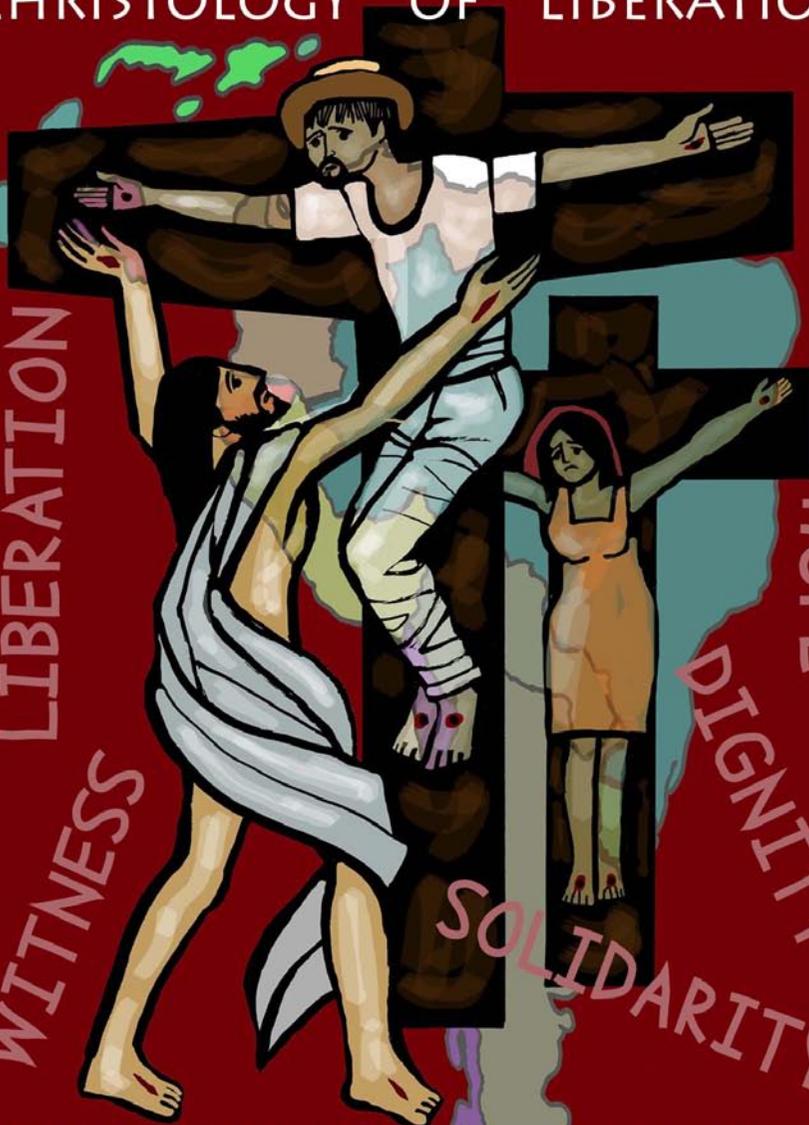


GETTING THE POOR DOWN FROM THE CROSS

CHRISTOLOGY OF LIBERATION

JUSTICE
LIFE
LIBERATION
WITNESS



REIGN
HOPE
DIGNITY
SOLIDARITY

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION

OF THE ECUMENICAL ASSOCIATION OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS

JOSÉ MARIA VIGIL (ORG.)

PROLOGUE: LEONARDO BOFF

EPILOGUE: JON SOBRINO

GETTING THE POOR DOWN FROM THE CROSS
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International Theological Commission
of the
ECUMENICAL ASSOCIATION OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS
EATWOT

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EATWOT / ASETT

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Prologue: Leonardo BOFF

Epilogue: Jon SOBRINO

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Prologue

Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Liberation Christology

“A brother who is helped by a brother is like an invincible city” (Prov 18:19). That is the experience that we as theologians want to communicate to our brother, Jon Sobrino, who has been treated to a painful ordeal because of his reflective and meditated faith, also called “theology”. May he, with our help as brothers and sisters, feel as strong as a fortress.

One thin stalk plus another do not make two thin stalks but a strong one because solidarity generates strength and creates the solidity of fraternity. Even though individually we are thin, we are many who stand beside him, constituting the strength of the *sacramentum fraternitatis*, the sacrament of fraternity. We express our fraternity and sororality by doing what Jon Sobrino has always done quite seriously and with compassion: reflect on our faith in Christ in the context of peoples who are crucified. That is what has always been, is now, and above all is determined to continue being our “liberation Christology,” which we all write, do, and live: Yes, a militant theology that struggles to “get the poor down from the cross,” without pretending neutrality or a hypocritical equidistance.

Every word in this digital book takes advantage of the propitious occasion provided by the Vatican notification about some points of his Christology. It is a book that pushes forward what, in our opinion, Jon Sobrino, for his part, has written with such pertinence, orthodoxy, and orthopraxis in dealing with the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ, based on the humiliated humanity of millions of brothers and sisters of our peripheral societies. He has taught us how the Churches can join forces in the resurrection of those who are crucified.

We are aware of the limitation of our words. They are nothing in face of the richness that is Christ. “Be still and welcome the Absolute,” Kierkegaard used to say referring to Christ. But, if in spite of this we speak, it is not about Christ as a challenging object, but about Christ as the One who is our Liberator and our Hope that there is still salvation for the world, especially for those marginalized peoples who are ignored in our societies.

We make the words of Saint John of the Cross, the burning mystic, our own: “There is much to fathom in Christ, for he is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures, so that however deep individuals may go they never reach the end or bottom, but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere. On this account St. Paul said of Christ: In Christ dwell hidden all treasures and wisdom (Col. 2:3).”

Easter, 2007

Leonardo BOFF

Petrópolis, Brazil

Introduction

From the beginning, the International Theological Commission of EATWOT believed it was appropriate to offer this service of coordination to theologians interested in bringing their word before public opinion in the face of the preoccupations that have arisen in not a few circles as a result of the “Notification” by the Vatican regarding two works of our brother and companion, Jon Sobrino. The issue that came into play and the theology that was shaken by this event was not that of an individual theologian but rather touched the thinking, the theology, and the faith of many theologians and of many more Christians. “Millions”, Bishop Casaldáliga would say a few days later, referring to “those who accompany Sobrino” around the world and who share the same task, mission and hope from the perspective of the poor. As a result we needed someone to take the initiative and create a platform to express ourselves together and with a strong voice.

We proposed promptness as a priority. We needed, once and for all, to overcome the proverbial sluggishness of our reactions in the face of events that call out for a word from us. We determined that we should hit the street “exactly one month” after the publication of the Notification as a theological community which, in addition to being alive and alert, knows how to move with the accelerated rhythm of these new times.

On this occasion we decided to address to the general public, to the men and women in the street who need a rapid word that comes “on time,” before the endless stream of news replaces important topics with new preoccupations. And we needed to do this with a word for the street, without complications or technicalities, without the paralyzing perfectionism of someone who seeks to polish all the rough points that can catch the fine silks of our censors.

The urgency and the duty of expressing ourselves was not only an act of solidarity with a companion, but also the responsibility of those who feel that the theology to which they have consecrated their life—with which they have expressed and lived their faith—is being questioned publicly. What is ultimately at stake is Liberation Christology, a branch of the weathered and persecuted theology of liberation. A responsible theologian cannot remain silent or look the other way when his/her theology or faith – from which no one can be separated – is once again questioned.

We therefore offered these pages to all theologians who wished to take advantage of them to speak their word. We simply asked them to adjust, as much as possible, to these criteria, precinding, for the time being, from both the Academy and the Inquisition.

The reader has the results on his/her screen, or eventually in his/her hand. More than 40 people from different parts of the spiritual Third World have put their hands to the work. It is that world whose covenant is raised up in the heart independently of the place where one lives. These are texts that focus in a way that is free, different and creative. In any case, practically all of them go beyond the Notification. No one sees any point in entering into a polemic about it; they simply offer a witness to what they believe and what they think without looking back. Instead, they take a step forward and reaffirm the job of their theological labor.

We are very pleased to be able to offer our word also for the English-speaking world. We hope this will be the first of many other opportunities in the future. If you are interested in assisting in future English translations, please contact the organizers as we have begun to create a volunteer translation network which will quickly enable our theological work to be accessible to English speakers throughout the world, in the Global South as much as in the Global North—Manila and Munich, Nairobi and New York.

At this point we announce a major and more reasoned work, one that will be developed with a special theological preoccupation for the Academy and the world theological community: we propose to publish a “Consultation on Liberation Christologies” as a new service to the theological community. We believe the present situation justifies it.

We acknowledge and thank the various messages of congratulation and support that we have received from so many people who have

expressed their satisfaction that someone took the initiative and offered this service. We also understand those who were not able to collaborate since this initiative coincided with a period that was overloaded in their agendas. Maybe the next time....

In addition, we are trying out a new way of reaching the public this time. This is a “digital book”, an entirely free book that can be offered as a gift and sent anywhere through electronic means and that can also be printed through a process that is usually called “digital printing” or in some places, “docutec.” This allows the commercial printing of books in minimal quantities (20, 10, 5 copies) at a cost that is equal to a normal book printed by offset. In this way we believe that we are putting this work, as a real book in paper, in the hands of smaller and more remote groups. It can thus reach the network of printers and bookstores in all those places on the planet where there is access to the internet without any other condition than that they locate an available service of “digital printing” be located. We think it is a new step that deserves to be celebrated.

On page 6 you will find information on how to retrieve this book either in digital form or as full resolution originals for printing according to the method of “digital printing.”

We are really pleased to be able to offer this service. It has been a pleasure and an honor and we are prepared to continue offering it in the future.

From cyberspace, May 15, 2007.

José María VIGIL

Coordinator of the
International Theological Commission of the
EATWOT / ASETT

Questions to CDF Regarding Jon Sobrino's Notification

The CDF recently published a Notification on the theological publications of Jon Sobrino SJ of El Salvador. It is the first major action of William Cardinal Levada, from the USA, as Prefect of the CDF in succession to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. It warns Catholics of possible errors on several tenets of Catholic doctrine.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has the objectives of safeguarding the Faith as well as of promoting theological development. The Notification deals very much with issues of Christology including the personality of Jesus Christ and his role in human salvation. It is critical of the writings of Jon Sobrino, remarking that some of his views are erroneous in terms of the teaching of the Catholic Church. Without commenting on them directly one would like to raise briefly some related questions concerning traditional dogmatic theology of the Church that are problematic in our Asian context, and to some extent elsewhere also. These may hopefully bring some light (or further problems) on the ongoing dialogue on this occasion.

The Dogmatic teaching of the Church concerning Jesus Christ and his role as universal and unique redeemer of the human race relates to the premise that the whole human race is in original sin and cannot redeem itself from its effect of deserving eternal damnation. It is only the grace of God merited for us by Jesus Christ that can bring about a reconciliation of God with humans, personally and as a group. Further it is defined doctrine that membership of the Church is essential for salvation due also to original sin (cf. 16th Council of Carthage 418, Second Council of Orange 529, General Council of Florence 1442, Council of Trent: Decree on Original Sin, 1546).

In this connection there can be some relevant questions to the CDF.

1) Of scientific nature concerning Monogenism and the consequent presupposition that all humanity is from the two first parents, Adam and Eve.

2) A further question is on the sources of divine revelation and their exegetical interpretation, including taking the Genesis description as literal and factual historical truth.

3) One wishes to ask a general question from the CDF for elucidation of Catholic doctrine. How can we propose as Christian doctrine that all those who were not members of the Church were destined to eternal damnation? Was this not the doctrine of the Church till a few decades ago? Is it reconcilable with the teaching of Jesus that God is love? Is not such a teaching not acceptable to those not of Christian faith.

4) Did not such a teaching and thinking give a wrong direction to the Church including intolerance of other faiths? Is it not only with Vatican II that the Church accepted the freedom of religions, treating other faiths also as possible paths to salvation? In this perspective most Asians were thought of as outside the pale of salvation. Could this be a reason why Christianity is accepted by only about 2% in Asia (excluding the Philippines)?

5) The Notification refers often to the Church's concern for the poor, especially by saintly members undertaking charitable works of mercy. But the issue Jon Sobrino is stressing is social justice. Was not the Church generally on the side of the oppressors during the centuries of colonialism and slavery, and even now of male domination?

6) The Notification is critical of Sobrino's statement:

"The poor in the community question Christological faith and give it its fundamental direction ... the Church of the poor ... is the ecclesial setting of Christology because it is a world shaped by the poor. The social setting is thus the most crucial for the faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of Christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break."

The Notification, critiquing this view, presents the faith of the Church as the primary norm for evaluating theological writing:

"the faith of the Church. It is only in this ecclesial faith that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological set-

ting... (i.e.) in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations”.

A question asked very much specially in the Asian region is : how can the consequent traditional exclusivist teaching of the Church concerning other religions and salvation be reconciled with the universal love and salvific will of God. But was this narrow view not held by the Church throughout many centuries till the changes of Vatican II (1962-1965).

The CDF Notification states that Jesus as God-man enjoyed the beatific vision of God from his conception in the womb of the Mother of God. How could the Church receiving revelation from such an all knowing Jesus propose profoundly wrong doctrines as “outside the Church there is no salvation”? How can such an unacceptable ecclesial teaching be the epistemological correct setting for discerning the faith of the Church?

Pope John Paul II apologized on over 100 occasions for the wrongs by the sons and daughters of the Church to others - and that even violently in the pursuit of what they thought was the truth. He sensed that the ecclesial teaching contributed much to the misunderstandings and conflicts such as the Crusades, and the colonial invasions. He called for a purification of memory and an openness to other religions as at the days of prayer at Assisi.

Perhaps the responses of the CDF to these questions may help the readers of Jon Sobrino evaluate his theological searches in his context ; and the CDF to define its historical role in the 21st century amidst widespread secularization mainly in the West and our multi-religious cultures. A public response to these questions would be most helpful to many, including theologians like Jon Sobrino grappling with the questions of inter-religious relations and social justice. In this the CDF can make a positive contribution to the purification of Christian theology and inter - religious harmony and justice in the world. Could we invite the CDF to contribute towards the development of theology in a direction that does not alienate persons of goodwill from the Church, and invites all to build the reign of God on earth, according to each one's lights.

Tissa Balasuriya OMI

Sri Lanka

Jesus of Nazareth, Spirit of Compassion

Elements of an Afro-Brazilian Christology

In spite of the long and rigorous ecclesiastical winter and of the fundamentalism expressed in notices from the Vatican, as well as in confessional synods that decide to break off relations with ecumenical organization, we live, in Latin America, in a moment of a new revaluation of the Afro-American and Indigenous religions. For these, the person of Jesus Christ has been respected and even feared for a long time. The dialogue with Christians of an African culture that seek to get close to Jesus and his experience of faith in the tradition of their African ancestors has changed this reality. The indigenous religious communities, as well as the Christian groups of African culture have begun to reinterpret the faith that was transmitted by a Christianity that was imposed by the colonizers. This not only changes the way that Candomblé and Umbanda begin to see Jesus Christ, but also those expressions of faith of the Christian communities of the masses with an African heritage and who live more closely with the indigenous beliefs and rituals.

I propose to deal with the latent Christological elements found in the various forms of popular Catholic devotion. I want also to touch on the evolution we can see in the way the communities of Candomblé see Jesus, but I will deal even more with the manifestations of faith in the African-heritage communities that are part of the Christian churches.

1. A look at Actual and Popular Catholicism

The colonizers brought from Europe a profoundly syncretic Christianity, “the result of a synthesis between the ancient religious experience of the Greeks, Romans and barbarians and the Judeu-Christian tradition.”¹ The ancient Councils that defined the Christological faith that was dominant in Christianity, in addition to the political interests

of the moment, were situated in this effort to express the Faith to the new peoples who were entering the Church. Today, the first thing necessary to observe is that the Christian faith, lived out by the Catholic and Evangelical communities already does not express exactly the same formulation that was consecrated by the ancient Councils.

Brazil is one of the few countries in the world in which the spiritist doctrines continue with great vitality. Inside this cauldron of cultures and theological expressions, terms such as “Son of God” and “incarnation” have meanings that diverge from what the ecclesiastic traditions had given them. Son of God, yes. However, a *mãe de santo* asked me: “Why the ‘only’? Tibetan Buddhism says that the Dalai Lama is the incarnation of the very Buddha of Compassion and I have no difficulty in believing this. God has so many ways of manifesting the divinity. But why say that only Jesus is the Son of God?” In the same fashion, when, in the most ‘popular’ levels of Brazilian religiosity one speaks of “incarnation,” it is easily understood by many to refer to a kind of “first reincarnation.” None of this has anything to do with the Christian dogma expressed by the ancient Councils of the Church.

This reality of popular Christianity is not, in itself, totally different from official Catholicism. In the same fashion, many times the popes, bishops and pastors expressing themselves about Jesus mix elements of Nicea and Chalcedon with myths that have been unconsciously absorbed in “popular” Christianity. All Catholics begin prayers “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” and the traditional churches continue making liturgical prayers to the Father, through the Son in the unity of the Spirit. However, this liturgical theology seems to have been only slightly absorbed in devotional practice. Even a rapid and superficial glance at the Catholic and Evangelical hymnals used in our dioceses and parishes, will show not only a kind of Christological monism (a Christ God considered in himself, in which the human element entered only as a transitory ‘covering’), but even worse, a religion whose God is Christ, with no direct or experiential reference to the Father.

Even prayers and official hymns of the Liturgy contain expressions that are questionable and rather unorthodox. Look at this prayer in the Office for the Evening of Holy Saturday in the current Liturgy of the Hours: “O God of the universe, who rules over the ends of the earth and Whom they tried to seal up in a tomb, free from Hell the human race and give it immortal glory.”²

In reading this prayer, one can recall Moltmann and his thesis of “The Crucified God,” according to which the Father is on the cross

with Jesus. But these prayers are not offered to the Father. They are offered to Jesus.

A greater and more critical understanding of history, as well as the challenge of cultural and religious pluralism gives us theological and pastoral reasons to question the Christological expressions of the ancient Councils, already different from the faith expressed in the New Testament, which, in itself, is already different from the faith movement Jesus proposed initially. However, a majority of our religious communities, even the “non-popular” ones, regard Jesus in ways that are not those of the Councils. They are more mythical, less humanized and less capable of dialoging with other faith expressions.

For these reasons it is even more urgent and essential that we reencounter other ways of believing in and speaking about Jesus. Even with the ambiguities inherent in the theme, I propose looking more deeply at Christological elements that seem to me to be characteristic of many persons and of communities that are living the Christian faith within the Afro-Brazilian cultures.

2. A popular spirituality of alliance

Many times, in the theology and pastoral practice of Popular Catholicism, in its diverse forms, it has been accused of being superstitious and even a kind of idolatry. In times of a Crusade for a Christ-centered dogmatic, it doesn't cease to be interesting to observe that many groups supported directly by Rome and a majority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy center much more of their faith in a devotion of Mary and in the worship of the saints than in the worship of Jesus.

In recent decades, we perceive that, by acting in this way, the faithful of “popular” Catholicism are redoing the spirituality of the alliance proposed by the Biblical faith that they have received. God seems to them to be distant and separated from life, so they have engaged in an alliance of intimacy with the manifestations of divinity that seem to them to be closer. The saints of popular devotion become “manifestations of God” as in the Biblical culture they speak of Torah (Word), the Shekiná (Tabernacle), the Hokmá (Wisdom), of Glory and even of the “Angel of the Lord.”

This religious expression of the Christian faith exists in the most diverse levels of popular Catholicism, whether Black, Indigenous or even of the European tradition. In certain form, it is present in some of the devotional practices in Europe and in North America. However, in Latin America, this kind of popular theology is found in the Afro

and Indigenous cultures. In the Ioruba faith and in the religion that came from Angola, as in many indigenous communities, this relation of intimacy with God takes place through divine manifestations in Nature (which in Candomblé are called Orixás and in the Angolan tradition Iquices).

A person, consecrated to this or that Orixá, has a relation so intimate with the Orixá he or she receives that he/she is transformed. The Lord of Bonfim in Salvador, or the Lord Jesus of Lapa, or Jesus of Pirapora are saints as any others. But these saints are manifestations of the Divine Love. They protect their devotees and accompany them in their lives.

Since in recent decades the Afro religions have begun to be appreciated and don't have to be hidden or camouflaged, their followers have more freedom to worship the Orixás directly and without the syncretism through which they called Iemanjá Our Lady. Within this new freedom, many faithful to the Orixás have "separated the waters" and have ceased to be part of the Church. But many, many of those who honor the Orixás want to continue to be worshippers of Jesus Christ. This Jesus is received and believed in from within a religion that is its own and that is original. The Story told in the Gospels and the traditional preaching of the priests and pastors are heard and incorporated. "Jesus is the son of the Virgin Mary, suffered for us, was crucified to save us," are known details, but are understood from within their own vision of the cosmos. In the context of condemnations and Christological debates, it is good to understand better these popular Christologies, principally in relation to Jesus and the Orixás.

3. Jesus and Kanambe

When I was in Kenya in January of 2007, I tried to get to know some expressions of the ancient African religions to see if this would help me to better understand the Afro-Brazilian traditions. I was taken about 100 kilometers from Nairobi, to see the traditional village of the Kamba people. There I met an elderly woman, a priestess of the Kanambe tradition, the Goddess of Water. After I listened to her express her faith in her traditional religion, I was quite surprised when they told me that all of the people there were Christians, including this priestess, who is often called by the Catholic priest during the Mass to bless her people. I asked how she understood the relation between her traditional religion and the Christian faith. She was surprised at the question and answered with words and expressions that, for me,

were very surprising. I took note of everything that she said and tried to translate her answer: “There is no difficulty in connecting Jesus and Kanambe. Jesus Christ reveals the God present in history, in the events of life and in the people and helps us to discover that Kanambe reveals God present in Nature, in the Earth and Water. The two orders are not in conflict and even interconnect. Jesus is a kind of fullness of faith in Kanambe, but not in such a way as to empty or substitute a kind of ‘western Christian culture’ for it, but, on the contrary, to give it value and ‘historical density.’”

It is clear that this expression of faith by that African Christian will never be accepted by a Christology for which Jesus is “unique” and, as happens with all colonizers, wants to substitute for what was there before as an exclusive faith. In fact, she told me of the difficulty she has when some neo-Pentecostal groups arrived that demanded that they abandon even the clothes, customs, music and cultural dances of their people.

My dialogue with that African priestess helped me to comprehend better the wisdom of the Afro-Brazilian syncretism. This has had an evolution or process that we can resume in three phases.

4. From the Lord of Bonfim to the Orixá Jesus of Nazareth

The understanding of the Christ, as lived by the descendents of the slaves, had a complex evolution, with at least three stages or levels:

1. Tribute to the Lord of the Good End.

In past times, devotions to Jesus as “Lord of the Good End”, the Good Jesus of the Lapa and others represented a species of tribute that the Blacks would have to pay to the white god who was not a friend of the slaves or their descendants, but would have to be bowed down to and courted to avoid punishment, since he was a strong god and he protected the white lord. It is from these times that there came the promises that demanded sacrifices and pain, such as going up steps on one’s knees, being humiliated in public, not eating on certain sacred days, or not drinking even water and so on.

2. The syncretism with traditional Orixás.

With the official end of slavery, no country indemnified the former slaves or took care for the survival of these people. They were abandoned to their fates. From this time, the Black communities star-

ted slowly to reappropriate for themselves their symbols and their own religion. For those who were Christian, this provoked a certain evolution in Christology. They did not need to see any more the Lord of the Good End or the Good Jesus of Lapa as gods of the white ruler. Those “gods” had not ceased being white and to represent always symbols of the colonizer. But, now, they really could be appropriated by the communities of the Afro culture. To clean them of the trappings of slavery, the black faithful or their descendants, now associated them unconsciously with Oxalá or Xangô. Many did this, not from ignorance or because they confused their gods with the Orixás, but because they needed this identification (in the same fashion that for Latin Americans committed to the Revolution, the figure of Che Guevara seems like that of Jesus Christ). It is a Christology of the syncretism of confusion or reappropriation.

3. The Orixá Jesus of Nazareth.

In recent years, we have passed to another level of Afro-Brazilian Christology. After the Second Vatican Council, many people of the Afro communities have participated in Biblical groups and Christian Base Communities. In these environments they learned to give value to the historical Jesus. The contact with the Gospels allowed a broader knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth in his historicity as a human being. This knowledge was integrated into these communities and even became part of their worship practices and common faith. However, as Xangô, Ogum, Oxalá and Oxossi were ancestors, kings or princes of the ancient kingdoms of Ioruba and thus became Orixás and associated with fire, iron, the earth, and the virgin forest, in the same way the Black communities began to see Jesus Christ as someone who lived in every way a human existence and, with his death he was taken up by God and became divine. That's like an Orixá. It is a man who, for having lived in a just and holy way, became divine, even as all human persons are called to become.

4. The originality of Jesus of Nazareth.

To express in “concepts” one's own faith is difficult, but to try to express how others believe is practically impossible, without running the risk of being unjust or reductive. In the case of the Afro-Brazilian cultures, it is even more complex because of the diversity of expressions and cultures and the fact that they are oral traditions. In any case,

all of these forms of living the faith make up a dialogue with or an engagement with popular Christian traditions and with the necessity of facing the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

There is a bit of everything. You could develop a complete Christology of the devotion of the “Dead Lord;” another Christology of the mythical Jesus of the oral narratives, which, in the midst of the people, form the new apocryphal Gospels full of stories that people told about “when Jesus and St. Peter walked in the world.” Almost all of the popular sanctuaries were born of fantastic stories related to the apparitions of images or extraordinary miracles. Most of them occurred with “Our Lady,” who in Latin America, substituted for the worship of Mother Earth or the goddess of fertility. In Brazil, however, there are a few Jesus (Good Jesus of Pirapora, Good Jesus of Lapa, etc.) All are a human Jesus, full of compassion (“Good Jesus”) pictured in his Passions as a figure of solidarity with human suffering.

Because these expressions of faith are experienced by a majority of the poor and suffering people, the figure of Jesus always appears as being the suffering and humiliated Christ. The Cross receives an explanation of solidarity as “he gave his life for us” (gave up himself to his enemies in the place of his disciples) more than as a justifying sacrificial character (gave himself to the Father or died for our sins).

These kinds of faith expressions come from persons not connected to Occidental culture. The tentative efforts at a Christological synthesis, when they take place, are not to legitimize hierarchical power or the domination of people by other people (there are official Christologies that were thought out with this in mind and then hide the fact). For all of this, they are Christologies that come from below and are connected with the life of those who suffer. They are narrative Christologies, and fragmentary, because they are not of a dogmatic character (they tell stories, rather than affirm dogmas); they aren’t ashamed of being incomplete. Instead of any tendency toward a Christo-centric exclusivist effort, Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One of God), but he is not isolated from all of his brothers and sisters. Not even the forces of Nature, which are divine sacraments, nor the personages who, like Jesus, are for the people Christs or Consecrated Ones. On the road to freedom, these communities learn to value the fact that the very person and mission of Jesus may be summed up in his own word: “I came that all may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10: 10)

In 1996, in Bogotá, the Second Continental Encounter of the Assembly of the People of God proposed the development of a

macro-ecumenical spirituality. They sought to re-read faith in such a way that our beliefs could unite us rather than divide. Wasn't this the pastoral purpose of John XXIII? The final document of the Second Continental Encounter of the Assembly of the People of God says: "We recognize Life as the maximum expression of the love of God for all beings and we defend the life of our people and of all Nature! Facing the globalization of the idols of death that the socio-economic system of the world points to, we proclaim the globalization of such signs of divinity as the gift of Life and the creative presence in the universe. Confessed in a thousand names, revealed to us through thousands of faces, through, above all, the indigenous and Afro-Amerindian religions, as well as through the Christian faith of our Latin American peoples, the divine mystery is always greater than our confessions, more beautiful than our images, and unique in the most diverse encounters and in its different forms of manifestation.

"As members of the its family, this divine love wants us alive and free, many and united, happy in this moment, in the common home of the Earth Mother and beneath the glowing ceiling of the Sun, the Moon and the stars. Inspired by the Divine Spirit, we say "no" to the fatalism of a supposed End of History and we fight against all forms of exclusion, arrogance, fear and death."³

This affirmation can be read as a summation of a Macro-ecumenical Christology in the sense that it recognizes in the person and mission of Jesus Christ this kind of witness. As Leonardo Boff says: "It is necessary to gather courage for a new and surprising incarnation of the Christian faith. It is necessary that Christ speak our languages, be dressed in our color, be celebrated in our dances and praised in our bodies, realities with which the Black People have enriched the Brazilian nation."⁴.

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Notas:

1. L. BOFF, *O caminhar da Igreja com os oprimidos*, Vozes, 1988, 31-32.
2. Liturgia das Horas
3. Cf. Final Document of *II Encontro Continental da APD*, em Cajamarca, Colômbia, 1996.
4. BOFF, *loc. cit.*

A Christology based on the Nazarene

We need to examine the thinking related to the incarnation of the Son of God from the correct perspective; otherwise we are immediately confronted with an impasse and find ourselves disorientated.

1. Incarnation as a term and not as the beginning of history

The incarnation is a point of arrival, not a starting point. It is the culmination of the whole Christological process which comes from below with the question asked by the masses, perplexed and full of admiration: “Who then is this, who commands even the winds and the sea, and they obey him?” (Matt 8,27; Mk 4,41; Lk 8,25). At the root of everything is the impact that the historical Jesus produced: the force of his word, his liberating feats, his freedom as regards the Law, his sovereign authority; later, his shameful death and his glorious resurrection. Such facts, especially the resurrection, radicalised the question that all the apostles and disciples were asking themselves: after all who is Jesus who we know and “we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon, and our hands have handled” (1Jn 1.1)?

More than 50 titles attributed to Jesus, from the simplest: master, prophet, good, to the most sublime: Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, Saviour and God, aim to explain the perplexity and the questions asked in the communities. In the period of 40-50 years following his death and resurrection, Jesus attracted all the titles of human and divine

honour that circulated in the Roman Empire. We call this deciphering process Christology. This was an unfinished process, and continues as such today. Therefore we have still not come to an exact understanding of the reality of the Nazarene, alive, dead and resurrected.

I like to use the name *Nazarene* for Jesus not to settle the geographic location of his home, but to indicate a subtle theological intention still present in the gospel of John. To John, Nazareth was considered a worthless place (Jn 1,45-46; 6,42): a land where there lived, according to the preconceived ideas of the time, ignorant people who did not know the law (Jn 7,4), obscure and anonymous individuals who did not attract anybody's attention. To say that Jesus is the Nazarene, as F. Brändle points out (*Why Jesus the Nazarene?*, in *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 39,1991,34-41), means that Jesus is of the world of the poor and marginalized and lives in the "flesh" situation, related to the environment from which he came. Moreover, the first Christians were initially called "Nazarenes"; a name abandoned later in Antioquia, about the year 43, when the Roman magistrates who considered the followers of Jesus members of a Jewish sect, had started to call them Christians (cf. Acts 11,26,28. 1Pe, 16). Focussing on Christology from the Nazarene is not only focussing on Christology from the man tout court, but from one determined man marked by poverty and social discrimination: the historical Jesus.

We know that the three cultural groups of Christians: Palestinians, Jews from the Diaspora and Hellenistic Christians, contributed, with their respective titles of exaltation, to the deciphering of the mystery that surrounded the trajectory of the Nazarene. This culminated when the Hellenistic Christians boldly affirmed that Jesus was the Saviour, the only Son of God, the Head of the Cosmos, the Head of the Church and the same God. No grand name could match the richness of Jesus; the only way was to call him God. At heart they thought: "As human like Jesus only God Himself".

It is important to stress that such titles of grandeur and even divinity do not act as foundations for the sovereignty, freedom and authority shown by Jesus in his terrestrial life. Instead, they aim to explain and to give the reasons for his authority, freedom and sovereignty. It is not the titles that conferred upon him this authority, but rather his authority gave origin to the titles. None of them are able to translate the incomensurable human wealth of Jesus, to which the evangelist John gives testimony: "I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21,25). Therefore only through using divine names and attributing to Jesus the proper divinity are we able to give

an adequate reply to the question asked by the man of Nazareth: “But what about you?” -he asked- “Who do you say I am?” (Matt 16,15).

2. How are God and man combined in the Nazarene?

To call a man like Jesus God creates a huge problem in our minds. What does God mean then? Who is this man who can say himself that he is God? What does it mean to consider the union of both -God and man- in a historical being, who was born under the Roman emperor Augustus in the “*immensa romanae pacis maiestas*”, grew up in Nazareth and was crucified in Jerusalem: our brother, Jesus, the Nazarene? Taking the statement “the man Jesus is God” on face value, he constitutes a paradox and even a scandal for Jews and for all religious people for whom God exceeds man infinitely, as “He lives in light that no one can come near” (1Tim 6, 16).

On the other hand, the faith of the original community testified: that which is God we, Christians, find alive and materialized in a man, Jesus of Nazareth, in his life, his practice, his death and his resurrection. In addition, through reflecting upon the human life of Jesus, the Nazarene, we learn what man is, in his radicalness and true humanity. It is not, therefore, from the abstract analysis of what constitutes God and what constitutes man that we understand who Jesus Man-God is. But it was through coexisting, seeing, following his steps and deciphering Jesus that we came to know God and the man. The God who is revealed in Jesus is human. The man who is revealed in Jesus is divine. This is what constitutes the singularity of the Christian experience of God and man. Man and God are so intimately involved that we can no longer speak of man without speaking of God and we can no longer speak of God without speaking of man.

In summary, we can say: The more man Jesus was, the more God was revealed in him; the more God was related to Jesus, the more God was humanized in him.

How can we understand similar statements that are true paradoxes: a difficult union of opposites? When we speak of Jesus Christ, we must always think, jointly and simultaneously, of God and of man. The coming together of both in Jesus is such that neither God nor man lose anything of their essence or reality. Here is the central thesis, affirmed as dogma by the Council of Chalcedon (451): “one and the same Jesus Christ... is truly God and truly man... subsisting in two natures

without confusion, change, division, or separation... and coming together to form one person and subsistence”.

This formula does not explain *how* God and man come together to form *one and the same* Jesus Christ; it only affirms the criteria that must be given in any type of explanation: the complete humanity and the true deity of Jesus must be maintained simultaneously, without compromising their basic union.

This Council, to express such a truth, used the effective cultural model of Greek bias, using the words *nature* and *person*. In Jesus two natures come into play: the divine and the human, borne and supported by the same person: the Son eternal, responsible for the union of the same, unique Jesus Christ. How that union of natures through the divine Person occurs, however, was left open by the council fathers.

3. The Nazarene: the man who is God and the God who is man

This open problem calls upon the creativity of theologians. Each generation will try to insert Jesus, God-Man, within the context of life, envisaging the experience of salvation he brought as coming not from outside but from his own humanity. Therefore it is important to start from his own humanity. Not from humanity already categorised and defined, but from humanity as it was lived by Jesus. From his life we learnt, and from his mouth we heard, that existence must be pro-existence, in favour of others and of the Great Other, God. Therefore, Jesus lived this way of life so radically that in him was revealed the “novissimus Adam” (1Cor 15,45). He was absolutely open to all and did not discriminate towards anybody, to the point of saying “whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (Jn 6,37).

If he was liberal as regards the law, he was demanding as far as unconditional love was concerned. Particularly with the Great Other, God, he created a very intimate relationship, calling him *Abba*, dear Daddy (Mk 14,36; Rom 8,15; Gal 4,6). Consequently he himself felt that he was his Son (Matt 11,27 pair; Mk 12,6 pair. 13,52 pair). This relationship does not betray any badly realised Oedipus complex: it is diaphanous and transparent. He indeed begs the Father to release him from pain and from death (Mk 14,36 pair; Jn 11,41-42), but even here he does not want to carry through his own will but rather the will of the Father (Mk 14,36). His last words are of calm surrender: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23,46).

His understanding of himself, coming from the Father, is total, thus he says: The Father and I are one (Jn 10,30). The fact that he opened and delivered himself completely to the Father means that he does not possess what the Council of Chalcedon taught: he was lacking the “hypostasis”, the “person” and the subsistence, to remain within himself and for himself. He was completely empty of himself in order to be absolutely full of the Other. He was fulfilled in the Other, not being anything for himself, but everything for others and for God. The lack of “personality”, in the old sense, was not a lack; it was the mark of Jesus: it was not imperfection, but the maximum perfection.

To become empty means to create inner space to be filled with the other. It is through going away from the self that the human being forms a deeper self within; it is through giving that we receive and possess our own being. Therefore Jesus is the *ecce homo*: because his radical humanity was secured not by an autarkic affirmation of himself, but by the unrestricted giving of his being to others and to the Great Other: “I give my life for my sheep” (Jn 10,15).

The more Jesus existed in God, the more God existed in Jesus. The more the man-Jesus existed in God, the more divine he became; the more God existed in Jesus, the more human he became. However, the man-Jesus existed in God in such a way as to identify with Him (Jn 10,30); God existed in the man-Jesus in such a way as to identify with him. God became man so that man became God.

If somebody accepts in faith that Jesus was the blessed man (*benedictus homo*) and thus could relate to God to the point of feeling that he was his Son and feeling at *one* with Him; if somebody accepts in faith that God could thus empty himself of Himself (cf. Phil 2,7) to fill the total opening of Jesus, to the point of becoming a man Himself; then this individual accepts and professes what the fathers of the faith taught in the Council of Chalcedon: without confusion, change, division or separation the unification of God and man in one and the same Jesus Christ, God remaining God and the man remaining radically man. This individual professes the incarnation of the Son of God in our warm and mortal flesh (Jn 1,14).

The incarnation does not have to be regarded only in the light of the Nazarene: in his *sarx*-related way of life, participating in the limitations of the human condition. It must, rather, be contemplated in the light of the Resurrection, with the total, patent and transparent revelation of what was hidden in Jesus of Nazareth: the universal,

maximum opening for all cosmic, human and divine realities, up to the point where Paul could say: “Christ is everything and in everything”(Col 3,11).

If Jesus is truly our brother, “equal to us in everything but sin” according to Scriptures and the Council of Chalcedon, then these statements are somehow valid for each one of us. Each one of us participated in his incarnation. We have the “*incarnatio diminuta*” of which the fathers speak. Or, as Council Vatican II beautifully puts it: “For His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man” (*Gaudium et Spes* 22/265).

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(Translated by Maria José Gavito)

The Commitment to taking the Poor down from the Cross

God the father holds many surprises in store for us, during the course of life, which portray both his goodness and mercy and, progressively educates us in the faith. These moments of grace do, perhaps, encourage us to make a radical commitment to the kingdom project and cause us to exult in happiness just as Mary of Nazareth did when the angel Gabriel announced to her that she was to be the mother of the Savior (cf. Lk 1,26-38). On other occasions they make us tremble in pain and kindness, like he apostle Paul, when he proclaimed his willingness to complete in his body, that which had been lacking in the Passion of Jesus Christ (cf. Col 1,24).

In recent times and in minute proportions, God, in his wisdom, has granted me the privilege of coming into contact with both of these surprises. The first was the gift of having the opportunity, not only of delving into Jon Sobrino's Christology in a thesis for my doctorate,¹ but of having had the opportunity of meeting him personally and bearing witness to his unwavering faith, his firm hope and his unconditional love of the poor. This contact with his theological reflection, which brings together into one scientific precision, consistency of life-style and sympathetic commitment to the poor, consolidated my belief and strengthened my pace in the pursuit of the practice of Jesus. The second of these surprises was that of not just hearing of the *Notification* by the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith regarding the writings of Jon Sobrino, but at the same time feeling, in a very special way, one with him and the whole community of theologians, both male and female, at this moment of suffering, a very fertile one for theological reflection.

Based on the fundamental methodological principle that no author or no written material can be correctly understood outside his, her or its context and without taking into consideration the entirety of the work, avoiding judgments made on isolated phrases taken out of their context, these short reflections wish to concentrate on two aspects indispensable for understanding the extent and intensity of the theological thought of Jon Sobrino: his course of life, understood within its context; and the essential elements of his Christology.

A Life Committed to the Outcry of the Victims

Despite the fact that he did not consider himself a professional theologian,² even though he carried out activities such as lecturing, writing, publishing and doing research, Jon Sobrino is, undoubtedly one of the greatest exponents of the present day theological scenario. For him to do theology is not to exercise the profession of the theologian, but instead, a way of life and existence. It is, above all, a life commitment to the Jesus project: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10,10).

His closeness to the suffering of the poor, his sensitivity to human pain and his docility to the Spirit led him to direct his time, physical strength, his gentleness of spirit and the sharpness of his intelligence towards the defense of the victims of this world.

Born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1938, he joined the Company of Jesus in 1956 and was ordained priest in 1969. From 1957 on he was part of the Central American Province, living, mostly, in the city San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, a tiny country in Central America, which he had adopted as his home.

Having graduated in Philosophy in the university of Saint Louis (USA) in 1963, Jon Sobrino got an Engineering Masters in the same university in 1965. His theological formation took place during the period leading up to, and coming immediately after Vatican Council II, and the Second Latin-American Bishops' Conference in Medellin, in 1968. He got his Doctorate in theology in 1975, in Hochschule Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt (Germany), his thesis being *Significado de la Cruz y resurrección de Jesús en las cristologías sistemáticas de W. Pannenberg y J. Moltmann*. (I.N. The meaning of the Cross and Resurrection in the Systematic Christologies of W. Pannenberg and J. Moltmann).

He got an *honoris causa* doctorate in the Université catholique de Louvain, in Belgium (1989), and in Santa Clara University, in

California, (1989). At the moment he is the one responsible for the Dom Oscar Romero Pastoral Center, and is also director of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* and the periodical *Cartas a las Iglesias*, as well as performing pastoral duties, answering the numberless calls for lectures, courses, encounters and congresses coming from all corners of the world, as well as being professor of theology in the Universidade Centroamericana up to recently.

When describing his theological career, Jon Sobrino affirms that, during his youth and his early years of Jesuit priesthood, the difficulties encountered living out his faith and vocation, were more of a challenge to his will power than to his intelligence, that is, they did not force him to think. However, it was during this period, referred to by him, as the *preceding period* of his life, that the seeds were planted and the roots were spread, many of the questions and ways of thinking which only came to the surface later on in life were implicitly present. This *preceding period* was followed by two important moments, which he referred to as his double awakening: from the *dogmatic slumber* and from the *slumber of the cruel inhumanity*.

The awakening from the *dogmatic slumber* came as the result of a strong painful jolt that knocked to the ground many of the concepts related to faith and demanded the reformulation of others. This took place during his philosophy and theology courses, when modern philosophers, the great masters of suspicion, such as Kant, Marx, Sartre, and Unamuno, were studied, as well as the critical exegesis and the demythologization of Bultmann, Modernity and the de-absolutizing of the Church.

Regarding theology, what was specific to this *awakening* was, as he himself said, the discovery of the triple mystery: that of God – the supreme mystery –, holy, near but not malleable; that of the human being and that of reality. This important discovery produced in Jon Sobrino the conviction that the mystery contains within itself, at one and the same time, excess darkness and excess brightness. Little by little he learned to see it from the angle of excess brightness. His great tutor during this period was, especially, Karl Rahner.⁵

Jon Sobrino wrote nothing explicit on the question of the mystery, but the discovery did have decisive consequences on his theological career, remaining there as a type of theological substratum. For him all theological knowledge is integrated into the mystery, and the deep reason behind his interest in Christology lies in the certainty that Jesus of

Nazareth sends us back to the mystery of God and the human being: it is in the relationship between these two mysteries that the fullness of the mystery is to be found. Then later on, when writing about the poor, – as well as the historical, social and political dimension -, he saw them principally as the expression of this mystery, *mysterium iniquitatis*.

At the beginning of his priestly ministry, Jon Sobrino felt the fresh spring breeze in the Church, as a result of Vatican Council II (1962-1965), and also the Second General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopacy, which took place in Medellin (1968), and which gave direction to his line of thought and his way of doing theology in the confrontation with injustice and oppression in El Salvador, in a Latin-American Church which, little by little, was opening up to the privileged cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the poor.

It was in this context that the awakening from the *slumber of the cruel inhumanity* took place. A jolt, at one and the same time, both shocking and happy, bringing him to realize that the Gospel, *eu aggalion*, is not just a truth to be reaffirmed, but a Good-News that produces happiness. It consisted, essentially, in the perception of a new reality: the poor and the victims are the result of sin and human oppression. This meant getting to know the God of the poor and the poor themselves, for whom the most urgent problem is survival and whose immediate destiny is a slow death.

This awakening had drastic consequences for religious and ecclesial living, intellectual interests, certainties and doubts regarding the faith, theological questioning, and demanded integrity when faced with the tragic historical reality of massive and unjust repression and death. It led to the perception of the existence not only of God but also of the idols. The existence not only of atheism, but also of idolatry, and the discovery of the transcendental relationship between God and the poor. The poor and the victims are sacraments of God and are the presence of Jesus in our midst.

All of this meant a radical change in the understanding of what it means to do theology. Without ignoring the *intellectus fidei*, it became, preferentially, *intellectus amoris*, or in other words, a theology interested in “taking the crucified nations down from the Cross”, precisely because of this *intellectus misericordiae*, *intellectus iustitiae*, *intellectus libertationis*. This theology is, also, *intellectus gratiae* and grace became part of his theology not as a specific theme to be developed but as God’s gift that nourishes and develops the theological task.

For Jon Sobrino, to see theology as *intellectus amoris*, the understanding of the accomplishment of the historical love of the poor and the love that makes us like unto (*afins*) the reality of God, is the greatest theoretical discovery of the theology of liberation, making it more biblical and more historically relevant, and helping it to be '*mistagógica*', offering love as the main way to make us like unto God.

Dom Oscar Romero's co-worker and close friend, Jon Sobrino is the tireless defender of the canonization of this martyr of our times. He defines him as "one human being capable of saving us and redeeming us from our egoism and smallness, like Jesus himself, to whom we can look in our moments of affliction".

A man bearing the scars of suffering and death, in his fight in the defense of life, Jon Sobrino can be referred to as a "living martyr", for having escaped death and lived through, in faith and hope, the painful experience of seeing his fellow companions being assassinated, especially his great friend Ignacio Ellacuría.⁴ This tragedy had a profound influence on his life and made stronger still his decision to fight for justice.

He is witness to the cruel poverty and injustice, the terrible and massive massacres of these victims of El Salvador, as well as their splendor, hope, creativity and immeasurable generosity. Regarding his own personal faith experience, in his typical simplicity and conviction, he says: "I think that I can sum it up using the words of the prophet Micah (6,8): 'act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God in history', adding to them the expression used by Jesus: with joy and hope".

The vast and extremely rich theological production of Jon Sobrino covers many of the basic areas of theology: the mystery of God, spirituality, ecclesiology and, above all, Christology. Jon Sobrino's great merit lies in the fact of him having contributed, in an efficient and decisive manner to the development of a Christology of liberation, with new interpretative characteristics that link theory and practice, history and transcendence.

The publication of the first of his writings, *Cristologia a partir da America Latina. Esboço a partir do seguimento do Jesus histórico* (T.N. Christology as seen from Latin-America. An outline from the standpoint of the following of the historical Jesus), in 1976, the fruit of a course given by him the previous year in the Theological Reflection Center of San Salvador, marks his public incorporation into the group

of liberation theologians. From this date forward, Jon Sobrino became famous for his extensive theological production, published in both books and magazines.

To follow Jesus of Nazareth, sent to announce the Good-News to the poor.

Among the prophetic innovative intuitions of Jon Sobrino, three are basic and inclusive for the understanding of his theological thought: the historical Jesus, the poor and the following of Jesus. Grounded on this triple reality and interwoven with his own vital and radically committed response, his Christological proposal is, above all, the theory of a practice.

The figure of the historical Jesus of Nazareth

Anointed to proclaim the Good-News of the kingdom to the poor, Jesus of Nazareth is the methodological starting point and the hermeneutical principle of the Christology of Jon Sobrino. This methodological option is a determining one, and one that runs through all of his Christology, opening up new prophetic perspectives.

Placed within the context of this second element, he tries to rediscover the theological density of the life of Jesus and redeems the deep meaning of his earthly life, with the objective of recreating his way of acting today and continue his cause and avoid that access to Christ be ideologized.

In this fashion, Jon Sobrino's Christology falls within the perspective of the New Testament, which professes the divinity of Christ, narrating the history of Jesus of Nazareth. The logical process coincides with the chronological one, which led to the confessions of faith and the dogmatic formulations.

To re-establish the historical Jesus is to reproduce his life in all historical circumstances. What is most historical in Jesus – he affirms – is his way of acting with the Spirit that makes it possible place all historical elements in a hierarchy and contains the mistagogical potential capable of leading into the totality of the mystery of Christ.

Very important consequences for the Christology of Jon Sobrino are derived from this methodological option, such as the discovery of the centrality of the Kingdom of God, the Father-Son relationship between Jesus and the Father, the mission to liberate, the call to follow him, the life of Jesus as the privileged place for the manifestation of the Spirit.

Hope of resurrection from the perspective of the victims

Sensitive to the reality of extreme poverty in which the majority of human beings live, “bent under the burden of life: survival is their greatest problem and a slow death their closest fate”⁵, Jon Sobrino affirms that the situation of the victims of this world or the crucified peoples is the breeding ground for his Christology and they are, at the same time, its privileged audience. He intuited the necessity of doing theology in the defense of the victims, *intellectus misericordiae*, and in this way introduced the poor and the victims into the center of the theological reality, making the relationship between Jesus and the poor the meta-paradigm of his Christology.

This perspective is founded on a double imperative: God’s preference for the weak and the little ones of this world, and the situation of extreme poverty in which the majority of human beings are forced to live. The poor are the sign of the times, the cruel reality, in the face of which it is necessary to have new eyes to see the truth of reality – the truth of human beings, God’s truth – and react with a heart abundant in mercy.⁶

Jon Sobrino’s Christology is characterized by hope, and inspired by the light of the resurrection of Jesus, which is an expression of, not only of the power of God over death, but also over the injustices that produce so many victims. God rose up the crucified one, consequently there is hope for all the crucified of history.

In his earliest writings coming under the influence of Medellín and Puebla, Jon Sobrino refers to the poor and oppressed proposes the total liberation of the human being. Later, while living the hard reality of the countless massacres and assassinations in El Salvador, he went on to insist on, especially, the reality of the victims of this world and the need of a *re*-action in the face of the other’s suffering which had become interiorized, and which he refers to as the mercy-principle.⁷

It is important to take note of the double ecclesiality in which Jon Sobrino’s Christological reflection is rooted: the first ecclesiality is the community living of the faith and the presence of Christ in history, especially the crucified Christ, incarnated in the person of the poor. The second ecclesiality is the Church as an institution, the factual place of Christology. These two aspects do not substitute each other, but rather mutually vindicate each other.

The following of Jesus of Nazareth

Starting with the historical Jesus, Jon Sobrino discovers, in the following of Jesus, the key to, and the synthesis of, Christian existence. He reaffirms that the call of Jesus of Nazareth is an uncontested historical fact, which has its own proper specificity that distinguishes it from the invitation extended by any other leader at any time or place. Through Jesus God intervenes in the history of the human person, in a radical unconditional fashion. The specific aspect of the Jesus proposal lies in the fact that it is directly linked to his person and reveals the awareness that he had of who he was and his salvific mission.

The following of Jesus – the basic Christological principle – is, for Jon Sobrino, the starting point for all theological-Christian epistemology and the fundamental hermeneutical principle. It is in this following that the rediscovery of the historical Jesus takes place and getting to know Jesus is a question of affinity and co-naturalness. Outside this following one cannot argue either for or against Christ – Jon Sobrino affirms – simply because one does not know sufficiently well what is being discussed.⁸

The following of Jesus is an all-including reality with the intrinsic capacity of embracing all spheres of human possibilities, of structuring Christian life in its full totality, of putting all human-Christian values on an hierarchic scale, of unifying the essential dimensions of Christian existence, while avoiding the danger of historical alienation and the manipulation of Christ according to ones own interests.

The acceptance of this invitation and setting out on the road with Jesus involves taking on that commitment of being the small seed scattered in the cornfield, at the mercy of the winds and the rains so that the Kingdom of God does become a reality. It presupposes the necessary courage to accept the challenge of fighting against the counter forces of the anti-Kingdom.

The following of Jesus has two tension points: the living, active memory of the past and ones courageous response to the challenges of the day. In the conflictivity of history, the following of Jesus is both the place of, and the criteria for, discernment. It is to walk the same road of pain and hope as Jesus walked and reproduce the basic structure of his earthly life: incarnation, liberating mission, cross and resurrection.

These three realities: Jesus of Nazareth, the poor and the following of Jesus are intimately and profoundly related one to the other: Jesus is sent to announce the Good-News to the poor and the poor are

his chosen people. The historical Jesus is the criterion for this following and this following is the way to rediscover the historical Jesus and continue his practice of fighting for a decent life for all.

These three pivotal points, understood within the context in which the theological reflection of Jon Sobrino came into existence and developed constitute a key to the reading and proper understanding of his proposal and express it with a plurality of spirit characteristic of the history of Christology since its very origins, expressed in the different images of Jesus portrayed in the New Testament writings.

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Notes:

- ¹ Seer: BOMBONATTO, V. I. *Seguimento de Jesus. Uma abordagem segundo a cristologia de Jon Sobrino*. São Paulo, Paulinas, 2002.
- ² Cf. SUSTIN, L.C. (Org). *O mar se abriu: trinta anos de teologia na America latina*. São Paulo, Soter-Lyola, 2000, pp. 154-155
- ³ SOBRINO J. *O principio misericórdia. Descer da cruz os povos crucificados*. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1994
- ⁴ IDEM.J. *Os seis Jesuítas mártires de El Salvador. Depoimento de Jon Sobrino*. São Paulo, Loyola, 1990.
- ⁵ IDEM. J. *A fé em Jesus Cristo. Ensaio a partir das vitimas*. Petropolis, Vozes, 2000, p. 16
- ⁶ IDEM. *O principio misericórdia*, op. Cit., pp 11-28
- ⁷ IBIDEM.
- ⁸ IDEM. Jesús de Nazareth. In: FLORISTAN SAMANES, C. & TAMAYO-ACOSTA, J. J. (orgs). *Conceptos fundamentales de pastoral*, Madrid, Cristianidad, 1983, p 510

The Primacy of the Poor in the Mission of Jesus and the Church

The Influence of Vatican II in the Episcopal Magisterium at Medellin, Puebla and Santo Domingo

The General Conferences of the Latin-American Episcopacy

The Latin American ecclesiastical tradition of General Conferences of Bishops, as is well known, began with the I Conference convoked by Pius XII. This took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1955. The fruit of that conference was the creation of the Latin American Council of Bishops, CELAM - the instrument of Latin American Episcopal collegiality before Vatican II.

Since then CELAM has organized three other General Conferences: “Medellin” inaugurated by Paul VI in 1968; “Puebla” (1979) and “Santo Domingo” (1992) inaugurated by John Paul II. And the V Conference “Aparecida” which will be inaugurated by Benedict XVI May 13 of this year 2007.

Medellin, Puebla and Santo Domingo were prepared by CELAM in collaboration with Rome. CELAM and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, CAL, worked using pre-agreed formulas. Those Conferences were convoked and inaugurated by successive Popes who once in Rome, together with the Roman Curia, reviewed and approved the final Documents thereby giving them Episcopal Magisterial authority for the Churches of Latin America.

Between Rome and Medellín: “The Church in the face of the transformation of Latin America in the light of Vatican II”

As the general theme of the II Conference celebrated in Medellín (from August 26 to September, 6 1968) indicates, the Magisterium of the Latin American Bishops applied the teachings of Vatican II to the particular churches of Latin America so as to evangelize the peoples of the continent who were in a process of transformation.

While in Rome, throughout the four Counciliar Sessions, CELAM's board of directors along with the 600 Latin American Bishops attending as members of the Council got many of the insights which they used at Medellín to discern the “signs of the times” the Churches and people of Latin America were living.

When the Council was drawing to a close in the European Fall of 1965, Don Miguel Larraín, bishop of Talca (Chile) - who was reelected president of CELAM in Rome itself- confided his feelings and pre-occupations to his companions and friends with these words: “What we have lived is impressive, but if in Latin America we are not most attentive to our own signs of the time, the Council will by pass our Church and who knows what will happen then.”

The president of CELAM singled out two most determining features in the “inspiration” of the II Conference of Latin American Bishops. These were: “What we have lived” (in Rome during Vatican II) and “the attention to our own signs of the times in Latin America.”

It is imperative to take most seriously into account the fact that the directors of CELM and all the Bishops who participated in the Council “lived” an ecclesial and spiritual experience that marked them profoundly. During those four years, in and outside the council hall Rome was a scintillation of lights lived in a spiritual experience as at Pentecost - what with 168 General Congregations, ten Council sessions, prayers, celebrations, readings, consultations, dialogues, encounters and forums.

Among the points of light that most “impressed” them, the Latin American Bishops have highlighted the passion with which, in and outside the council hall, talk was centered on the “the Church of the poor” and on the “eminent dignity of the poor in the Church”. They were astounded to hear talk of “the Church of the poor” in Europe, while in Latin America at the beginning of the 60's there was no mention of

it (even though it did exist) and the “Theology of Liberation” had not yet been born.

In September 11 of 1962, while they prepared their luggage to travel to Rome, the Latin American Bishops heard John XXIII on the radio talking about certain “shining points” in view of the coming Council. And, in the context that “the Church feels the duty to honor its responsibility to respond to the demands and actual needs of peoples,” they heard him say: “Another point of light (is): Face to face with the under developed nations, the Church presents itself such as she is, and as she wants to be, the church of all people, but in particular the Church of the poor.”

That “point of light” enunciated by John XXIII caused commentaries and events in and outside the Council hall, inspiring a “Forum on the Church of the poor. This forum was operative during the four stages of the Council with the participation of bishops, cardinals, periti and theologians, and an assiduous Latin American presence. That forum gave rise to one of the most historic ecclesial signs to come from Vatican II. This sign we will review later.

When the Council was still looking for a direction to follow, nearing the end of the first tumultuous session, exactly on December 6, 1962, the declaration that caused the most impact in the council hall was he one over the “Church of the poor”. This intervention was made by the Cardinal Archbishop of Bologna (Italy), *Giácomo Lercaro*.

In his extensive intervention, Cardinal Lercaro complained that the Council was lacking a “vivifying and unifying principle” to all its topics. He proposed one with the following three dimensions: “the Mystery of Christ in the poor, the eminent dignity of the poor in the Kingdom of God and the Church, and announcing the gospel to the poor”. He gave the theological, ecclesial and historical reasons, and said: “This is the hour of the poor, of the millions of poor throughout the earth; this is the hour of the Mystery of the Church mother of the poor, this is the hour of the Mystery of Christ in the poor.”

And he asked the Council, “that the unifying hub of all the topics” be “The Mystery of Christ in the poor of world and the Mystery of the Church Mother of the poor.” He demanded “(a) priority in formulating the evangelical doctrine on the eminent dignity of the poor in the Kingdom of God and the Church,” and asked the Council to establish “an ecclesiastical primate for the evangelization of the poor”.

The excellent chronologist of the Council José Luis Martín Descalzo declared Cardinal Lercaro's intervention as "the grand moment of today's session: one of the participants commented, you could cut the silence with a knife; and upon his finishing the assembly exploded in one of the most enthusiastic applause the Council has known."

But, even though the II Vatican Council was inviting the "Church-People of God", - anointed in its entirety with the messianic anointing of Jesus, urged, by "pastoral charity" - to "turn its eyes towards Jesus and embrace his style of life" (as Paul VI asked) so as to go to the human world with his Spirit; "not to dominate it, but to listen to it, embrace it and serve it," but fact is that the world of the Council was above all the modern Eurocentric world which was primarily concerned with its own "wellbeing."

On the other hand, among the people of Latin America the process of a generalized awareness of injustice, dependency, misery and oppression, made it impossible to ignore the clamor that irrupted in society and in the Church from the impoverished millions claiming to get out of their "unlivable status." This was the second factor that would make it possible that at Medellín the points of light lived at Vatican Council II should shed their light on the historic irruption of the poor as an impulse of the Spirit to the churches of the continent. To go to the "world of humans" among those people in order to evangelize them in the Spirit of Jesus, was to enter into the underworld of the majorities and minorities of the poor as the "Church Mother of the poor."

There was a preview of that in Rome three years after Cardinal Lerceao's claim. It was like and echo of his statement which impacted last session of the council. This was the gesture by an anonymous group of bishops committing themselves to be servants of the poor in their dioceses. They renounced all claims to titles of grandeur and power, to privilege and favor, to luxurious housing, to material goods and to personal bank accounts; and they committed themselves to promote justice, solidarity and service to the poor. The majority of them were bishops of Third World Churches. Several were Latin Americans who joined in this commitment with Don Helder Câmara, a member of the Board of Directors of CELAM, and who was one of the promoters of this group forged in the "The forum of the Church of the poor"

Paul VI and CELAM from Rome to Medellín

During the Council CELAM'S board of directors and the Latin American Episcopacy had in Paul VI acceptance and an inspiration. In his first discourse upon opening the second session of the Council the new Pope declared:

“The Church, open to the world of humans, looks with special interest on the poor, the needy, the afflicted, on the hungry, on the sick, on the imprisoned; she looks on the whole of suffering and crying humanity, which belongs to her by evangelical right, and We are pleased to repeat to all who belong to it: ‘Come to me all you who suffer’ (Mt 11,28)”.

The exhortation of Paul the VI to the Council assembly upon returning to Rome from is historic presentation to the United Nations on the topic of peace on October 5 1965, had an even greater impact on the bishops from Latin America. He said to the Bishops: “Peace must have justice as its foundation, let us then be advocates of justice because the world has a great need for justice and Christ wants us to thirst for justice. And justice is progressive: the more society progresses the more it becomes aware of the imperfection of its structures, because the strident and imploring inequalities that afflict humanity come to light. Aren't these inequalities among citizens and nations, the greatest threat to peace? It is imperative that we concern ourselves with the status of peoples in the process of development. Let us say it even more clearly: our love for the world's poor, whose number is beyond counting, must be more solicitous, more efficacious, more generous (...). To the testimony of the word, may the Lord give us the strength to add the testimony of action.”

Two affirmations by Paul VI in his elocution at the closure of the Council on December 7, 1965, would resonate in the two following General Conferences of the Latin American Bishops: “Perhaps never before as during this Council had the Church felt itself compelled to embrace the humanity that surrounds it, in order to understand it, serve it and evangelize it taking into account its rapid transformation.” “And in the face of each human being, especially when it has become obvious in their tears and pain we can and must recognize the face of Christ (Mt. 25, 40).”

Finally we must point out that on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of CELAM, November 24, 1965 (two weeks before the closing

of Vatican II), Paul VI gathered the Board of Directors of CELAM, its teams and all the Latin American Bishops who participated in Council. And he exhorted them to assume as Church in Latin America the challenge of “a society in flux, subject to rapid and profound changes,” where “to defend what exists is no longer enough” because “the masses become more and more aware of their difficult conditions of life, and harbor an unstoppable and well founded desire for changes that meet their needs.”

In that exhortation the Pope lamented “those who remain closed to the renewing winds of the times, and show themselves lacking human sensibility and critical vision of the problems that whirl around them”. He told the Bishop that “the faith of the Latin American people should attain a greater maturity,” and encouraged them to guide the process of evangelization “to transform parishes into true and authentic ecclesial communities in which no one feels a stranger and in which all feel an integral part”, and to move on to “social action:” “The suffering cry of the many who live in unworthy human conditions, cannot but affect us, venerable brothers, and we cannot remain inactive since that cry should not go unheard or unsatisfied. We should make a solemn commitment so that the Church, always moved and inspired by the charity of Christ that rejects disorderly and violent solutions, assume responsibilities for bringing about a sound order of social justice for all.”

