

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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## Abstract

This paper explores the issue and role of the church amidst poverty. Poverty is a crucial social issue that the church focuses on in its efforts to present the gospel and the kingdom of God. This paper uses the thoughts of Gustavo Gutierrez as a surgical tool to examine how the church should carry out its social function in addressing the issue of poverty. Poverty is seen as arising from structural injustice, and therefore the church must be present as part of its social responsibility. Therefore, Gutierrez offers a Liberation Theology perspective that synthesizes faith and action. This paper is qualitative in nature with a literature study approach. Therefore, data was obtained through a review of journals and books directly relevant to this research. This study found that the church must be present amidst the issue of poverty. The theological basis of the church's responsibility towards poverty lies in the recognition that God is on the side of the poor. The church is called to be a community of liberation—a fellowship that speaks not only of love but also lives in solidarity with the poor. According to Gutiérrez, the church's social service must be transformative, not merely charitable.

**Keywords:** *Poverty, Liberation Theology, Transformative Diakonia, Church*

## 1. Introduction

According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS) data for 2025, the number of people living in poverty in Indonesia reached 23.85 million. This data indicates that Indonesia's poverty rate is quite high, ranking fourth in the world.<sup>1</sup> This demonstrates that the issue of poverty is a crucial one currently facing Indonesia. Poverty is one of the most fundamental and complex issues humanity has faced throughout history. It involves not only economic deprivation but also social, political, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human existence. In a modern world filled with technological and economic progress, poverty remains an open wound that marks the global inequality between those in power and those deprived of the opportunity to live a decent life. Amidst this reality, the church, as a faith community, is called to respond to the problem of poverty not only through charitable acts but also through theological reflection that encourages just social change. The church cannot remain neutral in the face of suffering and injustice, for the Christian faith is fundamentally rooted in God's love, which defends and liberates humanity from all forms of oppression. Peruvian Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, through his ideas on liberation theology, presented a new paradigm for the church in understanding and responding to poverty. In his landmark work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Gutiérrez asserts that liberation is at the heart of the Gospel message. God is on the side of the poor, and therefore, true faith demands concrete action to free them from oppressive social structures.<sup>2</sup> For Gutiérrez, poverty is not simply a dire economic situation, but a moral and theological scandal. He sees poverty as the result of unjust social structures and oppressive economic systems, not laziness or personal sin. Therefore, theological solutions to poverty cannot simply consist of giving alms; they must

<sup>1</sup> <https://money.kompas.com/read/2025/05/09/130700826/10-negara-dengan-percentase-kemiskinan-terbanyak-indonesia-posisi-4-#:~:text=Sumber:,dengan%20Rp%20113.234%20per%20hari.&text=Bank%20Dunia%20juga%20milik%20standar,hari%20at au%20sekitar%20Rp%2060.336.,> accessed on October 11, 2025, at 16.00 WIB.

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

also encompass changes in the social and political structures that cause poverty.<sup>3</sup> In Gutiérrez's view, the church must be a liberating community that sides with the poor. He calls this preferential option for the poor—God's special choice for the poor. This choice does not mean neglecting the rich, but rather affirming the primacy of God's love and justice for those who suffer most. Gutiérrez writes that God defends the rights of the poor not because they are morally superior, but because they are oppressed and in need of defense.<sup>4</sup> Thus, being a church means participating in God's mission to free humanity from all forms of social and structural injustice. The poverty faced by modern humans is far more complex than in ancient times. It manifests itself not only in material deprivation but also in social isolation, unemployment, limited access to education and healthcare, and gender inequality. Poverty can also arise from exploitative global economic policies, climate change, and prolonged social conflict. Various studies show that poverty is often the result of an unfair system, where certain groups benefit at the expense of others.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, discussing poverty is always linked to issues of power and social structure. In this context, liberation theology provides a critical perspective that helps the church not only sympathize with the poor but also understand the systemic roots of poverty itself.

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, when the majority of people lived in poverty due to unequal social structures and authoritarian governments. Gutiérrez, along with other theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Pablo Richard, sought to reinterpret the Gospel message in the context of people's suffering. They rejected forms of theology that focused solely on personal salvation in the afterlife and demanded that the church be actively involved in real-world social struggles. Gutiérrez wrote that true theology is born of praxis, namely, from real involvement in the struggles of the oppressed.<sup>6</sup> So, theology is not only a reflection of faith, but also an act of faith that is realized in the struggle to free humans from poverty and injustice. Gutiérrez's approach is transformative because it rejects the separation between faith and social action. He unites spirituality and socio-political praxis in a single movement of liberation. In his book, he emphasizes that authentic Christian spirituality grows in the experience of solidarity with the poor.<sup>7</sup> Prayer, fasting and liturgy will be meaningless if they are not translated into love and real struggle against oppression. Thus, a truly spiritual church is a church that fights for social justice, not one that isolates itself from the world.

