

# Liberation Spirituality: A Contribution to the Creation of Common Good in Plural Societies

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## *Abstract*

Throughout most of the 20th century, religion was considered an obstacle to the development of pluralistic and democratic societies. Thus, many scholars, politicians and citizens considered that it should be only lived and practiced in the private sphere of each person. A normal consequence, religion should not be part (or allowed) in the public sphere. This idea was considered a self-evident law in Western society until recent. Lately, religion and spirituality (even if it is difficult to clearly distinguish them) are returning to the public sphere (but to be honest, they have never left it). Authors from different backgrounds like Habermas and Taylor have reflected on the importance of integrating religions and spirituality into the public sphere in pluralistic and democratic societies. In many ways, these authors argue, religion and spirituality could contribute to the political and social community by giving meaning and purpose. Thus, we would like to raise the question of how, and in what way, religion and spirituality can be a contribution to the common good in plural and democratic societies.

## *Key-Words*

religion, spirituality, secularity, common good, liberation spirituality.

## *1. Introduction*

Throughout most of the 20th century, religion was considered an obstacle to the development of pluralistic and democratic societies. Thus, many scientists, politicians, and citizens believed that religion should only be lived and practiced in the private sphere of each person. As a normal consequence, religion should not be part of (or allowed in) the public sphere. This idea was considered a self-evident law in Western society until recently.

Recently, religion and spirituality (even if it is difficult to clearly distinguish them) are returning to the public sphere (but to be honest, they have never left it). Authors from different backgrounds like Habermas and Taylor have reflected on the importance of integrating religions and spirituality into the public sphere in pluralistic and democratic societies. In many ways, these authors argue, religion and spirituality could contribute to the political and social community by giving meaning and purpose.

Following the idea presented above, we would like to raise the question of how and in what way religion/spirituality can contribute to the common good in pluralistic and democratic societies. We believe that a liberation spirituality, which strives for the liberation of human beings from all oppression and places the poor at the center, can be a contribution to this. This proposal for a spirituality of liberation has its roots in the thought of Ignacio Ellacuría. In what follows, we will analyze today's religious phenomenon. After that, we are going to reflect on the difficult concept of common good and the way this idea can be discerned and historized in reality (using Ellacuría's concept). Finally, we are going to try to show the way in which a liberation spirituality can be a contribution to the common good in society.

## *2. On the Religious phenomenon today*

During much of the 20th century, the idea that religions would gradually disappear from the public space and, eventually, from the private space as well, was assumed as an unquestionable *a priori*. In the 21st century, we can indeed say that Western societies are, to a greater or lesser degree, secular. Even more, other societies, in different ways, are also becoming increasingly secular. But has the secularist prophecy been fulfilled? In this regard, Peter Berger states:

My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. With some exceptions to which I will come presently, the world today is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled "secularization theory" is essentially mistaken (Berger 1999: 2).

Does Berger's assertion debunk the entire Secularization Theory? Yes and no. The process of modernity has generated secular effects: there is a separation between the religious and secular spheres, and, on the other hand, religious institutions have lost part of their power and influence in modern societies. Along with the above, one can appreciate the decrease of the faithful in weekly worship or how many religious rites (baptisms, marriages, etc.) are no more than a social ritual with little impact on the inner

religious life. Taking Casanova's triple definition of secularity<sup>1</sup>(1994), we can say that in our societies we experience the separation of spheres and the decrease of a certain religious practice. However, the privatization of religious experience is not so clear, since it seems that the religious phenomenon is very present in our societies, especially in two fundamental aspects: the actual experience of faith and what we could call the effects of religion on political-social problems.

For some years now, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has been questioning the traditional theory of secularization. We live, according to Habermas, in a time of “post secularism”. The idea of post-secularism is intended to account for the phenomenon that has occurred in modern societies, where three decisive facts have taken place: the first, is the widespread public perception that the religious phenomenon is present as an explanation for major global conflicts. According to Habermas, “This undermines the secularistic belief in the foreseeable disappearance of religion and robs the secular understanding of the world of any triumphal zest” (Habermas: 2008). The second has to do with the presence of religious communities in the public space of deliberation. In some way, churches and religious communities have been assuming the role of “communities of interpretation” in public spaces. And finally, it is worth noting the arrival of immigrants to Europe as guest workers, refugees or simply seeking better life horizons for themselves and their families. This has raised the problem of coexistence in the public space of cultures and religions beyond the mere political plurality that should occur in a pluralistic society. These three situations described above have been generating a new scenario in which the old answers do not provide a solution to the new social and cultural context.

