. The theology of liberation is the theology of salvation — that is to say communion with God and communion between us persons of today.

We have several theologies. I am not asking for this liberation theology. You can call your theologies in different manners. The question is the poor. The situations of oppression, of liberation, is clearer than other translations of salvation because the poor persons are oppressed, marginalized.

I think there is one methodological question. We say liberation theology is a reflection on practice in the life of the Christian message. All these theologies form a communion in method. The method is very important. All are starting from realities and not from ideas and doctrine.

It is a question. Today we have many theological perspectives speaking about different situations of the poor.

My last point is in liberation theology we do not understand poverty as one economic issue only, not only an economic issue. From the very beginning, we said in liberation theology the poor is the person, the lone person. The person is not considered * in our society because we don’t respect their human rights. Or another manner is to say the poor are insignificant.

I love very much one sentence coming from Hannah Arendt outside liberation theology. She is an intelligent woman. She says the poor is the persons without the right to have rights. It is the poor exactly, that is the point. When our contribution, not only Latin American liberation theology, even my part in this theology, but this question about the poor to read, it is a theological question. Poverty is not only a sociological or economic issue; it is theological.

It is very difficult to say poverty is a theological issue in the beginning. We say, “No, no.
We have a social doctrine for a long time.” Liberation social doctrine is very important, but it is only a text. Theology of liberation is giving the question the relation between Trinity and the poor, for example. It is theology to take the central points of the Christian message. Well, I think it is an effort to do that and to recall the relevance in the Christian message of the most marginalized people.

MICHAEL LEE: There are about seven questions.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: I have answers probably for three questions. [Laughter]

MICHAEL LEE: At least.

In your work, and in fact in the book that you are finishing now, this very important phrase that has made its way into the tradition, into papal encyclicals, etc., the “preferential option for the poor,” is for many a misunderstood phrase, a difficult phrase. Can you spend a moment talking about preferential option for the poor? Two things: the first is for some “preferential option” sounds condescending, non-poor, option for poor — two levels. The other question: since you have raised the theological importance, liberation theology as a logos about God, and you have called the preferential option a theocentric one, it would be helpful to talk about that.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: I can say the preferential option for the poor is 90 percent of liberation theology and 10 percent for other questions. [Laughter]

It is difficult to say this, but, more or less, the question is this. The source for the expression “preferential option for the poor” — the idea, not exactly the term — comes from the Bible certainly. Jesus announced the Gospel for the whole humanity, but at the same time he is closer, very close, to the poor, the several poor persons in his time. It is a question.

The preferential option for the poor, another source of the sentence is the sentence of John XXIII. I was quoting this. The Church of everyone — universality — but especially the Church of the poor; everyone, universal, but especially the Church of the poor. This is a contemporary source of this expression. We don’t understand the word “preference.” Even we are forgetting the question of
universality. The love of God is not only for one sector humanity; it is everyone, all persons certainly. But at the same time it is not in conflict, in contradiction, with universality. The text of Matthew 25 is this: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Certainly this is a very important text in Matthew.

But, at the same time, they have no contradiction between universality and preference. Tension yes, but tension is not a bad thing. On the contrary, it is very important. The tension is illuminating intellectually or practically also. It is the question.

You are right, some persons are interpreting the question of preference as a gesture to the poor, yes. But, you know, the sentence comes from one text of the Bishops Conference of Medellin. It was not the sentence, but the content was there. In the Bishops Conference of Medellin in 1968, we distinguished between real poverty and spiritual poverty and poverty as commitment, voluntary poverty. These same points are in the sentence. The preferential option for the poor — you know, in some moment the expression was “priority of the poor.” But it is synonymous — preference, priority. It is the same question.

But we can insist in this question because we cannot forget the universality of the love of God for any person. We cannot forget the preference for the insignificant people. Both aspects are in the witness of Jesus. When we say “option,” option is Spanish is stronger than in your language, in English. People told me this. But when we say “option,” my decision is not “Well, so” — no, no. It is the adverb. The adverb is optional. The substantive “option” has not the responsibility of the adverb. It is coming after. But “option” is a decision.