In this context, poverty must be understood multidimensionally. Robert Chambers explains that poverty is not just a matter of income, but also the inability to meet basic needs, the loss of decision-making power, and limited access to resources.<sup>8</sup> Social inequality and an exploitative global economic system exacerbate this situation. Furthermore, the spiritual dimension of poverty is also evident in the loss of human dignity and self-worth. The poor suffer not only from material deprivation but also from being looked down upon and treated inhumanely by society. The church, within the framework of liberation theology, is called to respond to all dimensions of poverty. First, the church must be a community of solidarity living alongside the poor, not simply a provider of charitable gifts. Gutiérrez rejects the hierarchical and paternalistic model of church ministry. For him, the poor are not objects of service, but rather active subjects of faith in the process of their own liberation.<sup>9</sup> Second, the church must be a place for critical awareness education (conscientization) as developed by Paulo Freire.<sup>10</sup> Through liberating education, the poor are encouraged to recognize structures of injustice and empowered to fight for their rights. The church serves as a space for reflection and social learning for the congregation to read reality with a critical eye of faith. Therefore, the church can implement transformative diakonia, namely social service that goes beyond providing aid but also encourages structural change. This type of diakonia includes advocacy for more equitable public policies, support for the people's economy, and strengthening solidarity networks among poor communities.<sup>11</sup> The church can play a

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez. *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Sobrino. *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Norman K. Gottwald. *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BCE*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Chambers. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. London: Longman, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Robert McAfee Brown. "Liberation Theology and the Churches." *Theology Today* 32, no. 4 (1976): 410–24.

<sup>10</sup> Fernando F. Segovia. "The Option for the Poor as Hermeneutic." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 92 (1996): 3–16.

<sup>11</sup> Jon Sobrino. "The Preferential Option for the Poor and the Eucharist." *Concilium* 1996/2.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

prophetic role by advocating for justice in the public sphere, opposing corruption and policies that disadvantage the common people. In the Indonesian context, for example, the church can play a role in addressing agrarian, environmental, and economic inequality issues by supporting affected communities and encouraging policy reform. The concept of liberation in Gutiérrez's theology includes three dimensions, namely socio-political liberation from injustice, existential liberation from sin and egoism, and spiritual liberation towards communion with God.<sup>12</sup> These three dimensions are interrelated and inseparable. A church that focuses solely on spiritual liberation without regard for social justice will lose its relevance in a world scarred by poverty. Conversely, social liberation that is not rooted in Christian spirituality will lose its moral direction. Therefore, the church needs to balance the two: living out an active faith in social action, while simultaneously cultivating a spirituality that provides a moral foundation and hope for the struggle for justice.

In the Indonesian context, this reflection is highly relevant. Indonesia continues to grapple with structural poverty, economic inequality, and corruption. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) shows that millions of people still live below the poverty line, particularly in eastern Indonesia. The church, although a minority nationally, holds a significant moral position in social life. Churches in Indonesia have undertaken various social service initiatives, such as humanitarian aid, education, and health care. However, many of these services remain charitable in nature and have not fully addressed the root causes of poverty.<sup>13</sup> This is where the relevance of liberation theology becomes apparent; the church needs to move from charitable ministry to transformative ministry. Several Indonesian theologians, such as Banawiratmo and Gerrit Singgih, emphasize that the church must position itself as an agent of social change that sides with the poor in a contextual manner.<sup>14</sup> The church cannot simply imitate the Latin American model of liberation theology, but must develop it in accordance with Indonesian social and cultural realities. For example, within a local cultural context that values mutual cooperation, the church can build solidarity-based economic communities that strengthen the independence of poor congregations. This approach aligns with the spirit of liberation, which emphasizes social justice, community participation, and respect for human dignity. Furthermore, the church needs to recognize that poverty also has an ecological dimension. Leonardo Boff has shown that environmental degradation and poverty are closely linked.<sup>15</sup> Excessive exploitation of natural resources causes suffering for poor communities who depend on nature to survive. A church that supports the poor must also side with the earth as a common home. Thus, the struggle against poverty is also a struggle to preserve God's creation.

This research is significant because it combines theological, social, and pastoral dimensions within a single framework of reflection. Theoretically, this research enriches understanding of the relationship between Christian faith and social justice. Practically, this research can serve as a basis for the church to formulate more effective ministry strategies in addressing poverty. And morally, this research reaffirms the church's calling to be a witness to God's love in an unjust world. In Gutiérrez's perspective, a theology that does not give rise to liberating action is a dead theology. Therefore, a church that does not side with the poor is a church that has lost the heart of the Gospel. The church is called not only to preach about love, but to be the embodiment of love itself—a love that takes sides, liberates, and restores human dignity. Based on a living faith, the church is expected to be a sign of hope for the poor and an agent of transformation for society toward a more just, humane, and God-given order of life.

## 2. Research methods

This research is qualitative with a literature study approach. The literature research method (library research) is a scientific approach that focuses on collecting and analyzing various written sources relevant to the research topic. In the context of theology, this method is used to explore, interpret, and develop theological ideas from various scientific works such as books, journals, church documents, and academic digital articles. Literature study does not focus on direct observation of empirical phenomena, but rather on critical analysis of previously developed theories and ideas. George M. Hillway states that library research is the activity of collecting data from library materials, reading, recording, and processing them to obtain scientific conclusions.<sup>16</sup> In theological research, this approach helps researchers understand the historical and conceptual context of a particular doctrine, figure's thinking, or church

<sup>12</sup> FJ Nugroho. "The Church and Poverty: A Discourse on the Role of the Church Amidst Poverty." *Evangelical: Journal of Evangelical Theology and Congregational Development* 3, no. 1 (2019): 100–112.