In this scenario, the question of the role of religion in the public sphere gains new force. In *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Habermas: 2008), Habermas devotes a whole section to religion in the public sphere and the cognitive presuppositions of the public use of reason among religious citizens. There, he recalls the liberal premises of the constitutional state and highlights the consequences that would follow from Rawls' idea of the public use of reason for civic ethics. After that, he points out some criticisms of Rawls' thought, considering that his position is very restric-

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1 According to Casanova, the Theory of Secularization has three separate moments. The first one is the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres (State, economy, science); the second one is the decline of religion. The third one, at last, is the privatization of religion.

tive with religion. Habermas thinks that a novel way must be developed, different from the traditionally proposed, in which the secular world and religions can meet in the public space. Habermas raises three important issues in this regard: on the one hand, he maintains the well-known distinction and separation between “Church and State”. Habermas states that this separation should be obligatory, as well as a requirement of neutrality concerning worldviews at the moment of exercising power. But there is a second issue: religious citizens have the right to express their religious convictions in the public space in a secular language that all can understand. If secular “translations” cannot be found for their statements, they could express their convictions in religious language. In all this, there is a fundamental requirement for anyone who wants to enter into dialogue with another: the epistemic capacity to consider one's views and to put them in relation to other conceptions. This requirement is addressed to religious communities as well as to secularist, agnostic or atheist groups.

Welcoming religious thought in the public sphere is not only important for the sake of a democratic exercise. There is something else: not to deprive society of important reserves for the creation of meaning. An example of this is the value of the human person: this idea comes from the Christian perspective. Enlightenment took it and secularized it; so, it became part of the Western tradition. not of religion but Western reason. Another example is solidarity or the preferential option for the poor<sup>2</sup>. Religions can create and provide meaning.

### *3. Common Good: an open and complex concept*

#### *3.1. A difficult concept*

Michael Sandel, a few years ago, claimed that “we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone” (Sandel 1982: 183). Sandel suggests that shared social and political life helps us to discover certain goods that, alone, we would not be able to know. Moreover, life in common helps us not only to discover these goods but also to live them.

When we speak of the common good, it is worth noting that it is a concept of long-standing in the history of philosophy and that it has been extensively developed in Christian doctrine, especially in Catholic social

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2 This topic has been very important over the centuries in Christian tradition. An example of this can be found in the interesting article of Martin Bernales (2021).

thought. However, it should also be noted that it is a concept that has its difficulties. In this regard, Patrick Riordan (2008) states that two features impose on the treatment of the common good and call attention when reviewing the extensive literature that exists on the subject: the first is that the common good is a concept, used by countless authors, that does not require explanation. That is to say, the common good would be a self-evident concept and would not need to be explained or defined. On the other hand, this is the second characteristic, Riordan regrets that the idea of the common good is used without having a clear definition, which leads to great confusion. The problem with this, according to Riordan, is that in the end, many authors decide to abandon this concept since, as we have pointed out above, it tends to be unclear and confusing. That is why a different approach may be required to understand the concept.

### *3.2. Common Good and Human Rights*

In 1978 Ignacio Ellacuría wrote an article about the historization of the common good and human rights in a divided society<sup>3</sup> (Ellacuría 2001: 207-225). This text was written as a paper to be presented at the Latin American Meeting of Social Scientists and Theologians. In this document, Ellacuría understands that the idea of the common good is based on two essential affirmations: the human person needs society and society cannot be what it should be if it does not have sufficient material resources. This approach per se might not seem very original, but Ellacuría relates it closely to the concept of human rights. Thus, Ellacuría understands that human rights must be interpreted as the prolongation and historical actualization of the common good.