But, at the same time, we have not. When we say, for example, for what reason? Only because it is a manner to speak, to say severe realities. You know, it is very classic in the Church to say “we don’t believe in the formulas but in the content of the formulas.” Normally, a language has many limitations. It is one manner to say “the preferential for the poor.” It is to say “first,” and first is an ordinal number. If you say “first,” you are thinking probably there is a second, a third, a fourth. If you say “one,” two is not covered — maybe not two. I know that. Well, it is a point.

But again, we cannot say that the formula is perfect. No. We can explain this. The world
is very present in the Magisterium of the Church, not only in theology. It comes from liberation theology in Latin America, this formula, but today it is present in many persons. Francis was also speaking the other day also about the preference for the poor. Is it a theological issue? Well, it is our intention to recall poverty is not only a question calling for our help. It is a manner to understand many points in the Christian message. One point is not the point, most important — no. But it is in the heart of the Christian message. Certainly it is a question.

MICHAEL LEE: And when you have said “even the poor must make the option for the poor,” what do you mean?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: Even the poor — really no, certainly no. Because we are speaking about the option. Even it is not one’s obligation to do the option. When we say “preferential option for the poor” we are speaking about all Christians. The option for the poor is not a challenge to non-poor persons only. Even the poor must do the option for the poor. Many poor were not doing the option for the poor, many. It is one universal question. It is not because non-poor persons in the formula for them — no, no, no. The question is the poor are first, and first also for the Christian poor certainly.

Even if we say only “option for the poor” and not “preferential,” we can say this. But the theological reason of this preference, of this option, comes if you think to the question, the distinction, between the universality of the love of God and the preference for the least. Option for the poor, you can say many persons with all the reasons for that — why not? [Inaudible] is good, even to do that, to do the option for the poor.

When you say “preference” is to say notice it is not a private possession of the Christians. It is one manner to say what Michael has recalled. It is a theocentric option. To say “preferential option for the poor” is to do the option for the God announced by Jesus. It is a theocentric option. It is the center to explain that the formula is the God of the Bible, the God of the Gospels, the God of the Kingdom of God.

It is only to indicate this. I have a great respect for persons not to believe Christian believers doing the option for the poor. I have nothing against this. It is only to say, theologically speaking, we say the last reason to do the option is because we believe in the God of Jesus. It is the source of this.
In addition, we say we can have many human resources for this. Why not? It is also compassion, for example. When it is right, no problem. But dealing with more theological language, we prefer to say “preferential option for the poor.”

It is in the text of Pope Benedict XVI also, John Paul also. The expression of preferential option for the poor is in their text because it is one manner, with some limitations, to express one important point in the Christian reflection, Christian commitment also.

MICHAEL LEE: Let me remind everyone that if you have a question you can write it down on the note cards that were provided on the seats, raise them, and then will be collected, so that we can have your input in these questions as well.

I cannot let the evening pass without asking about one of the great examples perhaps of the preferential option for the poor. In a few weeks the Church will see the beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in March of 1980.

You had a couple of encounters with Monsignor Romero, at first just as a student, but then later on. What was your contact with Monsignor Romero?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: The first time was at a theological course for Central American bishops organized by the [inaudible]. The course took place in Guatemala, in Antigua. I have had at this moment working, in 1972, in one moment, one week. In this week my course was theology of liberation. It was new. The book was published in 1971. This was August 1972. I met him there for the first time.

But after that several times, in Puebla, in several moments. I was in his funeral also — terrible, terrible day. Forty persons dead.

MICHAEL LEE: When was the last time you spoke to Monsignor Romero?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: The last contact was by phone. I was in one moment in the airport in San Salvador to change flights. I called him. I have said at the end a non-intelligent expression really. I have said, “Well, Monsignor, I was very happy to speak with you. Take care.” It's a formality. I am not affirming from this experience, because he was silent, a little silent. He said this: “Gustavo, to take care I need to go outside of
my country. I am not ready for this.” Well, it was not my intention certainly, but I said, “Take care.” No more “take cares.” But it was the last contact.

But one thing. My personal relation is not so important. What is important is to say this commitment to the poor is the main cause of what we call the Latin American martyr. There were hundreds of persons killed in Latin America. I think the first one was one young priest from Brazil, a black person. I have dedicated my book *Liberation Theology*, because it was before the publication of the book, to this person. He is Enrique Perea Nettle.