<sup>13</sup> Daulat M. Tambunan. "The Church, the Poor, and Pastoral Care." *Grace Theology Journal* 7, no. 1 (June 2021): 18–32.

<sup>14</sup> Firman Panjaitan. "The Church's Contextual Mission to Poverty Problems in Indonesia." *EJTI* (2021).

<sup>15</sup> *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> George M. Hillway, *Introduction to Research* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 47.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

practice.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the literature study method serves not only to summarize existing views but also to critique, compare, and develop new, contextual understandings of the realities of faith and community life. The literature study research procedure is carried out through systematic stages that include problem identification, source collection, analysis, and synthesis.<sup>18</sup> The first step is to identify a research problem relevant to the field of study. The problem in literature research is conceptual and theoretical, for example, the meaning of suffering in liberation theology or the practice of pastoral counseling in a particular cultural context. Next, researchers explore credible primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include original works by theologians, church documents, and primary texts, while secondary sources include writings that review or interpret primary works.<sup>19</sup>

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology on Poverty

The liberation theology formulated by Gustavo Gutiérrez arose from the social and political context of Latin America in the mid-20th century, where structural poverty and social injustice were rampant. In his book, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), Gutiérrez asserted that theology cannot be separated from the reality of human history, especially the suffering and oppression experienced by the majority of poor people in Latin America. For Gutiérrez, theology is not merely an abstract reflection on God, but rather a critical reflection on human historical praxis in the light of faith. He argued that poverty is not only a social problem, but also a theological issue that demands a concrete response of faith in acts of social liberation and solidarity with the oppressed.

In Gutiérrez's view, poverty has more complex dimensions than simply material deprivation. He distinguishes between material poverty, spiritual poverty, and poverty resulting from unjust social structures. Material poverty is the most concrete form of poverty, the lack of basic necessities such as food, health care, education, and adequate housing.<sup>20</sup> According to Gutiérrez, this condition is an evil that must be fought because it is contrary to God's will, which desires an abundant life for all humans.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the spiritual poverty often associated with poverty before God, as mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, is not an economic condition, but rather an open heart toward God and others. However, Gutiérrez rejects the romanticization of material poverty under the guise of spirituality, noting that, for him, there is no glory in suffering due to social injustice.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Gutiérrez views poverty as the result of structural sin, namely economic, political, and social systems that perpetuate inequality. In the Latin American context, poverty is not the result of individual laziness or moral failure, but rather the result of social structures built by colonialism and global economic domination. He writes that sin is not only personal but can also manifest in unjust and oppressive social systems.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, overcoming poverty is not enough by simply providing charitable aid or alms; structural changes that address the roots of injustice are necessary. True liberation must encompass economic, political, social, and spiritual dimensions. One of the key concepts in Gutiérrez's liberation theology is the preferential option for the poor. This principle affirms that God sides with the oppressed, as seen throughout the biblical narrative, from Israel's liberation from Egypt to Jesus' ministry of the poor and the rejected. This preferential option does not mean discrimination against the rich, but rather a perspective that focuses on those who suffer from unjust social structures. The Church and Christians, therefore, are called to stand with the poor, not merely helping them from the outside but becoming part of their struggle for justice and dignity.<sup>24</sup> In liberation theology, faith is inseparable from action. Gutiérrez asserts that theology is a critical reflection on practice, namely, concrete actions in history to liberate humanity from oppression. This practice is not merely a social activity, but a conscious and reflective act of faith. Theology that stops at contemplation without action is considered sterile, while action without theological reflection loses its direction. Thus, theology and practice

<sup>17</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), 73.

<sup>18</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 12th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2021), 122.

<sup>19</sup> Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 93.

<sup>20</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 11–15.

<sup>21</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* 1973, 24–26.

<sup>22</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Options for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 327–347.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 52.

<sup>24</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 8–10.



## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

must complement each other. Here, theology becomes dynamic because it is born from the concrete experiences of poor communities struggling to survive.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Gutierrez links liberation theology to the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God. He rejects the separation between spiritual salvation and social liberation. For Gutierrez, salvation is a process of liberation that encompasses all dimensions of human life: spiritual, social, economic, and political. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is not merely a future reality but is also present in the world through the struggle against injustice. Therefore, involvement in social struggles is part of the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez writes that true faith must “hear the cry of the poor” and respond with concrete actions to transform oppressive social structures.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, poverty is no longer seen as destiny, but as a challenge to faith. The poor are not objects of pity, but rather active historical subjects in the struggle for liberation. Liberation theology rejects the paternalistic attitude of the church, which merely provides aid without changing the system. Instead, the poor must be empowered to become agents of change capable of fighting for their own rights. In pastoral practice, liberation theology calls the church to become a church of the poor. This means the church must move beyond institutional comfort and boldly present itself amidst the realities of poverty and injustice. Gutiérrez emphasizes that charity cannot be separated from the struggle for justice. The church must not only feed the hungry, but also ask why they are hungry. In this way, the church serves as a sign of God's presence, siding with the oppressed and opposing all forms of human oppression against others. This is a concrete manifestation of God's love that saves humanity whole, body and soul.<sup>28</sup>