The Latin American Bishops were getting ever closer to “Medellin”. As we consider this final moment of preparation to Medellin, it is opportune to look at a final point in the Chronicles of Medellin where Dr. Hernán Parada documented the before, during and the after of the second General Conference: “The Documents prepared (in the Medellin Conference) were given to Monsignor Samoré who flew them to Rome and delivered them to Paul VI. Once the Roman Congregations corroborated the orthodoxy of the Documents, they issued their opinions in writing. The Pope then gave his approval.” And “on the same day of the Papal approval (October 24, 1968) Paul VI received Monsignor Pironio and let him know ‘the joy with which he had approved the Medellin Documents,’ adding that they ‘constitute a truly historic moment.’ And the Pope confided to the General Secretary of CELAM, that ‘the Latin American Church has reached a degree of maturity and extraordinary balance that makes it capable of fully assuming its own responsibilities.”

We must mention that the historian does not hide the fact that Rome communicated to CELAM three “requests:” clarify the expres-

ssion “institutionalized violence;” when they exhort solidarity with the poor to clarify phrase “make ours their problems and struggles” (Pobreza de la Iglesia 10) because the word “struggles” might “sound like Marxism” and that in general, when diagnosing the problems of the Continent, the eventual solution should be indicated.

What the Latin American Episcopal Magisterium Recuperates

There are a few traces in the Conciliar Documents from the shining points of John XXII, of Paul VI and Cardinal Lercaro that illuminated the ecclesial and spiritual experience of Vatican Council II in Rome. But their lights shine throughout the Documents of Medellin, Puebla and with less intensity even in Santo Domingo.

But in quite a few pages of the Medellin Documents those shining points are present; most of all in the documents on “Poverty of the Church,” “Peace” and “Human Promotion.”

In the Puebla Documents these shining points shed light and give prophetic force to the “social-cultural vision of the reality of Latin America,” and to the “the ecclesial reality,” emphasized in numbers 24-50, and illustrated where it speaks of the faces of Latin Americans which are “the suffering traces of the face of Christ.” This line of thinking continues all the way to number 149; and above all in the section “The Preferential Option for the Poor” (1.134-1.165).

In the Santo Domingo Document, we see this same trend of thought in the section entitled, “The new signs of the times in the area of human promotion,” and above all in the section, “impoverishment and solidarity,” along with “the new suffering faces” (178-181). We also see it in the section that speaks of the “challenges presented by the indigenous, afro-american and mestizo cultures” (228-262); and in the “Priority Pastoral Guidelines,” particularly where speaks of “An integral human promotion of the Latin American and Caribbean peoples” and of “an inculturated Evangelization” (296-301).

Anyone reading the Documents of these General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopacy in a spirit of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ can see in them the primacy of the poor and the mission of Jesus and the Church. This is what Cardinal Lercaro called “The Mystery of Christ and the Church in the poor” or “the eminent dignity of the poor in the Kingdom of God and in the Church.” This is also true in the shining point that John XXIII presented when he said that

“in the underdeveloped nations, the Church which belongs to all should be particularly the Church of the Poor.” Without this the “ecclesial Tradition” would cease to be the Tradition of Church of Jesus Christ.

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Notas:

1. G. Gutiérrez, «La recepción del Vaticano II en Latinoamérica», en G. Alberigo-J. P. Jossua, *La recepción del Vaticano II*, Madrid (1987) 227, nota 27.
2. Un comentario de Gustavo Gutiérrez a ese punto luminoso de Juan XXIII, en Alberigo-Jossua, op. cit. 221-225.
3. G. Lercaro, intervención en la Congregación General del 6 de noviembre de 1962: *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Ecumenici Vaticani II Vol I, Periodus Prima, Pars IV*, 327-330. Traducción española, T. Cabestrero «En Medellín la semilla del Vaticano II dio el ciento por uno», *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 46, Enero-Abril 1999, pp. 65-67.
4. J. L. Martín Descalzo, *Un periodista en el Concilio I*, Madrid (1964) 326-327.
5. Martín Descalzo reseñaba así ese gesto en su crónica del 30 de noviembre de 1965: «El documento reúne firmas episcopales y sé que ayer sobrepasaba el centenar. Es un documento significativo y quiero recogerlo en estas crónicas porque estoy seguro de que permanecerá como uno de los ‘símbolos’ de este Concilio Vaticano II y de su espíritu»; *Un periodista en el Concilio IV*, Madrid (1966) 490-493.
6. Pablo VI en la apertura de la segunda sesión del Concilio Vaticano II, en *Concilio Vaticano II*, BAC 252, Madrid (1966) 773.
7. Alocución de Pablo VI en la clausura del Concilio Vaticano II, op. cit., 490-493.
8. Pablo VI, *Exhortación Apostólica al Episcopado de América Latina en Roma*, en op. cit., 851-862.
9. H. Parada, *Crónica de Medellín*, Bogotá (1975) 237-238.
10. Tres alusiones puntuales significativas se ven en LG 8; AG 3; PO 6.

Jesus, the Poor, and Theology

I

All theology is an expression of praxis and spirituality, that is to say, of a form of being Christian and of following Jesus. These are the “secondary” and “primary” moments of which Gustavo Gutierrez spoke many years ago. Even if at this stage it may seem self-evident, this simple finding is one of the great contributions of liberation theology to all theology, one of the affirmations that make this theology a “teacher of suspicion” (Paul Ricoeur). It is intolerable, though, for a large part of the theological intelligentsia, whether in Rome or in San Salvador, in Tübingen or in Buenos Aires.

The history of the reception of Vatican II in Latin America is inseparable from the road that the Christian communities of our continent have made, first towards the poor, later together with the poor, and finally originating from the poor. It would be impossible to relate in any other way or by any other roads to theology than through what the Spirit inflamed within us, through the response to Vatican II. The option for the poor with all its implications, ripe and unheard-of fruit of the Council in Latin America, testifies to this.

Although there are some who always wanted to see in such an option a circumstantial “deviation” of the authentic Christian faith perpetrated by the “horizontalizers,” what Christians in Latin America express in it is the recovery of an essential dimension of the Gospel of Jesus, many times forgotten, but read in between the lines in the lives of those believers—of whom there will never be a lack—who knew how to express the radicalism of the Gospel at the most diverse moments in history. For however weak it was in many circumstances, the flame of this torch was passing from generation to generation (this is what tradition means!) from the beginning. And so it was that one day John

XXIII invited all Christians to “shake off from Peter’s seat the imperial dust of Constantine,” to turn to the sources, and to make the Church the “Church of the Poor.” In our continent, many took this to heart. And they continue to do it.

One has either experienced this perspective, or one has not. And if the latter is the case, one can either open him/herself to the authenticity of the experience of others, or one can negate it obstinately or even ridicule it. I believe that it is worth the effort to review an example of this latter attitude. In the “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” (1984), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith affirms/accuses: “We should recall that the preferential option described at ‘Puebla’ is two-fold: for the poor and ‘for the young.’ It is significant that the option for the young has in general been passed over in total silence” (VI, 6). I will only make two brief comments. One points to the conceptual: these two options—one centered on the pain caused by the human being and its structures, the other centered on an age group—cannot command the same theological-pastoral intensity. The other comment is entirely practical: in Latin America, the immense majority of the poor are young and the immense majority of the young are poor. The distinction made in Puebla is often unverifiable in practice. But, since only concepts are evaluated in Rome, major barbarities end up being said without anyone being taken to task for them.

In the following lines, I only seek to share some intuitions that speak to us about the poor as a theological setting, coming from the perspective of faith in the evangelical testimony of Jesus’ relationship with the poor. This is the hermeneutic setting—normative for Christian thought—of the response to the God of the Kingdom and of life in abundance.

II

If theology in the 20th century has recovered the centrality of the “theology of the Kingdom” through Christology, within Latin America, liberation theology has rediscovered the centrality of the poor for the theology of the Kingdom. Hence, we can speak of the “pauperocentrism” of Kingdom theology, and of Christology as well.

The abundance of words by Jesus that refer to the poor in the beginning of his ministry eloquently demonstrates it: the Kingdom of God that is coming is good news for them, is announced to them, and

pertains to them. It is as if Jesus needed to define the socio-historic domain of his mission:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”...The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:17-21)

Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue of his hometown the messianic words of Isaiah 61, with its clear reference to Leviticus 25: the year of the jubilee. The jubilee established the freedom of slaves and caused the land to return to its original distribution every fifty years, as if each generation of Israelites needed to pass through the experience of receiving the land as a gift from God. This “ideal,” grounded in the Law and not realized in history, began to be made part of the messianic expectation in Isaiah: it will be in the time of the messiah that these words will be fulfilled. And on an ordinary Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus says that it is with him that this Scripture passage is fulfilled. The times of the messiah have arrived, God has shown His mercy for the poor, and the new and definitive has been made present in history! Jesus’ listeners understood quite well what he was talking about: it is not accidental that this passage ended with the narrative of the first attempt to murder Jesus (see Lk 4: 28-30)...The God who manifests Himself in favor of the poor upsets the established order. Jesus is starting to become a stumbling block. However, he goes on:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. (Lk 6: 20-23)

With how much “romanticism” the Beatitudes are read on occasion, thus blocking the whole scandal and change of values found in them! Jesus proclaims blessed and joyous those that the society of his time—and of all times!—considers cursed and miserable; the poor, the hungry and thirsty, those who mourn, the persecuted and slandered, the afflicted; those who do not count; those who neither add nor subtract, but are just statistics. The Kingdom of God belongs to them!

This is the grounds for the blessing and happiness. Because of this, the “Gospel” is “news.” The coming of the Kingdom bewilders its own intended recipients. Jesus once again confirms that God is to be found where one least expects it, especially where the religious-cultural establishment least expects it, who throughout history have claimed to be the exclusive intermediaries with the one true God. Like the curate Brochero, lost amid the peasants of the Cordovan highlands in the 19th century, said: “God is like lice: he’s with the poor.”

The Beatitudes show God’s viewpoint. Only from there can one see that the Kingdom is coming. God does not look at human beings from the top of the Temple, nor from the perspective of the Law. God looks at them from the margin and invites those who put their hope in Him to look in another place.

The Beatitudes do not allow easy moralizing, nor do they constitute an “ethics of debility,” as Nietzsche accusingly proclaimed. The happiness of the Beatitudes is not rooted in poverty, hunger, sorrow, or persecution: it is rooted in the fact that God accompanies all those who suffer these things. What they communicate is that the poor’s lot is due neither to their sins nor due to a fatal divine predestination, but rather is a consequence of socio-historical causes that are reversible because they depend on acts of other human beings. Thus, God refuses to be the guarantor of the established order.

I have always wondered why poverty constitutes the *princeps analogatum* of human distress, the supreme and privileged symbol of the multifaceted forms of suffering. If there is any type of suffering that depends purely and exclusively on human agency and on its structures—one that cannot be attributed to finitude or to fatalism in any of its forms—it is poverty. This is especially so in a world that has reached levels of development such that it could eradicate poverty completely. Poverty does not minimize or disdain any other form of pain, but it makes them all more serious.

What makes the poor the depositories of the Kingdom is precisely their poverty, and no other reason. Confronted with the abandonment and injustice committed by humans, God makes himself present and close with His Kingdom. Jesus’ concern for the poor is in line with the Old Testament’s concern, although in Jesus it seems to be radicalized: while in the other Beatitudes the gift of the Kingdom of God is projected into the future, in the case of the poor, Jesus speaks in the present: “yours is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Lk 6:20), “theirs is the

Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 5:3). Matthew adds to the text at hand “to those persecuted for practicing justice” (Mt 5:10). God, in Jesus, looks at history from the vantage point of the disinherited and invites all who listen to conversion, to a change of perspective.

III

Jesus insists on this when the followers of John the Baptist inquire about his identity. John, imprisoned and apparently disconcerted upon hearing about Jesus’ activities, sends them to ask:

“Are you the one who must come or must we expect someone else?” Jesus replied to them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised and the good news is announced to the poor. And blessings to those for whom I am not a cause for scandal! (Mt 11:2-6)

Jesus’ answer refers to the “signs” that accompany his mission. An inattentive and misinformed view classifies these signs into two categories: miracles/wonders (references to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, and the dead) and announcements/predictions (the reference to the poor). From a profoundly biblical perspective, this distinction may not be the most appropriate. What Jesus is really telling the disciples of the Baptist is that something unheard of and unprecedented in human history is happening now, and with him. Therefore, the announcement of good news to the poor is on the same level as the signs of resurrection of the dead. It is even more: in the crescendo that the text illustrates, the announcement to the poor crowns the list of “wonders” which Jesus refers to. Equally or even more miraculously than raising the dead, Jesus says to the poor that God is giving them His Kingdom!

In the Roman Church, the tribunals of the curia ask the medical committees whether this or that healing was a miracle or not, as if God revealed himself not in the words and the deeds of the Nazarene, back in the Palestine of the first century, but in the anti-modern apologetics of the nineteenth century. It is not too much to remind these brothers (taking one or two friends to accompany us (see Mt 18, 16)), that the only miracle that has been given to us continually throughout history is the announcement of the good news to the poor. In the last decades, many Christian communities in Latin America—and the theology that

accompanies them—have made the continuation of this miracle their very reason for being, their *raison d'être*. Blessings to those for whom this is not a cause for scandal!

The God who shows His mercy and justice to the poor leads Jesus to exclaim:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Mt 11: 25-27)

It is God's way—it keeps being so—to hide Himself from those whom Jesus ironically calls “wise and learned.” It is God's way—it keeps being so!—to reveal Himself to the humble. The relevance of this text to understanding the mission of Jesus is decisive. His God can only be known through the revelation made to the “little children.” There is no other place where Jesus has wanted to reveal his Father to us. This is how God has wanted it. He does not want human beings to identify Him with the Law, with the cult, with power, with ritual purity, with judgment, and with punishment. He does not want to be identified with the encyclicals, the canonical code, liturgical rubrics, or other fanciful things. Only in the revelation to those who do not count—the marginalized and those who remain excluded from everything—can the true face of God be known. For this reason, Jesus perceives himself as a relief for the afflicted and the oppressed. (see Mt 11:28-30). Jesus frees God from His own yoke. And he frees the poor from the God that had condemned them to their fate by showing them that God is with them, that He has decided to undergo the same fate as the poor. For this reason, he calls them “blessed.” The new times they have hoped for have come.

I like to think and say that the only conclusion of the “first council” in the history of the Church (see Acts 15) is the one that Paul tells us about in Galatians 2:10: “They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.” Many Christians and communities in Latin America are only trying to do this: remembering the poor, committing ourselves to change their fate, recognizing the true God in their faces, rewriting theology starting from their lives, and celebrating faith in the midst of their joys and sorrows.

IV

Starting from this rediscovered “pauperocentrism,” the faithful in Latin America read the following passage from Matthew in a new light:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:31-40).

I am reminded of several different hermeneutic attempts that have been used to domesticate this text. An old lectionary that was in use until the seventies translated “the least of my brothers” as “the least of those who believe in me,” implying that mercy remains within the limits of the Christian community proper! I also remember the commonplace missals and spirituality of that time: the passage of Matthew spoke to us of “works of material mercy” of which there were seven. Fine. It was not bad to memorize them. The problem was the place they occupied in the Christian mystique: they were “works,” penitential the majority of times, and necessary to pay for sin. They were a penance received from the confessional: loving the poor was a punishment! I also remember the subtitle of the editors of the first Latin American Bible: “the salvation of the atheists.” But does a distinct salvation exist for the faithful? It is true that this subtitle drew our attention to an incredibly eloquent aspect of Matthew’s passage: God’s only question at the climax of history is not related to cultic practice or to religious beliefs. No. Following John of the Cross, “at the evening of life, we will

be judged on love alone.”

These words of Jesus dissolve all doubts about the God he announces—who He is and what He does: whatever happens to the poor happens to Him. There is no “as if” here: “You did it to me!” I believe that the many varied attempts at the domestication of the text arise from the scandal that it itself generates. Not only do we partake in the greatest radicalization possible for the Israelite faith—the whole Old Testament is nothing more than the witness and compassion of Yahweh—but we partake in the greatest “religious” revolution possible: God suffers with those who suffer!

The history of Christian theology has at times been the history of concessions to Hellenic theodicy. Thus we baptized the God of Greek metaphysics as a way of gaining positions of power in the culture of the times. But we began to lose the vitality and Scandal of the God of Jesus Christ. The famous expression that Pascal had sewn on his garments (“No, to the God of the philosophers! Yes, to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!”) witnesses to the dissatisfaction many felt about this mixture, precisely because it hid more than it revealed about the face of the God of Jesus. We repeated for centuries, as part of the “divine attributes,” the formula that spoke to us of the “impassiveness” of God. If, however, there is any God that cannot be described as “impassive,” it is the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is not just because of the Old Testament’s own anthropomorphisms, but also, and above all, because of the proclamation of God as com-passionate to the extreme: “You did it to me!” Let theodicy redo its accounts from this perspective if it likes. We will not remake our theology from those rational dogmas. Let it be others, not Christians, who attempt to domesticate the God who suffers. We will keep vigil so that the scandal of God’s decisions remains intact.

At the dawn of revelation, one of the first questions God asked us human beings—in the person of Cain—was: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 4:9). In the text of Matthew which places us at the final moment of history, we are told that God has not changed His question. And who knows, perhaps all of the revelation that happens between the one and the other have been nothing more than the divine effort to make us understand that there is no other question that merits an answer!

V

The God that Jesus finally reveals to us is the God who listens. Revelation itself tells us of the God who says and speaks: “thus says Yahweh,” “the word of Yahweh”... But Scripture must also be traversed and read from the perspective of the God who listens. From that first text in Genesis (“What have you done? Listen: Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil” (Gen 4:10), passing through slavery in Egypt (“I have seen the affliction of my people and I have heard their cry because of their taskmaster (Ex. 3:7), and throughout the texts of the Law that speak of the God who listens to orphans, widows, foreigners, day laborers, and the poor, God listens!

The Beatitudes, as said above, reveal to us God’s own point of view about this world. However, we could also talk of the “point of listening.” If God heard everything that we referred to earlier, it was because of His closeness, the perspective He assumed in compassion, and His love directed towards and suffered for the poor. In Matthew 25, God reveals that He listens because He suffers the very same thing that the poor suffer.

Thus, God reveals Himself—in the very last pages of the Bible—as the Consoler:

God’s dwelling is with the human race, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev 21:3-4)

The image of a mother consoling a child in her lap is one of the very last images that the Scripture leaves us with, delivered with an indestructible force. The “God is love” of the first letter of John finds in this passage of the Apocalypse its definitive meaning. God, who makes Himself the bearer of all sorrow throughout history, assumes, in His mysterious compassion, the task of compassion and consolation. All of this tells us something.

If we were invited in Leviticus to be holy like God (Lev 19:2), and if in Matthew this sanctity was interpreted as perfection (Mt 5:48), it is Luke who finally seems to give us the key to this road. There, Jesus tells us: “Be merciful, like your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). There is no divine sanctity/perfection to be imitated other than mercy, compassion, and consolation. These words that to some ears—maybe because

of the malformations they suffered during the course of the Church's history—sound empty or sugarcoated, but which are encountered in daily life and in the commitments made with the poor by so many Christians in Latin America, are flavored by passion, donated lives, and even martyrdom. Mercy, compassion, and consolation speak to us, definitively, about who the God of Jesus is, and what waits for those who give testimony about Him.

I have heard so often in the history of my country phrases like “love surpasses justice.” Those who say this seem to suggest that the love Jesus spoke of does not demand a hoped-for justice, but is rather an invitation to oblivion and resignation—in the end, an acceptance of the established order. Personally, I would like to double the wager. I do not reject the expression: I reinterpret it. Yes, love surpasses justice. But the love that surpasses justice is the love that accomplishes it, not the love that postpones, empties, and disguises justice. Jesus spoke to us of that love. And he validated it by his martyrdom.

VI

The journey of the Church in Latin America witnesses to all of this, through its pastoral work and through its theology. This pathway was created by Medellín and Puebla, by base communities and the popular reading of the Bible, by processions and popular beliefs, by the identification and discovery of differences, by the irruption of the poor in the Church and institutional innovations that attest to this, by witnesses and martyrs, by men and women, by peoples and cultures, and by deaths and resurrections. Taking account of ourselves, paraphrasing Sartre, we can say that, in the end, “we are what we have done for the poor.”

If—returning to the beginning of these lines—theology is the “secondary moment” of the life of the faithful, it must acknowledge this reality. Theology also will be judged by what it has done for the poor. And with what the poor do for theology.

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Translated by Stefaan Deschrijver

The Poor, The Church and Theology

An innocent question

Several years ago a German seminarian, who was studying theology for a semester at the Bolivian Catholic University in Cochabamba, asked me during one of the classes why liberation theology was not initiated in Germany where there were excellent schools of theology with good professors and the best equipped libraries. I simply responded to him that there were no poor.

It should not go unnoticed that John XXIII, from a poor rural background and having spent the greater part of his life in the poor nations of Eastern Europe, said a month before the inauguration of the II Vatican Council that the Church has to belong to everyone but especially it has to be the Church of the poor.

Cardinal Lercaro had a brilliant intervention during the Council when he affirmed that the theme of the poor was not a simple moral question but strictly ecclesiological. When the Church strayed from the poor it had strayed from the gospel and on the other hand, every conversion (movement) of the Church toward the gospel always was a movement toward the poor.

In spite of the words of John XXIII and those of Lercaro, the Council did not make the poor the central theme, although texts did make mention of the poor Christ in whose path the Church should follow, (LG 8) and that the joys, hopes, sufferings and sadness of the poor should also be that of the Church (GS 1).

It is known that the majority of the Bishops and theologians who played a decisive role in determining the results of the Council were central Europeans without an acute awareness of the theme of

the poor. Outside of the initiatives and prophetic proposals of Helder Cámara and Manuel Larrain most of the Latin American bishops also were not aware of the grave situation of poverty within the Latin American society and their influence on the Council was not significant. (They were called the Church of the silent.)

However, the II Vatican Council's orientation toward the signs of the times did indeed open the way towards developing the Church of the poor. Without Vatican II the current development of the Church in Latin American would not have been possible.

The journey of the Latin American Church

It is to be noted that it was during Medellín (1968) and later in Puebla (1979) when the Latin American Church, aware of the unjust poverty of the continent, "received" Vatican II re-reading it from the perspective of the poor, listening to their cries, denouncing the unjust structures as sinful and proposing a preferential option for the poor and at the same time indicating their potential as evangelizers. Since Medellín the Latin American Church initiated a unique and original journey and believed that from their very poverty they could contribute to the understanding and living out of Vatican II.

It was in this context that liberation theology was born, not as a simple copy of the dominant European theology of the times, but as a unique and original contribution from Latin America to the universal Church, precisely from the optic of the poor.

The poor as a theological staring point

All theology begins from a previous spiritual experience and the Latin-American one was set in motion by the experience of the mystery of Christ present among the poor. Without this spiritual experience liberation theology cannot be comprehended.

The poor are not only objects of compassion and assistance nor are they only victims of a sinful structure that demands justice. They are much more than that. They are the basic focal point for theology because to them, in a special way, have been revealed the mysteries of the Reign of God, hidden to the wise and prudent of this world. (Luke 10,21) Because of this, just as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, they project special insights to understand God's project, even though it be

from the other side of history. The poor are not just objects of social ethics but a hermeneutic and theological place of faith, a focal point for the development of all theology. In Latin America the poor are being presented as a privileged theological place from which to read the Word of God and Church tradition. It is not a question of replacing the ecclesial place of faith for that of the poor but viewing them as a hermeneutical and social place to understand the revelation of the Scriptures and ecclesial Tradition.

Reading the Scriptures from the perspective of the poor

From the perspective of the poor one can re-read the Scriptures and comprehend that what happened during the Exodus is inseparable from a current social, political and even labor problem even though the liberation from the power of the Egyptians was orientated to the Alliance with Yahweh. The cry of the people reaches Yahweh who, in turn, calls Moses to free the people. Yahweh wants the people free and desires that Israel be structured as an alternative to the exploiting society of Egypt. One can not extract what happened in Egypt from history. The Exodus was a foundation event for Israel, a vital experience that is recalled each year during the paschal celebration.

When Israel during the time of the monarch forgets the Exodus and falls into idolatry and internal social chaos, the voice of the prophets is heard calling to return to the Exodus and adhere to the law and justice. They announced that from the root of David will be born an offspring anointed by the Spirit, a Messiah who will practice the law and justice with the poor. The idols are gods of death while Yahweh is the God of life. The exile will be a time of conversion, of purification and of profound spiritual growth and the rest of Israel, the “*anawim*”, the poor of Yahweh, will be the root from which will be born the future Messiah.

It would be necessary to review all the New Testament to understand that this perspective of the Old Testament not only does not disappear but is confirmed and deepened. The incarnation of Jesus is kenotic, poor, and the medium of the poor, from Bethlehem to Nazareth and from there to Jerusalem. The Magnificat of Mary is a proclamation of this option of God for the poor. The announcement of the birth of Jesus is first made to the shepherds who were the excluded of that society. The systematic proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth, as assumed in Isaiah 61, is centralized in the liberation of the

poor and the announcing of the gospel to them. It is the Spirit who anoints Jesus for this mission. All of Jesus' public life is a continued dedication to the poor and excluded of his time. It is the poor with whom he eats, and whom he heals, nourishes, forgives, and whom he calls the beloved and who constitute the ultimate judges of the eschatological tribunal of history in the parable of the final judgment. The Reign that Jesus announces is a Reign of an eternal and abundant life, open to all, but begins with saving from death those whose life is threatened. The death of Jesus is inseparable from his option for the poor and his critique of those responsible for a religion basically exterior and not in solidarity with the poor. The parables, such as that of the Good Samaritan whose heart is touched by the wounded one along the way, clearly manifest the project of God and the core of God's mercy. Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, truly passed through the world doing good to all who suffered all types of oppression.

The history of the Church, as demonstrated by Benedict XVI in *God is Love*, is a continuous "diakonia" and service to the poor ever since the Fathers of the Church, monasticism, mendicants, modern religious life, committed laity, and including the social doctrine of the Church. However, it is not sufficient just stating this without adding that at the same time the Fathers, the theologians and the medieval spiritual leaders looked upon the poor as their masters, true vicars of Christ, a source of light and spiritual and theological inspiration.

It is logical that from Latin America, when sociology and economics have demonstrated that poverty is not an incidental coincidence, nor the fruit of chance and much less divine punishment, theology searches within the poor for the focal point to understand the Christian message. This focus does not deny other possible focuses, not that it be an absolute but it highlights and states it as legitimate since it is profoundly evangelical and can enlighten all the Church and humanity whose majority are the poor.

It is from here that the project of God can be comprehended, the Reign symbolized as a banquet, which above all is community, *koinonía* and those invited who are given priority to this banquet are those whom society has excluded. This is consistent with the expression of Ireneus, "the glory of God is that man lives" which was later adapted by Mons. Romero, "the glory of God is that the poor live" and it was the same Romero who defined sin as "that which killed the Son of God and kills the children of God." This does not deny that the Reign

is relationship and that the fullness of life is the participation in the divine life of the Trinity and the vision of God, but in a world where people die young, suffer hunger, do not have work, do not have access to schools, health clinics nor housing and must leave their homeland... the Reign of God has to begin from below, defending real life and belongings, a human life of dignity which is the primary mediation of the Reign.

It is for this that Jesus, before constituting the People of God with a theological and liturgical meaning (*laós*), is concerned about the people who are poor, ignorant, hungry, sick, public sinners, excluded, and looked down upon by the local leaders (*óchlos*). Before announcing the Bread of life, he gives food to the hungry. While the European and official theology has been more concerned with the *laós* than with the *óchlos*, that of Latin America believes that the People of God can only be formed by beginning to attend to the needs of the poor. People who are poor and unappreciated, objects of divine benevolence, enlighten extraordinarily the sense of faith, of the gospel and of the Church and therefore they are a privileged theological space. No one is excluded from the gospel nor from salvation but the theological priority of the poor must always be taken into account. This priority is not based on the holiness of the poor but on the benevolent and saving will of the Father.

The gratuity of salvation is not denied nor the need for prayer and liturgy, nor that the fullness of the Reign be eschatological. Jesus is not reduced to a simple social revolutionary, nor is it denied that Jesus redeems us and with his death and resurrection saves us from our sins, nor that theology be transformed into sociology, nor that faith into pure social practice. However, it is affirmed that without this reference to the poor, not the faith, nor the gospel of Jesus, nor the Church, can be fully understood or realized. The prophets have already affirmed that to practice justice is to know God. Therefore, salvation implies historic liberation, the “*Mysterium salutis*” must be “*Mysterium liberationis*”. The Church is the historical sacrament of liberation and is called to a continuous conversion to the Reign of God. It is from this perspective that one understands the expression, “outside of the poor there is no salvation”.

We believe that this dimension is valid not only for the poor churches of the Third World but also for the universal Church. It was due to this that John Paul II treated once again the theme of the

Church of the poor in his encyclical about work, *Laborem Exercens* (n 8) and in his apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, when he affirmed the need for the option for the poor for the universal Church (n 51) recalling that Jesus came to evangelize the poor (Matt 11, 5; Luke 7, 22)

A conflictive theology

The neo-liberal capitalistic society obviously feels criticized and threatened by this liberating vision of Christianity and accuses it as being Marxist. Because of this the advisors of several presidents of the USA in documents such as those of Santa Fe encourage fighting against this theology that attacks their imperialist interests. As such, this type of ecclesial and theological orientation has been conflictive and has generated numerous martyrs in all of America, from bishops such as Oscar Romero and theologians such as Ellacuría, to Religious men and women, priests, catechists as well as humble women, children, indigenous and elderly. We stand before a martyred Church just as that of the first centuries of our Church history.

At the same time this theology has been and continues to be conflictive for sectors within our Church, whose official magisterium published two instructions in 1984 and 1986 treating liberation theology, noting its dangers. We understand that it is not easy for other churches, such as those of the First World and specifically the Roman, to adequately interpret this orientation, finding it suspicious, dangerous and with materialist and Marxist connotations.

It is not new in church history to resist theological paradigm innovations and look upon them as suspicious and even having the ecclesial institution condemn them. It occurred to Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius Loyola, Theresa of Avila, Rosmini, Angello Roncalli (the future John XXIII), Rahner, Congar, Daniélou, De Lubac... The separations of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Church of the Reformed can be attributed, to a large extent, to the lack of comprehension and theological dialogue. In light of this history it should not surprise us that liberation theology has generated fears and suspicions.

The legitimacy of theological pluralism

The Latin American Church already possesses its own long journey that should be recognized and respected by the universal Church,

without it being obliged to follow other orientations. It is still difficult to re-affirm the local churches within the Universal Church even though it was one of the most important theological and ecclesiological achievements of the II Vatican Council.

Going further into the issue, behind this pluralism of theologies and ecclesiologies is hidden something more profound: the absolute, ineffable, unspoken, incomprehensible and infinite Mystery of God. No theology and no dogma can express this mystery perfectly and adequately, because it transcends all logical formulations. For this reason the Councils and even Thomas Aquinas affirm that there is much more that we do not know of God than what we know. This demands of us a posture of silence, humility and respect as we stand before the Mystery, as well as a great capacity to open ourselves and accept new approximations, always inadequate and poor, of the absolute Mystery of God.

That is why it is not unusual that visionary theologians of our time, such as Rahner and Congar, shortly before dying, wrote letters defending liberation theology and its promoter, Gustavo Gutierrez, saying that these theological attempts should be respected, even though they acknowledged them as different from theirs. Along the same line, it is significant to mention the support given by the recognized French biblical expert X. León Du Four who, after a prolonged stay in Perú, finally acknowledged and appreciated the central role of the poor in the Bible.

There is always the risk of presenting a theology of one sector of the Church as the only safe and valid one for the universal Church, forgetting that within the history of the Church there have been a wide diversity of local theologies that were totally accepted in North Africa, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Milan, Gaul, Hispania... Both in the Old and New Testament co-exist diverse theologies. The four Gospels contain diverse images of Jesus and the synoptic authors can not be accused of denying the divinity of Jesus for not mentioning the pre-existence of the Word as John does in his prologue. There are also diverse ecclesiologies presented in the New Testament but without declaring one as absolute or as the only legitimate one; for example, that of the Pastoral Letters.

This brings us to re-affirm the legitimacy of the configuration of the diverse local churches within the Universal Church, always and whenever united in faith and ecclesial communion with the Bishop of

Rome. From this perspective the configuration of the Latin American church with its history, tradition, theology, spirituality, pastoral options, local ecclesial structures, inculturation, saints and martyrs is indeed legitimate.

There are theologies like that of Latin America, that are only comprehended by having direct experience of the context from which they have emerged. The well-known Jesuit missionary and theologian from Perú, Fr. José de Acosta, author of the famous book, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, wrote that the theologians from Spain when they judged the ways and theology of the Indians were like physicians who, without seeing the patient, tried to diagnose the sickness from afar. At the same time, the theologians living with the Indians are like the physicians who know the patients, can converse with them and check the symptoms and therefore diagnose the sickness with certainty. The same can be said today of those who judge liberation theology from afar.

It is worth recalling the warning of Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin when they were persecuting the apostles: “leave them alone, if it is simply the work of humans then it will disappear, but if it is of God then it can not be destroyed.” (Acts 5, 38-39)

It is now many years after the German seminarian’s question about liberation theology and I ask myself if he really understood my response...

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(Translated by Tom Henchan, M.M.)

Reflections on the Notification Sent to Jon Sobrino

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has published a notification about the Christological work of Jon Sobrino. It is undeniable that the Congregation's mission is to defend the faith. In this case, it esteemed that it was the faith of Catholics that was being exposed to errors. It could have been harsher, but until now it has avoided condemnations and sanctions. This then seems to us a change in behavior for the Congregation, and we know to appreciate this. Additionally, the notification repeatedly insists in its method of proceedings and affirms that in no way does it wish to oppose the option of poor. This we also see as positive and demonstrating a certain change of position. However, some things leave us perplexed.

In first place, the work of Jon Sobrino is not isolated. This work is historically part of a debate that filled all of the twentieth century, and, especially the second part of the century. For this reason, what is at play here is not only the work of Jon Sobrino, but also an entire set of Biblical studies and theologians. Thus the questions: Why a notification solely on the work of Jon Sobrino, and not about all of the Christological current of which it is a part? Why has he been personally chosen and not others? Was there not an intention to create suspicion about the Central American University (UCA) and Latin American Theology in general? Furthermore, another set of questions: Why was this notification made public a few weeks before the Conference at Aparecida? This could be purely coincidental, but doubts do arise from this timing. Would there be a non-expressed intention in publishing this document precisely now and about the work of an author that has gained undisputable notoriety in Latin America? We have no proof of the existence of ulterior motives, but it is very strange to us that this

doubt has occurred to many Latin Americans. The members of the Congregation are not distracted persons that simply did not notice the timing of the date.

Christology is in the midst of a great debate, perhaps the most important debate of the century. The debate has as its object two ways of approaching Christology. Either one departs from the moment of incarnation—the moment of the conception—or one can begin with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

During all of Christian history, the theory of incarnation has prevailed. This starts from Jesus' divinity and of the incorporation of this divinity within a nature that is human. Divinity acquires a new attribute: the person is made out of a nature that is human.

The consequence is that what prevails is the tendency to exalt the humanity of Jesus in every possible way, giving that humanity extraordinary attributes. With that accumulation of privileges and power, that human nature does not seem much like ours. The humanity of Jesus seems rather to be the humanity that is glorified after the resurrection. Medieval theology created a list of those privileges of Jesus' human nature. However, the nucleus of the theory had already dominated since the fourth and fifth centuries.

It was not by pure coincidence that representations of Jesus were multiplied in Christendom through paintings or statues showing him as king or emperor. That royalty refers to the resurrected Christ, but practically also to the Jesus on earth. Would it be pure coincidence if that way of representing Jesus would happen in the Christianity that was founded in the close alliance between the Church hierarchies and the civil and military powers?

It is true that the images of Jesus as King were compensated with the reaction expressed with the image of the crucified one. However, that image of the crucified one remained so spiritualized that it was separated from the rest of the life of Jesus. It was then a spiritualized Christ also. In terms of the images of the Sacred Heart, they are so distanced from our humanity that they show a spiritualized person, not from this world that we know. These were in response to the royal and imperial iconography, but were limited also by the context of Christendom.

In the twentieth century there was a reaction, not only on behalf of the theologians, but also from many other well-trained Catholics. On one side, Biblical studies showed a very different Jesus. On the

other, Christendom dissolved, and it had been the foundation of all that theological and iconographic set. Diverse Christologies appeared in that context, and without denying the incarnation, they did not place it at their Christological center. In the center they placed the human life of Jesus that culminated in his death and resurrection.

The point of departure is the “kenosis” of God and the one he sent, according to the formula cited by Saint Paul: “But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:7-8). If that was the life of Jesus, it is evident that many texts of the New Testament that refer to his Divine attributes were discovered little by little in the ancient Christian communities under the impact of the resurrection. After the resurrection, the disciples understood in another way that which Jesus had told them. They attributed ways of being and acting that were proper to his resurrected life to his earthly life. A new reading was done. The texts that we have are a new reading. Christology wants to talk of the human nature of Jesus just as it was, without what later tradition added after the resurrection. Theologians do not want to deny the attributes that the disciples attributed to Jesus after the resurrection. They do not want to deny what the disciples understood and taught after the resurrection. The intention is to rebuild what was really the human life of Jesus, similar to ours as Saint Paul states.

This Christology insists in all that makes Jesus similar to humans. It is about giving full meaning to the humanity, avoiding the danger of spiritualizing that humanity, and giving the impression of almost divinizing humanity.

This debate shows that the theology of the incarnation, the most traditional since the fourth century, is maximalist in the interpretation of the New Testament. It reads the Bible from the dogmatic theology as defined in the fourth and fifth centuries. To the contrary, the new Christology of the twentieth century is minimalist, trying not to attribute to Jesus more than the texts state, and not to make abstractions based on what the tradition that followed added.

In each reading there may be ambiguities. However, would it not be more prudent to give an author a favorable bias? The current theologians do not want to deny the doctrine of the Holy Scripture, nor that that of the great councils, but they do not accept certain interpretations attributed to the Christian tradition, when they only belong to a theological tradition limited in time.

Would it not be better to promote a debate among theologians to compare theories and together examine their foundations? Let us take an example: John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh.” This text served many times to illustrate the doctrine of the incarnation. However, the text states something else. In Johannine literature, the word “flesh” never means a human nature. John does not intend to say that God became a human being. The flesh is the “weakness” of human beings—subject to sin and infidelity—when they do not have the strength given by the Spirit. “The Word became flesh” means that the very Word of God expressed itself with all the weakness of humanity in its actual and very limited condition. In antiquity, the Word of God manifested itself through the words of the prophets. Now, not only do we have words and another prophet in Jesus. The Word becomes this human being not only in words, but through his entire human life, including his passion and resurrection. All of this is the Word and God made flesh, or rather, the human debility with which Jesus expresses the message of his Father. This shows the difference between the Old and the New Testaments. If flesh is translated as a human nature, we do a reading of the text departing from the dogma of the incarnation.

The Biblical exegesis of the twentieth century had as its project separating as best as possible the primitive text and the ancient traditions from the later dogmatic readings. It did not do this out of pure curiosity but in order to recover the true figure of the humanity of Jesus that is the model and the way of our humanity.

None of our authors wants to deny the Council of Chalcedon with the proclamation of two natures in one person alone.

What is bothersome about Chalcedon is not what it states, but what it does not state. It expresses the humanity of Jesus, all of his human life, only through the word “nature.” However, human beings are not simply a form of nature. Each human being is a history, a story or history of a project, a history of victories and failures, a story lived in a determined context. Thus, a history acquires its meaning in that context. What the death of Jesus speaks about is not simply the fact that he died, but about the context surrounding his death and how it is placed within his life story.

Later on, certain disciples interpreted the death of Jesus through the Old Testament’s theory of sacrifice, although all the authors of the New Testament made restrictions, because they knew that the theory of sacrifice did not explain exactly the meaning of the death of Jesus.

The maximalist theory—the theology of incarnation—adopted without problems the theory of sacrifice that became classical theology for many centuries, but currently is much debated. The minimalist theory—highlighting the human life of Jesus with its meaning—tries to reduce to the inevitable minimum the theory of sacrifice.

The consequence of the Council of Chalcedon was the progressive abandoning of the humanity of Jesus as a concrete history in a human context and, as a result, also its human meaning.

That history of Jesus is precisely what interests Latin America, because it offers the base of a model of life. Since a half-century ago, it has been clear that the model of Christendom was damaging to the Church in Latin America; it had no future, given social and cultural evolution. What we searched for was a new model inspired more directly in the Bible and in the ancient tradition, without denying what was added later, but with the primordial interest in the origins of Christianity.

In Latin America, many theologians perceive that the medieval theology, which triumphed during many centuries—the theology of incarnation—was joined to the structure of Christendom. This structure of Christendom has meant that there has been an immense distance between the clergy and the people, which was the situation of Latin America for centuries and left us with a people that had been made infantile. Today, with the growing numbers of schooled people, there no longer is an acceptance of that distance with the clergy. The people want to be recognized fully as a people who are grown persons.

Secondly, Christendom has meant that there has been a close alliance between the clergy and the civil powers, meaning the civil authorities. A long reflection that is not only theory, but that has emerged out of living together with the poorest of the people, has demonstrated that this alliance has left no space for the Church of the Poor. This alliance has treated the poor like beggars, and has not allowed them to grow socially and/or culturally. This has been the case despite the pretty speeches of the authorities, meaning the dominant aristocracies.

We see the need for a theology that can guide and stimulate the growth of the laity in such a way that they can then announce the Gospel in their own lives and not only follow the clergy's orders. The recourse to a new Christology has been assimilated by many Catholics with positive results.

This is the importance of Jon Sobrino in this continent and is the surprise of all who have read his work. I do not believe that many

readers would lose their faith by reading these books. Rather, I believe that a greater number can lose their faith due to the notification.

Some things can be understood as ambiguous by the defenders of the mentioned theology of incarnation. Traditional theological elaborations can be understood as ambiguous by the theologians seeking renovation. We need an extensive, prolonged, and peaceful dialogue to clear up some of the more disputed points.

There are some points of medieval theology to which no meaning is able to be applied, given our social, cultural, and philosophical evolution: for example, the issue of Jesus' consciousness about his divinity. Many medieval theologians adopted the theory of the beatific vision. But, there is no explanation of how beatifically received vision can enter human consciousness.

We know that there is no consciousness without words. Without language, human beings cannot even think about themselves. Thus the following problem arises: Which were the words through which Jesus became conscious of his divinity? Did he perhaps say: "I am Yahweh"? Additionally, in the Gospels, there is nothing that might permit us to say that Jesus was conscious of being God. He never manifested any such thing to his disciples. The texts do not state any of this. Where does the theory derive from? To have that consciousness, Jesus must have had a consciousness that was not truly human. Well, it would be necessary to explain how Jesus formed concepts not departing out of experience as we do, but departing from a beatific vision. This changes human nature so that it is no longer is the nature that we have; human knowledge depends on experience but Jesus' knowledge comes from direct contact with the Father, which allows him to know not only God itself but also the totality of all that exists.

That theory has the effect to increase the distance between what is our humanity and what is Jesus' humanity, which would function in a radically different way. We have the impression that medieval theologians wanted to glorify Jesus before his resurrection and give him a way of knowing that will be the way for humans after the resurrection. Well, the human nature of Jesus would not be similar to ours, and the humanity of Jesus would not be completely a humanity, but an intermediate form between human beings and the elected ones of heaven. We do not see how to mediate that conception with the similarity in the weakness that is affirmed by Saint Paul.

This is why that theory does not elicit much enthusiasm, until it is defined by the Pope, or a Council, in an irrevocable way.

The notification restricts the expression “Church of the Poor.” However, that expression was used by Pope John XXIII and was adopted by many Bishops’ Conferences in Latin America. It was the returning to the New Testament. The initial nucleus of the Church that was the group of the Apostles was evidently a Church of the Poor. All the communities mentioned in the New Testament were a Church of the Poor. Until Constantine, the Church was of the poor—even though there might have been some rich in the midst of the poor, the tone was set by the poor people.

With Christendom, the situation changed. For centuries the clergy were rich and powerful and the people were poor. This situation provoked innumerable conflicts. The clergy won, thanks to the support of the monarchs and all the nobility. Even when there was a separation—by excommunication—of the Protestants, the clergy counted on the military power of the emperor and the kings to repress the protests against Christendom. No longer was the talk about the Church of the Poor, but rather the Church that helps the Poor.

Today, Christendom is in a dilemma: it can renew its alliance between the clergy and the new dominant political and economic forces, and move away from the poor, or it can enter the world of the poor and make out of them the body of the Church. This dilemma is the challenge of Latin America. Since Medellín, there is a tradition of the option for the poor. There are others that seek the alliance with the new political forces: they are the successors of the ancient emperors and kings. It is not impossible that there are many members of the dominant classes that wish for this. What it is expected of the Holy See is that it give full liberty to the Latin American Episcopate to make its option.

We have a theological tradition, about forty years old, that defends the option for the poor in the name of the Gospel and of the Church of the first centuries, and also, of all the popular movements that have protested against Christendom. Jon Sobrino is part of this tradition and he is one of the most well-known members. Thus, the doubts enunciated at the beginning of these modest reflections.

José COMBLIN

Joao Pessoa, Brasil

Translated by Matilde Moros

A CHRISTOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY THAT NOURISHES US

Two Books that have nourished our walk in the faith after Vatican II in Spain as well as in Latin America, (and I suppose in other continents as well) are *The Christology of Liberation*, Mexico 1976 and *Liberation in the Spirit*, Santander 1985; both works written by Jon Sobrino.

We consider that the changing times that many Catholic Christians have lived, who experienced Preconciliar Church and have lived out our youth during the Vatican II Council, have had a privileged experience. We appreciate what this Kairos in the Church has meant and we guard the certainty and the hope that it is the Spirit, the Spirit that lives in the hearts and souls of Christians, that will lead us to the truth.

We believe that this same Spirit of the Resurrected Lord, who lives within us, guides us, strengthens us, inspires us, enlightens us, sanctifies us and conduces us towards unity. Unity that Jesus asked for from the Father: “So that they can also be sanctified in the truth...so that by way of the Word they will believe in Me, so that they become One as we are One.” (Jn. 17, 18-22).

Wanting to remember our roots in our faith in Jesús -the Lord-, in the Catholic Church, we remember our childhood and our adolescence lived in the Preconciliar Church, with mass in Latin, where no one understood anything. The reality of our faith was lived out almost only in sacred time and places often far from the problems of our daily life. Then came Vatican II. Many Christians and Catholic Christians, lay people and consecrated religious consider that this period in time was indeed a Kairos in the Church, like a new Pentecost that we were blessed with gratuitously, and that motivated us in our efforts to follow Jesus working in His project to build the Kingdom God.

Our minds and our hearts were opened in order to understand the Church as the People of God, walking in the world, participating as Disciples of Christ in the joys and hopes, in sadness as well as in the anguish of all human beings of our time, and above all with the poor and those who most suffer. This new concept of Church, of Christians, of Religious Life enriched our lives, transformed us and it brought us to a closer sharing of the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters who most suffer on a day to day basis. The Church's Doctrine strengthened our desire to live faithfully according to the Gospel, in its clear reference and interpellation towards our poor and most needy brothers and sisters (Mt 25:31-46) as well as the most important Commandment to love God and your neighbor as yourself(Lc. 10: 25-37).

The Latin-American Bishop's Conference held in Medellín, was a continuation of this Kairos experience, when our Pastors analyzed the Latin American reality, Christian from the early 16th century, and at the same time oppressed, enslaved by evil, sin and unjust social and economic structures. We lived an exodus of religious life towards the world and reality of the poor and we began a new walk with God's People, in communities, where we were present in the midst of the people. We studied the Bible more than ever, reading the Word of God and praying together in community, experimenting the liberating strength that comes from the Word. We discovered in this new ecclesial experience, Life and Liberation as part of the Father's Eternal Project.

In the last three decades this Kairos lived after Medellín and Puebla, gave rise to the creation of catechetical centers as well as centers for the training of lay people all over the Latin American continent. This historical reality was a major contribution in the New Evangelization as well as giving a true evangelical testimony of faith in action.

Our theologians enlightened our path with a Christology interpreted and read in the Latin American context, based on a spirituality of Liberation, that nourished and continues to nourish our faith and our Christian commitment, in the Church and in the world.

We thank the Lord and we bless God for this historical moment and for the History of Salvation that has touched our lives and continues to give us life. Also we are thankful for these ecclesial times, which whether in the light or in the darkness, guides us towards the Truth. We give thanks for all the men and women that have been inspired by the Holy Spirit in these times, and have risen up with this new theological

and christological reflection. We also are grateful for their spirituality and Christian witness.

If it is the function of the Church's Magisterium to examine and guard the faith, to be attentive to orthodoxy as well as orthopraxis, then it should be the function of the Christian faithful, laypeople and religious, to manifest what the teachings of Liberation Theology have meant to us: The stimulation, enlightenment and nourishment that these reflections have provided us on our walk in the faith, as well as in our commitment and spirituality.

To this we can emphasize certain aspects that we live with joy and hope in our Latin-American Church, as witnesses of the vitality that the Holy Spirit has given to us:

- *Living out the mystery of the Incarnation in the midst of the poor, participating in all the aspects of their lives, in their joys and sufferings. Following Christ's example, living with social groups that have no power or privileges.*

- *Living this mystery, walking in footsteps of Jesus fully man and fully Divine at the same time, as the Gospels teach us. Discovering Jesus as a human being who grows, discerning the Father's Will, and who prays and opts for a Life Project: The Kingdom of God. God who reveals Himself in Jesus, is a God open to the Father, whose only desire is to fulfill God's will.*

- *Jesus serving the Kingdom of God, as grace, as a gift that invites us into the dynamic of conversion, in the struggle against sin and evil.*

- *Knowing Jesus in a more profound way, who was an extraordinary believer. Knowing the history of His faith and feel that His faith sustains us each and every day.*

- *Experience God on this walk with the poor, discovering in them the closeness of God, merciful and providential, who looks after the birds in the sky, the lilies of the countryside and above all who takes care of and never abandons his sons and daughters.*

- *Live in the Spirit of the Risen Lord who leads us to discover Him on the path to Emmaus, in our frustrations and in sharing, and then sends us off to be Witnesses.*

- *Maintain ourselves in the fidelity of the Holy Spirit that pushes us to a life constructing more dignified human living conditions, to encourage the fallen, who does not let the reed break in two, that infuses courage to lift those who find themselves prostrated. Who chose the small and humble in order to confuse the powerful.*

- *Discover in the poor, a God who privileges his least fortunate children, a God who Mary sings to in her Magnificat, he who tumbles the powerful from their*

thrones and lifts up the humble. The same God who invites Zachaeus to change his life around and who ends up sharing his wealth with the poor .

- *The undividable relation between the spiritual life and life itself, leads us to understand reality, live within the real context of daily life and carry this reality with us as well. This is a central point in our Christian spirituality.*

- *The Way of the Cross, as a means of confronting the powers to be, those that oppress human beings whether political or religious, is an inspiration in our daily lives.*

- *The importance of strengthening ourselves in prayer, live and pray like Jesus, gratuitously, with the confidence of a son speaking to his father, full of love and a spirit of abandonment in the darkest and most painful times. At the same time alert to all the false manipulations in prayer that Jesus adverted to and questioned in the Gospels.*

This Theology and Spirituality has nourished and truly strengthened the faith of many anonymous Christians, lay people or religious, who live offering their lives on the path to follow Jesus. It has given a profound sense and enlightened the faith of many of our Central American martyrs as well the lives of many other martyrs around the globe. At the same time these martyrs are converted into faithful witnesses of fidelity to God and to our people. Their memory transmits to us: strength, vitality and hope.

We believe that this is the particular charisma of the Latin-American Church, and is what we as a Church can humbly give and share towards the embellishment of the Universal Church.

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(Translated by Joseph Barnett)

Jesus of History, Christs of Faith, and Hope that Another World Is Possible

*“Jesus’ past can be recovered in the present only if it pushes us toward the future”
(Sobrinó, 1978, xxiii).*

Introduction

Since the 1960s, a series of “new” voices have irrupted around the world in liberation, social justice and eco-justice movements, revealing the immense worlds of poor and marginalized peoples, introducing their standpoints, perspectives, and concerns, and vastly expanding dialogues and debates in every domain. And in this process Jon Sobrinó has become widely revered for his intuitions concerning the worlds of the poor, his dedication in re-reading the bible and the life and death of Jesus from this perspective, his creativity in re-framing Christology, ecclesiology, and spirituality in these terms, and his scandalous insistence that justice is possible. As a theologian and sometimes activist from the North (Canada and the U.S.) long in dialogue with activists and theologians from the South, I have been wrestling with Sobrinó’s intuitions and insights for three decades. And here, as a contribution to evolving global dialogues on mapping the paths of the Spirit in our own history, I offer three reflections: (1) beginning with Sobrinó’s seminal contributions to discerning the transcendent dimensions of the hope and faith of the struggling poor in history; (2) touching on the broader worldwide irruptions of poor and marginalized peoples and their contributions to expanding epistemological and theological horizons; and (3) concluding with reference to knowledge explosions, technological revolutions, and rapidly proliferating global links, with all of the ecological dimensions, which are once again transforming the horizons of hope in history, and opening a new stage in worldwide Christological dialogues.

1) Jesus of History

In conversations in poor Christian communities in El Salvador during Holy Week in 1989, people told me: “we see our lives in the bible and the bible in our lives.” And no scholar has probed more deeply than Sobrino this fusion of horizons of poor people and the bible, and its implications for hope and faith today. Four contributions in particular stand out.

First, the pilgrimage of one originally not poor into the world of the poor has meant moving outside the circles of middle class culture, and middle class biblical and theological scholarship, to encounter the immense world of the poor. In listening to these voices and meditating on their sufferings, but also their ingenuity, their stitching together of everyday solidarities making survival possible, their dignity and humor, hope and joy, Sobrino has helped to expand the world of theology to include the vast world of the poor.

Second, re-reading the bible from this perspective, as Sobrino has helped us to do, reveals an all-too familiar world of imperial powers and marginal peoples. It sets the stage for rediscovering Jesus as a movement leader of marginal peoples in a marginal society who was arrested, tortured and executed for announcing, in fidelity to another King, another possible kingdom—like so many people in El Salvador in the 1980s, and so many others around the world. And we see more clearly that targeting spokespeople and leaders like Jesus is not aimed at them individually so much as at killing the hope for the transformation of history that they symbolize and help to make real.

Third, these insights—and the martyrdom of many thousands of poor Salvadorean—help us to think again about the mysterious death-transcending significance of Jesus’ historical praxis. As Sobrino’s friend archbishop Romero proclaimed before his execution, “If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador” (*Excelsior* (Mexico City), quoted in Sobrino, 1985, 50). And, as I witnessed on my trip to El Salvador, as an icon of great personal integrity and courage and as a symbol of thousands of other martyrs, Romeo tangibly lives on in the heart and minds of the people struggling for another future.

Fourth, Sobrino has insisted that we must become much more historical in doing Christology. In many ways, though, we have only begun to probe the deeper historical dimensions of the good news of salvation. In particular, in recent decades liberation, social justice,

ecology and peace movements have proliferated. The character of the struggles has changed, in some respects dramatically, over the last three decades in El Salvador, South Africa, and around the world. In these processes the content of “eman-cipation” or “liberation” is being redefined, and politics is everywhere being reinvented. And we are only beginning to probe the shifting horizons of hope in history.

Fifth, noting widespread tendencies toward Christomonism, Sobrino has long in-sisted on re-framing Christology, and the church’s mission of continuing fidelity to Jesus in history, in fully Trinitarian terms. Expanding Christology to include the Creator and the Spirit opens new horizons on the struggles for hope in history in terms of ongoing creation, including end times, and new beginnings. A similar intuition has surfaced in the worldwide upsurge and convergence of social movements symbolized and expressed in the World Social Forum with its prophetic announcement that “another world is possi-ble.” We are only beginning to probe the deeper meaning of these intuitions, and their implications for our theologies, ecclesiologies, spiritualities, ethics, and politics.

2) Global Festival of Christologies

Latin Americans have been participants in emerging choruses of “new” voices which, since the 1960s, have been irruping around the world in liberation, social justice and eco-justice movements. These movements have been giving voice to the sufferings and hopes of historically marginalized peoples, and their specific standpoints, perspectives, and concerns. They have disrupted reigning cultural and religious, political and policy-making discourses in countless ways, disrupting horizons, categories, and frameworks, historically expanding participation, and transforming the character of dia-logue and debate in every area.

Of course, they have irruped in the churches too. We know them in their expres-sions: along with Latin American liberation theology, in black, feminist and Hispanic the-ologies in the U.S.; black and liberation and contextual theologies in Africa; theology of struggle in the Philippines; Minjung theology in South Korea; Indian and Sri Lankan lib-eration theologies; Caribbean liberation theologies; indige-nous theologies in the U.S. and Canada; Palestinian liberation theology in the Middle East; theologies of incultura-tion in Africa and inter-religious dialogues especially in Asia; peace theologies; eco-theologies;

gay, lesbian and queer theologies; theologies of the disabled, or better differently-abled; Dalit voices in India. Moreover, within each of these currents challenges and invitations to more inclusive horizons have emerged: in the U.S. with African American women's (womanist) and Hispanic women's (mujerista and latina) theologies; Asian feminist theologies, in different ways in dialogue with various Asian religious traditions; the voices of immigrants with hyphenated identities, as with Asian-Canadian and Asian-American voices, and within these communities women's voices in particular; in Latin America with women's, indigenous, and Afro-Latina/o voices. The chorus continues to expand. And along these many paths theology in all its dimensions—content, horizons, methods—as well as the life of the Church is being widely diversified and profoundly transformed.

In different ways, these movements have nurtured the dignity of marginalized peoples, empowered them to speak for themselves concerning their sufferings, joys and visions of society, strengthened their capacities to make their voices heard in the centers of power. They have evoked new revelatory experiences, recovering from the bible and Christian traditions long-cherished but more recently forgotten faces of the Divine, and disclosing new ones. They re-discovered many earlier expressions of the Spirit of liberation in history, in black slave religion, the popular religiosity of peasants and workers, indigenous and women's spiritualities, the social gospel movement and turn-of-the 20th century feminism, movements like Young Christian Students and the Young Christian Workers. And they affirmed their right to think and to speak theologically.

They have forged new paths to understanding Jesus and his mission in his own historical context. They have impelled us toward everyday experience (*lo cotidiano*) as the context of our encounters with the Divine, pulling theology down from the clouds—more accurately, re-connecting Creator and creation, heaven and earth, civilization and nature, history and salvation, Divine and human agency, including the historical agency of “ordinary” people and especially of the marginalized and despised. And in many ways these theologies are more authentically “traditional,” resonating more deeply with biblical texts and traditions than liberal, conservative, and fundamentalist theologies. They have broadened and deepened theological discourse, re-connecting religion and economy, ethics and culture, spirituality and activism.

This great upsurge of voices signals the opening of a new stage in human history. In the church and beyond, they are contributing to

vast expansions of epistemo-logical horizons, including other standpoints and perspectives, revealing the limits of science in knowing this world and in mapping the possibilities for the future, (re)introducing the resources of other non-modern or transmodern (Dussel, 2002) traditions in helping us see the world and our places in it in new and very old ways. And, for the first time since the migrations from the Garden of Eden in Africa, they are contributing to the emergence of genuinely global—“universal”—dialogues transcending the gaps and barriers which have historically divided peoples.

They are vastly expanding theoretical frameworks and horizons through inclusion of the vast world of the poor. And within the world of the poor, they are disclosing many worlds, and many pasts, each shaped in distinct ways by class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, and conditioned by particular traditions in specific contexts and ecological niches, linked in various ways to the worlds of other societies and the wider world. They are contributing to the re-discovery of the openness of history, helping us to envision multiple possible futures, and clarifying critical choices. And, in these and other ways, they are (re)confirming, as Sobrino so often insists, that hope for the future, if there is to be any human future, requires the participation, creativity, and contributions of all the world's poor and marginalized majorities.

3) Another World Is Possible

The irruptions of poor and marginalized voices, including the voice of the earth, have occurred in the midst of historic expansions of knowledge, introductions of new technologies, and development of new modes and scales of social organization (reflected, often confusingly, in the debates about “globalization”). In the process, human agency is being vastly expanded. (More precisely, in a world of great disparities in power, the agency of some humans is vastly expanding; but multiplying global linkages are drawing all people everywhere into the effects of these decisions, and responsibility for them). And these developments are opening horizons of possibility on previously unimagined scales.

Humans have already become major geological, biological, environmental, climatological, and ecological, as well as global political and economic, actors. In various constellations, people are manipulating

matter at the nanoscale, creating new forms of matter, as well as new evolutionary niches, new life forms, altering the face of the earth, transforming land, air, water, local and planetary ecosystems. In the process we hu-mans are becoming “the planet’s most potent evolutionary force. Far greater in impact than anything in history, except perhaps the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs...” (Palumbi, 2001, 10). In the process global dynamics of epochal change, akin to the great geological, climatological, ecological and evolutionary transitions of the past, are accelerating. On the horizons, though, appear multiple, very different possibilities for the human future, indeed the future of all of life on the planet.

Announcements of great progress fill the news every day, new scientific break-throughs, medical miracles, communications marvels, expansions of the new realm of virtual realities. Grander visions of a glorious new golden era in human history—indeed the history of the solar system, perhaps the history of the cosmos—continue to appear. They include visions of improved humanity, literally of posthuman or transhuman suc-cessor species enhanced by bio-, info-, pharmo- and cogno-technologies, interfacing with artificial intelligences, globally linked in an emergent world brain. And growing numbers of commen-tators wonder if human nature has already become obsolete.

However, as the histories of marginalized peoples confirm repeatedly, the prom-ises of progress are so often appropriated and misdirected by reigning elites. The elixir of scientific breakthroughs and expanding capacities to act so often deafens them to cries of the vic-tims, blinds them to the consequences of their choices, and eventually leads to civilizational collapse.

And in the early years of the 21st century images of apocalypse are rapidly be-coming mainstream, as reports stream in from every direction concerning looming ca-tastrophes. A partial list includes: ecological crises like climate change, mutually rein-forcing and gener-ating widespread social turmoil and conflicts; pandemics suddenly kill-ing millions, perhaps tens of millions of people, also unleashing widespread social tur-moil, producing waves of fleeing refugees, and expanding turmoil regionally and glob-ally; spreading militarization, and the widespread pollution and ecological disruption as-sociated with it, along with multiplying wars intensified by chemical, biological weapons and smaller nuclear weapons (likely triggered “accidentally,” as in Iraq and Afghanistan today, by elites blind to the real sources of conflict and the ways militarized responses only intensify them); runaway bio-tech-

nologies, nano-technologies, and/or artificial intelligence in robots. More and more commentators point to already unfolding apocalypses, as many indigenous communities face extinction, communities in sub-Saharan Africa are devastated by HIV/AIDS, as many thousands of species disappear in the sixth mass extinction event in the history of life on earth. In recent months warnings of the “collapse” of oil-based civilization, indeed of modern civilization in any recognizable form, are multiplying. And growing numbers of prophets are crying out about the prospect of the extinction of the human species, with perhaps cosmic implications, if life is rare in the universe and consciousness even rarer.

Around the world and across disciplines commentators are searching for appropriate analogies: in civilizational terms comparable to the inventions of civilization 5000 years ago, or the fall of the Roman empire, or the rise of capitalist and colonial modernity with its accompanying devastation of “non-Western” cultures and civilizations; in ecological terms “climate change;” in geological and evolutionary terms “epochal,” comparable to the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago as a great asteroid triggered massive devastation and accelerated climate change. Evidence of planetary transitions is pouring in from every direction, along with reports on the many ways in which ways human agency is pivotal, for good and ill.