Romero was the second bishop. The first one chronologically was Monsignor Angelelli in Argentina. The last one was Juan Gerardi from Guatemala, as bishops. But many priests and lay persons.

It is a painful richness of the Latin American Church. Very painful, but richness, because we have this expression “the Church is coming from the blood of the martyrs of the five centuries.” Well, we have had this terrible, really very painful —

For the reason I think this beatification of Romero and the recognition of the condition of the martyrdom of Romero is not only beatification, but in recognition of a martyr is very important, with great meaning I think. For many persons he was a saint a long time ago. But I think beatification and, I think, probably soon the canonization, is one milestone in the life of the Latin American Church and important for the poor people. It is a very important event.

MICHAEL LEE: Part of the calumnies, the insults, that were thrown at some of these martyrs were that they were communists. Does it strike you as ironic that we have stories of now the KGB inventing liberation theology in the media? [Laughter]

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: The link is only to laughing only. It does not deserve two minutes. Nothing to do.

But the question in the past, certainly, for several persons in this continent, it was sometimes one argument. But you know in December 1987, last century, in Argentina took place one meeting of the armies of this continent, military people, from Canada,
Chile, Argentina. The conclusions — I have the brochure — you know what was the subject of this meeting? Liberation theology. The armies of Canada and Chile, military people.

It grew out thinking, I don't know, to the theology of Karl Rahner, a great theologian. Liberation theology is nothing, besides. We have not the armies dealing with the theology of Rahner, never. Never. In our cases and in [inaudible] of this, this theology is against the Christian Western society.

I have the brochure in my library. Military people, not only in Latin America, but especially in Latin America, are very strong. It is very important for our history and so on. It was present. I have older examples in this way.

But sometimes persons think or speak strongly about justice as a political question. Our intention in liberation theology, other theologies also is to say, no, this is Christian. Frequently I answer this. Liberation theology, from the first line until the last line of the book, is against Marxism. People say — surprise. I say, for Marx, Christianity — any religion, but especially Christianity — is oppressive, is alienating. The main affirmation of this book is that faith is liberating. Very different. Very different. All the time we say that faith is liberation for the people.

The Pope has received already this critique also. I was reading in Italian one article. I have this article also. This Pope seems a Marxist person because it is very clear, this manner. Maybe, I say, they have a great appreciation of the communists because they speak very much of justice. Communists are in great opposition. As Christians, we can — we must — speak about justice very strongly also for another reason, another point of view.

All this now has changed, except this question.

MICHAEL LEE: The Wall Street Journal did call Populorum progressio “warmed-over Marxism,” so maybe we should check Paul VI’s background, too.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: Exactly.

MICHAEL LEE: A question here. In our country there have been recent high-profile
cases of police violence, racial disparities. The question is, what can liberation theology bring to bear on the situation in the United States, do you think?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: About violence?

MICHAEL LEE: Yes, especially racial violence, racial structural violence.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: First of all, in the Bishops’ Conference of Religion, we were speaking about this. We are living in Latin America institutional violence. Poverty is the first violence. It is a violence because it doesn’t recognize the rights of persons, the right to eat or the right to be happy, to be persons. But to our fear of this, institutional violence is not another reason to justify any kind of violence. It is, rather, the contrary, a rejection of violence. If we reject poverty, and one aspect important of poverty is violence, we reject all the violence also.

We have a very long history in theology, in the history of the Church, about this question. Thomas Aquinas was dealing with this question also. The words today for many theologians, moral theologians — it is not the moment to speak about the possibility of just wars, but it is in the content in history. Just war was to answer one attack on the other country. In this moment it was possible to answer with violence. Today people don’t like to speak about just war because, with the arms now, it is not possible. But war is accepted in one moment in the Church. We have heroes, many important persons participating in this.

Sorry to quote myself. I don’t like this, but in my book I am [inaudible] and I have not the pages justifying a counter-violence — sometimes it is called this, a counter-violence — because it is not a way. It is not human and is not Christian also.

It is true [inaudible] many persons — well, not many; several persons at least — were in one moment — not in the last decades, but in one moment — in Latin America speaking about this question and in favor of violence. Even one document of the bishops of Nicaragua, they have accepted the violence of the Sandinista people in July 1979. It is a public document.