Gutiérrez's views also faced criticism, particularly from the Vatican in the 1980s. Liberation theology was accused of being too influenced by Marxism because of its analysis of social structures and economic inequality. However, Gutiérrez emphasized that he was not adopting a political ideology, but rather using social analysis to understand the human reality that God wanted to liberate. His goal was not political revolution, but social transformation rooted in the Gospel. He wrote that “to be Christian is to participate in the history of human liberation,” a history in which God works through human action striving for justice and love.<sup>29</sup> Methodologically, Gutiérrez places the historical experience of the poor as the starting point for theology. This differs from traditional approaches that make texts or dogmas the center of reflection. In liberation theology, human experience, especially the experience of suffering, becomes the locus theologicus, the place where God reveals himself. By listening to the cry of the poor, theologians and the church learn to recognize the face of Christ present in those who suffer. This is not a secular approach, but rather a profoundly spiritual one, as it places the incarnation of Christ as the basis for solidarity with the oppressed. Jesus Christ is present in human history as a sign of God's solidarity with the poor and marginalized.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Gutiérrez's concept of liberation theology offers a new understanding of poverty: not simply an economic issue, but a theological and moral one. He asserts that poverty is a reality that demands a response of faith through concrete liberation. The Church and Christians are called to transform the world, not simply to look forward to the world to come. Human liberation from oppression is integral to salvation itself. Therefore, true faith must be expressed in acts of love and social justice.<sup>31</sup>

### 4. Church and Poverty

Poverty is one of the most fundamental and complex problems in human life. In nearly every nation and era, poverty is a social reality that demands serious attention, not only from the state and social institutions, but also from the church as a faith community. World Bank data shows that more than 700 million people worldwide live in extreme poverty, with an income of less than \$2.15 per day.<sup>32</sup> This reality not only shows global economic inequality, but also reveals the face of humanity wounded by unfair social, political, and economic structures.

<sup>25</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith,” *Concilium* 4, no. 6 (1972): 10–22.

<sup>27</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 89.

<sup>28</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 54–60.

<sup>29</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 22–25.

<sup>30</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Faith as Freedom: A Theological Reflection,” *Cross Currents* 29, no. 3 (1979): 243–256.

<sup>31</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 41.

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022: Correcting Course* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2022), 5.

In a theological context, poverty is not merely an economic issue, but also a moral, spiritual, and structural one. The church, as the body of Christ, is called to view poverty not only from a material perspective, but also from the perspective of salvation and God's justice. Poverty is a reality that challenges the church's faith and witness, because in the poor, the church encounters the face of the suffering Christ (Matthew 25:35-40). Therefore, the relationship between the church and poverty is not an external one, but inherent in the church's calling to bring God's Kingdom to the world.

### 4.1. Poverty from a Social and Theological Perspective

In general, poverty can be understood as a state of deficiency in fulfilling basic human needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education and health.<sup>33</sup> However, many experts emphasize that poverty is not only material, but also relates to social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Amartya Sen, an economist and philosopher, introduced the concept of "capability deprivation," which defines poverty as a person's inability to live according to the values considered important in society.<sup>34</sup> Thus, poverty involves the loss of human opportunity and dignity. In Christian theology, poverty also has symbolic and spiritual significance. In the Bible, poverty is often seen as a sign of humility before God (Psalm 34:7; Matthew 5:3), but also as a consequence of social injustice that oppresses the weak (Amos 5:11-12). Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez assert that poverty is "a scandal" that demands liberation, not just compassion.<sup>35</sup> He distinguishes between poverty as a virtue (spiritual poverty) and poverty as a social evil (material poverty). The Church, according to Gutiérrez, must side with the poor as a concrete expression of living faith.<sup>36</sup> From a biblical perspective, God is a God who sides with the poor and oppressed. In the Old Testament, the law of Moses and the prophecies of the prophets emphasized social justice and the protection of the weak (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-7). In the New Testament, Jesus began His ministry by quoting Isaiah's prophecy: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). This statement affirms that Christ's mission is one of total liberation, encompassing both spiritual and social aspects. The church that follows Christ must continue this mission in a world plagued by inequality.

### 4.2. The Church is Sent to Serve the Poor

The church is essentially not just a religious institution, but a community of God's people sent into the world (*missio Dei*). As participants in God's mission, the church is called to be a sign and instrument of God's love for a suffering world. This is confirmed in the document *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council which states that "the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the poor are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of Christ's disciples."<sup>37</sup> The church cannot be neutral about poverty, because neutrality often means siding with oppressive structures. In the light of liberation theology, the church must practice a "preferential option for the poor," a stance born of God's just love.<sup>38</sup> This commitment is not merely charitable aid, but rather social transformation rooted in justice and solidarity. John Stott writes that Christian mission encompasses two inseparable dimensions: evangelization and social action.<sup>39</sup> The church is called to imitate Christ who not only taught about the Kingdom of God, but also fed the hungry, healed the sick, and set the oppressed free. The early church provides a concrete example of how faith is lived out in solidarity with the poor. The Acts of the Apostles records that the congregation shared all they had so that "there was no one among them in need" (Acts 4:34). This demonstrates that service to the poor was an integral part of church life, not an optional extra. In later church tradition, figures such as Basil the Great, Francis of Assisi, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized that love for the poor is a concrete expression of obedience to Christ.<sup>40</sup> Poverty challenges the church on two fronts: first, as a test of the authenticity of faith; second, as a call to action. A church that turns a blind eye to the plight of the poor betrays the Gospel it proclaims. Jacques Ellul wrote that poverty is not just an economic issue, but also a matter of humanity's relationship with God, to the extent to

<sup>33</sup> Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 31.

