

## JESUS OF GALILEE AND THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE: THE CONTEXTUAL CHRISTOLOGY OF JON SOBRINO AND IGNACIO ELLACURÍA

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*The author argues that the Christian historical realism of Ignacio Ellacuría and the “saving history” Christology of Jon Sobrino form a post-Vatican II contextual theology unified by two fundamental claims: the historical reality of Jesus is the real sign of the Word made flesh, and the analogatum princeps of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found today among the “crucified peoples” victimized by various forms of oppression around the globe. Sobrino and Ellacuría are situated as important interpreters of Rahner, Ignatius Loyola, Augustine, Medellín, and key European phenomenologists.*

THE FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY of Ignacio Ellacuría and the allied Christology of Jon Sobrino form what I believe may be the most fully developed contextual theology written since Vatican II.<sup>1</sup> This remarkable collaboration reflects epoch-shaping events in Latin America and the

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<sup>1</sup> The English titles of the Orbis editions of Jon Sobrino’s two-volume Christology (which is the focus of much of this article) are seriously mistranslated from the Spanish, casting them in the model of Schillebeeckx’s two volumes, *Jesus and Christ*, and obscuring the focus of *both* volumes on Jesus Christ. *Jesucristo liberador: Lecture histórica-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (San Salvador: UCA, 1991) becomes *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); and *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (San Salvador: UCA, 1999) becomes *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). Where I translate directly from the Spanish rather than quote the English, the Spanish version is cited first, followed by the English. It should be noted that the voluminous writings of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino cover in considerable depth many topics other than fundamental theology and Christology.

Catholic Church in El Salvador, as well as long years of Jesuit friendship, shared ministry, persecution, and finally martyrdom at the University of Central America. The impressive corpus produced by these Jesuit “companions of Jesus”<sup>2</sup> is unified by its shared conviction that the *analogatum princeps* of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found today among the “crucified peoples” of Latin America, and the billions of victims of poverty, inequality, structural injustice, and violence around the globe.

Sobrino summarizes the central themes associated with this claim in an evocative passage on Galilee published not long after the brutal assassination of Ignacio Ellacuría with five Jesuit colleagues and two lay coworkers on November 16, 1989.

Galilee is the setting of Jesus’ historical life, the place of the poor and the little ones. The poor of this world—the Galilee of today—are where we encounter the historical Jesus and where he is encountered as liberator. And this Galilee is also where the risen Christ who appears to his disciples will show himself as he really is, as the Jesus we have to follow and keep present in history: the historical Jesus, the man from Nazareth, the person who was merciful and faithful to his death on the cross, the perennial sacrament in this world of a liberator God.<sup>3</sup>

This analogy embodies Sobrino’s response to Vatican II’s mandate “of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel”<sup>4</sup> and introduces his hope-filled volume on the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, and his call to faith-filled discipleship. Methodologically, the analogy reflects 40 years of living with the “preferential option for the poor” discerned by Latin American bishops shortly after

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius Loyola named the order he founded on August 15, 1534 (officially approved September 27, 1540, by Paul III) *La Compañía de Jesús*, and referred to its members as “companions of Jesus.” The spirituality and the mystical theology of Ignatius embodied in the order’s name finds expression in the idea of Ellacuría and Sobrino that followers of Jesus are called not only to share the burden of his cross but also to take the crucified people down from the cross. This metaphor echoes the famous opening words of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (December 2, 1974, to March 7, 1975): “What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was: Ignatius, who begged the Blessed Virgin to ‘place him with her Son,’ and who then saw the Father himself ask Jesus, carrying his Cross, to take this pilgrim into his company. What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes” (Society of Jesus, “Jesuits Today” nos. 1 and 2, Decree 1, *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977) 401.

<sup>3</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 273.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et spes* no. 4, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975).

Vatican II as God's will for the Church, and places that discernment in a hermeneutical circle with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> Substantively, it reflects Sobrino's claim that "we have done nothing more than—starting from Jesus—elevate the reality we are living to the level of a theological concept, to theorize about a christological faith that we see as real faith."<sup>6</sup> And as an icon of Christian discipleship, it reflects the influence of Archbishop Oscar Romero on the Jesuits of El Salvador as a model of the call by Ignatius Loyola to discern and collaborate with the work of the Trinity in the world. I will say more about this near the end of the article.

What, then, is the significance for contextual theologies around the world of the *substance* and *methods* informing the analogy drawn by Sobrino and Ellacuría between the historical reality of Jesus Christ and the "crucified peoples" of today? In this article I will identify two elements defining their approach that I believe should and likely will help shape other fundamental and christological contextual theologies in the years ahead. First, Ellacuría develops a profound historical realism (a Christian historical realism, if you prefer<sup>7</sup>) that is manifested in his concepts of "historical reality" and the "theology of sign," which he uses to frame a Latin American fundamental contextual theology. Second, building on Ellacuría, Sobrino integrates these concepts in what I will call a contextualized Latin American "saving history" Christology, which starts "from below" with the historical reality of Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> It is essential to evaluate the legitimacy and adequacy of Sobrino's methodological presuppositions in terms of the hermeneutical circle he seeks to create between the option for the poor of the contemporary church, and the church's normative tradition regarding Jesus Christ. Sobrino asserts, "Latin American Christology . . . identifies its setting, in the sense of a real situation, as the poor of this world, and this situation is what must be present in and permeate any particular setting in which Christology is done" (Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 28). Noted American Christologist William Loewe argues that Sobrino's Christology "admirably" represents the kind of theological reflection approved in *Libertatis conscientia*, claiming that, "while he insists on the church of the poor as the ecclesial setting of his theology, what is received in that setting as the foundation of his theology is the apostolic faith of the church" (William Loewe, "Interpreting the Notification: Christological Issues," in *Hope and Solidarity: Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008] 143–52, at 146).

<sup>6</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 30, my translation. See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 8.

<sup>7</sup> In a handful of strictly philosophical works, where he develops the category of "historical reality," Ellacuría does not refer to explicitly Christian categories or to faith. However, in the majority of his writings (ethics, politics, education, and theology), he uses the category in reference to explicitly Christian concepts, norms, values, and ecclesial concerns.

## THE CHRISTIAN HISTORICAL REALISM OF IGNACIO ELLACURÍA

### Historical Reality

History and metaphysics have long been considered antinomies, yet Catholic and Christian contextual theologies and philosophies need both. In this section I will briefly summarize the meaning, and the philosophical and theological roots, of the term “historical reality,” the defining concept of Ellacuría’s (Christian) historical realism wherein the antinomy is overcome. Building on the work of Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri, Ellacuría claims that “historical reality” is the proper object of a contextualized Latin American approach to philosophy and theology.<sup>8</sup>

Ellacuría’s magnum opus, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* (1990, posthumous), summarizes the philosophical arguments for this core element of his 30-year effort to develop a Latin American philosophy and theology capable of conceptualizing the faith, hope, and struggle of the Continent’s “poor majorities” to keep their families alive.<sup>9</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Ellacuría is Rahner’s most important Latin American interpreter, building on Zubiri’s groundbreaking work on Heidegger and Continental phenomenology in order to historicize Rahner’s supernatural existential and his theology of sign.<sup>10</sup> While I cannot do justice to Zubiri’s arguments

<sup>8</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* (San Salvador: UCA, 1990) 42. For book-length studies and collections on the philosophical roots of Ellacuría’s theology see Kevin Burke, S.J., *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2000); Michael E. Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (New York: Crossroad, 2009); Kevin Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, eds., *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2006); Héctor Samour, *Voluntad de liberación: La filosofía de Ignacio Ellacuría* (Granada: Comares, 2003); José Sols Lucia, *La teología histórica de Ignacio Ellacuría* (Madrid: Trotta, 1999); and Jon Sobrino and Rolando Alvarado, eds., *Ignacio Ellacuría: “Aquella libertad esclarecida”* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “Función liberadora de la filosofía,” *Estudios centroamericanos* 435–436 (1985) 45–64, at 46; also Ellacuría, *Viente años de historia en El Salvador (1969–1989): Escritos políticos*, 3 vols. (San Salvador: UCA, 1991) 1:93–121, at 94. For Ellacuría’s efforts to develop a Latin American philosophy and theology see “Bibliography of the Complete Works of Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Love That Produces Hope* 255–79.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted here to the early work of Martin Maier, which focuses on the Ellacuría-Sobrino collaboration, emphasizes Ellacuría as an important interpreter of Karl Rahner, especially through his efforts to “historicize” Rahner’s supernatural existential, and asserts that Ellacuría seeks to develop “a theology of the signs of the times.” My own work is more specific, however, in asserting (1) the “saving history” character of Sobrino’s Christology and its roots in Ellacuría’s work; (2) that Ellacuría subordinates Rahner’s supernatural existential within the larger horizon of a human “historical reality” that has been transformed by grace; and

here, a word is warranted on this work and its implications for Ellacuría's understanding of the historical reality of Jesus.

