

## “STRANGE FRUIT”: BLACK SUFFERING/WHITE REVELATION

CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK

*Christian eschatology provides a compelling mystical-political framework both for unmasking the historical visage of racism and for calling White believers to conversion and racial solidarity. Juxtaposing the memoria passionis of the Black community with Vatican II's mysticism of communion with the dead, the author asks what it would mean for White Christians to place themselves under the judgment and mercy of the Black "cloud of witnesses." The author proposes three moments in the complex dynamic of conversion in Whites, a life-long process in which Blacks, both the living and the dead, must hold some degree of agency. The essay concludes with a meditation on purgatory.*

“THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL,” writes Reinhold Niebuhr, “is apprehended at the very limit of all systems of meaning. It is only from that position that it has the power to challenge the complacency of those who have completed life too simply, and the despair of those who can find no meaning in life.”<sup>1</sup> This article is an attempt to place Catholic theology, or more accurately, the *White* Catholic imagination, “at the very limit” of its customary and complacent systems of meaning, here represented by 400 years of Black suffering at the hands of Whites in the United States. The song “Strange Fruit,” which Billie Holiday recorded in 1939 and sang until her death in 1959, serves here as a figure for what is a radical limit of meaning, a shadowy realm of *unmeaning*, for most White Christians and Catholics in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949) 170.

Black bodies swinging in the southern trees  
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees  
 Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth.<sup>2</sup>

The images confronting the White listener in this song—inseparable from their embodiment in Holiday’s performance—share something of what feminist theology calls the “abject”: “that site of simultaneous fascination and repulsion based on proximity to something that neither maintains the distance of an object nor attains identity with oneself as a subject.”<sup>3</sup> For Christians whose imaginations have been deeply formed by the liturgical remembrance of Jesus’ passion, “Strange Fruit” cannot help but resonate in the same disarmingly “negative space”<sup>4</sup> as the haunting Negro spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” For in the lynching site, just as in the darkness of Good Friday, we behold in fear and trembling the historical irruption of irrational violence and evil, the senseless horror of “man’s inhumanity to man.” Like the cross of Jesus, “Strange Fruit” functions as a locus of a negative contrast experience: it is revelatory in the first place of *what should not be*.<sup>5</sup>

But quite unlike the Holy Week narrative of Jesus’ violent death, which ushers its hearers year after year into a glorious Easter coda, “Strange Fruit” in no way allows for such a latent promise and hope. There is no remainder concept that permits any honest participant in the song to ap-

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Allan (a.k.a. Abel Meeropol), “Strange Fruit” (1940); Billie Holiday, *Essential Recordings*, Hip-O Records B0007X9U2Y.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) 23, citing Julia Kristeva. The abject sets us “on edge” (at the *eschaton*)—a privileged locus, as Niebuhr insists, for grasping Christian revelation.

<sup>4</sup> On “negative capability” and “negative space” see Nathan Mitchell, “The Cross That Spoke,” in *The Cross in Christian Tradition: From Paul to Bonaventure*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer (New York: Paulist, 2000) 72–92, at 87.

<sup>5</sup> The revelatory dimension of a negative contrast experience—as in liturgical, artistic, or narrative *anamnesis*—resides in its integral, participatory (not merely passive or “objective”) dynamic: it is deep, evocative, moving. Just as the Holy Week liturgy is not merely performance but engaged participation, anyone who listens honestly to “Strange Fruit” is drawn not merely into a performance, but into communion with a living and ongoing history, i.e., a real presence. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 5–6; *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 153–54; *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 621–22. For the transcendental framework operative here, and generally presupposed in this study, see Thomas F. O’Meara, “Toward a Subjective Theology of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 401–27; note especially the language of God as “Presence” and as “Eschatological Summoner” (408–12).

prehend some fragment of meaning (cleansing, redemptive, esthetic) in such a scene of horrific suffering. Indeed, Holiday's rendering painfully dismantles any temptation to soothe the song's sting through some cleansing counternarrative, as in, "Well, thank God things are much better now." Above all, the song disintegrates the White mythos of America, the myth of innocence, in "the sudden smell of burning flesh." Further still, like gas chambers in the heart of Christian Europe, the specter of magnolia trees turned into gallows in "the gallant south" casts an accusatory shadow over White American Christianity and White Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

"Strange Fruit" thus serves to dramatically frame the questions motivating this investigation. Can White American Christians reconcile their own histories and, indeed, their faith in the gospel, with their eyes fully open on this "strange and bitter crop"? In Catholic terms, what would it mean for us to live in "communion" with this particular "cloud of witnesses"? For at least four decades Black theologians have been asking their White colleagues to subject themselves to such questions.<sup>7</sup> They have asked us, in other words, to place ourselves at the Niebuhrian limit of every racist, apathetic, individualist, or complacent framework of White hope and, in doing so, to transcend all culturally constructed limitations on Christian solidarity and love. The question at hand then is this: Does the *memoria passionis* of the Black community, which haunts the graveyards at the edge of every White system of meaning, hold revelatory, even salvific meaning for White believers? Can and should the dangerous memory of Black suffering function somehow as a source of White revelation? The answer, I believe, is a firm yes, and this article attempts to justify that answer.<sup>8</sup>

### METHOD AND CONTEXT

To locate salvific meaning in the disruptive narratives of the Black community is, in the first place, to accept the "hermeneutical role of the oppressed" with a rather deadly seriousness. It is to try to fuse into one

<sup>6</sup> Black Catholic historian Cyprian Davis writes: "Slavery is the anvil on which the African American Catholic community was forged. Contrary to what many Catholics think, the Catholic church in the South was implicated in slavery as an institution among the laity, the religious orders, and all ranks of the clergy. Black Catholic slaves supplied the labor and the skilled workmanship that built the antebellum Catholic church" (*The History of Black Catholics in the United States* [New York: Crossroad, 1990] 119).

<sup>7</sup> Of course the appeal reaches back much further than this if we recall the witness of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and all those who, from the earliest days of slavery, have prophetically confronted White Christians (and the framers of American democracy) with their sins and hypocrisy.

<sup>8</sup> To justify is not the same as to prove. As an exploration in eschatology, my thesis appeals above all to the realm of religious hope and imagination.

imaginative landscape the Black memory of the ancestors with the church's memory of Jesus, that is, to behold in this "strange fruit" no less than "the hidden Christ."<sup>9</sup> I am suggesting not merely a rhetorical juxtaposition but an eschatological identification. If this identification is well outside the limits of customary "White" Christianity, it is decidedly *not* beyond the pale of the Catholic theological imagination, as John Connolly has shown. He has argued persuasively that Black theology challenges White theologians to move beyond a method of correlation to "paradigmatic reconstruction."<sup>10</sup> While he has attempted a "revision of the White American Catholic theology of revelation," I am attempting a *re-visioning* of Catholic eschatology, with special attention to Vatican II's dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* and its vision of mystical communion with the dead.

With the word *re-visioning* I mean to highlight the somewhat fluid and even experimental tenor of eschatology, which plays out in images, hopes, and fears—that is, at the edges of rationality—more than in stable concepts. Part 1 of this article lays out the features of eschatology that I have in mind here, and begins to orient the experience of the Black community in that framework. Part 2 examines the strong resonance between Black theology and Catholic eschatology as expressed in *Lumen gentium*, the common thread being the notion of mystical-political communion with the ancestors, or "the living dead." Part 3 shifts the focus to White believers and considers the complex dialectic of guilt and reconciliation for White Christians: What might it mean for Whites to place themselves under the judgment and tutelage of the Black "cloud of witnesses"? In part 4, I suggest a "re-visioning" of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory that might account for the Christian hope in both a comprehensive and just salvation, a vision that imagines the lynched and "crucified peoples" not only as recipients but as agents in the eschatological "antechamber" of salvation.

The context of this study is the contemporary social and religious landscape of the United States. It hardly needs to be demonstrated that the centuries-long harvest of "strange fruit" continues to reverberate bitterly in

<sup>9</sup> As will be noted below, the association of Black suffering with Jesus does not rest on the uniqueness or essentialization of Black suffering, but rather its (ongoing) scope and intensity. William David Hart makes this point, while noting that prior to the Civil War the victims of lynching were predominantly White. See his review of *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* by Anthony B. Pinn (Fortress, 2003), in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004) 795–97.

<sup>10</sup> John R. Connolly, "Revelation as Liberation from Oppression: Black Theology's Challenge for American Catholic Theology," *Horizons* 26:2 (1999) 232–52, at 235. Connolly draws the terms "hermeneutical role of the oppressed" and "paradigmatic reconstruction" from Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2 vols., ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 1:74, 79, 84.

the memories, fortunes, and fears of countless Americans, peoples of every race and social background, in both urban and rural communities across the land. This article represents one constructive attempt to sow a seed of hope for racial reconciliation here “on earth,” just as it will be “in heaven,” where God beckons all peoples beyond a history still awash in the blood of too much senseless suffering.<sup>11</sup>

### ESCHATOLOGY AND THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

**“From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say,  
‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’” (Matt 4:17).**

Eschatology pertains not only to “things hoped for” at the end of days; it also looks for reverberations of ultimate hope now, for glimpses (“mustard seeds”) of salvation in the present. Indeed, many theologians argue that the symbols of Christian hope—resurrection, salvation, heaven, utopia—are meaningless, ideological, or flatly oppressive without foretastes or concrete realizations of them in history. The argument is especially persuasive from the viewpoint of those countless millions of persons relegated to the margins and trash heaps of history. Catholic womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland speaks for these “wretched of the earth” when she writes: “The anguish of the victims of history and the demands of authentic solidarity plead for the presence of the supernatural in the concrete.”<sup>12</sup> Copeland identifies the victims of history directly with the Mystical Body of Christ, “a body of broken bones.”<sup>13</sup> Her appeal to the symbol of the Mystical Body is just one example in contemporary Catholic theology of an

<sup>11</sup> The present context also includes my own social location as a White, middle class, Catholic theologian, whose upbringing has afforded all the privileges frequently and arbitrarily bestowed on my race in this country. In other words, when W. E. B. Du Bois describes the “double-consciousness” of being a Negro in America, I can only bow my head in distant wonder. Yet I have also known the joys of friendship and prayer alongside Blacks in integrated Catholic parishes. The value of this contact for me—first, simply as a human being, and second, as a theologian—can hardly be overstated. Moreover, sustained study of African American theological literature convinces me that its conjunction with Catholic thought should no longer come as a surprise. No one puts a finer point on this conviction than Jon Nilson in his address to colleagues at the Catholic Theological Society of America, “Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian” (*Origins* 33 [2003] 130–38).