<sup>34</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 87.

<sup>35</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 163.

<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 1973), 163.

<sup>37</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), no. 1

<sup>38</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 26–27.

<sup>39</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christianity Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 39–40.

<sup>40</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 156.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

which humans rely on wealth or grace.<sup>41</sup> A church that lives in luxury while many people suffer loses its moral credibility before the world. Therefore, the church's ministry to the poor must be prophetic, rebuking structures of injustice and striving for social renewal. In the modern context, poverty is often closely linked to the neoliberal economic system that creates significant inequality. The church needs to rethink its stance on the market economy, global capitalism, and the exploitation of natural resources that cause suffering for many poor people. The church is called not only to "feed" the poor but also to advocate for systems that enable them to live with dignity. More than that, the church must be a space where the poor have a voice. They are not simply objects of service, but equal subjects of faith. In liberation theology, the poor are referred to as the "locus theologicus," the place where God reveals himself in a special way.<sup>42</sup> Through encounters with the poor, the church learns about love, faithfulness, and true hope. Thus, poverty is not only a social problem to be eradicated, but also a mystery of faith that invites the church to discover God's face amidst suffering.

### 5. The Church's Responsibility in Overcoming Poverty According to Gutierrez

Throughout history, the Church has been called to manifest God's love in a world filled with suffering and injustice. One of the most obvious forms of human suffering is poverty. In a global context still marked by economic inequality and social marginalization, poverty is not simply an economic issue, but a reality with moral, spiritual, and structural dimensions. The liberation theology developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez provides a radical framework for thinking about the church's responsibility for situations of poverty. Gutiérrez rejects the view that poverty is God's will or the result of personal sin, but instead asserts that poverty is the result of unjust social structures that must be transformed through the liberating practice of faith.<sup>43</sup> He asserted that true theology is born from the struggles of real life, especially the experiences of the oppressed, and that liberation is at the heart of the Gospel message itself.

For Gutiérrez, the theological basis of the church's responsibility toward poverty lies in the recognition that God stands on the side of the poor. The entire biblical narrative, from Israel's deliverance from Egypt to Jesus' ministry among the sick and rejected, demonstrates that God is a God who stands on the side of those who suffer.<sup>44</sup> The church as the body of Christ is called to imitate God's attitude through real involvement in fighting for social justice. Thus, siding with the poor is not a purely moral act, but a fundamental call to faith.<sup>45</sup> In the concept of preferential option for the poor, Gutiérrez asserts that God has a special choice for the poor not because they are better or more pious, but because they are victims of an unjust social structure.<sup>46</sup> This bias is not discrimination against the wealthy, but rather a recognition that God's love is most evident when it is expressed for those who suffer most. A church faithful to the Gospel must make this choice the ethical and spiritual orientation of all its ministries.<sup>47</sup>

In Gutiérrez's view, the church is called to be a community of liberation—a fellowship that not only speaks of love but also lives in solidarity with the poor. The church is not merely a place of worship or a spiritual institution, but a social community where solidarity, equality, and love are manifested in concrete actions.<sup>48</sup> He rejected the hierarchical and paternalistic model of the church, in which the poor were merely objects of pity. Instead, they were to be recognized as active subjects of faith in the struggle for liberation.<sup>49</sup> The true Church is one that is present with and among the poor, sharing their lives, sufferings, and hopes. This solidarity is not merely emotional empathy, but rather a commitment that demands social transformation. Gutiérrez writes that faith without action is dead faith, because true theology is born of concrete practice.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 44.

<sup>42</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 32.

<sup>43</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 12.

<sup>44</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 1973, 83-85.

<sup>45</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 41.

<sup>46</sup>Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Well*, 1984, 97.

<sup>47</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 112.

<sup>48</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 106.

<sup>49</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 59.

<sup>50</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 11.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

One of Gutiérrez's most important ideas is the concept of structural sin. He asserts that poverty cannot be understood solely as a consequence of individual morality, but as a manifestation of unjust social, economic, and political systems.<sup>51</sup> This structure of injustice produces inequality that oppresses the majority of society and enriches a small elite. Therefore, the church cannot remain neutral. It has the responsibility to be a prophetic voice, rebuking public sin and challenging oppressive systems. The church must boldly speak out against corruption, the exploitation of natural resources, and neoliberal economic policies that marginalize the common people.<sup>52</sup> In this case, the church not only functions as a spiritual institution, but also as an agent of social change that brings the spirit of God's justice into the world structure.

According to Gutiérrez, the church's social service must be transformative, not merely charitable. While charitable services like the distribution of social assistance are important, they are insufficient because they fail to address the root causes of poverty. The church must develop a transformational diaconia, a service oriented toward empowerment and social structural change.<sup>53</sup> Through transformative diaconia, the church can educate the critical awareness of poor communities to understand the causes of injustice, accompany them in fighting for social and political rights, and develop forms of solidarity economy such as cooperatives or community businesses based on mutual cooperation.<sup>54</sup> The church must also engage in public advocacy, demanding policies that favor the poor, and fighting for equal access to education and healthcare. In this way, the church not only helps the poor but also walks alongside them toward a dignified life.

