A theology—and an activism—that centers struggle

In the 80s, Edicio De La Torre and other Filipino thinkers helped clergy and laypeople to understand the long-term nature of fighting for change.

by Colton Bernasol
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In 1971, my aunt was in college when she received a telegram informing her that her dad, my grandpa, was dead, and she should return home to Barrio three in the

provinces of Mindanao as soon as possible. My grandpa was stabbed, and the hospital had inadequate resources to tend his wounds. He died a poor farmer, landless. My father was only a boy. I don't remember how old I was when he first told me this story, but I feel like I've carried it my whole life.

Stories of my family's impoverished life as peasant farmers in the Philippines taught me how much we persevered—and how lives are cut short by the political and economic structures that extract labor while remaining indifferent to exploitation.

In college, I discovered liberation theology in the writings of Black and Latin American Christians. Liberation theology named the political implications of God's saving work. It named sin as structural and yet proclaimed that Jesus would bring the reign of God. Liberation named the political aspirations embedded in my religious convictions: the kingdom of God means a world free from the extractive tenant farming of capitalist development, from police violence, from failing healthcare structures, from anti-Black racism, anti-Asian hate, and the coercive violence of the American empire.

But sometimes the language of liberation does not feel adequate. How does one sustain the aspiration for liberation over the course of one's lifetime, or over many lifetimes? The language of liberation doesn't speak to me like it once did.

The Trump administration is currently supporting large-scale military funding in the Philippines and continuing to support what many claim is genocide in Gaza. This administration has imprisoned political dissidents, academics, and immigrants. They have gutted the federal bureaucracy and aid programs that reach millions of people and passed executive policies against diversity in education and environmental protections while bolstering a police system that already works with little accountability. These policies, actions, and platforms have and will impact millions of people. But their impacts are not just immediate. They reach into the future and threaten to determine it. Their consequences will be felt for years. Some will feel these for lifetimes, as I still feel the loss of my grandpa.

How do I keep hold of God's promises while recognizing the fraught and difficult time ahead? I don't want to get rid of the language of liberation, but it so often feels insufficient. It needs qualification.

While asking these questions, I've been thinking about Christian organizers in the Philippines who fought for liberation during and after the dictatorship of Ferdinand

Marcos in the 1970s and 80s, those Christian activists who would have recognized the injustices experienced by my own tenant farming family.

Known as the “Theology of Struggle,” this movement of priests, pastors, and lay Christians called for the political and social transformation of the Philippines, demanding better living conditions for farmers, peasants, the poor, and the oppressed in the country.

Central to this movement was not merely the language of liberation, but the language of *struggle*. Writing from prison in 1983, the activist and writer Edicio De La Torre offered a brief account of struggle as he understood it: “The struggle for liberation is precisely that—a struggle. Not even the most sanguine activists expect liberation to come soon. The struggle is difficult and protracted.”

For De La Torre, to struggle was to recognize the long-term nature of fighting for change while taking an active stance toward suffering: “I proposed once the following categories: people who suffer but do not struggle, people who suffer and therefore struggle, and people who struggle and therefore suffer.” Struggle situates the aspiration for change in the agency one claims in resisting the injustices that cause suffering.

In wrestling with De La Torre’s prison writings, I am reminded of theologian Vincent Lloyd, who today, drawing upon the traditions of Black philosophy and religion, calls for “struggle against domination.”

Struggle takes place daily. At the same time, it casts the temporal net wide and qualifies the aspirations for liberation in ways that encourage us to remember that organizing against injustice requires patient, protracted practices. We need to think both in the short and the long term.

What might that look like? The theology of struggle offers us some clues.

Theologian and ethicist Lisa Asedillo cites examples that can inspire the strategies of struggle we might engage today. Filipino priests, for instance, supported strikes by performing their service at a picket line. Others, including congregants, sang hymns as they marched to visit imprisoned activists. Yet others encouraged politically conscious modes of reading scripture, their interpretations catalogued, edited, and collected in *Faith in Struggle*. Activists did not fragment along religious or ideological lines but practiced what De la Torre calls a “revolutionary ecumenism.” De la Torre

writes, “this ecumenism is even more directly concerned with our struggle for unity, and unity through struggle, with the non-Christians, the Muslims, cultural minorities, and the Marxists.”

The theology of struggle in the Philippines responded to a different authoritarian context, but the emphasis on protracted, coalitional, organizing over time speaks to principles that can animate sustainable forms of protest today. Pastors and lay people ought to march with their non-religious colleagues and organize with and alongside those of other religious and ideological affiliations, especially where there are shared aspirations for resisting authoritarianism. Sit-ins, marches, petitions, boycotts, political education, even liturgy, as Asadillo writes, are resources churches have for struggles that endure across time.

My movement friends and comrades, not all of them religious, have invited me to be part of their struggle for freedom. Sometimes that struggle takes the form of protest, as when we marched on the 2024 DNC to demand a ceasefire in Gaza. But other times, this struggle is far quieter—a meeting over a meal, an encouragement over text, a prayer for endurance, the request for a small donation. These are the daily forms in which my activist friends encourage me to struggle for another world.

The theology of struggle also reminds me of those who struggled, consciously or not, to create a freer world for me, even if it was for a freedom they would not witness.

Once, over dinner with my aunt, I asked her what my grandpa was like. She said that despite the family having very little, he’d always wake up early in the morning to scrounge up what he could find and pack it in banana leaves for lunch for her and her siblings. I think of that as an act of struggle, a refusal to give in to the dehumanization of poverty. And that struggle, many decades far removed, still encourages me. Grandpa did not live to see a life beyond poverty, but his protest planted the seed for future freedom. I will continue to tend it, so that one day it will burst from the soil, and liberation will be upon us.