Ellacuría points out that the common good, seen from a formal perspective, is fundamentally understood as the set of conditions and structures that are expressed in the justice of society. These conditions, among which justice stands out, must be promoted by society as a whole. It is understood that the ruler must promote the common good, but the promotion of this cannot be limited only to the government. Civil society, in which religions and spiritualities are an important element, must seek to encourage and promote justice that generates the common good.

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3 I believe it is important to consider the historical situation Ellacuría had in mind: the situation of injustice in Latin America and, specially, in El Salvador.

Undoubtedly, the most suggestive idea in Ellacuría's approach has to do with this: his understanding that human rights can be considered as the unfolding of the common good of humanity as a whole. This idea is linked to the whole problem of historicization and discernment. In this regard he states:

It is not that the classical approach forgets the good of all mankind and even the good of the whole universe, but, given the historical circumstances, one could hardly speak with the historical truth of single mankind that could be involved in the realization of a single common good. Once the real condition of a single history of all humanity is fulfilled, the worldwide consideration of human rights is now urgent; it cannot be forgotten that the common good gave way to strict justice, before the will of individuals and generating strictly such rights, which must be recognized and promoted by the laws of society (Ellacuría 2001: 211)<sup>4</sup>

In the current historical situation, with a certain international community and with the idea of a common human history, Ellacuría believes that humanity is one humanity and that its common good, manifested in human rights, is obligatory. From this perspective, the challenge of the common good and human rights would be one:

Placing human rights in relation to the common good gives them their foundation and frame of reference while providing the common good with a principle of specificity and obligation. If human rights are derived from the common good, they will be presented as an obligation for all members of humanity, since everyone would have a fundamental right to participate in the common good as they must contribute to its realization (Ellacuría 2001: 212).

Ellacuría recognizes that this approach of linking human rights and the common good together has at least three positive aspects. Firstly, there cannot be a particular good without reference to the common good and, on the other hand, one cannot speak of a particular good without reference to the common good<sup>5</sup>. But Ellacuría goes a step further: in the case of a particular good without reference to the common good, this good would be only a self-interested and unjust advantage. The rupture of a just social order occurs when a few appropriate that which belongs to the communi-

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4 All of Ellacuría's texts are personal translations.

5 As Taylor affirms in *Irreducibly Social Goods* (1995), it can not be an "atomism".

ty; the appropriation takes place by preventing others from enjoying the common good. Injustice and misappropriation by a few is not something new; Aristotle, in the *Politics*, already warned about it when he stated that “when the one or the few or the many rule with a view to the common advantage, these regimes are necessarily correct, while those with a view to the private advantage of the one or the few or the multitude are deviations (1279a)”.

The second aspect highlighted by Ellacuría is that the common good is not achieved by the accumulation of individual goods. In other words, the sum of particular goods, and that each one follows his or her particular interest, will not generate a greater common good in society. This idea is central to the thinking of Christian humanism. Finally, and as a third aspect to take into consideration, Ellacuría understands that the common good is “fundamentally a set of structural conditions and it is expressed in the justice of society” (Ellacuría 2001: 213). The conditions and justice that promote the common good must be promoted by society as a whole. The State must generate the conditions of possibility so that the common good can be given and respected, but the common good is not only a task of the State but of society as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. *Historization of the common good*

Keeping in mind the current reality of enormous injustices - poverty, discrimination, ecological crisis, refugees, wars, etc. -, how is it possible that as a society we are not capable of seeking the common good? In Ellacuría's words, “what is wrong, then, with this whole approach, formally so reasonable and progressive, that it is not really satisfactory even as an approach?” (2001: 214). The difficulty lies in the formal and idealistic character of the common good. That is to say, reality (*la realidad*) is not taken into account. That is why it is necessary to carry out an exercise of historization.

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6 David Hollenbach understands, in a similar way to Ellacuría, that the common good must be an issue taken up by society as a whole: “We need to develop a public philosophy in which social connections and the goods that can only be achieved through these connections play more central roles. This will be a public philosophy that combines a commitment to the common good with respect for the equality and freedom of all members of the relevant communities” (Hollenbach 2002: 57).