<sup>12</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, “The New Anthropological Subject at the Heart of the Mystical Body of Christ,” in Catholic Theological Society of America, *Proceedings of the Annual Convention* 53 (1998) 24–47, at 44.

<sup>13</sup> The image is borrowed from Thomas Merton, who frequently identifies the victims of history with the broken body of Christ. See Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 70–79; also “Le Devot Christ,” in his *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 1.

appeal to “the eschatological at the core of the concrete.”<sup>14</sup> In her eschatological reading of history the ongoing scourges of racism, sexism, classism, and militarism mark no less than the crucifixion of Christ, never-ceasing, before our eyes.

Eschatology thus envisioned from the dark underbelly of history puts a marked emphasis on hope for transformation now, and less so in an absolute future shrouded from our eyes. For White Euro-American Christians—that is, those who by and large have enjoyed life from the upper tier of history—the view from below exposes the complacent fault line between privatistic hope (for me) and universal hope (for all the world). If our eyes are even half-open, in other words, the world’s suffering forces on us an obvious question: How big must my hope be? Is it enough to hope only for myself or my own “tribe,” for people I love and people that look and think like me? Should not Christian hope, rather, break open the imagination toward a truly catholic hope that includes the lost, the vanquished, the nonsubjects of history? What can believing or hoping in the resurrected Christ mean unless still-crucified persons also have a reason to hope, unless my hope becomes a non-egocentric hope for them?<sup>15</sup>

The hope I have in mind here is therefore both a mystical and a political hope. Thomas Merton, in a journal entry of March 7, 1964, wrote about this kind of hope:

I am coming to see clearly the great importance of the concept of “realized eschatology”—the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ *now* (rather than an eschatology focused on future cosmic events . . .). Realized eschatology is the heart of genuine Christian humanism and hence its tremendous importance for the Christian peace effort, for example. The presence of the Holy Spirit, the call to repentance, the call to see Christ in Man, the presence of the redeeming power of the Cross in the sacraments: these belong to the “last age,” which we are in. But all these do not reveal their significance without a Christian Mission to peace, the preaching of the Gospel of unity, peace, and mercy, the reconciliation of man with man, and so with God. . . . By this activity of the Church the work of God is mysteriously accomplished in the world.<sup>16</sup>

It is no accident that eschatology was foremost on Merton’s mind in 1964, nor that he inscribed these words just days after his grim reflection on “the stupor of the Church,” including its “treatment of Negroes in the

<sup>14</sup> Copeland, “New Anthropological Subject” 44.

<sup>15</sup> Thus Jon Sobrino writes: “Those for whom their own death is the basic scandal and hope of their own survival their greatest problem—however reasonable this may be—will have not a specifically Christian hope or one that stems from Jesus’ resurrection but an egocentric hope” (*Christ the Liberator* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001] 44).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) 216–17.

United States.”<sup>17</sup> To return to the concrete historical edge or *eschaton* of this study, let us dwell for a moment longer in this period of the early 1960s, and juxtapose two remarkable events that at the time may have seemed worlds apart.

### “A Cloud of Witnesses”

Forty years ago, all across the Southern United States, White policemen and national guardsmen were turning attack dogs, rifles, and water cannons onto unarmed protestors. Black churches were bombed, Black families terrorized in their homes, and young African American men were still being hung from trees. On April 16, 1963, sitting alone in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr., scribbled down one of the most important Christian ecclesiological documents of the 20th century. In the electrifying “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”—addressed to eight, prominent, White Southern clergymen—King refers to Christians who were suffering in the cause of justice as “leaven in the lump of the race.”<sup>18</sup>

Just two years later and a continent away, the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II employed the same biblical metaphor in describing itself and its relationship to the modern world: The church is “a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society”<sup>19</sup>; it is “a most certain seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.”<sup>20</sup> Even more striking is the mystical, eschatological vision of *Lumen gentium*. Here the church is described as a people of God living in palpable communion with all who have died before us in the faith: “In the lives of those companions of ours in the human condition who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ . . . God shows, vividly, to humanity his presence and his face. He speaks to us in them and offers us a sign of his kingdom, to which we are powerfully attracted, *so great a cloud of witnesses are we given* and such an affirmation of the truth of the Gospel.”<sup>21</sup>

Chapter seven of *Lumen gentium* puts forward a stunning vision of “the pilgrim church” walking in unity with all “the brothers and sisters who sleep in the peace of Christ.” Death in no way interrupts the communion

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. In an entry of May 16, 1961, Merton writes of King and the Montgomery bus boycott: “Certainly here is something Christian in the history of our time” (ibid. 173).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986) 289–302, at 300.

<sup>19</sup> *Gaudium et spes* no. 40, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery, rev. trans. in inclusive language (New York: Costello, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 9; see also no. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. no. 50 (emphasis added).

experienced between earthly “wayfarers” and those who have passed over, “but on the contrary, according to the constant faith of the church, this union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods.”<sup>22</sup> What is meant by this “exchange”? On this earthly side of death’s veil, so to speak, “those who dwell in heaven . . . add to the nobility of the worship that the church offers to God here on earth”; on the other side, “they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us.” But whether we are wayfarers on earth or in heaven, all of us “share in the same love of God and our neighbor, and we all sing the same hymn of glory to our God.”<sup>23</sup>

In the context of an American Catholic Church reeling from multiple crises, the language of *Lumen gentium* may sound embarrassingly lofty, even unrecognizable. Who today, we may ask, offers by their witness a sign of God’s reign such that “we are powerfully attracted” and drawn vividly to “the truth of the Gospel”? Where does the American church in our day find eschatological reverberations of the “image of Christ”? Where do we encounter Spirit-filled communities and saints? Surely a not-too-distant answer is found in that Birmingham jail cell 40 years ago, and, to be sure, in the uncommon faithfulness of Black Christians and Black Catholics in the United States for over 400 years. That particular cloud of witnesses, filled to bursting with the faces of millions of victims (and luminous survivors) of slavery and racism—the very face of Christ—forms the backdrop for the remainder of this article.

### BLACK THEOLOGY AND COMMUNION WITH THE DEAD<sup>24</sup>

African American Christianity, of course, has its own vibrant tradition of respect for the dead, and testifies to an equally arresting experience of the “exchange of spiritual goods” between the living community and its ancestors in the faith. We turn now to the vital role that the memory of the dead—their living presence, rather—plays in Black spirituality and in the theology that arises from it.

#### Ancestors in Afro and Black Religion

In traditional African cultures, writes John Mbiti, the ancestors are “the living dead,” that is, “they are still living within the active memory of a

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. no. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> By “Black theology” I mean the “Black theology of liberation,” with roots in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Cone, the genesis of which closely parallels that of Latin American liberation theology. For the relationship between these two traditions, see Jamie T. Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 672–99, at 685–88. Here I will also draw from the eschatology of Latin American and European thinkers such as Jon Sobrino and Johann Baptist Metz.



family or a community and interact with them even though dead.”<sup>25</sup> The veneration of ancestors in African religion should not be confused, as it often is by Westerners, with worship and adoration, although, to be sure, “the line between popular piety and veneration of the ancestors is very thin.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly there is a strong resonance here with Christian piety surrounding the communion of saints, and it is no surprise to find a rich blending of these thought-forms in the slave religion of the New World. In both belief systems, “a bond of solidarity has been established between the living and the dead.”<sup>27</sup>

It is striking how many Negro spirituals and even contemporary gospel songs express sentiments about “going home” and meeting up with the dead in heaven.

Swing low, sweet chariot  
Comin’ for to carry me home  
If you get there before I do,  
Comin’ for to carry me home  
Jess tell all my friends I’m acomin’ too,  
Comin’ for to carry me home.<sup>28</sup>

Given the horrific context of slavery and, for many, the ongoing enslavement to poverty and hopelessness in the U.S., the longing for a better life after death expressed in these songs cannot be downplayed.<sup>29</sup> Still, the sense of solidarity with the dead is not simply the anticipation of a future hope, a far-off home “over the river Jordan.” The line between heaven and earth is much more fluid. Just as in *Lumen gentium*, for the Black church, too, the future hope of reunion with the dead lives alongside a palpable sense of their presence to the community now, even if they now dwell just that side of the river. And so the very act of singing, “Tell all my friends I’m acomin’ too,” takes place already in the presence of “all my friends” in heaven. The song summons the living dead to make ready a place in heaven, but it also reminds the earthly church here and now that it is not alone.

<sup>25</sup> Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 231.

<sup>28</sup> “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” traditional Afro-American spiritual, melody by Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866–1949).

