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## When Theory Met Practice

**By Rev. Robert A. Sirico**  
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With the departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti lost more than just another in a long line of political despots. It also lost an aging icon of a brand of Christian socialist theory that was once hugely influential in both North and Latin American seminaries. As a former priest of the Salesian order, who studied theology in England, Canada, Italy and Israel, Mr. Aristide was a proponent of Liberation Theology, which attempted to weave Marxian dialectics into the Gospels in the name of helping the poor.

He had been ordained in 1982, in the last decade of the Cold War, when Latin America became the focus of many would-be revolutionaries. In the regional political struggles of the period, many clerics ended up playing an important and tragic role, giving cover to violent revolutionaries and would-be left-wing dictators, or advocating violence.

As pastor of a poor parish in Port-au-Prince, Father Aristide was one of their number. He preached the moral necessity of violent politics. In sermons later published in his book "In the Parish of the Poor," he called for forming "battalions" to perform "acts of deliverance" and for overthrowing the regime by "any means necessary" and pined for a Haitian version of the Sandinista Revolution. He did not hide his sincere devotion to Christian communism, which preferred its humanitarianism soaked in blood.

For this, he was expelled from the Salesians. He was elected president in 1990 but was overthrown in a coup eight months later. The Clinton administration restored him to power in 1994 amid wild optimism that his background and political values were precisely what this poor country needed. He was elected again in 2000, although discontent had reached such a point that the members of many opposition groups refused to vote. The discontent became violent earlier this month, resulting in his exile.

And little wonder. With Mr. Aristide, theory met practice. His "liberation" had much in common with that from which he was supposedly liberating his

people. He centralized power, channeled plunder and positions to those loyal to him, neglected the plight of the poor, and failed to govern with an eye to the common good. The revolt that led to his ouster may have begun among the merchant and property-owning class, but it spread to all sectors of society. To borrow a phrase, the expropriator was expropriated.

It should be said that there are many sincere people among the adherents of Liberation Theology. Their claims about the evils of certain dictatorships are often correct, just as Mr. Aristide was largely correct in his youth when he decried exploitation of the masses by the Duvalier regime. The theory is similarly right about the moral priority of helping the poor and about the evil of systems of government that neglect their plight.

When Liberation Theology was at its height, the Vatican dealt cogently and fully with its errors in the area of faith and morals. Just as serious, however, were its errors in the area of economics. Rather than seeing the state as a frequent source of oppression, Liberation Theology saw private ownership and capitalism that way. But if you eliminate property and the exchange economy, what are you left with? Not the utopia for which the socialists have long dreamed. You are left with a state that must centrally plan an economy, which no state anywhere can do with efficiency or an eye to prosperity. The result is economic chaos, from which the poor suffer more than anyone else, as John Paul II noted in an encyclical on economics in 1991. And of course, without private property to resist the power of the state, despotism is inevitable.

Lacking a coherent view of economics or an understanding of how society functions and develops, Liberation Theology ends up with precisely what it decries most of all: centralized power exercised on behalf of the few at the expense of the many. The story has been repeated so many times in the past 100 years that one would think that even theology students would get the message that socialism is a very bad idea. But somehow, there are always those who think that the next attempt under the right person will at last bring Heaven to Earth. Thus was Mr. Aristide's rule despotic not despite his professed adherence to the theology of liberation but precisely because of it.

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