In addition to social responsibility, Gutiérrez also emphasized the church's spiritual responsibility towards poverty. He rejected the dichotomy between spiritual salvation and social liberation. For him, salvation is a process of liberation that encompasses all dimensions of human life: spiritual, social, economic, and political.<sup>55</sup> A church that only talks about the salvation of souls without addressing social suffering is considered to have separated the Gospel from the realities of the world. Jesus' own ministry demonstrated that the good news concerns not only life after death but also real liberation from oppression and suffering in this world.<sup>56</sup> Thus, when the church fights for justice and frees the poor from structures of injustice, it is actually realizing holistic salvation as God desires. In carrying out its calling in the world, the church is also called to be a prophetic voice. A prophetic church boldly rebukes social sins, speaks out against oppressive powers, and advocates for justice in the public sphere.<sup>57</sup> This stance demands moral courage to oppose corruption, economic exploitation, gender inequality, and all forms of structural violence. A prophetic church does not seek comfort or popularity, but rather fidelity to the truth of the Gospel.<sup>58</sup> In this context, church ministry is not merely a charitable activity, but an expression of God's love that demands justice and social renewal. The church is called to be a "voice crying in the wilderness," calling for social repentance and the renewal of structures that oppress humanity.

The church's responsibility for poverty also encompasses aspects of education and social awareness. Gutiérrez was inspired by the thinking of Paulo Freire, who developed the concept of conscientization, or critical awareness.<sup>59</sup> The Church, through faith education and pastoral care, needs to help its congregations understand social realities critically and reflectively. Faith education cannot be separated from social practice. Through liberating education, people learn that the Christian faith always contains a call to transform the world.<sup>60</sup> A theologically and socially intelligent church will produce a congregation that actively fights for justice, not one that passively accepts injustice as its fate. Thus, education becomes one of the church's primary means of fulfilling its responsibility to address poverty. In addition, Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, added an ecological dimension to the discussion of poverty.<sup>61</sup> They emphasized that poverty and environmental degradation are closely linked. Overexploitation of nature for economic gain often leads to suffering for poor communities who depend on it

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<sup>51</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 175-476.

<sup>52</sup>Clodovis Boff, *Liberation Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 83.

<sup>53</sup>Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 104.

<sup>54</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 39.

<sup>55</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 198.

<sup>56</sup>Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 203.

<sup>57</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 45.

<sup>58</sup>Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 99.

<sup>59</sup>Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 22.

<sup>60</sup>Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 56.

<sup>61</sup>Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 112.



## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

for survival. Therefore, the church's responsibility for poverty also includes a responsibility to the earth as our common home.<sup>62</sup>The Church must reject an economic system that destroys nature and oppresses humanity, and develop an ecological spirituality that values life. In this way, the Church strives not only to free humanity from poverty but also to free all creation from ecological destruction and injustice. In the Indonesian context, the church's responsibility for poverty takes on a unique form. Indonesia still grapples with structural poverty, economic inequality, and systemic corruption.<sup>63</sup>The Church in Indonesia, though a minority, has a moral responsibility to bear witness to justice among the nation. Indonesian theologians such as Daulat M. Tambunan and Firman Panjaitan emphasize that the church cannot simply imitate the Latin American model of liberation theology but needs to develop it in accordance with local social and cultural realities.<sup>64</sup>In a society that upholds the value of mutual cooperation, the church can develop forms of community-based socio-economic services such as congregational cooperatives, sustainable agriculture, or scholarships for poor children.<sup>65</sup>The church can also play a role in public advocacy on agrarian issues, the environment, and the rights of indigenous peoples.<sup>66</sup>Thus, the church's responsibility for poverty in Indonesia is not only spiritual, but also social, political, and ecological.

From all these reflections, it can be concluded that, according to Gutiérrez, the church's responsibility for poverty cannot be separated from its very identity. The church is the body of Christ, sent to bring about the Kingdom of God, a just, peaceful, and loving order of life.<sup>67</sup>Therefore, addressing poverty is not an additional issue for the church, but rather the core of its mission and witness in the world. Gutiérrez reminds us that a theology that does not produce liberatory action is a dead theology, and a church that does not side with the poor is a church that has lost the heart of the Gospel.<sup>68</sup>A church faithful to the call to liberation is a visible sign of God's love that sides with the oppressed and bears witness to God's love at work in a wounded world. Thus, the church's responsibility for poverty is an active faith—a faith embodied in liberating love, justice, and solidarity.<sup>69</sup>

### 5.1. Implications for the Indonesian Church

In the context of the Indonesian church, the above concept serves as a sharp critique of the presence of churches in Indonesia. Churches must define themselves based on the context in which they grow and live. Therefore, the church in Indonesia is faced with conditions of very high poverty. The church must be able to engage in discussions and practices regarding care for those who are oppressed by the structures that cause poverty. Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology has profound relevance for the context of church life in Indonesia. Although born of the socio-political situation of Latin America, his ideas about God's siding with the poor and the church's call to be a community of liberation find strong resonance amidst the social reality of the Indonesian nation, which is still marked by structural poverty, economic inequality, and deep-rooted corruption. In this context, the responsibility of the Indonesian church is not merely to provide social services or charitable assistance, but to empower the congregation to become agents of real social change in society.