Zubiri attempts to preserve the insights of Heidegger's ontology of being in the face of the claim that relativity theory and contemporary science have shown that "space, time, consciousness, [and] being, are not four receptacles for things." For Zubiri, this insight leads to the potentially devastating conclusion that "modern philosophy . . . has been riding upon . . . four incorrect substantivations: space, time, consciousness, and being."<sup>11</sup> Taking a page from Heidegger's mentor, Edmund Husserl, Zubiri responds by creating a phenomenological definition of "reality" (or "reity"<sup>12</sup> as he calls it). Thus, Zubiri defines reality as the "thing" whose apprehension has the character of being something "in its own" right (*en propio*), as something "of its own" (*de suyo*), or "as something that already is what it is before its presentation, as a *prius*, more in a metaphysical than in a temporal sense."<sup>13</sup> Students of the emergence of systems theory during this period will notice that Zubiri's description of reality (or "reity") sounds like the phenomenological version of a "boundary-maintaining system."

Building on his studies of Einstein, Planck, Schrödinger, and others, Zubiri then describes "historical reality" as the most self-possessing (*de suyo* or "of its own") of the series of subsystems that comprise the natural and historical ecology of "the cosmos." Historical reality is the "last stage of reality" in which the material, biological, sentient, and personal and collective historical dimensions of reality are all made present, and "where we are given not only the highest forms of reality but also the field of the maximum possibilities of the real."<sup>14</sup>

Focusing on the human person, Ellacuría asserts that historical reality "is where all of reality is assumed into the social realm of freedom."

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(3) that Ellacuría reinterprets Rahner's theology of symbol as a theology of sign. See Martin Maier, "Theologie des Gekreuzigten Volkes: Der Entwurf einer Theologie der Befreiung von Ignacio Ellacuría und Jon Sobrino" (doctoral dissertation, University of Innsbruck, 1992); and Maier, "Karl Rahner: The Teacher of Ignacio Ellacuría," in *Love That Produces Hope* 128–43. For my development of this theme, see Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol: New Proposals from the Americas," in *Rahner beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul Crowley, S.J. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 87–99; and Robert Lassalle-Klein, "La historización de la filosofía de la religión de Rahner en Ellacuría y Zubiri," in *Historia, ética, y liberación: La actualidad de Zubiri*, ed. Juan A. Nicolás and Héctor Samour (Granada: Comares, 2007) 113–230.

<sup>11</sup> Xavier Zubiri, *Inteligencia sentiente: Inteligencia y realidad* (Madrid: Alianza, 1980) 15, my translation. All translations of untranslated Spanish works are mine.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 57

<sup>13</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, "La superación del reduccionismo idealista en Zubiri," *Estudios centroamericanos* 477 (1988) 633–50, at 648.

<sup>14</sup> Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* 43.

Elsewhere, he asserts: "The personal dimension of life . . . consists in achieving self-possession through defining oneself in terms of one way of being in reality when confronted with reality as a whole."<sup>15</sup> Zubiri explains, "When the human person, the reality animal, begets another reality animal, the person does not only transmit his or her life, that is . . . certain psycho-organic characteristics, but he or she also, inexorably . . . , sets them up in a certain way of being in reality."<sup>16</sup> Eventually, however, the demands of everyday life require us to interpret and to make choices about ways of being in the world that have been inherited, thereby forcing us to define our own historical reality. As a result of this process, Zubiri says, echoing Heidegger, the creation of historical reality involves "the constitution of a new kind of world," in which "reality becomes a world." Thus, if Heidegger can be said to understand *dasein* as the kind of being (i.e., the human person) that must take a stand on its being-in-the-world, then we could say by analogy that Zubiri and Ellacuría understand human *historical reality* as that reality that must take a stand on its historical-reality-in-the-world.<sup>17</sup>

Ellacuría and Zubiri then formulate the term "historicization" to refer to the appropriation and transformation of the historical (i.e., tradition-centered) and natural (i.e., the material, biological, and sentient) dimensions of reality<sup>18</sup> through which this process of human self-definition takes place. For Zubiri, historicization is driven by the fact that when something "is already given as a reality, I not only have to allow it to be [*dejar que sea*], but I am forced to realize the weight of it [*hacerse cargo de ella*] as a reality."<sup>19</sup> Ellacuría agrees, but argues that this process of "facing up to real things as real has a triple dimension."<sup>20</sup> Emphasizing the component of human freedom, he asserts that historicization involves not only

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 493.

<sup>16</sup> Xavier Zubiri, "La dimension histórica del ser humano," *Siete ensayos de antropología filosófica*, ed. Germán Marquínez Argote, (Bogota: Universidad Santo Tomás, Centro de Enseñanza Desescolarizada, 1982) 117–74, at 127.

<sup>17</sup> Zubiri argues that human persons individually (and communities as well) gradually define their own historical reality through the process of creating, transmitting, and actualizing or abandoning the "traditions" of "ways of being in reality" passed on to them by others. See Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* 528; and Zubiri, *La estructura dinámica de la realidad* (Madrid: Alianza, 1989) 325.

<sup>18</sup> For the two primary meanings of "historicization" see Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* 169; and "La historización del concepto de propiedad como principio de desideologización," *Estudios centroamericanos* 335–36 (1976) 425–50, at 427–28; trans. as "The Historicization of the Concept of Property," in *Towards A Society That Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John J. Hassett and Hugh Lacey, foreword Leo J. O'Donovan (Washington: Georgetown University, 1991) 105–37, at 109.

<sup>19</sup> This is Ellacuría describing Zubiri in "La historicidad del hombre in Xavier Zubiri" 526. See Zubiri, *Sobre la esencia* 447.

<sup>20</sup> Ellacuría, "Hacia una fundamentación" 419.

(1) “becoming aware of,” “understanding,” or “realizing about reality” (*hacerse cargo de la realidad*); but also (2) an ethical demand to take responsibility for or “to pick up reality” (*cargar con la realidad*); and (3) a praxis-related demand to change or “to take charge of reality” (*encargarse de la realidad*).<sup>21</sup>

Building on this foundation, Ellacuría and Sobrino apply the philosophical category of “historical reality” (and “historicization”) to Jesus and to Christian discipleship in three key ways. First, Sobrino endorses Ellacuría’s argument that a truly Latin American Christology must be shaped by a “new historical *logos* . . . which takes into account the historical reality of Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> He explicitly cites Ellacuría’s assertion, following Rahner, that “this new historical *logos* must start from the fact, indisputable to the eye of faith, that the historical life of Jesus is the fullest revelation of the Christian God.”<sup>23</sup> Second, both authors assert that the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth is defined or historicized (Sobrino says “created”<sup>24</sup>) in large part through the words and actions that define Jesus’ basic historical stance toward the history and people of Israel, his relationship to the Father, his mission, and the affirmation in faith (by his disciples) that he is risen from the dead and glorified with the Father. And third, both Ellacuría and Sobrino assert that God’s historical self-offer is definitively mediated by the historical reality of Jesus (Sobrino says “the human, Jesus, is the real symbol of the Word”<sup>25</sup>), which is described in the Gospels and forms the proper object of Latin American fundamental theology and Christology. In my second part I will address how each of these elements is taken up in Sobrino’s Christology.

### Theology of Sign

Ellacuría’s philosophy of historical reality leads him to historicize Rahner’s theology of symbol as a theology of sign.<sup>26</sup> His core claim here, that

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 27; trans. John Drury from *Teología política* (San Salvador: Secretariado Social Interdiocesano, 1973); cited in Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 46–47.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; cited by Sobrino in *Jesus the Liberator* 47. Ellacuría criticizes Rahner’s more transcendental focus, however, claiming that “the yardstick of Christian living is not to be sought in some alleged supernatural grace whose presence eludes the objectivity of personal and social awareness; it is to be sought in the following of Jesus, which is a visible and verifiable reality” (*Freedom Made Flesh* 31).

<sup>24</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 319. <sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner argues that the representative character of the symbol must be distinguished from the “merely arbitrary” forms of reference suggested by other “concepts which point linguistically and objectively in the same direction: *ειδος, μορφη*, sign, figure, expression, image, aspect, appearance, etc.” He says the symbol is “the

“God revealed himself in history, not directly, but in a sign: . . . the humanity of Jesus,”<sup>27</sup> is a contextualized reinterpretation of Rahner’s famous assertion from his theology of symbol that “the incarnate word is the absolute symbol of God in the world.”<sup>28</sup> The latter follows from Rahner’s “basic principle” that “all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.”<sup>29</sup> But Ellacuría has shifted the emphasis from “symbol” to “sign” in part to cohere with Medellín’s response to the council’s mandate to read the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the gospel. Accordingly, Ellacuría argues that the “mission of the Church” is to be “a sign, and only a sign, of the God who has revealed himself in history, . . . of Jesus, the Lord, the Revealer of the Father.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1978 Ellacuría further historicized this theology of sign for a Latin American context with the startling claim that the “principal” sign of the times “by whose light the others should be discerned and interpreted” is “the historically crucified people.”<sup>31</sup> Building on Archbishop Romero’s famous 1977 homily to the terrified peasants of Aguilares,<sup>32</sup> Ellacuría defines the “crucified people” as that “vast portion of humankind, which is literally and actually crucified by natural, . . . historical, and personal

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highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another . . . from the ontological point of view,” because “the symbol strictly speaking (symbolic reality) is the self-realization of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence” (Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 [Baltimore: Helicon, 1966] 221–52, at 224, 225, 234). Ellacuría’s theology of sign is most fully articulated in *Freedom Made Flesh*. Laurence A. Egan, M.M., in the book’s foreword (vii–ix, at viii) describes Ellacuría as a “former student of Karl Rahner” who “has tried to combine the insights of Rahner with those of the Theology of Liberation—a synthesis . . . imbued with the reality of Central America.”