What does historization mean? In an article written in May 1989 -a few months before his assassination- entitled “Historization of human rights from the oppressed peoples and popular majorities”, Ellacuría points out that historization does not “consist formally in telling the history of the concept of human rights, nor even in telling the real history connoted by the concept and from which it has been emerging, although this is methodologically useful to carry out historization” (Ellacuría 2001: 434). Historization consists of a few fundamental elements: first of all, the verification in the praxis of the true or falseness, justice or injustice, of the right. Also, the confirmation of whether the right helps for the security of a few people or most people; as well as in the examination of the real conditions without which there is no possibility of generating real changes (Ellacuría 2001: 434). It is fundamental to insist that historization implies moving from an abstract idealization to a real concreteness in the life of the community. In other words, historization consists in going from an “ought to be” idea to an actual reality. We will return to this point later.

From a different perspective, although with undeniable similarities to Ellacuría’s approach, Patrick Riordan (2008: 27) affirms that the common good of the polis is heuristic.<sup>7</sup> Riordan understands, by using this concept, that there is a general idea (a certain insight, using Lonergan’s expression) of what is the common good of the community. Even so, this common good must be discovered and concretized at each step. Riordan insists, following Aristotle -and Ellacuría would surely agree-, that the greater good is the one sought through human cooperation. This cooperation will be given in the form of dialogue in the community. Now, what would be the criteria for discovering this in praxis? At this point, Riordan turns to Aristotle. The first criterion is whether the ruler governs for his own interests or whether he governs for the interests of all. A second criterion that must be present is whether the good to be shared has any deficiencies. That is if the good proposed for the community has some deficiency in its

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7 It is interesting to note that Riordan’s concept of heuristics comes from Lonergan (who develops it in his work *Insight*). Heuristics is something that is seen or glimpsed but not yet fully grasped. That is, it has to be historized. As it is well known, Lonergan states that the method of any science that tries to know the “world mediated by meaning and motivated by value” follows the rhythm of the four human operations: experience, insight (or understanding), judgment, and decision. They articulate upwardly among themselves because experience asks to be interpreted, conceptual interpretation to be judged in its adequacy or not with reality, and true judgment, which culminates in a right decision in favour of the correct interpretation and its implementation.

capacity to produce human welfare. In that case, it is convenient to reformulate the good, so that it can produce a greater good for the community.

Let us return to the problem of historization of the common good and human rights. Ellacuría affirms that historization consists, fundamentally, in recognizing the mechanisms by which the effective realization of the common good is impeded or favored. From this perspective, it can be recognized that there is no effective realization of the common good and human rights in today's world. The reason is quite simple: the injustice and oppression of the most powerful over the weakest. Those who monopolize the commons, even legally, would be denying the common good. Therefore, Ellacuría understands that a true historization of the common good must imply the real liberation of the oppressed classes. Only through this process, we can speak of the true common good. Thus, human rights must be, first and foremost, the rights of the oppressed:

only by doing justice to the peoples and the oppressed classes will their true common good and truly universal human rights be achieved (...)  
The common good and human rights must be active, doing right and doing justice, doing oneself right and doing oneself justice (2001: 223).

Ellacuría and Riordan, each one from their own perspective, insist that the common good must be realized and recognized in the social and historical reality. In this process, a certain kind of discernment must take place. It is not difficult to recognize, at this point, the Ignatian spiritual tradition from which they both draw as Jesuits.

## *5. Spirituality and Liberation*

### *5.1. Spirituality: what are we talking about?*

In the introduction, we raised the question of what the contribution of a liberating spirituality could be in the search and development of the common good. However, before answering this question, we need to answer a previous question: what do we understand by spirituality? Are spirituality and religion the same thing? The distinction is complex and, at times, unclear. Moreover, the meanings may depend on who is making the distinction. In general, it seems that when we talk about spirituality we are talking about fewer norms and less institution. That is, spirituality tends to be freer, more personal, more experiential if you will. Religion, on the oth-

er hand, seems to be more related to the institutional and the normative<sup>8</sup>. Now, is it possible to define this phenomenon? Charles Taylor, in different parts of his work, defines religion as “openness to transcendence”<sup>9</sup>. Taylor uses this definition to speak of the religious phenomenon, but it can be applied, because of its generality, to spirituality.

