LIBERATION THEOLOGY: THE RICH AND THE POOR

The novel, *One Day of Life*, by Manilo Argueta, shows a division of the social classes, the rich and the poor. The novel is centered around an El Salvadoran family and their struggles during this time in history. The family is very in tune with their religious spirituality. They relied on their church and priests many times throughout the novel. “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 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 very differently and experienced many changes in life and in the church. 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. Finally, I will talk about the wealthy and how they were affected.

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 Jon Sabrino. “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 that believed that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, basically. 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” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 20). The priest did not care about these people and kept asking the parishioners for offerings. Then as you read on you 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” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 25).

The 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” (Argeuta, 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…” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 26). Even Lupe realizes the
great changes evolving in her neighborhood and see’s how it is
affecting the other population. “For us things were good; for
other’s 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” (Argeuta, 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” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 133). The guards did not like the new priests and would not let the parishioners go to mass. The guards wanted to keep the people from going there. 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…” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 95). The guards requested that each person had papers to prove that they lived in that area, but the people didn’t 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...” (Argeuta, 1983, p. 28).

The land owners 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 believe that their religion is 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. “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 were quite different. The poor were helped greatly by this new movement and changed their beliefs to benefit from it. The wealthy were not helped financially or economically by this turn of events but did stay true to the traditional Catholic faith.
References


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