<sup>27</sup> Ellacuría, *Teología política* 9; *Freedom Made Flesh* 18.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol” 237. The argument of this section is developed more fully in Robert Lassalle-Klein, “Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol” 93–96.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 224–25.

<sup>30</sup> Ellacuría, *Teología política* 48; *Freedom Made Flesh* 89.

<sup>31</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “Discernir ‘el signo’ de los tiempos,” *Diakónia* 17 (1981) 57–59, at 58. The “crucified people” first appears in Ignacio Ellacuría, “El pueblo crucificado, ensayo de soteriología histórica,” in *Cruz y resurrección: Anuncio de una Iglesia nueva*, ed. I. Ellacuría et al. (Mexico City, CTR, 1978) 49–82; translated as “The Crucified People,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 580–604.

<sup>32</sup> Two months after the assassination of Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero delivered this important homily to the Jesuit’s former parishioners in Aguilares, El Salvador, telling the traumatized peasants, “You are the image of the pierced Savior” (“Homilía en Aguilares [June 19, 1977], *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero* [San Salvador: UCA, 1980] 207–12, at 208).

oppressions.”<sup>33</sup> He ties this terrifying sign to Jesus with the claim that it has defined “the reality of the world in which the church has existed for almost two thousand years, [literally] since Jesus announced the approach of the Reign of God.” In the end, Ellacuría’s closest friend and collaborator, Jon Sobrino, claims that Ellacuría defined “his life, and his vocation as a Jesuit and, deeper still, as a human being”<sup>34</sup> in terms of “a specific service: *to take the crucified people down from the cross.*”<sup>35</sup>

Sobrino and Ellacuría insist that this striking metaphor for Medellín’s option for the poor ultimately places a claim on the universal church. Indeed, their whole project could be described as an attempt to show how followers of Jesus are drawn into a mystical “analogy”<sup>36</sup> between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,<sup>37</sup> and the struggles of the crucified people to believe and to survive the “world of poverty . . . today.”<sup>38</sup> This final point takes us into what the Greek Fathers of the Church called “*theosis*,” which, for Ellacuría and Sobrino, implies that following the historical reality of Jesus draws the disciple into a transformative participation in the divine mystery of the inner life of God. Building on the trinitarian mysticism of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Rahner’s

<sup>33</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People,” *Mysterium Liberationis* 580–603, at 580.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuría, the Human Being and the Christian: ‘Taking the Crucified People Down From the Cross,’” *Love That Produces Hope* 1–67, at 5, trans. Robert Lassalle-Klein from “Ignacio Ellacuría, el hombre y el cristiano: Bajar de la cruz al pueblo crucificado,” *Revista latinoamericano de teología* 32 (1994) 134.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Throughout this article, emphases in quotations are original unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>36</sup> See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 254–73; and *Christ the Liberator* 3–8.

<sup>37</sup> Sobrino identifies three “typical situations” of “present-day deaths for God’s Kingdom [that] are like Jesus’ death” (*Jesus the Liberator* 268). There are priests, nuns, catechists, delegates of the word, students, trade unionists, peasants, workers, teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, etc., who structurally reproduce the martyrdom of Jesus—they defended the Kingdom and attacked the anti-Kingdom” with a prophetic voice “and were put to death” (*ibid.* 269). There are those who die an ethical “soldier’s death,” defending the Kingdom by open struggle, using “some sort of violence.” He believes such a person may “share in martyrdom by analogy” by “laying down one’s life for love” (*ibid.* 270). Then, “finally, there are the [innocent and anonymous] masses who are . . . murdered, even though they have not used any explicit form of violence, even verbal.” Sobrino notes that, “They do not actively lay down their lives to defend the faith, or even directly to defend God’s Kingdom.” For “they are the peasants, children, women, and old people above all who died slowly day after day, and die violently with incredible cruelty and totally unprotected.” But, he argues, “their historical innocence,” like that of the Suffering Servant, shows they “are unjustly burdened with a sin that has been annihilating them” (*ibid.* 270–71).

<sup>38</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 4.

recovery of the economic Trinity in 20th-century Catholic theology, and Augustine's contributions to Christian semiotics and Western trinitarian theology, the two Jesuits offer us a deeply trinitarian theology of sign. This is emblemized by Sobrino's claim that the disciple who responds to the grace-filled call to take the crucified people down from the cross becomes a living sign of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sending of the Spirit, and the ongoing work of the Trinity in the world. I will say more about this intriguing and potentially controversial metaphor below.

### SOBRINO'S "SAVING HISTORY" CHRISTOLOGY

Jon Sobrino's two-volume Latin American Christology builds on Ellacuría's philosophical concept of historical reality and his theology of sign. Given what I have already said about the Rahnerian roots of Ellacuría's fundamental theology, it will come as no surprise that Sobrino defines his project in relation to Rahner's "two basic types of Christology."<sup>39</sup> Rahner distinguishes "the 'saving history' type, a Christology viewed from below," which he finds in the New Testament, from what he calls "the *metaphysical* type, a Christology developing downwards from above,"<sup>40</sup> which he associates with Chalcedon and the early ecumenical councils. Rahner presciently predicts his typology will be misunderstood, particularly the affirmation that a Christology from below "understands, and must understand, this process of 'rising up' as an act proper to God himself." Certainly recent criticisms suggest that Sobrino's appropriation of this aspect of Rahner's approach to Christology has also been misunderstood.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1975) 213–23.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 213–14.

<sup>41</sup> Sobrino's assertion that the historical development of dogma about Jesus Christ reflects the historical character of the divine economy of salvation appears not to have been considered in the recent notification issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The document clearly admits, on the one hand, that "Father Sobrino does not deny the divinity of Jesus when he proposes that it is found in the New Testament only 'in seed' and was formulated dogmatically only after many years of believing reflection." However, it criticizes a "reticence" that "fails to affirm Jesus' divinity with sufficient clarity," which, it asserts, "gives credence to the suspicion that the historical development of dogma . . . has arrived at the formulation of Jesus' divinity without a clear continuity with the New Testament" (CDF, "Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J.," in *Hope and Solidarity* 256). Reading Sobrino's work as an example of what Rahner calls "saving history" Christology, however, supports the interpretation that what the notification sees as "reticence" is instead a reflection of Sobrino's analytical focus on the church's "process of 'rising up'" from its first generation faith-filled response to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to the fully elaborated fourth-century doctrinal claims of Chalcedon as an act inspired by the Holy Spirit and "proper to God himself." Referring to the criticism of the CDF, William

Describing “saving history” Christology, Rahner argues that “the point of departure for this Christology . . . is the simple experience of the man Jesus, and of the Resurrection in which his fate was brought to its conclusion.” He argues:

The eye of the believer in his experience of saving history alights first on the man Jesus of Nazareth, and on him in his *fully human reality*, in his death, in the absolute powerless[ness] and in the abidingly definitive state which his reality and his fate have been brought to by God, something which we call his Resurrection, his glorification, his sitting at the right hand of the Father.<sup>42</sup>

Sobrinó explicitly ties his Christology to this “undertaking of Karl Rahner . . . to restore to Christ his true humanity,” which “insisted on thinking of the humanity of Christ “sacramentally.”<sup>43</sup> And Sobrinó adopts the “basically chronological” pattern of christological reflection “found in the New Testament,” where “Jesus’ mission of service to the Kingdom” raises “the question about the person of Jesus,” ultimately answered by the disciple’s “confession of his unrepeatable and salvific reality.”<sup>44</sup> Reflecting Rahner’s characteristic insistence on the unity of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, Sobrinó concludes: “As a result the *real* point of departure is always, somehow, the whole faith in Christ, but the *methodological* point of departure continues to be the historical Jesus. This is objectively, the best *mystagogy* for the Christ of faith.”<sup>45</sup> Sobrinó and Ellacuría further insist that one comes to know the resurrected Jesus mainly by picking up and carrying the historical burden of his message about the Kingdom of God,<sup>46</sup> and by accepting the suffering that comes to those who try to historicize today the values of the Kingdom that defined the historical reality of Jesus.

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Loewe correctly points out that “the Congregation does not insist that Sobrinó *should* be read as saying this, nor does his text support such a reading. Rather the opposite is the case” (Loewe, “Interpreting the Notification” 146, 150).

<sup>42</sup> Rahner, “Two Basic Types” 215, emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Sobrinó, *Jesus the Liberator* 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Jesucristo liberador* 104; *Jesus the Liberator* 55.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Like many theologians, Ellacuría and Sobrinó, from Medellín on, place great emphasis on the Kingdom of God as a defining element of the message and ministry of Jesus. Ellacuría, however, characteristically links the fundamental theological significance of the Kingdom preached by Jesus to what he calls “the transcendental unity of the history of salvation,” arguing that the Kingdom reveals that “there are not two histories but one single history in which the presence of the liberator God and the presence of the liberated and liberator human being are joined together” (Ignacio Ellacuría, “La teología de la liberación frente al cambio sociohistórico de América Latina,” *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 4 [1987] 21).