The Church in Indonesia needs to internalize these principles as an ethical foundation in all dimensions of its ministry. The Church must consciously and actively side with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, not only in discourse but also in social and pastoral practice. In many cases, church ministry remains trapped in a charitable model oriented toward immediate giving. While this type of service is important, it fails to address the root causes of poverty. The Church is called to shift from a charitable model to a transformative model, one that focuses on empowering the poor to fight for their own rights. The Church must be present as a companion, not a paternalistic protector; as a friend who walks alongside the poor in their struggle for a dignified life. The Church in Indonesia needs to play an active role in educating and raising social awareness. This aligns with Gutiérrez's concept of awareness-raising, which is the effort to build critical consciousness so that people can understand social realities and reject structures of injustice. Through sermons, catechism, theological discussions, and non-formal educational activities, the church can help congregants theologically interpret the signs of the times. This liberating education

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<sup>62</sup>Boff, 115.

<sup>63</sup>Daulat M. Tambunan, *Church and Social Development* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 84.

<sup>64</sup>Firman Panjaitan, "Contextual Theology and Poverty in Indonesia," *Journal of Theology and Ministry* 10, no. 2 (2019): 145.

<sup>65</sup>Tambunan, *Church and Social Development*, 117.

<sup>66</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 209.

<sup>67</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 210

<sup>68</sup>Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 122.

<sup>69</sup>Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 124.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

enables Christians to understand that faith is not only concerned with spiritual matters but also with the concrete struggle for social justice. The church needs to develop cadres of faith with integrity, critical of social inequality, and ready to serve communities across religions and cultures for the common good (*bonum commune*). Therefore, the church in Indonesia is called to play a prophetic role in the public sphere. As a community living in a pluralistic society, the church must not isolate itself from the nation's social and political issues. Prophetic responsibility means daring to speak out against injustice, corrupt political partisanship, exploitation of natural resources, and human rights violations. A prophetic church is not synonymous with a partisan church, but rather a church that dares to rebuke structures of sin without losing love. In the context of Indonesia, which is still grappling with issues of corruption, rural poverty, development disparities between the western and eastern regions, and the marginalization of minority groups, the prophetic voice of the church is urgently needed. The church in Indonesia must pay attention to the ecological dimension of poverty. Gutiérrez emphasized that poverty and environmental degradation are two faces of the same crisis: human greed and an exploitative economic system. In many parts of Indonesia, the poor are direct victims of forest destruction, industrial pollution, and land grabbing by large corporations. A church that sides with the poor must also side with the earth as our common home. In this regard, the church's responsibility extends to the ecological realm by promoting environmentally friendly spirituality, advocating for sustainable public policies, and liturgical practices that foster respect for creation.

### 5.2. Relevance for the HKBP Church in the Case of PT Toba Pulp Lestari

Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology is deeply relevant for the Batak Protestant Christian Church (HKBP) in addressing agrarian and ecological injustice in its service area, particularly the conflict between indigenous communities and the company PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL). This conflict has been ongoing for years and has become a symbol of the structural suffering of the Batak indigenous people living around Lake Toba. PT TPL has seized customary land, built ditches to prevent residents from accessing their fields, and carried out massive deforestation that has damaged the local community's environment. In this context, the church is not only confronted with material poverty, but also structural, cultural, and ecological poverty caused by exploitative economic practices. According to Gutiérrez, this kind of poverty and oppression should not be seen as an individual problem, but as a manifestation of structural sin rooted in an unjust social and economic system.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the conflict between indigenous communities and PT TPL is not merely a social or political issue, but a theological one, a question of how the Christian faith responds to injustice that destroys human dignity and creation. The HKBP Church, as a church born in the Batak context, has a moral and spiritual responsibility to stand with the oppressed community and the damaged environment.

The principle of "preferential option for the poor" initiated by Gutiérrez became the ethical basis for HKBP to side with indigenous peoples as oppressed groups.<sup>71</sup> This commitment means not only providing charitable aid, but also actively engaging in their liberation struggle. The Church is called to stand with the people who have lost their land rights, for God is present in them and cries out for justice.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the choice to side with the poor and oppressed is a direct consequence of faith in Christ who came to proclaim good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). In the case of PT TPL, the community lost access to the land and forests that were their source of livelihood. This situation reflects the structural oppression criticized by Gutiérrez, where a handful of parties with capital and political power sacrifice the lives of many for economic gain. The HKBP Church, which wields social and moral influence in the Toba region, must re-interpret its calling not merely as a religious institution, but as a community of liberation that fights for people's rights and environmental sustainability.<sup>73</sup> Beyond the social aspect, this conflict also has a strong ecological dimension. Large-scale deforestation by PT TPL has caused environmental degradation, soil damage, and a decline in water quality around Lake Toba. Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian who added an ecotheological dimension to Gutiérrez's thinking, asserts that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of humanity are two faces of the same sin: greed that rejects God's love.<sup>74</sup> A church that sides with the poor must also side with the earth as our common home. In this light, the

<sup>70</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 172–175.