Francesc Torralba understands spirituality to be a broad concept. It is a concept that refers to personal experiences related to the search for meaning. Trying to elaborate a definition of spirituality, Torralba understands it as “the pluriform inquiry of the meaning of life that brings man closer to the ulterior Reality, connecting the human being with everything that surrounds him” (Torralba 2014: 9). Along with this, and as a fundamental aspect, Torralba understands that spirituality is not an accessory or added element of the human being, but something fundamental and part of his/her essence.

Several years before Taylor and Torralba, Gustavo Gutiérrez developed the idea of spirituality of liberation. In *Teología de la Liberación: perspectivas* (1975), Gutiérrez understands spirituality as a concrete, Spirit-driven way of living the gospel of Jesus in reality. For Gutiérrez,

The spirituality of liberation will be centered on a conversion to the neighbor, to the oppressed man, to the plundered social class, to the despised race, to the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord goes through this movement. Evangelical conversion is, in fact, the touchstone of all spirituality. Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves, it means to think, feel and live like Christ present in the dispossessed and alienated man. To convert is to commit oneself to the process of liberation of the poor and exploited, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely. Not only with generosity but also with an analysis of the situation and with a strategy for action. To convert is to know and experience that, contrary to the laws of the world of physics, we are only standing, according to the gospel, when our axis of gravity passes outside of us (1975: 268).

Spirituality cannot be something distant from the human being or something that leads to alienation from reality. A true spirituality, from this

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8 For further references on this topic, please see Sepúlveda del Río (2019).

9 Taylor develops in many of his books and papers the idea of religion as an opening to transcendence. Defining the religious phenomenon in this way helps to have a definition that can include different manifestations of this phenomenon around the world. For a more detailed study of Taylor's proposal, you can consult Sepúlveda del Río (2016).

perspective, opens to the liberation of the oppressed, the plundered, the despised, and the dominated.

### 5.2. *Liberating Spirituality*

In the previous pages, when we talked about common good in Ellacuría's thought, we quoted *Historización del bien común y de los derechos humanos en una sociedad dividida* (Historization of the common good and human rights in a divided society). This text had a third part that Ellacuría did not write, although we know that he had the intention to do it since it was in the original typed text. This third part sought to reflect, more expressly, on what should be a Christian approach to the common good from the perspective of liberation theology.

Some years later, in a paper written in 1983, Ellacuría takes up the task again and reflects on what is a liberating spirituality<sup>10</sup>. Ellacuría understands that the “spiritual” is part of the personal and individual dimension of the human being, but it is also part of the community. Thus, when we speak of spirituality it cannot be understood as a merely subjective and individual phenomenon or, on the other hand, as a merely social and institutional phenomenon. Thus, Ellacuría's starting point is not to place the institutional and the personal in contradiction, but in a dialectical relationship: “A correct pastoral care of spirituality must start from the assumption that ‘the spiritual’ is but a dimension of man individually and socially considered, as well as of the Christian personally and institutionally understood” (Ellacuría 2002: 48).

Ellacuría assumes a spirituality that integrates different aspects that, at first glance, seem to be opposites. Christian spirituality, as Ellacuría understands it, cannot be understood as a set of spiritual practices (prayer, ascetic exercises, etc.), but as “something so new and so unexpected, so vigorous and transforming, that it leads to the affirmation that God is making himself present in a singular way among men” (Ellacuría 2002: 50). There is a profound transformation that is not only personal, individual, but should reach the community, the Church, and even more, the course of history.

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10 It is interesting to note that Ellacuría does not cite Gustavo Gutiérrez and his work *Liberation Theology: Perspectives*. Instead, he cites an article by the Chilean theologian Pablo Richard, published in the magazine *Christus* in 1981. In this article, Richard writes of ethics as a liberating spirituality.