### The Historical Reality of Jesus Christ

Exactly what, then, do Sobrino and Ellacuría mean by the “historical reality” of Jesus? And how does Sobrino make the historical reality of Jesus the proper object for his contextualized Latin American “saving history” Christology? I address these questions in this and the following sections. Then, heeding Rahner’s prescient warning, I will conclude by suggesting how Sobrino’s “saving history” Christology makes the “process of ‘rising up’” from the historical reality of Jesus to the Christ of faith into “an act proper to God himself.”<sup>47</sup>

Sobrino asserts that the historical Jesus is both the way to Christ and the starting point for Latin American Christology. He says that Latin American Christology “presupposes . . . faith in the whole reality of Jesus Christ.” But he notes that “the methodological problem” remains: “where does one start in giving an account of this whole?” So he argues, “I have chosen as my starting point the *reality* of Jesus of Nazareth, his life, his mission and his fate, what is usually called the *historical Jesus*.”<sup>48</sup>

Here it is worth noting that, while Sobrino generally refers to the “reality” of Jesus rather than Ellacuría’s more precise “historical reality” of Jesus, the meaning and the approach are generally the same. This conjunction of the terms *reality* and *historical Jesus* should also alert us to Sobrino’s affinity with Rahner’s insistence on the unity of history and transcendence in Jesus. This is clear in Sobrino’s statement, “Jesus Christ is a whole that, to put it for now in a simplified way, consists of a historical element (Jesus) and a transcendental element (Christ), and the most characteristic feature of faith as such is the acceptance of the transcendental element: that this Jesus is more than Jesus, that he is *the Christ*.”<sup>49</sup>

Sobrino outlines “the meaning of the *historical dimension of Jesus* in Latin American Christology,” starting with what he calls “(1) the most *historical* aspect of Jesus: his practice with spirit.”<sup>50</sup> He then moves “(2) from the practice of Jesus to the *person* of Jesus,” and “(3) from the historical Jesus to the whole Christ.”<sup>51</sup> While volume one, *Jesucristo liberador*, traces these themes through the New Testament from “the mission and faith of Jesus” to his crucifixion and death, volume two picks up the trail from the New

<sup>47</sup> Rahner, “Two Basic Types” 214.

<sup>48</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 36–63, at 36.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 36–37.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 50. Sobrino’s notion of the “poor with spirit” goes back to an early essay by Ellacuría on the Beatitudes where he interprets the first beatitude of Matthew 5:3 as “Blessed are the poor with spirit” (Ignacio Ellacuría, “Las bienaventuranzas como carta fundamental de la Iglesia de los pobres,” in *Iglesia de los pobres y organizaciones populares*, ed. Oscar Romero et al. (San Salvador, UCA, 1979) 105–18; repr. in Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos* 2:417–37, see esp. 423.

<sup>51</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 96, 100, 102; *Jesus the Liberator* 50, 52, 54.

Testament resurrection accounts through the development of Christology in the early church and the first ecumenical councils. In all this, Sobrino makes it clear that the deposit of faith remains normative, and that he is reading it from a Latin American ecclesial “setting”<sup>52</sup> defined by the option for the poor and the perspective of the victims of history. In the following three subsections, I will summarize the core claims of Sobrino’s two volumes on each of the aforementioned points. I will also link them to his profound historical realism and to his vision of what I will call a Latin American “saving history” Christology; it starts “from below” with the historical reality of Jesus.

*“The Most Historical Aspect of Jesus: His Practice with Spirit”*

Sobrino begins with the definition, “By ‘historical Jesus’ we mean the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his words and actions, his activity and his praxis, his attitudes and his spirit, his fate on the cross (and the resurrection).”<sup>53</sup> This inclusion of both the “spirit” and the resurrection of Jesus in what Sobrino calls his “historical” reality helps us see that his understanding of the historical reality of Jesus transcends the positivism of historical facts. Indeed, he argues that “the most historical aspect of Jesus is his practice, and . . . the spirit with which he engaged in it and . . . imbued it.” But what exactly does Sobrino mean by Jesus’ “practice with spirit” and the “spirit” of the practice of Jesus?

Sobrino says this “spirit” refers to Jesus’ “honesty toward the real world, partiality for the *little ones*, deep-seated mercy, [and] faithfulness to the mystery of God.” But what is “historical,” observable, or empirical about this spirit? On the one hand, he argues “this spirit was defined and so became real, through a practice, because it was within that practice, and not in his pure inwardness, that Jesus was challenged and empowered.” Thus, Sobrino contends that we can discover the spirit of Jesus by examining his practice.<sup>54</sup>

“On the other hand,” Sobrino insists, “this spirit was not merely the necessary accompaniment of Jesus’ practice, but shaped it, gave it a direction and even empowered it to be historically effective.”<sup>55</sup> The spirit that suffuses Jesus’ practice cannot be captured by “what is simply debatable in space and time.”<sup>56</sup> In fact, he argues, “the *historical* is . . . what sets history in motion.” And this is precisely what has been “handed down to us as a trust . . . [in] the New Testament . . . as narratives published to keep alive through history a reality started off by Jesus.” Thus, he concludes, the New Testament is less interested in empirically cataloguing Jesus’ activities than in capturing and passing on the spirit of Jesus to his disciples, when this

<sup>52</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 28.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 50–52, esp. 50.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

“spirit” is understood as the fundamental relationships, loves, commitments, and self-understanding that defined his life.<sup>57</sup>

After these introductory remarks on method, volume one provides two lengthy sections on factors that define the historical reality of Jesus. “The first thing that strikes one in beginning to analyze the reality of Jesus of Nazareth,” Sobrino writes, and what “emerges incontrovertibly from the Gospels” is that “Jesus’ life was an outward-directed one, directed to something . . . expressed by two terms: ‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘Father.’”<sup>58</sup> Both terms, Sobrino asserts, “are authentic words of Jesus” and “all-embracing realities.” The “Kingdom of God” defines for Jesus “all of [historical] reality and what must be done,” and “by ‘Father’ Jesus names the personal reality that lends ultimate meaning to his life.”<sup>59</sup> But, he concludes, “we begin with Jesus’ relationship to the Kingdom, because this is how the Gospels begin . . . and because, I think, one gains better access to the whole reality of Jesus by starting from his external activities on behalf of the Kingdom and by moving from there to his inner relationship with God.”<sup>60</sup> Sobrino’s starting point, it must be noted, is not determined arbitrarily but is based on a trajectory he discovers in the Gospels.

Building on Ellacuría’s three dimensions of historicization mentioned above, Sobrino then outlines how Jesus (a) understands the Kingdom of God, (b) takes responsibility for the Kingdom of God, and (c) carries out transformative activities on behalf of the Kingdom of God through his “practice with spirit.” Each of these moments is summarized in the subsections below, including what each contributes to Sobrino’s understanding of the “spirit,” or the defining aspects of the person of Jesus historicized in his practice.

### *Jesus’ Kingdom of God: A Hoped-for Utopia Addressed to the Suffering Poor*

Sobrino says that Jesus articulates a specific “concept” of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, and that he presents the Kingdom as primarily addressed to the poor.<sup>61</sup> He says the Synoptic Jesus understands the Kingdom as a “hoped-for utopia in the midst of the sufferings of history,”<sup>62</sup> a view Jesus shares with the Hebrew Scriptures and John the Baptist. Jesus believes the Kingdom is “possible” and “something good and liberative,”<sup>63</sup> which reflects not only the common “expectation” of the country folk of Galilee and first-century Israel but also the hopes and aspirations of oppressed people throughout the ages.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>59</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 121; *Jesus the Liberator* 67.

<sup>60</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 122; *Jesus the Liberator* 67.

<sup>61</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 69.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 75.

On the other hand, Sobrino observes that Jesus breaks with John the Baptist and the Hebrew prophets in four important ways. First, “Jesus not only hopes for the Kingdom of God, [but] he affirms that it is at hand, that its arrival is imminent, [and] that the Kingdom should be not only an object of hope, but of certainty.”<sup>64</sup> Second, Jesus insists that, while the Kingdom is God’s initiative, gift, and grace, its actual coming “demands a conversion, [or] *metanoia*.” This creates “a task for the listener” that differs according to his or her location in the cycle of oppression. Thus, “the hope the poor must come to feel” must not be confused with “the radical change of conduct required of the oppressors.” In either case, however, “demands [are] made on all to live a life worthy of the Kingdom.”<sup>65</sup>

Third, while the Kingdom implies a “crisis” and/or “judgment on the world and history,”<sup>66</sup> Jesus presents it as “good news” for the poor that “has to be proclaimed with joy and must produce joy.”<sup>67</sup> This spirit of joy and hope “is why Jesus aroused undoubted popular support throughout the whole of his ministry.”<sup>68</sup>

Fourth, Sobrino argues that, while Jesus “did not exclude anyone from the possibility of entering into the Kingdom,” he primarily addressed the Kingdom of God to the poor.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, for Jesus, “proclaiming good news *to the poor* of this world cannot be a matter of words alone,” since “what the poor need and hope for” is a change in their historical reality.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, while Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom as liberating good news for the poor provokes hope and requires conversion, it also demands a commensurate “messianic practice” capable of historicizing this spirit.