<sup>71</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*: Orbis Books, 1988), 178.

<sup>72</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 318.

<sup>73</sup>Firman Panjaitan, "The Church's Contextual Mission to Poverty Problems in Indonesia," *Evangelical* 5, no. 2 (2021): 153–167.

<sup>74</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 25–27.

HKBP church is called to develop an ecological spirituality that affirms that social justice is inseparable from ecological justice. The HKBP has a long history as a people's church, which in the past helped shape the identity of the Batak people in the fields of education, health, and social affairs. However, in this modern era, the HKBP faces a new challenge: how to present the Gospel amidst a capitalist economic system that often oppresses the common people and destroys the earth. Liberation theology offers a new paradigm for the HKBP, enabling it to go beyond doctrinal teaching of faith to practical living of faith in social and ecological struggles.<sup>75</sup> Thus, HKBP's diaconal service must move from a charitable model to a transformative diaconal model.<sup>76</sup> This means that the church cannot simply provide aid to affected communities; it must also accompany them in the process of advocacy, education, and empowerment. This is where the relevance of Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, adopted by Gutiérrez, becomes crucial.<sup>77</sup> The church can be a place of critical awareness education for the congregation to understand the structural causes of injustice, as well as to organize themselves peacefully to fight for their rights.

The prophetic role of the HKBP is urgently needed in this situation. The church must boldly be a prophetic voice, rebuking unfair corporate practices and demanding that the state take responsibility for protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. In the biblical tradition, the prophets consistently called for social and ecological justice as part of their faithfulness to God (Amos 5:11–24; Isaiah 58:6–7). A church that remains silent in the face of oppression perpetuates structural sin. Therefore, the HKBP must boldly use its moral and social authority to call for justice for communities oppressed by land and forest exploitation.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, reflections on liberation theology also remind HKBP to avoid the trap of spiritualistic theology, which focuses solely on spiritual salvation. Gutiérrez asserts that true salvation includes social and political liberation.<sup>79</sup> In the Toba context, salvation must mean restoring the relationship between humanity, nature, and God. Therefore, the true ministry of the HKBP is one that upholds human dignity and preserves creation. The church must live out the spirituality of a heavenly homeland while simultaneously respecting the land as a gift from God for all, not just a handful of entrepreneurs. HKBP pastoral action in this context can include several concrete steps: first, building solidarity networks with traditional institutions and environmental organizations; second, conducting ecotheological education for congregations about responsibility for the earth; third, advocating for agrarian justice in public forums and state policies; and fourth, presenting liturgies that foster ecological awareness. All of these steps align with Gutiérrez's spirit that the true church is one that goes down to the grassroots, walking with the poor and oppressed to live out the Gospel of liberation.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, the conflict between indigenous communities and PT TPL is not merely a local issue, but a reflection of the global struggle between faith and an oppressive economic system. In facing this reality, HKBP is called to bear witness to God's liberating love, as Gutiérrez emphasizes: a theology that does not lead to liberating action is a dead theology.<sup>81</sup> A church that remains silent amidst the suffering of the people loses the heart of its Gospel. HKBP has a historical and spiritual opportunity to become a pioneer of the liberation church movement in Indonesia—a church that stands with the poor and the wounded earth. By imitating Christ's presence amidst human suffering, HKBP can renew its ministry to become a tangible sign of God's love—a love that not only speaks but acts in defense, restoration, and liberation.

## 6. Conclusion

Gustavo Gutiérrez's thinking through liberation theology provides a strong theological framework for understanding and addressing the issue of poverty holistically. In his perspective, poverty is not merely an economic issue, but a theological scandal that demands a response of faith. God sides with the poor, and therefore, the church, as the body of Christ, must make that side the core of its faith-based calling. The true church is present

<sup>75</sup>Norman K. Gottwald, *Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 54–56.

<sup>76</sup>Marthen Nainupu, "The Church's Ministry to the Poor," *Sola Gratia* 2, no. 2 (2020): 15–16.

<sup>77</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Burns & Oates, 1993), 40–41.

<sup>78</sup>Dismas Kwirinus and Heribertus Peri, "Becoming the Church of the Poor," *Gaudium Vestrum* 7, no. 2 (2023): 60.

<sup>79</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: A&C Black, 1994), 82–83.

<sup>80</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 104–106.

<sup>81</sup>Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," 325.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Hana Masta Pasaribu and Riris Johanna Siagian

amidst human suffering, a sign of God's liberating love. The church's responsibility toward poverty, as formulated by Gutiérrez, encompasses spiritual, social, political, and ecological dimensions. The church must reject the view that salvation is solely spiritual; instead, salvation is a process of liberation that touches all human life. Liberation from personal and structural sin, from social oppression to spiritual alienation, are all part of God's work of salvation. Therefore, a church that focuses solely on spiritual activities without striving for social justice betrays the very essence of the Gospel. In the Indonesian context, liberation theology calls the church to carry out a contextual and relevant mission. The church is called to be a community that lives simply, sides with the poor, and dares to speak out against injustice. The church must also be a space of learning and social empowerment, a place where people grow in critical faith awareness and concrete practices of love. In such a community, faith is no longer an abstract discourse but a liberating action.

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