In this context, Sobrino’s intuitions that the most deeply revelatory Christology is historical and Trinitarian, implying that history should be re-framed to include, along with the struggles of the poor for liberation, ongoing creation, apocalypse (or decreation (McKibben, 1999)), and new creation are more compelling than ever. The morale of the creation story in Genesis—that the fate of humanity, indeed of all of creation on earth rests in human hands—is truer than ever. And, in more ways than we see, we are caught up in world historic processes of re-creating ourselves, our civilization, and (the rest of) nature, in nothing less than a “fierce struggle to re-create the world” (Santiago, 2004).

As so often in human history, marginalized communities first recognize the limits and contradictions of the prevailing civilization, and, like the Jesus movement 2000 years ago foreseeing the annihilation of Jewish society at the hands of the Roman empire, anticipate its collapse, and, in fidelity to the Spirit of life, launch quests for a new way of life. At the beginning of the 21st century too, on the margins and in the interstices of global (dis)order, across the South especially but also in the North, “life continues, reborn and organized even in the dis-

placed, persecuted, blocked and exterminated people...” (Movimiento continental de los cristianos por la paz con justicia y dignidad, 2004).

In the looming shadows of apocalypse(s), new visions of hope are flowering around the world, involving truly radical conversion(s) from blind faith in science, technology and markets, and rejection of the middle class spirituality of consumerism with its endless shopping to quench the hungers of mass produced needs and desires. More and more people are advocating “returning” to smaller scale, locally-centered, more fully democratic and ecologically responsible communities, linked in various mutually beneficial ways in a multi-centered, globally networked planetary civilization, which Sobrino, following his martyred friend and colleague Ignacio Ellacuría, names the “civilization of poverty” (Sobrino, 1993), and the Zapatistas describe as “a world where all worlds fit” (General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation –Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, 2001).

In this connection, perhaps most scandalous in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s notification on Sobrino’s writings and other documents is the absence of any hint of wonder about the signs of the times. There are no signs of interest in: the many irruptions of new voices, the vast expansion of epistemological horizons, the new possibilities for global dialogue, and the challenges of translating in mutually respectful ways across cultures; the vast expansions of human agency and the epochal changes sweeping the world; the shifting horizons of suffering, despair, and hope. In these texts there are no surprises of the Spirit in history, and few hints of concrete signs of hope for the future. And in these respects, these documents diverge radically from the spirit reflected in *Gaudium et Spes* and the other documents of Vatican II.

And in local communities, movements and churches—synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship too, and in social movement gathering places like the World Social Forum—there are many experiences of Pentecost in these times of epochal transition. These are powerful new experiences of the Spirit, poured out across the differences, gaps and barriers which have traditionally divided peoples, in the different tongues, accents and dialects of the peoples of many places, cultures and languages, religions and politics, calling for repentance and conversion, inspiring deeper respect for differences and broader

solidarities, and pointing the way forward together in this time when the whole creation is groaning in the labor pains of new birth (Rom. 8:22).

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An Analysis of the “*Notificatio*” from a Biblical Point of View

Given the haste with which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith analyzed and commented upon the writings of Jon Sobrino by means of an “accelerated process,” only an inattentive person could fail to make the connection with the upcoming meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference in Aparecida. We have seen a *Notificatio* (Notification), and a subsequent *nota posterior*, which require comment. (The reader will pardon our use of Latin on more than one occasion, but it seems as though we should return to Latin, even if we will have to translate it for the scant 99.7% of Latin American people who do not understand it).

We ought to comment on a number of points. For example, before the *Notificatio* saw the light of day (that’s a metaphor; we explain it just in case another inattentive person might understand that we are implying that it didn’t come from the light, or didn’t know the light), the Archbishop of El Salvador, from *Opus Dei*, expressing more his wish than the reality, asserted that Sobrino would be censured, would not be able to teach, and would not be able to publish books with ecclesiastical authorization. None of which occurred.

We should also note that one of the things of which Sobrino was “notified” was his affirmation of the efficacy of the death of Jesus: “This saving efficacy is shown more in the form of an exemplary cause than of a salvific cause. But this does not mean that it is not effective.” The Roman Congregation annotates: “The efficacy of the redemption and salvation brought about by Christ cannot be reduced to the good example that Jesus gives us” (#10). Without pausing for an exhaustive analysis, I note that since it has been said, “*Lex Orandi, Lex Credenti*” (the law of prayer is the law of belief) (Catechism 1124), it would not be strange if Sobrino had taken into account the prayer which the Roman Missal labels “Collect” (gathering prayer), and which is nothing less than the appointed prayer for Palm Sunday in the Passion of the Lord: “All powerful and eternal God, who in order to give to humankind an

example of humility, sent our Savior to become flesh and suffer the cross, grant that we might be worthy of the *witness of his Passion*, and so might participate one day in his Resurrection, through Jesus Christ our Lord...”

I will leave these and other issues to other scholars, and I will concentrate specifically on the biblical references in the *Notificatio* (Notification).

The *wise Romans* inform us that the “methodological setting” is the “faith of the Church,” and this is the starting place “from which” the “science of faith” is developed. Following the *modus operandi* (method of working) of the Congregation, we could say that this “seems to insinuate” or “makes one suspect” that that “faith of the Church” is primarily the “Creeds” rather than the “*sensus fidei – sensus fidelium*” (sense of the faith, sense of the faithful).¹ We ought to keep in mind that “the infallibility of the Church is not expressed solely in the hierarchy, but in structure and life, faith and hope. The hope of the Church lives in the faith which is expressed within it, since faith lives on hope. The fundamental facts of the spirit in the world are only able to subsist because each succeeding generation waters them again with its blood.” (J. Ratzinger, *The New People of God*, Barcelona 1972, 168). No one with biblical knowledge would deny that faith is “embedded/deposited” (this is the sense of the Hebrew term *’aman*) and that Jesus elects to speak “from the place of the poor.” No one would think that the parables or Beatitudes of Jesus are academic discourses, a point which brought German biblical scholar J. Jeremías to affirm that “the Kingdom belongs *only* to the poor... God gives revelation not for erudite theologians, but for the uncultured.” (*Theology of the New Testament*, Salamanca 1974, 142). Only a person who reads the Bible exclusively from a desk can deny that “the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18), deny that the Church *is* the Church of the Poor (John XXIII, John Paul II), and deny that the faith of the poor and the reality of the life and death of the poor is a privileged place from which that life and faith should become “word-about-God” (theo-logia).

With this starting point, the *Notificatio* (Notification) “seems to insinuate” or “makes one suspect” that some theologians believe that one ought to do exegesis and interpret the Bible (and not in every case, as we shall see), but accept “*explicitis verbis*” (literally) the councils and the dogmas as if they had not been created and produced in a particular language and at a particular time. Here’s what the *Notificatio* (Notification) would say: Sobrino “does not take into account the fact that the *transtemporal* subject of the faith is the believing Church, and

that the pronouncements of the first Councils have been accepted and lived by the entire ecclesial community” (#3).

The work of Sobrino, it is clear, has two principal parts, the first (*Jesucristo liberador [Jesus the Liberator]*)² more centered in the historical Jesus, and the second (*La fe en Jesucristo [Christ the Liberator]*)³ more devoted to the “confessions of faith.” The *Notificatio* (Notification) does not seem to have taken that into account (or did not want to take it into account). Let us reflect for a moment on the first part, *Jesus the Liberator*.

For much of the 20th century, it is evident that there was a “distance” between the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History,” but no one thought that the latter could be recovered with any certainty. The Gospels preached a Good News, and Jesus appeared “hidden,” as if mediated by the prism of faith in the Resurrected One, and by the life and death situation of the communities to which the Evangelists preached. However, for some time (it has been called the Third Question) scholars have believed that it is possible to approximate, with some probability, the historical words and deeds of Jesus. In order to do this, a number of methods have been proposed—criteria or elements which permit this estimation and “unveil what was behind the prism of preaching.” They do not claim that “this and only this is Jesus” but that “this is what we are able to know with any certainty.” Surely Jesus said and did much more than this, but, at least by the means which are available nowadays, we can assert at least this with some or much confidence. Particularly in the first volume, Sobrino resorts precisely to these methods. It is by means of applying them that he is able to affirm—as the *Notificatio* (Notification) states: “Let it be said from the start that the historical Jesus did not interpret his death in terms of salvation, in terms of soteriological models later developed by the New Testament, such as expiatory sacrifice or vicarious satisfaction [...]. In other words, there are no grounds for thinking that Jesus attributed an absolute transcendent meaning to his own death, as the New Testament did later” (*Jesus the Liberator*, 201). “In the Gospel texts it is impossible to find an unequivocal statement of the meaning Jesus attached to his own death” (*Ibidem*, 202). “...Jesus went to his death with confidence and saw it as a final act of service, more in the manner of an effective example that would motivate others than as a mechanism of salvation for others. To be faithful to the end is what it means to be human” (*Ibidem*, 204). What Sobrino states here is no different than what is stated by a great number of scholars, Catholic and non-Catholic, in their works on the historical Jesus, including great theologians like Karl Rahner.

The erudite Romans presume to answer this statement of Sobrino, saying that “Gospel passages in which Jesus attributes to his death a significance for salvation are not adequately taken into account; in particular, Mark 10:45, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*”; and the words of the institution of the Eucharist: “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many*” (#9). Let us focus on this. The affirmation that “Jesus attributes” should be accompanied by some of the numerous scholarly methods or criteria for finding Jesus, something that the *Notificatio* (Notification) does not do. As we say, the great majority of scholars affirm that “the post-paschal prism” is what gives the death of Jesus this interpretation; that is to say, that Jesus—facing the proximity of death, which in all probability he saw more and more imminent as a consequence of his full fidelity to God revealed as Father and the poor revealed as brothers—did not seem to give a specific meaning to this death which he freely faced. The primitive Christians, which proclaimed that this Jesus was the Messiah, had to confront doubt and debate with fellow Jews: “Where does it say there will be a defeated Messiah?” Certainly they would look in the Bible for this meaning for a response. The songs of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah would be the primary text which would permit them to say “he died, according to the scriptures,” and also, to affirm that this death was vicariously “for our sins.” (1 Cor 15:3, which is probably the oldest textual tradition of the entire New Testament). It is this same phrase of “died...for” which Christians reflected upon in the Gospels when they preached Jesus to their communities, and that is the reason the death is viewed as a ransom (see Mk 10:45) or through the words of the Last Supper, which were certainly transmitted and practiced in Christian communities as Paul demonstrated (1 Cor 11:23-26). We also note that in both texts from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle affirmed that what he transmits is at the same time something that he has received (11:23; 15:3). The salvific meaning of the death of Jesus, and its interpretation as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, seems more likely to be an interpretation of primitive Christianity facing the scandal of the Cross than an interpretation from Jesus himself.

If, as they state, the hypothetical reconstruction of Sobrino is erroneous, why is it so? What arguments establish that? The mere repetition of biblical citations is not an explanation of why a statement is erroneous; moreover, it resembles something very close to a fundamentalist reading, a reading which the Pontifical Biblical Commission has called “suicide of thought.” (The Interpretation of the Bible in the

Church, 1993, 19). In reality, the hypothetical reconstruction of the Roman Congregation is what appears to be erroneous, at least in that it has given no methodological criteria for accessing the historical Jesus in order to confirm its statements.

Moving along, and discussing “the faith of the disciples” in *Christ the Liberator*, the “Notificatio” (Notification) “seems to insinuate” or “makes one suspect” that the “Christology” to which it refers is a “Christology of titles” (“Son,” “Lord,” “God”). This approach has been largely set aside by modern students of the Bible. Nevertheless, we note that all these “titles” correspond with what is called a “high Christology” of the New Testament, that is, terms which indicate an “aspect of the divinity” in the words of R.E. Brown.

On the one hand, it is evident that the Christian faith at Nicea (325) proclaimed Jesus as “True God of True God” in contrast with the Arians who denied it. The point continued to be disputed, and new councils were necessary in order to develop the point. (Constantiople, 381; Ephesus 431; Chalcedon 451—the the first four ecumenical councils). Clearly, Nicea is the conclusion of a journey begun in the New Testament. But on the other hand, Nicea, in order to speak clearly, had to resort to Hellenic language and abandon biblical language, which is commonly accepted today. Finally, it is clear that the Arians (among other things, the majority of the hierarchy of the church of that time!) resorted to the New Testament, where it is clear that the fact of the divinity of Jesus is not so obvious. What Jon Sobrino precisely says is that the New Testament—in the few texts where Jesus is called “God” or which include an aspect of the divinity—does not use the same language as Nicea, in that it “does not clearly affirm the divinity.” Rather, “The New Testament...contains expressions that contain the seed of what will produce confession of the divinity” and finally, “at the outset Jesus was not spoken of as *God*, nor was *divinity* a term applied to him; this happened only after a considerable interval of believing explication, almost certainly after the fall of Jerusalem” (*Christ the Liberator*, 114). It is clear that for Sobrino, this “considerable interval” was only 40 years! And one should not forget that the majority of the writings of the New Testament were written and edited after the fall of Jerusalem! Here, we should clearly distinguish between what Jesus—or the disciples—could have said in the context of the resurrection, and what was proclaimed several years later by the community. Otherwise, “it would not be easy to explain the absence of the title [of divinity] in the documents of the Christian confession before the 60s” (R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to*

New Testament Christology, New York 1994, 190 n.280). Christian writers from the second century such as Ignatius of Antioch are more explicit still, and a Roman writer, Pliny, in a letter to the emperor relates that Christians sing hymns to Christ “*sicut cuasi Deo*” (as if to a god).

It is interesting to note that the application of categories of divinity to Jesus are extended geographically. Not only in one region is Jesus recognized within these categories of divinity. If the title or label does not seem to have its origin in the Greek ethos but in the Jewish one, no one can deny that it is a gradual process, since the influence of the Old Testament on the first Christians impeded such a development. Probably, the use of titles such as “*kyrios*” (Lord) had been—particularly in the liturgical context—a way of approximating the confession of faith which is clearly established at the end of the first century as “My Lord and My God.” (Jn 20:28). It is useful to highlight the clearly liturgical context of those texts in the New Testament which refer to Jesus as God, including the aforementioned one which—though it appears to be an exception—is presented in the narrative as having occurred on a Sunday, with the disciples gathered around Jesus. This seems to indicate that it was a formula of faith professed in the community (with collateral political connotations, since the Emperor was known as “Our Lord and God”).

One can see that this is not specifically metaphysical terrain, (as would be the case of Nicea), and one can well affirm that the New Testament presents a Christology with statements which “contain the seed of what will produce confession of the divinity of the divinity.”

On the other hand, it would be very confusing to state that “[t]he confession of the divinity of Jesus Christ has been an absolutely essential part of the faith of the Church since her origins. It is explicitly witnessed to since the New Testament” (#4). Original Christianity, perhaps since before the fall of Jerusalem, could only affirm this with difficulty, as can be seen from the letters of Paul, where he clearly uses *Kyrios* (Lord), there are no references to the divinity. The only exception apparently is Romans 9:5 but this is a disputed text: it is possible that here “God” reads as an exclamation to the Father; however if it refers to Christ, which is also possible, it should be noted that references to Jesus as God begin as an extension of divine titles for the Risen One (it is in the Resurrection that Jesus becomes Messiah, Son, Lord, and now God: “God raised him up [exalted him] and gave him the name which is above every other name....Jesus is Lord.” Phil. 2:9-11).

The “*Notificatio*” (Notification) also demonstrates that the New Testament affirms that “Jesus is Lord, and that all things are created by (mediated through) him” (1 Cor 8:6). How can this text be interpreted? “[T]hat Jesus is God, who is creator and omnipotent” (#6)? It would be difficult to understand that this is what Paul is saying, as is affirmed by the majority of commentators. To be the creator (which is said of God the Father) is not the same thing as to be the mediator of creation (which is what 1 Cor. says of Christ). Once more, the biblical texts seem to be chosen to demonstrate what the writers already wanted to say. They are presented without any analysis or exegesis. It is possible that texts such as 1 Cor 8:6 catch a glimpse of something more and more divine in Christ, and thus prepare the way for texts like Rom 9:5. Later on, other statements, even more developed, are written by the disciples of Paul (Col 2:2; 2 Thes 1:12; Tit 2:13). But this demonstrates yet again a gradual process of deepening thought which begins in primitive Christianity and culminates in Nicea.

This citation from Paul, used without any interpretive criteria as is done in practically the entire *Notificatio* (Notification) is related therein to the dogma of the Council of Ephesus which proclaims Mary as “*theotokos*” (Mother of God). The *Notificatio* (Notification) maintains that it “is therefore incorrect to maintain that “the unlimited divine” is not predicated of Jesus” (#6). Certainly this ought to “make one suspect” or “seem to insinuate” that every part of the unlimited divine which is predicated of God ought to be predicated of Jesus, by which one ought to be able to say that Jesus is “impassible,” “immutable,” “immortal,” “invisible,” etc. which is, of course, fairly difficult to affirm. *In a literal reading of these passages, the Notificatio (Notification) reflects the so-called theology of docetism which it turns out is incompatible with the Catholic Faith! This statement of the Notificatio (Notification) is understandable only within the context of Docetic christology, wherein the two Natures of Jesus are not clear.* (The italic type of this paragraph indicates textual quotations from the “*Notificatio*” (Notification) #5-6, even though indicating another heresy which the technique “seems to insinuate” or “makes one suspect.”)

Here, the *Notificatio* (Notification) also questions the understanding that Sobrino has concerning what is called “*communicatio idiomatum*” (the communication of languages), that is, the possibility of referring the properties of divinity to humanity and vice versa” (#6). In this, Sobrino seems to be influenced by Karl Rahner who states: “But the content of the ‘is’ in phrases of *communicatio idiomatum* in Christology is not precisely supported by an actual identification, but by a singular

unity of different realities which keep an infinite distance between them, a unity which occurs nowhere else, and is of the deepest mystery. Thus, Jesus in and according to his humanity, who we see when we say ‘Jesus,’ ‘is not’ God, and God, in and according to his divinity, ‘is not’ human in the sense of an actual identification. (*Curso fundamental sobre la fe*, Barcelona 1979, 340).

One final topic: Sobrino states that Jesus is a believer “like” us. To begin with, we note that to say “like” can also mean “as much as” or “as we are also.” The intimate relationship of Jesus with the Father can cause us to doubt that Jesus had the “same amount” of faith as we ourselves have. But he had faith, *just like we ourselves* also have it, didn’t he? That is what Sobrino teaches according to the *Notificatio* (Notification): “With regard to faith, Jesus in his life is presented as a believer like ourselves, our brother in relation to God, since he was not spared having to pass through faith. But he is also presented as an elder brother because he lived faith as its ‘pioneer and perfecter’ ([Heb]12:2). He is the model, the one on whom we have to keep our eyes fixed in order to live out our own faith” (*Christ the Liberator*, 138). Evidently, we must return to the discussion regarding the historical person of Jesus. Here is what Rahner has to say: “In and of himself, Jesus lived naturally in the religious space of his people (...), which he accepted and shared as the genuine beloved of God [...] Jesus experiences himself radically close to God, which for him is no secret due to his human importance, but as the obvious and ultimate reality, lived in a spontaneous way [...] The human self-consciousness of Jesus encountered God from the distance of a creature, with liberty, obedience, and adoration, the same as any other human self-consciousness.” (Ib., p. 292-4). Understood in this way, it is difficult to deny that Jesus would be a believer; one could argue with Sobrino about his exegesis of Heb. 12:2, but not about Jesus’ experience of faith. In the world of biblical studies, as we have stated, “to believe” (*aman*) means “to confirm” or “build upon.” The image which underlies all of this is that God is like a “rock” (YHWH is my rock). It does not seem easy to deny that for Jesus, God—his Father—would be the one on whom he would build his life. He would construct his life around his fidelity to his Father, with confidence and trust. [In Spanish, the close relationship between *con-fiar* (confide or have confidence in) and *fiar* (trust) are more pronounced—Trans.]

The *Notificatio* (Notification) also questions Sobrino’s suggestion that there is a “danger” associated with the doctrinal definitions as written by the Christological councils. It states that “there is no foundation

for calling these formulas dangerous, since they are authentic interpretations of Revelation” (#3). But, once again, what Sobrino says is also said by Rahner: “The Christological formulations of “is”—“the same one” “is” God and man—are in constant danger of false interpretation because of the supposed parallelism between these uses of “is” and the use of “is” in the residue of common language.” (Id., pp. 340-341; emphasis in original). Moreover, this is said in the context of the hellenization of language undertaken to enrich the expression of faith, which the *Notificatio* (Notification)—strangely—interprets in the following way: “If these Councils used the terminology and concepts expressive of the culture of the time, it was not in order to be conformed to it. The Councils do not signify a hellenization of Christianity but rather the contrary. Through the inculturation of the Christian message, Greek culture itself underwent a transformation from within and was able to be used as an instrument for the expression and defense of biblical truth” (#3). This sentence, as can plainly be seen, contradicts itself, and need not be analyzed.

What then, can we conclude regarding the *Notificatio* (Notification)? First some marginal notes: it is stated numerous times that there was a need for an “urgent proceeding” for this analysis, but Jon Sobrino responded in March of 2005 to a petition sent in July of 2004, and the “urgent procedure” took place on November 23, 2005. And—at last—the decision was made to publish “this present *Notificatio*” in March of 2007! (Is the Vatican mail a little slow?) And curious timing, too, just two months before Aparecida. Almost as if they intended to say, “Don’t talk about this!”

The document uses many phrases such as “the author evidently does not deny...but does not affirm with sufficient clarity” and “makes one suspect” (#4), “suggests” (#5), “arises from” (#6)...It seems very strange that an objective analysis of a text by “the science of faith” looks at the text with such glances of subjective suspicion, inference, or derivation...

I did not speak at all of what is said in (#7) regarding the Kingdom. The text is very poorly written and does not withstand analysis: it mixes references to Jesus the mediator of the Kingdom with other kinds of mediation; it seems more like a review of texts of John Paul II, than a serious review of the theme of Kingdom in the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus. Curiously, the Explanatory Note (a strange *addenda* [addition] which seems to say “but don’t think we aren’t interested in the poor...”) maintains “Father Sobrino manifests a preoccupation for the poor and oppressed...This preoccupation certainly is shared by

the whole Church” (#1). In light of such a statement, it ought to really stand out that this preoccupation with the poor, like that of Sobrino, isn’t at all apparent! That is not what Benedict XVI seems to demonstrate in his speech to the *nuncios* [papal ambassadors] of Latin America. The word “poor” appeared only once, while he mentioned “sects” three times, “family” three times, “vocations” four times, and alluded to his “beloved predecessor” three times. There were no references to the Bible (nor to any other words like “neoliberalism” “base communities,” or “liberation”...). If the poor really are the “preoccupation” of the entire Church, a little effort ought to be expended to demonstrate it...

The following statement is also interesting: “Here again, the difficulty about Father Sobrino’s use of the New Testament appears. In his writing, the New Testament data gives way to a hypothetical historical reconstruction that is erroneous” (#9). As we have seen, exactly the opposite seem to be true. It is the *Notificatio* (Notification) in which *the difficulty about the use of the New Testament appears*. Once more, it seems as if wherever “Jon Sobrino” occurs, one could substitute “*Notificatio* (Notification)” and come to similar conclusions, albeit from a different perspective.

The *Notificatio* (Notification) concludes by saying: “The purpose of this *Notificatio* is precisely to make known to all the faithful the fruitfulness of theological reflection that does not fear being developed from within the living stream of ecclesial Tradition” (#11). We ought to recognize that if this is the “purpose” of the *Notificatio* (Notification), it certainly has not succeeded.

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Notes:

- 1 The Spanish version of the Vatican notification uses the terms “*parece insinuar*” translated here as “seems to insinuate,” and “*da pie a la sospecha*,” translated here as “makes one suspect” in #4. Citations to the Notification are to the English translation except where otherwise noted, as here.—Trans.
- 2 The English translation of *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórico teológica de Jesús De Nazaret* is *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, (Orbis Books, New York, 1993, 2003). All citations will be taken from the English version.—Trans.
- 3 The English translation of *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* is *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, (Orbis Books, New York, 2001). All citations will be taken from the English version. The Spanish title of the book particularly emphasizes faith in Jesus Christ, rather than Christ’s role as liberator.—Trans.

Jesus Christ as *Chakana*

Outline of an Andean Christology of Liberation

1. Introduction

The “preferential option for the poor”, defined at the II General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín, and ratified at the III General Conference in Puebla, in the course of the last twenty years is finally be contextualized for human groups of different sex, race and cultural background. In the Andean context, it is spoken of a “theological and ecclesial option for the indigenous peoples”, an “option for the forgotten and marginalized people”, and an “option for indigenous religiosity and spirituality”.

The faith of the original and indigenous Andean cultures turns out to be a *locus theologicus* – a “theological place” – favorite to develop and to re-elaborate the main theological subjects, in a critical intercultural dialogue with the dominant and classic tradition of the West. The condition of being marginalized and poor, of being “forgotten” and stigmatized, gives the indigenous peoples of the Andes an exceptional scope.

In the figure of Jesus of Nazareth as *Taytayku* (“our father”), Christ occupies in the imaginary monk of the Andean community (mainly Quechuas and Aimaras) a favorite place, more visible and incorporated in the popular religiosity than the first (Father) and the third person (Spirit) of the Trinity. The religious celebrations are centered on hierophanies of Saints, the Virgin and Christ (christophanies); these last

ones follow the course of the liturgical year, with three great moments: Christmas, Good Friday (including Passover of Resurrection) and the Celebration of the Cross (Third of May).

It seems that the Andean *jaqi* and *runa* (“people” in Aimara and Quechua, respectively), have followed closely the letter of the traditional catechesis of the creed that jumps from the birth right to the passion and ignores the preaching and praxis of Jesus. The image that Andean people have of Jesus seems to be centered in its cosmic, redeeming and mediating function, and not in the historical figure of Jesus, carpenter and Jew of Nazareth.

2. *T'unupa*: Jesus disguised as a beggar

In the Peruvian and Bolivian High Plateau, the myth of *T'unupa* (or *Tonapa*) is still alive between the Quechua and Aimara population, whose image was superimposed in the colonial time by the figure of Jesus Christ. According to the testimony of an Aimara *jaqi* from Juli (the extreme south of Peru):

“My grandfathers told us the myth of T'unupa; saying that T'unupa was the son of the god Wiraqucha. This god has ordered the Earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and all things. And later He has sent his son to teach humanity a harmonic life with nature. He passed through the villages and taught the farmers to get greater benefit from the Earth, without damaging it. He preached against laziness and drunkenness and emphasized the foundations of solidarity and mercy” (personal testimony).

The myth of *T'unupa* becomes especially interesting for a liberating christological reflection because of the diverse manifestations it has. One of them is interpreted as “Andean Christ”: a wise, humble and preaching man of mercy. In the same form, the figure of *T'unupa* is often identified with Saint Bartholomew or Saint Thomas. It is said that the legendary “proto-evangelization” of the Andes was done by the Apostle Thomas (*T'unupa*). The word *T'unupa* seems to have its origin in the language and the *Pukina* culture, lords of *Tiwanaku* (town and culture in present Bolivia, conquered by the Incas).

One of the religious aspects that called the attention of the first evangelizers was the mysterious [pre-colonial] Cross of Carabuco (which has its origin in the “Andean Cross”), attributed by some missionaries to Saint Thomas or Saint Bartholomew and associated in the last instance to the God or original hero *T'unupa* (*Tonapa*, *Tarapaca* and even son of *Viracocha* or *Wiraqucha*). This legendary hero has been called

sometimes the “Andean Christ”, because of his miracles, persecutions and finally liberation, after which he sailed the Titicaca Lake and created the Desaguadero River. Until today a volcano located at the north side of the *Salar* of Uyuni has his name.

“[...] a bearded, medium sized man with long hair, and somewhat long shirts had arrived at these provinces and kingdoms from Tawantinsuyu and he was seen a nobody, with grey hair, he was skinny, he walked with the pilgrim’s staff, and was the one who taught with great love, calling all of them his sons and daughters. He was not heard neither followed by the locals, and when he traveled through all the provinces, he did many visible miracles. Just touching the patients, he healed them without any personal interest or attraction. It has been said that he spoke all the languages better than the local ones, and he was called Thonapa [...]” (oral tradition).

According to the myth, *T’unupa*, son of the supreme God *Wiraqucha*, walked disguised as a beggar from town to town, preaching the Good News of liberation and a worthy life, healing the sick and giving his love to the natives. Nevertheless, he was rejected by many, which brought natural disasters and petrification of the villains. In several occasions, a widow welcomed him and was saved from the fatal consequences.

The mythical figure of *T’unupa* was re-interpreted by the Andean population, through catechizing, as the figure of Jesus Christ, pilgrim and pauper, healer and lover of the humble people, the liberator of this nation subjugated by the Inca Empire and later by the Spanish colonizers. *T’unupa*-Jesus is a subversive figure of resistance and hope that has being fused with another very important myth of great weight until nowadays: the myth of *Inkarri*.

3. *Inkarri*: Jesus revived in the middle of the Andean people

Shortly after the Conquest, the Andean population created a myth that has apocalyptic elements (in the Biblical sense) of resistance and hope, and that simultaneously is a dramatic reading of the situation of the Andean people. According to the story, the supreme God *Wiraqucha* had two children: *Inkarri* (the Quechuzise form of the Spanish words “Inca” and “king”) and *Españarri* (“King of Spain”), according to other versions: *Inka* and Jesus. Between both brothers, a conflict of life and death took place [Conquest], when *Inkarri* was carved up by *Españarri*, and his parts were scattered in the four directions of the winds (the *Tawantinsuyu* or “empire of the four parts”, but now conquered).

Although in the beginning the native population identified *Españarrí* with the new “God Jesus”, they very quickly saw him as the incarnation of *Inkarri*, who suffered the same fate as Jesus Christ on the Cross, under another equally bloodthirsty and unjust empire [the Roman Empire]. *Inkarri*-Jesus became, for the colonized and subjugated indigenous population, soon a figure of hope, liberation and restitution of lost rights.

According to another version of the legend, *Inkarri*, as Jesus, was persecuted because he defended his community against the invader, and was obliged to flee into the forest (*uraypacha* or *yunka*: conceived by the missionaries as “hell”; here we have the parallel of Jesus’ “descent to the reign of death”) and continues living there to resuscitate one day among the poorest and to restore the great Inca empire. For many, the native revolutionary Tupac Amaru (and Tupac Katari in the Bolivian case; both killed in 1780/1) has been an incarnation of the *Inkarri*.

The popular myth of *Inkarri*-Tupac Amaru has many parallels with Jesus Christ: Tupac Amaru (as well as his Bolivian equivalent Tupac Katari) was a charismatic leader, who fought against injustice and exploitation of the natives, and was carved up by the colonial power, but he would resuscitate one day gathering his pieces from the four regions (*Tawantinsuyu*) to reestablish justice: the *parousia* of Christ in terms of the Andean utopia.

The myth of *Inkarri* is as much a story of resistance against the power of occupation and the European civilization (even Spanish Catholicism), as also a sort of indigenous interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus and his last coming (*Parousia*), to carry out the *atakatástasis*, the total recapitulation of all creation. As the resurgence of the *Inkarri* would revive the Andean indigenous culture, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (or *Cristorri*) it will also revive the new community of God, in order to leave behind centuries of subjugation and exclusion.

4. Jesus Christ as a *Chakana* (cosmic bridge)

According to the surveys among Andean Christians, the popular Andean christology affirms with the official Church that Christ is the Son of God becoming human, who came to Earth to redeem us through his death on the Cross. Nevertheless, it has its very own elements related to uttermost Andean thought and Andean mythologies (among them the myths of *T'unupa* and *Inkarri*).

In the first place, for the Andean *jaqi* and *runa*, Jesus is almost completely dispossessed of historical aspects. The two greatest Christological moments are the birth (Christmas) and Jesus' death on the Cross (Good Friday), culminating in the Passover of the Resurrection and again remembered in the Celebration of the Cross (Third of May). Neither the preaching of Jesus, nor his miracles related in the New Testament play an important role in Andean religiosity. Resurrection is associated with Good Friday or the *pachakuti*, Andean cataclysm of the cosmic restitution of the order.

Secondly, Jesus is venerated as the “miraculous *Taytacha* (beloved father)”, under multiple sacred manifestations or christophanies, receiving many different names and titles. In Peru for example, He is known as the “Lord of Miracles”, “Lord of Tremors”, “Lord of Huanca”, “Lord of Qoyllur Rit'i”, “Lord of Achajrapí”. Each particular Christ (or each hierophany of Christ) shows a certain characteristic of the universal Christ.

The legends of most of these christophanies insist that “*Taytacha* Jesus” has revealed himself first to a poor shepherd, a marginal *campesino*, causing immediately a conflict with the official ecclesiastical power which tried, at a first moment, to deprive of authority the miraculous manifestation of *Taytacha*. The native community embraced, nevertheless, the miraculous Christ, in spite of the warnings and even prohibitions by the colonial clergy, appropriating Him as theirs (*Taytacha* Jesus). The artistic and legendary representations of these christophanies display indigenous characteristics: dark skin complexion and revelations in Quechua.

Thirdly, Jesus is expressed in the first place in the symbol of the Cross. The Cross reveals the most important aspect of Andean christology, due to the function it has in the Andean worldview. First of all, the Cross is for the Andean *jaqi* and *runa* a *chakana*, a bridge between different cosmic regions, between above and below, left and right. The indigenous people of the Andes already knew the figure and the symbol of the Cross before the arrival of the first missionaries [for example the Cross of Carabuco]. The Southern Cross, named “The Great *Chakana*” (*batun* or *jisk'a chakana*) by Quechuas and Aimaras has always been a very important element within the Andean worldview.

The Andean Cross (*Chakana*) has a horizontal and vertical symmetry, in such a way that it represents the cosmic balance in a two-way traffic: from above to below the balance of correspondence, and from

left to right the balance of complementarity. In addition it is staggered, emphasizing the mediating function. All the aspects together reflect the basic principle of the Andean wisdom: the principle of relationality which is the very core of christology. Christ is both the definitive connector as well as the exemplary connection.

The Andean Cross – and therefore Jesus Christ – as a *chakana* or cosmic bridge connects the different levels and aspects of reality, and is therefore the eminent symbol of divinity. The emptiness in the center represents the divine mystery of the universal *Chakana* that tends bridges between the human and the divine, between living and not living beings, between the feminine and masculine, between past and future, but mainly between a situation of injustice, servitude and oppression (condition of non-redemption or sin) and a situation of harmony, freedom and inclusion (condition of redemption or grace).

In the Andes, the green cross without corpus marks the top of elevated hills. These topographic places have a double function. On the one hand, they continue being the sacred places of “*Achachilas*” or “*Apus*”, that is to say: of the tutelary spirits who protect the people and who incarnate the presence of the ancestors, specially the mythical ancestor founders of the village. The names of *Apu* or *Achachila* have become honorary names for Jesus; in Quechua, it is common to say “*Apu Jesus*” or “*Apu Taytayku*” (our God Father). In Aimara, people distinguish more clearly between the *Achachilas* (tutelary spirits) and *Tata* (Father) God or *Tata Jesus*.

On the other hand, the hills with their tops are eminent *chakanas*, that is to say: cosmic transitions or bridges between the world of the daily life, called *kay* or *aka pacha* (“this cosmic layer”) and the world above, called *hanaq* or *alax pacha* (“the cosmic layer of above”). With the visible symbol of the cross, the function of *chakana* is to empower in a certain sense: the top of the mountains as well as the cross, both are very powerful and effective *chakanas*, and altogether, have an immense redemptive power.

In the Andean popular religiosity, the Cross (also called the “Holy Cross”) is not necessarily related to Jesus Christ, but is considered to be a particular Saint. The Celebration of the Cross, which begins Third of May with the “descent” of the cross from the hills and culminates in Pentecost with the “ascent”, in a broad sense follows the choreography of the procession of any Saint, and, in addition, obeys the logic of the *Apus* and *Achachilas*. The Cross is considered to be a “protective Saint”

for the people (which is not the same as the Patron Saint figure), who closely watches from the hill during eleven months. The purpose of the Celebration of the Cross is to make sure this protective function, in which *Apu Taytayku* come close to the people, so that during a certain period of time (between the descent and the ascent) he can live among them (that is to say: on the main square of the town or in the church). But his main home is the top of the hill, due to his essential function as a *chakana*.

In the Celebration of the Cross, the reference to the passion of Jesus does not play any role. The Cross is considered a symbol of life (for that reason the green color) and a symbol of the relation between the human and the divine. The Cross does not have a corpus (perhaps just outlines of faces, hands and feet), but is embellished and “dressed” with clothes and flowers.

Another presence of the Cross occurs on Good Friday in memory of the “suffered Lord”. The Cross incarnates all the pain and suffering of the people “deposited” literally in the wood, by means of tears, kisses, hugs and sobs. If the cross itself does not have a corpus, a dying and bleeding figure of Jesus is placed at the head of the bed. In that scenario, they infer different types of christophanies: as the “Lord of the Column” or the “Lord of the Agony”, who – as the Cross in general – are and consequently exert functions of particular Saints.

It recalls our attention that the Andean representations of the passion and the suffering of Jesus emphasize with great intensity the suffering and agony. They are a symbol of identification of the suffering of the people, of exclusion and oppression with the dying and the suffering of God. Many observers of the Andean popular religiosity do not understand the fundamental role of Good Friday and its preeminence with respect to Passover of Resurrection. By no means, this is related to aspects of the original cultures like masochism or necrophilia that take place in a visible form in the rituals of Good Friday. As well as the crosses placed at the top of the mountains are symbols of life and hope, so is the Cross of Good Friday.

Good Friday and Passover are two complementary aspects of a single reality, the intrinsic dialectic of life and death. In the *Via Crucis* of Good Friday, normally a 15th station of Resurrection is included for the Andean believers. Good Friday is rather a sign of hope than a sign of death. It is certain that *Pachamama* is in mourning in the Holy Week, because she cries the fate of her “partner” Jesus; for that reason, she is

“untouchable” in these days. But on the other hand, Easter is a period of much hope, of the conversion of suffering and death in joy and pain, of sterility in fertility, shortly: of the liberation of the people.

5. Andean christology: bridge between suffering and liberation

What can we conclude theologically of the practices, beliefs and rituals of the Andean myths of *T'unupa* and *Inkarri*, as well as of the eminent place that the Cross has in the popular religiosity in the Andes?

In the first place, Jesus is seen like a companion on the path of the Andean people sharing humiliation, marginalization and despoliation. He is a “God disguised as a pauper”, embodying the suffering of the people, but full of hope. Jesus Christ is the “caring God” who joins the oppressed ones, who doesn't bond with the representatives of the power (*Españarrí*), but who undergoes the consequences of his opposition to the empire, as in the case of *Inkarri*.

The identification of the Andean people with the suffering and passion of Jesus reveals their own martyrdom and the hope of the integral liberation that could be interpreted more in a cosmic than a historical sense. In the *imitatio Christi* the Andeans recover strength for their own liberation; *Taytacha* Jesus has identified himself so much with this culture that he was put to death on the Cross. The identification is mutual, although the initiative corresponds to *Taytacha* God to send us his Son; as an answer, the Andean *runa* and *jaqi* are identified with the fate of Jesus, through the personification of *T'unupa* and *Inkarri*, but also through the representation of the “Christ of Agony”.

The death of Jesus Christ on the Cross reveals the fundamental meaning of this event, because the Cross is much more than a torture log; it is the ultimate symbol of the reconciliation, the restitution of a corrupted order, of the definitive mediation. The Cross is the cosmic bridge (*chakana*), and therefore, Jesus Christ is the *Chakana par excellence*, exemplary intermediary, insurmountable mediator.

On the Cross the divine and human, the region of “above” (*hanaq* or *alax pacha*) and the one of “below” (*kay* or *aka pacha*) come together in an intense way (like a “real symbol”), as a cosmic sacrament, as a definitive reconciliation of what has been divided before. The Cross incarnates the hope of the restitution of what has been broken (the fundamental harmony), of a damaged balance, of a disturbed order.

The Cross is the symbol of the suffering and the Resurrection, of death and life.

The Cross as a universal *chakana*, represented by an endless number of crosses on the tops of the hills, symbolizes one of the most important *theologumena* of the Christian faith: God himself becomes a human being. Sky and earth are no longer totally separated, the human and the divine touch each other and communicate (in the sense of “communion”). The Cross incarnates this “bridge” and symbolizes the deepest christological dogma: the integration of separated worlds, the anticipation of a “cosmic reconciliation” between what was once divided and disarticulated.

On the other hand, Andean people have incorporated very little of what the Cross historically meant, including Jesus’ life and death. As in the case of the Saints as intermediaries, neither their lives nor their hagiographies are known; the same in the case of Jesus Christ, where the most important are not his preaching, neither his destiny under the Roman regime, nor his belonging to the Jewish community, or his doctrinal and ritual dissidence. What matters are his “function” and his topological, or rather: theological place. In this sense, Andean christology, even in its soteriological and harmatological aspects, is much closer to a Johannic cosmic christology (of the evangelist John) than to a christology “from below” of the synoptic evangelists.

It is true that the Andean people practically don’t know the historical and political background of the symbol of the Cross. Nevertheless, they identify themselves – although in a more unconscious form — also with the political and ethical message: the injustice, humiliation, suffering, oppression, and exclusion. The Good News has arrived to *Abya Yala* (native name of Latin America) with the cross and sword, originally two instruments of aggression and mistreat. The symbolic and religious complementarity between the Christian Cross and the Andean *Chakana* made possible that this central symbol of the new faith was not identified in the first place with an instrument of torture and subjugation – although in fact it has been used frequently in this sense –, but as a symbol of cosmic reconciliation and total life.

The definitive liberation, anticipated in the Resurrection of *Taytacha* Jesus, is expected with the final return (*parousia*) of Jesus Christ, conceived in a way as the reestablishment or restitution of the fundamental harmony, lost by sin, either structural or personal, mainly due to the rupture of the cosmic order (*pacha*) by the Conquest and its conse-

quences. Jesus Christ will retribute one day – as it is taught by the legend of *Inkarri* – order and harmony, creating a “new heaven and a new earth”. For the Andean people, this will be done through the *pachakuti*, “an apocalyptic” cataclysm which is a “revolution” of the present order of injustice, exclusion and suffering.

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JESUS CHRIST LIBERATOR: CHRISTOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In Latin America and the Caribbean, Jesus of Nazareth is professed as Jesus Christ Liberator: “*Through Jesus Christ Liberator God is present and alive in the heart of Latin America.*”¹ To be understood by human beings, the event of salvation is inscribed in history and cannot be known except in reference to history.² This assertion comes from revelation itself: “*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*” (Jo 1,14) Hb 1,1-4. “*According to the Christian conception God revealed himself in Jesus while living the non-divine of his being as a man.*”³

To announce Jesus today we must present him as someone who is part of human history and who gives meaning to those who follow him. He is thus present, at the same time, as historical, and contemporary. *Historical* because his history is not something random, and *contemporary*, so he can be understood by men and women of our time. This is to say that we must take his history, his life in 1st-century Palestine, and his practice into consideration. He must also be translated in an understandable way for people of today. This is one of the functions of Christology as it describes the profession of faith as “*A theoretical moment of ecclesial functioning.*”⁴ This has been the basis of Christological reflection in Latin America and the Caribbean, namely, to reconstruct the *shattered* image⁵ of Jesus, often presented in catechisms in a way that prevents young people, and even adults, from understanding why he was imprisoned and executed, why he was nailed to a cross as a political rebel.

1. The Historical Jesus, the starting point for Latin-American and Caribbean Christology

Faithful to the profession of Christological faith, Latin-American and Caribbean Christology seeks to understand Jesus' presence in 1st-century Palestine. This reflection is based on the life, practice and message of the Carpenter of Galilee, who announces the Gospel of the Kingdom: "*We state from the beginning that we choose the reality of Jesus of Nazareth as our starting point, including his life, his mission and his fate. This is usually known as the 'Historical Jesus.'*"^b Developing Christology on the basis of the historical Jesus "*Is not just another chapter or aspect of Christology. This starting point is at the same time the background and the horizon that guides the global character of the formulation of faith in Jesus Christ. It guides people's access to all his mystery.*"⁷

It is with this understanding of Jesus of Nazareth that Latin-American and Caribbean Christology is in line with the advances made by modern exegesis when it asserts that we do not have direct access to Jesus.⁸ There is awareness of the different stages in tradition: from the historical Jesus to the Jesus of the gospels, and then to the Jesus of dogma. To stay true to the tradition of the Church, this Christology reinterprets dogmatic statements so that they can be understood in this present moment in history. In this regard, it seeks to be faithful to the intentionality of dogmas, which always seek to assert the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus, true God and true man, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with us.⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* had the following to say in this regard: "*In effect, through His incarnation, the Son of God united all human beings in some way. He worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin*" (G. S, 22).

The reconstruction of the historical image of Jesus¹⁰ in Latin America and the Caribbean has been led by Christian women and men, especially those participating in Basic Ecclesial Communities, who have joined in the struggle for liberation. A new way of creating theology is being forged in these communities, namely, liberation theology, and it implies a new image of Jesus. The result is a Christology related to the context of Latin-America and the Caribbean. This process was clearly explained by G. Gutierrez: "*Participation in grassroots struggles for liberation has been – and still is – the beginning of a new way of living for many Christians in Latin America, by transmitting and celebrating the faith. It matters not whether they come from the lower-income sectors or from other strata of society, in both cases it can*

be seen that – despite ruptures and varying paths – a conscious and clear identification with the interests and struggles of the oppressed of the continent has arisen. This has been the most important fact of the Christian community of Latin America in recent years, and it continues to be the matrix for the efforts at theological clarification that led to liberation theology.”¹¹

This ecclesial practice related to the process of liberation favors the reconstruction of the image of Jesus in closer consonance with his historical practice. Following in the footsteps of the gospels, Latin-American and Caribbean Christology returns to Jesus’ own historical practice and understands him on the basis of his confrontations with Jewish officials and representatives of the Roman Empire in Palestine.¹² The Jesus of history gives us the opportunity to understand the process of persecution and death organized against Jesus of Nazareth as a consequence of his life focused on the poor and excluded of his time. This figure also helps us understand that the best preaching of Jesus today is the constitution of communities that are consistent and consonant with his historical practice. His death on the cross also helps us understand the meaning of donating one’s life, the act of being concerned for others that can be seen in the life of many martyrs in Latin America and the Caribbean. Like Jesus of Nazareth himself, they gave their lives to benefit the lives of their brothers and sisters. Following the gospels, we can say that the martyrdom of Jesus gives clearer meaning to the death of our martyrs, and the martyrdom of our martyrs clarifies that of Jesus. The understanding of a new image of Jesus comes up as related to his commitment to liberation and produces a new theological reflection: “*In Latin America (...) Liberation Theology underscores (...) an irreversible moment in the Christian process of creating new awareness and maturity of the faith. Countless Christians have committed themselves to a new and radical interpretation and experience of their faith. Liberation Theology is the theoretical result of this commitment.*”¹³ Christological discussion moves in this same direction and indicates the points of convergence among the many different experiences of Jesus Christ lived out by his followers in the countries of the Latin-American and Caribbean continent. These experiences include ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, which calls for a pluralistic language that can take into account the entire human density present in ecclesial experiences. This need for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is based on Latin-American and Caribbean reality, as defined in Santo Domingos as “*A multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural continent.*”¹⁴ This same need is emerging in other continents as well, where new experiences of the following of Jesus based on the struggles for liberation are calling for another type of Christological and

theological reflection. The link between the yearning for liberation and the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus of Nazareth is becoming ever more present in today's world. James Cone, a protestant theologian associated with black liberation theology in the United States, puts it like this: *"Black theology's answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated concisely as the following: the hermeneutic principle for scriptural exegesis is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from their social oppression and in favor of political struggle. From this view, the poor recognize that their struggle against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel, it is the very gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Liberator, helper and healer of the wounded, is the starting point for the valid scriptural exegesis from a Christian perspective. Any starting point that ignores God in Christ as Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation a mere secondary liberation is, ipso facto, invalid, and this is why it is heretical."*¹⁵

This aspiration is also expressed in the situation of Africa by the Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu: *"Liberation theology, more than any other type of theology, arises from the crucible of human anxiety and suffering. It arises because the people are crying: 'Man, until when? Oh! God, but why?'" All liberation theology comes from the struggle to give meaning to human suffering when those who suffer are victims of organized oppression and exploitation, when they are mutilated and treated like beings who are inferior to what they really are. They are human persons created in the image of the triune God, redeemed by a single Savior, Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. This is the origin of all liberation theology and, therefore, of all black theology, which is the Theology of the Liberation of Africa."*¹⁶

2. Option for the poor: a theocentric option

*Research on the historical Jesus has been marked in Latin America, the Caribbean and other poor countries of the world, the so-called Third World,¹⁷ resulting from the approximation of Christianity to the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized by the prevailing system as its subject par excellence, its privileged interlocutor, and its last judgment. Therefore, "The so-called option for the poor is more than a pastoral option. It is a totalizing option as it sees the totality but, consciously, based on a part. The totality, then, is not reduced to one of its parts, but it is hoped – and in this regard the option is also a 'bet' – that, from the point of view of the poor, one sees more and more clearly than from any other place."*¹⁸ This is why the starting point for understanding Jesus cannot be the same as that received from the Christianity that has been present on the Latin-American continent and the Caribbean since the 16th century, strongly marked by its Euro-centric character in both culture and theology. On the basis of the

process of liberation, the historical Jesus is sought among those who are at the margin. One seeks to understand Jesus on the basis of the situation of those who are not taken into account by the dominant system. In this regard, it is impossible for the exegesis practiced in the Third World to have the same characteristics as European exegesis. In Latin America and the Caribbean, therefore, *"We must seek the historical Jesus starting with the poor, the oppressed, the excluded, the native populations, the Afro-Americans, the peasants and the suburban populations submitted to extreme poverty."*¹⁹ This search for the historical Jesus based on the poor exercises, and will continue to exercise a tension on all of theology. The option for the poor is becoming the hermeneutic key for theological reflection because, to the extent that the excluded poor become the universal value, we have in them the eschatological criterion for salvation or condemnation. In the final analysis, the option for the poor means, *"An option for the God of the Kingdom that Jesus announces to us. The entire Bible, beginning even with the account of the Fall and the tragedy of Cain and Abel, is marked by God's love of predilection for the weak and mistreated in human history. This is what reveals to us the beatitudes of the gospels. They declare, with deep simplicity, that the predilection for the poor, the hungry and long-suffering are based on the Lord's free goodness."*²⁰ The theological criticism that has been developed in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on the poor and excluded, denounces the death of God's Epiphany in native peoples, Afro-descendants, women, children, migrants, slum dwellers and landless peasants who are not treated like people. This criticism, in turn, tends to have repercussions on theology around the world, since it approximates the criticism formulated by the Jesus of history, as he is described in the gospels.

Although liberation theology has been criticized by documents issued by Rome,²¹ the new way of making theology is being purified and broadened, since it shows that liberation must have repercussions in all dimensions of human life, including the economic, social, cultural, religious, sexual-erotic, pedagogical and, today, ecological aspects. In this regard, liberation theology is being listened to in the context of citizenship in the Church.²² This is happening to the extent that it asserts itself as *"A way of making theology, the universality of which is based on the commitment to the liberation of the poor in their struggle against poverty, and in the march to the final Kingdom... In liberation theology the point of view of the oppressed is theological pre-understanding for formulating the theological complex. Starting with the poor, one analyzes reality and makes oneself available to transform it in the forging of a new society."*²³ We can therefore see an intimate connection between the announcement of the Kingdom and the process of liberation, to the extent that the

point of view of the oppressed, the poor, becomes the *locus theologicus* that demands a Christian commitment for justice and fraternity. In this sense, liberation theology thinks from the place of the poor and reflects on their deliverance: “*The concept of liberation must be understood within the articulation between salvation and history, based on two levels that are dialectically related. First, the liberation of the poor from real misery and, second, soteriological liberation carried out in God’s theological potentiality through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The level of historical liberation is the fulfillment of a liberating process carried out by the poor. It is economic, political, social and pedagogical liberation.*”²⁴

This concern also seems present in Jesus of Nazareth when he shows that God’s salvation occurs in his practice of mercy toward the poor and marginalized of his times, as can be seen in Mt 11,5 and Lc 7,10. “*In relationship with the liberation of the poor, one must consider the possibility of a ‘logion’ from Source Q, noted in Mt 11,5 and Lc 7,22. Beyond the exact content of the words, it can be held as probable that this does indeed go substantially back to Jesus. The reference to Is 61,1, about the good news given to the poor, and Is 29,18-19, about the cures described, shows that the messianic signs of the eschatological time pre-announced by Isaiah are fulfilled in Jesus. It also becomes clear that the evangelization of the poor, placed at the end of the ‘logion,’ recapitulates the gestures of liberation, or deliverance, indicated above. One can thus see that the poor are evangelized not only through verbal proclamation, but also through concrete acts of curing the sick and raising the dead. Jesus is an effective and operative evangelist. Resulting from the beatitudes, the natural beneficiaries of the Kingdom of God, the poor, find true liberation in his thaumaturgic activity. Through it, the eschatological times explode into history.*”²⁵

Jesus of Nazareth took the reality of the poor of his time seriously, first announcing to them the message of the Kingdom. Today the reality of the world of the poor and excluded must be taken seriously. Otherwise, theology will be accused of complicity and connivance with the injustices that afflict our world. This obliges theology to face the challenge of practice, seeking to build a society that can anticipate the marks of the Kingdom in the course of history. This construction is the great challenge, and means that the historical contradictions must be confronted, as Jesus of Nazareth confronted them, always guided in his practice by those excluded from the system of the times. Today this challenge is facing the same contradictions and requires us to wager on the utopia of the Kingdom: “*The challenge consists of starting with those who have been left out, the poor, and walking side by side with them. In the process, one should encourage the struggle in favor of all, for the most possible and feasible broad and inclusive society. Thus, the task demands a structural change in our societies and goes beyond resistance to the worst aspects of neoliberalism. This does not mean simply*

including the excluded into the systems that operate as generators of exclusion. It implies gradual and patient work that tends to create an inclusive society that does not yet exist."²⁶ The understanding of the historical Jesus thus implies a different type of hermeneutics in Latin America and the Caribbean, because we must realize that this is a continent where the majority of the population consists of citizens who are believing Christians, and where the majority go hungry. As a result, "*We of the Third world are involved in an intense struggle against hunger and oppression, through liberation. This is the terrain for reading the Word and reflecting on it.*"²⁷

3. Points for conclusion

The return to the historical Jesus in Latin-American and Caribbean Christology indicates several acquisitions that we would like to underline.

Christians have entered the political struggles of liberation of the poor and excluded in Latin America, the Caribbean Region and, specifically, in Brazil. With the emergence of Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), social pastoral work and liberation theology, there has been a process of reconstruction of the *shattered* image of Jesus. The place of the poor at the center of theological reflection made it possible for people to approach Jesus of Nazareth anew. He was poor like the poor and he struggled against injustice, as did many of those who began participating in the ecclesial experience that flowed from the Second Vatican Council and from Medellín. Access to the Jesus of history came about by presence in the ecclesial community in general, and especially through Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs). This presence of the poor and the Christology of Liberation made it possible to reconstruct the historical and human image of Jesus, with greater appreciation of his historical practice. The death of Jesus was no longer seen as pre-determined fate, but as a consequence of his life, his announcing the Kingdom based on the marginalized of his time. His execution on the cross was understood as a result of his confrontation with the religious, political and economic powers that be in first-century Palestine, and thus strongly underscores his historical witness.

This new image, the image of *Jesus Christ Liberator*, has had broad repercussions on the life of many Christian men and women, and has modified the understanding of being his followers. We can therefore see a new way to live the faith, a new way of transmitting it and a new way of celebrating it. Canticles by grassroots poets and singers began to re-launch

this new image of Jesus, providing an education of the faith that is related to its link with life. Catechism is carried out in a testimonial way and the reading of the Bible is becoming more vigorous through the mediation on relationships of class, gender, ethnic group, generation and its affinity to ecology in defending nature. All this has to do with the reconstruction of a human historical image of Jesus.

The basic factor of all this change is undoubtedly related to returning the Bible and the figure of Jesus to the poor. It means giving the Bible to the People of God so that this People of God, with Bible in hand, in heart and in mind (in the words of Carlos Mesters), may, with authority, legitimacy, freedom, security and autonomy, proclaim the Word of God and discover in the Bible the Jesus of History as a criterion for discernment and beacon for the faith and, in the footsteps of Jesus himself, making change in the Church possible.²⁸ This is what has been happening in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on the rediscovery of the historical Jesus: the constitution of Christian communities that are firmly allied to the historical Jesus' practice. There is no doubt that this is the best way to preach the gospel:²⁹ This is the mission of Christianity in the world.³⁰

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Footnotes

- 1 CELAM, PUEBLA, *Mensagem aos povos da América Latina*, n.º.9.
- 2 CATÃO, B., *Salut et rédemption chez S. Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris, Aubier, 1965, p. x.
- 3 SCHILLEBEECKX, E., *História humana, revelação de Deus*, São Paulo, Paulus, 1994, p. 166.
- 4 "Christology and ecclesiology are inseparable because all Christological confession (as "symbol of the faith") is a theoretical moment of ecclesial functioning. To separate these two aspects, to separate the Christology from the concrete context of the community, is to make Christology a "theory." Only to the extent that the historical event of Jesus Christ is evoked and brought into historical context as a word spoken in a community, can it reveal its dimensions and interpret the community's existence" (PALÁCIO, C., *Significado de Cristo na religião do povo*, in *Religião e catolicismo do povo*, São Paulo, *Studium Theologicum* - Ave Maria Publishers, 1977, p. 189-190).

- ⁵ “The popular figure of Jesus Christ is a shattered figure. The task of education of the faith, as a critical principle of the religion of the people, is to remake the figure of Jesus Christ, not by the simple substitution of language, (...) but by the meaningful and operant evoking of this figure, brought up to date and reappropriated in the concrete experience of celebration and continuation of the community” (PALÁCIO, C., op. cit., p. 189).
- ⁶ SOBRINO, J., *Jesus, o libertador: I. A história de Jesus de Nazaré*, São Paulo, Vozes, 1994, p. 62.
- ⁷ HILGERT, P.R., *Jesus histórico, ponto de partida da cristologia latino-americana*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1987, p. 19.
- ⁸ “The question about who correctly interpreted Jesus is not answered by the historical Jesus, if for no other reason than that a Jesus not interpreted by anyone does not exist. There is no Jesus-Jesus. Whatever, with reasonable certainty, we can attribute to him historically, is still itself interpretation” SEGUNDO, J.L. *O homem de hoje diante de Jesus de Nazaré, III: Sinóticos e Paulo*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1985, pp. 28-29).
- ⁹ See DENZINGER, E., *El magisterio de la Iglesia: Manual de los símbolos, definiciones y declaraciones de la Iglesia en materia de fe y costumbre*, Barcelona, Editorial Herder, 1963, nº.148.
- ¹⁰ It is impossible here to go into the question of the meaning of the word “person.” But to be consistent with the definition of the Council of Chalcedon and taking the acquisitions of contemporary psychology into consideration, we will certainly have to reformulate our understanding of the humanity of Jesus. Tarcicuis van Bavel states it this way: “The assertion of a growing number of theologians that “Jesus is also a human person,” in a current meaning of the word, is not in contradiction with Chalcedon. Christ does not have a personality distinct from his divine personality, but he “is” a human person, because the personal Son of God became truly man (human). Today one cannot simply say that Jesus is not a human person.” (*O Significado de Calcedônia ontem e hoje*, in *Concilium* 173 (1982/3), p.87 [331]).
- ¹¹ GUTIÉRREZ, G., *A força histórica dos pobres*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1981, p. 245.
- ¹² In this regard, it can be seen “That the historical Jesus faced a situation which presents a double structural similarity with the situation of Latin-America, both in regard to hope for liberation and to the situation of sin. This common trait also results from the experience of the faith lived in a project of liberation, where one can note that ‘The path to understanding the universality of Christ, in these concrete circumstances, is that of his historical materialization.’ ‘It is the historical Jesus who makes unmistakable the need, the meaning and the path to attain liberation.’”(SANDER, *Jesus, o libertador: A cristologia da libertação de Leonardo Boff*, São Leopoldo - RS, Sinodal, 1986, p. 51). See also, HILGERT, P.R., op. cit., p. 18.
- ¹³ SANDER, L.M., op. cit., p 05, quoting SEGUNDO, J.L., *Liberación de la teología*, Buenos Aires, 1975, p. 07.
- ¹⁴ CELAM, *Santo Domingo*, nº 244.
- ¹⁵ CONE, J.H., *O Deus dos oprimidos*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1985, pp. 92-93.
- ¹⁶ TUTU, D., “The theology of liberation in Africa”, in *African Theology en route*, edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sérgio Torres, New York, Orbis Books, 1979, p. 163, quoted by GUTIÉRREZ, G. in *Falar de Deus a partir do sofrimento do inocente*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1987, p. 15.
- ¹⁷ Although the concept of “Third World” is ambiguous, it can “Be materialized if we say Latin America, Africa, Oceania, and if we consider the oppressed cultures and religions and the

70% of the populations on these continents who are poor.” (RICHARD,P., *Jesús histórico en la teología de la liberación*, in *A esperança dos pobres vive: Coletânea em homenagem aos 80 anos de José Comblin*, São Paulo, Paulus, 2003, p. 186).

¹⁸ SOBRINO, J., *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁹ RICHARD, P., *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁰ GUTIÉRREZ,G., “*Pobres y opción fundamental*”, in *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, tomo I, San Salvador, UCA Editores, 1991, p. 309.

²¹ See SAGRADA CONGREGAÇÃO PARA A DOCTRINA DA FÉ, *Instrução sobre alguns aspectos da “Teologia da Libertação”* (1984) e *Instrução sobre a Liberdade cristã e a Libertação* (1986).

²² The Message of John Paul II to the Bishops of Brazil (1986) is clear: “*Imbued with an understanding of the rich experience of the Church in this country, one struggles to find just answers that are as effective and constructive as possible. At the same time, they must be consonant and consistent with the teachings of the Gospel, with living Tradition, and with the perennial teachings of the Church. To this extent, we, you and I, are convinced that theology of liberation is not only opportune, but useful and necessary. It should constitute a new phase – in close connection with those of the past – of that theological reflection which began with Apostolic Tradition and was continued by the great Fathers and Doctors [of the Church], by common and extraordinary teaching and, in more recent times, by the rich heritage of the Social Doctrine of the Church, expressed in documents that extend from Rerum Novarum to Laborens Exercens.*”

²³ LOPES GONÇALVES, P.S., *Liberationis Mysterium – O projeto sistemático da teologia da libertação: Um estudo teológico na perspectiva da regula fidei*, Rome, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997, pp. 54, 35.

²⁴ LOPES GONÇALVES, P. S., *op. cit.*, p. 36. “*The reality of the Kingdom of God has a transcendent dimension - God - and a historical dimension - the Kingdom, that is, God’s fulfilled will. These two dimensions are closely related to one another*” (BOMBONATTO,V. I., *Seguimento de Jesus: Uma abordagem segundo a cristologia de Jon Sobrino*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2002, p. 214).

²⁵ BARBAGLIO, G., “*O Reino de Deus e Jesus de Nazaré*”, in V.V.A.A., *Conoscenza storica di Gesù*, Brescia, Paideia Editrice, 1978, pp. 103-119.

²⁶ *O Neoliberalismo na América Latina. Carta dos Superiores Provinciais da Companhia de Jesus da América Latina*, São Paulo, Loyola, 1997, n.50.

²⁷ HILGERT, P.R., *op. cit.*, p.13.

²⁸ See RICHARD,P., “*Jesús histórico en la teología de la liberación*”, *op. cit.*, 191.