<sup>29</sup> This bleaker side of longing for the afterlife—i.e., as an escape from unbearable, inhuman surroundings—is well documented, as will be seen below, in the books of Jewish author, teacher, and social activist Jonathan Kozol. See especially his *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Crown, 1995).

### The Memory and Authority of the Victims

In the spirituality of the Black church, the dead are indeed the living dead, and their presence is guaranteed through memory. But for African Americans the memory of the dead is largely a *memoria passionis*, and this casts the community of the dead with a distinctive role, a certain *kind* of presence. What has been said of Auschwitz also applies to the crimes against humanity that spiral forth from slavery like a plague. As Copeland has written, “the memory of the victims of such malevolence pleads with us”<sup>30</sup> to make right the wrongs of history, to ensure that “Never again!” will human beings subject one another to such unspeakable crimes. Central to the methodology of Black theology, then, is the principle of remembrance, or what German theologian Johann Baptist Metz calls “dangerous memory.”<sup>31</sup> The stubborn refusal to forget the victims, both before God and before the victors of history, requires Black theology to stand on the margins and “speak truth to power.” It means the exposure of every systemic and subtle form of White amnesia, including that within the church.<sup>32</sup> Just as for Christian theology in the wake of the Holocaust, for Black theology the names and numbers of the dead bear revelatory, theological meaning.

By contrast, while most Anglo and European theologians have wrestled with the existential aporia of the Shoah and even the plight of Latin American peoples in their struggle for justice, they have yet to acknowledge the Black face of suffering right in their midst. Jamie Phelps compares the silence of U.S. Catholic theologians on racism to that of leading German intellectuals during the rise of Nazism against the Jews. Can such a comparison be dismissed as brash, rhetorical overkill? Jon Nilson insists that Phelps’s accusation “is more than justified by Basil Davidson’s conclusion that the slave trade ‘cost Africa at least 50 million souls.’”<sup>33</sup> He continues: “[It] is more than justified by the extremes of suffering endured by the kidnapped Africans and their descendants for 244 years of legalized slavery; it is more than justified by the 71 years of oppression and discrimination known as Jim Crow; more than justified by the 51 of those same years

<sup>30</sup> Copeland, “New Anthropological Subject” 16.

<sup>31</sup> With the notions of narrative, solidarity, and “dangerous memory,” Metz provides a crucial bridge between European and Black theology. See especially his “On the Way to a Postidealist Theology,” in Johannes B. Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998) 30–53.

<sup>32</sup> “Most marginalized and oppressed peoples,” Phelps writes, “passionately desire to be in union with one another and all of humankind and creation. Yet true community is only possible if it is founded in the radical truth of our personal and collective history of joy and sorrow” (Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology” 695).

<sup>33</sup> Nilson, “Confessions” 131.

during which one Black person was lynched about every 2.5 days somewhere in the United States ‘at the hands of persons unknown’; and more than justified because racism continues to infect our country today.”<sup>34</sup>

Because Black ecclesiology is shaped by the particular memories buried in such horrific numbers, narrative takes a central place in the life of the community. Through their stories, the ancestors claim a theological authority marked by uncommon fidelity to the church and, above all, hope in the midst of darkness. Their texts—the slave narratives, the Negro spirituals, the documents and oral histories of the Civil Rights Movement, African American literature—function alongside the Christian Scriptures as a kind of contemporary canon, a living record of recent salvation history and the Spirit’s liberating power even in the deep valley of suffering.

### Mystical-Political Solidarity with the Dead

Black theology interprets the gospel beatitude of thirsting for justice as an age-old thirst that afflicts both the living and the dead. This radically undivided and *unforgetting* scope of concern is what Metz calls the “mystical-political” dimension of Christianity: “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for the universal justice of God that applies to everyone, to the living and dead, to suffering present and past. Passionate interest in this undivided justice of God is a constitutive part of witnessing to God. It is at the same time mystical and political: mystical, because it does not give up its interest in the salvation of past, unreconciled suffering; political, because it is precisely this interest in universal justice that continually commits it to justice among the living.”<sup>35</sup> For Martin Luther King, Jr., the weary *memoria passionis* of the Black community was exactly the reason why Blacks, indeed, why America, could not wait for justice any longer. “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.”<sup>36</sup> King’s community, the “we” of his imagination, is clearly a mystical-political community of both the living and the dead. “Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper.”<sup>37</sup>

The electrifying, sometimes confrontational use of language by King and other Black thinkers (witness Malcolm X) illustrates the dangerous, po-

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Catholic theologian Mary Doak rightly expands the horizon of historical oppression even further: “the genocide committed against Native Americans is also a foundational American sin.” See Mary C. Doak, “Cornel West’s Challenge to the Catholic Evasion of Black Theology,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 87–106, n. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Metz, *Passion for God* 162.

<sup>36</sup> King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” 292.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, cited in *A Testament of Hope* 519.

tentially volatile, and politically transforming character of this particular cloud of witnesses. Put simply, the mystical cloud of the dead may not always represent a benevolent presence, a festival of friends. As Mbiti observes of African religion, the living dead “can be troublesome”; “they are wanted and not-wanted”,<sup>38</sup> they are respected, in part, out of fear. During liturgies in El Salvador, after every name spoken in the litany of missing and murdered human beings, the community shouts out, “Presente!” Just so, when we invoke through memory and prayer the cloud filled with millions of souls torn from Africa, surely it becomes a threatening storm cloud, an accusing portent. To the degree that the dead are kept alive in communal memory—a highly selective practice—their presence calls the living into account. They hover over history not only as guides and companions, but as judges.<sup>39</sup>

### Martyrdom and the Naming of the Dead

To whom does the church look for a sign of God’s reign such that we are drawn powerfully to the gospel? According to *Lumen gentium*, while all those who have died in faith show us the face of Christ, it is the martyrs who give “the greatest testimony of love to everyone, especially their persecutors.”<sup>40</sup> Martyrdom marks the church publicly and sacramentally with the humility of Christ. Its grace is linked especially to the office of the bishops, the shepherds of Christ’s flock “who should not be afraid to lay down their lives for their sheep.”<sup>41</sup> If one of the fruits of fidelity to the church’s mission is the martyrdom of its shepherds, surely in both King and Archbishop Oscar Romero the church of the Americas has seen the face of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?* 221.

<sup>39</sup> Keller recalls the Ghost Dance in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*: “‘We dance and we do not forget all the others before us, the little children and the old women who fought and who died, resisting the invaders and destroyers of Mother Earth! . . . The spirits are outraged! They demand justice! The spirits are furious! . . . The line between justice and vengeance is subtle, since the needed changes will *feel* like hell to those who benefit most from injustice: the collapse of their privilege is its own punishment” (Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then* 58). Here one sees the “dangerous” (i.e., potentially pathological) role of memory as *ressentiment*, so also the fault line between “liberation” and “reconciliation” exposed. We will revisit this point below in the Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

<sup>40</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 42.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* no. 41; also no. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Tragically, by far most of the victimizers in the oppressive contexts of both King (North America) and Romero (Latin America) have been Christians. Of course there are countless more anonymous witnesses to the kind of martyrdom suffered by King and Romero, both from Christian and non-Christian ranks. Jon Sobrino calls such victims “Jesus martyrs” because they have died, if not for Christ

But it is not only the traditionally defined martyrs in whom the church recognizes the likeness of Jesus. *Lumen gentium* expands the boundaries of witness: “Similarly, the church encompasses with its love all those who are afflicted by human infirmity and it recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the likeness of its poor and suffering founder.”<sup>43</sup> The church cannot fail to recognize Jesus, then, directly and vividly, in the cruelty that deals death to millions of human beings, “especially children, in the form of poverty, exclusion, wars, massacres, in the everyday form of hunger in sub-Saharan countries and in some regions of Asia, of deaths from AIDS, particularly those of children, who are in no way to blame.”<sup>44</sup> With Vatican II, both Black and Latin American liberation theologians underscore the theological significance of these masses of people by giving them a name—that is, by identifying them explicitly with Jesus, the crucified one, the suffering servant of Yahweh.<sup>45</sup>

Giving the forgotten dead a name is no small matter, as Salvadoran Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino insists. It both expresses the love God has for them, and, as a first act of reparation, it aims to prevent “a monumental scandal: the silence that closes over them in our world.”<sup>46</sup> But more importantly, it is *for us* an act of faith. “It means not only conferring ‘dignity’ on the dead but seeing a saving power in them: they summon to conversion, bring light and salvation.”<sup>47</sup> As we have seen, this is precisely how the cloud of witnesses functions in Black theology. When the souls of Africa and all those who have borne the dehumanizing blows of racism are conjoined with the suffering face of Christ, who can fail to be moved, Black or White? They call us to conversion, light, and salvation.

### The Dialectic of White Conversion

“The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30). In this terse proclamation there resides

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or because of Christ, then *like* Jesus and for the cause of Jesus, insofar as they were murdered for their solidarity with the poor (Jon Sobrino et al., ed., *Rethinking Martyrdom* [London: SCM, 2003] 19).

<sup>43</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Sobrino, *Rethinking Martyrdom* 9.

<sup>45</sup> Black theologian Joseph Washington has applied the biblical term “suffering servant” to the African American community, although this move is not without critics. See William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1998) 79–97. Prior to his own martyrdom, Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría described his fellow Salvadorans as a “crucified people,” “whom the sin of the world continues to deprive of any human features, whom the powers of this world continue stripping of everything, wresting his life from him as long as he lives” (cited in Sobrino, *Rethinking Martyrdom* 18).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

an entire soteriology. Though deeply paradoxical—the reality it unveils is both wonderful and terrible—it claims unequivocally to be “good news” both for the one raised and for those of whom it is said, “You killed him.” Somewhere in this dialectic we have to locate the White believer sitting at the feet of Black suffering.