But others were insistent in this, and sometimes some of them say liberation theology — I
have not registered my property of liberation theology. People say poverty as
Christianity, Christianity when we have these terrible things in the past and consequences
today. In South Africa, this racism for them — they were Christians. They say it isn’t
violent. I don’t agree. There is nothing violent. In this case these persons are feeling it is
liberation theology. I say no. But I think not personally to do the sort of thing, again, a
response by many persons, good friends — Sobrino, Juan Luis Segundo, Ronaldo Muñoz,
Leonardo Boff, Elsa Tamez, and so on — and for myself. But sometimes also we are doing
very strange questions.

The question is difficult, certainly, politically difficult. The true solution is to fight for
justice. In this moment the causes, eventual causes, for some persons of violence are
finished, disappear. I think this is really the question to do.

MICHAEL LEE: There is a question here about advice that you can give to the young
theologians that are here tonight. It strikes me that in the first generation of liberation
theologians, many of the names you mentioned — Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, Jon
Sobrino — and because of where the Catholic Church was at that time, theologians were
often priests. That is not the case today. Our faculty here at Fordham, our theology
faculty, has thirty-two members. Thirteen are women. Three are priests.

With this changing landscape of who is doing theology, with what experience they are
doing theology, what advice can you give to young theologians today?

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: Liberation theology was not born in the theological
institutions, it is true. [Applause]

I was never a professor in theology in my country, never. My first appointment as
professor in theology in my life comes from eleven years in Notre Dame in South Bend. It
is my first appointment. I was seventy-five years old. My whole life I was a parish priest,
pastoral work. I have a great admiration for the Pope also for this reason, because the
pastoral work is very stimulating, theologically speaking.

To give one example, four years ago there was a meeting in Brazil for [inaudible] for
forty-five years, beginning of liberation theology. There were 800 people in this
celebration. Many of them were students or young theologians.
It is important, but not so much. I am not exactly concerned by the future of liberation
theology. My main concern is the future of my people and the Church. Liberation theology is a little means to do this. Liberation theology is not, for some pastoral work, helpful. For this goal, I have no problem. If they are looking for this — that is to say, fraternity, justice — my people, Peru, my country, is one Indian country — a great part of the population, mezitos and Indian people, as Ecuador, Bolivia, and so on. It is a misery, their lives. I think liberation theology is helping, waking the conscience of Christians about the relevance of the poor in the message of Jesus Christ. This is one manner to contribute to this.

But other ways are possible. Other ways are possible also. I am very happy to see so many young people in this congress in Brazil, in a Jesuit university. I am very happy for the presence of them, work in several dissertations and so on. The question is, they are not so known. But many things are being published. The support of the academy to one theology is very important, but is not the most important question.

It seems a little strange. I am a professor. I love to do theology, it is true, but at the same time it is not the center of my life. I like it very much, but it is direct contact with persons. I have received in my life several times this question, and my answers were not good for a long time. I have found, I think, a good answer. But the question was this: “You have published your *Liberation Theology* twenty years ago. Are you able to write the book in the same terms as twenty years ago?”

My first answer was, “No, because the book is there, but I am my life and I am learning.”
“Ah, good, retraction.”
Their answer: “Ah, you have nothing learned in twenty years or twenty-five years or thirty years.”
“No, no.”
Once I have found a manner to answer, I repeat this answer — the conditioned reflexes of Pavlov. I repeat this.
A very polite person, a journalist, [inaudible] the same person: “Are you able to do?” I say, “My friend, are you married?” She was very surprised, she is married or my theology has to do. She was very polite.
“Yes.”
“How many years are you married?”
I don’t remember exactly, fifteen, twenty years.
“Are you able to write to your wife today a love letter in the same terms?”
“No.”
“It is my case.” [Applause]

For me, to do theology is a love letter to the God of my faith, my Church, and to my people. It is this. I tried to express in one manner my love also. For me, this is theology. Theology is to write a letter of love. Today I repeat this all the time: “You are married?” I have learned.

Because I try to do theology in this way, close to these concrete questions, and at the same time, paying attention to be open to the source of theology. I try to read many things and to have knowledge about different currents today, in several aspects. I think theology is reflection, intellectual reflection. But the motivation and the goal is love.