What would a spiritual person be like from this perspective? It would not be defined by “spiritual” practices with a certain personalistic and intimate tendency. On the contrary, spirituality should move to create and renew and to overcome human oppression and death. Spirituality, from Ellacuría’s liberating perspective - and, obviously, from liberation theology - must be a liberating praxis of sin and its consequences. In our postmodern societies, the mere idea of sin sounds old-fashioned, inquisitorial, and meaningless. But we must be careful. Sin, from the perspective of liberating spirituality, is the oppression of human beings by human beings. Sin is the rupture of friendship with God and is the ultimate root “of all injustice and oppression” (Gutiérrez 1975: 69). Injustice, oppression, violence against human beings, and against nature, are what is understood by sin. A liberating spirituality must be situated in a perspective of liberation from all the current oppressions that people live.

What should this liberating spirituality be like? In other words, what essential elements should be present in this spirituality for it to be truly a liberating spirituality? The first one must be the idea of mission. The mission is the proclamation and realization of the reign of God in history. This involves a praxis that must be actualized again and again. That is to say, the mission and the proclamation of the kingdom is not something static; it must be historically actualized (heuristically, as Riordan states) in reality. From Ignatian spirituality, Ellacuría understands that this process must be contemplative in action. That is to say, the spiritual cannot be separated from action. The latter, based on contemplation, must be directed towards the kingdom of God, which implies the transformation of situations of injustice and sin. The second characteristic is based on the Sermon on the Mount and the spirit of the Beatitudes. This means that there must be a preferential option for the poor and the struggle for justice, as Medellín and Puebla affirmed at the time.

Finally, Ellacuría understands that all Christian spirituality must be grounded in faith, oriented by hope, and consummated by love. Approached in this way, Christian spirituality exceeds any kind of Pelagianism. Three theological virtues unite dimensions of the human being and the Trinitarian God. These three dimensions of faith, hope, and love open us to a transcendent and fulfilling reality, but without falling into solipsistic spiritualism.

### 5.3. *Discerning reality*

There are a couple of characteristics of this liberating spirituality that Ellacuría repeats several times. Although in the text, we have quoted above he does not mention them: historicity and discernment. Liberating spirituality is understood to be presented and lived in history, with real situations, in a conflictive world where it is necessary to choose how to concretize the good that is sought. There is an emphasis on the idea of Ignatian discernment: people have to discern, in a particular society and history, the best way to materialize the common good. There is a heuristic search.

The main problem, when it comes to discernment, is to see what elements can help us to discern better. For Ellacuría the answer is clear: the poor. Ellacuría - and this is not something peculiar to his thinking, but is part of the heritage of liberation theology - understands that poor people are a theological place from which reality must be discerned:

But among the many signs that are always present, some striking and others barely perceptible, there is in every age one that is the principal one, in the light of which all the others must be discerned and interpreted. That sign is always the historically crucified people, which joins to its permanence the always different historical form of its crucifixion. That crucified people are the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, whom the sin of the world continues to take away every human figure, whom the powers of this world continue to strip off everything, continue to take away even life, above all life (Ellacuría 2000: 134).

A spirituality distanced from the poor would no longer be spirituality or it would lack something essential. Discernment must be guided by the theological place of the poor - a true sign of God's presence - and to seek their liberation. The mission of spirituality must be to seek the liberation of the oppressed. In short, Ellacuría's spirituality seeks to bring Christian values into the social and public sphere and thus open up a proposal for greater justice and humanization from a perspective of the common good.

## 6. *Conclusions*

In the introduction, we raised the question of how, and in what way, religion and spirituality can be a contribution to the common good in plural and democratic societies. The common good, as we have presented

it, is fundamentally understood as the set of conditions and structures that are expressed in the justice of society. Thus, the good of society would not be the sum of particular goods, but the good of the whole society. The originality, from Ellacuría's perspective, is to link the common good with human rights. In this way, they would have a foundation in the common good and would be the prolongation and actualization of it.

The spirituality of liberation -understood as a spirituality not self-centered and open to justice and the liberation of the oppressed- can be a fundamental element in the search for the common good from civil society. This search must be based on historical discernment in concrete realities. One of the key elements of this discernment should be the liberation of the human being from the different oppressions and injustices.

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