White Christians may accept that what is at stake in race relations is not political correctness but our very relationship with God, that is, salvation. Whites may also be persuaded that the preferential option for the poor and systematically oppressed is not added on, but is integral to Christian faith. To be “moved” by the dead means little if we are not literally moved to discipleship, political engagement, and solidarity. But to begin with the demand for praxis may be to leap too quickly over its necessary seedbed: the experience of genuine conversion to the other. In New Testament imagery, how does one move from a condition of blindness to sight?

What is patently clear is that we are not capable of moving ourselves. Though we can ask for liberation, it comes finally as a gift, and not only from “the God of our ancestors” but perhaps, too, from the ancestors themselves, from all those human beings whom White hegemony and violence has hung on a tree. The second half of this article tries to take seriously the dynamic of conversion in Whites, a lifelong process in which Blacks—both the living and the living dead—must hold some degree of agency, that is, they must become subjects.

### BLACK SUFFERING/WHITE REVELATION<sup>48</sup>

One of the most striking characteristics of the church described by *Lumen gentium* is Christ-like poverty, suffering, and humility. The climactic final paragraph of no. 8 begins with the words of St. Augustine, the great African father of the church. It is, in my view, a hauntingly prophetic description of the Black church that looks to Augustine as a forebear. “The church, ‘like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God,’ announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes. But by the power of the risen Lord it is given strength to overcome, in patience and in love, its sorrows and its difficulties, both those that are from within and those that are from without, so that it may reveal in the world, faithfully, although with shadows, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it shall be manifested in full

<sup>48</sup> What follows presumes Anselm’s definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” i.e., we may experience something as deeply true prior to our capacity to explain it. As an exercise of the religious imagination, eschatology mediates truth in a manner much more akin to art or poetry than to science. Yet understanding can come through the stammering effort to express a communal intuition conceptually, i.e., theologically.

light."<sup>49</sup> One can identify this passage with the Black church on the basis of historical fact—"like a stranger in a foreign land"—and do so without romanticizing the Black community or ignoring its limitations and failings.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, it would seem to require a great deal of sentimentality to find in no. 8 even the remotest family resemblance—"he emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave"—in the relatively affluent White churches of middle-class America and Europe.

In saying this, I do not suggest that "the African American experience" is monolithic, or that "Black experience" is ontologically bound by suffering.<sup>51</sup> Nor can my purpose here be to dramatize Black suffering (or White racism) with a litany of statistics drawn from social scientific analysis. Those who resist my basic thesis would probably not, in any case, be swayed by such information. My point is this: Even if the greater "family resemblance" of Blacks to the suffering Christ is granted, it remains to be explored how Whites might appropriate such an identification, if inclined to do so at all. This is not only a question for eschatology but, as the title of this article suggests, the theology of revelation.

As Connolly has observed, revelation grasped from the underside of history has an inescapably dialectical structure: God's unveiling is liberation for some; for others, it is judgment, and a call to conversion.<sup>52</sup> I think it is fair to say that most Whites—perhaps especially the most liberally-minded like myself—are "too ambiguous" to understand or judge themselves in the milieu of a racist society.<sup>53</sup> As a culturally constructed form of

<sup>49</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 8; cf. *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Significantly, Black theology has a strong tradition of self-critique. See James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 272–87, 300–303. Many contributors to *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) view Cone's work through a critical lens, and William Jones describes his own project as an "internal critique" of Black theology.

<sup>51</sup> The "ontology" of race and victimization is clearly a contentious subject in race discourse in the United States, both within and between racial groups. Emilie M. Townes, for example, worries about a "rhetoric of victimization" in Black literature and speech that "fails to acknowledge the individual and collective choices we make in how we live our lives—even in the midst of death-dealing socio-economic and cultural realities" (Emilie M. Townes, "Searching for Paradise in a World of Theme Parks," in *Black Faith and Public Talk* 105–25, at 116); see also Victor Anderson's critique of womanist and Black theological hermeneutics, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> Connolly, "Revelation as Liberation" 248.

<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr writes: "Man in his strength and in his weakness is too ambiguous to understand himself, unless his rational analyses are rooted in a faith that he is comprehended from beyond the ambiguities of his own understanding." For Niebuhr, revelation "will not be convincing except to the soul which has found the profoundest enigma of existence not in the evil surrounding it *but in itself*." Rev-

blindness, racism distorts everybody's vision; nobody can see either the other or themselves quite properly. To place oneself under the Black cloud of witnesses is therefore to allow oneself to be "comprehended from beyond the ambiguities" of one's social location and incomplete understanding. It is to place oneself—to borrow Merton's image—under "the presence of the redeeming value of the Cross."

And so here I want to suggest three "moments" in the complex dialectic of revelation and conversion for White Christians: (1) the revelation of the real, (2) contrition and mourning, and (3) reconciliation. Let me stress from the outset that no one should underestimate the difficulty or the significance of each of these moments. In the movement from blindness to sight they represent dawning glimpses of participation in the reign of God now drawing us up, as it were, into the cloud of eschatology "realized." Though realized *imperfectly*, to be sure, such moments break in as gifts for the whole Body of Christ and are worthy of celebration.

### The Revelation of the Real

In considering the revelatory power of the cross, Jon Sobrino reminds the White North American reader that we are not talking here about "an exceptional place but the most common of all human settings." The cross of Jesus "before being *the* cross, is *a* cross and . . . there have been many more before and after it."<sup>54</sup> In the United States, the locus of this "many more" includes the killing trees of the South; it remains to this day disproportionately fixed, and often no less dramatically, in the lives of African Americans. Many if not most Whites, however, remain blind to the present-day experiences, to say nothing of the history, of African Americans. This blindness manifests along a continuum of naiveté, complacent ignorance, or simmering resentment and hatred. Thus, if Christians are to talk about hope for genuine racial reconciliation in America, the first moment of revelation for Whites will have to be what Sobrino calls a new and difficult "honesty about the real."<sup>55</sup>

Honesty about the real means assessing the world in its totality, and not simply from an assumed standpoint within one's own class and its particular boundaries of the "real." It means seeing the world not from the top but from below. As simple (or quaint) as it may sound, this kind of honesty

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elation takes root in those persons and communities who know "what they are," like the "moral derelicts" of the Gospel—e.g., the criminals crucified with Jesus, and not the Pharisees. Niebuhr, *Faith and History* 101, 142–44.

<sup>54</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 43.

<sup>55</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 22.



takes on its radical meaning when “we stop to consider the status of truth in our world.” As Sobrino notes, “We human beings, alien from reality as we are, are incurable in our tendency to distort and manipulate reality.”<sup>56</sup> Every “tribe” remembers its own story, its own heroes, and especially its own suffering first. While no ethnic or racial group is innocent of racial bias, those who benefit from the status quo have a much greater interest in manipulating the reigning discourse and perception of “reality”—and, we may add, the power to do so. But revelation, understood as divine disclosure and *interruption*, opens up a more universal field of vision. The first moment of revelation is the awakening to the scope of a connectedness that was not perceived or accepted before, to a self-identity that reaches well beyond “tribal” identity. In biblical terms, it is the realization of humankind’s radical oneness “in God,” or “in Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

There is something profound to be learned here in the life of Malcolm X. Even after a life-altering conversion to Islam, it was only with his pilgrimage to Mecca that Malcolm would experience a remarkable opening, an eschatological epiphany of the real: “There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to Black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white world.”<sup>58</sup> For Malcolm, the experience of the Islamic hajj was at once universal and disarmingly personal: “Never have I been so highly honored. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an *American Negro*?”<sup>59</sup> The pilgrimage graced Malcolm with both a theocentric revelation of the real—it “proved to me the power of the One God”<sup>60</sup>—and a revolutionary anthropological reversal, casting a wholly new light on the human race: “I have never before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.”<sup>61</sup> It was the sudden shattering of what had been a lock-tight (i.e., racist) horizon: “What I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to *re-arrange* much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to *toss aside* some of my previous conclusions.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Gen. 1:27; Matt. 5:43–48.

<sup>58</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine, 1964) 346.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 348.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 345.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to compare Malcolm’s story with Virgil Elizondo’s account of his first pilgrimage to Tepeyac as a young boy. He describes the thousands of pilgrims moving toward the image of Guadalupe “in rhythmic procession . . . as

The revelation of the real for White Christians will have to involve a comparable interruption and rearrangement of thought-patterns. Malcolm continues: “perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in *reality* the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color.”<sup>63</sup> Malcolm’s stress on “reality” (i.e., ontology) should not be overlooked. Reality is just this: *all* are human beings, children of God, irrespective of “differences” in color. To behold the senseless suffering of another human being—“Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”—without compassion, without mourning, without a word of protest, is to betray not only the God of all life, but to deny one’s own humanity, the *imago Dei* within. For Whites, the Black cloud of witnesses breaks open a lock-tight, self-referential, and thus thoroughly impoverished (i.e., racist) horizon.<sup>64</sup>

This revelation of humanity’s essential oneness may break in, of course, not only in self-transcending experiences of joy, celebration, or religious worship, as with Malcolm X, but also in the midst of profound suffering. For example, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast communities of the United States and the government’s bungled response, the moral outrage expressed by so many Americans suggests a kind of national “revelation of the real,” in which the ubiquitous but largely ignored scourges of poverty and racial segregation were nakedly exposed. To the degree that this crisis produced in middle class Whites a sense of kinship with poor Blacks, whether as “fellow Americans” or simply as fellow human beings, the underside of this genuine empathy would appear to be a deep sense of shame.<sup>65</sup> It is no stretch to suggest that this shame involves more for Whites than merely the shattering of the American democratic mythos or the putative “American dream”; it also rests in the secret recognition of their own power and privilege relative to Blacks, that is, the *taken-for-granted* power to live with basic dignity in the United

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one collective body. . . . I was part of the communion of earth and heaven, of present family, ancestors, and generations to come” (*Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997] x). For both Malcolm X and Elizondo the experience of the oneness of humanity occurred (could only occur?) outside the United States.

