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The documentary "The Gospel of Revolution" traces liberation theology's history of inspiring social movements in Latin America to seek economic and social balance through policies that prioritized the poor. (Icarus Films)



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In one of his many rousing speeches during the 1940s, Colombian politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who fought for the rights of "the people" against the oligarchies, proclaimed, "*¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*" ("The people united will never be defeated"). The motto was adopted by Popular Unity protesters in Chile, which is how it came to the ears of musician Sergio Ortega Alvarado, who in 1973 recorded the eponymous protest song that became a banner for social movements across Latin America and all over the world.

I was six when I first heard the "people united" motto. My grandmother, Ana Ruth Zúniga, told me about her days in the Honduran cooperative movement, where she and my grandfather Marcial helped farmers create unions and fight for land reform in a country that had become a "banana republic" ruled by American corporations and the wealthy Honduran families that aided and profited from them.

It doesn't take long into director François-Xavier Drouet's documentary, "The Gospel of Revolution," to see footage of protesters carrying a "people united" banner. The sight made me think of the snowball effect painted in Matthew 4:24, "The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them."

In "Gospel," Drouet traces liberation theology's history of inspiring countless social movements in Latin America to seek economic and social balance through policies prioritizing the well-being of the poor. The film also documents how these movements were squashed through American intervention and a series of military coups that changed the course of the continent's history.

Liberation theologies became prominent following the Second Vatican Council, presided over by Pope John Paul XXIII and Pope Paul VI, who advocated for a church that dealt not in abstract faith but in missionary work. The roots of this movement inspired theologians, priests and nuns in Latin America to create grassroots organizations that empowered the poor.

Religious leaders became targets ("Be a patriot, kill a priest" was a motto in El Salvador).

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The provocative and rousing documentary is divided into chapters following revolutionary movements in Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Nicaragua. As Drouet travels from country to country we get a sense of how the spirit of revolution came to be in each place, how religious leaders became targets ("Be a patriot, kill a priest" became a motto in El Salvador) and how the repercussions of those failed movements continue to affect Latin America.

Drouet avoids the colonialist tradition of forcing meaning into the history he's sharing, willingly becoming an observer instead of a guide. Whatever parallels are drawn to what's happening in the world, Drouet allows viewers to decide for themselves. The result is a meditative experience.

When María López Vigil, a Nicaraguan journalist and theologian, talks about how she came to understand that structural sin, as differentiated from personal offenses towards God, needed to be corrected, it's impossible not to think about the growing wave of fascism that makes a Liberation Church feel more urgent than ever.

When Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano wrote "Open Veins of Latin America" in 1971, he traced the five centuries of exploitation of the continent. His prescient book remains important as Latin America continues to heal from military coups, violent dictatorships and the eradication of a church that lived the words "Thou shalt not oppress the poor and needy hireling from thy brethren, or from thy stranger which is in thy land in thy gates." (Deut. 24:14).

Toeing a fine line between academic chronicle and call to action, "The Gospel of Revolution" aches with the silenced sorrow of people who once upon a time saw the promised land within their reach, only to have it taken away. But the film is not without hope. In several individual stories, we meet people who continue working at the margins, living with the poor and feeding the hungry.

Growing up, one of my favorite stories was about the meals my grandmother shared with farmers and plantation workers; simple meals of tortillas and salt passed around under the hot Honduran sky, sheltered only by palm trees. I recently discovered that my grandmother authored the prayer of the cooperative movement in Honduras, which continues to be recited by impoverished people who still believe that the dream of "The Gospel of Revolution" is possible.

*Let us raise our spirit to God,  
who is a source of goodness and an example of justice.*

*May he light in our hearts  
the thirst to serve our neighbor,  
inspired by the noble principles of cooperativism.*

*Let him illuminate our understanding  
and guide our selfless decisions,  
and spirit of profit.*

*In order to achieve the resolution of our problems,  
economic and social, and those of our brothers  
in order to promote, achieve and preserve world peace.*

*So may it be!*

- Ana Ruth Zúniga

"The Gospel of Revolution" is showing at select screenings and film festivals worldwide.

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