

8.41

Was Mary's Magnificat Banned in Guatemala?

In February 1993, the *Chicago Sun-Times* reported:

In Guatemala, the mother of Jesus became a fulcrum for liberation theology's social justice movement, compelling the government to ban the singing of the Song of Mary or the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) as subversive. In it Mary proclaims that God will bring down the mighty, raise up the lowly and feed the hungry.¹

This claim is made repeatedly in works on liberation theology and spirituality and, eventually it became an axiom cited in numerous works on Luke's Gospel or on Christian liturgy.

For example, the Benedictine poet and essayist Kathleen Norris says:

Mary utters a song so powerful that its meaning still resonates in profound and disturbing ways. In the twentieth century Mary's "Magnificat" became a cornerstone of liberation theology, so much so that during the 1980's the government of Guatemala found its message so subversive that it banned its recitation in public worship.²

The claim is often stated authoritatively, but those who have tried to substantiate it have found no evidence of an actual government proclamation to this effect. While the Guatemalan government

definitely disapproved of the Christian base communities that heralded the Magnificat as an anthem of liberation, it apparently did not officially ban use of the hymn (a staple of the Roman Catholic liturgy), at least not in any manner that left a paper trail.

It is, of course, possible and probably likely that use of the Magnificat was discouraged due to its association with revolutionary political groups, and such discouragement may have been expressed in a variety of ways in different settings.

Resistance to oppressive governments in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and other Latin American countries was widespread in the 1980s and such resistance found spiritual and ideological support in the liberation theology movement. Sentiments of that movement may be seen in a 1979 document issued by the bishops of Latin America:

The poor [referred to in Mary's Magnificat] do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in sociopolitical life. Those found in this category are principally our indigenous people, peasants, manual laborers, marginalized urban dwellers, and in particular, the women of these social groups. The women are doubly oppressed and marginalized.³

So, poet Norris cited above continues:

The Magnificat reminds us that what we most value, all that gives us status—power, pride, strength and wealth—can be a barrier to receiving what God has in store for us. If we have it all,

or think we can buy it all, there will be no Christmas for us. If we are full of ourselves, there will be no room for God to enter our hearts at Christmas.

Mary's prayer of praise, like many of the psalms, calls us to consider our true condition: God is God, and we are the creatures God formed out of earth. The nations are but nations, and even the power of a mighty army cannot save us. We all return to dust. And if we hope to rise in God's new creation, where love and justice will reign triumphant, our responsibility, here and now, is to reject the temptation to employ power and force and oppression against those weaker than ourselves.

We honour the Incarnation best by honouring God's image in all people, and seeking to make this world into a place of welcome for the Prince of Peace.⁴

The Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Luke 1:46–55

1. Larry Stammer, "Theologians Question Role of Virgin Mary," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Feb. 7, 1993.
2. Kathleen Norris, "Fourth Week of Advent," in *God With Us*, ed. Greg Pennoyer and Gregory Wolfe (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 99.
3. Council of Latin American Bishops, "Final Documents of Puebla," third general meeting of the council, January 1979, footnote to §1135.
4. Norris, "Fourth Week of Advent," 113–14.