²⁹ See PALÁCIO, C., *op. cit.*, p. 197.

³⁰ See COMBLIN, J., *Antropologia cristã, Coleção Teologia e Libertação*, Tomo I, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1985, pp. 16-17.

Global vision of Jesus Christ in the Notification about Jon Sobrino. Reflexions about the use of the Bible

When I was a boy, more than once I heard the phrase that nearly sounded to me like a blasphemy and for sure I didn't understand: "There was a commotion saying Jesus is God". Lately I understand that it has something to do with Christological dogmas and that without any doubt it expressed enormous popular knowledge. Because it expressed with great strength that the point was not to declare that Jesus was God, but that God was in Jesus. To preach the divinity of Jesus is all the truth we want if we are talking about the true God, not about God's ideas that human reason pretend to define with its omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, impassivity, as far as the famous *Motor immobilis*, or the *Noesis noeseos* that take great delight in narcissistically in its own self. But if what we preach of God is that Jesus is his definitive human manifestation, then we can start to know much better about that mystery of love who involves us.

It is knowing that Jesus of history that we Christians pretend to know more and better than never the God revealed to the long history of faith of the people of Israel. Thanks to it we appear to the mystery of the Father of Jesus and of that Son of God is He himself; we are entering on the paths that leads to Father continuing the Good News of God Kingdom and making gestures and signs that point to his future fulfillment. We begin to build consciously that family of the sons of

God illuminate and move by his own Spirit. That is why the will never leave aside the historic investigation about Jesus of Nazareth, based about all in the testimony of faith that the same Spirit raised above all and that was able to recognize as it *norma normans*, ever before there were popes not even councils.

I don't feel myself a professional Christologist, just simply a modest exeget that believes in Jesus of Nazaret as the Christ of the New Testament. I don't have problems of dogma because evidently all of them are very posterior; and supposedly they are no more than an interpretation of what the faith the New Testament proclaim within a certain context and always to live open the road to new lectures that the errors to which the dogma is against wanted to close. They are not only arrival points but starting points for a more mature faith, more confronted with the world that walk and more conscious of the great mystery that cover us, always bigger than our poor capacity of comprehension and conceptual expression.

I have taken seriously the saying that the sacred writing must be "the soul of the theology" as recently affirmed in the *Dei Verbum* and reiterate the document of the PCB about the interpretation of the Bible in the church. I used to say, with all modesty and love to my fellow brothers professional theologians that, that is scarcely true between the catholic theology and neither on the texts of *magisterium*. I understand that the word of God is much more bigger and indescribable of what it is expressed in the Bible, but that does not mean that we all agree with it (even the Jews but above all the Christians from different denominations) that the original fountain of our valid faith expressions are the scripture, because in them they tell us the large history of faith of the people of Israel and the short but the decisive history of Jesus of Nazareth, where the Christians confess having done the presence and the major proximity of God in our midst, up to proclaiming him his eschatological prophets and His Son, His wisdom and His word incarnated definitively.

As a frequent reader of New Testament especially of the Gospel and of certain parts of the contribution of many exegetic brothers above them and more deeply about Jesus of Nazareth, I think that we can make some modest observations to the notification about the two Christological works of the Latin American theologian, Jon Sobrino that are object of the same. First of all it will give us the impression that the notification starts from a Christology that is not based in the exegetic knowledge that are now a days common patrimony of the major

part of the serious exegesis of all the Christian confessions, including the catholic in which I feel myself at home. Anyway it pretends to have a direct reading of the “New Testament *data*” without mediation any historical interpretation, and used them to the Christological ideas that dominates his thinking.

Of the 35 notes only 9 are referred to the NT, the majority of them are of Pauline text (10 quotations) and some of John (5 quotations). There are less from Synoptics (6,5 in Parallel Gospels), when all the exegesis knows that in them is where we have more basis to reach to historical Jesus, without living to show him also like the Christ of faith. The rest are documents from *magisterium* (approximately 24) of all from the more recent ones. The quotations did not appear in the question of the method, where the faith of the church, as it is seen, not necessary the permanent exegesis of the New Testament much more than the repetition of the phrases of any teachers in the church, theologians and bishops included. Despite that he blamed Jon not attentive to the affirmations of the NT about the divinity of Jesus Christ and in a more special way his filial conscious, it appears to me that this theologian cares much more the actual exegesis more known and reliable.

The danger of certain formulas of faith, repeated without reflection and adaptation to the approach of the actual man, has served and service to any kind of fundamentalism and in relation to the Christology, point a monofisim or docetism not too latent. May be very exact that the inculturation of the Christian message in the Greek culture served for giving expression and up to defend the Biblical truth; but certainly only between that culture and not in ours, that it is not too much helenistic; and less at world level.

You must excuse me that I don't understand properly that of “transtemporal subject” of the faith of the church that is said in the document (No.3). In fact, less than before those conciliar and dogmatic formulations, the historical subject by no means had those formulations in his mind. Nearly in NT it is far from helenistic thinking of the theologians and bishops of those first councils, and much more near to the thinking and biblical language of the semitic like Jesus or the apostles. Only Paul in a certain way and John in other major way, they are more influenced by the helenistic thinking. Sobrino's affirmations that are supposed to deny the divinity, are well correct for nearly the world exegetically informed. Those two texts of John (1:1 and 20:28) with great probability belongs to those posterior to 70 years in which John recognized that they confess that Jesus as God. In change it is not

exact that the Pauline texts, so careful *rabby* he was; affirm without any doubt the equality of Christ with God the Father. Nor 1Thess 1:10, nor Phil 2:5-11, nor 1 Cor 12:3, not even Rom. 1:3-4 or 10:9 like it is assured categorically the notification. Nor we can admit of Col. 2:9 which Pauline claim is as we know more than doubtful. The less of the clear continuation between biblical formulations, of semitic style in his origins and that of the theological language of the bishops of those councils is evident, although due to the tremendous tensions until they reached those conciliar formulations

I think the divinity of Jesus is from the origin of Christian faith but formulated in that germinal, metaphoric, symbolic language that looks very little to the Greek conceptualization that try to defuse, almost demarcate with precision, the ineffable mysteries of those that are treated. All the biblical language is much more modest, more symbolic, more open to the human ignorance and to the muttering of metaphoric and mythical language if we want that to the Cartesian or Aristotelian conceptual precision, not to mention scholasticism. The notification seems not to care scientifically, diversity of the time between Jesus before Easter and the Risen Christ, between the time of newly formed church and of the church that testifies her faith in a new different culture.

About the distinction between Jesus and the kingdom there is no fitting doubt to any exegesis of the NT at the same time that the `peculiar relation between both that make of Jesus that the biblical theology wants to say with eschatological mediator and terminal achievement. The same document affirms that only in certain sense identify themselves". I don't think that the sentence of John Paul II is to be neither dogma nor he wanted to say something very distinct to that. Neither Jon Sobrino nor the theology of the liberation are never separated; they have been who have pointed directly the radical relation to the kingdom of all life and work of all persons and the mission of Jesus of Nazareth like the Synoptics do and Paul and John in their way.

To imagine one Jesus with conscience of His divinity and been able to provide divinity discernment and omniscience as well as enjoying of the beatific vision of the stable up to the cross, can be a logic deduction of a Christology that does not care the exegesis but touches with grotesque and inhumanity and is never affirmed in the NT neither in the nearest mythological language Gospel of the gnosis like is in John. To deny the faith in Jesus not only to the explicit text of Heb.12:2 but to so much passages of the NT where that is the primary condition

that is asked to the occasional students and disciples as well as to the beneficiaries of the miracles of God.

There is no problem in telling that Jesus sees the Father and speaks to Father etc. But without denying that, seeing in faith and speaking in faith and surrendering himself in total confidence in his paternal arms, even, or above all, in the middle of the darkness of the anti-kingdom and of the dead that are gripped and murdered. It is right that the catechism I speak of the union of Jesus with the divine wisdom perhaps one of the primary biblical Christologies. But in the newtest-mental language that not excluded, neither the human conditions nor the human mode of living the relation with God in faith. Similar to all of us except in the sin, including necessarily the faith; if not he is not similar to all unless we think that faith is a sin (Heb.4:15). The faith of Jesus is not the faith of a sinner like us, but without that faith it would not have sense informations repeated in the Gospels, like the prayer of Jesus and his temptations.

It is entirely correct that the exegesis more serious of the NT can assert with utmost probability that the explanation of the salvific courage of the death of Jesus are all subsequent to the pascal act and fruit of the reflection of the distinct Christian communities, without doubt under the light of the spirit; and not proceed from Jesus before Easter. Neither it is seen to be less salvific that probable lecture that make a lot before that Jon Sobrin about the attitude of Jesus before His presumable violent death that never looked for or wished. The passages that are mentioned are Pauline and Johanine, let us say for nothing one pretends of historical Jesus, but of the post pascal believer's reflection without doubt. The unique text of the Synoptics that mentions (Mk 10:45) is clearly the theological lecture of Easter, perhaps to the light of the prophetic text of Isaiah. 53; and it is not that sure that to be of same Jesus, may be it will be possible.

The words of the supper, as we know, support itself in a double tradition, the more ancient of which is probably that which not mentioned to the theological lecture based in Isaiah 53; but the rite of the Sinaityc Alliance in his eschatological showing of Jer 31:31ff. The probability base itself nothing less than in Paul (1Cor.11:23-25), who at the same time states transmitting what has been received (without any doubt of Jerusalem) and that it is previous to the explicitness. (It is also that which appears in the ancient Christian writing, called generally *Didaché*, from the primitive Judeo-Christian groups, according to the more accepted opinion.) This does not take off the value of Christian reflection;

but leave freedom to the subsequent theologies for not to anathematize to the others in name precisely of the biblical faith, precisely more wide than that scholastic stiffness. And it is treated nothing less than that of one of the essential rites of the Christian communities that, it has always been called; based on the previous meals of Jesus, in his farewell supper and in the meals with the Risen Lord from the paradigmatic of Emmaus and the cenacle or the lake of Tiberias (Lk 24 and Jn21)

To say that there are some “New Testament *data*” that give up the steps to some “hypothetical, historical reconstruction” is to deny all the effort of the historical-critical methodology, that so much avoided the pre-council church but recommending vividly perhaps too much by Pius XII for the *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II, moreover of the last magisterial document titled “The interpretation of the Bible in the church” of 1993. To expect to do an obvious lecture and objective of the information, without that historical-critical analysis only fit to do that with great hope and little scientific effort. In any case the debated questions are treated, that no one can settle with the authority of *magisterium* but with arguments of sort of exegesis.

For to say that a reconstruction is erroneous, will be to know to do other than to be that. And one does not see the exemplary chance, in the ends of salvation of man and humanization, to be less than the efficient chance, above all if this point to one extrinsicism nearly mechanic, not humanized. God saved us by grace, but not without our opening to the same. That is what is expressed the “*non salvavit te sine te*” of Augustine and any reflection sensible about salvation, and against anything “*ex opere operato*” understood wrongly and unfortunately has been and may be still spread out too much.

What the theology owes to have as womb the faith of the church does not fit the minor doubt to any catholic believer between those that I count. But that signifies, in first place, in the faith, that had his first and normative expression in the early Christian communities and in the church later that admitted the canonical courage for above all the later interpretations, to be of connotation that would be and for work of whoever, ordinary and extraordinary teaching included. It is not that we have to read in NT from the teaching and less from certain opinions of the same, but inside out. All authentic teaching in the church ought to validate itself with its biblical fundamentalism above all NT with all the equipments available today; and not with easy exegesis, without some critical control, and shown in a dogmatized form without paying attention at all to the efforts of so many believers who taking in a serious

way the word of God, manifested above all in Jesus of Nazareth and expressed with the force of the spirit in the NT.

If one reads the Christological works of Sobrino not with suspicion and hunting of errors, but with a favorable prejudice, like the testimony of one believer who wants to transmit the faith with clarity, the expression that could be deficient inclusive appears in another light. He has no need to say everything, nor he pretend to be the unique and definitive Christologist. It is possible that Jon feels that it is nor necessary for writing a Christology from all the poor and victims of the world and of the history, that are much more than the Christian communities of Latin America.

Since many years the biblical scholars has been studying the “literary genres” of the Bible, precisely to understand those human words in those that is expressed, always limitedly, the Word of God. I think that it is urgent to make a serious study of the “literary genres” of the whole church teaching, to make the same demarcation among the faith that they seek transmit and to defend and the human shell, deficient so many times in that they present it.

José Comblin has written that, in the Catholic world, “the biblical exegesis reflects in parallel and practically it doesn’t influence in the structures of the Church.” And the missed Juan Luis Segundo said that, in the fifty years that had passed from the *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pious XII on the exegetical work, “the practice of a really such biblical theology, and at a serious level, practically has not existed.” I think that they are perhaps two too pessimistic trials, about all for the world of the Protestant theology and certain academic discussions among Catholic specialists; but every time I am under obligation to recognize that it seems that they have too much reason.

I agree that the theologian doesn’t have to accept the teaching of any exeget; between other things because any exeget can understand each other as teacher, but as careful interpreter of the biblical word, from their first historical sense until their possible current application, in the field that it maybe, what usually it’s called “history of the effects” of the text along their diverse readings in the heart of the Church. But it would not be bad that a theology that affirms that the Sacred Writing is its soul, kept it more something in mind, at least as the starting point of its ulterior systematizations and pastoral proposals or of any other type. Maybe it would be necessary to have it even more in mind when it is to prosecute negatively a Christological work that tries to be

based seriously on the historical Jesus, and of reading it from the poor and our humanity's more aching problems, suffering and hopeful in a Christian way.

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The Apostolicity of the Option for the Poor

I would like to begin with an experience that many of my brothers and sisters who now serve the church in Mexico shared between 1985 and 1998. I experienced it in 1996. Roberto Oliveros, the eminent theologian and deacon of the Colegio Máximo of the Society of Jesus, entered the classroom to begin his course on Christology. He gave us the pertinent instructions and described the structure of our reflection, solemnly, but with a dry wit. As we were about to leave, he held up a book in each of his hands and told us, “our principle companions throughout the journey of this class will be two brothers, Juan Luis Segundo¹ and Jon Sobrino.”² Roberto dropped Juan Luis’ book from his hand, letting it fall on the table. He added, “Juan Luis has just passed away and so now it’s just Jon and us.”

That is how we began the process of familiarizing ourselves with Sobrino’s style: systematic, at times redundant, and always full of provocative and memorable expressions. It was a journey of reconstruction of faith that brought us to love more our Father God, a close and kind presence; Jesus and the centrality of the Kingdom of God and its salvific approaching; and the sacramental and mysterious presence of the Church called to be Samaritan for the excluded of this world. The reflection was amplified beyond the walls of the classroom and many of us returned passionately to read *The Principle of Mercy*³ and its corollary *Christ the Liberator*⁴ which lead us to understand and live theology as *intellectus amoris*, an explanation of what we love and what in the case of Sobrino is made more explicit as an *intellectus misericordia, iustitiae, liberationis*: a rationality that mercifully gives meaning to justice and the possibilities of the liberation of humanity.

The Christology of Jon Sobrino is already part of the patrimony of the Church, especially in the Latin American theological tradition that John Paul II called “opportune, useful, and necessary” and connected to the “Apostolic Tradition of the Great Fathers and Doctors, through the ordinary and extraordinary Magisterium.”⁵

Today, recognizing myself indirectly as one of his students, I take advantage of the “Notification”⁶ directed to Jon Sobrino as a new invitation to develop and clarify some elements present in his work, something that we have already done in brotherly dialogue, in the classroom and before the Lord in the Sanctuary throughout these many years.

Far from seeing them as *anathema sit*, I see the points signaled in the Notification as an invitation to deepen our understanding of Christology from a Latin American perspective, in order to bring to the forefront its reason for being.

There are various issues that the Notification touches upon, all of which can be clarified. I will choose just one, the first issue, “Methodological Presuppositions,” which is important because it raises some questions about the theological method of the Christology of Sobrino. It is divided in two parts:

- The poor as a theological setting and principle of interpretation (n.2).
- The normative value of the Christological Councils (n. 3).

The second point of the Notification begins by citing the work of Jon Sobrino⁷ where he affirms that from the Latin American perspective, the poor occupy a privileged setting and are a fundamental principle of interpretation for theology. In the following paragraph, it valorizes the theological setting of the poor, which precisely must be (like any theological setting) inserted in the Faith of the Church. The Notification concludes with a profoundly disquieting phrase: “The ecclesial foundation of Christology may not be identified with the ‘Church of the poor,’ but is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations.”

I say that it is disquieting because it suggests that the Apostolic Faith is opposed to the Church of the Poor. I do not believe that any of us who do Catholic theology in Latin America can agree with the primary sense that this phrase would seem to have.

This asks to us to develop our understanding of two things: we must determine what “Apostolic Faith” is, and, from this perspective, we must verify if the construction of a Church of the Poor goes against it.

The Apostolic Faith

Let us begin by closely reading the commentary that Pope Benedict XVI made during his audience of March 28, 2007, upon introducing Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, one of the great theologians and pastors of Christianity. The Pope commented as follows:⁸

In the center of Irenaeus’ thought is the question of the “rule of faith” and its transmission. For Irenaeus, the “rule of faith” coincides in practice with the “Creed” of the apostles, and it gives us the key to interpret the Gospel, to interpret the Creed in the light of the Gospel. This apostolic symbol—which is a type of synthesis of the Gospel—helps us to understand what the Gospel means and the way in which we must read it.

In fact, the Gospel preached by Irenaeus is the Gospel he received from Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, and the Gospel of Polycarp came from the Apostle John, of whom Polycarp was a disciple. In this way, the true teaching is not that which is invented by intellectuals, surpassing the simple faith of the Church. [*The true Gospel is that which has been discerned by those who demonstrate to the community what they have received, not only as knowledge, but as faith lived in community*] thanks to an unbroken chain which proceeds from the apostles. The faith lived and confessed publicly by the Church is the common faith of all. Only this faith is apostolic, that which proceeds from the apostles, that is to say, from Jesus and God.

Irenaeus was concerned to describe the genuine concept of the Apostolic Tradition, which we can summarize in three points:

- *The Apostolic Tradition is “public,” not private or secret. [It has a communal character; it is not what one just happens to think of, but rather it passes through the filter of the ecclesial community throughout time and space, in which the bishop is the head of discernment.] For Irenaeus, there is no doubt that the content of the faith transmitted by the Church is that which is received from the apostles and Jesus, the Son of God. There is no other teaching.*

- *The Apostolic Tradition is “unitary.” While gnosticism is divided into numerous sects, the Tradition of the Church is unitary in its fundamental contents that, as we have seen, Irenaeus calls “regula fidei” or “veritatis.” Given that it is unitary in its fundamental contents, it creates a unity throughout communities, throughout different cultures, and throughout different communities. Like the truth, it has a common content, despite its presence in different languages and cultures. [This unity is what Jon Sobrino calls the “meta-paradigmatic” element of Christology in the introduction of Christ the Liberator.]*

- *Finally, the Apostolic Tradition is “pneumatic,” that is to say, spiritual, guided by the Holy Spirit. It does not deal with a transmission trusted to more or less instructed men, but the Spirit of God, who guarantees the fidelity of the transmission of the faith. This is the “life” of the Church, which always makes her young, that is to say, fruitful with many graces. Church and Spirit for Irenaeus are inseparable: “Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace.”⁹*

Because of this, the faith of the Church should be transmitted so that it shows itself in the way that it must, that is to say, “public,” “unitary,” and “pneumatic-spiritual.” By using each of these characteristics as points of departure, it is possible to arrive at a rich discernment about the authentic transmission of the faith today in the Church. The Pope concludes by saying, “this doctrine is like a master path to clarify to all people of good will the object and the confines of the dialogue about values, and to give an ever-new push to the missionary action of the Church, through the force of the truth which is the source of all of the authentic values of the world.”¹⁰

The Apostolicity of the Option for the Poor, the Church of the Poor

That the Church should orient its activity in favor of the poor is not a sociological question, a political strategy, “seventies”-style thinking, or an affirmation of the decadent theology of liberation, like some suggest. To construct “from below,” “from the perspective of the victims,” “from the excluded,” and “from the poor” is a datum that already appears in the Old Testament tradition: “I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their

taskmaster. I have come down to liberate them”(Ex 3:7). Jesus confirms it in the spirit of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-11). Our judgment will depend upon this salvific nearness (Mt 25:31-46). When the Church does not “discern the body,” and neglects to base itself on this perspective, it is strongly reprimanded by its pastors: “That is why some of you are sick and weak, and some have died for this reason. But if we were to judge ourselves, we would not come under judgment” (1 Cor 11:30-31).

Additionally, the entire event of the Incarnation is focused on this datum: it speaks of shepherds—excluded and impure like the first witnesses—the manger, no room at the inn, etc.

Later on, the ecclesial tradition abounds with examples. Let me cite a few. The deacon Saint Lorenzo was called “the treasure of the Church.” During the Middle Ages, the Church sought to approach the poor through innumerable initiatives and spiritual movements, with the Franciscan movement surpassing them all. For example, Saint Antonio of Padua affirmed, “If one does not help his poor brother and closes his heart to him, I say that he has mortally sinned, because he does not have the charity of God in him. Well, if he had it, he would joyfully help his poor brother.”

In the Counter Reformation, examples abound; we have the hospital orders, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Cayetano, Saint Camil of Lelis, Saint John Bosco and an infinity of institutions that incarnate this idea.

For Latin America, the Bishop’s Conference of Medellín (1968) gave our Church the essential elements that would mature in the following decade with Puebla, configuring the three keys which we can say are unique to or typical of the Latin American Church: the option for the poor, the theology of liberation, and the Ecclesiastical Base Communities. In Puebla, an ecclesial demand was given: “we affirm the necessity of conversion of all the Church for a preferential option for the poor, looking towards an integral liberation” (Puebla 1134).

The culmination of this process, I believe, is in the declaration of John Paul II in *Novo Milenio Ineunte* 49, so ignored but paradigmatic because of the context in which it was given: the beginning of the 21st century and the millennium (*italics are mine*):

The century and the millennium now beginning will need to see, and hopefully with still greater clarity, to what *length of dedication* the Christian community can go in charity towards the poorest. If we have truly started out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn

to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Mt 25:35-37). This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a *page of Christology* which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the *orthodoxy* of her doctrine, the Church *measures her fidelity* as the Bride of Christ.

Certainly we need to remember that no one can be excluded from our love, since “through his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every person” (*Gaudium et Spes* 35). Yet, as the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us, *there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them.* This option is a testimony to the nature of God’s love, to his providence and mercy; and in some way history is still filled with the seeds of the Kingdom of God which Jesus himself sowed during his earthly life whenever he responded to those who came to him with their spiritual and material needs.¹¹

Certainly it would be possible to insist that the Notification is talking about the “Church of the Poor.” Well, we insist upon it. The term is not from Jon Sobrino, or from any liberation theologian. Our pastors were the ones who coined them; the Blessed John XXIII in a radio message in 1962, before the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council said, “Confronted with the underdeveloped countries, the church presents itself as it is and wishes to be, as the church of all, and particularly as the Church of the Poor.”¹² But Pope John XXIII was not the only pastor proposing that the Church demonstrate a preference for the poor. In the first meeting of the Council, the Archbishop of Bologna, Cardinal Lercaro touched on the theme of poverty: “The theme of this Council is certainly above all the Church of the Poor.” Before the reunion of October 26th to discuss the theme of poverty, the Archbishop of the Sahara, Monsignor Mercier, by the indication of the attendees, wrote a note with the title “The Church of the Poor,” in this way coining a central term of the future theology of liberation.

A Church of the Poor has never been understood in the Latin American tradition as a select club of miserables, a species of a “court of miracles” that despises the “traitorous rich.” We proclaim out loud, “God does not want misery for anybody in this world! God wants all of his sons and daughters to have abundant life!” When we are confronted with the scandalous fact of misery side-by-side with lacerating opulen-

ce, our Christian faith—because of Gospel commandments and the Apostolic Tradition—demands that we make an option for the poor. This is what the ecclesiology of the “Church of the Poor” consists in; it has never seen itself as separate from its pastors because it precisely from them that it arose.

This Church of the Poor attempts to see society with the eyes of the poor and to enter into solidarity with them. Because of this, we are not talking about a class struggle, but about making historical what Saint Augustine says: “In charity the poor is rich, without charity the rich is poor.”

In light of what has been said, it is evident that the faith of the Church must necessarily make an option for the poor, and that in this option, the orthodoxy of our faith is verified. To return to the supposed duality that the Notification suggests, it is clear that the Faith of the Church and the Apostolic Tradition do not conflict with a “Church of the Poor,” understood as a Church that makes a privileged “salvific approach” in favor of them, and which is based on a fundamental Christological datum.

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Notes:

- ¹ Juan Luís Segundo, *La historia perdida y recuperada de Jesús de Nazaret*, Sal Terrea, Santander, 1991.
- ² Jon Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórico teológica de Jesús de Nazaret*. San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991. Eng. trans. *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993.
- ³ *El Principio-Misericordia: Bajar De La Cruz a Los Pueblos Crucificados*. Santander: Sal Terrea, 1992. Eng. trans. *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994.
- ⁴ *La Fe En Jesucristo: Ensayo Desde Las Víctimas*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999. Eng. trans. *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001.
- ⁵ John Paul II, Letter to the Episcopal Conference of Brazil, April 9, 1986.
- ⁶ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ: *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórica-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* and *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas*. Nov. 26, 2006.

⁷ “In his book *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View [sic]*, Father Sobrino affirms: ‘Latin American Christology...identifies its setting, in the sense of a real situation, as the poor of this world, and this situation is what must be present in and permeate any particular setting in which Christology is done’ (*Jesus the Liberator*, 28). Further, ‘the poor in the community question Christological faith and give it its fundamental direction’ (*Ibidem*, 30), and ‘the Church of the poor...is the ecclesial setting of Christology because it is a world shaped by the poor’ (*Ibidem*, 31). ‘The social setting is thus the most crucial for the faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of Christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break’ (*Ibidem*).”

While such a preoccupation for the poor and oppressed is admirable, in these quotations the ‘Church of the poor’ assumes the fundamental position which properly belongs to the faith of the Church. It is only in this ecclesial faith that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological setting.

The ecclesial foundation of Christology may not be identified with ‘the Church of the poor’, but is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations. The theologian, in his particular vocation in the Church, must continually bear in mind that theology is the science of the faith. Other points of departure for theological work run the risk of arbitrariness and end in a misrepresentation of the same faith.”

⁸ Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 28, 2007. Explanations by the author of the Pope’s words are noted by brackets. The text of this audience is available on the Vatican website.—Trans.

⁹ *Against Heresies*, 3,24,1.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 28, 2007.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 49.

¹² John XXIII, Radio message inaugurating the Second Vatican Council, September 11, 1962.

PLURAL CHRISTOLOGIES

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? The response to this question has always been plural since the first followers of Jesus. The texts of the New Testament are first witnesses to the foundational pluralism of Christianity. It is in an attempt to reinforce the Christological pluralism within the Christian communities that I make the following ideas explicit.⁷

To welcome Christological pluralism into the heart of the Christian communities is in my view an important step toward accepting pluralism of beliefs and the religious searches of different cultural groups without intending that any one of them be the most important, the truest or the absolute experience of the divine.

In an attempt to make clear something of Christological pluralism for the Christian communities, a suggestive phrase of Saint Paul comes to mind: "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2,20). What would Paul have experienced when he formulated that phrase? To the life of what "I" was he referring? I believe that Paul with his characteristic lucidity, had no intention of reproducing in his life the individual life of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, to take on in his life the values that according to his understanding of Jesus gave sense to his life, would make him another Christ. We are already into Christological pluralism. With this, we can ask ourselves, how can this phrase, fruit of a personal experience, be true for us today? How can we follow Christ if we do not discover His face stamped on my heart through my history and that of my neighbors? Can it be that I have to

deny this fundamental experience to follow Christ taught from outside of human experience as is the case with that of ecclesiastical powers? Can it be that to follow Christ I have to betray the face of Christ who lives in me? Do I have to renounce my culture, my life context, the cries of the very real pain of my people, cries that resound in me and in my contemporaries? These questions that can seem purely rhetorical, do not arise from official ecclesiastical thought, but from the observations of the ordinary life of common people.

For this reason, all Christological control coming from religious powers who claim for themselves the possession of the true doctrine about Jesus Christ, or the total control that we ourselves desire to exercise over one another, runs the risk of denying the plural and diverse life of Christ in us. We cannot reduce Christ to a formula, a dogma limited in time, a single behavior, a single action as if we could control by force the different forms of love and then affirm that all of us can love only in this manner affirmed as the only possible and true manner to live love.

But who is Christ who lives in me? How can I understand Him and live His truth in me? How can I be faithful to a religious tradition that is recognized as Christian?

Christ, a word of Greek origin, means the anointed, the one designated for a special mission. For a long time it was understood that Christ was only Jesus of Nazareth, bringing, by means of His person, salvation to all of humankind. Today, in the Christian community, we say that Christ is a word that means that each one of us has, as Jesus of Nazareth, the capacity to discover himself or herself anointed to be at the service of one another, to seek with others justice and the common good. It is in this sense that all of us are Christs, that is, responsible for warmly receiving our humanity and permitting that it develop with the respect and dignity that we deserve. If the tradition attributed this word to Jesus in a special way, it was to permit that from this concrete man, Jesus of Nazareth, we could perceive how one can, in a given context and with our humanity, be, in fact, Christ. In other words, the task is in each context, to create "christic relations", that is, relations of justice, of love, of tenderness, of truth and solidarity with one another, assuming our human condition and responsibility. Thus, what is most important in Christ is not His abstract, divine attributes which we concede to Him. It is not His divine sonship in a hierarchic, religious sense. It is equally not the attributes taken from the divinities of Greek Olympus or of the Egyptian world that we have added to His story

through the centuries. The fact is that one of us, and each one of us, within our own humanity could become Christ. And when we become Christ, we receive in the greatest depths of our humanity that simple experience that leads us to recognize ourselves as one with others, one for others, as one same body. One body that only lives a full life if we care respectfully for one another, if we begin each day with renewed relations of respect, of justice, of tenderness among us.

A plural Christology is simply owning this intuition of the first followers of Jesus. It can be lived as a human experience of relation with persons near or far from us in an always renewable form. In this sense, to determine dogmatically the forms of this relation and to employ unique words to express it, does not seem to be part of the tradition we inherit from the Gospels.

It is in this context that we think of Saint John when he says that “the wind blows where it will and you hear the sound, but you do not know from where it comes or where it goes. This is what happens to everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (Jo. 3,8). This wind blows in us or breathes in us or we breathe in it, when we feel how much the pain of another moves us in the depth of our being and in some way becomes our pain. For this reason, we seek with this person ways to alleviate his or her suffering and nourish his or her hopes. It is the wind, the gentle breeze or the storm winds, that brings us to our fellow human beings and makes us discover that we are of the same flesh, one same body with the Earth. This body, though divided by the suffering and by the greed that is in us, is the only reality that we are. And it is also the body of Christ symbolized in different places and in different times. Why, then, demand that its sound be according to one law or one only rule? And how forbid the wind its different sounds and intensities, trying to control it as the lords of the world do? For them, the riches of the world have to run through their coffers, the knowledge of the world through their computers so that they can control and accumulate riches without advertent to the fact that “rust and moths will corrode them,” (Mt. 6,19). But “among brothers and sisters it cannot be that way” (Lk, 22,26), said Jesus in one of his encounters with his friends. At the same table sits the prostitute, the leper, the hemorrhagic woman, the man with the withered hand, the tax collector, the old, the child, and each one affirms the Christ who lives and seeks “that love be all in all.” The diversity of lives expresses the diversity of the forms of love and of the poetic forms for expressing it in fidelity to who we are and to the well-wishing that we cultivate for each other.

Multiplier Christologies respond to the pluralism of life, to its complexity, to the diversity of situations in which love and justice happen in our midst. How can one dare to reduce the creativity of love? And yet, we are always doing that as if by controlling love and thought about love, we could take possession of others and even possession of the divine power.

We are not convinced that our Christology, that which is present in our community of faith, is only one of many that exist within the Christian tradition or within our Church itself. And when I say this, it is to affirm that based on our Christology, we cannot judge the others and make ourselves judges of the orthodoxy of the love and practice of justice. In the ordinary life of love, one does not submit to pre-established forms. Love assumes various colors and expressions like the wind that blows where it will. It is this wind of different sounds that makes different Christologies come to be like different forms of love and freedom:

Black Christologies that seek to hear the cries of negroes on our continent and to affirm the unction that they have in the very interior of their human vocation to seek ways of affirming their dignity and their respect for their cultural traditions.

Feminist Christologies that feel the pain of the feminine bodies that are excluded and judged inferior—real domination in the form of symbolic domination, of economic, social, family and religious domination. Do we women not have the right to a Christology that takes into account an affirmation of our dignity flowing from our very pain, flowing from the forms of the Cross that the patriarchal society imposes on us? Would this not be a road to resurrection within the limits of present history?

Indian Christologies that experience even today the extermination of native peoples and through struggles seek their dignity to affirm themselves as peoples with the rights to have their lands and traditions respected. And how would one not feel anointed, called to respond to the human vocation of freedom in the face of the injustice of seeing their lands taken, their cultures assassinated and reduced to folklore at the service of the elite?

How can we not try to be a thousand Christs and each one trying to respect his/her brother Christ, his/her sister Christ, each with his or her own pain immersed in the collective human pain?

Many times the religious empires preach and demand a Christology of the Tower of Babel. They construct towers and from on high supervise the actions and thoughts of the workers, demanding that they speak the same language, even knowing that they originate from different peoples. They threaten those who speak their own language with diverse punishments in view of the fact that the diversity of languages can be a threat to the political and religious hegemony of those who detain the power. They become intolerant and exclusivist, claiming that Christian superiority is a pure choice and a divine decision. They act as if they needed to defend the orthodoxy and purity of Christ, protecting Him from beggars, prostitutes, widows, strangers, farmers, critical thinkers who sit at the same table and can eat a variety of delicacies. The detainers of political and religious power live for the most part by equivocation and threaten us with them. They make us believe that they do this through ecclesial responsibility, for the love of Christ and the Truth. But who is their Christ in the diversity of Christologies? I believe that, despite the good will of some, they create their image of Christ from imperial and dualist categories that have guaranteed for centuries the superiority of Christianity in relation to other religious approximations. They forget, perhaps, that the greatness of Christianity began in a manger, in the welcoming of a child, born of a woman in the dark night of an exploited people. A fragile, vulnerable, unarmed child, dependent like all of us. But in this child as in all children of the world, a hope was born, a hope for a better world today and tomorrow. The child, Jesus, became an adult and at about 30 years of age, because of his commitment to the marginalized of his place, he was crucified, and killed by the political and religious powers. This unjust death was transformed into a memory of life and love that has brought about a rebirth of hope in life for many. Nothing of imperial glory, nothing extravagant, no riches, no ideological control! But it is precisely here that we situate the originality of Christianity. We do not need to be like God all powerful, with a masculine image, seated on His heavenly, golden throne. It is enough that we are human beings—men and women—and that God is in us since the beginning. For this reason, each one of us is invited, in our very humanness, to approach one another, to set up our tent near to the other, to become over and over again neighbor to the other, to make our way together, to share our bread and wine and give thanks to LIFE. And this is what we call being Christ.

For this reason, to speak of plural Christologies is not really new. It is not just today that they have become plural. It is we who have tried

to kill the pluralism. It is important that we not forget this, because accustomed as we are to live a life in which the plan considered superior is always better, we have difficulty welcoming earthly diversity and the riches of our differences. Perhaps, as the tale of the three Kings teaches us, we will dare to be guided by the star which led them to the child Jesus. Let us welcome our star, that which will lead us to the children, the adolescents, to the woman who gave birth, to the shepherds and landless field workers, to the unwanted of this world, to the afflicted. There we will find the child that we are, Christs born to mutually help one another in the infinite mystery of LIFE.

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The Gospels and the formulae of the old councils: text and context

The four subdivisions of the *Notification* addressed to Jon Sobrino on 15th March last, are labelled with expressions such as “Jesus Christ’s divinity”, “The Incarnation of the Son of God”, “God’s Kingdom” and “Salvific value of Jesus’ death”. These are formulae elaborated centuries ago by the ecumenical councils of the old Church, in particular by the Council of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). These expressions sound familiar to people used to the ecclesiastical hierarchy’s jargon as they are part of its traditional vocabulary. But they sound strange to those not used to listening to sermons. And they threaten to fall like blocks of granite on the head of whoever dares to disturb them in order to present the Christian faith in a way that is more intelligible to the human being of our times.

It just happens that we are talking about words from a time when, for the first time in many centuries, philosophy dealt explicitly with the issue of the complexity involving the relationship between word and objective thing, a subject to which traditional Western philosophy pays little or no attention. In the eighth chapter of his *Confessions*, Agustin, for instance, explains how he learned how to speak.¹ From the earlier months of our life and throughout our entire existence, he wrote, we learn to construct our inner universe through words directly related to things. Agustin tells us that he learned what “chair” meant by observing people saying the word “chair” while pointing to a certain object. In Latin: *verba signa rerum* (“words are signs of things”). For Agustin and the whole philosophical tradition he represents, the word maintains a pure and simple relation with reality. It is like a brick that is embedded into the “objective” house where we live our whole life².

The 19th century linguistic philosophy believes that this way of understanding words is naïve. It helps us to perceive that words are part of intentional sets or “games”³. The word only begins to make sense when it is fit into a set built with a given intentionality. To understand a speech presupposes the understanding of its insertion into a certain intentional construction. This applies both to ordinary everyday language and to the scientific one (that cannot be regarded as an ivory tower of objectivity). When it explains things this way, linguistic philosophy places its finger on a sore that, increasingly so in our times, affects our lives. We are all exposed, today more than ever, to increasingly sophisticated productions of words, images, signs and symbols emanating from powerful means of communication that have as their main objective the profit of large companies and institutions in detriment of the common good. These institutions play the game of their interests under false pretences. The future of democracy, in the whole world, always depends on people’s ability to perceive these (frequently unfair) games hidden behind apparently harmless and always attractive words. The linguistic philosophers struggle against the naivety that predominates even today with regard to the reception of messages, images and words and teach us to be stricter about this. And this should also apply when we read the Vatican *Notification* issued on 15th March last.

1. The first thing that bothers me in the *Notification* is the lack of overlapping between text and context in the reading of the documents presented along the discussion. In the “methodological assumptions” we see the following sentence: The formulae (of the councils) are authentic interpretations of the revealed datum (n. 3). The authors of the sentence ignore the historical insertion both in the case of the New Testament texts and in those from the councils and seem to be unaware of (or even regard with disdain) the “principle of the context” enunciated for the first time in 1884 by the German philosopher Frege⁴. This principle says that: “A statement only has a meaning within its context”. Out of context the word means nothing. We must contextualize the texts, that is, understand them within their specific contexts. The context in which the New Testament texts were written differs totally from the context in which the formulae from the 4th century councils were developed. The Christianity of the first three centuries was a religion of male and female volunteers⁵. People freely joined the Christian movement. Therefore, to assign a normative-authoritative character to the texts produced at that period is an anachronism. When St. Paul, for instance, speaks about norms, he is referring to prescriptions pre-

viously discussed and accepted by the participants in his groups. Paul only reminds us of the norms accepted by all. He does not impose any of them. In the earlier centuries, nobody was obliged to follow the Christian way of living. The Christianity of these first three centuries, insofar as it was composed of people that joined the movement voluntarily, has a dialogical rather than an authoritative nature⁶.

All this changes in the 4th century. Let us take as an example the Council of Nicaea, in 325. The administration of the Roman Empire is the instance interested in seeing the bishops gathered in the Emperor Constantine's summer residence as it wishes to unify the vast empire under a single religious belief. At the end of the Council works, the Emperor, showing great political skill, offers the bishops a reception worth of the Empire's senators. Eusebius of Caesarea tells us how deeply impressed the Bishops were by this honour. Detachments of the Imperial Guard and of other troops stood by the entrance to the palace with unsheathed swords. The God's men were able to go through without fear, surrounded by soldiers until they arrived at the heart of the imperial rooms, where some of them sat at the table next to the Emperor and others lounged on couches spread on both sides of the room. Witnesses to all this, felt as if they were seeing an image of Christ's Kingdom, a dream rather than reality⁷. The imperial authorities cleverly took advantage of the bishops' desire to resolve some internal issues – Arianism, Melitianism, and the establishment of a common date to celebrate Easter – in order to suggest a total change of behaviour. Fascinated, the bishops offered little resistance to Constantine's proposals that apparently were very much attuned to their own urge to fight heresies. Thus, they overruled the dialogical tradition of the Christian movement and soon after adopted the normative and authoritative ways of the imperial administration⁸. At Nicaea, Christianity became normative. Here lies the great difference between the formulae of the councils and the "revealed datum" (in the Gospels): the former are normative and the latter is dialogical. Therefore we cannot speak of "authentic interpretation".

2. A second term from the *Notification* that is worthy analyzing is the term "truth". At the end of the text (N.11) we read: "The truth revealed by God Himself in Jesus Christ and transmitted by the Church constitutes the ultimate normative principle of theology and no other instance can overcome it". Somewhere else in the *Notification* it is stated that this same "revealed truth" can be found in the New Testament texts. In what sense can we speak of "truth" with regard to the New

Testament, in a cognitive sense? I imagine that an evangelist such as Mark would be surprised if he heard that the readers today seek “the (cognitive) truth” in his text. For it would not have occurred to him to transmit a new type of “knowledge” to people. His “truth” is different. He wants to establish a dialogue with his listeners or readers and to encourage them to walk with Jesus and the apostles. Mark does not confine himself to describing episodes from Jesus’ life, he wants action. He is constantly watching the listener/reader and he challenges him/her, argues with him/her and shows that it is worth it to follow Jesus’ path. It has been a long time since the day when we studied the “historical Jesus” in a purely informative line. Since the 90s evangelical studies focus on the dialogical – and not merely on the informative – character of the gospels. The gospels are texts that seek those who would be moved by Jesus’ history, not in order to admire Him, but to let themselves be touched by His way of being, acting and speaking. Strictly speaking, the gospels neither “claim” nor prescribe anything. They are directed towards the conversion, i.e. a change in the way of thinking and feeling of those who read them. The New Testament affirmations about Christ’s divinity, His filial consciousness and the salvific value of His death (n. 3 of the *Notification*) must be understood from this dialogical perspective, and never in a cognitive or dogmatic sense. It is strange to speak of “truth” (in the cognitive sense) when speaking of the gospels and other New Testament texts. The early Christians wanted to communicate a life experience and invite other people to share this experience. They did not wish to inform, but to establish a dialogue and to attract. This is another item in which the *Notification* ignores a contextual approach to the Christian message.

3. The oddest sentence in the entire *Notification* is found in N.3 and reads: “The councils do not mean a Hellenization of Christianity but the opposite. Greek culture underwent inner change and could become a tool for the expression and defence of the Biblical truth”. This sentence is incomprehensible, for, since Adolf von Harnack (who wrote in 1886), the idea of the Hellenization of Christianity is consensual among historians.⁹ What must be said about this encounter between Christianity and Hellenism is that – in the case of the Nicaea formulae – we are not dealing with a mere “translation” of the evangelical message in Greek terms, although the concepts mentioned in the credo (incarnation, divine filiation, ascension, the coming of the Holy Ghost) come from a reading of St. John’s gospel. Between the linguistic universe of that gospel and the Council’s universe there is a crucial difference.

Nicaea is not a mere translation or “adaptation” in evangelical terms. There is a change of meaning. The evangelical terms are submitted to a process of calculation that changes them into weapons in the fight of orthodoxy against heresy. The bishops gathered at Nicaea thought, before anything else, of establishing and safeguarding the power of a certain institution. After all, the bishops’ assembly at Nicaea was a game of political forces between emperor and bishops, bishops among themselves, priests and bishops, heretics, monks, etc.

The use of the term “game” invoked previously, helps us to understand that Nicaea is pure contingency, an action of the moment, a linguistic transfer motivated by political interests. It belongs to a history that passes inexorably. In the 4th century, the bishops decided to take some words of St. John’s gospel out of the linguistic universe in which they were written and change them into tools for the unification of the Church and against heresies. This is a temporary step. Nevertheless, the repercussion of both the Nicene and the Constantinopolitan creeds in the history of Christianity continues to be huge. They constitute the basis of the catechism that Christians learn throughout the centuries. Coated in institutional power, for centuries these words showed a great ability to congregate. But, unlike the dialogical words that continue to be strong as long as there is someone willing to establish a dialogue and to question things, normative words do not survive without the support of a powerful organization. Words die when no one understands them any longer and when the interest in them is lost, for it is the dialogue that revives the word. That something which, for centuries, was the great strength of the creed has now become its weak point. Research indicates that the majority of today’s Christians either is unaware of the terms of the creed or merely hears about them in liturgical sermons and celebrations¹⁰. People always become more sensitive to the negative aspects of a dogma that is often invoked to show hostility to those that think differently, to subordinate women, to tolerate slavery in its various forms¹¹, to support authoritarian systems, to discriminate against homosexuals and to perpetuate a patriarchal viewpoint about the world and about life. Today, many Christians just “turn off”: they no longer want to discuss this type of subject, while small fundamentalist groups take advantage of the prevailing indefiniteness in order to stop the process of Christianity’s re-updating.

We have a long period of insecurity and quest ahead of us. Many prefer to die with the old words rather than face the challenge of returning to the dialogical creativity of the gospel authors. On the other

hand, however, a growing number of Christians overcomes the nostalgia of pomp and superlatives, of Persian fans, of tiaras, of mitres, of *sedes gestatoria*, of rings and genuflexions, of subservience and obedience and is moved by the suffering of crying Iraqi women, of frightened Haitian children, of starving children in Africa, of girls sold as white slaves throughout the world and of youngsters living in slums and playing with weapons. It is here that the spirit of the Gospel is reborn.

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Notes:

- 1 AGOSTINHO. *Confissões*. São Paulo, Ed. Abril, 1973. Chap. 3: Como aprendi a falar. Col. Os Pensadores VI.
- 2 OLIVEIRA, M. A. de, *Reviravolta linguístico-pragmática na filosofia contemporânea*. São Paulo, Loyola, 1997. pp. 119-126.
- 3 The term “play with words” (Sprachspiele) comes from the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein, but the idea of intentional structures through words is shared by many linguistic philosophers.
- 4 In his *Grundlage der Arithmetik*. Frege’s “semantic holism” would be called Sprachspiel by Wittgenstein. See OLIVEIRA, *op.cit.*, pp. 59-69.
- 5 SHEILS, W.J. & WOOD, D. (orgs), *Voluntary religion*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- 6 For the distinction between “dialogical” and “authoritative” see: BAKHTIN, M. M., *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Org. M. Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.
- 7 Vita Constantini, 3,15. Cit. CROSSAN, J.D., *O Jesus histórico: a vida de um camponês judeu do Mediterrâneo*. Rio de Janeiro, Imago, 1994. p. 462.
- 8 MEYENDORFF, J., *Imperial unity and Christian divisions (The Church 450-680 A.D.)*, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989.
- 9 HARNACK, A., *von Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1886. Re-editions in 1888, 1894, 1909, 1931 and 1990. Between 1886 and 1909 the author revised and updated the text. Now we use the 1990 edition, in three volumes.
- 10 SPONG, J.S., *Um novo cristianismo para um novo mundo*. Campinas, Verus, 2006.
- 11 The enslaving of huge human contingents, practiced for centuries by the Christian nations, was condemned for the first time in the document *Gaudium et spes*, issued by the Vatican Council II, in 1965 and even so, only in vague terms.

CHRISTOLOGY BECOMES PROVOCATIVE

Jesus Christ has become more meaningful in the Latin American context and in the heart of the Church due to Jon Sobrino's scholarly and prophetic work. Because of its acute relevance for today's humanity and its insistent option for the poor, Sobrino's theology provokes us and calls us to action. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith has published a "notification" on mistakes and dangers in two of his books. Moreover, distortions in the press have made people imagine a condemnation of Sobrino and of Latin American theology.

For more than thirty years, Jon Sobrino has explored the meaning of the Christ of the Gospel, and has done it from the point of view of people who are marginal in the world and who are faithful to God. Let us recall that a dictatorial regime in San Salvador killed Ignacio Ellacuría, other Jesuits, and the cook and her child. That night, Jon Sobrino was away from his home, and so he is not a martyr like those just mentioned.

Today he is able to exercise his theological mission, with its good fruits and with its shortcomings. The life of the Church has been gifted by Sobrino's proposal to think from the standpoint of love (theology as *intellectus amoris*). However, he has been censured and rejected by persons who have North Atlantic patterns of thought (which have an influence over some church people).

Christologies of Liberation have been developed by Christian communities and their theologians, in solidarity with victims of injustice and in communion with all who seek life. Many persons are outstan-

ding: Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, José Comblin, Hugo Etchegaray, Carlos Bravo, Carlos Mesters, Ronaldo Muñoz, Ana Maria Tepedino, Carmaña Navia, and others. It is most evident that there is a new way of conceptualizing the faith¹ and of doing Christology in solidarity with the poor.² These writings draw from the faith of the people of God and nurture such a faith. These writings have not been condemned! Rather, they deserve discussion and discernment, and they are limited and capable of correction like any human endeavor.

These Christologies provoke us because they call communities to go forth, creating and opening new paths for the followers of Jesus as they journey towards His Kingdom. It is not true that they favor conflict and confusion. Rather what is important is *from where* and *with whom* they are carried out. As *intellectus amoris*, Latin American Christologies are done *with* the person and Gospel of Jesus. What is new comes forth *from* the Gospel that is relevant here and now. An accent is placed on the humanity of the Lord, in the Kingdom of God, in salvation that comes from below, and in the Paschal mystery lived by broken and heroic people. This concern for liberation is not a way of having pity for the downtrodden. Rather, it is a hermeneutics done *with* the poor. This includes a theoretical and practical solidarity, so that there may no longer be people who are crucified, and so that humanity may enjoy resurrection.

In Latin America, Christologies are being reconstructed by those doing biblical work, men and women theologians, indigenous peoples, and Afro-American peoples.³ Great work has also been done in Asia and Africa.⁴ Let us therefore praise and thank the Lord for all this creativity and wisdom throughout the world. This positive attitude allows for a confrontation with those who mostly fear dangers and who reject new voices in theology. What has happened is a strengthening of the human and faith journey of peoples throughout the world. In this way, theology is not simply a function for academic elites and religious institutions.

Having in mind that two books of Sobrino have been censured, let us remind ourselves that any theology belongs to the Church and is at the service of humanity. It is not infallible thinking. The official teaching of the Church, its Magisterium, and also the depth of the people's faith (its *sensum fidei*) must take action in case something does not agree with the Word of God or with the pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God.

The Roman “notification” says that certain ideas developed by Sobrino do not agree with the doctrine of the Church. I am sure that those who are specialists in doctrinal debates will continue to examine these issues. For my part, may I point out the existence of misinterpretations of Sobrino’s writings. His perspective about the Church of the Poor does not replace apostolic faith. It is also not true that he sees dogmas of the first centuries as only cultural phenomena. Nor is Sobrino rejecting the divinity of Jesus or the mystery of the Incarnation. Moreover, Sobrino is seriously misinterpreted concerning the relationship between Jesus and the Kingdom of God, the humanity of the Lord, and the Paschal mystery.

It would take plenty of time and space to examine the writings of Sobrino about the above mentioned themes, making an evaluation of all his writings. Such a task may be done by dogmatic and biblical scholars. What I find unjust is to selectively use just a few phrases and urge people to consider his Christology as dangerous. It is also a scandal that there is a campaign throughout the press claiming Sobrino has been “condemned.” For example, see the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* with its headlines: “The Catholic Church against the theology of liberation” and “Jon Sobrino, a Salvadoran rebel” (3/18/2007, D30-31), or what is said by a spokesperson of Opus Dei: Sobrino “virtually denies the divinity of Christ” (J. M. Ibáñez, in *El Mercurio*, 3/25/2007, D28). All of this is superficial and unjust criticism.

What has to be done, in my opinion, is to allow Latin American Christologies to continue growing and to be self-critical. One does not have to step back because of fear. Rather, what has to be done is to continue developing Christologies from the point of view of the crucified peoples of today, who are gifted with resurrection.

Jon Sobrino is to be admired and praised for his intellectual work and his personal coherence. He provokes church people to understand the love of God (*intellectus amoris*) in the concrete contexts of Latin America. One does not have to imitate or repeat the thinking of other places of the world. Thus hegemonic forms of thought are deabsolutized.

Christologies are an effort to understand God’s merciful love within our human journeys. In our continent, there are several ways of understanding discipleship and faith in Christ, the Savior of humanity.

Diego IRARRÁZVAL

Notes:

- ¹ See J. Sobrino, "Cómo hacer teología?", *Sal Terrae*, 1989, 307-317; *El principio misericordia*, San Salvador: UCA, 1992; "La salvación que viene de abajo", *Concilium*, 314 (2006), 29-40.
- ² J. Sobrino, *Cristología desde América Latina*, México: CRT, 1976; *La fe en Jesucristo, ensayo desde las víctimas*, Madrid, 2000, and other writings.
- ³ See the *Revista Latinoamericana de Interpretación Bíblica* (published since 1988); Ana María Tepedino, *Las discípulas de Jesús*, Madrid: Narcea, 1994; Carmiña Navia, *El Dios que nos revelan las mujeres*, Bogotá: Paulinas, 1998, *Reflexiones para Semana Santa y Pascua*, Bogotá: Paulinas, 1999; Antonio A. da Silva, "Jesús Cristo, luz e libertador do povo afroamericano", *Existe um pensar teológico negro?*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 1998; Eleazar López, "Cristología indígena y la evangelización inculturada", *Teología India*, Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000; Several authors, *Teología con rostro de mujer*, Managua: Revista Alternativas, 2000; Lucas Cerviño, "El resucitado, mediadores/as andinos/as y Jesucristo", *Teología Andina* II, La Paz: ISEAT, 2006, 105-134.
- ⁴ See two collective works: R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1993; J.N.K. Mugambi, Laurenti Magesa (eds.), *Jesus in African Christianity*, Nairobi: Acton, 2003.

A Liberating Christology Is a Pluralist Christology – with Muscle!

As we have often heard from the theologian Ratzinger, both when he was Josef Cardinal and since he has become Benedict Pope, one of the greatest concerns about a “Pluralistic Theology” in general, and about a “Pluralistic Christology” in particular, is that it so easily slides down the slippery slopes of relativism. What Ratzinger the theologian and Ratzinger the Pope fear – as do many other theologians and church dignitaries -- is that as soon as Christians start recognizing the real and distinctive value of other religions and other religious figures (like Buddha or Muhammad), it won't be long till the real and distinctive differences of all religions will start to blur. That means not only that the Catholic Church will lose its necessary role for salvation, but Jesus will lose his uniqueness (or *unicitas*, as Ratzinger termed it in his well known announcement, *Dominus Iesus*.)

Such fears should, I believe, be taken seriously. For all religions to merge into a soupy sameness in which differences would be nothing but interesting variations on the same theme would mean that religions would lose their identities. That would be a great loss for humanity.

But I would like to explain how such fears can be met and such dangers avoided, at least for Christians. My suggestion is rather simple: if Christian theology is, as many of us Christians believe it should be, a liberation-theology, it will automatically also be a pluralistic theology; but it will be a kind of pluralistic theology that will have inbuilt safeguards against the slippery slopes of relativism. Or more practically and

personally, if Christians understand their lives as primarily a following of Jesus-the-Liberator, then they will necessarily have a twofold attitude to followers of other religions: Christians will both be open to other religions, and they will have something very important to say to them. Let me try to explain:

A Liberative Christology Is a Pluralist Christology

As Jon Sobrino has so clearly shown, both in what he has written about Jesus and in how he himself has tried to follow Jesus, the center of Jesus' preaching and living was not just God but the Reign of God. God without the Reign, in other words, was not the God of Jesus; such a God would have been a "false God" for Jesus. What came first for Jesus, what counted most for him, was not that people came to a clear and theologically orthodox understanding of God, but that they came to see that whatever the Mystery of God might contain, it definitely called them to commit themselves to working for God's Reign -- that is, to building communities in which people would truly care for each other as God cares for them. The "Reign of God," in other words, would be a truly new social order built on both compassion and justice for all.

And so we see why such a liberative understanding of Christ, of Christian life, and of the Christian church is essentially and unavoidably pluralistic. It is naturally open to, affirming of, ready to work with and learn from any other religion (or any other secular movement) that is trying to promote a way of life in this world that will assure greater compassion and greater justice for all. In the perspective of a liberative Christology and theology, the primary criterion for determining the value -- yes, the salvific value -- of another religion is not whether they have the same understanding of the Divine as we do, not whether they believe in the same kind of after-life as we, not even whether they can confess Jesus as Son of God. What comes first is whether they are seeking, in ways perhaps new and unexpected to us, to promote what we can identify as the Reign of God. If that is there, then we have a basis for talking with them about how we understand God, the after-life, and Jesus as the Christ.

A liberative Christology, therefore, is not inherently exclusive of other religions. It is, rather, cooperative with them, ready to work with them in building the Reign. As Sobrino points out, when the early Church proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus, it did not exclude other

“Lords” who were different from Jesus, only those who were opposed to the ethical principles of the Reign of God. “The New Testament, in comparing other lordships with that of Christ, does not speak simply of lordships different from that of Jesus, but of opposed and excluding lordships..... Remember Jesus’ saying: ‘Whoever is not against us is for us.’ (Mk 9:40)”(1). Jesus and his followers are not opposed to other Lords who found other religions but only other Lords who stand in the way of compassion and justice.

A Pluralistic Christology “with Muscle”

But in such a liberative understanding of Jesus and the Reign he announced, there are particular priorities or urgencies. As Sobrino’s analysis of the Synoptic Gospels makes convincingly clear, Jesus had a particular concern for those who were suffering because of marginalization or exploitation. He responded to their suffering, he identified with their cause, he spoke up for them and with them – even to the point of willingly allowing himself to be executed like one of them.

All of this is the content and the power of Sobrino’s announcement that “outside of the poor,” there is no salvation, there is no church, there is no Christian theology (2). In God’s Reign, or in God’s new social order, as Jesus understands it, the first order of business is the suffering of the marginalized. This is what counted most for Jesus and what must be found in any true “faith” or authentic “religion.” If we are to ask what was “the Ultimate” for Jesus – that is, what was his fundamental criterion for deciding what is truly human or truly religious -- we will find the answer not in terms of God or Christ, or church; the Ultimate for Jesus is the suffering of victims. This is how Sobrino understands the message of Jesus in the light of the “barbarity” and the “terrorism” of 9/11 and its aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq:

Barbarity and terrorism raise questions about what is ultimate for human beings, and they challenge us, inescapably, to answer. That “ultimate” is the suffering of the victims. And the “ultimate” reaction is compassion for them, co-suffering with them, living and pouring out life for an end to their suffering. (3)

This then is what I call the “muscle” of a liberative/pluralistic Christology: it not only is ready to affirm other religions, it also has the means to challenge them, to take a stand toward them, and so to avoid the dangers of relativism. Such a liberative Christology, and the liberative theology of religions that it grounds, is not only ready to affirm and

work with all other religions that are seeking to promote the well-being of people and planet. It can also challenge them with what is distinctive about Jesus' experience and message: that in our efforts to promote the well-being of all in a society of compassion and justice, it is the victims, the marginalized, -- and our working not only for them but with them -- who will best show us the way. We must all be ready to listen to them, ready to follow and work with them, even to the point of the ultimate sacrifice. While Christians may have much to learn from other religions, this is the message they have to announce and to teach -- and to live.

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1. *Christ the Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 167-68.
2. Jon Sobrino, "The Kingdom of God and the Theological Dimension of the Poor: The Jesuanic Principle," Paper given at the Tantur Center, Jerusalem, in May 2000, p. 20 of manuscript.
3. Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004) 109. "La barbarie y el terrorismo nos cuestionan sobre lo que es ultimo para los seres humanos, y nos interpelan, sin posible escaptatoria, a dar una respuesta. Eso 'último' es el sufrimiento de las víctimas. Y la reacción 'última' es la compassion hacia ellas, con-sufrir con ellas y vivir y desvivirse por eliminar su sufrimiento". Terremoto, terrorismo, barbarie y utopía. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2003) 181.

The rediscovery of the Kingdom in theology

In the last decades before the Second Vatican Council the exegesis and the Biblical theology were already valorizing the category of the Kingdom of God¹. The II Vatican Council sanctioned it by connecting it to the Church. It dares saying that Jesus started the Church by “preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God... This Kingdom clearly manifests itself to human beings through the words, works and the presence of Christ”. After Jesus’ resurrection the Church enriched by the gifts bestowed by Him received the mission of announcing and establishing the Kingdom of Christ and of God among all peoples. It is its source and beginning².

If due to historical circumstances the Catholic Church in fact had identified itself with the Kingdom, today we realize the distinction between both that the Kingdom is in relation to the Church a reality that transcends it.

In this context of valorizing the Kingdom and Jesus’ mission as the Kingdom’s preacher, the theologians of liberation worked out some innovating reflections in a simple and analytical way that we will sum up in four theses:

- 1. Jesus did not preach Himself but the Kingdom of God. Only after the resurrection the community identified Him with the Kingdom so that some centuries later Origen called Him self-shrine – the Kingdom itself.*
- 2. Jesus is understood in a double relationship with the Kingdom.*
- 3. In the Kingdom preached by Jesus the poor occupy a preferred place in such way that they qualify it.*

4. *The Church is required to shoulder the double task of announcing and signifying the Kingdom in words and gestures especially by the option for the poor and by recognizing the Kingdom's presence in all places where the poor are evangelized and liberated.*

Jesus preached the Kingdom

Before Jesus started His preaching, John the Baptist proclaimed: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Mt 3,2). He announced that the eminence of the Kingdom required a conversion that was symbolized by the baptism. John very soon left the stage being beheaded on Herod’s orders.

Jesus entered. He repeated the same preaching: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1,15). Good exegetists understand Mark’s verses as the true summing up of Jesus’ mission: to point to the presence of the Kingdom by God’s action. And it manifests itself in His person, message and actions. And He does not consider Himself outside such relation with the Kingdom. In order that the children of paganism would not trick themselves about this “God’s Son” who appears on earth, imagining that it is just a divine being’s visitation among us and not a true incarnation, Luke and Mark insert Him in the human genealogy, starting sometimes with Adam (humankind), other times with Abraham (Hebrew people). Moreover: Luke places Him in the historical-geographic co-ordinates by naming Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod and his brother Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas. It is a Jesus well placed and not a peregrine God’s Son. As though it were very little, Paul in the Epistle to the Philippians, definitely sanctions Jesus’ human condition by playing with two metaphors: it vacates the divine and assumes the slave’s condition: “He, existing in the condition of God, did not intend to retain for Himself to be equal to God. But He annihilated himself (in Greek: *ekenosen*) assuming the condition (in Greek: *role*) of slave, becoming solidary with the human beings. And introducing Himself as just a man (Phil 2,6-7)”.

In this human, empty, slave condition Jesus would not be able to preach Himself. All reference is to the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom, as Jon Sobrino usually points out. At the time of Jesus, for being well known, the Kingdom of God category was contended by several proposals, before which Jesus took a stand, marking his own originality. The Torah’s sacred nature runs throughout Israel’s

tradition. In the reading of the Old Testament it is impressive the importance given by the Jews to the law. The Ps 119 (118), which today is part of the Church's daily prayer, sums up very well this exaltation of the Law. Such sublime beauty that Pascal advised to pray it everyday. The Pharisees took over such proposal of the Kingdom. "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk and live in the law of the Lord" (Ps 119,1). The Kingdom of God for them was summed up by following the Law rigorously. They were supported by the people, the pious, the followers and lovers of Jahveh's law. The situation of Israel at Jesus' times had been one of foreign domination and then was under the Roman occupation.