*Jesus Assumes Responsibility for the Kingdom of God  
through His “Messianic Practice”*

Sobrino sees Jesus as driven by a spirit of ethical responsibility for the Kingdom, which he historicizes through a “messianic practice”<sup>71</sup> as “*proclaimer* and *initiator* of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>72</sup> To appreciate the role of Jesus’ miracles in this practice, Sobrino says we must see them through the eyes of the poor country folk of Galilee as liberative signs and expressions of God’s compassion. The miracles arouse faith “in a God who, coming close, makes us believe in new possibilities actively denied to the poor in history.” They elicit “a faith that overcomes fatalism . . . so that believers, now healed, are converted so as to become themselves principles of salvation for themselves.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 76–77.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 93.

Second, Sobrino says that when Jesus casts out devils, his Galilean audience appreciates Jesus' recognition that "the Kingdom implies, of necessity, actively struggling against the anti-Kingdom."<sup>74</sup> Third, Jesus' welcoming and forgiving common sinners simultaneously liberates them from themselves and overcomes their marginalization.<sup>75</sup> He calls the powerful to "an active cessation from oppressing" and asks the poor to accept "that God is not like . . . their oppressors and the ruling religious culture."<sup>76</sup> Fourth, Jesus tells parables about the Kingdom that similarly call the oppressor to conversion, defend the poor, and justify his actions on their behalf.<sup>77</sup> And fifth, Jesus gathers his followers for meals and other joyful events that "are signs of the coming of the Kingdom and of the realization of his ideals: liberation, peace, universal communion."<sup>78</sup>

In the end, Sobrino argues that Latin American liberation theology "makes the Kingdom of God central for strictly christological reasons"<sup>79</sup> grounded in the Kingdom's defining role in Jesus' messianic practice, and the conviction that his historical reality is the real sign of the Word made flesh. Sobrino argues that the messianic practice of Jesus historicizes his spirit of compassion, joy, forgiveness, courageous willingness to confront oppression, and his call for personal transformation. And he concludes that this messianic practice leads Jesus to a "prophetic praxis" that decisively alters the historical reality of first-century Israel.

*"Prophetic Praxis": Jesus' Transformative Activities  
for the Kingdom of God*

Jesus defends the first fruits of his messianic practice in service of the Kingdom of God through a "prophetic praxis" of "direct denunciation of the anti-Kingdom,"<sup>80</sup> which Sobrino says changes both Jesus' immediate context and the historical reality of Israel forever. He distinguishes this praxis from Jesus' "messianic practice" that produces "signs" of the Kingdom but is not "aimed at bringing about the total transformation of society."<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, in the controversies, unmaskings, and denunciations "Jesus denounces the scribes, the Pharisees, the rich, the priests, the rulers . . . [who] represent and exercise some kind of power that structures society as a whole." Jesus' prophetic actions, Sobrino affirms: (a) seek to reform and change the "realities (the law, the Temple) in whose name society is structured"; (b) expose structural abuses of institutional power as "an expression of the anti-Kingdom"; and (c) "show that the anti-Kingdom seeks

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 95–99.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 100–101.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 160.

to justify itself in God's name."<sup>82</sup> In this way, the prophetic activity of Jesus historicizes a spirit of transformative "'praxis' . . . because . . . its purpose [is] the transformation of society." He says this praxis demonstrates "that Jesus, objectively, faced up to the subject of society as a whole—including its structural dimension—and sought to change it."<sup>83</sup>

Sobrinó then analyzes controversies, unmaskings of lies and other mechanisms of oppressive religion, and denunciations of oppressors and their idols, which are too numerous to review here. He concludes, however, by examining Jesus' expulsion of the traders from the Temple (Mk 11:15–19; Mt 21:12–17; Lk 19:45–48; Jn 2:14–16), which serves as an explanation for the crucifixion. I will say more about this below. He insists that in virtually all the controversies, unmaskings, and denunciations, "Jesus not only proclaims the Kingdom and proclaims a Father God; he also denounces the anti-Kingdom and unmask its idols." He concludes that "in this praxis, Jesus can be seen to be in the line of the classic prophets of Israel, of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah . . . , and in that of the modern prophets, Archbishop Oscar Romero, . . . Martin Luther King, Jr." Thus, Jesus historicizes a prophetic spirit in keeping with the prophetic traditions of Israel through a prophetic praxis designed to confront, reform, and transform the current abuse of its ancient institutions and practices by contemporary first-century elites.<sup>84</sup>

With this claim, Sobrinó concludes his argument that (a) Jesus understands the Kingdom of God as justice, forgiveness, and mercy for the suffering poor and the margined; (b) Jesus' "messianic practice" responds in a liberating manner to this suffering; and (c) Jesus' transformative "prophetic praxis" is both good news for the poor and leads inevitably to his crucifixion. Sobrinó's point is that the merciful, liberating, and prophetic spirit that suffuses Jesus' proclamation and initiation of the Kingdom of God as good news for the poor, also provokes resistance by the forces of the anti-Kingdom. Sadly, the awful logic of the anti-Kingdom willingly sacrifices the poor and their defenders to preserve its treasures. Unfortunately, this logic also implies that those who share Jesus' spirit of service of the Kingdom as good news to the poor will be crucified as well.

*"From the Practice of Jesus to the Person of Jesus"*

I come, then, to what Sobrinó calls the second "*historical dimension of Jesus* in Latin American Christology."<sup>85</sup> He argues that Jesus' "practice with spirit" of the Kingdom of God as good news for the poor (which includes his prophetic praxis) leads directly to his crucifixion, the defining

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 179.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 50.

moment of the life and “the *person* of Jesus.”<sup>86</sup> Praising this dimension of Sobrino’s work, biblical scholar Daniel Harrington argues that “Sobrino’s ‘historical-theological’ reading of Jesus of Nazareth offers important methodological contributions to both the historical and theological study of Jesus and his death.”<sup>87</sup> Harrington points out that Sobrino correctly eschews the “narrow version of historical criticism” found in many authors and formulates a “more adequate and fruitful way of treating ancient sources,” which “involves taking seriously the historical data about Jesus and trying to do theology on the basis of and in light of these data.”<sup>88</sup>

Harrington agrees with Sobrino that “Jesus’ death was not a mistake, tragic or otherwise,” and that “what got Jesus killed . . . was the fact that he was a radical threat to the religious and political powers of his time.”<sup>89</sup> Jesus “got in the way” by defending the victims of their policies, in the name of the Kingdom of God.<sup>90</sup> As evidence, Harrington cites the fact that “the four Gospels are united in presenting Jesus as the victim of persecution and in suggesting that his death was . . . the logical consequence of who Jesus was and the circumstances in which he lived and worked.”<sup>91</sup>

Harrington then asks, “Did Jesus know beforehand that he was going to suffer and die in Jerusalem?”<sup>92</sup> Noting that biblical scholars generally view the three passion predictions (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) as later insertions, Harrington says that Sobrino “wisely points to the fate of John the Baptist” to argue that Jesus went to Jerusalem ready to accept death “out of fidelity to the cause of the kingdom of God, out of confidence in the one whom he called ‘Father,’ and out of loyalty to his prophetic calling.”<sup>93</sup> With this move, he argues, Sobrino correctly situates “the link between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith” precisely at “the root of Jesus’ resolve to go to Jerusalem . . . [and] his understanding of his life as service on behalf of others, even to the point of sacrificial service.” This is Sobrino’s explanation for how the divine economy of salvation is historicized through what the Gospels portray as the defining moment of the historical reality of Jesus: his decision to accept suffering and death in order to fulfill his messianic, prophetic, and priestly mission from the Father to bring the Kingdom of God as good news for the poor.

Citing the Temple incident (Mk 11:15–19) and Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (13:2), Harrington supports Sobrino’s argument that “it is reasonable to conclude that at the ‘religious trial’ [before the

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 52–54.

<sup>87</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “What Got Jesus Killed? Sobrino’s Historical-Theological Reading of Scripture,” in *Hope and Solidarity* 79–89, at 81.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 82–83.

Sanhedrin] Jesus was accused of wanting to destroy the Temple not only because he criticized certain aspects of it but also because he offered an alternative (the Kingdom of God) that implied that the Temple would no longer be the core of the political, social, and economic life of the Jewish people."<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Harrington endorses Sobrino's acceptance of Luke's charges in the "political trial" before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (23:2), as very likely historical: "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding them to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."<sup>95</sup> Harrington argues that "the charge that Jesus made himself 'the Messiah, a king,' would have been especially incendiary in this context." Thus, the Evangelists' description of the inscription on the cross, "The King of the Jews" (Mk 15:26), not to mention the public torture itself, would have served as brutal public warnings to "would-be Messiahs . . . tempted to lead an uprising against the Roman occupiers."<sup>96</sup>

It is crucial to understand that Sobrino is arguing that Jesus' relationship with the Father ultimately guides and motivates the nature of his obedient service to God's call to initiate his Kingdom, which is historicized through a liberative prophetic practice that leads to Jesus' faith-filled death on the cross. Harrington notes appreciatively that Sobrino finds "strong analogies between first-century Palestine and late-twentieth-century El Salvador," which open up new insights "that other interpreters in other circumstances may miss."<sup>97</sup> Sobrino admits: "I have nothing to contribute to the exegetical elucidation" of scriptural accounts of the death of Jesus, but, he insists, "the point I want to make is that the cross that dominates the Third World greatly illuminates the coherence with which the passion and death of Jesus—as a whole—are described."<sup>98</sup> Thus, the received tradition clearly remains normative in Sobrino's analogical approach. But his work enters the hermeneutical circle initiated at Vatican II through the commitment to read the terrifying sign of the crucified people of Latin America in light of the historical reality of Jesus' "praxis with spirit, his crucifixion, and his resurrection,"<sup>99</sup> and vice versa. Harrington correctly argues that it is this perspective that defines Sobrino's primary contribution to the interpretation of the New Testament crucifixion narratives.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>98</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 196.

