LIBERATION THEOLOGY: THE RICH AND THE POOR

The novel, One Day of Life, by Manlio Argueta, shows how the wealthy and poor people of El Salvador were affected by liberation theology. The novel is centered around the Guardado family and their struggles during this time in history. The Salvadoran family is very in tune with their religious spirituality. They relied on their church and priests many times throughout the novel. The priests that ran the church before “the liberation” told their parishioners things to make them feel better about their situation. The priests gave them a sense of false hope. “Children go to heaven. That’s what the priest used to say. And we never worried. We always believed that” (Argueta, 1983, p. 13). The new priests gave them hope by educating the poor to make their life better. The historic changes occurring during this time involved the church and the way religion should be practiced. Liberation theology affected the wealthy and the poor negatively and positively respectively. The two social classes were affected and reacted very differently to the changes in the church, and life, due to liberation theology. I will begin by giving a background on what liberation theology is and how it began. Then I will explain the benefits of the poor and how they reacted to the positive
changes. Finally, I will talk about the wealthy who were negatively affected and how they reacted to the new movement.

Liberation theology was brought into the El Salvadoran culture around the same time that the Vatican II took place, in the late 1960’s. At that time, the Catholic Church focused on the terrible living conditions in Latin America and vowed to make them better. So in 1968, at the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), “the new pope, Paul IV, pledged to preside over a church that responded not only to the spiritual, but also to the material, needs of the underprivileged” (Boland, 2001, p. 62). This was the first time that religion and politics were combined. A new theory was formed, a social conscience, if you will, called liberation theology. This was started in El Salvador by Father John Sabrino. Father John stated that “when the church has taken the poor seriously, it is then that it has become truly apostolic” (Thirty Good Minutes, n.d.). “Liberation theologians combined the words of the Scriptures with the message of Karl Marx to draw up a persuasive agenda that justified the participation of Catholics in the struggle for liberation of the poor and oppressed” (Boland, 2001, p. 63). Karl Marx was a sociologist who believed that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, basically. Marxists, people who support Marx believe “that a capitalist society is characterized by the last choice—the capitalists obtain whatever they can get
in any possible way” (Tischler, 2007, p. 209). This is what was happening in El Salvador until liberation theology took place.

Liberation theology really influenced the poor people of El Salvador. In this novel, Lupe, the main character talks about how the priests behaved before the movement. “And when we would tell the priest that our children were dying from worms, they’d recommend resignation or claim we hadn’t given them their yearly purge” (Argueta, 1983, p. 20). The priest did not care about these people and kept asking the parishioners for offerings. Then as I read on I could tell that things were changing for the better. “They’d (the new priests) descend to the Kilometer and would come to see how we were living. The previous priests never got as far as where we lived—they took care of everything in the chapel; they’d get out of their jeeps there—and then after Mass they would get back into them and disappear in the dust from the road” (Argueta, 1983, p. 25). These new priests cared enough to go out and meet the Salvadoran people on their level. “The priests arrived in work pants and we saw that, like us, they were people of the flesh and blood” (Argueta, 1983, p. 29). Instead of them going to church the church came to them. These new priests learned about the people and educated them on ways to make life better.

“They (the new priests) even formed the first cooperatives and we made a little profit. They taught us how to get a good

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Comment [s9]: Good, but introduce the QUOTE with a COLON.

Comment [s10]: Good use of first-person pronoun.

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Comment [s12]: You’re doing a good job of integrating these book quotes.

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price for our eggs, chickens or pigs” (Argueta, 1983, p. 26). The Salvadoran people began to create cooperatives/communities to allow themselves to meet and help each other so the conditions of living were not so bad. “These communities have been effective in showing workers and peasants how to organize for their own social welfare” (Rhodes, n.d.). Lupe and her family even made some money and were able to save some to buy toys and medicine for their children. The changes in the priests and religion also allowed the people of El Salvador to change. “Knowing that something called rights existed. The right to health care, to food and to schooling for our children. If it hadn’t been for the priests, we wouldn’t have found out about those things that are in our interest” (Argueta, 1983, p. 31).

The previous were not the only changes that occurred. Different people came to their neighborhood besides the new priests. “Well, back then something happened that had never happened before: the Guard started appearing in our neighborhood…” (Argueta, 1983, p. 26). These guards were taught how to bring violence to the people who went to church. Even Lupe realizes the great changes evolving in her neighborhood and sees how it is affecting the other population. “For us things were good; for others they were bad. Especially, for the landowners, who are the ones who suffered most when we demanded
our rights. They spend more and earn less” (Argueta, 1983, p. 32).

Finally, the wealthy were also greatly affected by liberation theology. The rich people had sent guards out to the neighborhoods where the new priests were helping the poor. They did this because the guards were needed to protect the land that the wealthy owned. The guards were taught, “The world had progressed precisely because we are not all equal” (Argueta, 1983, p. 133). The guards did not like the new priests and would not let the parishioners go to mass. They wanted to keep the people from going there. The new priests have taught groups of lay people how to teach religion to the community in their own neighborhoods so they wouldn’t have to endanger themselves. The gringo, a trainer of the guards, tells them that Christianity is being disgraced by the priests: “Even though the gringo tells us that the only true religion is Christianity, their religion, and that priests have been shitting on it ever since a Communist pope arrived on the scene…” (Argueta, 1983, p. 95). The guards requested that each person had papers to prove that they lived in that area, but the people didn’t have these important papers because they couldn’t afford them. “And they’d point the barrels of their guns at us, and we’d better stay away from the chapel…” (Argueta, 1983, p. 28).
The landowners were very upset by this change of events because they had given so much to the previous church. In their eyes, they were the ones who were suffering for it now because of liberation theology. The landowners and guards believed that their religion was changing too much. “Biblical theology reveals that God is for the poor, but it does not teach that the poor are the actual embodiment of God in today’s world. Liberation theology threatens to politicize the gospel to the point that the poor are offered a solution that could be provided with or without Jesus Christ” (O’Malley, n.d.). Liberation theology was not accepted well only by the landowners but many of the leaders of the church. Monsignor Arturo Rivera y Damas, who was named the archbishop after the assassination of Romero, “found it appropriate to take a more distant or ambivalent position with respect to the question of the proper role of the church in Salvadoran national life, a position that also accords more closely with the conservative attitude of the Vatican under Pope John Paul II” (El Salvador-Religion, n.d.). These changes happening were also causing problems inside the church. Some of the bishops were concerned that the hierarchy of the church was being compromised as well as the traditional roles of the priests. “As civil unrest in general increased in the late 1970’s, the church as a whole became increasingly polarized. The majority of the bishops supported the traditional role of the
church, the traditional hierarchy, and the overriding authority of the government” (El Salvador-Religion, n.d.).

In conclusion, liberation theology has affected all characters in this novel. However, the effects and reactions were quite different. The poor were helped greatly by this new movement at huge costs to themselves and their safety. The wealthy were not helped financially or economically. The guards did inflict violence on the poor, however, thought they were protecting their faith. These problems within the church are, now in society, a constant struggle.
References


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