Rebellions sprang on, mainly by the peasants against taxes and census ordered by the Romans. The Zealots took advantage of this insurrection feeling against the hard political reality by appealing also to the religious experience of Jahveh's absolute sovereignty upon Israel. The Romans, on the other hand, retorted with violent destruction by crucifying the rebels and citizens. That was rich humus for the growth of people's dissatisfaction and the break out of armed conflicts by the rebels such as Theudas (Acts 5,36), Judas of Galilee (Acts 5,37), Barabbas (Mk 15,7) and others. The brutal face of the Kingdom.

Instead of taking up arms other groups chose to wait for Jahveh Himself to interfere violently by destroying the enemies. It was the eschatological perspective and more than everything the apocalyptic perspective of the Kingdom. Its supporters found excellent Biblical grounds in the literal reading of Isaiah's and other prophets' passages. It is the feast that the Lord will prepare on Jerusalem's mountain (Is 25,6). It is God's vengeance and retribution that will perform wonders bringing back to Zion the people with everlasting joy (Is 35,1-10). They are the new heavens and the new earth (Is 65, 17-25). There was such atmosphere of eschatological expectation. The Essenes closed themselves in the monasteries to pray and purify themselves awaiting the children of the light's full victory against the children of darkness.

The physical beauty, the religious, political and economic importance of the temple, besides the laws that prescribed the sacrifices, made the priests and Sadducees a powerful religious-political group. Why would not the Kingdom of God be established by starting at the temple?

In every situation of domination and resistance there is a group of conciliators who strike an alliance with the occupants hoping that

lives are spared. Caiaphas referring to Jesus' condemnation formulates clearly the principle of accommodation with the foreign power: "It was expedient that one man should die for the people" (John 18,14).

Jesus confronted directly John the Baptist. He let him baptize Him. He recognized that the Kingdom's irruption was about to happen. John the Baptist's voice silenced, there is room for His own announcement of the Kingdom. He kept away from all other previous conceptions. For Him the essential idea rests in the unique and original relationship that He establishes with the Kingdom and the God of the Kingdom.

Jesus views Himself in a double relationship with the Kingdom of God

And the relationship is twofold. To announce the Kingdom is His main mission. After the baptism's moment of grace He starts to preach the Kingdom. The Kingdom is something greater than Him. In a way at the start it presents itself as something external to Him. God's work, the God of the Kingdom. God is greater than Him (John 14,28). He calls attention to the reality of the Kingdom which is God's redeeming action, the ultimate and definitive sovereign of everything created and everything built by the human being. God rules with salvific authority, in a concrete manner, within human history. Such conception is inserted in the prophetic tradition whose core is Jahveh, the God of the armies, Adonai who freed the People of Israel from Egypt and conducted it to the Holy Land through a powerful arm. He took them out from Babylon's second captivity through Cyrus. He is the God of the Alliance, the faithful God, the forefathers' God. Israel's history is summed up in the liberating feat by Jahveh and his absolute sovereignty which in the second Isaiah is extended to all peoples and the whole creation. Everything is done for the love of God's option in respect of the people in spite of the infidelities.

Jesus changes the stress on the Kingdom to the character of Jahveh as Father, His and ours, who acts in Jesus' own works according to John's words (10,37-38). In Him the Kingdom is realized. It is established then a second relationship between Jesus and the Kingdom that slowly will lead the community to identify Him with the Kingdom.

At first glance the emphasis on the historical Jesus as well as His preaching of the Kingdom seems to ignore the absolute reality of what Jesus Himself means and is. The theology of liberation stresses Jesus'

historicity perspective and the centrality of the Kingdom in His life by questioning a certain Christology that starts by viewing Jesus from the divinity. Today is back the tension that in the beginning existed between the Antioch's Christology with emphasis on humankind and the Alexandrian Christology with stresses the divinity.

Such tension is overcome not by denying the first relation of exteriority and dependence of Jesus on His historical character before the Kingdom but by deepening the reflection. At first Jesus inferiority in respect of the Kingdom manifests the limitation of His historical human conscience. It remains an aspect of the revelation, as we said previously.

However, the contrary is valid. In His last root Jesus was constituted by the relationship with the Father, in the repeated insistence of John's gospel. The word relationship is so complex and strong that the Trinitarian theology chose it to define the divine persona. It has a different meaning when used in the casual relationships in life. Based on experience we perceive the difference in the relationships that we establish. They go from those very much superficial with things around us passing by those that bind us to commitments and people to the one with the God creator and savior that constitutes us as being. It is as much right to say that the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom are greater than Jesus as to say that He is defined elementally by them under a radical equality. Jesus said that we would do things greater than He did. A daring phrase. But we know that we do not do it without His presence.

Therefore they are still valid the two statements in antithetic form, that is, provocative to each other. The historical Jesus preaches, announces, brings up to date the Kingdom of God which surpasses his life's historicity. The Kingdom is present in all times and spaces beyond everything that He did and said. The later Christian faith illuminated by Jesus' resurrection, interpreting everything from the glorified Christ, identifies Him with the Kingdom in such way that where there is a minimum presence of the Kingdom there is also the presence of the Lord.

God's Kingdom and the poor

In the Kingdom's preaching the poor occupy a place of centrality³. It is one of the New Testament evidences. Luke formulated it in a

decisively manner without adjectives: “Blessed be you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God!” (Luke 6,20). As if it were not enough, he changed the blessing into ill-fatedness in respect of the rich: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation!” (Luke 6,24). There is not much to speculate about the rudeness of Luke’s expressions that speak straightforward about the poor in three conditions of poverty, hunger and tears. According to J. Dupont, a French exegetist, who thoroughly studied blessedness, the Kingdom’s nature is in the root: God’s disposition to exercise his Kingdom in favor of the most disinherited of this world⁴. We are in the presence of the poor’s privilege for being poor whose ultimate fundament is not in him but in God’s love concerning him. A mystery of the divine tenderness that chooses the poor in his condition of poverty in order to show afterwards His Kingdom.

The revelation is permeated by this God’s option for the lesser, the weak. This divine feature is already manifested in choosing the Israel people to make an alliance with Him. “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples...” (Deut 7,7). The people cannot be proud for achieving prosperity through the might of its hand but through God’s gift (Deut 8,17). The poor has no reason to boast God’s option. God loves him preferentially because so He wishes. And there is nothing else to it. And it is up to us to accept humbly and astonishingly this God’s predilection.

In order that everything would not be linked to a phrase and thus some bourgeoisie peregrine exegetist or ecclesiastical authority unmindful of the poor could render conditional such Jesus’ statement, He insisted on multiplying the signs of option for the poor, sick, women, children, sinners, Publicans --- who at the time constituted the big group of the excluded. They were viewed as despised enemies even punished by God according to a tradition that did not correspond to God’s true revelation. Jesus supports the authentic prophetic conception by announcing a Kingdom that becomes present as the excluded are reached by God’s redeeming action.

The prophetic tradition is inspired by the culture of the ancient Near East according to which the king viewed himself as the protector of the weak and poor. When researching such socio-cultural context which influenced Israel, N. Lohfink found out that in law books prologues and epilogues, in royal inscriptions, in epic and sapiential texts was emphasized that the king’s main mission was to take care of society’s

weak, especially in the role of a judge. As an example in the Aqht Epic about the king's usual actions it is written that "he gets up, takes position at the entry of the town among the circle of the noblemen who meet at that place. He grants rights to the widow and finds for the orphan's claim". The ethical basis for taking care of the poor was the common conviction that gods, particularly the Sun god, paid special attention to the poor⁵. If Israel tried to execute such program interpreting Jahveh in the light of such cultural matrix, Jesus took it to the plenitude. In conclusion Mathew 25 is eloquent about the eschatological realization of the Kingdom in respect of the judgment. Jesus identifies Himself with the hungry, thirsty, foreigners, naked, sick, prisoners, that is, "one of the least brothers of mine" (Mt 25, 312-46).

The Church and the Kingdom. Brief final words

Before the II Vatican Council the predominant understanding of the Kingdom's reality was as of the concrete and institutional Church. The historical building of the Church was projected on the Kingdom. The modern critical exegesis, the Biblical theology fed by it, the systematic reflection of the footmarks of the II Vatican provoked the necessary reversal. First of all one inquires the revelation, especially the person of Jesus, His acting, messages about the Kingdom, as we saw above, and, later, under such reality, the Church judges itself.

The precedence of the poor in God's Kingdom led the theologians of liberation to think the Church starting from the poor. A Church of the poor. By the way, at this point, they are in good company with pious John XXIII who in his message of September 11th, 1962, a month before the beginning of the Council, aspired to a Church to present itself as it is and wants to be: "The Church of everybody and, particularly, the Church of the poor"⁶. It became remarkable also the intervention by Cardinal Lercaro in the Council's lecture at the end of the first term that criticized the plan of the Church for not presenting the poor as its privileged members. John Paul II used plentifully the expression: "Church of poor". Just in his speech at the Favela do Vidigal he repeated it ten times⁷.

Thus where the poor are evangelized and loved the Kingdom of God will come. The Kingdom is mainly of the poor. The Church, then, as the sacrament of the Kingdom, is mainly a Church of the poor. Its main mission consists of announcing in words and gestures the option

for the poor and to denounce everything that hurt them. Moreover: in the reading of the signs of the times, as it was done in *Gaudium et spes* it interprets the social and spiritual realities starting from the option for the poor. The theology of liberation meant in this respect an enormous blessing for the Church when it reminded it of the poor's priority and starting from them to elaborate a consistent reflection and to determine pastoral actions.

Conclusion

The Biblical order: Kingdom, Jesus, Church. The Kingdom illuminates Jesus' preaching. Jesus is defined by the Kingdom as a preached exteriority and as realized identity. The Church refers to both in respect of being judged itself by them and of being their sacrament for the benefit of humankind.

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Notes:

- ¹ SCHNACKENBURG, R. Gottes Herrschaft und Reich: eine biblisch-theologische Studie. Herder, Freiburg 1958.
- ² II VATICAN COUNCIL, Lumen Gentium, n. 5.
- ³ NEUTZLING, Inácio, *The kingdom of God and the poor*, Loyola, São Paulo 1986.
- ⁴ DUPONT, J. *Les béatitudes*, J. Gabalda, Paris 1969. v. II: La bonne nouvelle, p. 15.
- ⁵ LOHFINK, N. *Option for the poor, The basic principle of liberation theology in the light of the Bible*, Bible Press, Berkeley, CA, 1995, 2nd edition, pages 15 and ensuing.
- ⁶ AAS 54 (1962) 682.
- ⁷ BARREIRO, Álvaro, *The poor and the Kingdom. From the Gospel to John Paul II*, Loyola, São Paulo 1983, p. 119.

A Certain Jesus

“I come to speak with you about a certain Jesus,” declared Peter, a fisherman from Capernaum, when the Jewish religious authorities took him to court for riling up people with a revolutionary message. He spoke of Jesus of Nazareth, his friend of three years, the prophet who declared that the poor would cease to be poor and that God the Father was concerned about the need for things to change.

For us, *A Certain Jesus* was first of all a dream and a challenge. We wanted to give life and warmth to the systematized, sometimes cold stories of the Gospels. We wanted to present Jesus as a real man—passionate about justice, a defender of human dignity, joyful, audacious in his religious ideas, a visionary with a counter-cultural project. We wanted to reconstruct the setting in which he lived.

After nine months of hard work, *A Certain Jesus* was born in the form of a radio drama broadcast. The drama had twelve dozen chapters, a total of 144 programs, each fifteen minutes in length. We chose the radio as a medium because we wanted to direct ourselves primarily to the men and women of Latin America who do not know how to read, who do not have electricity to read, or money to purchase something to read. People listened to the program over the radio day after day, waiting for the next chapter just like they waited for the next episode of their favorite soap operas, wondering what would happen next. The programs could also be used by groups to engage in debates. It was the glorious era of liberation theology: Latin America was filling up with communities that were reflecting on the *reality* of the times

and understanding Christianity as a social commitment to change and transform social injustices. The production style that SERPAL, the Radio Broadcasting Service for Latin America, had been successfully disseminating for years gave us the opportunity to massively introduce the historical Jesus.

Today we use the expression “*another world is possible*.” But another world will not be possible if *another God* is not also possible. Even at that time, we wanted to change the previously held idea of God. Jesus had also wanted this. Yet, in Christian culture, this first required changing the inflexible and heretical idea that many Christian men and women had of Jesus, an idea caused by a catechism devoid of historical information, based on incomprehensible dogmas, and focused on a negative notion of God.

We wrote the radio drama in 1977, we recorded it in 1979, and by the end of 1980 the tapes began circulating throughout Latin America. It is hard to estimate how many have listened to the tapes. In 1982, the radio series became a book. How many have read it? We will never know. Since 2004, we have made all the texts and audio files available online (www.untaljesus.net). How many have journeyed to this destination? Daily we hear of new travelers reaching this site. Almost thirty years after it was written, new generations continue to search for the “Moreno” (the dark-skinned man) of Nazareth who laughs, who learns, who doubts, and who does not want to die—the historical Jesus, the path that leads us to the *other God*.

We had to re-record and re-record when we first began taping the chapters. The actors and actresses were stiff, they were too serious. Some were believers, others were atheists. But all of them were uncomfortable with their roles. When have you seen a dancing Jesus who also tells jokes? When have you seen a Virgin Mary gossiping with the other women in the neighborhood and arguing with her son?

It took such an effort to relax the Moreno himself, the actor who played Jesus, so that he would be able to laugh! And Phillip, Peter, John, Mary Magdalene... It even took effort from us, the authors, while writing the script, to put a joke, an insinuation, a laugh on the lips of Jesus!

And the reason is that this obscurantism has lasted for many centuries. The theology of the fear of God, the bloody Christology—where God is the executioner who cleanses sins through suffering, appreciates pain, and demands sacrifices—has invaded temples and minds.

Luckily, Jesus was not like that. He did not have an ounce of asceticism or sanctimony. He liked to eat and drink, to be amongst the people, to dance during weddings, and to chat with prostitutes and drunkards. Jesus' life was led in the open air.

That was *A Certain Jesus'* first *theological intuition*: common sense. Or rather, a sense of humor. From Father Peito's movies to those of the sadomasochist better known as Mel Gibson, from Passolini and Zeffireli, Jesus had always been presented with a dry face and a sour demeanor. That is how he was always shown, as solemn and distant as a stranger: a teacher, but never a friend, a great man, but never a comrade. By distancing him in this way, we forgot the cornerstone of any sane Christology: Jesus was a man who lived like so many other men. We decided that if we really believed he was the Son-of-God-made-man, the best way we could show respect for this incarnation was to embrace all that was ordinary about it, prosaic and profoundly human.

That is how we represented that certain Jesus: a joyous and open man without prejudices or hypocrisy: a man of the people who did not need to make much of an effort in order to get close to the people, the masses. He existed there. He was born there. He was from the people and he spoke the same language the people spoke. He smelled of onions, he had holes in his sandals, and he blew his nose without any need for a handkerchief.

The *second intuition* of our series was that Jesus was a layman. He did not belong to the tribe of Levi and he never studied in a seminary. He criticized the priests harshly, he renounced their arrogance, and he put prostitutes before them in the Kingdom of God. He also questioned the exclusive rites and doctrines of the pious and sectarian Pharisees.

Jesus did not pray at a temple nor did he think of it as a sacred place. He visited the temple to question its alms and practices as well as to expel the merchants through whiplashes. He did not view the Sabbath as a sacred time.

For Jesus, the true temple is the heart of all humankind. He said that the temple was neither in Jerusalem nor in Garizim, neither far away nor up in the clouds. He taught people that the temple of God, God himself, is near, among us, within us. Jesus knew that God lived in the hearts of all human beings, and that this made us sons and daughters of God. He was so sure of this, so firm in his conviction,

that he called himself the Son of God so that we could all also believe in it, see ourselves as such, and live accordingly. He enabled us to live without submitting ourselves to religious hierarchies that see themselves as representatives of God, but who only end up monopolizing God's knowledge. We, men and women, do not need priests to help us relay our prayers. Nor do we need to offer sacrifices to God, whom we do not see. Rather, we need to love our neighbor, that is, anyone who crosses our path. Jesus was not interested in the sins committed against God, but in the damages and fallouts of human relationships.

The *third intuition* is that Jesus was passionate about justice, a revolutionary. He came to bring fire back to the earth and he never used “politically correct” language.

Accepting the major principles of liberation theology, we presented Jesus proclaiming the Year of Grace, the cancellation of debts, and the liberation of slaves. May the poor cease to be poor. May the hungry be able to eat and to laugh. May women be respected just as men are respected. May boys and girls have their own place. May no one have more than his or her share so that no one shall lack.

As soon as we had finished recording the series and the programs began to be distributed in Latin America, the censorship and anathemas started.

We were accused of being vulgar and heretics. We were even accused of “hating God” and of promoting pornography. Alfonso López Trujillo—he of unhappy memory who proposed finishing off Jon Sobrino—orchestrated a crusade against *A Certain Jesus*. He lied, blackmailed, and was able to force consensus within the Latin American Bishops' Conference. He was able to get nearly all bishops' conferences in Latin America to prohibit the program in radios and other groups. Yet, none of these inquisitors ever deigned to listen to even one of the episodes, and less still to enter in a dialogue with the authors. Later, López Trujillo was able to get the Spanish hierarchy to censor the first edition of the book. Since we were not ecclesiastical functionaries, they were not able to prohibit us from teaching in any classroom, nor were they able to keep us from writing other texts for theological divulgation.

In 2007 we will launch another series in audio and text. It will be called *Another God is Possible* and we hope that it will also be censored. It will be a sign that it is water quenching a thirst.

Censorship gave us free publicity. And while prohibitions came and went in 1981, the episodes kept being transmitted in the camps of the Dominican Baoruco and in the barrios of Bogotá and Buenos Aires. Little by little, just as the seeds of mustard grow, the cassettes and later the books were distributed, copied, changed from hand to hand, played in the liberation radios, and discussed in communities of faith. All the while, many were discovering the new face of Jesus, dark-skinned and smiling: human, undeniably human.

We wanted to accompany Latin America's Christian religiosity with *A Certain Jesus*. Afterwards, the Moreno was also made a "Spaniard." Today, he "speaks" English in the Philippines and in the United States. And finally, since 2006, he has been talking with the people of Brazil in Portuguese!

We wanted to put the Christology of the prominent theologians of Latin America on the map by means of a narrative, with colors, smells, tastes, sayings, laughter, tears, psychological profiles, drama, and tragedy. We remembered what the great Joachim Jeremías taught us: there is no better theology than narration. We wanted to provide the clay with which to mold the images of liberation theology, liberating Jesus from centuries of solemnity which only succeeding in estranging him from those men and women with whom he always belonged.

We did not want to write a Christian treatise that reflected the latest trend in exegesis. Nor were we pretending to write a literary work. What we wanted was to find a way to put in the hands of the popular church—the church of poor men and women—a tool for reflection with which to rethink faith from an evangelical and humanist perspective.

Some friends criticized us for having done little to demystify the image of Jesus. Haven't you put in too many miracles? We were not interested in doing away with myths. We were interested in accompanying the people. In the series, the Moreno performs miracles and he heals the sick. Was it important to debate whether Jesus converted water into wine in Canaan? We were more than aware, when writing, of the symbolism of this Johannine narration. Yet, we felt it was more important to highlight that the new wine was a gift for the poor. It was so that the happiness of the poor—and not of the rich—would last forever.

The revolutionary element of our work consisted not in taking any miracles away from Jesus, but rather in shortening the distance

that had been used to alienate him from the people, kidnapping him. Proclaiming the Beatitudes in the first person plural (*happy are we, the poor*)—now *that* holds a decisive importance. The Kingdom is for the humble, marginalized women, outlaws, and those fighting for justice. The last shall be first and vice-a-versa. That was the miracle we were most concerned about when writing *A Certain Jesus*. We demonstrated how Jesus prayed to God before being arrested, “*may their will not be done, but yours, Father; may the will of those who want to kill me in order to destroy the Kingdom not be done, but yours, Father, you, who want me to live.*” This was the theological shift which concerned us the most: Jesus’ death could not be—as it was not—a fruit of the “will of God,” but rather was a fruit of the injustice of the powerful. His resurrection was God’s response to Jesus’ insurrection against the powerful and unjust.

Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, recently censored by the Vatican, was one of the first three theologians to read all the episodes of *A Certain Jesus* in February 1981 and to give us assurance. This move did not put a stop to the censorship that was used to discredit us in those days, but it filled us with happiness. Months later, in November, he wrote to us from San Salvador:

I am going to start reading *A Certain Jesus* again, and I will continue to read it. I became excited again, something which I do rarely... The work is truly wonderful from a pastoral as well as a theological point of view. You have achieved a magnificent presentation of the person and activity of Jesus that I believe will be perfect for radio. I do not see any dogmatic problem at all. Rather, I see a very good introduction to the Christological problem in which Jesus’ true humanity is highlighted and the transcendence of his person is shown.

Now, when Jon Sobrino was asked about the condemnation of his writings on Jesus by the Vatican, he replied, “More than what Rome or history may think, I am more concerned about whether the woman who cooks in my house sees us as good people.”

The authors of *A Certain Jesus* share his thoughts.

José Ignacio and María LÓPEZ VIGIL

Lima, Peru / Managua, Nicaragua

Translated by Sheila Hong

A New Teaching, Given with Authority

*Value does not lie in beautiful words,
but in testimony, in concrete gestures*

*For Jon Sobrino, faithful disciple of Jesus,
with friendship, admiration, and gratitude for his testimony*

The Hope of the People Realized in Jesus

The painful and disastrous experiences that the people had under the kings of Israel and Judah during the four hundred years of monarchy (from 1,000 to 600 BC), produced a double effect. On the one hand, the people's suffering called forth the prophets to make harsh criticisms of the kings, the "Shepherds of Israel," who did not take into account their flock and only thought about themselves (Ez 34:1-10). On the other hand, the people began to expect a Messiah who would truly be a good and faithful Shepherd, tending the flock with love and care (Ez 34:14-16). Through the mouths of the prophets, God also came to promise that: *"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak"* (Ez 34:16).¹ This hope was realized in Jesus, who said: *"I am the good shepherd"* (Jn 10:11). The Shepherd is the one who cares for the sheep and takes them to green pastures and still waters (Ps 23:2). Saint Peter summarized the work of Jesus in these words: *"he went about doing good"* (Acts 10:38).

Jesus the Good Shepherd, Full of Kindness and Tenderness

In fact, what is most striking is the kindness and tenderness with which Jesus received the people, and, above all, the poor (Mk 6:34, 8:2,

10:14; Mt 11:28-29). He demonstrated the presence of God with his attitude of welcoming tenderness. Jesus not only spoke about God, but he also revealed God. He communicated something of that which he himself lived and experienced. His pastoral practice valued individual people and stimulated them to feel affirmed in God and to have confidence in themselves. He praised the scribe when he came to understand that the love of God and of one's neighbor was the central message of God's Law. Jesus told them, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God*" (Mk 12:34). He encouraged Jairus (Mk 5:36); he confirmed the hemorrhaging woman (Mk 5:34); he cheered up blind Bartimeus (Mk 10:49-52) and the father of the epileptic child (Mk 9:23-24); he welcomed the woman with the perfume (Lk 7:36-50); he revealed the value of the widowed woman's meager contribution (Mk 12:41-44); and he consoled and cured the sick (Mt 1:34, Mt 4:23).

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus welcomed the poor with much love, "*because they were like sheep without a shepherd*" (Mk 6:34, 8:2). He confirmed them, proclaiming that they understood the message of the Kingdom better than the teachers (Mt 11:25). He walked with the people on holy festival days (Mk 11:1-11; Jn 5:1, 7:14), cultivating his devotions, alms, fasts, and prayers (Mt 6:2, 18), and, as a layman, he participated in the weekly celebrations in the synagogue, rising to read scripture (Lk 4:16).

The hospitality and goodness that Jesus showed to all people without distinction is remarkable. For example, when the disciples pushed away the children, Jesus welcomed them and embraced them without worrying about whether or not he was breaking a legal impurity code. Their mothers must have been happy (Mk 10:13-16). Other examples: Jesus' welcoming gesture to old Zaccheus, disvalued by the public for his job as a tax collector (Lk 19:1-10), and the manner in which Jesus treated the pain of the widow whose only son had died (Lk 7:13). Jesus' greatest concern was to be able to alleviate the pain of the suffering people: "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Mt 11:28-30).

Jesus' welcoming attitude radiated his light upon the disciples and caused to be born in them a greater freedom of action in the face of the religious doctrines and customs of the time. They acquired courage to transgress antiquated norms that had nothing to do with faith in God or with the life of the people: when they were hungry, the disci-

ples plucked grains, even though it was the Sabbath (Mt 2:1); they did not wash their hands before eating (Mk 7:5); they entered the houses of sinners and ate with them (Mk 2:15-16); they did not adhere to the customary fasts of the Jews (Mk 2:18). Criticized by teachers, Jesus defended them (Mt 12:3-8; Mk 2:17, 19-22). The teachers invoked the Bible and tradition to declare that Jesus and his followers were wrong (Mk 7:5). Jesus responded by invoking the same Bible to make it very clear that the interpretation of his accusers was mistaken and that they were unfaithful to the deepest meaning of the Word of God: “*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition*” (Mk 7:8; cf. Mk 7:6, 2:25-26).

Jesus the Traveling Preacher

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus walked through all the towns of Galilee to speak with the people about the coming Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15). Wherever he encountered people who would listen, Jesus spoke and transmitted the Good News of God: in the synagogues during the celebration of the Word on the Sabbath (Mk 1:21, 3:1, 6:2); in informal gatherings in the homes of friends (Mk 2:1, 15, 7:17, 9:28, 10:10); in work settings, where he called Peter and Andrew, James and John (Mk 1:16-20), and Matthew (Mk 2:13-14); walking on the road with his disciples (Mk 2:23); along the sea on the beach, seated on a boat (Mk 4:1); near the well where the women came to gather water (Jn 6:32-34); on the mountain where he proclaimed the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1); in the village squares and city centers, where the people brought their sick (Mk 6:55-56); and in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem during the festival days, every day without fear (Mk 14:49).

The teachings of Jesus were closely tied to the lives of the people living in the land. His parables demonstrated that he had a great capacity to compare the things of God with the simpler things of the people's lives: salt, candles, light, work, food, seeds, flowers, love, weddings, children, birds, etc. This implies two things that mark the teachings of Jesus: he paid close attention to the lives and problems of his people, and he understood well the things of God, the Kingdom of God. Not everyone agreed with Jesus on these points, and some teachers from Jerusalem had come to Galilee to keep watch over him so that they could accuse him (Mk 3:22).

The parables also demonstrate another very important aspect of Jesus' teachings. He did not teach from above to below so that the people would learn by rote memorization, but rather he inspired the

people to participate in the discovery of the truth. For example, imagine a Galilean farmer who hears the parable of the sower. He thinks to himself: “Seed in the earth...I know about this. But Jesus says that seeds have something to do with the Kingdom of God. What does he mean by this?” Now you can imagine the long conversations of the people regarding the meaning of Jesus’ parables. As another example, mothers might undergo the same sort of process when hearing Jesus’ parables about salt, food, candles, etc. A parable causes a person to reflect upon his/her own experience and use this experience to discover the presence of God in the things of life: salt, candles, light, seeds, children, business, unemployment, corruption, assault, birds, grass, etc. Reality becomes transparent. This was Jesus’ method of teaching the people about God.

In Jesus, everything was a revelation of what was inside of him and inspired him! He not only spoke about the Kingdom. He himself was a sign, a living testimony of the Kingdom. His entire way of being demonstrated what occurs when a human being allows God to reign, allows God to take charge of her/his life. Because true value is not found in words but in testimony, in concrete gestures.

The Impact of Jesus’ Teaching Upon the People

The main thing that Jesus did was to teach (Mk 2:13, 4:1-2, 6:34). It was his custom (Mk 10:1). The people liked to hear him; they admired him and they asked him: “*What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him*” (Mk 1:27). The people were amazed, astonished, and frightened because Jesus “*taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*” (Mk 1:21-22). It seemed so ironic! The scribes, when they taught, repeated the sayings of the authorities of the age, but in the eyes of the people, although they cited the authorities, the scribes themselves did not teach with authority. Jesus never cited the authorities, but for the people he taught with authority! A person speaks with authority not by citing other established authorities or by agreeing with them, but by speaking words that come from the heart. Words alone, although they may be beautiful, have no value; it is testimony to true life experience that gives authority to one’s words. Jesus spoke about God from the basis of his experience of God and his experience with the life of the people. The teachers of the age did not have authority, they only had power. For this reason, they only knew how to teach the official doctrines that came from the established authorities.

Jesus had not been a student in the school of the official teachers in Jerusalem. Only one time had he been with them, when he was twelve years old, during the festival days (Lk 2:46). He was not clergy. He was not from the priestly tribe of Levi. He was a layman. Jesus did not absolutize his own thought. He was humble (Mt 11:29). He taught with authority, but did not impose his ideas in an authoritarian manner. He learned with the poor and also with people who were not of his race or religion. The Canaanite woman, for example, helped him to discover that he should extend his mission to the Gentiles (Mt 15:21-28). Jesus knew how to listen to the call of the Father in the lives of people. For this reason, his teaching displeased the authorities in Jerusalem.

Jesus was a disciple of God and of the people. As the servant of Yahweh, announced by Isaiah, he entered into prayer before God to find words of comfort for the discouraged people. He identified himself as the Servant of God, whose words would seem like a self-portrait of Jesus.

*“The LORD God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
That I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear
To listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
And I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward”* (Is 50:4-5).

The Other Side of the Coin

The other side of his goodness with the children was the firmness with which Jesus defended them against the outrages and deviances of the religious authorities of the age: priests (Mk 11:15-18), Pharisees and Herodians (Mk 12:13-17), Sadducees (Mk 12:18-27), and scribes and teachers of the Law (Mt 23:1-36). The latter, instead of helping the people, exploited them (Mk 12:40). They cared not for the suffering of the people and said that it was an evil people (Jn 9:49). Jesus knew that his manner of welcoming the people, and especially the poor, displeased the religious leaders of his time, but, like the Servant in Isaiah, he did not turn back:

*“I gave my back to those who struck me,
And my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.
The Lord God helps me;*

*Therefore I have not been disgraced;
Therefore I have set my face like flint,
And I know that I shall not be put to shame” (Is 50:6-8).*

My dear friend Jon, all of this came to my mind when I was learning about the difficulties that you had with the authorities, or rather, that the authorities wanted to have with you. May Jesus, the humble Servant of Yahweh, help and confirm you.

**Carlos MESTERS
and Francisco OROFINO**

Since 1972, Carlos Mesters has helped in the popular interpretation of the Bible in Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs), and since 1978 he has worked in CEBI, the Ecumenical Center for Biblical Studies.

“To write this article we used the Biblical Circles that Francisco Orofino and I made to help the people to prepare themselves for the 5th Conference of CELAM.”

Notes

¹ All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.—Trans.

Translated by Margi Ault-Duell

Jon Sobrino's Notification

My attention was drawn to the following in the Vatican's Notification on Jon Sobrino's two Christological works:

1. IN THE VATICAN'S ANALYSIS of these works, there is a tendency to attribute to the author "separation" or "alternative" (mutual exclusion), when what he raises is "distinction" and emphasis. For example, in the Notification:

- The "*social setting of the poor*" (or of the victims—the great majority of our continent—who are the believing community or the "Church of the Poor"), is described as an "*other point of departure for theological work*" (my emphasis) that opposes the "*apostolic faith transmitted through the Church.*"

- The particular historical humanity of *Jesus of Nazareth* is made to oppose the *Son of God* or his eternal Word, who "is incarnated (kenotically) in" or "assumes" the vulnerable, concrete, and limited humanity of this "marginal Jew" in the fascinating and cruel world of the Roman Empire.

- *Jesus as Mediator of the Kingdom* (in his historical ministry, and in his "spiritual" influence as resurrected Lord, in the Church and the world) is made to seem incompatible with the very *Kingdom of God* (which demands that "Thy will—justice and abundant life for everyone, starting with the poor and excluded—be done on earth...").

- *Jesus' practice and faithful following of God* (with the force of the spirit), a following and discipleship that the entire New Testament speaks about (but not the Notification, except perhaps when it refers to "moralism"), is made to oppose the "*ontological transformation worked by Jesus in his Passover* and realized in the sacraments of the Church (an "inner" transformation that seems to fill the entire salvific or "soteriological" horizon of the Vatican document).

2. IN THE CHRISTOLOGY of the Notification, from the Vatican's point of departure:

- This Christology, presented as “that of the Church,” seems to me, from my perspective, obsessively *fixated* (that is to say, in a fundamentalist way) on the *dogmatic formulations of the Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries*. The center of interest and language of these formulations is strongly conditioned—far from the abandoned multitudes who followed Jesus in Galilee or on the road to Jerusalem—by Greek philosophy, more worried about defining the essence of beings than about the human life and coexistence of the common people.

- This results in a *shocking double ignorance*. First, it demonstrates an ignorance of the most recent vision of the human Jesus and his cause, in the historical context of his country and his time, as the *biblical sciences* have shown, applied to the synoptic Gospels and the whole of the New Testament (with historical-critical methods approved and recommended by the top Catholic hierarchy).

- Second, it demonstrates an ignorance of the *reality of our Indo-Afro-Latino America*. Not only does it show an ignorance of the socioeconomic and political reality, but also of the cultural and religious reality of a continent that today includes close to half of the world's faithful Catholics. Our continent, so suffering and yet so hopeful, lives and dies within the global “civilization of capital” that massively produces “serious deficiencies, dehumanization of people, destruction of the family” and a grave threat to the very survival of the planet. As if this reality did not affect the God of Jesus Christ and were irrelevant for Christian theology!

- To me, this double ignorance seems contradictory to the teachings of Vatican II (especially in *Dei Verbum* and *Gaudium Et Spes*), as well as to important parts of the teachings of Paul VI (especially in the *Evangelii Nuntiandi*) and of John Paul II (especially in his speeches to the Latin American communities and in the “Gospel in America”), not to mention the Latin American Bishops' Conferences (particularly those of Medellín and Puebla) with their conclusions approved by those same Popes.

My Testimony Concerning the Work of Jon Sobrino

In light of the present Vatican Notification, I feel as though I must modestly witness to the valuable contribution made to Latin America by the Christological and evangelical work of my brother Jon,

a Latin American in his heart, risking and staking his very life on our continent.

I do this from my forty years of study and academic teaching on Christology and the Christian God, while living among modest people and walking with Christian communities, on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile or in the fields of the south of the country.

During years sprinkled with quick departures to brother countries, for theological work in teams and for small services to diverse communities and churches, I certainly always learned much from these communities and peoples.

I want to recognize the immense contribution my brother Jon Sobrino has made, through the depth of his belief—prophetic and martyrial—his passionate love for Jesus Christ and his poor, and his clarity of thought and systemic rigor.

This contribution has been received by the multitudes of Christians and ecclesiastical communities on this suffering and still hopeful continent, a victim—because of its great impoverished majorities—of such terrible injustice and such terrible violence.

From his early *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, published in 1977,¹ to his recent essay “*Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus*” (Outside of the Poor there is no Salvation),² he has undertaken a long quest, humble and self-demanding. This quest has always been in pursuit of greater evangelical fidelity and greater historical realism, of a fuller and more explicit communion with the faith of the Church, of a more clear and responsible service to the discipleship of Jesus, and to his cause of the Kingdom of God in our lands.

Two “Confessions” from Jon Sobrino Himself

There is no better way to end this short note with than two “confessions” from Jon himself about his continuing journey and work, one from 1982 and the other from 2006:

“The figure of a Jesus of the poor, who defends his cause and assumes his destiny, who is introduced into the conflict of the world and dies at the hands of the powerful, and in this way announces that he is the good news, maintains a fundamental and eternal newness. This is the reason to continue writing and publishing about Jesus...”

Whoever approaches Jesus only as a student of Christology can quite easily integrate—if it is what he or she desires—the theoretical newness that Jesus represents for Christology. But for whomever Jesus is good news—an eternal call to conversion and discipleship—it is necessary to keep returning, time and time again, to this figure of Jesus.

This last fact by itself does not justify the publication of one more book on Jesus, nor does it mean that the abundant theological literature on Jesus does not have to be judged by its own merits. But it does explain the intention in publishing this book. Perhaps the reader will find in it some step forward in theory, a greater insistence in relating Jesus not only to the Kingdom of God, but also to the God of the Kingdom, or a new attempt to locate faith in Jesus within the Church's faith in Christ. I have certainly attempted this. But it has been attempted, mainly, to give lucidity and spirit to the Christians who follow Jesus, who aim for conversion, who fight for justice and against oppression, who defend the cause of the poor and oppressed, who undergo persecution and who—at times—end up, like Jesus, crucified.”

(From the author's prologue to Jesús En América Latina: Su Significado Para La Fe y La Cristología. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1982.)³

“Upon finishing these reflections, I am still left with the uneasiness that I mentioned at the beginning, which is produced by the newness and scandal of the subject. We are conscious of many limitations. We have neither offered a sufficiently systemic concept of salvation, nor of the different ways that salvation operates for the poor and the non-poor. We still have not offered a better way to produce goods and knowledge for the benefit of the individual and for communities, nor have we offered a better way of creating ‘inspiration,’ ‘attraction,’ and ‘impulse’—in the form of ‘ferment’—to generate modest models of another type of society. And I also think that we need to devote more in-depth analysis to the relationship between the ‘destitute poor’ and the ‘poor in spirit.’

But this being said, there is something that seems clear to me: there will be neither salvation nor humanization if redeeming impulses do not come from the world of the poor. That which is produced by ‘the world of the non-poor,’ imposing and arrogant, will not generate salvation unless it passes, in some way, through ‘the world of the poor.’ Said in a more succinct form, salvation and humanization will take place ‘with’ the poor. ‘Without’ the poor, no salvation will take place that is human.”

(The two final paragraphs of “Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus” (257).)

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Santiago, Chile

Translated by Clare DiSalvo

Notes:

- ¹ *Cristología Desde América Latina: Esbozo a Partir Del Seguimiento Del Jesús Histórico.* México [City]: Ediciones CRT, 1977. Eng. trans. *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978.
- ² “*Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus.*” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología.* No. 69 (2006). Partial Eng. trans. “Apart from the Poor no Salvation.” *Revista Envío.* No. 309 (April 2007) at <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3531>.
- ³ Eng. trans. *Jesus in Latin America.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.

The Hermeneutical Method under suspicion

-The notification to Jon Sobrino-

The recent notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to two Latin American Christological writings of the Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino begins with marked observations regarding the methodological principles that define the orientation, the elaboration and the conclusions of Sobrino's Christology.

In view of that, in the present paper it is tried to ask again about the crucial issue of method in theology, just inside the required limits for a sufficient understanding of the problem that has been arisen now by the notification, regarding the methodological principles of the notified author.

The difficult freedom of theologians and Theology

The *statute of theology and theologians in the Church* as it is formulated in a roman document with the same title, struggles between the autonomy of the theological discipline and the instance of supreme control and vigilance exercised over theologians and theology.

At the last trajectory of that instance of control and vigilance, under the direction of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and the very short time of his actual successor, the interventions, notifications and punishments have been multiplied to such an extreme, that the proclaimed autonomy of theology and theologians turns out restricted and narrowed so that practically the principles that define and support it become unrecognizable.

As a matter of fact, the Council's and Pope's interventions gathered in the mentioned Statute of Theology and Theologians in the

Church, have been abundant and have honored, before all, the same Council as well the Pope John Paul II.

In the context of the indispensable relationship between human, cultural and Christian education, the Council stated that:

“Let those who teach theology in seminaries and universities strive to collaborate with men versed in the other sciences through a sharing of their resources and points of view. Theological inquiry should pursue a profound understanding of revealed truth; at the same time it should not neglect close contact with its own time that it may be able to help these men skilled in various disciplines to attain to a better understanding of the faith. This common effort will greatly aid the formation of priests, who will be able to present to our contemporaries the doctrine of the Church concerning God, man and the world, in a manner more adapted to them so that they may receive it more willingly.” (14) Furthermore, it is to be hoped that many of the laity will receive a sufficient formation in the sacred sciences and that some will dedicate themselves professionally to these studies, developing and deepening them by their own labors. In order that they may fulfill their function, let it be recognized that all the faithful, whether clerics or laity, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and of expressing their mind with humility and fortitude in those matters on which they enjoy competence” (Gaudium et Spes, 62).

On the other hand, John Paul II connected the just freedom of theology with the autonomy to which it cannot renounce because the fidelity to the Church and the pastoral magisterium “do not enrapture theologian from his task or subtract anything of that autonomy to which it is not possible to renounce. Magisterium and theology have different tasks to fulfill. This is the reason why one of them cannot be reduced to the other, even though both tasks serve to one unique whole. It is necessary to deep in this horizon and to follow on further, despite the conflicts that can always arise”. (Speech to theologians in Altötting, Germany, 11-30-1980).

Likewise the Pope says: “It is an unavoidable duty of theologian to make new proposals addressed to the understanding of the faith. For this reason, the objective impartial discussion, the brotherly dialogue, the opening and the disposition to changes regarding the own opinions are part of the theologian’s essence”. (Ibid.)

“The Church wishes an autonomous theological research, different from the ecclesiastic magisterium but committed to it in the common service to the truth of the faith and to the People of God” (Ibid.).

The theologian’s study is not reduced to the mere repetition of dogmatic formulations, but it has to help the Church in order to acquire an every time more deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ. The Savior talks also to the mankind of our time” (Acta Apostolicae Sedis 71, 1979, 1431).

And finally, “*It shall not have to exclude that tensions and conflicts could arise. Neither this has to be ever excluded from the relationship between Church and science. The basis stays in the limitation of our mind that in its field has its own limits and because of that it is exposed to error. Nevertheless we always can have the hope of a conciliator solution if we construct upon the base of that capacity that the mind possesses to tend to the truth*” (Speech to theologians, Altötting, Germany, 11-30-1980).

The solid method of Latin American theology

The freedom regarding method and methods should get established in the first place among the substantive elements of freedom that the same Church demands for theologians and theology. The Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* makes again a reference to this:

“The Council also encouraged theologians, while respecting the methods and requirements of theological science. Certainly the Church’s Magisterium does not intend to impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one”. Nevertheless, in order to “*reverently preserve and faithfully expound the word of God, the Magisterium has the duty to state that some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are incompatible with revealed truth*”. (29).

So is how Gustavo Gutiérrez in the founding text of Latin American theology knew by intuition that it was the decisive role of method in the constitution itself of the theological procedure that with it was taken place for the first time. “*The liberation theology proposes, maybe not a new theme for the reflection but a new way to make theology*” (*Teología de la liberación: perspectivas*, 1973, p. 40).

The new way is obviously equivalent to a new method for making theology and as it was later said by Claude Geffré, “*the new way has less of new places than of new relational ties*” (*El cristianismo ante el riesgo de la interpretación*, 1980, p. 72).

So by its methodic dimension, Latin American theology did not go further than to recognize and to agree with the great intuitions of classic philosophers and theologians to whom *science becomes specified and defined by its method*. It is equivalent to declare that science is debtor of its method and that the horizon of the method settles the horizon itself of the methodic discipline.

For the purpose of this paper it is enough to remember that the philosophies of praxis, so in vogue during the 70ies of the last century

and the great current of hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur) were the inspiration and support to shape in our America a mature and proved theological method that today is part of the patrimony of the universal theology.

Method features

In the particular respects of method, Latin American theology is characterized by assuming a triple change that identifies it with herself and marks the difference with other possible ways of making theology: 1) The transit from the classical and usual dogmatic method of obtained and closed senses, to the hermeneutic and interpretative method in order to make possible open senses to the question of the person who asks, when it is about the permanent understanding of the great biblical and Christian tradition's texts. 2) The step from the usual philosophical methods and mediations to the own methods and mediations of social analytical sciences, when it is about the understanding of the complex human and social reality. 3) The priority of the praxis of changing, of liberation and of transformation of the unacceptable misery of the reality, by difference and contrast regarding theological usual forms that could be manufactured from the outside theory, distant and divorced from any political and social commitment of theologians and theology itself.

In the confines of hermeneutics and over proved and certain tracks of the so called sciences of the spirit, the method of Latin American theology has been inscribed without any misunderstanding in the historical postmetaphysical interrogation of human beings in worldliness, spatiality, historicity, finiteness and inexorable declining. This establishes the difference of simply being thought and abstracted according to the transcendental issues created by metaphysics. This asking of the historical being in historicity and concrete situation has been correctly called the *contextual place* that, as such is the departing point to any answering. And it must be noted that there is a contrast and a difference with theologies of answers without questions and of theological accumulation of abstract truths without real senses.

Only that the question of historical and concrete human beings is addressed to spaces and confines that use to be great reserves of answers and senses. So the tradition's texts are read and recovered from the contextual asking. This hermeneutical field to which the question for the sense is addressed is called textual place. And here we have to

note the contrast and difference with theologies of texts without contexts and the frequently dramatic textual accumulations not referred to contextual places of asking for the real sense of our existence.

Finally the logics of asking from the contexts and of answering of the texts cannot have a different purpose than this of that the historical individuals be directed through the paths of the sense of life and action interrogated from the contexts and answered from the texts. It is then about the *pretextual place*, because that what definitively the texts show and the contexts pretend is a possible different human being and world, in a history less unjust and cruel especially regarding the victims, the defeated and the poor.

It must stay always clear that the contextual, textual and pretextual places are not ordained in a parallel way or in a kind of juxtaposition neither in the tangentiality of a point in a determined segment. They are ordained and they operate like a hermeneutical circle of the understanding of the sense of being and according to the form of asking and answering. So the contextual question determines and conditions the answer, this one follows the orientation of the question, and question and answer are orientated beyond themselves towards a human being and world to be constructed. The theological contextual, textual and pretextual places appear then to be pro-vocative and loaded with hope and sense to the tortuous path of existence.

The method under suspicion

The mood of the notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the methodological assumptions of Jon Sobrino is substantively connected with the judgment about the method that many years ago was forged by the then Cardinal Prefect of that entity. He was who, first personally and afterwards institutionally raised the first notification addressed not to a particular theologian but to the hermeneutic method inscribed inside the method itself of Latin American theology.

As a matter of fact, already in the far 1984 the Italian Magazine *Trenta Giorni*, organ of the known group Communion and Liberation published with the suggestive title of *Vi spiego io la teologia della liberazione* (I explain you the liberation theology) the personal notes of Cardinal Ratzinger Assumptions, problems and challenges of liberation theology, probable fruit of his expositions inside the Vatican. In those notes it is already processed *the fundamental danger that represents the liberation theology*

for the faith of the Church, that is not possible to place in none of the heresy diagrams of those that have existed till the actual time and that represents an evident risk to the faith of the Church. And with sharp sense the same Ratzinger Document glimpses that this theology does not pretend to add a new theological treatise to those already written, but a new hermeneutics of the Christian faith, it is, like a new way of understanding and implementing the Christianity in its whole.

For the Cardinal Prefect, Bultmann in theology would represent not only *the ditch he dug between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history*, but *to have introduced the ancient theme and problem of hermeneutics*. Having assumed this double Bultmannian contribution, Latin American theology would have ended as a pupil almost naive of the ancient and superseded teacher.

From the first contribution it would be turned out the supposed separation that Latin American Christologies would establish between the Jesus of history from the Jesus of tradition; and from the second contribution it would be turned out the setting off of our theology towards the tracks of hermeneutics, described by the Cardinal with right issues but placed by him under suspect: 1) *There is not given a real understanding of the historical texts by a simple historic interpretation, but each historic interpretation includes some previous decisions.* 2) *Hermeneutics tend to a fusion of the old horizons with actual ones and its question is: what does that old horizon mean today? In such a way that the figure of Jesus would have to be transferred to the present time with a new hermeneutics.* 3) *At the instances of interpretation the decisive concepts are "people", "community", "experience", "history", and not the whole of the Church that transcends spaces and times.* 4) *The community interprets with its own experience and so it finds its praxis.* 5) *The "people" has a sociological sense and the history a sense of historicity that replaces the permanent value of metaphysics* (Trenta Giorni, March 1984).

These opinions were literally reproduced in the Cardinal's broad dialogue with the journalist Vittorio Messori which caused the text *Report about the faith*; in those confines it is exposed too, as we can notice, the Ratzingerian think about the problematic Council, about continuity and not break of, about the restless demands of Bishops Conferences, about the spring of Charismatic, Pentecostal and Catechumenal groups and movements, about the return to the preconciliar liturgy and the Latin language, about brothers yes but separated (Joseph Ratzinger, Vittorio Messori, *Report about the faith*, Bac, 1985).

Finally, from his personal notes the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith passed to the official and

institutional notifications in the *Instruction about some aspects of liberation theology*, at the end of that year of 1984. The Instruction, at it is known, pretends to go to the cores that it judges engraved in the liberation theologies: *to deny the radical newness of the New Testament, not to know the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, to leave to one side the authorized interpretation of the magisterium, to reject Tradition, to pretend to reach the Jesus of history from the struggle of the poor for their liberation* (Instruction, 1984).

The notification to the methodological principles of Sobrino

In its positive and suggestive aspect the notification to the illustrious Jesuit theologian is generous regarding him and the great theological Latin American trend in which he is inscribed, because it declares that *the purpose of the present notifications is to point out to the faithful the fecundity of a theological reflection that it is not afraid of being developed inside of the vital flow of ecclesial tradition*. In these confines the job of supreme control and vigilance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would perfectly lead always to honest and cordial debates inside the ecclesial community and inside the theological community, in order to a possible overcoming of the initial points of view of participants and to the Christian sketching of consensuses about the basis of the dialogue and the capacity of argumentation and of reason.

In the critic field of the methodological principles of Sobrino, the Congregation judges that the “*Church of the poor*” (so in inverted commas as it was the case to evocate an unknown element or a strange body for theology and for the Church itself) *is located in the place that corresponds to the fundamental theological place that is only the faith of the Church; in it any other theological place finds the correct epistemological position*.

With the same logic the Congregation judges that *the ecclesial place of Christology cannot be the “Church of the poor” but the apostolic faith, transmitted to all generations by the Church*.

And perfectly according with its own qualitative grading of theological places, the notification judges that *other starting points for the theological work would be in danger of arbitrariness and it would end spoiling the contents of the faith itself*.

The last demand of the notification points to underline the value and the place of the normative sources of theology and it warns that the lack of due attention to the sources causes the concrete problems of his theology even though the author says that he considers them “normative”.

The theological analyst can conclude that the demand of the Congregation fundamentally deals with the grading by qualitative value of the sources of the constitution of the theological discipline and that this debate did not began in 2001 with the decision of the Congregation for *an ulterior and deeper study of the two Christological Works of Sobrino*, nor in 2004 with the list of *erroneous propositions*, nor in 2007 with the publication of the notification. All the premises of the notification are given in the long and tortuous debate of Cardinal Ratzinger with the figure self of the method of the Latin American liberation theology.

The prejudice (always possible in hermeneutics) leaves a space to connect the notification to Jon Sobrino with the notification to the Latin American theology self end with a kind of pre-notification to the V Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. In the first and the second, is it not an issue of method? Do not demand the Brazilian Bishops and others the return without detours to the method of our theology and our pastoral?

The methodological principles of Sobrino

It is necessary to put before that the issue of theological places (*loci theologici*) was received and elaborated by scholastic theology at the end of Middle Age (in particular Melchor Cano), inspired in the topic (*topoi*) perspectives of the Greek classic writers in order to define the sources of inspiration, of constitution and of regulation of a specific discipline. Each discipline has its own places and so theology.

From this tradition on, it can be understood that in the best hermeneutic perspective, Sobrino assumes that *the poor of this world are a substantive reality* and, then, place of reference for theology in the fundamental instant of asking. Further: who ask the tradition of their faith about the sense of their lives and about their ill-treated and excluded existence are the poor of the world. They, like always, are not only the main listeners of the answers of the Gospel proclaimed to the poor. To say, then, that *the poor are the categorial place in which the Christology* is carried out, does not constitute any different thing than an emphatic and forceful principle of theological hermeneutics.

In this same perspective, if hermeneutics are constructed from the excellence of the question that asks, it turns out clearly obvious that *the poor inside the community question* (ask, inquire) *the Christological faith and offer to it their orientation and fundamental direction*, because the answering, to be sensible, must be done from the horizons selves of asking. From

there on the assertion of Sobrino of being it *the social place the most decisive for the faith, the most decisive for shaping the Christological way of thinking and that demands and facilitates the epistemological breaking off*. And for epistemological breaking off should be understood the cognitive fracture that prevails in order to do not produce Christologies of answers without questions nor Christologies of questions without the answers of the founding sources of tradition and faith.

The other methodological principle of Sobrino cannot be of more ecclesial deep nor higher spiritual fineness: *the Church of the poor is the ecclesial place of Christology*. With this it is declared that any interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be done in the topos of the Church, but that the Church in its entity, in its constitution and in its mission *is the Church of all but particularly the Church of the poor*, as it was stated by Pope John XXIII in order that this should be the norm and the track of the Council and of the universal Church.

So there is no space to mistake the *social or contextual place* of any genuine hermeneutics, the fundamental ecclesial place of the theological question and the *normative place* where the theological understanding elaborates the answer, that would be always the sources selves of the Scripture, of the Tradition and of the Apostolic Faith, as Sobrino declares: *the first and more obvious source for a Christology are the texts in which revelation have stayed: especially the New Testament and that is normatively interpreted by the magisterium*.

This and no other is the genuine circle of understanding. These and no others are the theological places concerning the identity of theology with itself. The different value of the theological places does not prejudice about its grading in the free play of disciplinary method.

For an essentialist theology indeed the order of methodic grading starts from the text as a normative place, passes (if it passes) trough the contextual ecclesial place, and generally lacks of pretextual place of applicability, of validity and of facticity in order that the text should produce its redeeming effects in the real misery of existence. This method starts from the answer and it is built without any question.

For a theology with a libertarian style, in the parameters of the irreversible hermeneutics, the order of methodic grading is established with the priority of the question that asks for the sense of being in situation; it listens to the answers evoked by the normative places that are the givers of the sense of salvation and grace; and in obedience to the texts and to the requirement of the contexts, it tries hard to operate

the liberation of everybody, especially of the poor who is the privileged place of the asking in situation and of the answering of the tradition of the Lord.

It is the great “risk” of the interpretation and the great merit of the new way of making theology that the pressing, overwhelming, abysmal questions of the poor of the world impose conditions to the answer of the Christology and that push into the spiritual and social liberation of three quarters of the mankind. It is far away maybe of the essentialist metaphysic quietness, but without any doubt very much closer to the Gospel of the Lord.

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Jon Sobrino and Theology of Liberation

Karl Barth is storied to have mounted the pulpit with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. For Jon Sobrino, however, the source that complements the bible is not the newspaper, which is the voice of its owner, but the poor, who are also the pulpit from where he expounds the Scriptures. Consequently, his kerygmatic theology proclaims a God who calls for the deliverance of the poor from the burden of poverty, the rich from the lure of riches, and both groups from greed, which St Paul equates with idolatry (Col 3:5).

To sharpen the contours of this theology, I like to contrast it with two medieval theologies, which Jean Leclercq compares in his classic, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. He says that the *lectio divina* (scripture reading) of the scholastics takes the direction of *questio* (inquiry) and *disputatio* (discussion) leading to “science and knowledge”, whereas in monastic theology the *lectio divina* moves along *meditatio* (rumination) and *oratio* (prayer) leading to “wisdom and appreciation”. If I were to extend this comparison to the Latin American Liberation theologians, I would have to say that their *lectio divina* alternates with *actio* and *reflectio* among the poor ending up in the “proclamation and anticipation of God’s Reign” here and now.

This theology, then, is not a Marxist reading of the Bible as its critics interpret it simplistically, but a legitimate child of Vatican II. This Council’s invitation to return to the Scriptures and to forge autonomous local churches (see *OE*, 5) was taken seriously by the Latin American bishops and priests who were *obedient* to the Council. Liberation theo-

gy was the fruit of a *lectio divina* made by the local churches of the poor, in line with the prophetic vision of John XXIII of happy memory, who invited the church to be “the church of the poor, the church of all”. If there is anything dangerous in this theology, it comes from the bible and the poor, not from a putative Marxist inspiration. The danger is bound to be felt by those ecclesiastical institutions that fail to reflect “the church of the poor, the church of all”.

After all the axial theme of the bible is a God covenanted with the runaway slaves of Egypt. The latter’s successful struggle for freedom, *the Exodus*, was partnered by Yahweh, whose self-definition invokes Her involvement in the Exodus: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2). Thus the allegiance to Yahweh as *God of the Exodus* (God of liberation) entailing the *renunciation of all idols* was the first stipulation of the covenant which defined Israel’s faith. The Christ-event, which renews this Covenant, reaffirms this same faith using the same language of the exodus and the pass-over. But the leadership of the Western Patriarchate, which insists that the Faith expressed in the Greek idiom is of the essence of Christianity, seems uncomfortable with a theology that revolves around the biblical theme of exodus.

Understandably, Benedict XVI’s discourse on the God of the Old Testament does not even allude to the Exodus but gives Aristotle an honorable mention (*Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 9-10). The Word of God, as he puts it, is “the *logos*, the primordial reason” (no.10), which, as we know, has been invoked in the apologetical treatises of the Church. But the liberation theologians, who bypass Greek philosophy and plunge into the bible in the midst of the poor, find the Word of God to be the Hebrew *dabar*, an executive word which demands *action*, more precisely an *exodus* from every kind of enslavement. Instead of explaining reality to the satisfaction of rational beings, they aim at transforming society to the satisfaction of oppressed masses. The intellectual exercise of reconciling faith with reason recedes before the more urgent task of aligning faith with justice. Hence their mission is not to demonstrate God’s existence and nature to the “wise and the intelligent”, but to bear witness to God’s love before the “little ones” with whom God is in direct communion (cf. Mt 11:25). Jon Sobrino, who wants us to read the bible with the eyes of the poor rather than with the heads of phi-

losophers, is himself a brilliant thinker, who has successfully conveyed this theological method to the “wise and the intelligent” in their own sophisticated idiom!

The role that the victims of injustice play in the genesis and growth of an authentic church is a crucial feature of an ecclesiology which tries to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the Pauline concept of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ with Jesus’ own claim (Mt 25) that the victims of nations are his real “Me”, his own person, his body (“you did it to *Me*”); that the *poor as poor* (with no religious tag attached) are qualified not only to enter God’s Reign but also to qualify others to enter it. Since most of the poor in our world are not members of the Church, we come to the inconvenient conclusion that Christ’s real body is for the most part non-Christian; and that even the Christian poor of Latin America, who form part of his body, do not reside in ecclesiastical establishments. Unless, therefore, these institutions become co-extensive with *that* Body of Christ, they could remain a counter-witness to the Gospel. This seems to be the uncomfortable implication of Sobrino’s ecclesiology.

Then comes the question of the teaching authority. The traditional dichotomy of the church into a teaching church and a learning church has been challenged by no less a person than John Paul II in his best-seller, *On the Threshold of Hope*. Did not Jesus demand non-reliance on money-power from his disciples (Lk 10 : 4) before promising them the authority to teach as his proxy (Lk 10:16)? No wonder Dean Brackley, a North American Jesuit, who works with Sobrino, confesses that the moneyless and the powerless are his professors! I myself was not outrageous when I proposed in many places that the *ministerium* of the Pastors and Theologians should resonate with the *Magisterium of the Poor*. Authority is the credibility which one gains by renouncing all power derived from Mammon. What appears to be a crisis of obedience today is, in fact, a crisis of credibility.

Finally, no liberation theologian has ever denied any of the Christological dogmas, even if these dogmas focus mainly on the Incarnate God rather than on the Crucified Christ. Nor has the Church ever declared that these dogmas have exhausted everything that can be said about Christ. On the other hand it is not Sobrino but

the Jesuit Cardinal Alois Grillmeier, who, in his authoritative study of the Christological councils, laments that these dogmas, though valid in themselves, have left behind what he calls “a burden”, namely, a Christology minus soteriology. It is the cross that explains the incarnation, not the other way about. Sobrino, who thinks, prays and writes in the midst the Crucified Ones is humbly trying to relieve the church of that “burden”. All of us should join him rather than hinder him in this noble task.

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Lord of the Miracles

In Peru the feast of the Lord of the Miracles is celebrated with a great deal of devotion, above all during the “purple month” (October). The image is that of Christ crucified and was painted in the 18th century, legend says, by a Black slave in Lima. When the painting takes to the streets each year, more than a million believers accompany it along its path.

The city of Chimbote, on the northern coast of Peru, has, for many years, also celebrated the purple month of the Lord of the Miracles. Among the sites visited by the image is the city prison. The first time it entered that prison, around 1983, one of the prisoners spoke in the name of them all and said:

Lord of the Miracles, you who also knew the whip, you who were judged and sentenced, you ought to understand what we experience and you surely have compassion for our lot. We beg you to be mindful of our misery and orient us so we can overcome the burden of our past and strive to build a new life... We too are your Church; we are people who believe, hope and search for life. We are workers deprived of every opportunity to make a positive contribution to our society; we are deprived of seeing the fruit of our labor and of sharing the sweat of our brows with others. It is good, Lord, to suffer in silence, but we cannot silence the hunger we endure .

I want to offer some comments on this moving text.

In the *first place*, it is important to recognize that the prisoner is speaking as a spokesperson for those who suffer. He speaks with the

simplicity of his life, of his desires, of his afflictions. He also speaks with a great deal of confidence as to someone he knows very well, as a friend and companion. His way of speaking has the tone of a conversation and the form of a prayer. He is able to assume this accent because he already knows whom he is dealing with. It is a conversation in the literal sense of the word: con-versar (Latin for turn toward). The prisoner turns toward Jesus and immediately encounters a communion of spirit: "You also knew..." That communion of spirit is based on sharing a common human experience. Standing before Jesus, the inmate reveals his search for meaning in life: "We are people who believe, hope and search for life". There is nothing in him that is outside the conversation, not even the most shameful elements: "Be mindful of our misery and orient us to overcome the burden of our past..." He presents himself just as he is, nothing more and nothing less. He has no theological formation; nevertheless, what he says rises up from deep within his being and manages to connect with what is most profound in the being of Jesus. Speaking with Jesus, he is also revealed at the most profound level of his intimacy as a son of God: "We too are your Church".

In *second place*, if the prisoner speaks with Jesus, it is important to note that Jesus also speaks to the prisoner and this touches him very profoundly. Jesus did not die as a willing sacrifice that occurred in a religious context. He was not executed for being Son of God who offered his life to redeem the people. Rather he was arrested by the authorities of his time, questioned with torture according to the norms for dangerous prisoners of that period, judged by civil authority and condemned to death for having confronted the public order. Even though he accepted his lot with an extraordinary force of will, Jesus suffered the death penalty, not by any personal disposition, but by order of the Roman authority and his death had all the atrocious circumstances of an implacable capital punishment for the crime of treason against the empire.

For having lived through a judgment, whipping and sentencing, Jesus is able to understand the experience of an inmate in the prison of Chimbote ("you ought to understand..."). Only for that! This is the basic condition for the conversation and all the moving elements it contains. For having shared the human experience, the inmate can have confidence in the power of Jesus to offer the fullness of life that corresponds to his own deepest desires. If Jesus of Nazareth were not crucified, this conversation would be impossible. What speaks most to the inmate in the human experience of Jesus is what corresponds

to the most difficult element of his own life: suffering (whipping, judgment) and marginalization (“We are deprived...”). That suffering of the crucified one is what gives strength and confidence to speak (“We cannot silence the hunger”). It is none other than the crucified one who presents himself; no one else can inspire that confidence or give that strength. Everything that the prisoner recognizes in Jesus comes from his passion as it is recounted in the Gospels. And that is enough. He doesn’t look for anything else. The young inmate and parent speaks because Jesus has already spoken to him through the medium of his life, passion and death in Palestine. That speech has touched something deep within him.