<sup>99</sup> Sobrino clearly insists on the normativity of the received tradition (*Christ the Liberator* 36), while illustrating David Tracy's widely accepted definition of systematic theology as "the discipline that articulates mutually critical correlations between the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the Christian fact, and the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the contemporary situation" (David Tracy, "The Foundations of Practical Theology," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, ed. Don S. Browning [New York: Harper & Row, 1983] 61–82, at 62).

*“From the Historical Jesus to the Whole Christ”*

Volume two, *La fe en Jesucristo*, deals with what Sobrino calls the third element of the *historical dimension of Jesus*, shifting “from the historical Jesus to the whole Christ.”<sup>100</sup> The perceptive reader will note that here Sobrino moves far beyond the bounds of the usual treatment of the “historical Jesus” (e.g., he includes the Resurrection) precisely because his Rahnerian “saving history” approach to Christology leads him to interpret the historical reality of Jesus as the living sacrament of the Word of God.

Sobrino’s approach is marked by the historical reality he attributes to the New Testament “paschal experience” and to its interpretation and acceptance in faith. This emphasis on the historical dimension of the Resurrection emblemizes Sobrino’s “saving history” approach to the historical reality of Jesus. His analysis is driven by what he calls the “reality principle,”<sup>101</sup> which he says is “the central presupposition of the Christologies of the New Testament.” The reality principle is a kind of scribal exegetical standard that works to limit the addition of various titles and other elements to the story of Jesus in the New Testament so that “the real and historical subject is still Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>102</sup> The key point is that the reality principle allows the New Testament authors to credibly claim—given first century scribal standards—that “Faith . . . is referred back to ‘what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands’ (1 John 1:1).”<sup>103</sup>

Sobrino observes that New Testament witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus are presented as firsthand accounts of a “paschal experience,” which “claims to be based in a *reality* that happened to Jesus and was, in some way, observable.”<sup>104</sup> But what exactly does Sobrino mean when he asserts that “the New Testament builds its reflection on this *reality of the historical Jesus and his resurrection*”?<sup>105</sup> Having outlined in the previous section the defining elements of his understanding of the historical reality of Jesus, I will focus in this section on Sobrino’s answer to the question, “What is historical in Jesus’ resurrection?”<sup>106</sup>

Sobrino’s observation that the canonical Gospels “never describe Jesus’ resurrection” leads him to assert that “in order to know what happened to Jesus, we are of necessity referred to what happened to the disciples” and what he calls “the Easter experience.”<sup>107</sup> He then examines the pre-

<sup>100</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 102–4; *Jesus the Liberator* 54–55.

<sup>101</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 225. <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 225.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 413; this sentence is part of a paragraph not translated in the English edition.

<sup>105</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 226, emphasis added.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

Pauline kerygma that scholars place among the earliest summaries of what Christians believed (1 Cor 15:3b–5): “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”

From this material Sobrino draws three properly historical claims. First, the kerygmatic texts “affirm that something happened to Jesus’ disciples, something they attribute to *their encounter with Jesus*, whom they call the risen Lord.”<sup>108</sup> Second, “a change was worked in the disciples . . . before and after Easter.” The texts describe changes in “the places in which they were (from Galilee to Jerusalem); their behavior (from fear to bravery); [and] their faith (from ‘We were waiting, but it is now the third day’ to ‘The Lord is risen indeed’).” Third, the kerygma does not reflect the impact of Jesus on his followers during his life and death but emerges from the disciples’ experience of the Resurrection. “The *objective* conclusion, therefore, has to be . . . [that] for them there was no doubt that this subjective faith had a corresponding reality that happened to Jesus himself.”<sup>109</sup> Sobrino concludes, “From a historical point of view, I do not think one can go further than this.”

This brings Sobrino face to face with the problem of the exact nature of the relationship of history and faith, his resolution of which ultimately defines his interpretation of the historical reality of Jesus from a Latin American context. Sobrino argues that “the proclamation of the message that ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’” presents Christians with a historical “invitation” to a “reasonable faith.” Drawing an analogy between the claims of the Resurrection and the Exodus, Sobrino notes that both accounts confront readers with historical events that some have believed can be reasonably interpreted as actions of the transcendent God. Sobrino agrees with John Henry Newman that the faith that God has acted in history through such events can in fact be seen as a “reasonable response” to a “sum total of [historical] indicators,” which he says include credible texts, personal experiences, and the long-lasting impact on believers of faith. In the present case, Sobrino argues that Scripture first confronts the reader/hearer with testimonies to “the presence of the eschatological in history” from witnesses that “appear to be honest people.” Second, readers/hearers judge these claims through analogies to their own “present-day” historical encounters with “something ultimate.” And third, readers/hearers note that believing acceptance of these claims consistently (but not always) generates “greater personal humanization” and the creation of “more and better history.”<sup>110</sup>

These factors lead Sobrino to conclude “that understanding Jesus’ resurrection as an eschatological event is an analogous problem to that of

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 64, emphasis added.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 64–65.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

knowing God through any divine action.”<sup>111</sup> The underlying idea, grounded in Ellacuría’s Christian historical realism, is that history and faith are not opposites but are inextricably intertwined in human historical reality, which, as I have noted above, must take a stand on its historical reality in the world. Adapting the three questions that Kant says every person must face, Sobrino then asks what historical *knowledge*, what historical *praxis*, and what historical *hope* “are needed today in order to understand what is being said when we hear that Jesus has been raised from the dead?” As I will show in the next section, Sobrino predictably argues that “the replies will above all take account of what the scriptural texts themselves require,” while at the same time reflecting what emerges when the story of Jesus is “reread from the Latin American situation.”<sup>112</sup>

In this section, then, I have outlined important aspects of what Sobrino means by the “historical reality” of Jesus Christ and have begun to suggest its place in his Christology. Here Sobrino clearly builds on the concept of “historical reality” developed by Ellacuría with his vision of a Latin American Christology guided by a historical *logos* capable of articulating the salvific significance of the historical reality of Jesus. Ellacuría’s notion of historical reality as that reality which must take a stance on its history in the world is exemplified in Sobrino’s claim that Jesus defines his life, his person, and the salvation he brings through his fundamental historical stance toward the Father, his people Israel, the mission he gives Jesus to initiate the Kingdom of God, and his action of raising Jesus from the dead. These are the defining elements of the historical reality of Jesus Christ as witnessed by the Gospels, and Sobrino argues that they guide his contextualized rereading of the tradition.

But I have only begun to suggest the place of the historical reality of Jesus in Sobrino’s overall reading of christological tradition from a Latin American perspective. In what follows I will allude to how Sobrino builds on Ellacuría’s Rahnerian theology of sign, the trinitarian spirituality of Ignatius Loyola, and most especially Archbishop Romero’s vision of the poor as the crucified image of Christ to argue that it is the “victims of history” who help us understand and enter the historical reality of Jesus as the “real symbol” of the Word made flesh.<sup>113</sup>

### **The Faith, Hope, and Love of the “Victims” of History as the Hermeneutical Key to the Historical Reality of Jesus’ Resurrection**

The originality of Sobrino’s approach to Christology is reflected in the question he adds to those of Kant mentioned above: “What can we

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 319.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 36.

celebrate in history?”<sup>114</sup> Sobrino contends that, “however scandalous this may seem,” we must ask what there is to celebrate in the blood-stained history of “the Latin American situation.” He answers with three “hermeneutical principles from the victims” of history, which he believes lay the foundation for understanding acceptance of the resurrection of Jesus in a Latin American context.<sup>115</sup> First, he says that the historical *hope of the crucified* in the victory of life over death is “the most essential hermeneutical requirement for understanding what happened to Jesus.”<sup>116</sup> He begins by asserting: “If human beings were not by nature ‘beings of hope’ or were unable to fulfill this hope over the course of history with its ups and downs, the resurrection texts would . . . be incomprehensible. It would be like trying to explain colors to a blind person.”<sup>117</sup> Historicizing this claim, he argues that Hebrew scripture calls Israel to faith and hope in the God of life and justice who has been revealed through Israel’s history of oppression and liberation. Similarly, New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus call for “hope in the power of God over the injustice that produces victims,”<sup>118</sup> and over the crucifixion and death that tries to defeat the promises of the Kingdom. Thus, he concludes, “Human transcendental hope is a necessary but insufficient condition for understanding Jesus’ resurrection.”<sup>119</sup>