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* 347.

<sup>64</sup> This opening to the rich horizon of Black experience and culture can take place for Whites in many ways. As mentioned above, my own religious imagination has been deeply shaped by immersion in the life of African American Catholic parishes, as well as the study of Black literature and theology. For an account of the former, see my “O Happy Day: Imagining a Church Beyond the Color Line,” *America* 189.4 (August 18–25, 2003) 8–10.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Alter, “Poverty, Race, and Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005, 42–48.

States, to protect themselves not only from natural disasters but from humanly (politically, economically, racially) fashioned ones, too.

The sociological construct of “White privilege” suggests that the awakening to real kinship and solidarity across the color line comes necessarily for Whites with a certain loss of innocence: the discomfiting realization of one’s own a priori social capital, unearned and arbitrarily bestowed, in a societal order that still privileges Whiteness.<sup>66</sup> Whether or not we are personally conscious of such privilege, whether or not we guard it jealously for ourselves or our children, the fact of White privilege may be the most cogent, if hidden, reason why Whites resist conversion, social justice, and racial reconciliation. In a social order so bent by group bias and “decline,”<sup>67</sup> so unforgiving to those without access to power, the best that may be said is that many Whites (and White Christians) resist confronting and changing an unjust society, whether consciously or not, for their own diffuse “fear of falling.”<sup>68</sup>

But one may wonder whether this more empathetic reading—which (rightly) insists on honoring, case by case, the concrete situation, choices,

<sup>66</sup> White privilege has been described as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions” (Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies [1988],” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, ed. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins [Albany: Wadsworth, 1998] 94–105, at 94–95). See also Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University, 2001); Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed* (New York: New York University, 1996); Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al., ed., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2001); Charles E. Curran, “White Privilege,” *Horizons* 32 (2005) 361–67. In his pastoral letter on racism, “Dwell in My Love” (April 4, 2001), Cardinal Francis George of Chicago names institutional racism and White privilege as evils calling for personal conversion and structural transformation (<http://www.archchicago.org/cardinal/dwellinmylove/dwellinmylove.shtml>, accessed February 22, 2006), and since 2003, the Catholic Theological Society of America has devoted a working group at its annual meeting to exploring the implications of White privilege in local and institutional ecclesial life.

<sup>67</sup> In her career-long analysis and denunciation of systemic racism, Copeland has consistently used the cognitional theory of Bernard Lonergan, especially his notions of “bias” and “decline.” For a close study and interpretation of her theological anthropology, see my “‘Living in the Master’s House’: Race and Rhetoric in the Theology of M. Shawn Copeland,” *Horizons* 32 (2005) 295–331.

<sup>68</sup> Of course, a similar kind of indictment is often leveled against middle class or “upwardly mobile” Blacks. As King pointed out in the 1960s, the growing chasm between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the United States is not simply a “Black and White” problem, but a phenomenon of both race and class: “There are, in fact, more poor white Americans than there are Negro. Their need for a war on poverty is no less desperate than the Negro’s” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, in *A Testament of Hope* 587).

or goodwill of particular Whites—does not often lose its nerve when it comes to naming the deepest structure of reality in “White” America. Racism, as Copeland insists, compromises the “whole texture of a civilization.”<sup>69</sup> Inside the corridors of “the master’s house,” any perceived threat to the security or “values” of “my own kind” tends to provoke not only diffuse anxiety or group resentment, but all manner of (quite pointed) systemic resistance, not excluding violence. The cogency of “White privilege” as a sociological construct lies especially here. For those who benefit most from the unjust social order, that is, “the master” and his kind, are the same ones who generally hold the power to put down resistance, dismantle hard-won advances in justice, and justify it all by manipulating—not infrequently through religious rhetoric—the reigning discourse on “reality.”<sup>70</sup>

This brings us back to “honesty about the real.” Simply the desire to behold reality more fully—that is, to vigorously resist the premature or biased closure of meaning—is constitutive of authentic Christian discipleship. The mark of Christian spirituality in full bloom is, as Sobrino notes, the “willingness to be swept along by the ‘more’ of reality.”<sup>71</sup> For White Christians, especially the young, this willingness may manifest itself tentatively and unthematically as simply the dull ache for something more than “more of the same.” With prayerful self-examination and honest discernment of one’s place in the world, even of one’s own privilege, such a “holy restlessness” can blossom into the expansive spirituality envisioned for the pilgrim people of God by Vatican II: “Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”<sup>72</sup>

### Contrition and Mourning

In biblical terms, honesty about the real means looking history “straight in the eye,” as it were, and facing the mystery of original sin, our “ambiguous position” as creatures and co-creators of history.<sup>73</sup> What Genesis portrays as rebellion and Augustine calls pride, Niebuhr calls “hubris,” “vanity

<sup>69</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, “Theology as Intellectually Vital Inquiry: A Black Theological Interrogation,” in Catholic Theological Society of America, *Proceedings of the Annual Convention* 46 (1991) 49–57, at 55–56.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Brueggemann’s description of the “royal consciousness” is apt here. While Moses (the prophet) stressed the freedom and transcendence of God at the expense of his accessibility, for Solomon (the king), “God is totally and unquestionably accessible to the king and those to whom the king grants access.” Thus 1 Kings 8:13: “I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in for ever.” “God is now ‘on call,’” Brueggemann writes, “and access to him is controlled by the royal court” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978] 28–43, at 35).

<sup>71</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* 19.

<sup>72</sup> *Gaudium et spes* no. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History* 70.

of imagination,” and the “illusion of omnipotence.” No matter the name, sin has the same mysterious, destructive, and tragic root. “Biblical faith,” says Niebuhr, “interprets this evil as so universal a corruption of human freedom that it is symbolized as having infected the first man. . . . Ever since, men and nations have rent and torn the whole fabric of human togetherness because they made themselves the false centers of the whole of existence.”<sup>74</sup>

It is not hard to hear in these words echoes of the long, sad history of White hubris—chattel slavery; legal and illegal disenfranchisement; the displacement and destruction of Native American peoples; *de jure* and *de facto* segregation; racist profiling and the unjust application of civil law; subhuman conditions in public housing and prisons; unequal access to education, health care, and the political process; the economic marginalization of Africa and the entire Third World; the so-called “war on drugs” and the bankrolling of low-intensity warfare in Latin America; military-industrial empire building in the Middle East; and the list goes on. One hardly has to have a “view from below” to behold the tornado-like subjugation of peoples of color (and the natural environment) that continues to this day, both on American soil and abroad.<sup>75</sup>

Thus the cross of Christ casts an accusing shadow over every center of White power in America. The scandal of this cross is not death itself, but *senseless* death—the needless suffering and dehumanization of billions of innocent, inconvenient, exploited, and “worthless” persons, and “the possibility, a thousand times actualized, of putting them to death.”<sup>76</sup> As was said earlier, these thousands and millions of the living dead “can be troublesome.” For Whites, the bloodletting of Jesus’ cross foreshadows the revelatory power of “strange fruit” as a divine word of judgment: *You killed him*. Put another way, the good news of Easter presupposes a rather difficult caveat: divine judgment and openness to conversion.<sup>77</sup> But this is true not only for the complacent abusers of human life—for example, U.S. presidents, CEOs of transnational corporations, CIA death-squad trainers, White nationalist propagandists, traffickers in cheap labor or the global sex “industry” (read: slavery). It holds for “ordinary” White Americans as well.<sup>78</sup> Why?

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>75</sup> As I write these lines, U.S. Marines continue to storm civilian residences and mosques across Iraq in search of “insurrectionists” and “foreign terrorists,” and new allegations emerge daily about the sanctioning of torture in secret prisons run by the CIA in Eastern Europe. Copeland links U.S. foreign policy with “White racist supremacy” in her important article, “Racism and the Vocation of the Theologian,” *Spiritus* 2 (2002) 15–29, at 20.

<sup>76</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 44.    <sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> To be sure, it holds for all Christians, regardless of social location. While my emphasis here remains the structural sin of White racism, it is obvious that neither

Addressing this question may well be the pivotal challenge facing any discourse that seeks conversion and racial solidarity among Whites. But conscientizing Whites in ways that are both prophetic and pastoral—that is, with speech that invokes not only judgment, but invitation—will require something more than the concept of White privilege.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, as Gregory Baum argues, the complexity of systemic social sin (e.g., racism) necessitates greater nuance in how we talk about and ascribe guilt. Baum offers a helpful distinction here between “guilt by personal implication,” which means to knowingly participate in sinful structures or refuse to resist them, and “guilt by common heritage.”<sup>80</sup> The latter applies to persons or communities who, even if not guilty by personal implication, may still “willingly share in the burden of guilt” because they share “a common heritage and are spiritually identified” with those who are (or were) personally responsible. As an example of guilt by common heritage, Baum points to Germans today who were too young to have experienced World War II, and yet strongly believe that as Germans they must assume the heavy burden of past evils. Why? “Without grieving over the past, they argue, people cannot come to a truthful understanding of the present nor adopt a responsible orientation toward the future.”<sup>81</sup> To assume a share of culpability is not always about guilt in the proper sense, Baum observes, though it may be that; often “it is more aptly described as grieving or sorrowing,” the readiness to mourn and “a keener sense of personal responsibility.”<sup>82</sup>

While guilt by common heritage may not make sense rationally, it will ring true intuitively for Catholics formed by theological constructs such as original sin and the common good, and above all, by the memory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, the Catholic imagination is formed under the ritual remembrance of guilt and responsibility—“for what I have done and what I have failed to do”—every week in the Mass. It is significant that the act of contrition is a communal act. Just so, when the passion narrative is proclaimed during Holy Week each year, it is the whole community that is meant to shout, “Crucify him!” While most of us, I presume, would not wish to identify ourselves with the bloodthirsty crowd, and still fewer with Pilate (those guilty of Jesus’ death “by personal implication”), we still place ourselves uncomfortably into the narrative.