The people of Latin America identify profoundly with Jesus of Nazareth. He lived in a world that is very similar to their own. He grew up in a marginal region of a marginal people in a marginal piece of a planet dominated by great powers that violently occupied their lands. Those powers demanded absolute obedience. Religion itself served to assure obedience to those powers. The homeland of Jesus is similar in many respects to the lands known by the peoples of the Andes and the Pacific coast of Latin America: often arid, with mountains and valleys, an agricultural life with remote villages hanging to the edge of precipices or hidden in the shadow of deep valleys. There they even cultivate some of the same crops (wheat, fig, grape) and know some of the same animals (donkey, lamb, goat). In the Gospels, Jesus finds himself among a people very similar to the poor people of Latin America who suffer from the same problems, illnesses and exclusions. The life of a peasant or of a small-scale fisherman today is not all that different from what it was two thousand years ago. Jesus’ compassion for the suffering of the poor profoundly touches the poor of Latin America. In him, they see the mercy of God. Conversation with Jesus becomes a communion with the mystery of God.

The marginal people of Latin America, by their very circumstances of their lives, cannot always live up to all that the great centers of power – or Canon Law – demand. Jesus, at least as they know him, does not demand uniformity of thinking or of being. He is interested in those who are outside the structures, outside the norms, those who are marginal: the leper, the Samaritan, the centurion, the blind man, the paralytic, the adulteress. This is someone who liberates from the rigid molds and structures. Jesus touches the leper, speaks with the Samaritan, offers to visit the centurion, forgives the adulteress and heals on the Sabbath.... Jesus, as viewed by those who find themselves in the

prison in Chimbote, does not insist much on rituals but is constantly providing gestures that place them before the ultimate mystery of God: he heals the woman that was doubled over, invites the paralytic to stretch out his hand in the synagogue, sends the leper to show himself to the priests so that they can confirm his health. This is a Jesus who tells simple stories about daily life that move the heart because they touch the deep meaning of life. What Jesus is looking for is not so much conformity to the correct norms or thinking as such as integrity of heart.

The Jesus who speaks to them is obviously someone who is living and who is very present. Nevertheless, he is not the all-powerful Pancrator of the Roman basilicas. The one who comes to greet them is rather Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one. He who speaks to them is the same one who was broken on the cross. In the Latin American context, with its misery and violence, the poor are living a crucifixion and, for the moment, they remain within the limitations imposed by that reality. Nevertheless, when they give witness before Jesus to their own lives and their desires, one has a whiff of resurrection, of life that triumphs over death.

For that reason they can speak of Jesus so simply and with such openness. Their conversation is a communion that gives strength, heals wounds and promotes life.

In the *third place*, the poor represented here by the inmate in the prison of Chimbote speak also to us. They break the silence. They do not allow the hunger to remain silent. Our way of life is questioned as also our experience, our faith, our knowledge and recognition of Jesus.

The poor challenge us to discover a new word of Life in the Gospel. Every time our path crosses that of a poor person, his or her experience opens a path to a new encounter with the Gospel, with the compassion of Jesus, with the salvific mercy of God. If we are sensitive to what the life of Jesus of Nazareth represents, and to his word, passion and death, we cannot simply pass by on the other side as did the religious people who were on the road to Jericho. The one who fell into the hands of thieves in the parable is none other than Jesus himself.

And this history repeats itself in some way in the life of every marginal person because, in the same way, it obliges us to recognize the presence of the suffering mercy (con-passion) of God that challenges us to commit ourselves with the "other".

The poor evangelize us. They can open to us the meaning of the Gospel not because they are saints. The inmate who speaks to the Lord of the Miracles is in prison for a reason and he knows it. He speaks of the “burden of our past.” He is not innocent. Still, what stands out is what he suffers. He deserves our attention, not because he is good or innocent but simply because he is poor, “deprived”, judged by the powers of this world and sentenced to misery. As such, he ends up speaking to the depths of our own being.

Besides, he asks for something: “We beg you to be mindful our misery”. First of all, he asks that “you be mindful,” that is to say to become aware, to wake up to face the harsh reality of the poor. And, secondly, he asks that “you orient us to overcome the burden of our past and strive to build a new life”. He begs this of Jesus but we who are listening also hear these words. We are the disciples of Jesus and so the request cannot leave us indifferent. We are called to be the hands and the feet of Jesus for our world today. We ourselves are called to become aware of the reality of the poor and to take charge of our way of acting. Please note that he does not ask, not even of Jesus, that he be withdrawn miraculously from his situation but rather that he be directed so that he himself can move forward. He does not ask for paternalism but for companionship.

In the *fourth place*, it seems to me that it is evident, based on this little speech in the Chimbote prison, that the poor of this world ask that the wise men and women of the Church, that is to say its theologians, bishops, priests and religious, accompany them so that they can find their way to this man of compassion. Once there, they will know what to do, how to relate, how to engage.

In Peter’s speech in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10, 34 ff) he speaks of what Jesus did in Judea and Galilee and how he was captured and killed by the authorities. He insists on how the disciples ate and drank with him after his death (Ibid, 41). It is a very simple pedagogy in which Peter shows how Jesus was moved by the Spirit of God in all the good that he did (Ibid, 38).

So, are those very mistaken who help people encounter this Jesus of Nazareth? Would it not be a very good think to present this humanity of Jesus to the poor? In this way, the poor, drawing close to the Suffering Servant, discover for themselves and on their own the mystery of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

The pastoral pedagogy with the poor does not require nuanced speeches about the dual nature of Jesus, his divinity, his equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. What the poor ask, and what serves them well, is to show them Jesus of Nazareth who died on the cross, who spoke of his Father and who showed us how to relate to one another.

Let me conclude by turning to the final words of the Gospel of Mark. Many biblical scholars think that Mark ended his gospel with 16: 1-8. Thus there would be no apparition of Jesus at all after his resurrection. The women visit the tomb and find it empty. An angel tells them that he is not there, that they should return to Galilee to meet him. The gospel ends with these astonishing words: “They said nothing to anyone, they were so filled with fear”. This is not the image that we normally have of Resurrection day. The women end up with nothing more than a disappeared Jesus and a notice that they should return to Galilee that is to say return to where everything started. The text seems to indicate that they have to follow the same path as Jesus if they hope to one day to see him again. They have to stay with the memory of the crucified one in order to recognize the resurrected one.

We will know the mystery of God in Jesus when we commit ourselves with him in walking toward Calvary. The important thing for the Christian, as also for the Church, is not so much being able to make subtle conceptual distinctions about the natures of Christ but rather to commit ourselves to the same journey as Jesus. This, it seems to me, is primary in order for the poor and suffering people of today, just like the women in the Mark’s gospel, to make the whole radical journey of faith and return to us, constituted then as Church, with an astonishing word that ends up evangelizing our pallid faith.

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THE CHURCH OF NOTIFICATIONS

These reflections on the import of the Vatican's Notification on the christology of Jon Sobrino represent the concerns of a theologian from the developed world about the direction in which the leaders of the Catholic Church are steering it. The hierarchy does not issue notices on the ideals which identify and distinguish their goals. Rather members of the church and members of society at large must discern these values and policies on the basis of public acts such as this Notification. This brief reflection tries to answer the question of the conception of the church that is reflected in this Notification and others like it.

I write from the perspective of Western society with prompting from the writings of the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz. This perspective situates the response; it contains no pretense of having a universal perspective. Nor should it distract from a more immediate and pressing concern that this Notification appears to be an attack on one who has spent his life dedicated to ameliorating the situation of the poor in the name of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Nothing can conceal the fact that the Notification, despite words to the contrary, aims at blunting the irruption of the poor and their urgent cry for justice. But this fact in itself raises the broader question which I want to address: in what direction is our church being led?

To answer such a large question in a short space I propose five statements, each one of which is followed by a brief commentary. Together they lead to a distressing conclusion.

1. *The Notification manifests an uncritical appreciation of the relationship between faith experience, the experience of men and women who live faithful lives within the church, and the formulas of belief that represent the object of that faith.*

This first proposition simply raises up the primitive quality or archaic character of the theology that underlies the Notification. But this suggests that the theology employed in the Notification is itself not the main issue but remains subordinated to other larger designs.

The distinction between faith as a lived reality and the formulas that try to put words on the transcendent object of Christian faith is not complicated. Ordinary Christians who have studied no theology can appreciate the difference between the faith they put into practice and the formulas that theologians design to give us a language to talk about what we believe. A critical historical and developmental approach to any and every doctrine of the church shows how it developed out of concrete historical experiences. Every Christian has experienced different theological explanations of things that Christians share together in their common Christian existence. No theologian would maintain that the formulas of faith which preserve and protect our lived faith experience have more value than that experience itself.

This means that the value of doctrines does not lie in their notional coherence or their speculative acuity but in their ability to express and intelligibly represent to the community the faith which gives grounding and substance to their actual lives. Christians look back on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to find the courage to meet the exigencies of daily life. As Metz puts it, the critical power of faith and doctrine resides in the memory of the liberating experience that they preserve. The category of memory allows the past formulas of faith to be interpreted as liberating memories and critical memories that challenge the present status quo when it oppresses freedom or dehumanizes our existence (Metz, FHS, 202-04). "The category of narrative memory prevents salvation and redemption from becoming paradoxically unhistorical" (Ibid., 211), because without a narrative experiential base behind the language, it becomes idealistic and unreal.

This fundamental insight has particular relevance for christology generally and in particular for the christology of Jon Sobrino. To approach Sobrino's christology as a set of doctrinal truths or doctrines about the person of Jesus Christ fundamentally misunderstands his writing. Once again Metz states it plainly in terms that the simplest person of

faith can appreciate: Jesus Christ is always a way, not just one whom we worship, but one who engages human beings. Following Christ is not a subsequent application, but the way into recognition of who Jesus is: “the practice of following Christ is itself a central part of christology” (Metz, FC, 39). “Christ must always be thought of in such a way that he is never merely thought of” (Ibid., 39-40). Christology expresses practical knowledge. “It is by following him that we know whom we are dealing with and who saves us” (Ibid., 40).

It follows, therefore, that christology has a narrative structure (Ibid., 40). Christology is handed down through the practices of the community, and in accounts of people following Christ. Christology is based on these narratives and leads to them. Christology portrayed in systematic argument “is continually worked out as an open invitation and introduction to following Christ, and ...through this...it retains its genuinely critical power over against church and society” (Ibid., 40).

2. Many signs suggest that the current leadership of the Catholic Church is more interested in a rigorous maintenance of its institutional forms than in stimulating a radical and creative living of gospel values.

There is no need at this point to enumerate the restrictive interventions of the Vatican over the past two decades. The list gives the impression that the repressive measures of the central authority of the church in these days is analogous to the stifling of Catholic thought in the wake of the modernist movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Much of what is often referred to as the explosive power of Vatican II was due to the fact that public theological discussion had not been allowed to keep pace with the developments in history and culture in the world for over fifty years. Metz has some reflections that suggest the actions of the Vatican reflect a policy based on fear of historical developments rather than trust in gospel values. “If the church were more radical in the gospel sense, it would probably not need to be so ‘rigorous’ in the legal sense” (F&F, 23). For example, the church would not “need compulsory celibacy to dress up a Christianity that had lost its radicalism. There would be no danger that the apocalyptic virtue of celibacy would die out; it would constantly reemerge out of the radicalism of discipleship” (Ibid., 23). The radical ideas of the gospel have to be seen as having as well relevance for the large social dilemmas of world history (Ibid., 24). Liberation theology is founded on that premise and proves its accuracy.

As the church becomes ever more deeply inculturated in non-Western nations and societies, it will automatically become more pluralistic. This must appear threatening to a central administration. But a leadership which addresses this situation out of fear with no other tools than legalistic disciplinary action ends up misrepresenting on a global scale the gospel values of Jesus Christ.

3. This leads to the question of whether the leadership of the church conceives the very church it represents more as a sect within society but on the margins of society rather than an integral part of society assuming a particular responsibility in it and for it.

The church is not a sect in terms of its size and prevalence. But the leadership of the church seems to be adapting certain attitudes and policies that are sectarian in character. Sectarianism is one way, but certainly not the predominant way nor the Catholic way to relate to society. These attitudes and policies are reflected in certain values that seem to guide its actions with the resultant loss of leverage it wields in society. The term "sectarian," therefore, characterizes certain qualities of a new presence relative to Western society that may in fact exist in tension with other decidedly non-sectarian characteristics such as the size of the church and what Metz calls its bourgeois character.

Some sectarian characteristics are these: a new stress on a more or less pure traditionalism. This means a looking backwards to the past in order to secure an identity from the past, and then a bringing of this past forward to be preserved in its ancient form of words and practices. Interpretation is discouraged; repetition as recital is encouraged; the ideal is continuity in an identical unchanging form over against a changing world. Continuity in the sense of literal sameness is good, change is bad.

Second, a sectarian church allows no self-criticism or self-critical activity on the part of its members or its intellectuals. Critical reflection on the part of theologians, in the sense of questioning and reinterpretation to preserve the past in new contexts, is considered disloyal. The result leaves no room for freedom of expression or communicative action within the church. The ideal of unity becomes reduced to uniformity and hence carries an accent on discipline. Intellectuals are not the only ones who experience this suppression of their freedom; all the people of God in the Western democratic nations experience frustration at the present time. Metz blames failing Catholic membership in

the church on the church's culture of suppression of freedom (FHS, 96-97).

This results, thirdly, in a cognitive isolation from other Christian churches and a cognitive dissonance with society. Rather than the confrontation of society at crucial points where the prophetic values of God's kingdom interrupt social and cultural behavior, one finds a disconnect, a deculturation that does not allow the church's language to even appear comprehensible within society. The point of contact is broken so that the church begins to live a culturally margined existence, not in terms of numbers and size, but in terms of its language, public ideas, and policies. Faithful members begin to be embarrassed by their church. Metz puts it this way: the church's "increasing cognitive isolation in a world which it has no more influence to define threatens to drive it into a closed sectarian attitude..." (FHS, 97). The church will not become a sect because it is small, but because of its closed theological self-understanding and the attitude and behavior of the leaders (Ibid., 98). The sectarianism shows itself in a traditionalism marked by "a growing inability or unwillingness to have new experiences and to apply them critically to a self-understanding of the church and its constitutions and documents" (Ibid., 97). Zealous and extremist polemics within the church also manifest this sectarianism: they are narrow and mean spirited. This is not following Christ.

4. If the latter point is true, it would mean that the Church's loss of credibility in society and of any impact on it represents a deliberately chosen course of action.

Most people in the developed societies today would accept the principle that no authority in society is possible without competence and experience. Too many institutions and agencies claim authority over people's lives. Few today are recognized as living up to their promises. It is difficult to find even one major institutional form in the Western world that does not appear fallible, if not corrupted, from government through judicial systems, to education and business, and on to the family itself. This is of course not the way things should be, but the facts reinforce the principle: no organization can have authority in Western societies without critical self-appropriation and freedom of discussion. The church has lost its authority because these do not exist inside the church. Authority that appears as a basis or "principle of inequality and subordination, almost automatically loses social plausibility" (Metz,

FHS, 40). To regain its authority the church must gain competence, and this requires religious and some form of democratic social praxis, not sheer external control.

With this cultural distance, cognitive dissonance, and eccentricity of the church's doctrinal expression and public witness, as distinct from substantial content, other institutions are filling the void. The loss of the public relevance of Christian spirituality creates a vacuum that is being filled by modern literature and poetry, according to Metz. In other words, other forms of literature are deprivatizing the problems of common human existence and providing a public language to engage them (IW, 127-27). For example, it used to be that the priest was the authority for managing death and dying; today authority in these matters belongs to the doctors. On a more banal level, popular psychology and self-help spiritual literature command more attention for the discernment of the meaning of human life than the public message of the church. These observations are not the result of a deep analysis: for most they are self-evident observations. Which leads implicitly to the conclusion that the policy of the leadership of the church seems to be deliberate.

5. There must be a better way for the church to be church in a modern or post-modern social and cultural situation. The answer lies in the freedom of the human spirit that is promised by the gospel of Jesus Christ and a church that, by honoring and mediating that the dignity and critical freedom of human beings, gains purchase on dehumanizing institutions of society that deny them.

I use the words of Metz to suggest how the church can gain authority in the world. Other spheres of human discourse do offer public criticism of society. Science can rationalize public policy, but it cannot decide the value of its goals. Philosophy too can criticize public policy as ideology when it has no precedent or reason other than power behind it (IW, 132-33). But in the end, effective criticism of society must have some institutional backing in the form of a party or an institution. Institutions which can proffer such critique "must in themselves ensure freedom and make it possible. They must not be opposed to enlightenment and enquiry. In them the public itself must be able to exercise a critical function" (Ibid., 134). For church to be such critical institution of society requires "the creation of a critical public within the church" which will not succumb to the normal path of least resistance taken by most institutions. There will always be a tension between

eschatological truth and freedom and what can be achieved in the church. But to strive for a church in which there is no friction but only uniform obedience in opinion and practice is to promote the peace of a graveyard (ibid., 135).

These reflections lead to the following conclusions. The theology employed by the Vatican in this Notification is embarrassing to Catholics. A public document of the Roman Catholic Church approved by the Pope claiming a fetus with a beatific vision is simply bizarre. More disturbing is the use of spiritual power to discredit one of the church's most faithful and productive theologians; this is a religious disgrace. But the most ominous of developments here is the sectarian direction in which the church is being directed by its leaders. The deeper values of the Church of Notifications are far from those of the gospels.

Jean RICHARD

Jean Richard is a theologian from the developed world who believes that she or he needs a pseudonym in order to discuss these matters in a Church of Notifications.

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Which Jesus Does the Church Believe In?

I want to begin with some of Jon Sobrino's thoughts that have helped me respond to a basic concern of mine: Which Jesus do I really believe in, and which Jesus does the Church believe in? I write with deep solidarity and gratitude for Jon Sobrino.

He tells us, "The temptation we hope to avoid ... is the mistake of trying to broach the problem of Christ's divinity *directly*. Such an approach would imply that we already knew enough about the nature of divinity and could apply that knowledge to Jesus himself" (p. 60). *We have to begin with the man Jesus and then reflect on his divinity*. The point of departure for Christology cannot be the Council of Chalcedon, but rather the historical Jesus in order to "dispel any illusion that the mere repetition of some dogma gives us access to the reality of Christ" (p. 4). "But it would be a serious mistake, fraught with baneful hermeneutic consequences, to use Jesus' activity in order to prove his divinity in apologetics" (p. 50).

We can add some other basic ideas: "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, not himself" (Rahner)... "Jesus did not talk simply about 'God' but about the 'Kingdom of God'" (p. 41). "Sin is not seen simply as saying no to God but as saying no to the Kingdom of God" (p. 51). "Any initial attempt to approach the historical Jesus must be done from the standpoint of the Kingdom of God" (p. 60). "After Jesus' resurrection we find Christian faith initiating a theological movement in which it formulated certain basic assertions. Its most basic assertion was that the man Jesus of Nazareth, who died a failure on the cross and abandoned by God, is really and truly the Son of God" (p. 200).

These quotations (and some I will use later) are taken from Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978. I believe it is one of his earliest books. It was this book that, in the 1970s, first helped me to understand *the spirit and charism of Jon Sobrino*.

The Great Heresy that Dominates the Church Today is Not Believing in the Full Humanity of the Historical Jesus

About 400 years passed between the death of the historical Jesus (30) and the defining of Christological dogma in the first four ecumenical councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). The task now is to recover the memory of the historical Jesus during all that time. It is a search that goes against the current because the dominate tendency in the Church is to begin with the dogmatic definition of Jesus established by these four councils. The Church, little by little, has forgotten the Jesus of history, ceasing to be the disciple of Jesus, and concentrating its interest in the defense of orthodoxy against heresy. Throughout this pathway of 400 years, so complex and contradictory, the doubt arises that—perhaps—the *first four ecumenical councils* of the 4th and 5th centuries have succeeded in replacing the *four Gospels*. If we are Jesus' disciples, we can only be disciples of the historical Jesus. We believe and confess the Christological dogma, but no one defines himself or herself as a "disciple of dogma."

There are two theological challenges that permit us to discern in which Jesus we believe: the human self-awareness of Jesus and the faith of Jesus.

The Human Self-Awareness of Jesus

I follow Jon Sobrino's thought because it has provided me spiritual and theological tools for my personal search for knowing in which Jesus I believe. My job now is to remember these tools in order to continue this discernment.

Jon tells us: "Traditional theology started off from the *dogmatic* supposition of Jesus' personal union with the eternal Logos. This union had to be an object of awareness in the human condition of Jesus, and so the man Jesus was aware that he was the Son of God in the strict, metaphysical sense of the term" (p. 67).

According to Jon Sobrino, there is no dogmatic and direct Father-Son awareness, but rather a total confidence or trust of Jesus in the Father, and unconditional obedience to the will of the Father. This is not particular to Jesus. What is particular to Jesus is the *concentration of his whole life as trust and obedience*. Jesus prays because his life and mission depend on the Father. For this reason, he prays in the most difficult moments of his life.

In *dogmatic theology* "it is customary to say that Jesus had divine

knowledge because he was united to the divine person of the Logos; and that he also had three kinds of human knowledge—the kind of knowledge acquired normally, infused knowledge, and the beatific vision” (p. 74). The Gospels give no reason to admit the last two.

The Faith of Jesus

We continue to follow the thought of Jon Sobrino in order to reaffirm our search for the Jesus in which we believe. Jon reminds us that an interpretation of the four Gospels that refuses to recognize *the faith of Jesus* not only negates his full historicity, but ignores the most profound mystery of his person: his faith. Faith was Jesus’ mode of existence. The story of Jesus is the story of the faith of Jesus. Jesus does not relate to his Father through a permanent beatific vision, but through a life of faith, with all of the obscurity, uncertainty, and risk that that this involves.

Jesus’ faith is found not only in his relationship to the Father, but also with his relationship to the Kingdom of God. By not reading the Gospels from the optic of Jesus’ faith, we do not understand the demands of faith that Jesus makes upon his disciples. Faith does not signify possession of God and God’s Kingdom, but rather the constant and believing search for the Kingdom of God. This search is intimately related to Jesus’ temptations and ignorance. Jesus was tempted, but it was his faith that permitted him to overcome these temptations. Jesus also was ignorant of many things, as any human being is. The faith of Jesus was strengthened in the temptations and in the human condition of not knowing everything.

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Between elegies and heresies

*I hear confusing
and enigmatic voices
I need to decipher...
Some say I am a heretic and blasphemous;
others affirm I have seen the face of God.*
León Felipe

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are acutely aware of the *radical historicity* and *contingency* of all crucial affairs of human existence, including theology as critical reflection on human religiosity. It is no longer possible to presuppose the existence of a universal inquisitive rational faculty, suitable for every time and space. Neither can one propose a universal Christian theology valid in every historical period and geographical area. The historicity of rationality, in its distinct manifestations, and of religiosity, in its plural doctrinal, liturgical, and institutional expressions, has become irrefutable. This obviously includes also theological production as a creative effort of human intelligence and imagination to understand its relation with the sacred, nature, and society. To think otherwise, taking refuge in the alleged infallibility of the Sacred Scriptures or of the teachings of the magisterium, precipitates an idolatrous confusion between the divine and the human words.

This entails the need to admit that every articulation of religious faith is a *human construction*, with its contingent processes of birth, development, change, and, at times, decline. There is no *theologia perennis*. Our emphasis should not lie on the negative dimension of this new perception, as so frequently is feared by some dogmatic hierarchies. What is genuinely new and thrilling is the possibility of designing new manifestations of the intelligence of faith, along with its exciting challenges

of reconstructing its perennial dialogue with human cultures. To think otherwise would lead ecclesiastical authorities into the fateful, regrettable, and today futile, persecution of creative and innovative theologians, as it happened so many times in the twentieth century, from Alfred Loisy and Teilhard de Chardin to Hans Küng, Leonardo Boff, Jacques Dupuis, and more recently Jon Sobrino. As well as repressive, it would be a project that, in these times liberated from the yoke of the hierarchical *imprimatur*, is fated to failure.

But, then, one must also admit the *irreducible plurality of theologies*. The Roman Curia might decree their negation, with authoritarian edicts such as *Dominus Iesus* (2000), and evangelical fundamentalism might proclaim the perpetual immutability of its notorious doctrinal principles; however, judging by the fragmentation, the shattering glass, of theological intellectual discourse, the wise Galileo's phrase may once again be remembered and reiterated: *eppur si muove*. The main issue at stake is not the pallid tolerance of the postmodern perception of the kaleidoscopic multiplicity in human cultures and rationalities. What is truly required for a genuinely theological creativity is the recognition and joy in face of the intellectual wealth this polyphony entails. It is not only the amplitude of themes and topics, but, above all else, the variety of perspectives and sites of enunciation and analysis. This is something we have learned from the vigorous emergence of liberation theologies in their multiple dimensions: Latin American, feminist, womanist, mujerista, Afro-American, Indigenous, third world, gay, and queer. It is a happy festival and carnival of the intelligence of faith.

This does not mean that chaos reigns inexorable in theology. But, indeed, it demands a remarkably paradoxical emphasis both on its *contextual* and *ecumenical* attributes. On the one hand, every human reflection, theology inclusive, flourishes from very particular cultural roots, from the accents and nuances marked by the sufferings and hopes of particular peoples who travail to forge their own path through history. Every theology arises and develops in a concrete historical, social, and cultural context. On the other hand, this contextuality should not legitimize theological isolationism, which frequently leads merely to superficiality and mediocrity. On the contrary, it requires a profound ecumenical and international dialogue that enriches all those who participate in it with honesty, depth, and intensity. Each theological path is, perhaps, a legitimate and valuable contribution to the living out and reflection of faith. It may also carry over deficiencies, prejudices, and shortsightedness, which might be mitigated by comparatively confronting it with

other theological perspectives. Critical creativity requires a worldwide ecumenical dialogue, the attentive hearing of the multiple theological voices and impressive polyphony of the Christian ecumene.

Theology, as well as so many other expressions of human creativity, presently experiences a dramatic process of *intellectual and spiritual decolonization*. There is no sense anymore in translating, adopting, and adapting the latest European or North American theological trend. The last decades of the twentieth century announced the dawn of a genuine and intense international theological critical dialogue. This is part of a general process in the ecumenical world: the recognition and appreciation of the theologies that bring in their textual physiognomy the marks of a specific cultural history of a people. What, after all, are the Judeo-Christian sacred scriptures, but a collection of stories narrating the adventures of faith of a particular and very vulnerable people at the margins of the political and economic history of powerful and expansive empires? The Bible is a set of narratives from and about some marginal, despised, captive, persecuted, and even crucified communities, classified as “barbarians” according to the aristocratic Greco-Roman social system, who, springing from their faith in the divine grace, boldly dare to change human history and destiny.

This involves a displacement of the tortuous traditional assessment about *orthodoxy and heresy*. A significant portion of the Christian doctrinal history is a gloomy tale of censorships, condemnations, and anathemas, so often followed by tragic sentences to those found guilty of heterodoxy. Was it not the same Saint Augustine, who so exquisitely stirs our spirits in his *Confessions*, the one who, as bishop of Hippo, demands and justifies the imperial repression of Donatists and Pelagians? Many novice students of theology find themselves astonished when they learn that the great fourth century Trinitarian disputes revolved in great part about the famous iota that differentiates *homoiousos* from *homoousios*, with severe penalties enacted against the losers in those theological debates. And now other ecclesiastical authorities, in their attempt to silence liberation theologians like Jon Sobrino, pretend to cloister Christology in the anachronic language of the *communicatio idiomatum*! To those who share this mentality, I recommend Jorge Luis Borges’s delightful short story, “The theologians,” an excellent example of the great Argentinean brilliant irony, as exquisite as Erasmus’ famous and sarcastic satire about dogmatic controversies, *In praise of folly*.

It is ironic, but rather illustrative, that Tertullian, the author of one of the fiercest attacks against heresies (*Liber de praescriptione haereti-*

corum c. 200 A.D.), was himself eventually censored as a heretic (due to his espousal of Montanism). Without necessarily admitting the postmodern inference that truth is only a well-disguised fiction, it is doubtless that the history of theology must dispense with the classical anathemas and ecclesiastical repressions. Baruch Spinoza's famous dictum is right on target: "The true enemies of Christ are those who persecute the righteous and lovers of justice only because they disagree and do not share their same religious dogmas." Due to their doctrinal divergences, Jan Hus in 1415, Girolamo Savonarola in 1498, Miguel Serveto in 1553, and Giordano Bruno in 1600, suffered atrocious deaths at the stakes of dogmatic inquisitions. They are emblematic victims of many other lives sacrificed in the tabernacles of intransigent orthodoxy.

Theology is a *rigorous and transdisciplinary intellectual task*. It has never been, it cannot be, nor will it ever be an isolated island. It has historically emerged from two sources whose convergence has always been risky: religious piety and contemporary conceptual systems. The monasteries, with their deep liturgical devotion, and the universities, with their commitment to intellectual rigor, were, in the Middle Ages, the institutions that cherished the renaissance of theological creativity. Karl Barth, a critic of the religious sterility of modern liberal theology, yet insists, in the introduction to his *Church Dogmatics*, on the academic character of theological thought, on its entitlement as a science, and on the place of theology among the diverse intellectual disciplines of modern universities. Barth's intent is, on the one hand, to challenge the academic monopoly claimed by secular disciplines, and, on the other hand, to avoid the decline of theology into a mediocre replication of archaic dogmatic formulas.

The conceptual articulations of *liberation theology* do not perish, they modify, and change. Despite the anxieties of certain hierarchies who aspire to impose fruitless models of dogmatic restoration, the correlation between Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God, human redemption, and historical liberation, rediscovered through so much travails and sacrifices, is not to be renounced or abdicated. The so much heralded predictions of the demise of liberation theology are premature and self-interested. Rather, what happens is a complex diversification of themes and perspectives that do not renounce the basic theological and biblical liberationist hermeneutics. A prominent example: at the end of the twentieth century, in the impoverished Nicaragua, Jorge Pixley published *The resurrection of Jesus, the Christ* (1997), an exemplary work for its methodological intention of binding together the new

critical studies on Jesus (John Dominic Crossan, “Jesus Seminar”), the renewed interest in the analysis of the extra-canonical gospels, and the hermeneutical reflection coming from Latin American liberation theology to develop a comprehensive vision of the neo-testamentary theme of resurrection as a matrix of crucial metaphors for emancipatory and transformative action. Certainly, the key idea of the “preferential option for the poor” has been fragmented, in the wake of the recognition of the particular identities of repressed communities; this tendency, however, has resulted in the critical strengthening of the liberationist perspective, rather than in its elimination.

In fact, the three original sources of liberation theology experience nowadays a process of strengthening: 1) the tenacious persistence of poverty and socio-economic inequality, increased by neo-liberal globalization, 2) the resistance of the excluded and impoverished communities, who demand an alternate and distinct social order, 3) the recovery of the challenging prophetic and evangelical core of the biblical scriptures and the Christian faith. Even in Pentecostal ecclesiastical circles, for so long unconcerned with social and political conflicts, signs of a liberationist reconfiguration of their theology are gaining visibility and potentiality.

It is neither a totally new or original intuition. The Cuban José Martí already genially glimpsed it, in the nineteenth century: “It is always the humble people, the barefooted, the defenseless, and the fishermen, who, when facing iniquity, get together and allow to fly, with its luminous silver wings, the Gospel! The truth always reveals itself more clearly to the poor and those who suffer!”

The ecclesiastical curiae tend to like elegies. I confess to prefer the heresies...

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Jesus, constituted Son of God by the resurrection (Rom 1,4)

Introduction

For some 16 centuries now, the Church has tended to give more importance to the divinity of Christ than to his humanity. In some cases it has actually fallen into the *de facto* heresy of “monophysitism”, which obscures and almost prescind from Jesus’ humanity by placing the major emphasis on his divinity.

Many people think that Jesus was a kind of superman, possessed of special powers that he could put to use in the different situations of his life. Thus Jesus would not have been a human being like us; he would not have had to go through a learning process and experience temptations and human limitations. Rather, right from his infancy he would have been seen to possess superior powers. This tendency to emphasize Jesus’ divinity is discernible starting from the last years of the first century. The first letter of John (first in enumeration, but actually the last of the three to be written) bids the reader to beware of those who think that the flesh and the death of Jesus were only apparent: “*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. Rather, this is the spirit of the antichrist*” (1 John 4,2-3; see also 1,1-4).

Some apocryphal gospels, which could not be read publicly in the Christian assemblies, adopted this tendency and narrated incredible stories of Jesus’ infancy. For example, the Arabic Gospel relates the following: “*Now, when the Lord Jesus had completed seven years from His birth, on a certain day He was occupied with boys of His own age. For they were playing*

among clay, from which they were making images of asses, oxen, birds, and other animals; and each one, boasting of his skill, was praising his own work. Then the Lord Jesus said to the boys: 'The images that I have made I will order to walk.'

The boys asked Him whether then he was the son of the Creator; and the Lord Jesus bade the clay figures to walk. And they immediately began to leap; and then, when He had given them leave, they again stood still. And He had made figures of birds and sparrows, which flew when He told them to fly, and stood still when He told them to stand, and ate and drank when He banded them food and drink. After the boys had gone away and told this to their parents, their fathers said to them: My sons, take care not to keep company with him again, for he is a wizard: flee from him, therefore, and avoid him, and do not play with him again after this." (Arabic Gospel 36, 1-2)

The intimate union of divinity and humanity in Christ has always been difficult to accept. Some taught that if Jesus was really man, then he could not be God. Such was the teaching of Arius (4th century), who claimed that Christ was inferior to God. Others, such as the Docetists, taught that if Jesus was really God, then he could not be truly man, similar to us in all things except sin (cf. Heb 4,15).

What takes place in Jesus is the union, not the mere mixing together, of humanity and divinity. That has been the faith of the Church since the times of St Ignatius of Antioch (2nd century). It was expressed with the formula: Christ is true God and true man. The Word of God became incarnate, and that means the Word took on all the potentialities and limitations proper to human beings; he did so to reveal to us the mysteries of God and to offer us salvation. In his humanity God makes himself present. Thus Christ is God's face turned towards humankind and at the same time is the face of humankind turned towards God. That is what makes it possible for Christ to be the mediator, the bridge between God and human beings, the one who reconciles us with the Father, the one who gives the Holy Spirit, the Strength and the Wisdom of God.

Discovering the humanity of Jesus and what it presupposes requires of us serious reflection, since the traditional tendency has been to recognize Jesus primarily as God and to diminish the significance of his humanity. This especially happens when many human properties do not seem to pertain to Jesus. For example, some would deny Jesus the property of historicity: they would claim that Jesus did not experience simply a biological process, but also had the actual consciousness and being of the "incarnate Son of God", not as God, but as Son of *God*

incarnate. In order to understand this, let us begin with the process of the disciples' faith in Jesus, the Christ.

1. The resurrection of Jesus as the historical and theological beginning of faith in Jesus

The faith of the disciples, which is transmitted to us through the New Testament writings, became fully possible for them only after the resurrection. That does not mean that it was simply a post-Easter invention of theirs and had no relation with the historical Jesus. Indeed, the disciples would not have been able to accept the Christological faith in Jesus as Son of God if there had not been a clear basis for it in their experience of the pre-Easter Jesus.

Matthew's gospel has two passages which indicate that the disciples, even before Easter, had a clearly Christological faith (Mat 4,33; 16,16), though these passages perhaps respond more to theological motives of the evangelist than they do to historical precision. Both texts in Matthew contain a confession that Christ is the Son of God, but the parallel passages of Mark's gospel are quite different. First, Mark 6,52 tell us that the disciples did not even understand the saying about the loaves and were left dumbfounded; and second, Mark 8,29 cites Peter's confession as being simply "*You are the Messiah*". Nowadays all scholars recognize that Mark's version is the one that sticks closest to historical truth.

Through the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the disciples came to accept in faith that the Crucified One had been exalted and had been constituted Son of God, Messiah, Savior. The resurrection is the historical and theological beginning of the disciples' faith in Jesus.

There are texts that must be read with great care in order to discover the revelation of this process of exaltation. We will examine two of them.

1. In the initial greeting of the letter to the Romans, Paul writes: "*The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and constituted Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Rom 1,3-4). For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the culminating point of his process as Savior and Son of God. In the resurrection he was constituted "Son of God in power". He reached the ultimate point of his being as savior

of humanity and therefore of his being as mediator between God and humanity. And if Jesus is mediator by his incarnation, by his being the Son of God incarnate, then being “*designated Son of God in power*” means that he was designated Son of God as “*Word of God incarnate*”. This process touches the very being of Christ: not the divine being separated from his humanity, but his being as God incarnate, his being as “*God and man*”.

Some of the Church Fathers, such as St John Chrysostom, thought that the Greek word for “constituted” should rather be understood as “revealed” (in the sense of making known) or “predestined” (in the sense of God’s determination), as is done in the Latin Vulgate version. But neither of those senses is precise; the correct understanding is “constituted” (in the sense of his being Messiah and Savior).

2. Another text is found in the gospel of Luke (2,52): “*Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man*”. This verse forms part of the infancy narrative, in which Luke makes an initial presentation of Christ. More specifically, it comes right after the passage that tells of how the young Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, where he was found among the doctors of the law. Jesus astounded with his wisdom those who were listening to him (v. 47). Jesus there says that his father is not Joseph, but God, whose business he was attending to (v. 49). In Luke’s portrayal Jesus possesses a wisdom far beyond his age and is dedicated to a mission that neither Mary nor Joseph can understand at that moment. Verse 52 contrasts with the preceding ones, because it makes Jesus appear so human that he must grow, that is, he must go through a process of physiological development and of gradual maturing of his gifts before God and before other people. This process touches the deepest reaches of Jesus’ being, his being as the Word incarnate: “*before God and man*” (v. 52). It is not a question of a progressive manifestation of Jesus, but of an integral growth that encompasses his very being as God incarnate. We can affirm that Jesus grew, progressed, and advanced in an integral way. Jesus’ process of becoming the Son of God incarnate consists in this: in the resurrection he placed all the potentialities of his human nature at the service of his being Son of God; thus did he assume them and reach his human-divine fullness. In order to be able to explain this a little better, let us examine the very earliest Christology.

2. Exaltation Christology: the earliest of all

We cannot treat extensively the question of primitive Christology, that which developed earliest in the first Christian communities. To do so would require a much larger space than we have available. Still, it is necessary to treat this matter in order to find the point of union between our faith and Jesus, and so be faithful to his project. As we said above, it was only after the resurrection that the first Christians had a Christological faith in Jesus, but this faith had its grounding in the historical Jesus. Many elements that we find explicit in the post-Easter stage were already found in germ in the pre-Easter Jesus. We cannot say, as did Bultmann, that between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus there is an insurmountable wall or gaping abyss. The post-Easter faith of the disciples was founded on the experience they had had as they walked with Jesus in Galilee and in Jerusalem.

Some authors hold that the earliest Christology is that of an *exaltation without the final coming (parousia)*. It would be explained this way: through the resurrection Jesus has been justified by God after his death on the cross, and he lives now with God; no glorious return is to be expected. Authors who argue this way, such as J. A. T. Robinson, want to find in the text of Acts 3,20-21 a trace of this most ancient Christology. Others, such as F. Hahn, interpret the title *Maramatha* (Come, Lord) in the sense of a Christology of hiddenness, that is, Christ is hidden in God and will manifest himself on the day of his glorious coming. Anglican scholars tend to think in terms of an exaltation that does not expect a glorious coming of the exalted Jesus. They support themselves with the text of Mark 14,62 and affirm that, because of its allusion to Psalm 110,1 and Daniel 7,13, it does not contain the idea of Jesus' coming from heaven, but only the idea of his justification by God and his elevation to God's right hand. The majority of Catholic scholars, including R. Schnackenburg, hold that the primitive Christian community needed to bear witness before the Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and that he was therefore constituted such in the resurrection, as appears in Acts 2,36. The glorious coming of Jesus, as Messiah and as Son of Man, is simply the necessary consequence of his exaltation, so that Jesus might appear before the entire world as Savior and Judge.

Studies made of the New Testament conclude that the earliest Christology affirmed that Christ was exalted by God in his resurrection and could therefore send the Holy Spirit to the members of the

community, the people of the Messiah Jesus, who awaited his glorious return. They support their arguments by appealing especially to two enthronement psalms: a) Psalm 110,1: *“The Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies a footstool’*”; and b) Psalm 2,7: *“You are my son, today I have begotten you”*. If it could be said of the kings of Israel that Yahweh seats them at his right hand, and if that means that they thereby have power from God himself and have been begotten as sons of God on the day of their coronation, then how much more justifiably can the same be said of Jesus, who upon being resurrected has been seated at God’s right hand and has been begotten by God as Son of God with power and has reached his culminating point as Word of God incarnate! Behind this “exaltation Christology” is full acceptance of the process that Jesus followed, starting from his pre-Easter life, in order to reach in his paschal event the fullness of his being as Son of God incarnate. But is it legitimate to pass from the plane of the disciples’ faith to the ontological plane of Jesus’ nature? I believe it is. Let us examine the reasoning involved:

I. Human beings, by the fact of being contingent and being creatures, do not possess the perfection of being; rather, they grow gradually and develop themselves. The human potentialities that they possess are not fully developed from the beginning, but unfold themselves little by little. This is what may be called “being historical”. Every human being is historical; he or she has a beginning, and tends towards a peak of maturity. This historical quality is not only proper to each individual human being, but is also characteristic of humankind as a whole. The different peoples are historical, because they also have capacities that they gradually develop to the degree that they mature as peoples. Being historical is a necessary consequence of our being creatures.

God has taken this characteristic into account, and to carry out his plan of redemption he reveals himself within the history of the peoples, and he saves them through historical events.

II. The faith of Israel is a historical faith. God enters into human history in order to make it a history of salvation. God saves through historical events that are the expression of his salvation, as well as the means for bringing it about. Thus it is that Israel’s creeds are professions of faith in God’s salvific intervention in history – a good example is Deuteronomy 26,5-11. Therefore, the Israelite professions of faith are confessions not of abstract truths, but of events in which Israel recognizes the saving strength of God.

The faith of the disciples is based on historical events, and therefore on the experience they had of Jesus during his life in Galilee and Jerusalem before Easter. It is inconceivable that their post-Easter faith had no historical foundation. If their faith speaks of the process that culminated in Christ's exaltation in the resurrection, it is because they were already witnesses of that process from before the resurrection.

3. The process of Jesus in becoming Son of God Incarnate

III. The Word of God became man. He entered into history, he became history. Therefore he accepted the historical character of all humans and all peoples. This means that he entered into a process of growing and maturing in his own human-divine being. The divinity of Christ cannot be separated from his humanity. There is a distinction between them, but not a separation. We cannot say that there are frontiers between the human and the divine in Christ. His actions are divine-human. All of them involve his being both God and man, his being God incarnate.

Thus Christ discovered little by little the path of his mission. His life cannot be compared to a theater script in which the actor already knows the outcome of the work, but only awaits the opportune moment to pronounce the phrases or perform the actions that are assigned to him. Christ took his incarnation seriously. Thus, if the resurrection is the culminating point of his life as Savior and Messiah, then we can affirm that it is the climax of the same process that began the moment he entered into human history and became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. From that point on he undertook the process of growth and maturation that culminated in his exaltation in the resurrection. According to scripture scholar Senén Vidal, we can find in the ministry of Jesus three distinct life projects, since he had to keep changing constantly in order to take account of the different circumstances that presented themselves.

4. The process of Jesus and our following him

This process that Jesus experienced has implications for our following of Christ. We find revealed in Jesus not only the Son of God, but also the way for becoming sons and daughters of God. To become children of God we need to travel the way of Jesus, we have to become his followers. As L. Boff states, "following Christ means carrying

on his work, pursuing his cause, obtaining his fullness". We need to learn from his experience and accept his project in order to give it ever more concrete form in specific historical projects, which are of course contingent and tentative and must take much into account the personal and social context in which we live. These provisional projects in no way exhaust the great Project of God's Kingdom, which is always in the future and always far grander and more majestic than our own projects. It is precisely for that reason that hope is a characteristic of Jesus' followers. Full confidence must be placed in the Father and in Christ, Lords of the Kingdom. As Archbishop Romero used to say, we are not the architects, but only the masons. That should give us a great sense of relief, but also great strength in following Christ in the construction of the Kingdom.

Conclusion

Jesus, the incarnate Word, is like us in all things except sin (Heb 4,15 and Sunday preface VII). He is therefore like us in being historical, in the process that he followed during his life in becoming Son of God incarnate. In the resurrection he managed to put all his human abilities at the service of his being Son of God. In the resurrection he became the Reign of God in Person (*autobasileia tou Theou*, in the words of Origen).

Like Jesus, we also undergo a process in our faith. By that process we continually grow in our being as disciples and in our commitment, which grows ever deeper. Living the process as Jesus did makes us his followers; it makes us follow after him, through the way of the cross all the way to the resurrection. By following in this way, we also continually place our human abilities at the service of God's Project.

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The Hidden Christs Christology (-ies) from the Excluded Ones

Who is Jesus Christ? The Lord, our brother, the master, the rabbi, the founder of a religion, friend of prostitutes and publicans, the Eternal High Priest, a guru, the Savior, a wise man, a servant, the liberator? There are many images of him. If the images are so diverse, can Christology possibly be only one? Is there only one way of reflecting about the significance of Jesus for Christian faith and of communicating it to believers and non-believers? Shouldn't we rather think about a plurality of Christologies, that is, different ways to think and talk about Jesus, depending on our own contexts and personal experiences?

Plurality of experiences with Christ, pluralism of Christologies

In theology's history, Christology has been treated as being only one. The different images of Jesus and the diverse experiences with him were considered as variations of a sole theme: The Son of God made flesh, killed, and resurrected, Savior of humankind. One did not worry about the fact that this central theme of Christology already contained a number of diverse Christologies. Moreover, theology tried to harmonize this main theme with all of the New Testament's testimonies about Jesus, neglecting the differences between each of these testimonies and hiding the fact that none of them coincides exactly with the dogmatic definitions formulated by the Christological Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries.

Present day Christological studies present a pluralism miles apart from this. First, the critical study of New Testament texts introduces us to the figure of a Jesus with many faces who—like every human

being—cannot be described by only one or two words. We meet a Jesus who is a Jew through and through and at the same time criticizes his own religion's authorities. He is a very Galilean Jesus, a peasant and artisan, who seeks religious-political confrontation in the Capital. He is a very tender Jesus, joyful and humorous, who, at the same time, may be hard, strict, and demanding. This figure of Jesus does not fit into the rigid and simplistic schemes of a sole Christology. What is more, the testimonies of the different New Testament authors *about* Jesus also are multiple. Within the canon of the sacred writings, we are already able to find a plurality of Christologies, in some cases irreconcilably diverse.

Second, at present, Christology emphasizes the importance of perspective and context in the process of reflection on Jesus. If Christology describes the meaning of a historical person for today's world and at the same time the real and present experience with the Risen One, reflections will necessarily differ according to the place and perspective of the people who develop and construct these reflections.

These considerations not only affirm the importance of a plurality of images of Jesus, but also the importance of a plurality of Christologies, understood as the systematization and the communication of the reflections on Jesus. Theological science is not done independently of the individual characteristics of the person who proposes it, and it is characterized by the circumstances of the person's context. No human being is able to systematize all the experiences with Jesus throughout history and throughout the world. Everyone will always choose some aspects and leave out others. Therefore, every Christological reflection is selective and cannot be universal.

Plurality must be considered the base of every Christology, because it reflects on a real historical person, multifaceted and plural, testified to by different authors, in different ways and in different circumstances, and recognized and experienced by different and diverse subjects throughout history up until the present. By asserting plurality, we do not hide the true nature of Jesus. On the contrary, this pluralism reveals the multiple faces that he has had and has even now for the different people who have built a relationship with him.

Of course, this plurality is not arbitrary. It is a qualified plurality, because it must go back to the historical experience of Jesus of Nazareth, the encounter he had with the people of his time and context, and his message of the Kingdom of God and the preference

of God for the poor. The historical memory of Jesus must prevent the plurality of Christologies from becoming a game of personal and political interests. However, it demands that we construct a spectrum of plural Christologies that reflect on the meaning of the historical person of Jesus in relation to the specific situations of poverty, injustice, and exclusion in our present world.

Incarnation of the Word Implies the Contextualization of Christology

Jesus of Nazareth was a Palestinian Jew, a peasant in origin who worked as a laborer, possibly a day laborer. He lived in certain places, next to certain people at a certain time two thousand years ago. He was male. Of this specific historical person it is said in Christology, and already in the New Testament, that “the Word was made flesh.” Through the incarnation, God became a specific person, a body in history. This Christological affirmation contains a deep risk. Although nobody will affirm that God is Jewish or Palestinian, or a day laborer or a peasant, we have accustomed ourselves to believe God is male. Yet, these affirmations belong to the same level of language: God is as much male as he/she is a Palestinian day laborer. Only the historical form into which God incarnated himself/herself, the human person who has been recognized Son of God, possessed these attributes. While the incarnated Word brought us in contact with God and provided us with a real idea about the relationship of God with humanity, it introduced us to a very specific human form who is different from God. Although God became male, the male is not God.

This incarnation of the Word, accomplished in a concrete and specific way at one particular time for the benefit of everyone in the history of human life, must serve as a model for the concretization of this message, according to the many diverse circumstances of humankind. Jesus enunciated a contextualized message, and his words, along with the good news about him, need to be contextualized again in each place and in every time. The active memory of Jesus is carried out through the continuous work of deconstruction of what was preached about Jesus until yesterday, and of the construction of a new message, corresponding to our present, but faithful to message that we have received. This work is a process of “trial and error”¹ in which we must try to remain as faithful as possible to two elements: we must be faithful to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and we must be faithful to the specific contexts in which we live.

The place from which a Christology is developed exerts a decisive influence on its contents. The place in which a person is located determines the perspective that he or she will have on reality. Just as reality is different from one place to another, Christ is also different when he is seen from one place or another. Christ is different in a temple or in a factory, in a hospital or in a brothel, in a slum or in a mine, in the forest or in the capital. Although the historical memory of the person of Nazareth is one, within one place or another, different facets of his personality will appear, and some of his words will acquire more or less importance and take on different meanings. Still more, the encounter with the Risen One, the experience of the present and real Christ, will be lived differently—in a unique and real way—in every place.

Therefore, every place will originate its own Christology. We should accept this pluralist principle and we should deny the possibility that only one singular truth constructed from one singular place can exist. The European conviction of possessing the philosophical and epistemological means to detect and to communicate universal truths is a temptation that is born of the peculiar European context through the 19th century. Universalism is a myth and a typically European temptation, born also of a context and a history, and it cannot demand general validity for all places and times. After all, Jesus was not European, nor did he ever step on the ground of that continent. He was born in Asia and he died there.

There are privileged places for Christ. He was born—according to the testimony of Saint Luke—outside of a forgotten village and among the shepherds of the field. He lived—according to the testimony of Saint Matthew—the life of migrants and refugees, between Asia and Africa. His land, Galilee, was a province detested by the pride of the “righteous ones” of the capital, and exploited by the great estate owners, the Romans, and the customs officers of the Temple and the State. He died outside of the city, on the cross of the damned ones, between a pair of criminals. If these were the privileged places of the encounter with him in his own time, it will be important for us to look for the privileged places of today. It will not be an easy task—although it is an essential task—to avoid falling either into the relativism of Christologies or into the temptation to consider that one’s own place is the only suitable or adequate place for Christology.

The Encounter with the Living Christ: Body to Body

The Word was made flesh. It is crucial that we understand this phrase in all its reach. The Word did not become a spirit disguised as a body, but was incarnated as a human body with all of its functions and attributes. God made himself/herself a human body. Because of this, the domination and exploitation of human bodies by other bodies must be considered an offense against God, because God himself/herself has lived as a human body. The contempt of the human body in general and the humiliation of certain bodies because of some of the physical characteristics they possess offends the God-made-human-body in Jesus Christ. When becoming human flesh, God united himself/herself to every human body.²

The bodies of men and woman can therefore be a place of encounter with God. My own flesh, the one that I experience every day, with pains and sorrows, with joys and pleasures, this is the flesh united to God in the incarnation. This experience of God is open for all people of the human race. Each person can be related to Christ through his or her own body. This is the reason why the experience of Christ of each human being will be very individual, very personal, very specific, and therefore very plural. Christologies will also be plural because they also depend on the body of the person who enunciates them. The Christology of a mutilated and disabled body: different. The Christology of a white woman, middle-class and academic: different. The Christology of a marginalized and exploited man: different. The Christology of an indigenous woman deeply rooted in the interchange with nature: different.

Therefore, spirituality is something very corporal. If we can find Christ through our bodies, we will also celebrate him with our bodies. This is, after all, what Jesus himself did in his own body. To dance, to eat, to drink, to feel, to see, to hear, and to touch and feel one another are corporal experiences that can be sacraments of the encounter with Christ. This God-made-human-body relates himself/herself to us through our weak and often abused bodies. In this way, he/she lets us participate in life in abundance, which has been promised to us and—through Jesus—is already a reality.

We can encounter Jesus in a very corporal, bodily way. He can be experienced body to body. The Risen One is a corporal being, of whom the Gospels relate to us that he ate and let himself be touched by his

friends. Paul describes the body of the resurrected ones as “a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44), surpassing the dichotomizing anthropology of his Greek culture, to express his conviction that the human body is more than just a fragile vessel that does not matter, once the spirit can be released from it. The Risen Christ lives as a spiritual body, and we are not only able to relate to him by means of our spirit, but body to body.

Through the testimony of the New Testament, we can identify privileged bodies for the encounter with Christ. Matthew says to us through the parable of the final judgment that hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, ill, and imprisoned bodies are the ones that lead immediately to the encounter with Christ (Mt 25:31-46). In the face of these human bodies, we may recognize the presence of Christ and react appropriately, or we may reject them, and at the same time reject Christ and the encounter with him. These human bodies mentioned by Matthew are the true Vicars of Christ on Earth.

The Hidden Christs

For Michel Foucault, there are places constructed by society as “other places.”³ They are places that are “different” from what the society considers “normal”: cemeteries, jails, brothels, hospitals, etc. Society pretends that these places do not exist and hides them, but—in spite of it all—it needs them. Similarly, “other places” exist in theology. They are places that, according to the official theology, do not exist or at least cannot contribute anything original to theological development. They are, in relation to their theological value, hidden places.

The experiences of Christ that are being made in these places are non-existent experiences for the official theology. We can say that they are “Hidden Christs” because they are corporal experiences of the Risen One, renounced and denied by a theology that pretends to already know everything of Jesus Christ that we can and must know. Hidden Christs appear in hidden places to excluded and apparently nonexistent people. Nevertheless they are revelations of the one true God that, through the Holy Spirit (free to blow wherever He/She wants), wishes that we come to know His/Her Son made flesh in the flesh of each one of us, even in the excluded ones in the “other places.”

These Hidden Christs are the subject of the Christology of liberation. Or rather, of the *Christologies* of liberation. In the last forty years,

liberation theologies have contributed widely to rescue hidden experiences of these Christs. The real faces of the poor in the situations “of extreme generalized poverty,” as the bishops said in Puebla, confront us with “the suffering features of Christ, the Lord, who questions and challenges us.”⁴ It is a face of authority, not only because it is the face of the Lord. The authority resides also in the fact of the suffering of the poor, who also question and challenge us and lead us to our own conversion.

The opposition that liberation theology encounters from the official theology illuminates this fact. It is a question of authority in the Church: are the Christs that appear in the hidden places being purposely obscured, or can they reveal their own identity? The face of the Hidden Christ exerts authority, but those that hide his face also claim authority. The faces of the poor show authority, but only for those who obey him. Liberation theology has reminded the Church of the fact that we owe obedience to the face of Christ hidden and revealed in the face of the poor. But the fear of a portion of the ecclesial hierarchy, when confronted by the experiences of God-with-the-poor and of the Word incarnated in the flesh of the poor, has prevented the whole Church from converting to and following the Christ hidden in the hidden places of reality.

Jesus Christ is one, but the experiences with him, the interpretations of him, and the Christologies about him are multiple. If we speak of him in the singular we run the risk of excluding and of silencing multiple specific and real experiences made with him in the hidden places. To be faithful to Jesus Christ, we need a plurality of Christologies that do not exclude, but seek to integrate the genuine and corporal experiences with him from the bodies of the excluded ones who are the ones that reveal his face to us today.

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Notes:

¹ I owe many ideas in this paragraph, above all the development of dogma through “trial and error,” to Juan Luis Segundo. *El Dogma Que Libera: Fe, Revelación y Magisterio*

Dogmático. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1989. Translated by Phillip Berryman as *The Liberation of Dogma: Faith, Revelation, and Dogmatic Teaching Authority*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992.

² Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], n. 22.

³ He denominates these places “heterotopias” contrasting them with “utopias.” Cf. <http://www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

⁴ Puebla Final Document, ¶ 31. Eagleson, John, Philip J. Scharper, and Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano. “Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary”, Orbis Books, 1979.

The Centrality of the Kingdom of God in Liberation Christology

1. The Kingdom of God: Between Forgetting and Remembrance

“Yes, Jesus! Church, no!” Many believe that this militant cry expressed the feelings and thoughts of many Christians who, in the 60’s and 70’s, and in disenchantment with their ecclesiastical structure, called for a “return to Jesus.” At a deeper level, this cry represented a legitimate attempt to renew the face of the Church, to remove the “Constantine makeup” that had accumulated over the centuries and to return to the source: Jesus of Nazareth and his praxis.

Later, during the 80’s and 90’s, some analysts affirmed that the cry that was flowing out of feelings and thoughts of religiously disquiet men and women was actually: “Yes, God! Church, no!” What mattered most in this case, beyond any formal attention to ecclesial boxes, was one’s belief in God: having faith was not the same as belonging to the Church; in fact, these were two things that could be perfectly disassociated from one another.

Developing this premise even more as a continued expression of it in the fragmented atmosphere of postmodern culture—which includes supply and demand even in the religious sphere—is today’s expression: “Yes, Religion! God, no!” Numerous brothers and sisters have abandoned the formal practices of the Christian faith. Many others no longer identify themselves with the Christian faith but opt to unravel their religious aspirations on alternative routes. Now, well into the twenty-first century, the quasi-prophetic prediction of religion’s disappearance, as a result of it being an alienating manifestation of human

infantilism, has not come true. Today religious indifference and a pronounced hunger and thirst for the transcendent, for contact with the Absolute, coexist peacefully. However, the transcendent—the divine or the Absolute—does not necessarily assume the personal characteristics of the God that is confessed in the Christian faith, but finds other modes of expression that frequently conjoin the most diverse religious and cultural traditions. That is why many people cry: “Yes, Religion! God (of Christianity), no!” They seek a proposal that matches their sentiments, a more personalized religious offer, where they can choose what they do and do not want *a la carte*. This search, on a fundamental level, is a search for a religious practice that calms the thirst for the infinite and Absolute in harmony with particular interests and personal preferences. The God-image of Christianity is therefore not the only contemplated possibility that can satisfy this search, but instead appears as one of many, subject to the laws of supply and demand that cross through and commercialize even the religious atmosphere. The offer or proposal of the Christian faith has witnessed a decreased demand in the past years. This could be due, among other things, to the fact that this offer is a two-for-one special, not just including a God with his own face, but the Church as well. This fact discourages a majority of “potential customers” who, in reality, are looking for an experience of transcendence, rather than membership within a questionable institution where the air carries little freedom and diversity, and the pending representational image is seen negatively at a popular level.

The questions that surface before this socio-religious panorama can be several. But now to focus on the present topic: What of the Kingdom of God? Has it found a mode of expression in the explorations of our brothers and sisters who thirst for transcendence, the divine and/or the Absolute? How has the ecclesial community proposed and proclaimed it? What has happened in the Church’s history for us to not even manage to instigate the question of, the search for, or the disquiet surrounding the Kingdom? Jesus, God and the Church are questions that have received ample treatment in Christian theologies and pastoral models. The above cited claims, in part, draw attention to this fact. However, returning to the question: And what about the Kingdom? We must, without a doubt, recognize that the Kingdom has become a forgotten topic in the Christian tradition. This practical forgetting certainly clashes with the omnipresent remembrance found in the Gospel writings, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke). One must ask, how can it be that the believing

consciousness has forgotten something so substantive to its faith and life? Rehearsing an answer of sorts, one could dare to say that this forgetting has been the consequence of replacing the Kingdom's core with a different reality. Christian thought, an expression of human thought, does not escape the laws of physics: one body cannot occupy the place or space of another, as well as its own, at the same time. In this case, the Church has replaced the Kingdom, displacing and relegating it into oblivion. Theological reflection and pastoral practice have, for centuries, placed the Church at the center and not the Kingdom. A. Loisy stated: "Jesus predicted the Kingdom and the Church came instead." What a contrast! This rupture or discontinuity that Loisy found continues to be a cause of concern. On one hand, this indicates that the Kingdom's reality has priority over the Church's reality. And on the other hand, it indicates that the Church's reality, throughout history, has not embraced this other reality: it seems that the Church has lost a sense of Jesus' original intentions when he was proclaiming the Good News. Would the prophet of Nazareth ever have imagined that Christian faith and life would suffer such an accentuated ecclesial focus? Little by little, as we left Christianity's origins behind, the Kingdom—in pastoral praxis and Christian theologies—underwent a process of ecclesialization that was accompanied and cemented by the marriage between the Church and political power. This process has basically consisted of replacing the Kingdom theme with that of the Church, reaching the extreme even, where the Kingdom could not be identified apart from the Church. There was not only a thematic substitution, but also one on the plane of pastoral praxis, whose fundamental objective became that of "adding" members to the Church and the "implementing" of such in latitudes still too inhospitable for the Gospel. The ecclesial horizon that animated the Church's mission provoked this hyper-ecclesialization of theology and pastoral praxis, bringing the well-known tragic consequences that today are history lessons.

This ecclesial, theological, and pastoral model, dubbed "of Christianity," fundamentally initiated in the post-Constantine era (4th century), intensified in the Middle Ages, and confirmed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), was well entrenched up until the 20th century. It was only then that it was questioned. One event served as a catalyst for the diverse renovative currents that carried a re-orientation of the Church's mission in face of history: the Second Vatican Council. One of its accomplishments was precisely the recovery of the Kingdom theme as a fundamental category in defining the Church's mission.

Some of the statements in one document are illuminative, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [*Lumen Gentium*], where the Church herself recognizes her own nature and identity: “For our lord Jesus Christ brought forth the Church in his preaching the Good News, that is, the Kingdom of God as promised centuries prior to the Gospels” (LG 5). Along with this identification between the Gospel (Good News) and the Kingdom of God, *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the fundamentality of Jesus in order to know the Kingdom: “In the word, in the works, and in the presence of Christ, this Kingdom was clearly open to the view of men”. Just as the Good News is nothing but the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is only known by the faithful through Jesus’ praxis, the Church “is given the mission to announce the Kingdom of Christ and God, to establish it amidst all the peoples, itself constituting the germinating seed and beginning of this Kingdom”. Through the Council’s statements, a theological equilibration re-centered the marginalized Kingdom theme. This way, the Church acquired a dimension relative only to the Kingdom, recognizing itself as “sacrament,” that is, a mediator (“the germinating seed and beginning”) of the Kingdom’s Good News and a function of such.

Liberation Theology (LT) in Latin America recognized the maturing fruit of the Council that had, for many, disappeared. One of the fundamental goals of Liberation Christology (LC) was and is to place the Kingdom of God in the center of the discussion about Jesus. How can one speak of Jesus Christ and become aware of his mystery, his person, and his mission without mentioning the Kingdom? Can one speak effectively about Jesus Christ without speaking about the Kingdom? Today, we would undoubtedly say that this is impossible. Sustaining a Christology devoid of a Kingdom would certainly be a task reliant on a theologically experimental over-emphasis on certain concepts. However, for many centuries, Christology was able to remove itself from the Kingdom peacefully and without major problems. It was finally around the time of Vatican II that the problems provoked by stagnation and historical retardation became intolerable. This hidden and repressed pathology was repelled by one re-orienting movement towards fresh origins, the goal being to find in them the inspiration from which to heal a body laden with signs of necrosis in several of its organs.

