

Gustavo Gutiérrez accompanied God's suffering people

The father of liberation theology endured much criticism, but he lived to see his groundbreaking work transform the church.

by [Raúl E. Zegarra](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1928–2024 (AP Photo / Domenico Stinelli)

I still remember my first encounter with Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian liberation theologian and Dominican priest who died October 22. It was a mild winter in the town of Chaclacayo, 20 miles away from Lima. Gustavo and his colleagues from the

Las Casas Institute and the Catholic University of Peru (PUCP) were running that year's winter theology course. They had been doing this for decades, offering one course in the summer and one in the winter as a way to bring theological reflection to more people and contexts. The courses were remarkably famous in the 1970s and 1980s, with hundreds (sometimes thousands) of attendees from all over the world, including many well-known theologians, activists, and bishops.

The principal goal of these courses was—and still is—to build community and offer theological training to pastoral agents working in Peru, tending to the needs of the poor and the most vulnerable. “How can we tell the poor that God loves them?” Gustavo pointedly asks in *On Job*. As in all of his books, the question was not theoretical in origin. It came from experience. It originated in spaces of dialogue, like Gustavo's theology courses, his parish work, and his organizing and consciousness-raising against structural oppression and political violence.

I remember it was winter because Gustavo was wearing a scarf (the same one with which he might appear when you Google him) and because we walked back and forth across a wide corridor for over an hour to keep ourselves warm. I was a college student at PUCP and had read some of his work in a theology class. My mind was blown. Until college, my understanding of faith was limited to church attendance, the sacraments, and prayer. *A Theology of Liberation* articulated a richer, more radical view: This book is an attempt at reflection, based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human.

I could not put the book down. It changed everything for me, but this would not compare to the gift of Gustavo's friendship and accompaniment.

So there we were, walking back and forth. I was a curious philosophy major, amazed by the opportunity to talk to this great theologian. Gustavo, in turn, was more interested in me as a person. Anybody who has spent time with him knows what I am talking about. Gustavo of course made key contributions to contemporary theology. Theologian David Tracy several times shared with me his assessment of Gustavo's work: he must be one of the most influential theologians of the second half of the 20th century, and yet his erudition and contributions always came through the prism of his generosity, warmth, and humor.

Gustavo always said that he did not think of himself as an academic theologian. He also maintained, somehow, that his academic production was quite limited. I believe this gives us an entry point to his character and intellectual orientation. When he was a young seminarian in Peru, his professors immediately noticed his intellectual prowess. In the 1950s and 60s he was sent to Belgium and then to France to pursue advanced studies in psychology and theology, respectively. He spent a year in Rome at the Gregorian University and attended the Institut Catholique de Paris as well. Gustavo loved reading and took pride in the work he did as a student in Europe. He once told me, with playfulness but genuine pride, that he discovered a dating error for one of Freud's manuscripts while digging through some archives in Leuven.

Gustavo was a passionate reader, a meticulous archival researcher (just read the footnotes of his book on Bartolomé de las Casas!), and an amazingly creative thinker who brought together theology, philosophy, literature, and film with remarkable ease. Not only that but he had the privilege to study under some of the greatest theologians of the preceding generation, including Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac. Interestingly, at the time, the Vatican had banned de Lubac from teaching—but Gustavo could not miss the opportunity of studying with the maestro. Demonstrating some of his power as an organizer, he gathered some students, went to de Lubac's apartment, and asked him if he would do a reading course with them. De Lubac agreed. They read *Surnaturel*, a study of the relationship between nature and the supernatural in Catholic theological thought—the very book that had instigated the removal of de Lubac from his teaching position.

Despite his excitement about this academic environment, Gustavo wanted to return to his native Peru to do the work for which he pursued the priesthood: accompanying the people of God, especially those suffering the most. Gustavo was well acquainted with suffering in his own flesh. For most of his teenage years, a bone infection called osteomyelitis kept him bedridden and dependent on a wheelchair. This experience marked him forever but also planted the seeds for some of his greatest concerns and passions, including his vocation for reading, his attentiveness to the experience of suffering, and his love of chess. As he would say sometimes, "there was not much to do, so I read a lot and played chess with my friends."

He returned to Lima in 1960. He became active as a counselor of college students at the National Union of Catholic Students and a member of the theology faculty at

PUCP. Just a few years later, in 1965, Gustavo attended the fourth and final session of the Second Vatican Council. This experience was transformative. The newly found openness of the church further shaped Gustavo's conviction that the Catholic faith could be a force for positive change in the world. Only three years after that, the Latin American bishops gathered in Medellín, Colombia, to ascertain the role of the Catholic faith in the Latin American context. The result was one of the most powerful documents produced by magisterial teaching in the 20th century.

The Medellín document focused on the experience of massive poverty and marginalization among most Christians in the region, calling for concrete action to eradicate the institutional violence at the root of these problems. But Medellín did not only produce documents. It unleashed the energies of a generation of ordained and lay leaders to struggle for a more just world. Though backlash soon ensued, this moment gave organizational and theological strength to what later would be known as liberation theology. It is worth noting, as sociologist Christian Smith does in his classic study of the emergence of liberation theology, that Gustavo was "the single most important person" in the making of Medellín.

Gustavo Gutiérrez lived to be 96 years old. *A Theology of Liberation* was originally published in Spanish 53 years ago. Many times, critics and fortune tellers have spoken of the death of liberation theology, its concessions to Vatican pressure, its loss of teeth. Gustavo would often joke: "If liberation theology is dead, since they say I am the father, I am a bit upset that nobody invited me to the funeral!" But there was no funeral. Liberation theology, diverse and complex like all social and intellectual movements, has grown and developed over five decades.

Gustavo did too. New conversation partners and critics have become part of liberation theology's vision of change and its struggle for justice. Initially unattended issues like race, gender, and the environment are now central to anyone working for liberation. Further, the key convictions of the movement—the radical opposition to all forms of oppression, the formation of networks of solidarity among the oppressed, the denunciation of structural forms of oppression, and the theological grounding of this work—are central tenets of contemporary Catholicism and the pontificate of Pope Francis and have spread widely beyond Catholicism and Christianity as well. As with the great theologians of Vatican II—who, before the council, were silenced and heavily criticized—Gustavo was able to see in his lifetime the transformation of his beloved church, even after long periods of being unfairly criticized.

The transformations are limited, of course. Gustavo was never naive about this. But they matter; they nurture people's hope and produce painfully slow but real change.

The last time I saw Gustavo in person was when I visited him this summer in his apartment in Lima. We did not walk this time. He was ill and lying in bed, but it was a joyful visit. We chatted, we joked, we held hands. I told him the same thing I tell you now: that his life completely transformed mine, that the gift of his friendship surpassed any of my expectations, and that I hope that some of what I do can express my gratitude for all I learned from him.

The *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu discusses Gustavo Gutiérrez's life and work with this article's author Raúl E. Zegarra.

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