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“the Black community” nor “the poor” are exempt from sin, the distortions of racial formation, and the need for conversion.

<sup>79</sup> In negative terms, this “something more” relates to further nuancing discourse about White complicity and guilt, which I attempt presently in sociological and theological language; in positive terms, this “something more” will be addressed below in the discussion of reconciliation and the deepest basis for racial solidarity (part 3).

<sup>80</sup> Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 199.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

Why? Because somehow we know ourselves to be involved in the crucifixion.<sup>83</sup> The case of Peter may be even more helpful in nuancing our involvement in the passion narrative. I dare say that most of us *do* identify directly with Peter's situation, that is, his denial, paralysis, fear, and flight from the ugliness of the cross; we understand too well his tears of shame and regret. There is little comfort in the warmth of fires inside the gate, when crosses are being raised just outside, one after another.<sup>84</sup>

To return then to the concrete *eschaton* of this study: by what light are White Christians already involved in, and indeed judged by, the realities of ongoing racism and the long history Black suffering in the United States? The further I am from the specter of bald systemic racism—the killing trees of Alabama, the bullet-riddled tenements of the South Bronx—the more likely I will rebel against any suggestion of complicity in systemic White racism and the quotidian reality of Black suffering.<sup>85</sup> But like Peter, the Christian community that has been formed in the memory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, knows it is deeply involved every time human lives and hopes are crushed under the weight of humanity's collective sin. They know it because they have been formed by Christ to accept *in reality* the oneness of humanity: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt 25:40).

If the first moment of revelation is to be swept into the more of reality, the second moment is the grace of repentance and mourning. The Black cloud of witnesses moves the White Christian to say, "Brothers and sisters, this should not be, and I am deeply sorry."

### Reconciliation: "On earth as it is in heaven"

To repeat: we must not underestimate the significance of the previous two moments, what Niebuhr calls "the contrite recognition of the real," in

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History* 144. Thus the power of the spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" resides in the implicit affirmative answer to the question it poses. Not only *were* we there, but by entering into the song we *are* there. As noted above, the song "Strange Fruit" mediates an analogous kind of interruptive and revelatory participation.

<sup>84</sup> "There are no islands," writes Karl Rahner, "for the individual person whose nature does not already bear the stamp of the guilt of others, directly or indirectly, from close or from afar." Even "the good act itself always remains ambiguous" because of the "permanent co-determination" of freedom by the social matrix of guilt and the burden of unintended consequences. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 109.

<sup>85</sup> Indeed, many Whites today (and not only Whites) might find talk of "strange fruit" misleading, manipulative, or polarizing, a cheap play of "the race card." It is much easier to presume that America has moved beyond such racial nightmares. But America has patently not done so. The assumption itself is symptomatic of the power of racial formation to obscure realities outside our usual ken, combined with the media's "gift" for soothing over and diverting the impulse toward protest and meaningful participation in society.

the context of systemic White racism in America. Put another way, if White Christians wish to talk about “reconciliation” at all, they must first take full account of the terrifying contents of reality for many of America’s non-White citizens. One would like to think that a snapshot of that reality would be sufficient to wake up Whites, and certainly White Christians, from the thin illusion that “all is well” for peoples of color (and the marginalized generally) in America. As Sobrino notes, any such naive optimism is shattered when one begins to consider the status of truth in the world, especially in a culture saturated, anaesthetized, and polarized further by the mass media. To the degree that America’s underbelly of economic and racial separation is exposed at all, to say nothing of massive global imbalance, it becomes empirically impossible, if not laughable, to speak of the “oneness of the human family.” “The human family, not just the species, is ruined.”<sup>86</sup>

To lend concreteness to our final topic of reconciliation and also to guard against platitudes, I would like to interject here a snapshot of reality as seen from below. In his book *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol invites the reader into the microcosm of Mott Haven, “whose 48,000 people are the poorest section in the South Bronx. Two thirds are Hispanic, one third Black. Thirty-five percent are children.”<sup>87</sup> Written in straightforward prose, the book’s power resides not in the author’s voice but in the people he allows to speak for themselves: children, grandmothers, pastors, and schoolteachers with whom Kozol has established relationships over several years of visiting Mott Haven—Kozol is no detached observer. Above all, the book mediates the revelation of the real through the eyes of children.

Two of the children in this book haunt me. The first is Bernardo Rodriguez, Jr., who died when he leaned against a broken elevator door of his apartment building and fell down the shaft. Bernardo was eight years old. His body was discovered when residents in the elevator noticed dripping blood. The *Daily News* reported “garbage piled five feet high in an air-shaft” of the building and noted that the telephone company had been to the building repeatedly because rats had “eaten through the walls” and “chewed through the phone lines.”<sup>88</sup> In the postscript of a letter to Kozol, a friend of the family mentions that Bernardo’s grandmother is “inconsolable.”

The second child is Anthony, age 13. In a discussion with Kozol about heaven, Anthony says: “No violence will there be in heaven, no guns or drugs or IRS. If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you’re not there. As for television, forget it! No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have

<sup>86</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 4.

<sup>87</sup> Kozol, *Amazing Grace* 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 99.



arrived.”<sup>89</sup> No liberal romanticizing of “the poor” or academic mystification of “the other” is required to discern in this corner of the view from below one of the most persuasive articulations of eschatology yet uttered in America by anyone.

Kozol makes no apologies for his appeal to “the conscience of a nation.” The stirring of White conscience by no means depends on the premise that suffering is unique to Blacks, Hispanics, or other non-Whites in the United States. In one sense, Kozol opens our eyes to human suffering *as such*, and Bernardo’s ethnicity is irrelevant. On the other hand, Kozol confronts us with a suffering that is disproportionately and senselessly fixed in Black and Hispanic communities. What Kozol asks is not only that we pay attention but that the nation might recover its capacity to mourn. These two moments, it seems to me, are nonnegotiable in any authentic Christian spirituality. With regard to issues of race, they certainly outrank the contentious rhetoric that reflexively defends itself by assigning blame. Indeed, mourning is a first sign of Christian protest, a first act of solidarity across sinfully constructed boundaries.<sup>90</sup>

Reconciliation “on earth,” then, has to do with crossing boundaries. “The entire life of a disciple of Jesus is essentially a life of reconciliation.”<sup>91</sup> Just as Jesus asks us to pray for God’s reign to come “on earth as it is in heaven,” this article gestures toward a hope for reconciliation that includes both the living and the dead. On this side of eschatological reality, reconciliation remains radically unrealized, because Christ—“Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his”—is still senselessly crucified “in ten thousand places.”<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Christ today “is where men starve and are beaten.”<sup>93</sup> If the Christian community wants to do more than talk about solidarity, it must follow Christ into such places. More than “orthodoxy,” it is courage that is demanded of the church, courage to build relationships across racial, ethnic, and economic boundaries. What reconciliation looks like concretely on the ground is difficult to say, but it begins simply enough by reaching out, as Kozol has done, to people like Bernardo’s grandmother and anonymous millions like her, that is, the “inconsolable.”<sup>94</sup>

To articulate a national vision of racial reconciliation as King did with

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. inside jacket.

<sup>90</sup> The example that comes to mind here is the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 and, on his mother’s insistence, the publication of photographs of his mutilated body in *Jet* magazine—a revelatory moment that prompted not only widespread mourning and protest, but inspired a whole generation of youth (of every color) to dedicate their lives to the Civil Rights Movement and the cause of justice.

<sup>91</sup> Daniel P. Grigassy, “Reconciliation,” in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) 1083.

<sup>92</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As kingfishers catch fire,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986) 129.

<sup>93</sup> Merton, *The Intimate Merton* 40, entry for November 24, 1941.

<sup>94</sup> In its stinging critique of racism in the Catholic Church, one has to fault Black

the symbol of “the beloved community” would appear to be an even more difficult task today.<sup>95</sup> Many Blacks today express ambivalent feelings (putting it mildly) about reconciliation with Whites, especially to the degree reconciliation is understood as integration. To be sure, Americans of every race appear ambivalent about the legacy and aims of the Civil Rights Movement, and this holds for Christians and Catholics as much as anyone.<sup>96</sup> To the degree that race is mentioned at all from the pulpit of White Christian churches—the obligatory nod once a year, for example, on Sundays adjacent to the King holiday—one can expect a fair amount of pious moralizing about King’s “dream” for America. While such rhetoric is not itself a bad thing, surely it cannot be mistaken for meaningful relationship-building or Christian solidarity. The latter, in any case, will flow less from “shoulds” and “oughts” (that is, cursory guilt) than from more hidden places of wonder and gratitude, humility and grace. Solidarity with the stranger depends, as Sobrino writes, on “having seen, touched, and realized love,” and thus “the conviction that love is possible.”<sup>97</sup> For Christians of any color, “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

“Nothing is more practical,” writes Pedro Arrupe, “than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.”<sup>98</sup> The way to build racial solidarity on the negative contrast experience of racism, that is, to engender an integral *spirituality* of liberation, must be “a positive and

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theology for at least one major oversight, namely, the degree to which the Catholic Church in the United States has incarnated the compassion of the Good Samaritan in far-reaching institutional forms, from urban schools and hospitals to the social ministries of mainstream parishes. On the other hand, these traditional ministries do not typically challenge the root causes of poverty. If the recent national elections are any indicator, Catholics need more than ever to embrace and voice the principles of Catholic social teaching in the public arena.