LC absorbed these conciliar fruits and also echoed the findings from biblical and theological scholarship that had, since the end of the eighteenth century, begun the search for the historical Jesus. The

commitment behind these investigations was, among other things, to discover Christ's face in their socio-cultural and political-economic contexts, discerning the historical elements of theological elaborations in the figure of Jesus. On the margins of this "search for the historical Jesus" one can —on the level of literary criticism and biblical exegesis— discuss whether said phrase of Jesus left his own lips or was created by the communities that proclaimed faith in Jesus in light of the Paschal event. But if there is something on which all historical-biblical investigations agree, it is on the centrality of the Kingdom of God in the preaching and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. This forgotten datum returned to become a memory that would imprint an unprecedented renewing force on the Church's history.

2. The Significance of the Kingdom of God

So, what is the significance and breadth of this rediscovery of the Kingdom in LC? For this question we propose, in the first instance, some literary and interpretative norms about the reality of the Kingdom of God to later validate its place in the context of LC. Once again, what is the Kingdom of God?

There are no exclusive or explicit definitions of the Kingdom of God in Biblical revelation. We do find diverse images, parables or metaphors through which its significance is presented. They all coincide in categorizing the Kingdom as a salvific reality. We could say that the Kingdom of God is God's great utopia for humankind: the dream that God offers human beings from the origins of creation, and that is manifested in flesh, in the story of His Son, made man among humankind in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4). God responds to the crucified reality and to the human desires for abundant life. God does not look away, but in looking, takes charge of the reality of His children (Luke 10: 33-35), fundamentally of the broken lives of the poor and exploited on the earth. There is a current of hope crossing human history and that in the biblical history of the Hebrew people includes many historical figures. The Kingdom of God is the expression of that popular hope in overabundant life and the gift with which God responds to that hope. In the Old Testament, the experience of the Jewish people testifies: "The Israelites, who groaned in slavery, made their cry heard, and that cry reached God, from the depths of the people's bondage. God heard their cries and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He then turned His eyes to the Israelites, showing them concern" (Exodus 2:23-25). Then comes the convocation to Moses and

the convincing sentence of Yahweh: “I have seen the oppression of my people, in Egypt, and I have heard the cries of pain, provoked by their captors. Yes, I know their suffering well. For this reason I have come to free them from the power of the Egyptians and to have them rise, from that country, to a fertile and spacious land, a land running with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:7-8). Before the cries of the people and their hope for liberation, God listens, remembers, takes account of, knows, “comes down”, and frees. God proposes a communitarian political project from below, from the pain of the oppressed slaves of Egypt. From those that are “nothing,” God gestates a “great people” (“light of the nations”). God invites the people to a collective journey of hope implying a walking and crossing of the desert in order to enjoy the salvific goods of the promise: the fecundity of the earth, abundance, room for everyone. Kingdom of God is a category that expresses the totality of the salvific experience. It being in either the shape of the Promised Land or in the lineage of Davidic Messianism, Kingdom of God expresses the historical concretization of God’s gratuitous salvation to humans, as well as their correspondence in their constructive embrace of this gift.

It is easier to have goals and to wait for them from a comfortable and content situation than from a situation where life itself —the very minimum which is the very maximum for God— falls into the vacuum on the edges of history, a product of poverty, injustice, and submission. This is why, in the New Testament, the Kingdom of God —in its historic salvific aim, proclaimed and realized by Jesus— is hope and abundant life for the poor. Let’s start with the Beatitudes! “Happy are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). The Kingdom is fundamentally the horizon and utopia for them, those who permanently find their aspirations cut down by indifference, lack of opportunity, or the opportunism of so many politicians who submit them to new forms of slavery: dependent assistance, interested beneficence, false promises. Certainly these are forms of slavery that, despite their subtlety, are no less brutal than the yoke that Egyptian slave-drivers lay across the broken humanity of the Hebrew peoples. The Kingdom of God is the political project of hope and abundant life that God proposes to all humankind, but which begins with the poor. Announced in the dawn of creation, espoused by Israel’s popular gesture in the desert and manifested fully in the life, death and resurrection of the Son, the Kingdom of God, more than a place, is a state of life. We could characterize this state as one of perfect justice, reconciliation, liberation, brotherly and sisterly love, communion with God, and peace. It is a state of life that

is called to be lived out in this history and to be fully realized beyond it, when “Christ returns the Kingdom to the Father” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 39)—death being overcome and a space of full and abundant life opened where God is “all in all” (1 Cor 15: 24, 28). In the meantime, on the walk of history, humankind must make sure that our goals and personal and communitarian practices are similar to God’s goal of abundant life for all: the Kingdom. Of course, we must always be aware that, in history, this similarity will never become perfect equality and that this distance is what must continue to inspire imagination, newness, and human creativity in dialogue with the Spirit.

Summing this up, if Jesus Christ is our vocation on a personal level, the Kingdom of God is such on a communitarian level. What are we saying in this statement? We are called—every man and woman—to open ourselves, to fully realize ourselves personally, building our life through love and freedom in order to resemble the image and likeness of Jesus. God the Father offers us—in the life, death, and resurrection in the incarnate humanity of His Son—the way and the goal for our personal fulfillment. Another document from the Second Vatican Council states: “in truth, the mystery of Man is not fully disclosed except in the mystery of the Incarnate Word” (*GS* 22). Jesus Christ is our vocation. God calls us to be “sons and daughters in the Son”, meaning, to realize our humanity in accord with Jesus’ style, the Word that “became flesh and lived amongst us” (Jn 1:14). As said in the text: Jesus makes it clear to us that we are called to be human beings.

Just as God desired to “sanctify and save men and women not individually and isolated from one another, but constituting them as a people” (*LG* 9), our personal fulfillment is not an individual matter. The communal dimension is fundamental. The relationship between the communitarian and the personal is not exclusive; rather, it has to do with a relationship of mutual inclusion and mutual growth: the person becomes more of a person the more he or she acts for the community, and the community becomes more of a community the more it contributes to the growth of opportunities for the people who form it. Furthermore, we as human beings do not fully realize ourselves individually, but communally. The expression of this communal realization (in Christian language, sanctification and salvation) is the Kingdom of God. Our political, collective and communitarian vocation is the Kingdom. God calls all human beings to the common fullness of life that means “the Kingdom of God”.

3. The Kingdom of God in Liberation Christology

In Latin America, Christology is the discourse about Jesus *sub specie Regni*: from the perspective of or in light of the Kingdom of God. Nothing that is said about Jesus can be said that is not in synch with the Kingdom of God. A Christology without a Kingdom is a mere formality. How can we speak a valid Christian word about Jesus without referring to the Kingdom? We cannot forget that the figure of Jesus has been used to justify more than one Latin American dictatorship in the 70's and 80's. For this reason, without reference to the praxis of the Kingdom that directed the life of Jesus, Christology is a mere abstraction that can be pressed into the service of the most diverse human projections, including the ones the "Cains" of history re-edit without conscience. What are we saying when we say "Jesus Christ"? The concrete content of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, his intimate mystery, can only be unveiled in the light of the Kingdom of God. We can only talk about Jesus in connection to his history, his praxis: contemplating what he did and what he said (gestures and words), something that is impossible except—at first instance—through the Gospel writings. They certainly have it as a central theme! The Kingdom of God is referred to 114 times in the Synoptic Gospels (discounting the book of the Acts of the Apostles).

In Liberation Christology, we move from Jesus Christ to the Kingdom of God in a hermeneutic circle that constitutes an epistemological principle for Christology. With this, we mean to say that the hermeneutic circularity between Jesus and the Kingdom is a fundamental condition that must be taken into account in order to know Jesus Christ. The person and the mission of Jesus Christ can only be understood in the light of the Kingdom. In the same way, the Kingdom of God can only be understood in light of the mission and the person of Jesus Christ. This is what constitutes the circularity of the interpretation. If I want to understand one of the terms of this binomial (Jesus-Kingdom), I must inevitably refer to the other term. But to understand that term perfectly, I must also refer to the first. This tells us two things.

First, understanding the Kingdom through Jesus means that the only way we can understand the Kingdom of God is through making the praxis of Jesus our starting point. Continually returning to Jesus' praxis will help us always to constructively embrace the Kingdom of God in history, avoiding the temptation to canonize as a Kingdom something that is nothing more than an expression of the desire for power and domination of humanity. This temptation, always present, manifested itself as well in Peter who, faced with a destiny of rejec-

tion, conflict, condemnation, and death predicted by his friend, took Jesus aside to correct him. Probably a Messianic destiny such as Jesus' was not a part of his expectations. Before this attitude, Jesus exclaims, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not think as God does, but rather as men do" (Mk 8:33). In this sense, understanding the Kingdom through Jesus requires always remaining aware of how Jesus opted for the poor, remembering the first Beatitude, conceiving power as service and not as dominion, including the excluded, accomplishing the praxis of descent and incarnation, and prophetically denouncing whatever threatens the will of God (that humankind live).

Second, understanding Jesus through the Kingdom will remind us of the concretization and historical rootedness of his person, his insertion into the current of human hope rooted in the Old Testament, the popular and collective character of his call, the primacy of the option for the poor and excluded of the system, of placing his own life in the context of a larger horizon of hope, among other things.

LC also looks at the conflictive nature of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is at once the cause of Jesus' death and the cause of his life: the unmasking of sin, the proclamation of salvation for those considered "impure" or sinners, the special care for the poor and the subversion of the traditional religious order, the questioning of economic and political power (let us not forget the economic relevance of the temple!) One of the fruits of the announcement and realization of the Kingdom was the unleashing of a violent conspiracy that ended giving death to the "Lord of Life" (Acts 3:15). And this is captured vitally in Latin America, because it is incarnated in the life and death of so many martyrs that are witnesses to the Kingdom, because they have lived and died for the cause of the Kingdom: the search for justice, peace, friendship, and abundant life for the poor.

In respect to this last theme, LC proposes a second hermeneutical circle. It is necessary to center oneself on the mutual reference that exists between praxis for the Kingdom of God and praxis for the Kingdom of Latin American martyrs. What do we affirm with this? First, that the praxis for the Kingdom of Jesus is better understood, its relevance better captured, and the passion it evokes more fully embraced through the experience of the praxis for the Kingdom of Latin American martyrs. Second, the praxis for the Kingdom of our martyrs helps us understand Jesus even more. The lives of the martyrs are "canonical texts" for LC, for they have been "written" in virtue of a loyal following of Jesus unto death.

This second hermeneutical circle proposes another epistemological principle, another condition for knowing Jesus Christ: following. We are not referring to a reproduction in the style of an ahistorical imitation of Jesus' praxis. It is about, instead, a following of Jesus in the Spirit, which allows us to repeat with a creative fidelity the salvific praxis of the Kingdom. This qualifies LC as a faith-filled, ecclesial, and evangelical Christology.

4. Proclamation and Memory: Yes to the Kingdom!

We have noted only two fundamental aspects of LC in relation to the subject of the Kingdom. Today, thanks to LC and renewing of our memory, we can offer a new expression for the religious sentiment that hopefully will echo in many brothers and sisters: Yes to the Kingdom! This new expression has notable advantages over the expressions cited earlier in this piece. On one hand, it is not a disjunctive expression: it does not establish an opposition between two apparently irreconcilable terms, for example, between Jesus and the Church or between God and religion. At the same time, it is an inclusive affirmation: it includes Christian elements but it also embraces elements of grace and truth that stretch beyond the borders of the Church. For Christians, speaking about the Kingdom clearly includes Christological, ecclesial, and Trinitarian dimensions. Other religious and cultural traditions will probably name the reality of the Kingdom in some other way. Of what we cannot doubt is our ability to sit down and share our common journeys with the brothers and sisters who want to gestate in history that reality which we Christians denote "Kingdom of God". The significance of this Kingdom—in terms of abundant life as the fruit of justice, friendship, and peace for all men and women—opens up the possibility of a new and unprecedented macro-ecumenical and multicultural dialogue placing humanity on a common and new path. We are offered the possibility of conjoining all human beings of diverse religious, human, and cultural traditions of the planet to a common horizon: the reality of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom-centrism of LC also opens new perspectives in the face of evangelization. Originally, the Fathers of the Church (those theologians and pastors that "gestated" the Church after the Apostolic Age) considered Christ present not only in the Church but also in all humanity. In the Church, his presence was explicit, and beyond it more implicit, hidden or in a seedling state. They denoted this germinal state of Christ as one that made it necessary for it to be "watered" or poten-

tiated by the announcing of the Gospel in order produce its best fruits in a particular way: “seeds of the Word” (*semina Verbi*). This is a consequence of the Incarnation of the Word that assumes entirely the human being and all of humankind (see Phil 2:6-11), of the universal salvific will of God (see Tim 1:11), and of the grace of God that arrives always prior to the proclaiming of the Gospel (see Rom 5:5). The Kingdom-centric perspective of LC invites us, in actuality, to search for the “seeds of the Kingdom” (*semina Regni*). This category certainly opens up a new perspective of common dialogue and discovery with so many men and women who have the same horizon that Jesus had, although they may call it by a different name than the teacher of Nazareth did. This Evangelistic perspective of the *semina Regni* invites us to share the same eye for history and reality that Jesus fundamentally had: the Kingdom.

This way, we can join forces with our brothers and sisters who not only want to attend to the wounded lying on the margins of the road, but want to ask why the road continues to expel and dispose of human lives. We will ask together how we can rebuild the road, developing a new path of freedom, liberty, justice, peace, and brotherhood and sisterhood, where there are no executioners or victims: Yes to the Kingdom!

How sad it would be if, after putting at the center of our line of vision what Jesus put in the center of his, we would, once again, stare down at our belly buttons!

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In between the lines of the Notification – Previous considerations to an answer that must be constructed

1. Reading between the Lines

The recent *Notification* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith about two well known works written by our brother in faith Jon Sobrino is – as it should naturally be - grounded on a number of assumptions. Some of these premises are explicit, others hardly so. For example, the conviction that “the theologian can only acquire a deeper understanding of God’s work contained in the Scripture and transmitted by the Church’s living Tradition through the ecclesial faith and in communion with the Magisterium” is explicit. “The truth revealed by God Himself in Jesus Christ” the document states “and transmitted by the Church, constitutes the ultimate normative principle of theology”.

“It is the Holy Ghost” “that introduces the Church into the plenitude of the truth” and only in the submission to this “gift from above” can theology be truly ecclesial and at the service of truth”. Only thus will the theological reflection be fruitful: if it is not afraid of developing itself in the vital flow of the ecclesial Tradition” (n.11).

Would anyone dare to refute the relevance of these statements? And yet, these statements must presume that certain conceptions are univocal, when actually they are not always so. For instance, when we speak of “ecclesial faith” are we including in it the orthodox “*sensus fidei fidelium*”? Does the submission to the Ghost preserve the theology from any and every imprecision or is it more appropriate to say that the effort to conceptually translate the Mystery keeps us in a constant temporariness, even if we are inspired by the same Ghost? Is being “at

the service of truth” the same as being literally “in the truth”? Shouldn’t a theology that “is not afraid of developing itself in the vital flow of the ecclesial Tradition” - precisely because of this and in obedience to the faith - dare go beyond the dogmatic concepts and formulae that, albeit efficient in the past, might, in other contexts, hinder or prevent our genuine experience of God?

The Notification states that its main purpose is to help the faithful to perceive the fruitfulness of a bold theological reflection that develops without neglecting its original Tradition. However, in order to perceive this, it is obvious that the faithful must have both sufficient access to the items at play and that “mature freedom of the heirs” that Pauline theology tells us about. Only thus will they be ready to assess which theologies commit themselves to growth while still being faithful to the Tradition.

If this is so, the expected repercussion of this document in the local churches will only make sense if it is followed by an effective space where the faithful may put their *sensus fidei* into action and deepen the understanding of their faith. For this, a few items must be clearly explained to the average Christian as s/he is often not used to the coded language of the more technical theology.

2. The Ordinary Magisterium and its Limits

The first task is to help Christians remember the classic and effective distinction between extraordinary Magisterium (that of the ecumenical councils or of the Pope’s *ex cathedra* definitions) and ordinary Magisterium (that of the Papal encyclicals and exhortations in addition to the documents issued by the Roman curia). In so doing, Christians will take into account that opinions as those expressed in the Notification belong to the ordinary Magisterium and are, therefore, subject to errors like any other theological current or trend within the Church. The Pope himself, when he is totally certain of his infallibility, pronounces himself *ex cathedra*; in all other situations, he prefers to write encyclicals or exhortations. This is important, because it places us – both laity and clergy – in our due place as servants of the Word and apprentices of the Ghost.

Nevertheless, to admit the fallibility of the ordinary Magisterium and to admit its effective mistakes – here it is sufficient to briefly compare Pio IX’s *Syllabus* and the Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae* in the question of “religious freedom” - is not the same as saying that its deci-

sions are trivial. When the Magisterium exercises its teaching function it counts on our responsible obedience. This is the same as saying that not even the high ecclesiastical hierarchy is interested in an attitude of blind obedience or passive submission. What kind of testimony could a flock of uncritical followers of fideism give to the complex and contradictory present-day world?

For the *Notification*, “a theological reflection that is not afraid to develop itself in the vital flow of the ecclesial Tradition” is “fruitful”. Clearly, when it supports boldness, the document admits that there are risks and that, eventually, some theologians could be frightened in the process. I imagine St. Agustin’s boldness when he flirted with Platonism in order to affirm *de vera religione*; or that of St. Thomas of Aquino when he accepted the Philosopher’s (Aristotle’s) categories. Why would it be different in our case, as we are called to listen to the masters of suspicion and to so many others “adversaries” of the Church who, as the Council admitted, helped it with the task of offering humanizing elements coming from its faith, in view of Mankind’s development? (*Gaudium et Spes* 44a.c)?

The document itself admits – presumably criticizing Jon Sobrino – that if the first ecumenical councils “used the terms and concepts of the culture of their time, it was not in order to adapt themselves to it: the councils did not mean a Hellenization of Christianity but precisely the opposite” (I.3). And the text goes on: “With the absorption of the Christian message, Greek culture itself underwent a transformation from within and could become an instrument for the expression and defence of the Biblical truth”. Very well, if such a procedure in the past – surely a very risky one but nevertheless unavoidable – deserves approval, why isn’t a similar approval given to the attempts of a critical approach to contemporary thinking?

In my view the greatest proof of respect and consideration for the ordinary Magisterium’s manifestations is for us to welcome them within their own functional limits while avoiding their always harmful extremes. They are not mere guesses, but neither do they claim to be infallible. They must be read, therefore, as the statements of a certain theological stream that at present is hegemonic in the high Catholic hierarchy – more or less in tune with what Zoltán Alszeghy called “Roman paradigm” – and as such it has the right and the duty to publicize its opinion about this or that stream, work or author.

3. Every written text is subjected to the reader's hermeneutics

Once it is published, every text is subjected to the most basic rules of hermeneutics and exposes itself to critical evaluation and to its virtual readers' creative appropriation. The benefit of this open exposition is that, from then on, we are all able to, on one hand, revisit the criticized works and analyze them at our own responsibility and risk; and, on the other, to devote ourselves with intellectual freedom to the exegesis and interpretation of the Magisterium's text. It may happen, then, that the author or authors involved in the note do not feel included in the description. It is also fairly frequent that, in the urge to be clear and direct about what they are criticizing, texts such as the *Notification* may produce – often unwillingly – simplifications or neglect important gradations not included in the chosen excerpts.

Now, once exposed to the daylight, the *Notification* is at the disposal of our careful consideration. It is important that we should appropriate ourselves of it, question it, and identify its underlying guidelines. A task that, in the best Latin-American tradition (that, in this aspect is a mere apprentice of our Biblical roots) is much better done by a team, in a communitarian way, so as to produce a result that will last as long as the loved theological reflection that was born and remains among us.

In this spirit, I'll throw in some elements and questions that have occurred to me as I read the curial document and thrust that, together with other voices, we may obtain more clarity about what is really at work in this crucial moment of the Latin-American Church.

4. The *Notification* strikes Latin-American hermeneutics

The *Notification* claims that there are “imprecisions and errors” in Jon Sobrino's works and expresses its concern in view of the “wide diffusion of these writings”. Although recognizing that “the Author's concern for the fate of the poor is worthy of esteem” and that, “in some points, the Author succeeded in partially diversifying his ideas” it considers that “in [other] points, there are remarkable discrepancies with the faith of the Church” because “they are not in conformity with the Church's doctrine” (n.1).

To judge by the list of themes, in the curial eyes, hardly any orthodox text would be left in Jon Sobrino's work. According to the *Notification* Sobrino is wrong: 1) “in the methodological assumptions stated (...) on which he grounds his theological reflection”; 2) when he

deals with “Jesus Christ’s divinity”; 3) in the “incarnation of the Son of God; 4) “in the relation between Jesus Christ and God’s Kingdom”; 5) “in Jesus Christ’s self-consciousness”; 6) “in the salvific value of His death”.

I think I am not alone when I read in the objections raised against some of Jon Sobrino’s excerpts something more than mere admonition to an author or an individual book. What seems to support the entire reasoning is that J.L. Segundo had already detected in the notorious *Instrução sobre alguns aspectos da Teologia da Libertação*: (Instruction about some aspects of the Theology of Liberation) “a true hermeneutic principle” that presupposes a theological mind untouched by the ardour of the Vatican II. In this sense I make mine Segundo’s words in that occasion: “I want to make clear that I consider myself to be deeply and fully affected by it [the *Notification*]; I understand that my theology (my interpretation of the Christian faith) is false if the theology of that document is true or the only truthful one”.¹

I arrive at this conclusion for the following reason: As it seems evident, the writers of the document opted for the old path of displaying quotations of individual theological propositions in order to illustrate how the ideas they want to strike depart from the Christian faith recognized by all or even refute it. It is obvious that such strategy simplifies the attack in so far as it neglects the nuances in the development of the work or various works of a given author.

Actually, which theologian – whatever his/her perspective – would come out unharmed from a massive attack to a list of quotations extracted from his/her books? Let us look, for instance, at the following assertion made by the well known theologian Joseph Ratzinger: “The doctrine of Jesus’ divinity would remain intact if Jesus came from an ordinary Christian couple”.² Would this be an insinuation or an open door for the admission of a sexual intercourse between the human parents of the Saviour, who would thus have been conceived? Or would be necessary to give further attention to the context where the quoted sentence came from?

The disadvantages of the procedure followed by the writers of the *Notification* are huge. As J.L. Segundo said when he proposed his exegesis of the famous Instruction against “some” theologies of liberation: “the quotation loses in *extension* what it gains (in terms of its condemnation) in *precision*”.³ It will not be difficult for the accused to argue that the quoted expressions do not represent all the subtleties

examined in the whole of his theoretical edifice. To the accusers no alternative is left but to say – as indeed, they do in the document in case – that despite the nuances, such and such a position is still ambiguous or mistaken.

5. Mitigated Manichaeism: Theology versus Magisterium

No doubt, what makes this dispute unbalanced - a dispute that in itself could have everything to be a legitimate one – is that in the everyday jargon we end up by admitting in between the lines that the opposition between some “theologists” and the members of the “Magisterium” (seeing in the former the partisans of certain theology and in the latter the representatives of the faith) is a natural thing. Now, this mode of speech is dangerously imprecise. We theologians are, in principle, mystics that venture to carry out – gropingly - the task of translating the experience revealed in contemporary conceptual categories to our communities of faith; and the Magisterium can only fulfill its mission of explaining the faith and defining its limits if it is able to understand it – and the synonym of this understanding is precisely *theology*.⁴

This artificial opposition between Theology and Magisterium, both seen as self-sufficient quantities, can only be detrimental to the healthy spiritual distinction to which we are all invited throughout our Christian pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of the Father. Ironically, the risk we face is the possibility of seeing the liveliness and creativity of the Church reduced to a single theological bias – even more harmful because it does not recognize itself as a “bias”, even if authoritative.

That is precisely what Karl Rahner feared in a letter written a few days before his death and addressed to the Cardinal de Lima in defence of Gustavo Gutiérrez (who, at that time, was the butt of criticism): “A condemnation (...) would have (...) very negative consequences for the only environment in which a theology that is at the service of evangelization could last. Today there are several schools and this has always been so(...). It would be deplorable if by means of administrative measures we over-restricted this genuine pluralism”.⁵

6. The forgotten declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*

The document in question is about to discredit the pluralism defended by Rahner. The strong reservations raised against Jon Sobrino’s methodological assumptions strike, clearly, at one of the most

original intuitions of the Latin-American theology: the experience of the poor as an authentic theological space. It is depressing to see this space reduced to a mere “concern for the poor and oppressed” that merely “deserves” the writers’ consideration.

The binary conception pervading the document presupposes that if “the ecclesial place of Christology” is the “Church of the poor” it will not be able to be “the apostolic faith transmitted by the Church to all generations”. Moreover, suggesting that, in Sobrino’s works, it has found something different, the document insists that “the theologian, by his/her specific vocation in the Church must have constantly in mind that theology is the science of the faith”.

The document also blames the alleged problems of Sobrino’s theology to his lack of attention to the sources. It states that “the New Testament assertions about Christ’s divinity, his filial consciousness and the salvific value of his death (...) do not always receive due attention” (n.3). The *Note* also suggests that Sobrino’s statement, according to which “these texts [from the large councils of the old Church] are theologically useful, besides being normative, but are also restricted and even dangerous, as it is now easily recognized” (*La fe*, pp., 405-406) is questionable. For the writers of the Notification, “there are no grounds for saying that these formulae are dangerous as they are authentic interpretations of the revealed datum”.

It would certainly be instructive to the debate raised by the Roman Notification to remember here the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, from the same Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1973) that defends the “reformability”, or rather, the need to reform the dogmatic formulae regarded as infallible. Not forgetting also that even if referring to the ordinary *Magisterium* five reasons were presented in the latter for the need of a theological work that might give new form to the dogmatic expressions of the past, namely:

1. the expressive strength of the language used is not the same in different periods or contexts;
2. no formula is, indefinitely, complete and perfect in its expression of the truth: new experiences of the faith or new human insights demand that the issues unforeseen by the old formula be resolved and its errors discarded.
3. every dogmatic formula expresses itself through forms of thinking that are eventually surpassed and this may prevent the understanding of the meaning it expressed originally.

4. formulae must be reformulated in order that the truth they transmit may stay and remain alive, rooted in everyday life and its problems;

5. no matter how perfect the comprehension of the truth expressed by the formula was originally, in time (opportunities/crises) our development and maturity demand greater clarity and plenitude. ⁶

If the writers of the *Mysterium Ecclesiae* are right, it becomes impossible to see why Jon Sobrino would be belittling the “pronouncements of the first councils” or their ecclesial quality when he inserts them into the due context.

7. From the orthodox to the truthful: we make the road as we walk it

Sobrino’s Christology is criticized on a variety of its aspects. The document asserts that “several of the Author’s statements tend to limit the scope of those passages from the New Testament that affirm that Jesus is God” (II.4).

Another isolated excerpt is shown as a full proof that “the Author establishes a distinction between the Son and Jesus that suggests to the reader the presence of two subjects in Christ (...). It is not clear that the Son is Jesus and that Jesus is the Son” (III.5).

Sobrino’s understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* – namely that “we preach the limited humanity of God, but we do not preach the unlimited divinity of Jesus” (*La fe*, 408; cf. 500). For the theologians who wrote the Notification, “in the Christian language (...) we say, for instance, that Jesus is God, the He is creator and all-powerful. Therefore, it is not right to say that we do not preach the unlimited divinity of Jesus” (n.6).

The first consideration we can make with regard to such value judgements – which are the same with regard to the other criticisms that continue until the end of the curial text – is that, if we abstracted the controversial context that defines beforehand the party that knows all and the party that makes mistakes, we would be in the face of the most natural and most welcome theological dispute like so many others that preceded us in history. A Church that respects the inevitable theological pluralism that has its origin in the Mystery of which we give testimony should encourage more debates, with a series of rejoinders about matters that are so vital for the understanding of the faith.

Secondly, it should be recognized that both parties in dispute here are orthodox. But orthodoxy is not a synonym of truth. Of the real truth of our theological propositions, what can we know for sure? Will it be true to assert that “Jesus is (...) creator and all-powerful” as the curial text guarantees? Or such formulation is inadequate because it flirts with variations of the old Sabellianism? As it may be, both schools that are confronted in the document – with the inevitable errors and gaps that their conceptual schemes contain – are orthodox insofar as they are affiliated to the same spiritual tradition.⁷

In this sense, it is our own condition as human beings corresponding to the divine self-communication that urges us towards pluralism (and eventually even to syncretism) given the “creature’s very impossibility” (I. Queiruga). The legitimacy of pluralism – as Rahner said in the above mentioned letter – lies on the fact that the best way to correct errors is to discuss them.

Difficult and complex themes such as the relationship between Jesus Christ and God’s Kingdom (IV) or Jesus’ controversial self-consciousness (V) were not invented by Jon Sobrino. Neither can they be the object of such laconic conclusions as the *Notification* seems to intend. The truth that may spring from the debate about these Christological chapters is the work of a much wider network of contributions and it would be absurd to try to close the discussion with a - somewhat manicheistic - artificial table-tennis match.

8. An answer to be constructed

What remains of positive in this episode - hurriedly called a “condemnation” – is that, when it displays its disagreements with Jon Sobrino’s work, the ordinary Magisterium exposes itself in the arguments and opens itself to theological critique. Theologians of both genders, Latin-Americans by birth or adoption, we cannot shun this dialogue that, in the light of the ecclesial faith, happens between two equals. The Church gathered in Latin America hopes we are able to play our part.

I could have ended this reflection in the previous paragraph. But I could not resist the temptation to close it with the prophetic word of Karl Rahner whose sensitivity foresaw what was to come a long time ago and for which I render him this homage:

Can we refute the theology of liberation as “modern secularism”? Shouldn’t we admit beforehand that the “Sitz im Leben” (...) of this

theology (...) is legitimate insofar as it is inserted into that place where there begins the path that leads to the goal that consists in surrendering life in benefit of our brethren? (...) From our context of well-being, typical of the selfish bourgeois, could we dare to slander these theologians, knowing that, for them, our judgment may mean, there where they are, a death sentence? ⁸

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Notes

- 1 SEGUNDO, J.L. *Teologia da Libertação*; a warning to the Church; São Paulo, Paulinas, 1987, p.23.
- 2 Cf. RATZINGER, J. *Der christliche Glaube*, 1968, p.225, apud VON BALTHASAR, H.U. *Puntos centrales de la fe*. Madrid, BAC 1985, p. 123.
- 3 SEGUNDO, *Teologia da Libertação*, cit., p. 24.
- 4 IDEM, IBIDEM, p. 25.
- 5 IDEM, IBIDEM, p. 26. Cf. tab. VORGRIMLER, H. Karl Rahner, experience of God in his life and in his thought. São Paulo, Paulinas, 2006, pp. 159 and 195.
- 6 SEGUNDO, J.L. *O dogma que liberta*. 2nd edition. São Paulo, Paulinas, 2000. ch. 11. Segundo transcribes the full text of the declaration, in fact as it was published by the *Osservatore Romano*, in 24/06/1973, signed by Cardinal Prefect F. Seper.
7. On this see the discerning essay by Ghislain Lafont in which the author suggests that “the theological truth [not perfect] is found not when we try to reconcile Plato and Aristotle but when we try to tactfully ally Boaventura and Thomas” whose “symbolic polarity (...) may be the key for theological discernment” (LAFONT, G. *História teológica da Igreja católica*; itinerary and forms of theology. São Paulo, Paulinas, 2000, pp. 303-304).
- 8 NEUFELD, K-H. *Die Brüder Rahner*. p. 338-339, apud: VORGRIMLER, Karl Rahner, cit., p. 159.

Theology of Martyrdom

It is surprising that neither the word “martyr”, nor the word “martyrdom” (not even a verb or an adjective with the corresponding root: “martyrize”, “martyrological”) are to be found even once in the “Notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ”.¹ Nothing. It is surprising precisely because the Notification denounces a lack of clarity on the part of Rev. Sobrino when dealing with certain matters of faith: “Father Sobrino does not deny the divinity of Jesus (...). Nevertheless he fails to affirm Jesus’ divinity with sufficient clarity”. Others, or even myself when given an opportunity to expound, will show how many times, and how clearly Rev. Sobrino affirms the divinity of Jesus Christ; taking into account that he does so in two Theology books² (which are the object of criticism of the Notification) destined for learned readers in such subject matter, and not in catechism pamphlets for people just initiated in the faith. Doctoral courses, regardless of the university department to which they pertain, do not cover that which is explained in first year undergraduate classes; in both of Rev. Sobrino’s books Jesus Christ’s divinity is presupposed from page one, among other things because this Jesuit priest affirms it every Sunday, in public, within the celebration of the Eucharist. Rev. Sobrino sets out in detail the significance of Jesus’ divinity, as well as other central Christological themes, in both of his abovementioned Christological works. As we were saying, the Notification complains about a lack of clarity when evaluating Sobrino’s work, but nevertheless forgets the central theme of Jon Sobrino’s theology: martyrdom. How can such an oversight have occurred after studying Sobrino’s work for six years?³

Incomprehensible.

Rev. Sobrino, as well as the whole of the Jesuit community of El Salvador, received death threats from different groups in collusion with the Salvadorian army (i.e. “Unión Guerrera Blanca”, Major D’Aubuisson, Salvadorian death squads, etc.) from 1977 until approximately 1991. Rev. Sobrino could have very well abandoned the country and returned to his halcyon Spain, where he could have most probably given theology classes without placing his life in harms way. Nevertheless, his choice, free and evangelical, to stand side by side with earth’s suffering lot led him to stay all those years in El Salvador, up until this day, albeit he no longer receives violent political threats. During those fourteen years (1977-1991) Rev. Sobrino would wake up every morning with the fear that a bullet, or a bomb would end his life, and he would go to bed every night with the certainty that he was where he had to be.

During those years El Salvador’s *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA), where he was professor of Theology, received twenty-five bombs. The threats were no prank: in 1977 Rev. Rutilio Grande, SJ, was assassinated; in 1980 Archbishop Óscar Romero and four north American missionaries were killed; in 1989 six Jesuits from UCA were assassinated; and a multitude of pastoral agents, catechists and catholic teachers were also killed for proclaiming that the God of Life that revealed Himself in Israel, and in Jesus Christ, condemned those injustices and oppression. Rev. Sobrino has been preaching about the God of Life, revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, for more than thirty years in a country where doing such a thing carried the risk of being put to death, at least during the seventies and eighties. It seems surprising, baffling, that it is he, of all people, who is accused of not affirming Jesus’ divinity with sufficient clarity, considering he put his life on the line again and again for fourteen years by publicly proclaiming it.

The authors of the notification seem to have totally forgotten the role martyrdom played in the foundation of the Church, as well as throughout its history. The fact the Lord died on the Cross is in no way incidental, on the contrary, it is capital. Nor is it secondary that Jesus was condemned by the legitimate Jewish religious authorities of the time, which affirmed that He had “blasphemed”. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which represents the legitimate Catholic religious authority of today, should never overlook this. The fact that the majority of the twelve Apostles died as martyrs is not secondary either; nor is it that the apostle Paul died as martyr, as did hundreds of Christians of the first Christian communities. Christianity is unin-

telligible if its martyrological mettle is disregarded. Nonetheless, the Notification has paid no heed to it.

Rev. Sobrino's theology is equally unintelligible if the figure of Archbishop Óscar Romero is not taken into account. Another incomprehensible oversight of the Notification is that it does not cite Monsignor Romero even once.⁴ Rev. Sobrino has been explicating the same theology for thirty years. It cannot be said that he has changed course. On the contrary, he could be criticized for stalling thematically.

Nobody (that is not blinded by an ideological uptightness) doubts that Archbishop Óscar Romero has been one of the greatest graces the Church has received during the past decades. Nobody doubts that he has been the greatest Latin American Pastor of our time, and the greatest martyr of the Church since the Second Vatican Council.

Archbishop Romero's Pastoral in his diocese, since 1977 (when he was made Archbishop of the capital, precisely on the day his good friend Rev. Rutilio Grande, SJ, was assassinated, on March 12th) and up until 1980 (when he was assassinated) constitutes one of the most resplendent transparencies of the Kingdom of God in the contemporary Church. His homilies, his pastoral writings, his speeches, will be studied and will be the subject of prayer in the Church for centuries to come. Now then, Archbishop Romero counted on Jon Sobrino as his head theologian. Monsignor Romero consulted Rev. Sobrino on many occasions, and the former made the latter's theology his own. For instance, when Monsignor Romero meticulously prepared his address, to be delivered on February 2nd, 1980 (by the way, just one month before his assassination) on occasion of the *Honoris Causa* Doctorate Degree the University of Leuven bestowed upon him. This very beautiful speech constituted a magnificent theological synthesis of one of the greatest pastors of the Church, Monsignor Óscar Romero. Now then, the speech had been entirely written up by Rev. Jon Sobrino and, obviously, supervised by the Monsignor, just as James R. Brockman explains in the second edition of his book *Romero. A Life*. Did the authors of the Notification not know this? Did they not know that to accuse Rev. Jon Sobrino's theology of erroneous signified doing the same with regard to, the Catholic Church's martyr, Archbishop Óscar Romero's Pastoral Magisterium? Did they not think about this during the six years spent studying Rev. Sobrino's work? Do they realize what it means to condemn the martyrological Church, which is directly embedded in the origins of the Catholic Church, in turn essentially martyrological? If they did not realize all of this, how can such a paramount oversight be explained?

Something similar occurred with the six Jesuit martyrs from UCA, assassinated on 1989, the most famous of which was Rev. Ignacio Ellacuría. The victims were persons, Christians, Catholics, religious, priests. Nothing of which is irrelevant. The assassination was not selective (“kill Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Montes and Ignacio Martín-Baró, and let the others go”): they killed everyone that was there that night.

They killed the entire community. They killed the whole Church. Let us suppose that the current Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, had then been visiting that University, staying in the Priests’ house: he too would have been put to death with them, and with those two wretched women (Elba and Celina Ramos) who were staying there, seeking refuge from the city’s violent chaos. Let us suppose that Rev. William Levada, now a Cardinal, and Rev. Angelo Amato, now an Archbishop, both of whose signatures appear on the Notification, had also been staying there: they too would have been killed with the Priests. On that night the Catholic Church was killed, just as the Lord was killed on the Cross almost two thousand years ago, as were the Apostles and hundreds of Christians.

Rev. Sobrino was a member of said community, and he would have been sleeping in his bed, and would have been killed that night were it not because one of his multiple trips led him to be in Thailand during those days of November 1989. In the ecclesial world Rev. Jon Sobrino and Rev. Rodolfo Cardenal (but especially the former, maybe because he is a theologian), being the only two members of the community that were not there that night, were the only survivors of the carnage, and thus remain as living witnesses of those Living Witnesses, the six martyrs of UCA (precisely, “martyr” means “witness”). Rev. Jon Sobrino is not a martyr, since he did not die violently; rather he is a “confessor”, that is, a living witness of Christ, who suffered death on the Cross for all. Fortunately, Rev. Sobrino is still alive, but his theology, his faith, is the same as that of the six UCA martyrs, who are the great symbol of the seventy-five thousand people that died in El Salvador during those years, and of the more than two-hundred thousand people that died in neighboring Guatemala, just to mention two of the countries of the subcontinent.

To condemn Rev. Sobrino’s theology amounts to condemning the theology that abided in the six UCA martyrs, true evangelical light of the Church in our days. Did the authors of the Notification consider this?

The fact that both times the authors of the Notification laconically write: “although the preoccupation of the Author for the plight of the poor is admirable, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has the obligation to...” shows that they have understood nothing about Rev. Sobrino’s theology, nor about Monsignor Romero and the six Jesuit UCA martyrs. Because, in them, “the preoccupation for the plight of the poor” is not just an additional “admirable” fact, but rather their essential mettle and the fundamental element of practical, historical and ecclesial continuity with the Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. They lived according to what they preached. And they were killed for it. They died, as did the Lord, which constitutes the nucleus of the Christian faith. That is not merely “admirable”, as the Notification states, just as Jesus’ Cross is not merely “admirable”.

Regrettably, most torturers and killers in Latin America during the seventies were Catholic: the dictators, the militaries, renowned families - whose names are known, many of whom are still alive. Many of them went to Mass, and invited Prelates of the Catholic Church, some of whom are also still alive, to their family reunions, some of them are now Cardinals, and some are now in the Vatican. These same Prelates have publicly recognized their personal friendship with Pinochet, or with other famous dictators, aside from having been seen within the intimate circle of friends of those families of assassins and cutthroat politicians of the seventies and eighties. Surprisingly, the accusing finger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the same finger that had before pointed towards Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross) points today towards Rev. Jon Sobrino, “living martyr”, if I may, who inspired Monsignor Romero theologically, and kindred spirit of the UCA martyrs, and however does not point towards the doctrine and pastoral practice of those who were intimate friends of cutthroat dictators. Incomprehensible.

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Text translated from Spanish by Juan Camilo Pérez.

Notes:

- ¹ Further referred to simply as the “Notification”.
- ² SOBRINO, J.: *Jesucristo Liberador. Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret*, Trotta, Madrid, 1991 (translated into English as: *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, Orbis Books, New York, 1993, 2003); and SOBRINO, J.: *La fe en Jesucristo. Ensayo desde las víctimas*, Trotta, Madrid, 1999 (translated into English as: *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, Orbis Books, New York, 2001).
- ³ The Notification states that its authors studied both of Rev. Sobrino’s books since 2001, thus summing up six years of analysis.
- ⁴ Only once does his name appear, in one of Rev. Sobrino’s cited texts.

Towards a Church of the People

Let us imagine a moment, before or after Aparecida, in which the Latin American Church is waiting at a bus station. A few hours have passed, and the bus has not arrived. On the other side of the street, bus after bus passes in the opposite direction. By nightfall, many are taking the return bus, going to the refuge of “Vatican II.” Others want to go to even farther, to the “bunker” of Christianity. Some—surely those of the “Journey Church” or the “Pilgrim Church,” who don’t lower their voices when they speak of liberation theology—propose walking in the direction of the destination, instead of waiting longer. They walk decidedly and joyfully, following their own five step rhythm, neither samba nor tango. Jon Sobrino is in the midst of the group.

I. Sobrino: Our brother

An imaginary stain of blood on the hands of Lady Macbeth. A sleepwalker, she arises every night. Although she washes her hands—the hands that offered the knife to her husband in order to conquer the throne—she cannot avoid the constant sensation of bleeding. It was her rage and the prediction of the three witches that awakened an unbalanced ambition. The magical power of the sorceresses over those that listen to them, the ambitions of power, and the inability to start over, lead Lady Macbeth and her husband to tragedy.

The “Notification” to Jon Sobrino—[nephew-brother]—from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, brings to memory this scene from *Macbeth*. This Shakespearean tragedy presents the universal themes of power and ambition throughout all institutions. Liberation Theology, an imaginary wound, continues bleeding in the body of the Church. An imaginary wound caused by the real guilt of a forbidden sacrifice on the altar of the idols of possession, of fear, and of power, it demands victims. Jesuits who imitate Franciscans should watch their backs! Anthony de Mello (1998), Jacques Dupuis (2001), Roger

Haight (2004), and now our brother Sobrino, are a warning. In the case of Indian theologian Anthony de Mello, the “Notification” came many years after his death, which indicates, maybe, an oversight of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Errare et dormire humanum est*. The doctrinal case of Jon Sobrino in the context of current theology was very well illustrated by Peter Hünemann, one of the successors of Professor Joseph Ratzinger in the University of Tübingen.

The Congregation that notified Jon Sobrino about “errors” in the explanation of the mysteries of the faith also felt the necessity to affirm that its intervention is, obviously, not against but for the poor. “The preoccupation for the poor,” says the Explanatory Note that accompanies the notification, is “one of the traits that characterizes the Church.” The document further explains the Church’s version of poverty. The first kind of poverty is not knowing Christ, or not knowing Him in an adequate, authentic, and integral way. It is not known from where the Congregation finds such certainty in a subject that allows, according to the Church’s own definition, only analogical statements. Why such severity with a poor survivor of the massacre at the University of Central America (UCA) in El Salvador (November 16, 1989), who represents the Church’s return to the people?

Neither the pills of Frei Galvão,¹ who will be canonized on May 11, nor the Latin Mass will help the people in the authentic understanding of faith in Jesus Christ. The massive exodus of Catholics from the Church—one percent annually—cannot be contained by a wall of doctrine or a disciplinary fence. Finally, Vatican II itself declared religious liberty as a fundamental human right. And now, Joseph? Tell the people to move forward!

II. FIVE STEPS

1. From Missionary Territory to the Missionary Nature of the Church

The Second Vatican Council initiated ecclesiological and pastoral processes which liberated the mission of the Church from geographic ties and territories. The Church declared itself the People of God that is “by its nature” (*Ad Gentes* 2 and 6) a missionary Church. From their baptism, Christians participate in this missionary nature as “followers of the way” (Acts 9:2) and followers of Jesus Christ. He is the first missionary, sent by God the Father-Mother to the world (Jn 5:36s). He is the Way; and this Way is choice and education. Starting from this missionary nature, the Church as People of God was able to reconstruct

its identity, its pastoral services, and its theology. It has slowly dismembered the Church with territorial missions under the responsibility of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*) or Religious Orders, the missions for which the Church takes collections and asks for prayers. The new Church is a Church in which “mission” represents the fundamental orientation of all of its activities and its being, at a local (in the communities), regional (in the diocese and in the Bishops’ Conferences) and universal level (the Roman Curia). In the relationships between the different ecclesial entities, the principle of subsidiarity should prevail, consecrated in the Church’s Social Doctrine.

2. From *Ad Gentes* to the *Inter Gentes* Mission

The “*ad gentes* mission”—in its traditional sense—today is actually the “*inter gentes* mission,” a mission between peoples and continents, between local Churches and communities. The paradigm of the “*inter gentes* mission” came out of the context of religious pluralism in Asia, where 60% of humanity lives. It is a context of dialogue with different religions, with different cultures, and with the poor. The theology of mission of the Federation of Bishops’ Conferences of Asia (FABC) can be synthesized as a theology of the *inter gentes* mission.² We, the Church of the People of God of Latin America and of the Caribbean, still with some deformations in our Christianity, can learn much from Asia.

The paradigm of the “*inter gentes* mission” corresponds with the spirit of Vatican II:

- *It takes into account the situation of religious pluralism and the growing diaspora of the Church in the world today;*
- *It emphasizes the that the local Church is also responsible for mission;*
- *It breaks the monopoly of one Church that sends missionaries and another Church that receives missionaries;*
- *It admits to reciprocity and mutual conversion between agents and receivers of mission, recognizes the Church on six continents, and values intercultural and interreligious dialogue;*
- *It highlights mission, not as an activity between individuals, but between communities.*

It will be important that the old Latin American Christianity prepare for the new religious situation, which presents itself concurrently as an inherited popular religiosity and as a diaspora of an already small flock.

Who are the “people” of today? In the beginning of Christianity, there were three recipients of the Good News: the Jews, the Christians, and the pagans. Pagan became a synonym for “people” (neither Christian nor Jew). The Second Vatican Council contemplated missionary activity and the missionary “being” of the Church in the Decree “*Ad Gentes*,” the dialogue and the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholic Christians in the Decree about ecumenism, “*Unitatis redintegratio*,” and the dialogue and relationships with non-Christian religions in the Declaration “*Nostra aetate*.”

For Latin America and the Caribbean, which have come to a deepened understanding of the Bible, and have gone through renewal at Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo, the “*ad gentes*” mission means to follow Jesus, to call together His favorite audience—the poor—and to send them as protagonists of His Kingdom. In His axial discourses in the synagogue of Nazareth, (Lk 4), in the Beatitudes (Mt 5), and about the Final Judgment (Mt 25), Jesus of Nazareth is very clear. The protagonists of His project, which is the Kingdom, are the victims (the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the hungry, the oppressed, the strangers, the sick). To recognize the poor—the “other”—in their dignity and alterity, signifies inclusion and participation.

Puebla dedicated one of the five parts of its conclusions to “communion and participation” (Puebla 563-981). Promoting significant participation by the People of God is a coherent expression of the missionary nature of the Church. The fraternal sharing of services and instrumentalities makes the option for the poor more dynamic through an option *with* the poor. The poor allow Life to enter; they are the protagonists and the recipients of the missionary project, and they are also representatives of God in the world. As missionaries of the universal “*inter gentes*” mission, they point to another world that is necessary, possible, and real.

3. Creation from Nothing (*Ex Nihilo*) to Continuity with Ruptures

We are part of God’s journey with us (history of salvation) and part of the journey of the Universal, Latin American, and Caribbean Church. We don’t mean to start from zero or to reinvent the wheel. On this journey, we bring about transcendental and historic experiences, experiences of God and of faith:

a) Wherever the Church arrives with its missionaries, God is already present. He precedes us in all people, in all communities. It is left to the missionaries to hear how God acts in other people, to hear their cry, and to perceive in them the signs of resurrection. This

cry is part of their “history of salvation.” (Not to be confused with the history of the Congregation).

b) Aparecida will be the fifth Conference, not the first. It could be the quintessential conference of our journey. The great contributions that the people and the bishops themselves brought together in Medellín must be truly adopted, re-contextualized, and transformed into concrete actions.

The contributions of this journey can be incorporated as imperatives that emerge from the Gospel:

- *The assumption [taking up or embracing] of reality, understood as a sign of God in our times, should be once again the starting point of any theological reflection or pastoral action, according to the principle of Saint Irenaeus: “that which is not assumed is not redeemed” (cf. Puebla 400).*
- *The option for the poor can be expanded upon, in two directions:*
 - a) As an option for the person of Jesus Christ, who identifies with the poor (Mt 25).*
 - b) as an option for the poor and with the poor, respecting their subjectivity and protagonism in building the Kingdom.*
- *The theological and pastoral recognition of the local Church, which requires structural changes. The local Church should break with any type of colonial dominance and come into full maturity.*
- *The expansion, decentralization, and restructuring of ministries so that, through pastoral practice, they can respond to social and cultural diversity, geographic dispersion, and the spiritual necessities of the people of God.*
- *The qualitative and differentiated participation of the lay people, above all the women, in the Church.*
- *The significant co-responsibility of the people of God in the choosing of its pastors, without the democratic formalities of civil society, but with established rules of participation.*
- *The formation of pastoral agents (deacons, future priests, lay people) to the service of and in proximity with the poor and simple people.*
- *The continuing and deepening of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.*

All of this has already been decided and assumed in the text. The fruit of Aparecida could be the emergence of a historic synthesis: the decisions made in previous conferences could be embraced and structurally implemented. The people of God are tired of the fact that these conferences, analyses, and interpretations are promoted without any concrete course of action.

Let us implement that which we hope for, and let us go deeper in these paths marked by grace and by sin, without perpetuating the status quo. Medellín, but also Puebla and Santo Domingo, describe this continuity with ruptures in such theological terms as “conversion,” “new

creation,” “option for the poor,” and “liberation.” The Church “evangelizes itself” (EN 15) by denouncing and breaking from the system, a system that creates victims. It also evangelizes itself by announcing the Good News, which tells of another world that is growing among us. The delegates of the Fifth Conference need to have clarity about the concrete steps that they should, can, and want to take. The voice of the people is documented, and the interpretation of reality is within everyone’s reach. The “otherness” of indigenous people and African-Americans is threatened; the cry of the poor and the migrants is in the air.

4. From Church-Centeredness to the Centrality of the Kingdom

The missionary community is the heart of the Church of the People of God. This community is constituted of smaller communities that, through faith, live their mission in a fight for their lives. This mission is not just one among many activities in the Church. Mission comes from the “nature” of the Church that has its mission in the sending of the Son, and in the mission of the Holy Spirit, according to the design of God the Father (cf. AG 2). To speak of the Church means to speak of mission. The structure of this Church-Mission is Trinitarian. It is the “People of God,” the “Body of Christ,” and the “Temple of the Holy Spirit” (*Lumen Gentium* 17).

In order to be truly missionary, the Church cannot live for itself. It is not in the center, nor does it put itself in the center. It lives in service of the Kingdom, which is central for all of its activities and reflections. The goal of the Church is the Kingdom of God (cf. LG 9). It is the servant and the testimony of the Kingdom. It is sent, through the Holy Spirit, in order to universally articulate the voice of the people within a large “net” (cf. Jn 21, 11) of solidarity. The “sending” brings about paschal communities which try to contextualize the utopia of the first day of the new creation. These communities, in turn, will also send forth missionaries. Mission, as the heart of the Church, has two movements: the diastole of sending missionaries to the peripheries of the world, and the systole that it calls for, from the periphery, for the liberation of the center. Under the sign of the Kingdom, it proposes a world without center or periphery.

Becoming the Kingdom is a daily task of this Church, the People of God. Its historic manifestations permanently need the “purification,” “inspiration,” and “animation” of the Holy Spirit, who is the Father of the poor. Because of this, the signs that mark its trajectory are also poor: emptiness, opening, division, rupture, the path, the cross, and the sacred host. The manger and the tomb are empty; the door of

the upper room is open; the genealogy is interrupted by the Spirit. This Church doesn't have a homeland or a culture, nor is it the owner of truth. It is a servant, a pilgrim, a guest, an instrument, a sign. But it has a path. He who is born and reborn at the foot of the cross, in flight and in pilgrimage, distrusts the false wealth of the conquerors.

The mission of the Church is achieved with eschatological urgency. The announcement of the Kingdom, through the manifestation of the "new commandment," is an urgent question of life or death. Mission cannot wait until tomorrow, because life cannot wait. "The charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14) to destroy the structures of death, to interrupt the logic of systems, and to question the slowness of bureaucracies. Life is always for today. The signs of justice are here already. The announcement of hope is meant for this moment. This hope should not be imagined as quantitative progress, in a society of classes. The horizon of justice and of hope is in a society that overcomes the division between social classes. The announcement of the Kingdom is historically relevant beyond history; it is eschatological.

5. From Supervision to Enculturation

In the logic of the Kingdom, "the little ones," those who live on the shadowy side of the world, are paths of truth and the door of life. For them, the missionary community always reserves the best: the best time, the best dress, the best space. The victims of the anti-Kingdom are not only the protagonists and the recipients of the project of God; they are the place of the epiphany of God, *par excellence*. The social question is tightly linked with the question of orthodoxy, because sin means indifference to the exploitation of the poor, and to the contempt that they suffer. In them, the Church recognizes "the image of its poor and suffering Founder" (LG 8c). In Christianity, this poverty of God Himself has many names: incarnation, cross and Eucharist. "Poverty is the true divine apparition of truth."¹ From the point of view of Latin American theology, we would make an addition: the poverty lived by the poor and the "different," by those who suffer, and by migrants. Above all, the migrants of today represent Jesus Christ in the radical stripping of His being. They are the carriers of the Gospel of the journey. A Church on a journey is a simple, transparent, and paschal Church.

Like the poor and the "others," we work and we interact with that which is culturally available. Missionary solidarity is fulfilled through concrete enculturation, in context. We are not the supervisors of God's "project," or of the "social works" that we inspire. Sophisticated

means and positions of power are a counter-testimony for mission. “Supervision” often separates us from that which is simple, and from the actual faces of the poor. Missionary efficiency cannot be found in the instruments we use, in our leadership or in our “good works,” but in the coherence between the message of the Kingdom and its contextualization. It can also be found through our lifestyle; this should be taken into account when the ministries are restructured. In the midst of all of these means, sharing should always be present, symbolically celebrated in the Eucharist. Upon giving out the bread, the disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus resuscitated. Only the sharing of the bread can satiate the hunger of the people.

Through the mystique of missionary militancy, by means of alternative acts, we challenge and confront the logic of systems. Against exclusion, we propose participation; against accumulation, sharing; against speculation, gratuity. In the spirit of giving freely, our resistance against this logic is made concrete. This logic substituted the “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes) for the “I pay, therefore I am” (cost-benefit). The Church of the People of God was born on the feast of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), that is, God in the gesture of a gift. Gratuity, or giving freely, makes possible “a world for everyone.” On Pentecost, the missionary community was sent to the plural world—in the generosity and plural unity of the Holy Spirit.

May Our Lady of Aparecida accompany us in this missionary path, *inter gentes!* The Immaculate Conception, not born of royalty, does not deny the humble origins of her birth or of her image, which is of clay fired and darkened by its long stay in the river. From the depths of the water of our reality, of our imagination and our subconscious—where poverty and royalty coexist—she calls us and reminds us that we are all itinerants in the service of the Kingdom.

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Translated by Colleen Lawler

Notes:

- 1 J. RATZINGER, *Der Dialog der Religionen und das jüdisch-christliche Verhältnis*, in: IDEM, *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund*. 3.^a ed., Bad Tölz: Urfield, 2003, 93-121, here 116.
- 1 Used in popular devotion to Frei Galvão, as a way to send petitions to him and to God. Stamps, candles, and other traditional religious objects are also used [Frei Galvão, the first Catholic saint born in Brazil, was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on May 11, 2007].
- 2 Tan, Jonathan Y. *Missio inter gentes*. “Towards a new paradigm in the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).” *Mission Studies*, 21/1 (2004), p. 65-95, here p. 82ss.

What is Behind the Notification of Jon Sobrino?

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published, on March 14, 2007, the *Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J.* intending “to call to attention to certain propositions which are not in conformity with the doctrine of the Church”. What attracts attention in this document is the recurrence of expressions of this type: “although the author affirms that... the lack of due attention that he pays to them gives rise to concrete problems”; “Father Sobrino does not deny the divinity of Jesus... nevertheless he fails to affirm Jesus divinity with sufficient clarity...”; “the author certainly affirms... [but] does not correctly explain”. This type of argumentation shows us that, if there are doctrinal problems in the books of Jon Sobrino, they are not so explicit or so serious. This is clear in the introduction of the document itself: “one must note that on some occasions the erroneous propositions are situated within the context of other expressions which would seem to contradict them, but this is not sufficient to justify these propositions (*Notification*, n. 1).

Now, the CDF’s *Notification* itself says that the author presents theological arguments that apparently contradict what it calls “erroneous propositions”; with that it recognizes that the author does not propose any false doctrine, but presents propositions that taken in themselves, without relation to other ideas that contradict or relativize them, would be erroneous. But, since Sobrino develops his reflection articulating, comparing, and summarizing diverse thoughts – some of which could be considered erroneous were they placed alone –, there is not much logical sense in this warning.

Books of theology, like those of other areas of knowledge, are done precisely with the development of arguments that counterpose one idea to another and with new syntheses present new perspectives for their readers and interlocutors. Without this type of reasoning, there is no development in any area of knowledge. Therefore, the ideas cannot be taken out of the context of such counterpositions, articulations, and syntheses.

No theoretical work, whether in the area of theology or in other areas, manages to express its thesis and argument in such a clear and definitive way that there is no room left for doubts or criticisms that some idea is not sufficiently set out.

If we take seriously the demand made of Sobrino, almost all theologians of the Catholic Church would have to be on the list of the warned, since no theological work manages to be so complete and so “orthodox” that it is not open to the critique that it “lacks sufficient clarity...” or “does not affirm with due clarity and strength...” The only way to avoid this problem would be simply to copy the conclusions of the great councils, and also of the smaller ones (to avoid any problem), the documents of the Church that treat dogmatic questions, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church itself (which was quoted in the *Notification* as an argument of authority in order to criticize Sobrino).

This reasoning, if taken to the extreme, leads to a somewhat absurd conclusion of prohibiting or avoiding the publication of any work of theology and only permitting the publication of manuals that summarize the documents of the Vatican. But, the manuals might also be warned for not having done the summary in a way that makes it “explicitly clear that...” or such things. This absurd situation shows that this is not the central question.

I think that the true reason for this warning appears in the *Explanatory Note on the Notification*, which was published by the CDF together with the Notification. The Note says: “From the beginning, this preoccupation for the poor has been one of the characteristics of the Church’s mission.” So it would seem that there would be no fundamental difference between the position of the CDF and that of Sobrino and of those sections of the Catholic Church that defend the option for the poor. But, the problem is in the understanding of what this “preoccupation for the poor” means. Making reference to the *Message of his Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2006* (“The worst poverty is not to know Christ.”), the CDF says that “the first poverty of the poor

is not to know Christ” and, therefore, the first and principal mission of the church in relation to the poor is to present to them the true Christ, who was the principal figure in the “divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of ‘the righteous one, my Servant’” (Notification, 10, citing the Catechism, 601).

For the CDF, the first problem of the poor would not be the hunger and other infra-human conditions that result from poverty in a capitalist society, but not knowing Christ and not knowing that he was sent by God to suffer and die on the cross to save us from the condemnation that God himself would impute to us.

Here we have a basic point that we must understand well. For the Pope and the CDF, what characterizes poverty first of all is not the economic question, but the lack of knowledge of Christ. Thusly, a rich person who does not know Jesus would also suffer from a fundamental poverty. With this, there is no longer any fundamental difference between the poor and the rich who do not know Christ. Now, if the social difference between the poor and the rich is no longer meaningful, how can we make the option for the poor and the mission of our preoccupation with the questions of poverty and with the life of the poor?

The true problem that Sobrino’s work raises is not the fact of his not having set out with due emphasis the divinity of Christ, or other technical theological questions, but his having assumed that the first and primary problem of the poor is hunger, premature death. What seems to be quite obvious to almost all of society, finally for all – or almost all – poverty is an economic and social question. More than this, Sobrino shows us that Jesus dies on the cross, not because God demanded his sacrifice, but “to announce hope to the poor and denounce their oppressors.”

But, why do the CDF and the Vatican itself have so much difficulty in seeing that the meaning of the word poor is one who goes hungry and not one who still does not know Christ? It would be enough to look in any dictionary in order to see that there is no doubt, in any language, concerning the meaning of the word poor. This leads us to conclude that the problem is not on the level of understanding common speech, but on another level. My hypothesis is that they do not want to accept the common meaning of this word because this would imply theological and practical consequences that they do not want or with which they do not agree. We must recall that, as the Note says, the Church has always associated her mission with the preoccupation

with the poor. Finally, the Bible, especially the New Testament, is full of references to this. As one cannot deny this mission of being in solidarity with the poor, or, in a more traditional phrase, love the poor, an alternative is to reexamine what is understood by poverty.

If we assume the view that poverty is a question of life and death in the economic and social spheres, the Catholic Church, from her faith, does become one among other religious institutions that are, or not, preoccupied with this question; on the other hand, if we assume that the great problem of the poor is not knowing the true Christ, which only the Catholic Church most fully understands, the Catholic Church would become the principal institution in the large task of struggling against poverty.

What is behind the warning to Jon Sobrino and also a good part of the criticism of Liberation Theology and the arguments that will take place at the Fifth Conference of CELAM is the discussion concerning who is poor because this directly affects the understanding of the role of the Catholic Church in the world and its relation with the Kingdom of God. It seems to me that the CDF is trying to produce a new meaning for the word poor so that the Catholic Church can regain the importance, influence, and centrality that it had in the past.

If the first poverty of the poor is not knowing the true Christ, the Catholic Church would become the most important institution in the worldwide struggle against poverty and the defense of true doctrine against theologies, like Sobrino's, that do not repeat the doctrine that the Vatican considers orthodox would become a vital task.

However, if the poor who we must serve are poor in the sense of "I was hungry and you fed me" (Matthew 25), the Church must see itself as an instrument for announcing and revealing the presence of God in the world and God's Kingdom, struggling to overcome injustices and oppressions in order to construct a society worthy of being called human.

In this case, the Catholic Church, like other Christian churches, must assume a posture of service, of one who places herself at the service of the Kingdom of God announcing the good news of liberation to the poor, being solidarious with people and groups marginalized or excluded from society, thereby also with workers and the unemployed, struggling in defense of the dignity and life of all human beings. Pope John Paul II understood that this is the cause of the Church, "for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ,

so that she can truly be the ‘Church of the poor’” (Encyclical *Laborum Exercens*, 8).