But where in history do we actually find this hope, and how do we make it our own? The answer, Sobrino says, “is difficult; it requires us to make the hope of victims, and with it their situation, our own.”<sup>120</sup> Like a parable of Jesus that turns the world on its head, hope “is like a gift the victims themselves make to us.” In order to make it our own, however, “we have to slot ourselves into this hope, and by doing so we can rebuild—with different, through ultimately similar, mediations—the process followed by Israel’s faith in a God of resurrection.” Thus, by making the historical hope of history’s victims into our own hope, “we progress in finding a God who is loving and on the side of the victims, so we can respond to this God with radical love for them.” On the one hand, adopting the hope of the victims “makes the question of the ultimate fate of these victims more acute,” which can be uncomfortable. On the other hand, however, it implies not

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 35. Matthew Ashley asserts that Sobrino’s hermeneutical principles are formulated in reference to “a hope that hopes first . . . for the raising to full life of the poor; a praxis devoted to raising them up now by striving for justice for the poor and . . . a knowing that is open to the surprise of finding God revealed in the poor” (J. Matthew Ashley, “The Resurrection of Jesus and Resurrection Discipleship in the Systematic Theology of Jon Sobrino,” summarized in Tatha Wiley, “Christology,” Catholic Theological Society of America, *Proceedings of the Sixtieth Annual Convention* 60 [2005] 104).

<sup>116</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 45.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

only that “we can . . . ‘hope’ that the executioner will not triumph over them,” but also that we are invited to “resign ourselves to a final and fulfilling hope.”<sup>121</sup>

Second, Sobrino asserts that the hope of the victims in God’s victory over death is only truly understood through a *praxis of love* that takes the crucified people down from the cross. This provocative assertion reflects Sobrino’s idea that, if “the ultimate root of all hope is . . . always love,” then “the Kingdom cannot be understood only as what is hoped for . . . but also . . . as what has to be built.”<sup>122</sup> Sobrino argues that, just as love leads Jesus to initiate the Kingdom and to accept suffering and death on its behalf, so when he appears to his followers, “the risen Lord sends them out to preach, baptize, forgive sins, feed the faithful, and . . . (Matthew 28:19–20; John 20:23; 21:15, 17) . . . like the earthly Jesus, to heal and cast out demons (Mark 16:17–18).”<sup>123</sup> The point is that love of neighbor implies action on behalf of the beloved.

Similarly, Sobrino insists that “understanding today that Jesus has been raised by God entails [not only] the hope that we can be *raised*, but . . . that we also have to be, in some way, *raisers*.”<sup>124</sup> Here it is important to appreciate the interlocking character of Sobrino’s trinitarian theology of sign and the *analogatum princeps* he draws between the fate of the crucified people and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Sobrino argues that, just as in due course God’s “justice was done to the crucified Jesus, . . . so the course of action called for is [for us] to take the crucified people down from the cross.”<sup>125</sup> He then makes the startling claim: “This is action on behalf of the victims, of those crucified in history, that tries in a small way—with of course no hubris—to do what God himself does: to take the victim Jesus down from the cross.”<sup>126</sup>

Lest the reader miss the significance and potentially controversial nature of this claim, it is worth noting that in a private letter leaked and published in 1984, Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, mentions (citing an earlier work) “the impressive, but ultimately shocking interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus made by J. Sobrino . . . that God’s gesture in raising Jesus is repeated in history . . . through giving life to the crucified.”<sup>127</sup> Responding to what he sees as a misstatement of his claim, Sobrino cautions, “I hope it is clear that I am not talking of repeating God’s action, any more than I talked of bringing in the Kingdom of God in the previous volume of this work.” He argues,

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>127</sup> Originally published in *30 Giorni* 3.3 (1984) 48–55; republished in *Il Regno: Documenti* 21 (1984) 220–23; cited in Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 48.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

however, “What I do insist on is giving signs—analogously—of resurrection and coming of the Kingdom. And this is also what Ignacio Ellacuría meant when he . . . used the expression ‘taking the crucified people down from the cross’ as a formulation of the Christian mission.”<sup>128</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand Sobrino’s claim (and Ellacuría’s as well) without taking note of its roots in Ignatian spirituality, and how those are articulated in Sobrino’s theology of sign and his understanding of the historical reality of Jesus.<sup>129</sup> In the famous meditation on the Trinity from the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius calls the retreatant to direct collaboration with the work of the Trinity in the world.<sup>130</sup> This meditation is cited by the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1974–1975)<sup>131</sup> as one of the defining elements of the mission and spirituality of Jesuits today; the reference comes in a document first drafted by the Central American Jesuits during the very years in which Sobrino wrote the text cited by Ratzinger. The meditation on the Trinity is also cited by the former novice master of both Ellacuría and Sobrino in the defining talk of the epoch-changing 1969 retreat at which the Central American Jesuits officially embraced the option for the poor professed by the Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Colombia (1968). Outlining the vocation of a Jesuit, Miguel Elizondo writes:

The Ignatian vocational experience consists in a trinitarian experience, of the Trinity present and operative in this world, in all things . . . realizing its plan

<sup>128</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 48. The first instance of this metaphor is cited as Ignacio Ellacuría, “Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España,” *Sal Terrae* 3 (1983) 230.

<sup>129</sup> In his important essay on Ignacio Ellacuría as an interpreter of Ignatian spirituality, Ashley asserts that Ellacuría’s “philosophy and theology had as their goal the communication of a powerful ‘fundamental intuition’ from the *Spiritual Exercises*,” which he later describes as a “mysticism of the historical event.” In a related article, Ashley asserts that Ellacuría tried to put this spirituality “at the service of the church in Latin America . . . by seeking philosophical and theological language and arguments to articulate the encounter with Christ that is structured by Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*,” and which is embodied in the Ignatian tradition of “contemplation in action.” While I agree with and build upon Ashley’s insights in this regard, my article places more emphasis on the trinitarian dimensions of Ignatian spirituality (which Ashley recognizes) and their influence on Ellacuría’s theology of sign. See J. Matthew Ashley, “Ignacio Ellacuría and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 16–39, at 37, 39; “Contemplation in the Action of Justice: Ignacio Ellacuría and Ignatian Spirituality,” in *Love That Produces Hope* 144, 145, 164 n. 54.

<sup>130</sup> David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978) 70–74, 102–9.

<sup>131</sup> “Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice” no. 14, *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* 414.

for the salvation of the whole world. In this experience Ignatius sees that all things are born from God and return to God through the presence and operation of God's self. And not only by means of the presence and operation of God, but through the insertion of humanity in history. Into this history of salvation comes the human "par excellence," Christ, and with him all persons chosen to actively cooperate in the operation of the Trinity, to realize the salvific plan of God.<sup>132</sup>

Here, then, we see the Ignatian roots of Sobrino's claim that Christians are called "to do what God himself does: to take the victim Jesus down from the cross." The disciple is called to collaborate with the work of the Trinity in the world. The initiative for this call originates with the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ and the call by the Holy Spirit to join him in discipleship and service. As a result, Elizondo says, "the definitive God of Ignatius is going to be the God of this world." For Ignatius and his Jesuits, "action becomes a totally different category. . . . Love will not be principally affective or contemplative, but a love that is realized in works, that translates into service, that is realized in this cooperation with God." "Thus," Elizondo argues, "action will be for St. Ignatius the response to this trinitarian God and the sign of the active presence of the Trinity in Ignatius and in the life of his Society."<sup>133</sup>

Sobrino's point, then, is that, when the disciple responds to a grace-filled call by Jesus Christ to take the crucified people down from the cross, he or she is caught up in what the Greek Fathers called "*theosis*," becoming a living sign of God's work (including the Resurrection) in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, just as Jesus' prophetic praxis leads inevitably to his crucifixion, so "action on behalf of the crucified . . . is also automatically against the executioners and . . . conflictive."<sup>134</sup> Sobrino says this praxis implies, on the one hand, that "action at the service of the resurrection of the *dead*, [and] . . . the resurrection of the *many* . . . should also be social [and] political, seeking to transform structures, *to raise them up*."<sup>135</sup> On the other hand, however, it also implies that such action will bring persecution and suffering to the disciples of Jesus, transforming them into living signs of his life, death, and resurrection. Thus, the disciple who responds to the call, embodied in the historical reality of Jesus, to loving action on behalf of the poor is destined to become, analogously, a living

<sup>132</sup> Miguel Elizondo, "La Primera Semana como comienzo indispensable de conversión," in *Reunion-Ejercicios de la Viceprovincia Jesuitica de Centroamerica*, Diciembre 1969," vol. 2 of *Reflexión teológico-espiritual de la Compañía de Jesus en Centroamerica* (San Salvador: Archives of the Society of Jesus, Central American Province, Survey S.J. de Centroamerica) 1-8, at 3.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

<sup>134</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 48.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

sign of the Kingdom and the economy of salvation carried out in Jesus Christ.