<sup>95</sup> “Speaking about the oneness of humanity,” Cone writes, “was not innocent Sunday-school talk.” It was a direct challenge to segregationists at every level. It also anointed the Black community with a prophetic self-identity: “go forth knowing that you as a people have been called by God to redeem the soul of America” (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 80).

<sup>96</sup> See David K. Shieler, *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997) especially 223–26; and Jean Bethke Elshtain and Christopher Beem, “Race and Civil Society: A Democratic Conversation,” in Hopkins, *Black Faith and Public Talk* 211–16. Connolly’s discussion of the controversy between James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts is helpful here. Cone’s impatience with Roberts’s advocacy of “reconciliation” with Whites reflects Cone’s general mistrust of “dialogue” (especially with White academic liberals) while the systemic plight of ordinary Blacks deteriorates unabatedly (Connolly, “Revelation as Liberation” 249–51).

<sup>97</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 46.

<sup>98</sup> From Pedro Arrupe, *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*, sel. and intro. Kevin F. Burke (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004) 8.

inclusive language of shared goals,” for what is being attacked in systemic racism is our common humanity.<sup>99</sup> What Christian faith-hope provides in response to racism is an eschatological vision, both already and not yet, for dwelling in and restoring that common humanity. Whether our pastoral and theological discourse aims to “seize” the imagination with Jesus’ parables of the Reign of God, Rahner’s vision of a graced world, Copeland’s eschatological appeal to the “Mystical Body of Christ,” King’s dream of the “beloved community,” or Vatican II’s portrait of the pilgrim “people of God,” in every case we are talking about “falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.”<sup>100</sup>

Thus it seems to me that prior to any preconceived political or social agendas, prior to any speeches about integration, reconciliation, or even shared worship—which *is* crucial—simple physical *presence* is the greatest gift Christians can offer one another in a divided society. Christians on all sides must cross geographic, economic, and racial boundaries in order to simply be present to one another’s experiences, to celebrate them and, indeed, some-

<sup>99</sup> Roger Haight, “White Privilege versus Racial Solidarity” (paper presented at the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, St. Louis, Mo., June 2005). While I have argued that the recognition of White privilege represents a crucial negative moment in the conscientization of Whites, I concur with Haight’s suggestion that “White privilege,” as a rhetorical symbol, falls short of generating a positive commitment to racial solidarity: “Solidarity is built upon a common anthropology. It requires an appeal to the *humanum*, a common human good; it cannot allow race, or gender, or class interests to supercede what we share in common” (ibid., citing M. Shawn Copeland, “Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,” in *Women and Theology*, ed. M. A. Hinsdale and P. H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 3–38, at 14–15, 29; see also Pramuk, “Living in the Master’s House” 312–15, 326–29; O’Meara, “Toward a Subjective Theology of Revelation” 419, on solidarity (i.e., Christian ethics) as a “personalization of grace.”

<sup>100</sup> The pregnancy of these symbols, it must be noted, and the safeguard against their mystification or overly innocent reading, resides in their capacity to communicate truth dialectally. Thus, in Copeland’s reading, the “Mystical Body of Christ” is at once a “body of broken bones”; in the theology of Vatican II, the “people of God” is not a “perfect society” but a people still “on pilgrimage.” These symbols make room, in other words, for the apprehension of both the “already” and the “not yet.” Whether we are talking about individuals, institutions, or quotidian life in the United States, this dialectical or partially redeemed character of human experience is the “something more” that the language of “White privilege” fails to account for; its rhetoric of “denunciation” should therefore be paired with, not replaced by, symbols and narratives of “annunciation.” In like dialectical manner, it should also be clear that “falling in love with God” (what King called “God-intoxication”) is no naïve or sentimental plea for simply “loving Jesus,” or for “brotherly love,” with no thought of contrition or the demands of justice. While the Gospel does promise earthly fellowship and joy (as in Bethany)—and we should not easily dismiss this—it also leads to confrontation with power (as in Jerusalem) and communion at the foot of the cross. Again, a dialectical reading of any of the above symbols will bear out their constitutively prophetic and paschal dimensions.

times to mourn them. Again, Kozol presents an unassuming model. Even at one-tenth of the dramatic scale we find in his story, any serious movement by individuals and communities to make such “crossings over” constitutes a miracle of the first order, the dawning of a “first Christian generation.”<sup>101</sup>

A range of factors, some toxic and others more benign, may explain (not necessarily justify) the paucity of relationships across racial lines in many communities. In addition to apathy and fear, cultural ignorance and outright racism, we should not underestimate the lack of invitation as a serious factor. The members of a family long divided against itself have to make conciliatory gestures if they are serious about healing. Again, solidarity is not a matter of preconceived agendas, that is, offering help (which risks condescension) or asking for help (which risks pawning dignity). The first step may be mustering enough courage for the smallest gesture or ritual of shared presence; by risking it we place ourselves in the path of grace. But if one thing is patently clear in the racially polarized landscape of the United States, time does not heal all wounds. If the churches (the corporate Body of Christ) are not the leaven for hospitality and communion across the color line—not uniformity, but unity in difference—who will be? From ecumenical Christian unity, new strength can arise to confront reality, grieve for it, and change it.

### TRUTH/JUSTICE/RECONCILIATION ON THE OTHER SIDE<sup>102</sup>

#### “Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates” (James 5:9)

We turn, at last, to our hope for reconciliation “as it is in heaven”—our hope in solidarity with the living dead. Though they continue to be

<sup>101</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 116–20. Among many more hidden and unassuming examples that might be cited here—e.g., the witness of interracial friendships and families, vibrant integrated churches—one can point again to the Civil Rights Movement for evidence of the possibility of real communion across the color line in the United States, even if this experience of solidarity was imperfect, and its sacrifices yielded no political utopia. While resignation and cynicism are understandable, even sociologically justifiable in the face of deeply flawed outcomes, they are hardly worthy of our human and Christian calling. Prophetic religion calls human beings not only to see *what is* with open eyes, but also to see *what is possible* when human beings risk, in grace, the path of solidarity.

<sup>102</sup> The following reflections are limited to (and perhaps by) a Christian conceptual framework, even though Catholic eschatology envisages a salvation that reaches out to all persons and the whole of creation. Peter Phan has richly explored many of the themes addressed in this paper (e.g., veneration of the ancestors; the intermediate state) in an interreligious context. See Peter C. Phan, “Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 507–36, and pertinent references therein.

mourned, we have also seen that the living dead are invoked and celebrated. They are “Presente!” Thus the Christian community trusts that their hope for the dead is to some degree already realized, though we cannot know what this means.

“*The tomb is empty, he is not here.*” Surely we can dare to hope this much: Bernardo Rodriguez is utterly bathed in warm light, his eight-year-old body, crushed on this side, is now pulsing playfully with life on the other.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, when our lamentations are transformed by God’s Spirit into protest and political praxis on behalf of human beings like Bernardo, the ancestors are further “reconciled” by the agency of the living. Their presence guides, fortifies, and blesses our work. On the other hand, it is right to suggest that as long as the structures that crucified them continue to deal death on this side of history, the dead remain restless and “unreconciled,” and the real possibility of hell for the complacent abusers of life must be maintained. This is to acknowledge the always threatened, not-yet character of our hope. On the last day, the circle may be irretrievably broken.

But this seems not to be the final word for the living dead. The experience of resurrection reverberating across both sides of history gestures toward a divine love so gratuitous, so free and overwhelming, that the possibility of hell must at least be relativized by the evidently greater possibility of forgiveness. But how can we imagine “forgiveness” for those who mock God and abuse God’s creation? Are we to imagine the God of the Bible granting such forgiveness by divine fiat, as it were, in splendid and royal isolation, without first requiring judgment and contrition before the offended? Given the breadth of our hope—of *God’s* hope—for both justice and reconciliation, might not divine pardon somehow involve the agency of the ancestors, the victims themselves? Indeed, who can judge the complacent abusers of human life, who can bind or unbind them from their crimes before the divine Judge, if not their victims? Here I am trying to account for Sobrino’s striking intuition that the crucified peoples offer not only “the challenge of and need for conversion” but also “light and salvation,” “welcome and forgiveness.”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>103</sup> The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is at its most profound when merged with the concrete memories of persons like Bernardo and Emmett Till, i.e., those whose bodies have been brutalized on this side of history. The vision of these glorified bodies on the other side will be wondrous and terrible indeed.