MICHAEL LEE: I would like to thank you, not just for this evening and the remarkable thoughts you have shared with us, but for allowing us to sneak a peek at your love letters. They have nourished our own ability to write our own letters and continue to provide us beautiful images and language.

If you all would join me in thanking Father Gutiérrez.
[Applause]

Let me now invite our President, Father Joseph McShane, to say a few words and to confer the President’s Medal on our distinguished guest.

JOSEPH McSHANE: Thank you very much.

I first encountered you when I was a student at Berkeley [Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley], but not face to face, only through reading. So tonight has been for me a great blessing and a great grace.

I, of course, want to thank you for being here, for being such a resource for us. But I want to thank you above all for being such a blessing to the Church and a sign of hope to all of us.
I do want to point out, with a touch of, I hope, good humor, that this is a very ecumenical
moment for us, for a Jesuit university to welcome a Dominican.

For those here in the audience, I don’t know if you realize that Pope Francis has just asked our distinguished guest to be one of the leading experts and directors of the Holy Year of Mercy, which will take place next year.

If I read my “Whispers in the Loggia” correctly — and don’t we all? — you will be in Rome on Tuesday for a major event with the Pope. Please bring him our love, tell him we expect him to break loose from the motorcade and come to Fordham when he is in New York, and congratulate him on his extraordinary good sense in asking you to be one of the periti for the Holy Year, which is the year dedicated to mercy.

On behalf of everyone at the university, I want to bestow upon you the President’s Medal. I am going to ask you to join a few of us at the center of the stage while Monsignor Quinn reads the citation. This is a medal that has only been given about thirty times in the 174 years that the university has been in existence. We are very, very discerning — some would say persnickety — about whom we give this to. It is the greatest honor that the President of the university can confer on anyone.

Because you offer us a source of hope, a living saint in the Church, and a man who has helped to shape conscience for many, many generations of theologians and brought excitement to the life of faith for many of us, it is a joy for me to be able to bestow this upon you, the greatest honor that I can give, on behalf of the university.

Father, if you would join me at the center of the stage, with others of our colleagues, Monsignor Quinn will read the citation.

JOSEPH QUINN: “For nearly a half century, Father Gustavo Gutiérrez has served as a beacon of light and a wellspring of inspiration for women and men around the globe. Recognized as the founding father of liberation theology, his insight, that theological reflection should be shaped by the agonizing experience of the world’s oppressed and marginalized, has enriched and transformed how we understand the Gospel today. His persistent dedication to allowing the Church’s preferential option for the poor has spurred the Christian community to more faithfully follow the Lord Jesus, who boldly proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke that he came to preach good news to the poor.
“A native of Lima, Peru, he was ordained a priest in 1959. Father Gutiérrez came to his priestly vocation of healing souls by way of a prior calling to the physician’s work of healing bodies. A student of literature, philosophy, and psychology, his theological vision came as the fruit of a diverse range of experiences seeking to bridge the gap between the life of the mind and the most pressing needs of the human family.

“Father Gutiérrez’s groundbreaking work, *A Theology of Liberation*, first published in 1971, immediately signaled his emergence as one of the most influential figures in modern theology and has remained a touchstone for both theologians and pastoral ministers who seek to bring the Gospel alive in the contemporary world.

“In recognition of his leadership role, his own religious community, the Order of Preachers, saw fit to honor Father Gutiérrez with the title Magister Sacrae Theologiae, a title previously bestowed only on the towering medieval theologians St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas.

“As we commemorate the occasion of his visit to the Fordham University community and we recommit ourselves to living lives of solidarity with all members of the human family, especially those who suffer from the deadly hardships of deprivation and exclusion, we celebrate the remarkable and compassionate service of Father Gutiérrez to the universal Church and to all of humanity.

“On behalf of the Fordham University community, it is a great honor now to bestow on Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., the President’s Medal.”

[Applause]

JAMES McCARTIN: Thank you, Father McShane. Thank you, Father Gutiérrez for being with us. Thank you, Michael Lee. And thanks to all of you for joining us this evening, which I hope was as wonderful for you as it was for me. I wish you a lovely evening. God bless.