Third, Sobrino says that we learn from the victims of history that, “in the final analysis, to know Jesus’ resurrection we have to accept that *reality is a mystery* that is being shown to us gratuitously.”<sup>136</sup> Sobrino’s point is that, “If . . . one confesses [the Resurrection] . . . as something real, then it is necessary to have . . . faith in God’s possibilities for intervening in history.” This implies “an understanding of reality as that which bears within itself and points to[ward] an eschatological future.”<sup>137</sup>

This conjunction of “history” and “reality” reflects Ellacuría’s understanding of historical reality, including his rejection of the narrow focus of “nineteenth-century positivism”<sup>138</sup> on history as empirical events and its inability to conceptualize the possibility of radical historical discontinuity. Sobrino argues instead that the religious claim that the transcendent is known through history, like the more specific Christian claim that “the Resurrection is the appearance of the eschatological in history,”<sup>139</sup> presupposes that events reveal a historical reality that is “more” than the empirical event itself. This “more” is epitomized in the aforementioned trinitarian Ignatian spirituality that suffuses the works of Sobrino, Ellacuría, and Rahner, and that leads them to suggest that the “more” revealed in history is the mystery of God and of the economy of salvation.

At the end of volume two Sobrino suggests: “On this journey through history, not going outside history but taking flesh and delving deep into history, it can happen that reality gives more of itself, and the conviction can grow (or decrease) that . . . the journey is enveloped in the mystery of the beginning and the end, a mystery that antedates us, from which we come, which moves us to good and leads us to hope for eternal life.”<sup>140</sup> Here, he further historicizes for a Latin American context the Ignatian spirituality and the trinitarian theology of Ellacuría and Rahner. The originality of Sobrino’s work, however, springs less from his interest in Ignatian spirituality or a Rahnerian fascination with the dialectic of history and transcendence than from the use by Ellacuría and Sobrino of these sources to articulate, after Vatican II, the experience of the Latin American church in living with the option for the poor.

Thus, the influence of Sobrino’s Latin American context can be heard in the remarkable claim: “This mystery is grace, and the victims of this world, the crucified peoples, can be, and in my view are, the mediation of this grace. The victims provide the dynamism—the quasi-physical ‘shove’—for carrying out the task of journeying that involves taking the

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>138</sup> Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador* 50.

<sup>140</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 340.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 52.

crucified peoples down from their cross.”<sup>141</sup> Sobrino finally concludes, however, that “the greatest encouragement comes from those who inspire with their actual lives, those who today resemble Jesus by living and dying as he did” (no matter who they are). These are the people like Archbishop Oscar Romero, who pick up this hope, take responsibility for it, and carry out Jesus’ compassionate, loving, and transformative “practice with spirit.” Reflecting his Ignatian preoccupation with discerning the practical means to collaborate with the historical work of the Trinity in the world, Sobrino concludes, “This is God’s journey to this world of victims and martyrs, . . . it is the way to the Father and the way to human beings, [and] above all [it is the way] to the poor and the victims of this world.”<sup>142</sup>

### **“Rising Up” from the Historical Reality of Jesus to the Christ of Faith: “An Act Proper to God Himself”**

We are now in a position to summarize how Sobrino’s Christology embodies Rahner’s notion that “saving history” Christologies make the “process of ‘rising up’” from the historical reality of Jesus to the Christ of faith “an act proper to God himself.”<sup>143</sup> Here Sobrino clearly builds upon the trinitarian character of Ellacuría’s Rahnerian theology of sign.

Sobrino’s trinitarian (and Ignatian) approach to Christology leads him to situate Chalcedon’s teaching on the unity of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ within the larger, more “holistic” framework of the divine economy of salvation (the ongoing work of the Trinity in the world). Sobrino rejects the tendency “to understand the unity of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ as . . . the union of two realities that . . . could exist independently of one another.” He argues instead for “the sacramentality of the real,” endorsing Rahner’s claim that “the human, Jesus, is the real symbol of the Word.”<sup>144</sup> For Sobrino and Rahner, this claim implies a dynamic understanding of role of human nature in the economy of salvation, which Rahner places under the heading of theological anthropology. Sobrino writes: “The Word . . . took on human nature in creating it and created it in taking it on.” His point is that “the humanity of Christ is . . . that created reality which becomes the Word when the Word alienates itself, goes outward from itself.” This means that what Ellacuría and Sobrino call the historical reality of Jesus Christ ultimately “remains the symbol of the Word for always, including in the beatific vision.”<sup>145</sup> Here Sobrino means that the historical reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the real symbol, the definitive

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 340.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Rahner, “Two Basic Types” 214. <sup>144</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 319.

<sup>145</sup> Sobrino, “Jesus, Real Symbol of the Word,” in *ibid.*

revelatory sign of the Word of God in history. Ellacuría emphasizes this point with his claim that “the historical life of Jesus is the fullest revelation of the Christian God.”<sup>146</sup>

The key idea in all this is that the initiative in Sobrino’s “saving history” approach to Christology originates with the work of the Trinity in the world. Ellacuría makes the point clearly when he states: “It is in the incarnation where one appreciates up to what point God has interiorized himself in history.” Thus, Ellacuría concludes:

Following St. Augustine and with greater truth than in his formulation—*nolite foras ire, in interiore hominis habitat veritas* [do not go outside, truth resides within humanity]—it should be said: *nolite foras ire, in interiore historiae habitat Verbum trinitarium* [do not go outside, the Word of the Trinity resides within history]. That is, the Word personally resides in history, and the historical incarnation of the Word makes the Father and the Holy Spirit present . . . in history in a radically distinct manner.<sup>147</sup>

The key point, then, is that the self-revelation and self-offer of the Word of God achieved in the historical reality of Jesus Christ is an action of the Trinity.

For Ellacuría (as for Sobrino), this notion of the Trinity acting through the historical reality of Jesus presumes that “the presence of God in the mediation of Jesus does not take place like a momentary docetist step.”<sup>148</sup> Rather, “it is a real continuing presence, whose full reality will be given in the Second Coming.” Thus, “the resurrection and the exaltation [of Jesus] in heaven manifest transcendence, but they are not a negation of history.” And here I return to the question of what is historical in the resurrection of Jesus? For Ellacuría, in addition to what has already been said, the Resurrection means “that [Jesus] sends the Spirit, who is his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, precisely in order to continue dwelling among humanity until the end of the ages.”<sup>149</sup> This Spirit produces historical witnesses and living signs of the resurrection like Archbishop Oscar Romero and the many thousands who have followed his example.

In the end, Sobrino is arguing that the historical reality of Jesus Christ is the very sacrament of God’s self-revelation and self-offer, and that the acceptance of this offer raises up witnesses to the Resurrection, and living signs of the work of the Trinity in the world. Thus, using Rahner’s formulation, Sobrino’s argument implies that the “process of ‘rising up’” from the historical reality of Jesus to the Christ of faith must be seen as “an act

<sup>146</sup> Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh* 27.

<sup>147</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “Fe y justicia,” *Escritos teológicos*, vol. 3 (San Salvador: UCA, 2002) 307–73, at 319–20; repr. from *Christus* 42 (August 1977) 26–33, and (October 1977) 19–34.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

proper to God himself,”<sup>150</sup> whereby the Holy Spirit empowers the disciple to respond in faith to the call to follow Jesus Christ, thereby fulfilling the will of the Father by saying *yes* to the historical self-revelation of the mystery of God. Given this perspective, it seems only fair to suggest with Sobrino and Rahner that other contextual Christologies using this promising “saving history” approach might be expected to discover an analogous historical *logos* operating in their own particular historical context.

### CONCLUSION

In concluding, I return to the question with which I began: What is the significance for contextual theologies around the world of the substance and the methods informing the *analogatum principis* drawn by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, between the historical reality of Jesus Christ and the “crucified peoples” of today? I have argued that Ellacuría develops a profound historical realism, providing key concepts from fundamental theology that Sobrino uses to develop a contextualized Latin American “saving history” Christology that starts “from below” with the historical reality of Jesus Christ, and which he interprets as the real sign of the Word made flesh. More specifically, I first outlined how Ellacuría uses his concept of “historical reality” to formulate a “theology of sign” (historicized as a theology of the signs of the times), which claims that (a) the “crucified people” are the defining sign of the times today,<sup>151</sup> and (b) disciples of the Jesus are called to take the crucified people down from the cross. Second, I have tried to show how Sobrino’s Latin American Christology builds on these claims to argue that, when followers of Jesus heed his call to take the crucified people down from the cross, they are transformed into living signs for the universal church of the Kingdom, the resurrection of Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the ongoing work of the Trinity in the world.

In the end, I have highlighted the importance of a few key concepts developed by Sobrino and Ellacuría during 40 years of living with the “preferential option for the poor” discerned as God’s will for the Church by the Latin American bishops after Vatican II. I have suggested that Ellacuría’s fundamental theology and Sobrino’s “saving history” Christology should be placed together, forming what I believe may be the most fully developed contextual theology written since Vatican II. More importantly, I hope that some of the key elements outlined here will contribute to the development of fundamental and christological contextual theologies now emerging around the globe.

<sup>150</sup> Rahner, “Two Basic Types” 214.

<sup>151</sup> Ellacuría, “Discernir ‘el signo’ de los tiempos,” *Diakónia* 17 (1981) 58; also Ellacuría, “The Crucified People” 580–603.