<sup>104</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 8. The hope embedded in this claim is stunning coming from a man who has seen his companions and tens of thousands of his fellow Salvadorans brutally murdered. On the topic of hope and resurrection Sobrino must therefore be read mystagogically, with humility and awe. It is important to note that he never separates “the crucified peoples” from the whole Christ-event. Thus the forgiveness offered by the crucified peoples “reverberates” in the same

The traditional Catholic doctrine of purgatory holds a certain credibility and latitude for “re-visioning” what is possible for reconciliation both *with* and *by* the living dead. The doctrine of purgatory posits “an intermediate state of purification between death and heaven that provides for the removal of remaining personal obstacles to the full enjoyment of eternal union with God.”<sup>105</sup> It seems to me that if all “obstacles” are to be removed prior to communion with God, the crucified and their crucifiers will have to meet again, face to face (1 Cor 13:12). What I suggest here is an eschatological moment, perhaps “in purgatory,” that grants to the crucified peoples a subjectivity utterly denied them on this side of history, not excluding the freedom to forgive or condemn. Indeed, thinking about all of us, wherever we stand in the human mosaic, it is not only God who is seen “through a glass darkly” on this side of history. In the interest of full disclosure, as it were, it would seem most just (and terrible) if the purifying vision granted in death includes the *lumen gloriae* of all those ancestors, strangers, and enemies from whom we were sinfully divided in life. It would be the last (and perhaps also the first) truly *free* space we are given to be reconciled with one another, before the gates open into the heavenly banquet.<sup>106</sup>

Thirteen-year-old Anthony gestures spontaneously and intuitively toward the need for such a transitional “moment” or “healing place” when he says of heaven, the final destiny, “If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you’re not there.” Can we imagine that the ancestors, purified of all “bitterness” by God’s reconciling love, await their former persecutors not with raised swords but with open hands? This is not to grant them the power to reconcile all things, which can belong only to God; it *is* to grant them the dignity of intercession and agency in the antechamber of salvation, where all earthly pretenses will be stripped away.<sup>107</sup> To be clear, there is no evading here the searching power of the

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eschatological field as the forgiveness offered by Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:34). In fact Sobrino echoes what we have already seen in *Lumen gentium* no. 42: it is the martyrs who give “the greatest testimony of love to everyone, especially their persecutors.”

<sup>105</sup> Joseph A. Dinoa, “Purgatory,” in *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* 1070.

<sup>106</sup> In his haunting “Last Testament,” written several years before his execution in 1996 by extremists in Algiers, the Trappist monk Dom Christian De Cherge writes: “I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil that seems, alas, to prevail in the world, and even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a space of lucidity which would enable me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.” Cited in *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 55 (May 1996), at <http://www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins.php> (accessed February 22, 2006).

<sup>107</sup> Recall *Lumen gentium* 49: those who have died “do not cease to intercede

divine light of justice, awesome and terrible. To the contrary: the vision of all the crucified peoples in their resurrected, glorified humanity will expose the earthly lie that we, in arrogant contempt for the God of life, could have ever stolen their humanity definitively away.<sup>108</sup>

*“Tear off the disguise of wild delusion; let the crimes be seen naked, weighed naked, judged naked.”*<sup>109</sup> Might purgatory be that final and necessary confrontation of *all* sinners with the disturbing light of reality, the liberating exposure of penance, the narrow gate to unbounded communion and salvation?<sup>110</sup>

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with the Father for us.” We find the same belief strikingly expressed in a letter Merton wrote to Japanese Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki (April 11, 1959), in which Merton offers an act of contrition to the East for “the huge burden of the sins of the Western World”: “The victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are before me and beside me every day when I say Mass. I pray for them and I feel they intercede for me before God” (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 566).

<sup>108</sup> Recalling Keller’s commentary on the Ghost Dance (n. 39 above), purgatory “will feel like hell” to those who have perpetrated and benefited most from injustice.

<sup>109</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 3.14. Compare Merton on “mystical death”: “This ghastly emptying, this inexorable gutting of our own appalling nonentity, takes place under the piercing light of the revealed word, the light of infinite Truth. But it is something far more terrible still: we find ourselves eviscerated by our own ingratitude, under the eyes of Mercy” (*Bread in the Wilderness* 120).

<sup>110</sup> This is admittedly to reconstruct the traditional paradigm, since “Purgatory is not an opportunity for conversion where none has transpired in earthly life” (Dinoia, “Purgatory” 1070). In defense of the “re-visioning” of purgatory suggested here—i.e., as the gateway to a possible *apokatastasis*—I would submit that the apophatic character of all eschatological statements allows for a certain free play of hope and imagination with regard to the *eschaton*. But one can and should provide more reasons than this for such a hope.

First, the hope for universal salvation might function as an opiate (or liberal platitude) if it were not suggested from the point of view of the victims, which is precisely how I read the eschatology of Jon Sobrino. By all empirical and reasonable accounts, Sobrino’s reconciling vision would appear humanly impossible outside of a deep experience of divine mercy, an experience of resurrection that can imagine liberation even for “the crucifiers.” Sobrino is supported at least tangentially on this point by Niebuhr, who insists that genuine repentance is made possible “only if the judgment overhanging man is known to be prompted by love and to be crowned by forgiveness” (Niebuhr, *Faith and History* 144); so also Augustine, for whom “God’s justice can mean, not the rewarding of human beings according to what is properly ‘theirs’ on the basis of merit, but fidelity to God’s own promises of grace, without respect to merit” (Eugene TeSelle, *Living in Two Cities: Augustinian Trajectories in Political Thought* [Scranton: University of Scranton, 1998] 85).

Second, Niebuhr and Sobrino insist that forgiveness presumes penance. Considering the extreme case—e.g., Ku Klux Klan members, German SS officers, teen-aged paramilitaries in El Salvador—we might ask whether all the “crucifiers” have been free enough of the contradictions in their situation to grasp the horror of their

## CONCLUSION

**“No one will look at you from the outside.  
People will see you from the inside.”**

The words, “I am sorry” presume a recipient, even when uttered in silent, solitary prayer. Much of what I have done in these pages is to argue for the real presence of the recipient. On the other side of visible history, as it were, we have called them “the living dead,” “the ancestors,” and “the Black cloud of witnesses.” On this side, we have called them “the beloved community,” “the people of God,” and the “church.” Our conceptual framework has been “realized eschatology,” “mystical-political solidarity,” and “communion with the dead,” theological symbols resonant with “the Catholic imagination.” The corporate experience shaping this imagination has been identified as the remembrance, in word and deed, of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: “God raised a crucified man, and since then there is hope for the crucified.”<sup>111</sup>

The danger in speaking of “strange fruit” and “crucified peoples,” of course, is to forget that the victims of history do not want to be crucified, least of all for our spiritual edification.<sup>112</sup> They want to be taken down—they have long been trying to take themselves down—from their crosses

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actions even partially, much less to conceive of “conversion” or “penance” on this side of history. In the same vein Graham Greene has said: “If we want God’s mercy to flash before the eyes of unbelievers, they must see that it is granted to the most degraded of human beings” (Henry J. Donaghy, ed., *Conversations with Graham Greene*, ed. [Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1992] 18). Implicit in Greene’s intuition is not only a robust doctrine of God’s mercy, but also an equally robust doctrine of original or structural sin. In other words, we may presume with Greene that *nobody* will be exempt from the need for penance and reconciliation with *somebody* on the other side of history.

Indeed, the a priori intimacy with one’s own guilt first, i.e., the utter lack of pretense or self-validating complacency in Catholic writers like Greene and Flannery O’Connor is surely one of the most appealing and “revelatory” aspects of their work. The paradigmatic instance of this is the much-discussed vision of Ruby Turpin that concludes O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation”: “Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.” O’Connor herself called Ruby’s revelation “purgatorial.” It is “the closest O’Connor came to a theology of liberation” (Lucretia B. Yaghjian, “Flannery O’Connor’s Use of Symbol, Roger Haight’s Christology, and the Religious Writer,” *Theological Studies* 63 [2002] 268–301, at 297).

<sup>111</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 43.

<sup>112</sup> Catherine Keller writes with poignancy of activist Marta Benevides who works among the poorest of El Salvador’s indigenous people: “After nearly two decades of struggling at home and in exile, she declares she ‘does not want to be a redeemer’ and ‘does not want to be crucified’” (Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then* 279).



and lynching trees. They are tired of being made into objects, objects of White racism, pornographic fascination, economic exploitation, psychosexual domination, and even liberal or theological romanticization. Blacks are saying to Whites that they do not want to be separated out as an anomaly, but neither do they wish to be homogenized into a White “mainstream” dominated by alien values and sensibilities. They tell us that they wish simply to be full subjects unto God and the community of humankind, agents of their own lives, destinies, and histories. As the spiritual goes, “If anybody asks you who I am, say that I’m a child of God.”

Feminist theologian Sallie McFague writes most eloquently about healing “the body of God.” Her lens is that of a contemplative. “The more I know about it, the more open I am to its presence, the closer I look at it or listen to it or touch it or smell it—the more amazed I am by it.”<sup>113</sup> The point is “that whether we pay attention to the others in nature or to our own kind we do so with love, that is . . . with the ‘extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.’”<sup>114</sup> In this article I have presumed the capacity of human beings, not only in their suffering but precisely in their luminous differences, to radiate the divine for one another. Alice Walker writes of this capacity to perceive one another with the contemplative eye of love: “I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye.”<sup>115</sup>

When we behold in one other this combination of transparency and solidity, invisibility and radiance, we are liberated momentarily, I believe, from all earthly blindness. In the one family of humankind, the hope of all God’s people is to celebrate and to be celebrated for their God-given, beautiful differences. Let the day come, then, when “people see you from the inside.”

<sup>113</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 210.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 211, citing Iris Murdoch.

<sup>115</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 241. Merton wrote often of a return to the “true self” or *le point vierge*, a “point of nothingness and of absolute poverty [which is] the pure glory of God in us” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [New York: Doubleday, 1965] 158).