In this understanding of the poor and of mission, the Church does not claim the central and most important place, but places herself humbly at the service of the Kingdom of God, which is the reason for the Church’s own existence. In service to the Kingdom, Christian communities must be signs of the loving presence of God in our midst, in our struggles against the sin that contaminate the life of the people, social relations, and even economic and social structures.

When we announce God’s love to humanity, defending the dignity and life of persons who are treated as sub-humans, the most important thing is not doctrinal exactness, but the capacity to love and forgive, to feel compassion, and to live in solidarity. This is not to say that truth is not important for Christianity and Christian theology. But we must not forget that, as the apostle Paul says, the truth that interests the Christian faith is that which is a “prisoner of injustice” (Romans 1:18), and not of conceptual imprecision. It is the truth that unmasks the injustices of the world and impels people of good will to struggle to transform that world. Religious or theological doctrines that do not move us to love and solidarity are nothing more than empty sounds, however “orthodox” they may be.

Therefore, Jon Sobrino insists so much in his writings that “while faith is a way with a praxis in order that the victims come down from the cross, theology is *intellectus amoris*,” a reflection moved by love in order to realize that love in history.

The CDF can create a new sense of the word poor in order to see itself as the most important institution in the world, it can write documents and notifications, but the world will not listen, since it will not come to understand what it is saying. What the world really expects from Christians and the Church is the testimony of compassion, love, mercy, and solidarity towards more poor persons and victims of all forms of oppression.

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The Privilege and the Danger of the “Theological Setting” of the Poor in the Church

“Dangerous” theological affirmations are absolutely consistent with loyalty to the Christian form of theology. As Johann Baptist Metz noted, Jesus himself, who belonged to the line of the prophets, not only made a dangerous announcement as to who God was, how God would be revealed, and how God saves, but he himself also became a “dangerous memory” for the history of the Church. Metz referred to a Christianity stuck in the bourgeois spirit. But Jon Sobrino does theology very consistent with Christian thought, knowing the pleas and the hopes of the poor of Latin America. Here, the great majority of the population is poor, is Christian, and is in large part Catholic. What is the importance of this Christian population and its understanding of faith in God to the Church at large?

Clearly, poverty suggests scarcity, need, hunger, illness, etc. Poverty is first corporal, economic. But it further extends to social and institutional relations: the poor person does not have pull, does not have importance, and is not recognized in his or her dignity: the poor are only recognized by what they lack. Poverty also extends to the spiritual dimension: it seems that the poor bear the fault for their poverty. To feel oneself distant from God because one is poor is a completely different experience from not believing in God when one is not poor. They are nearly opposite experiences, and it is unjust to equate them as though they were the same reality. Jesus himself approached the two situations differently.

The Christian and biblical tradition has a clear legacy and memory regarding the setting of the poor: the poor are the allies of God, who loves their life and freed them from the yoke. The great biblical moments, starting with Abel, attest to this alliance. God is the Most High, but lives with the humble and the contrite (Is 52:17). God chose Israel because it was the least populous nation (Dt 7:7), and when Israel became proud of this, God said that he also chose the Egyptians, the “Cushites”, and even the sons of Canaan. It is even easier to see this divine decision in Jesus’ way of being and in his parables: there is a clear position in favor of the poor, the humble, and the oppressed. The first Christians continue having this experience. God chooses the humble and those who “are nothing”. In this scandal and madness, he reveals who he is and how he means to save (cf. 1Cor 1). How can the poor, who have no power, be “dangerous”? Why do they end up being persecuted and eventually martyred, along with their prophets?

There is an exposure and a difficulty in the life of the poor that in the end makes clear what is truly human, what is truth and justice. The gaze and the message of poverty upset order and threaten power. The official powers govern the poor in such a way that they will not put established power at risk. This occurred to Cain, to Pharaoh, to Herod, to Pilate, and to the Caesars, including the “Christian” Caesars. How is it that the poor upset the order even of the Church? This merits some very careful discussion.

Before we continue, we should ask the following question, “What setting can best serve as the space and mediation —that is, the sacrament— of revelation and divine salvation? Where can God best reveal the form of his being? As Christian Duquoc taught us, it is more fruitful to ask about the location where God reveals himself than to ask about the divine essence! Now, there is another setting that has always pretended to be the human site of the divine —the mediator of revelation and salvation— and this setting is exactly the opposite of the setting of the poor. It is the “theological setting of power”. The greater the power, the more it reveals divine “omnipotence”. In this, Genghis Khan in China and the Pharaoh in Egypt agree: they are considered sons of the divine in the heavens. The extent of their power is what, on Earth, best approximates celestial power. In the Christian world, the “Constantine about-face” can be regarded as marking the introduction of a tremendous ambiguity in the clarity of the gospel. From that point forward, the empire, its swords —secular and spiritual— and its supreme, central, and hierarchical power have tried to be the manifestation of

the divine in the Christian realm. In struggle or alliance—in the throne and at the altar—the basic structure does not change: the theological setting of power. When the battle for political power is lost, “doctrine” may become—as seems to have happened since Pius IX—the exacerbation of this theological setting of power.

But the poor, who have no power, are real—they think, feel, and offer experiences dangerous to Christian theologians. The Hesychasts, although they proposed deprivation and a life of poverty in order to achieve their prayer of quietude and pilgrimage with Jesus, were considered dangerous by the imperial power, which persecuted them on the pretext that they were diverting the faith. The problem was that they accepted the popular expression of prayer through icons, the only form of wealth that the poor maintained. This unleashed a massive iconoclastic persecution, promoted by the imperial power. The victory of the poor and of the Hesychasts was a victory without power, of pure patience and resistance.

In the Latin Church, while the powers made their treaties, the poor united themselves in “paupers” movements: lay, itinerant, apostolic. They returned to the Gospel sources and created alternatives from them. And they were systematically stigmatized and persecuted. This is one of the issues behind popular support for reformers and of the great schism in Christian Europe.

In the Catholic Church—given the pastoral sensibility of many bishops who shaped the Second Vatican Council, including Pope John XXIII himself—the issue of the poor reasserted itself sharply in the middle of the twentieth century; it became a real test of the honesty of the Church. There was never any doubt about two things: that the poor should always be objects of compassion and concern, and that groups of Christians could be detached and poor, and even have binding vows to do so. But a Church in which the poor would feel “at home”, a Church “for everyone and especially the poor” — in the words of John XXIII at the Council— opened the doors to the dream of a “Church of the poor.” The expression was not yet Latin American: that came from the bishops of the Council and from the Pope is well documented. It is inevitable that a Church returning to its roots and seeking to act in dialogue with society and with contemporary thought would end up going through a dangerous trial because of its commitment to being the “Church of the Poor”.

What the Council left open but pending as an unattained goal, the Church of the Latin American countries pursued, based on a

broad consensus among bishops, theologians, and intellectual leaders: an alliance with the people at exactly the time that dictatorial political powers were punishing the Latin American peoples. The Council's expression "People of God" became flesh and bone; in various areas it was called the "Popular Church," and it was woven together with the "Ecclesiastic Communities of the Base" (CEBs, the Spanish acronym), where the poor became "ecclesiastic subjects" with "evangelizing power", and not mere objects of care.

The pastoral priority known as the "preferential option for the poor," like its Christology, became a target for the new iconoclasts. The icon of the CEBs and the broad consensus around them is precisely the humanity of the Son of God, just what the Hesychasts appreciated among the people of their time. All iconoclasts must elevate Jesus to pure divinity, destroying the human face. They must destroy not only the images, but also the doctrine. They condemn the recognition of the human element as sociology and reductionism. When the time came to respond to these accusations, Carlos Mesters, our master of popular reading of the Bible, said that he accepted being called an "augmentist", rather than a reductionist: he helped the whole people to involve themselves with the Bible and to recognize themselves as members of the People of the Book!

Behind this disagreement between theologians lies the question of the place of the poor in the Church and, still more fundamentally, the "theological setting" of the poor. In order to understand this question, it is useful first to remember what a "theological setting" is. After the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent, a series of criteria or references developed that would serve as a secure, responsible base for theological language. Two of the "settings," or "materials," from which the theological treatise was constructed had been pointed to more and more clearly throughout the course of medieval scholarship: 1. The Scripture; 2. The living tradition of the Church.

Five more, which followed from the first two, were added: 1. The faith of the Church, also called the "sense of faith" of the faithful; 2. The Councils and the Synods, or the teachings of the Episcopal College; 3. Papal teachings; 4. The Fathers of the Church, or those who formed the Church's theological thinking; 5. Theologians who were recognized as such. And, finally, three more broadened the horizon of the theological settings: 1. Human reason; 2. The philosophers; 3. human history and its lessons. It is commonly recognized that these theological settings can be enriched and improved. The classic dictionary of fun-

damental theology published by Rino Fisichella, for example, suggests the inclusion of the liturgy and the local Churches. The philosophers may be understood today as “the wise” of various different traditions. Today, “cultures” and “religions” are also seen as possible theological settings. And it is clear that all of these “settings” must pass through an interpretive “hermeneutic circle,” interacting and integrating themselves into an ever-clearer discernment regarding revelation and salvation.

When the Second Vatican Council spoke of the “signs of the times,” it decidedly accepted history and its events, good and tragic, as a theological setting. Latin American theology’s perception of history began “from its reverse” (Gustavo Gutiérrez), from those who do not triumph and are always historically subjugated and exploited: the poor. And it perceived that the history of God, revelation, and salvation is biblically and evangelically linked to this reverse of the triumphant history of the political and economic powers. This is the biblical and evangelical privilege of the theological setting of the poor. From this setting, one understands better, more concretely, and more universally, what God reveals in Christ, how humanity is saved, and what God wants from the Church:

a) As in the stories that Jesus told to justify his attitudes, it is by seeking the sheep that has gone astray that one assures the inclusion of all; it is by embracing the prodigal son that one may celebrate with everyone; it is by receiving sinners at the table that one may give life to all. The setting of the poor is the setting of universality, from which everyone may encounter God, may understand God, and may receive “universal” salvation. This is why the pastoral option called the “option for the poor” is the most encompassing without being abstract. The “option for all,” without the priority of the poor, is prone to a universalism of the type that a French Catholic thinker criticized in the celibate love of the clergy: when it declared its love for everyone, it actually did not love anyone concretely. In fact, the abstract universalism of grand discourses frequently conceals the interests of those who are in another setting, the setting of the privilege of power. Though it may not confess to this, it will become cynicism in front of the Gospel.

b) Starting from the “theological setting of the poor,” one understands better who Christ is. The Son of God not only gave preference to the most needy in terms of health, dignity, and justice, but he identified with the small, from Bethlehem, to the Cross, and to the day of final judgment, according to Matthew 25. There is a grand ecclesiastical tradition that identifies Christ with the poor. As much as he is

confessed to be the Lord, he is known by his dispossessed condition as a servant.

c) Starting from the “theological setting of the poor”, one understands better what a human being is: we are all fragile, flowers of one day, and in need of help. But we may discover in this “emptiness” our “being not of this world”. But this mystical anthropology would once again be an abstract formalism if it did not share in the concrete experience—the experience of flesh and bone—of the poor and their testimony.

d) Starting from the “theological setting of the poor”, one understands better the essence and identity of the Church that serves and is called to sanctity through love and service. This love and service should be like Jesus’ when he washed the disciples’ feet—inverting hierarchies and liturgies and divesting himself of all that was not service.

e) Finally, starting from the “theological setting of the poor”, one understands better who God is, God’s way of acting and of being, and even God’s feelings and priorities. “The greater glory is a humble God”—in Saint Augustine’s surprising words—summarizes well the evangelical revelation of God. It is the paradox of the grandeur of God in what is small and supplicating. For this reason, the practice of defending the cause of the poor and needy is, according to Jeremiah, “knowing” God (Jr 22:16).

The key to understanding the Notification of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the theology of Jon Sobrino is in the Explanatory Note that follows it; fittingly, its Achilles’ heel is here also. Of its seven citations, four are from documents from the 1980s by the same Congregation concerning Liberation Theology: the Notification to Sobrino is, in truth, just one more blow against Liberation Theology. The members of the Congregation know that Liberation Theology lives on! The Note becomes nearly incomprehensible when it avers that it is a grave methodological deficiency to state that “the ‘Church of the poor’ is *the* ecclesial ‘setting’ of Christology and offers it its fundamental orientation”, claiming that “this disregards the fact that it is only the *apostolic faith* which the Church has transmitted through all generations that constitutes the ecclesial setting of Christology and of theology in general” (Explanatory Note 3). This contrast between the “Church of the Poor” and the “apostolic faith of the Church,” favoring the second to the detriment of the first, and alleging that Sobrino (read: Liberation Theology) emphasizes the first to the detriment of the

second, is simply incoherent: it condemns its own apostolic tradition and it condemns John XXIII; it condemns the bishops of the Second Vatican Council and it condemns the Latin American bishopric. It creates an unsustainable schizophrenia between the Church and the poor—the absolute majority of Catholics in the Third World!—as if they were separate entities. As though the poor—who have the “sense of faith”—were not part of the apostolic tradition, as though they had their own special ministry in the Magisterium, but were not otherwise absorbed throughout the entire apostolic tradition. Finally, it condemns the first apostolic communities—which were of the poor—and it condemns Jesus, who sat at the table with his followers, men and women. It is incomprehensible. And so, comprehension must search for other reasons and another theological setting, one that is certainly less “dangerous”. But will it still be a Christian theological setting?

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The Challenge of a Christology in a Pluralist Key

Introduction

In 2007's first issue of *Concilium*, the international magazine, Brazilian theologian Luiz Carlos Susin mentions the "fertile matrimony" which today unites liberation theology with religious pluralism. They are two theologies which strive to respond to the fundamental challenges of current times: global responsibility in favor of social justice, the defense of the integrity of creation, and respect for religious diversity. In the last few years, liberation theologians have begun to realize that liberative work should be shared not only on an intercultural level, but also on an interreligious level. This awareness has begun to open up its interlocutors to the essential exercise of mutual enrichment with other matrices of theological reflection which accentuate, in particular, the positive reality of understanding religious pluralism.

In important sectors of contemporary theological reflection, there is an awareness that pluralism is emerging as a new paradigm, provoking a substantial change in the common current of theological reflection, and questioning the parameters which until now were unquestionable, amongst them being the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. Particularly in this, exponents of liberation theology and exponents of religious pluralism are becoming aware of compatible features. Their essential challenge is capturing the specific situation of Jesus within the horizon of religious pluralism.

In Support of a Narrative Christology

Current theological reflection alive in the Third World, be it in Latin America, Asia, or Africa, comes from a common perspective: the return of a narrative Christology, which starts from the dynamic history of Jesus of Nazareth, springing from Judaic spirituality and its intense passion for the Kingdom of God, the essential nucleus of its message. It shares the conviction that “humanity here [on earth] is, effectively, the *manner* (...) *in which* the divine appears because access to God does not exist outside of God’s own created manifestations.”¹ Its attention returns to the human existence of Jesus and his profound relationship with the mystery of God, with his affectionate treatment of God as *Abba*, or rather, “Father”—the familiar name with which children and adults in Jesus’ time would refer to their progenitors.

It is impossible to capture the awareness that Jesus had of himself. Indications regarding this are few and far between. We only have indirect access to his consciousness, as Schillebeeckx reminds us, through Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom and the form of his existence: his call for following, his proximity to the world of the poor, and the symbolism which animates his words.² The account of the events from Jesus himself is inaccessible because what we know about him is the fruit of “interpretive selection” of the Christian community, which has translated for posterity the way he was “perceived” and “remembered.”³ It is this same Christian community that—after his death—will apply various titles to Jesus, like “Son of God” or “Son.” They are titles which bring a “Christian identification” to Jesus of Nazareth, but he never spoke of himself in this way.⁴ When the Christian community first applies the title “Son of God” to Jesus, its significance is explicitly functional and not ontological. It is in continuity with the meaning present in the First Testament: more than explaining the structure of the being of Jesus, it seeks to understand his significance and role in salvation history.⁵ The Christology presented in the Second Testament—above all in the Synoptics—is a Christology “from below” which rises from the community’s encounter with and memory of Jesus, seen as “the prophet of the nearness of divine sovereignty.” The change in perspective comes only afterwards, after the Council of Nicea (325), when—based on the Johannine Christological model—a descendant Christology is affirmed and becomes the norm for Christian churches.⁶

Much like liberation theology, religious pluralism seeks to rescue “the experience of Jesus” as told by the Second Testament. It tries to

recuperate the “Mystery of Jesus,” truly the fountain of life, which has been drained of energy and imprisoned in the “cloth of the metaphysical clouds” of traditional Christology. More than a “message which should be believed,” Christianity is above all else “an experience of faith which becomes a message.” It is the “Jesus story” which is at the foundation of this experience of faith, which has given rise to diverse testimonies and diverse languages. The plurality of this dynamic interpretation cannot be destroyed by a vision which seeks to be hegemonic and exclusive. It is important to protect—as Dupuis demonstrates—the right to “distinct perspectives” of the same faith in diverse contexts.

Pluralistic Christology in Liberation Theology.

The work of the hermeneutic revision of Christology in a pluralistic key is not an easy task and it is full of risks, as José María Vigil reminds us in an article on the subject.⁷ It is a delicate task because it leads to the reinterpretation of the very nucleus of Christological dogma, elaborated in the Council of Nicea (325), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). On the one hand, pluralist Christology’s objective is a revision of Christo-centric exclusivity and its Christo-monist perspective. On the other, it attempts to do this without devaluing or eliminating the singularity of the internal perspective of the Christian faith, according to which

Jesus continues being normative for the “Christian appropriation of the ultimate reality.” Nonetheless, because there is a need for a more positive evaluation of religious pluralism, a new position is emerging which holds that Jesus is not strictly necessary for salvation, in so far as God, in God’s infinite mystery, can make use of other religious mediations as instruments for God’s salvific action.⁸ In order to defend the value of religious pluralism—understood as a pluralism *de jure* or by principle—and to recognize the universal presence of God in creation, this new approach questions both the causal link which has been established in the Christian tradition between Jesus of Nazareth and salvation, and the related connection between the entire dynamic of the grace of God and the reality of Jesus. It is an interpretation in which nothing endangers the “commitment of the Christian to what he or she experiences God to have done in Jesus Christ.” It is an interpretation which aims to preserve the “logic of God’s infinite love,” and to honor the singularity, the irreducibility, and the irrevocability of the rest of the religious traditions.

Despite some intuitions and signs which point in this direction, a pluralistic Christology of liberation cannot yet be spoken of. In reality, as Vigil has indicated, the most classic liberation theology “has been constructed upon the paradigm of inclusiveness and Christocentrism.”⁹ The collective work in favor of the elaboration of a pluralistic theology of liberation is relatively recent, and the fruit of an important initiative of the Latin American Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). This work was initiated by the production of the series *The Many Paths of God*, with the first volume being published in 2003. Indications of an opening in Christology can be recognized in the works of three liberation theologians, although other names can also be mentioned.

First, the name of Jon Sobrino must be mentioned along with his proposal—which is also the proposal of other authors of liberation theology—for a Christology which returns to an awareness of its historicity: a proposal to return to the historical Jesus and his fundamental call to the Kingdom of God. An important aspect of his Christological proposal is the recuperation of the relationality of Jesus. In line with other authors of religious pluralism within Christian theology, such as Jacques Dupuis and Roger Haight, this Salvadoran theologian points out the impropriety of a Christology which makes Christ absolute and overlooks his fundamental relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. He warns against absolutizing the mediator and forgetting or ignoring the mediation, that is to say, the constitutive relationship between the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom. The author emphasizes that nothing is more terrifying for Latin America than a Christ without a Kingdom. In his opinion, a Christ without a Kingdom is a Christ without the essential provocation of his mediation, without the prophetic appeal of the Father’s will, and without the demands of the Spirit: a Christ who ends up being a “reconciler.” Latin America has suffered the consequences of faith in such an unmediated Christ: “Centuries of faith in Christ were not capable of confronting the misery of reality, nor of even giving rise to the suspicion that, on this continent, there is something scandalous about the coexistence of unjust misery and Christian faith.”¹⁰ The return to the historical Jesus and the recognition of this relationality provoked the emergency of a “hermeneutics of praxis,” which is a distinctive aspect of Liberation Theology: there is no way of reaching Jesus except through the praxis of following him.

The recuperation of this relational “Trinitarian symbol” has an important impact on the question of religious pluralism. First, it is a symbol which rescues a distinctive element of the imminence of Christianity. It preserves—as Adolphe Gesché suggests—one of Christianity’s most “mysterious” elements to fully comprehend: the distance between God and us. There is nothing more problematic than a Christianity which absolutizes Christ, erasing and overshadowing both the mystery of the inaccessibility of the always-greater God and the dynamic essential for Christ’s project, which is to return us to the Father and the dynamic of His Kingdom.¹¹ Second, it is a symbol which opens up a space for the welcoming of diversity. In revealing God’s Self in the particularity of Jesus, God does not absolutize this particularity or ignore the dynamic of the difference. “On the contrary,” it indicates that, “no historical particularity is absolute, and in the spirit of this relativity, God can be reached in our own real history.”¹²

A second name that can be mentioned here is Leonardo Boff, along with his initiative in favor of a Christology of the Cosmic Christ.¹³ His intention is to seek an adequate theological response in this time of globalization and religious pluralism, where the challenge of dialogue among cultures and religions is becoming more imperative every moment. In his reflection on the Cosmic Christ, the author finds a theological category essential for situating Christianity in a perspective of openness to other religions, maintaining the dynamic of the free self-manifestation and progressive mystery of God. In line with authors like Panikkar and Amaladoss, Boff seeks to recover the Christ-like dimension rooted within every human being and the exercise of Christ’s expression in other religious figures, apart from Jesus. For Boff, the historical Jesus participates in this Christ-like element which is present in all of creation but does not exhaust all the possibilities: “the Christ-like can emerge in other figures. Truly, it emerges in every human being, in all living organisms, in every being in the universe, in matter, in the subatomic world, and in the primordial energies. The Christ-like can be found at the root of every being.”¹⁴

In an excellent article regarding this problem, Indian theologian Michael Amaladoss has treated the theme of religious pluralism among religions and the significance of Christ. He has also accented this larger dimension of the mystery of Christ, expressed in the well known phrase: “Jesus is Christ, but Christ is more than Jesus.” His Christological reflection indicates that one can only speak about the fullness of Christ when “all of the manifestations of God in history, not just those reali-

zed in Jesus” are included. In other words, we must acknowledge all of the riches which God has communicated to the world, present and alive in other religious traditions.¹⁵ For Amaladoss, the conversion of Jesus into Christ is a process and implicates the living dynamic of salvation history.

A third name which can be noted is that of José María Vigil. Although he does not have such a systematized reflection on the subject of Christology as the two mentioned above, he touches upon this question in many of his works on the pluralistic theology of religions. In the Christological question, the author sees the *punctum dolens* [sensitive point] of the entire problematic which religious pluralism must confront. It is worthwhile to point out that, in the recent notifications of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—for example, to theologians Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight and John Sobrino—the Christological question is the center of the signaled difficulties. Vigil emphasizes that the problem does not lie in the way the Gospels narrate the life of Jesus, but rather in the image of Christ which has been constructed in the elaboration of Christological dogma.¹⁶ His reflection seeks to revise the “Christocentric exclusivity which hides itself in the habitual interpretation of inclusiveness.” As for his pluralism, his suggestions particularly follow the path opened by John Hick. With the help of this theologian from the Presbyterian tradition, Vigil recognizes the importance of reexamining the “dogmatic nucleus” developed by the first four councils of the Christian Church, and, in particular, the traditional understanding of the Incarnation, which provoked the collateral problems in historical reality, including Christian anti-Semitism, the social subordination of women, and the arrogant superiority complex of Christianity.

In the development of his pluralistic hypothesis, John Hick raises an important question for future theological investigations regarding religious diversity. He approaches the question of the centrality of Reality, understood as the “ultimate symbol of All,” as fount and foundation of everything. This concept of Reality for Hick is similar to the concept of Deity (*Gottheit*) of Meister Eckhart, which is beyond the God of creatures (*Got*), of the “persons of God.” It is the concept of Spiritual Presence defended by Paul Tillich, the Infinite (*Eyn Sof*) of Judaic mysticism, and the “Absolute God” of Islamic mysticism, which is distinct from the God of beliefs. It cannot be said if this Reality is personal or impersonal, substance or process, one or many, masculine or feminine. This Reality in itself cannot be described; only the form in

which it is thought and experienced in human terms, which are always contingent, can be grasped. Apart from Hick, other authors are opting for this term to designate the ultimate horizon, as it presents a greater potential for universality. Today, it is the situation of Panikkar which opts for defining the mystery as the “experience of ultimate reality.”¹⁷

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Notes:

¹ Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Gesu: La storia di un vivente*. Brescia: Queriniana, 1976, p.635.

² Id., pp. 47-48.

³ Id., p.48. James D.G. Duna. *Gil albori del cristianesimo. La memória de Gesù*. Brescia: Paideia, 2006, p. 146 (Fede e Gesù storico).

⁴ Schillebeeckx, p. 264.

⁵ Dupuis, Jaque. *Introduzione alla Cristologia*. Piemme: Casale Monferrato, 1996, p. 32.

⁶ Schillebeeckx, pp. 606-607. The author signals that other Christological perspectives have not been fully explored because so much attention has been given to Johannine Christology. Today there is an attempt to recuperate the features of other Christologies, such as the narrative Christology of Jesus as the Servant of God, which makes possible the recuperation of other terminologies, like “enthronement”—seeing Jesus enthroned as the Son of God is the focus of the First Testament; cf. Greffré, Claude. *Crer e Interpretar*, Vozes: Petrópolis, 2004, pp. 221-222. As Hans Küng demonstrated, the first Judeo-Christian communities elaborated Christologies “from below,” accentuating regal, prophetic, and priestly aspects of Jesus, but later these were ignored, demeaned, and even considered heretical, in as much as they were not as sophisticated as the “always more elevated and complicated Hellenist Christology which came from Christians from the pagan provinces who had classical training.” Küng, Hans. *Cristianesimo*. Rizzoli; Milano, 1997, p. 111. According to Küng, Christology began modestly “from below,” based on the “perspective of the Jewish disciples of Jesus, not with elevated metaphysical speculations, but with the question: ‘Who is he?’” (Mk 4:41).” Id., p. 112.

⁷ Vigil, José María. “Cristología de la liberación y pluralismo religioso.” *Por los muchos caminos de Dios I: Hacia una teología cristiana y latinoamericana del pluralismo religioso*. Organizers J.M. Vigil, L.E. Tomita, and M. Barros. Abaya Yala: Quito, 2004, p. 163, “Axial Time” Collection.

⁸ Haight, Roger. *Jesus, símbolo de Deus*. Paulinas: São Paulo, 2003, p. 464, 472.

- ⁹ Vigil, id., p. 165.
- ¹⁰ Sobrino, Jon. *Jesus, o libertador*, Vozes: Petrópolis, 1994, p. 34.
- ¹¹ Gesché, Adolphe. "O cristianismo e as religiões." *Diálogo de pássaros*. Organized by Faustino Teixeira. Paulinas, São Paulo 1993, pp. 52-57.
- ¹² Duquoc, Christian. *Un dio diverso*. Queriniana: Brescia, 2nd Ed. 1985, p. 137.
- ¹³ Leonardo Boff. "¿Es el Cristo cósmico mayor que Jesús de Nazaret?" *Concilium* 319 (February 2007) 74-83; id. *O evangelho do Cristo cósmico*, Record, Rio de Janeiro, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Boff, id., p. 81.
- ¹⁵ Amaladoss, Michael. "O pluralismo das religiões e o significado de Cristo." *Diálogo de pássaros*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 101, 103. For Panikkar as well, Christ cannot be completely identified with Jesus. It is true that Christians encounter Christ through Jesus, but Christ continues being a hidden mystery also for Christians, who are permanently challenged to look for "Christophanic" manifestations, of the union of the divine, human, and cosmic, in the paths of reality: cf. Panikkar, Raimundo. *Cristofania*. EDB: Bologna, 1994.
- ¹⁶ José María Vigil, "El paradigma pluralista: tareas para la teología." *Concilium* 319 (February 2007) 46. See also: id., *Teología del pluralismo religioso. Curso sistemático de teología popular*. Córdoba: El Almendro, 2006, pp. 153-194, published also in Abya Yala, Quito 2005, pp. 153-194; id., "Cristología de la liberación y pluralismo religioso." *Por los muchos caminos de Dios II. Hacia una teología cristiana y latinoamericana del pluralismo religioso*. Organizers J.M. Vigil, L.E. Tomita, and M. Barros. Abya Yala: Quito, 2004, p. 163-172, "Axial Time" Collection.
- ¹⁷ Panikkar, Raimundo. *L'esperienza Della vita. La mistica*. Jaca Book: Milano 2005, pp. 59,63,73. For the pluralistic hypothesis of Hick and his reflection on "the real," cf. John Hick. *Teologia cristã e pluralismo religioso. O arco-íris das religiões*. Attar: São Paulo 2005, pp. 33-55.

Considerations about the Notification

I first want to positively comment that this is a notification, not a condemnation. That is to say, it notifies the faithful on certain aspects, but it does not take any measures against the author. This is a very positive step, one we hope is maintained. We have written repeatedly that this is the proper role of the Congregation, outside of cases where there are evident heresies or affirmations that openly contradict the faith of the Church, which is obviously not the case here. For this reason, we are happy that the selected channel is indeed a notification.

Because the Notification is authorized by the Church to which I belong, I recognize its authority and I obey it, as I understand the author has done.

But, because the Notification cites and comments on the texts of Sobrino, it seems pertinent to offer opinions about his exegesis and his hermeneutical approach. Therefore, without the aim of offending, we peacefully offer our analysis, hoping that, through listening to other voices, we might bring more elements into this dispute.

The *prior point* is that the New Testament exegesis and theological interpretations of Sobrino to which the Notification refers are not new to the author. Rather, they are the exegesis and interpretations which circulate freely in the theological community and in books on Christology. They are not, of course, the only ones; there are also those in circulation that express the views of the Notification. But, if what we are saying is true, the Notification claims that a large part of the exegetical and Christological material that circulates is dangerous to the faith or is positively erroneous. This judgment from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is so generalized that it is frightening: is it really possible that so many educated people—even experts—of good will and sincere belief are wrong without being conscious of it?

Couldn't one here apply the phrase *qui nimis probat, nihil probat* [those who prove too much prove nothing]? Well now, if these opinions do not contradict the faith of the Church but rather express it in other ways, the Notification will have canonized one manner of doing theology and will have expressed grave reservations about the other methods by which it is done. This procedure does not seem very Catholic.

This point seems to me to be very worthy of consideration because, following Vatican II, we have tried to express the Catholic Church as really Catholic. The Council laid the foundations so that there would be African, Asian, and Latin American Catholic Churches in communion with the Western Churches and, of course, with the center of communion who is the Pope. Each of these Churches would have to develop its own theology, keeping in mind dogmatic development and, in an equal measure, the newness that turning to these cultures would represent for the expression of Christian faith.

It is always opportune to recall it —because it tends to be forgotten— that the one Gospel of Jesus Christ is transmitted to us in four versions. One version cannot be canonized and used to measure the other three by the standard of the chosen one. In the same way, the one Church of Jesus Christ has existed since New Testament times in different models. At the very beginning, these included the Judeo-Christian community of Jerusalem, the “Christian” Church of Antioch, the Pauline Churches, and the communities of the Beloved Disciple. No one model can be canonized and used to judge the others. If only one Gospel cannot be canonized, nor only one model of a New Testament Church, then neither can one specific theology —which in every case is somewhat derived from and connected to a particular context— be appointed the Boss and then used to judge the rest.

Without even acknowledging or realizing it, it is possible that a narrow strand of European theology is being canonized, one that does not grant a systematic importance to several aspects developed by the Second Vatican Council. These aspects are: the signs of the times; the Spirit poured out through Easter that moves humanity, and of which the Church is a sacrament; and Jesus of Nazareth —the Jesus of the Gospels— in as much as he reveals who God and the human being really are and their true mutual relationship, since human beings are created in order to become sons and daughters in the Son.

The *second point* is that, as the Notification itself recognizes, Sobrino says different or contrary things in other parts of the very books that have been examined. We will show some examples.

If he confesses repeatedly and without hesitation to the divinity of Jesus, is it fair to infer the contrary? The law of consistency demands that the overall interpretation be a recognition that he affirms the divinity of Jesus, taking into account his many statements on the theme. The worst that can be said is that sometimes he expresses himself imprecisely. But it does not seem a fair inference to declare that he demonstrates notable discrepancies with the faith of the Church or that he teaches that the dogmatic developments affirming the divinity of Jesus have no continuity with the New Testament, since he explicitly acknowledges this continuity.

Now that it is settled that Sobrino confesses to the divinity of Jesus, it is also only right that the authors of the Notification recognize that it is important for theology to understand that the New Testament barely speaks about Jesus as God, while it speaks abundantly about Jesus as the Son of God. According to this initial primordial use, it is more appropriate to say that Jesus is the Son of God than to say God the Son. It means that when the question is raised about the way in which he is God, it is first appropriate to affirm with the New Testament that he is the only Son, and to only then move onto Nicea and affirm that he is God from God. Nicea is very current because today many are returning to say (almost to the point of being trendy) that Jesus is a son of God like all of us, which is obviously in contradiction with the faith of the Church (and also what Sobrino expresses). Because of this, the Christological councils continue to be normative for our faith. But when one is in calm possession of faith, it is necessary and pertinent to keep insisting—like Sobrino does—that Jesus is the Son of God and that his constant and unique relationship with God must be a fundamental focus, since Jesus came to introduce us into this relationship.

We can say the same thing about the dilemma that the Notification creates between “*exemplum* and *sacramentum* (gift)” in order to explain the value of the death of Jesus. We cite, for example, a text from Sobrino where both concepts are subsumed and affirmed simultaneously: “This crucified man has lived humanly, with love, and so the cross is the radical expression of Jesus’ self-giving *throughout his* life. Also, and above all, this life of Jesus’ can in itself be offered as salvation... The inviting exemplariness of Jesus (“their eyes fixed on Jesus”) is efficacious historical soteriology” (*Christ the Liberator*, 305-06).¹ For Sobrino, the efficacy comes from this self-giving and definitive love. Isn’t this what was affirmed by the paragraph from Trent cited in the Notification explaining the derivation of the saving efficacy: “from the excessive love with

which he loved us”? Is it possible to go beyond this central affirmation, which Sobrino shares? Aren’t all the other academic affirmations subsumed in this —saying not more, but less, and confusingly at that?

There is so much more that we could say about his interpretation of the Christological councils. We believe not only that he appraises them very highly, but that he takes from them very pertinent things that others usually do not make use of, and, in this manner, he makes their pertinence more recognized than other authors do.

Now then, complementarily, what author has failed to note what Sobrino has noted about elements of abstraction and ahistoricity in the councils? He could have said much more: he could have mentioned that the councils neglect the Gospels. That these omissions are very explainable, and that even with these omissions, the legacy of the councils are indispensable for our current faith, no Catholic, including Sobrino, denies. But isn’t it crucial to point out the deficiencies, as Sobrino insists upon doing, because these deficiencies encourage the forgetting of the concrete humanity of Jesus (who is the Way who leads to life) and the forgetting of our present suffering humanity (without whose solidarity we won’t be saved)?

More, the statements in the Notification concerning the Kingdom fill us with stupor. How is it possible to say that it is erroneous to affirm that the mediator remits “something that is distinct from Jesus himself”? Don’t God (in the biblical sense of the Father), the rest of humanity, and creation all enter into the Kingdom? Isn’t it obvious that the mediator remits something relatively distinct from himself, insofar as he himself obviously enters the Kingdom — something that Sobrino affirms— although the Kingdom is not reduced to him? Doesn’t the Notification itself say the same thing immediately following: “In a certain sense, Jesus Christ and the Kingdom are identified”? If they are identified in a certain way, then that means they are identified in one particular way. That is, they are not completely identified with each other in all ways.

Isn’t reducing the Kingdom to the Mediator a way of reducing, of minimizing, this same Mediator, who lived constantly in reference to his Father and to others? Doesn’t it fall into pietism, in contrast to the will of the Savior himself, who didn’t want Mary Magdalene to remain at his feet, but instead sent her to the disciples as a messenger to continue the same mission for which the Father had sent him? Isn’t it the Lord himself—who draws everything to himself—who sent Jesus into the world to proclaim that the Kingdom had arrived with his coming?

The *third point* that we wish to emphasize concerns the poor and, more concretely, the Church of the Poor as an epistemological setting. This point, unlike the previous ones, is characteristic of Sobrino, even though it is obviously not only his but is shared by a large part of Latin American theology, and it flows back to the previous points. It is a systematic perspective.

In regards to the hermeneutics of his texts, I do not see how it is possible to interpret the Church of the Poor—the same about which John XXIII spoke and believed should become a focal point of the Council—as a distinct church rather than as an aspect of the universal Church. This is because the Gospel and the Kingdom belong to the poor. Because of this, they have heard this Beatitude and have believed that, in this, they constitute the heart of the people of God. The poor evidently feel that they belong in the Church and they do not attempt to make a competition out of the distinct ministries or charisms. Neither does the Church of the Poor, understood as a call within the One Church. The Church of the Poor is an element that, with its very presence, questions without ceasing the entire people of God (it also questions the very same poor), asking about its primordial obligation to pay attention to the poor. The poor are the “sacraments” of the Lord in as much as the relation that we have to them is the same relation we have to the Lord, and this relationship decides our eternal fate.

How is it possible to deny that the Gospels—read in the breast of the only Church and in the breast of the Tradition—open with an unusual purity and transcendence, read from the poor with spirit and, even further, with them? What does the faith of the Church have against affirming that to do theology from the evangelical commitment with them helps to maintain the evangelical transcendence of theology?

The theologian is not a specialist but an experienced expert, that is to say, the theologian is a person of faith, a faith lived in a church community. If theology needs to be inserted in this community of faith, what location is more privileged from which to speak than that of the poor with spirit, that is to say, the poor who have received the Beatitude of the poor and are inspired to live with gratitude because of it?

In the Explanatory Note, it is apparent that the authors perhaps do not appreciate the difference between speaking about the poor in the proper context and embracing the poor as a perspective from which to focus on everything. Obviously it is not the only perspective, but it is

an indispensable perspective. If the poor are only relevant in a particular place or conversation, that is, in the discipline of social ethics, one can spend most of one's time completely unconcerned about the poor. However, if it is a perspective, it is always necessary to take them into account, and it is impossible to live tranquilly in this situation of sin.

It is evident that for anyone who reads Sobrino that his perspective is profound, and that, for this reason, it is an unsettling theology. But it is unsettling more because his perspective does not unilateralize other perspectives, but, on the contrary, it raises questions that appear in the sources and that, without this perspective, would tend to be passed over.

Therefore, it is not without reason that many may fear that the Notification, at its base and perhaps unconsciously, seeks to neutralize the questioning role of this type of theology, which is certainly very healthy for the Church and for theology.

Many years ago, Jon Sobrino told me that, as long as the Church continued considering the Gospel as the source of life of the Church and of theology, those who disagreed with Liberation Theology would never be able to get rid of it, because it always strives to anchor itself in the Gospel. It is clear that intention never equals complete realization. But it does speak of a truly orthodox direction. We believe it has not been condemned for this reason, even though inferences have been made concerning its statements and it has been suggested that they could give rise to erroneous interpretations. These are disputable inferences, like the statements of the author. These inferences should not attempt to supplant either the sources or the Magisterium.

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Notes:

¹*La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999. Eng. trans. *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001.

Contingent Christologies

I was excited to read in the first volume of Jon Sobrino's Christology, in the very first pages in fact, a quotation taken from Christian Duquoc, saying:

Christologies are transitory constructions that use contingent conceptual instruments. (*Jesucristo liberador*, I, UCA Editores, San Salvador 1991, p. 20), quoting Duquoc: *Mesianismo de Jesús y discreción de Dios. Ensayo sobre los límites de la cristología*, Madrid 1985, p. 11).

To grab the attention of the listeners, or the readers in the case of a book, a classical rule of oratory is to begin by exalting the qualities of the material to be expounded upon. But this quotation of Duquoc's, appropriated by Sobrino, would seem to do just the opposite. Instead of praising or extolling the matter to be taken up in the book, Christology, it would seem to downgrade it, placing it anew in all humility in front of the scholar. This should be understood in several senses.

First of all, the quotation states that Christology is "transitory," that is, it moves, it is on its way, it does not keep still or motionless. This is because Christology is like a living being: it rises, it is developed, it evolves, it grows, it reproduces, and often, it gets sick and even dies. (Sometimes, and this should be especially so in Christology—it rises to new life!) It really is "like a living being" because it lives in the heads—and hearts—of living beings, of human beings. This is why Christology, in its short history on this planet, has never failed to evolve and transform itself from the very beginning. Christology is really alive and in this sense, it is "transitory"—it evolves, it changes, it moves, and one day it disappears from the horizon.

Since Christologies are transitory, from this it can easily be inferred that their contents will also be transitory—at least most of their contents. That is to say, the very contents of these transitory Christologies are also transitory. Christological assertions are not eternal: they are not written in stone, but in human words belonging to different societies that are human and alive, and in categories of thought created by human cultures which are in permanent evolution. That is why, even if they want to remain identical, held up in the past, as if they were mummified or fossilized, they cannot remain still or motionless.

Life itself spins and revolves around them, looking at them from different angles or points of view, obtaining new glints and reflections from their kaleidoscopes, and continuously gives new meanings to their assertions, which because of this, stop being identical with themselves. The affirmations, the expressions, and the formulas are born, grow, reproduce, get sick, and die—and then they stay there, lying in state, like lifeless bodies, no matter how much we would like to disguise them.

Hence, it can be deduced that there is not only “one” Christology, which would be “the Christology,” but there are many Christologies coming in historical succession. They march as in a relay race through the centuries, but in such a way that the torch or guiding light does not always pass gently and peacefully from hand to hand, from one generation to another. Rather, it often happens that diverse Christologies, and even adverse Christologies, divide and confront each other, serving opposite interests, expressing themselves in different languages, and surrendering to different philosophies. Throughout this process, sometimes converging, sometimes diverging, they all are called to contribute to the plurality and richness of Christian life.

The Duquoc-Sobrino quotation says something more: the conceptual instruments used by Christology are “contingent conceptual instruments...” We could say that this affects Christology in itself, in its way of operating, although the concrete contents of a given Christology may really be true. The quotation says that, even in this case—no matter how correct the conclusions may be—the procedure by which they have been developed is not absolutely reliable, since it utilizes necessarily contingent elements. This is where the paradox is: The instruments used by Christologies are “necessarily contingent.” They are never “necessary” (“necessary” is that which could not have been otherwise...). They are what they are, but to a great extent, they could have been other ones. They are what they are, but they could have been

different ones, probably even better ones. At any rate, they are always limited by that particular ontological limitation called “contingency.”

At this point, with wisdom, it has to be remembered that what is contingent can never be absolute. It is relative. To recognize the absolute as absolute and the relative as relative is not relativism, but realism and logical accuracy.

Let us take a further step. The Duquoc-Sobrino quotation does not explicitly state—but we can obviously understand it this way—that if Christologies are “constructions,” then they are also “human constructions.” Logically, God does not develop Christology, and likewise He does not develop theology. The fact that Christologies are human constructions implies that they have to be taken as they come: as human products, they are formed by social developments and cultural environments, just as human beings are.

That they are “human constructions” means also that, even though they attempt to deal with the most divine reality, they are not solely divine, but they continue being human, and oftentimes, all too human.

Although my readers may be surprised by what I am trying to convey in this writing, the topic is really very old. This topic, placed, not in the context of Christology, but its covering umbrella, theology, is something that has been well known for ages, practically forever. All language, because it is linked to a culture, a philosophy, an idiom, a society (or several of them)...is contingent, limited, inevitably unfit to grasp the reality of God or to pretend to provide an appropriate explanation of Divinity.

St. John of the Cross, following the tradition of the mystics on this point, goes so far as to state that whatever we say, think, or imagine about God is probably false. Therefore, neither Duquoc, nor Sobrino, nor myself now, are particularly conspiring against Christology. Rather, we are now explicitly applying what has always been said of it, inasmuch as it is part of theology.

Everything we have said so far can be understood through a famous adage of classical logic which states that the quality of the conclusions can never be better than that of the original premises. If one starts from uncertain or false premises, one cannot deduce certain and true conclusions. From contingent premises, one cannot deduce necessary conclusions—ontologically speaking. This is valid also for

Christology and for its conclusions. Because it is a human construction—transitory and using contingent conceptual instruments—its conclusions can never “surpass the quality of its premises.”

Apart from this, we should remember that Christianity is very familiar with a plurality of Christologies, although there are some people who do not want to take this into consideration. Throughout history, this has always been so. In recent years, special emphasis has been given to this, coming from different fields. From the very moment when Christology was born, there were multiple Christologies. In the New Testament itself we can find several different, even very different, Christologies that, in large part, are simply incompatible with each other. Yet, all of them were tolerated, and all of them were appreciated, loved, and enthusiastically and personally experienced by the faithful, to the point where, under their inspiration, Christians were happy to give the greatest sacrifice, their very lives.

If this—the plurality of Christologies—existed from the very beginning, then what is the problem? What is keeping Christologies from living side-by-side, showing the spiritual quality of each Christology by the quality of life of their adherents?

This reflection has been prompted by the present situation in which liberation theology is being questioned. After all that has been said, we might ask ourselves the following question: What is the point of continuing to think of only one Christology, to which all should allegedly submit themselves? Is there anybody, by chance, who thinks that there is indeed only one permanent, eternal, necessary, non-transitory, and non-contingent Christology, perhaps because that Christology is not considered as a human construction? The more we recognize that Christologies are contingent, it seems all the more necessary to have a sense of humor.

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Epilogue

I

I have been asked to write the epilogue to a book that I have barely had time to read. I have accepted, since it gives me the opportunity to thank the many people from many places who have written me during these days: companions, religious, theologians, members of communities and other churches, some bishops, and agnostics who, in some ways, are captivated by Jesus. I would have liked to respond individually, but you will understand that this has not been possible for me.

I would especially like to thank the authors of this book. In a very brief time, they have written it with a lucidity and friendship for which I am grateful. I am happy to perceive a spirit of companionship—*esprit de corps*—throughout this book, which can only bring good things. Each author has his or her own theological interests, and the passage of time has permitted theology in Latin America to develop in many different ways. However, throughout the book I see a great tradition that we should maintain, update, and improve upon, the tradition of “liberation theology.”

We all know how much debate there is about whether liberation theology is in good health or has already been buried in the ground. I ask these questions myself. But in many ways I feel these immortal words continue to resonate: “I have seen the affliction of my people and I have heard their cry because of their taskmaster. I have come down to liberate them” (Ex 3:7-8). This is our world. And this is our God.

“God” and the “suffering people” are ultimate realities. As Dom Pedro Casaldáliga reminds us, “everything is relative except for God

and hunger.” Separately, neither is ultimate nor absolute. But they become ultimate and absolute when they enter into relationship with each other, and I believe that this is the originality of our faith. There is a great temptation to separate them, or at least to keep them at a prudential distance from each other. But although we try, it is not easy: “What God has joined together”—and He did it by joining Himself with the poor, the weak, and the suffering—“let no man try to separate” (Cfr. Mc 10:9).

The spirit of this theology continues to be an inspiration: that indigenous peoples—Africans above all—not die from abandonment and silence, that there are those who never give up their struggle to defend human rights and poor Mother Earth. And it is enough to remind ourselves of the distinguished group of very recent martyrs who have taken up a central place in this theology. Its spirit inspires faith in a God of the poor, and it pushes us to follow His Son, who was “not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb 2:11). In the expert judgment of Leonardo Boff, “this theology is alive in all the churches that take seriously the option for the poor, against poverty, and in favor of life and liberty.”

II

I have not been able to read the book thoroughly, but I would like to say a few words about the title *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, illustrated in Maximino Cerezo’s beautiful drawing. Let us begin with a reflection on “the poor.”

Those of my generation will remember a famous book from the Sixties with the pertinent title “*A Vueltas con Dios*”. (We may paraphrase this Spanish phrase as “journeying with God, asking about Him, trying to understand Him, over and over again, without ever coming to total rest”). God is mystery, simultaneously sacred and close. If we let Him be God, without manipulating Him or domesticating Him, we are always “a vueltas” with Him. This is because, as Karl Rahner said, theology only says one thing, “that the mystery remains mystery forever.”

The mysteriousness of the mystery of God remains. But in addition to Him, we have discovered the mystery of the poor. This is in the Scriptures, in Christian traditions, and in other venerable religions. In Medellín, to put a date on it, we were permitted to see it (*opthe*, cfr. 1Cor 15:5) as an inexhaustible mystery, powerful light, and inviting exigency.

Since then, in a very real and existential manner, God, while remaining the God of mystery, has made a space for the mystery of the poor. For this reason, whether we do it with better or worse fortune, we must continue “a vueltas with the poor.” Because of this, I am happy that they are in the title of the book.

Questions such as what does it mean to be poor, how many poor are there, why are they poor, and how long will they be poor are more categorical. Some debate these questions in order to more deeply understand the reality of the poor. Others do this to politely exclude and hide them from our sight. The theologians, men and women, who have journeyed “a vueltas with the poor” have given me much insight. On a personal level, I have formulated the following conclusions in an attempt to connect the poor with our reality, the reality of those of us who are not poor.

The poor are those who can never take it for granted that they will be alive from one moment to the next. I do not share this uncertainty, and therefore I am not one of them. The poor are those who have (almost) all the powers of this world against them. They present us with a dialectical dimension. By their very existence, they make us answer the question: “Am I for them, or am I against them?” The poor are those who do not have names. They are the eight hundred thousand people of Kibera, crowded together with practically no latrines. If you will indulge me, the poor are those who do not have a calendar. Nobody knows what 10-7 is although everyone knows what 9-11 is. 10-7 is the 7th of October, the day in which the democracies bombed Afghanistan as a response to 9-11. Without a name and without a calendar, the poor do not have an existence. They simply are not. They ask us a question: What words do we say or not say about them so that they may be?

But the poor exist. In them, a great mystery shines forth: their “primordial holiness.” With fear and trembling I have written “*extra pauperes nulla salus*,” “outside the poor, there is no salvation.” They bring salvation.

Of course, everything I have said can be debated. What I want to insist upon, at least in a Christian theology, is that we cannot dismiss the poor with the stroke of a pen nor can we place them on a secondary level, even if we insist on such a noble and necessary thing as behaving ethically towards them. I have already stated the reason: in them, a mystery is revealed. They offer a mystagogy to introduce us into the mystery of God. And it works in reverse: from the *Theos*, we better approach their mystery.

Monseñor Romero knew the sentence of Irenaeus, *Gloria Dei vivens homo*, and a few weeks before his assassination, he reformulated it in this manner: *Gloria Dei vivens pauper*. The consequence is that, although it sounds unpardonably abstract, “the poor are those who, by being alive, are the glory of God.” Said in more intimate language, God is beside Himself with joy and is delighted when He sees these millions of human beings—impoverished, depreciated, ignored, disappeared and murdered—breathe, eat, and dance, live with each other, lend a hand to those of us who are not poor, and pardon even those who have oppressed them for centuries. They trust God as their loving father and mother, and they are delighted that Jesus is their brother.

Before continuing, I would like to make two clarifications. The complete citation of Irenaeus is *Gloria Dei, vivens homo. Gloria autem hominis, visio Dei*, “the glory of God is a living person, and the glory of human beings is the vision of God.” Because it is what Monseñor Romero did, and in order to avoid misinterpretations, I want to emphasize that Romero also spoke about what the glory of the poor really is. As far as I know, he did not paraphrase Irenaeus to the letter, as in the first part of the sentence, but he did so in fact. During those same days of February in 1980, in the middle of death and destruction, preaching in the midst of the poor and addressing himself to them, he said, “No human being has self-knowledge before having the encounter with God...Brothers and sisters, tell me that my preaching today will bear fruit in the form of the encounter of each and every one of us with God!” Neither Irenaeus nor Romero saw human beings without God, or God without human beings. Monseñor Romero made it even more concrete. He walked “a vueltas with God” and “a vueltas with the poor.”

Secondly, Irenaeus and Romero are both illustrious members of the tradition, measured not by calendars, but by quality. They were both bishops. Martyrs? Certainly Romero, although it is not known for sure whether Irenaeus was, although the bishop of Lyon who he succeeded was. Saints? Irenaeus is a canonized saint. At the present time, Romero is only a servant of God, although for the poor and those with good hearts, he is “Saint Romero of America.”

The sentence from this Christian bishop and martyr, *gloria Dei vivens pauper*, is as exalted and worthy as the sentences of Irenaeus or Augustine. And it is grafted onto a greater tradition that runs throughout Scripture and the history of the Church: the tradition of the dignity of the poor. The poor have Matthew 25 in their favor, because Christ

wanted to identify himself with them in a special way. In the Middle Ages they were called “vicars of Christ.” Puebla says that, regardless of their personal and moral situation, God “defends and loves” the poor, and in that order. When it is necessary to “defend” someone, it is because there are enemies lying in wait, ready to strike. Puebla identifies these enemies as the idols of wealth and power. The poor speak to us of the “struggle of the Gods.”

III

The centrality of the poor is what first came to my mind when I saw the book’s cover. It suggested to me that *gloria Dei vivens pauper* can serve as a “brief formula for Christianity” in today’s world. But there is more.

In Maximino’s drawing, the poor—men and women—hang from a cross. This is not a metaphor that economists use, and “crucified people” is not politically correct. Hanging from the cross may be artistic language. It is also the language that some of us theologians use, although not everywhere. The poor are the impoverished and they die—slowly or violently—merely because they are poor. Every day, one hundred thousand people die of hunger, and every seven seconds, a child under ten years old dies of hunger. Because hunger can be overcome, “every child who dies of hunger in today’s world has been murdered” according to Jean Ziegler, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on the Right to Food.

The cross is not a metaphor. It signifies death and cruelty, to which Jesus’ cross adds innocence and defenselessness. To Christian theologians, the cross brings us back to Jesus of Nazareth. He is the crucified one. By calling the poor of this world the “crucified people” they are not only rescued from their anonymity, but they are granted maximum dignity. “You are crucified like Jesus at the cross,” said Monseñor Romero to terrorized campesinos, survivors of the Aguilares massacre. “The crucified people” are always “the” sign of the times, wrote Ignacio Ellacuría.

The title of the book tells us precisely what we have to do: “take them down from the cross.” Saint Ignatius of Loyola—we are now commemorating the 450th year of his death—asked that the exercerent recognize himself as a sinner and that he ask three questions in front of the crucified one: “what have I done, what am I doing, and what am

I going to do for Christ.” Among us—historicizing this tradition—we ask ourselves “what have we done to cause our peoples to be crucified, what are we doing to get them down from the cross, and what are we going to do to resurrect them.” There is no *hubris* of any type here. There is recognition of our own sin, a humble expression of conversion, and a grateful decision to bring salvation. In philosophy, this is called “taking charge of reality.” In theology this expresses “the mission of Christians,” that is, *praxis*.

It is necessary to add something even more important and even more forgotten. Taking them down from the cross is not just compassion, an option for the poor. It is returning to them a small portion of what they have given to us. Without knowing it, because of who they are and because of the values they possess, they save us, humanize us, and pardon us. By carrying their reality, a heavy cross, we feel carried by them. They are a blessing.

IV

Liberation theology develops many important elements. I will only remind my readers that it speaks of God as the absolute mystery and it insists upon a message of scandalous and salvific good news: in the words of Leonardo Boff, *transcendence* has become *trans-descendence*, in order to become *con-descendence*—refuge, pardon, love, and liberation.

It speaks of Christ as the sacrament of the Father. In Him, divinity is made present as Sonship. And He is a liberator. On this earth, He is the liberator in His utopic announcement of the kingdom and His prophetic denunciation of the anti-kingdom. He is the liberator in His message of Abba, the God who gives us refuge and saves and frees us from ourselves. He is the liberator who loves to the very end, to the cross, and He is the hope and promise that the executioner will not triumph over his victim. In His way of being, He is the liberator, compassionate, respectful, and dignifying. And He is the liberator who allows Himself to be evangelized by a poor widow.

I will not continue with any more elements, but I would now like to comment on some formal problems of this theology.

The first is that there may be correct and incorrect parts, parts that can offer salvation, and parts that may pose dangers. I would like to make a brief commentary about this.

On a personal level, I am ready—as I think all of us are ready—to fix any error I may have made. I do not see any problem with this. What I see as more necessary is that everyone take proper responsibility, according to their position, be it administrative-hierarchical, intellectual, academic, or the *sensus fidei* of the people of God, to ensure that faith be alive and life-giving, and that theology be truthful, true, and salvific.

It seems inadequate to me to think in terms of having a monopoly on the truth, especially as we stand before “the mystery of Jesus Christ.” Rather, I insist upon dialogue and fraternity. During these past days, several groups have expressed their opinions about my Christology. The ecclesiastics of the Doctrine of Faith have done this, as well as a great many other prestigious, responsible theologians from many places. We hope that this will give rise to a true dialogue and that an attitude of doing Christology “among all” will prosper, with each instance retaining their proper role.

They refer us back—and we refer ourselves back—to the faith of the Church and tradition. I believe that, in substance, this is an obvious thing that we all accept. But it does not seem adequate to me to refer us back in such a manner to the past, as if the past were jealous of and superior to everything new. This would be forcing the God of today to remain obscured in the shadows. If you will allow me to return to what I said previously, I like to think that Irenaeus is not jealous of Romero. Certainly Romero does not feel superior to Irenaeus. He feels rather thankful.

Syncretic dialogue between places, cultures, and churches—and more and more between religions—seems very important to me. But so is diachronic dialogue within a tradition that extends throughout the centuries. Sometimes it will be difficult and have its dangers, but I think that we have to take the present seriously. Let us permit God to be God and allow Him to speak his word today also. Like the Council says, the people of God “labor to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, exigencies, and desires in which it has a part” (*Gaudium et Spes* 11). To see God in our world today we need to take all necessary precautions, but *theo*-logy should be alert to the God who continues to pass through our world.

They warn us about dangers, and of course we all want to avoid falling into dangers. Sometimes it is easy to detect them, but other times it is not so simple. If a Christology puts at risk the transcendental relationship of Jesus with God and his relationship—for some also transcendental or at least essential—with the victims and the oppressed,

then the danger is obviously something negative. But if it “endangers” an image of Jesus who favors everything that is power, wealth, and worldly honors, then this is a positive danger. It “endangers” the human sinfulness that also threatens theology.

Among people and institutions, there is a diversity of opinion about what is dangerous and what is not. Karl Rahner with his theology and Monseñor Romero with his homilies were dangerous for some and a blessing for others. This is something that all reasonable people should decide for themselves, even when there are institutions, in the public forum, which can objectively pass judgment. Personally and existentially, I trust the judgments of those who most resemble Jesus of Nazareth. The martyrs are very trustworthy.

I say this directly. If a Christology animates the poor of this world, victims of terrible sins—including ones committed by so-called believers—to maintain their faith in God and in His Christ, and to have dignity and hope, then this Christology will have its limitations of course, but I do not consider it to be dangerous in the world of the poor, but rather something positive. However, it is possible that it will be seen—and it has been seen—as dangerous in other worlds.

We confront a delicate question: when is a Christology not only conceptually correct but also pastoral and existentially Christian? During these days, many people have wanted to thank the believers and theologians from our part of the world for helping them to discover Jesus as Good News. They see no danger here.

I want to end this portion with a reflection on the sources and settings of theology. In my book “Jesus the Liberator” I wrote with clarity that: “Christology’s specific sources are God’s revelation, embodied in texts from the past, the New Testament in particular, and its authoritative interpretation by the magisterium.” But having said this, it is evident that theology is not done in a historical vacuum, but rather it is done, whether it is recognized or not, in the middle of concrete personal, social, cultural, and existential realities. One must always be situated in a particular reality to read the sources of revelation and reflect on them.

Following Ellacuría, the most adequate setting to do theology is the place where the God of Jesus manifested Himself in a special way. It is important to do theology here because the Father wants it this way, and it is the best place for living out the faith in Jesus and for the corresponding praxis of following Him.

“Setting” means the *reality* from which the believer believes and the theologian reflects. “Setting” thus understood is not at all opposed to “sources” of theological knowledge—scripture, tradition, and the authoritative magisterium. “Setting” and “source” are formally distinct realities, although they do not need to exclude each other. Rather, they demand each other. What I have tried to do in my Christology is to find the setting where it is possible to most effectively and most Christianly concretize the contents that emanate from these sources. That is why Ignacio Ellacuría said:

It is useful to distinguish, at least methodologically, “setting” and “source”. The distinction is not strict, still less exclusive, since in a way the setting is the source inasmuch as it enables the source to yield one thing or another, so that, thanks to the setting and by virtue of it, particular contents become relevant and really present.

This seems very sensible to me. And history confirms it. Luke 6:20-26 is read in a very different manner in the first world than in the third world.

V

The last word on the cover is “liberation.” We could also talk about “salvation” and “redemption.” More and more, I am inclined to talk about “humanization.” Each word has a slightly different matrix, but all of them point to something fundamental: we need an urgent solution to the reality that we live in, and this solution will not be easy. Ignacio Ellacuría told us this on November 6, 1989, ten days before he was murdered:

What I have called on other occasions coprohistoric analysis—the study of the feces of our civilization—demonstrates that this civilization is gravely ill and that, to avoid a fatal and devastating outcome, it is necessary to change it from inside itself [...] Only by being utopian and hopeful can one believe and have the energy to work with all the poor and oppressed of the world to reverse history, subvert it, and launch it in another direction.

Not everyone has a reason to share this analysis—it is bleak. Not everyone wants to accept the solution—it is scandalous. But it is good to know what is necessary to do, because, at the minimum, it is the truly fundamental option of the Church. In his speech at Louvain, Monseñor Romero spoke of this option in the form of a calling, an election. He formulated it this way: “To be in favor of life or in favor of death. With great clarity, we see that neutrality is impossible. We serve the life of Salvadorans, or we are complicit in their death.”

A Church that chooses this option is not just the people of God. Among us, it has been a glorious Church of martyrs. It brings to fullness what began as a seed in the words of Cardinal Lercaro and John XXIII: “the Church of the Poor.” Monseñor Romero talked about this on Christmas Eve in 1978:

The Church preaches in the midst of the poor, and we are never ashamed to say the Church of the Poor, because among the poor Christ wanted to put his classroom of redemption.

The Christology of liberation must deal with many issues, but it should contribute significantly to the creation of that Church. In this way it will overcome some of the demons of our time, in society and in the churches: *doceticism*—living in unreality, living in abundance and pomp in a world dying of hunger, and *gnosticism*—looking for salvation in the esoteric and not in the following of Jesus, a faith and liturgy *lite*, when reality demands an unrelenting and durable faith. There is another Christology that we have to strongly reject. This is the Christology that, confronted with the crucified Christ present in Latin America—as in a gigantic scene out of Matthew 25—says, like the Grand Inquisitor, “Lord, go and come no more.”

We have a different hope. Our hope is that the Christ of Medellín will come back and remain with our continent. We hope He will appear with many other effective witnesses from our churches and other religions. We hope that we may know Him better so that we may more love and follow Him.

Jon SOBRINO

April 30, 2007

We express our fraternity and sororality by doing what Jon Sobrino has always done quite seriously and with compassion: reflect on our faith in Christ in the context of peoples who are crucified. That is what has always been, is now and above all is determined to continue being, our "liberation Christology," which we all write, do, and live: Yes, a militant theology that struggles to "get the poor down from the cross," without pretending neutrality or a hypocritical equidistance.

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