

## **Jesus Christ, the Liberator**

### **1. Introduction**

In their attempt to understand, describe and relate to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Christians over the centuries have used many titles.<sup>1</sup> None of them is sufficient by itself, nor combined do they completely embrace the person of Jesus Christ. Gerald O'Collins (1998) points out that St. Basil of Caesarea in his *De Spiritu Sancto* of 375 CE, highlighted the functional motivation for many of Jesus' titles: "Because of the many ways grace is given to us poor human beings by him whose goodness and wisdom are manifold, he is described by innumerable other titles: Shepherd, King, Physician, Bridegroom, Way, Door, Fountain, Bread, Axe, and Rock. These titles do not describe his nature, but ... are concerned with his manifold energies, by which he satisfies the needs of each (8.17)."

Calling Jesus "the Liberator" is to some extent a redundancy, because the meaning of the name *Yehosua* in Hebrew is "God saves" or "God is salvation." Although the Hebrew Scriptures use this title to some human figures (kings and prophets), the Christian Scriptures reserve "Savior" only for God and Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Luke links the anointing of Jesus with his liberation ministry in passages like Luke 4:16-21 (where Jesus is announcing at a synagogue in Nazareth the fulfillment by his person of a promise from Isaiah) or Acts 10:38 (where Peter is preaching about Jesus at Cornelius' house). These passages highlight Jesus' power to deliver and release those who are poor, oppressed, handicapped or have fallen under the control of the devil.

Recognizing that *Jesus, the Liberator* is just one of the facets of the ministry of the Incarnate Son to humanity, we will in the next sections attempt to give an idea of the history of this title and its theological place in the manifold life of the Church. In the next section we will explore the title from the perspective of the Synoptic Gospels in general, and from Luke's Gospel in particular. In the third section, we will link this title to a significant theological development of the twentieth century: the *Liberation Theology*. In section four, we will discuss the original, and still most visible and vibrant of the manifestations of the Liberation Theology in the Church: the one in Latin America. And finally, in the last section of the paper, we will report on the current status of this theology within the Catholic Church and make some personal comments about it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brown listed: Lord, Messiah, Master, Son of God, Son of Man, Teacher, Victor, Lamb of God, Healer, Savior and Word.

<sup>2</sup> O'Collins (1998), page 21.

## 2. Jesus, the Liberator – the view from the Gospels

Naming Jesus “the Liberator” is practically synonymous with naming him “Savior,” “Redeemer,” and “Deliverer.” Incidentally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church in referring to Christ’s work, uses the terms “redemption,” “salvation,” and “liberation” in that order of frequency.<sup>3</sup> The apparent tension in Jesus’ preaching about the *yet-to-come* kingdom of God and the *already-here* kingdom is like the two sides of a same coin. One implies the other. The eschatological work of Christ and His Spirit necessarily leads all people towards an authentic social and political progress here and now. The liberating work of the crucified and risen Jesus encompasses not only the age to come, but also the present human life on earth.<sup>4</sup>

O’Collins (1998) gathered from the Gospels some instances of Jesus’ *social activism* towards the realization of the kingdom here and now:<sup>5</sup>

1. Jesus’ concern with human progress in the social area:
  - rejection of divorce by either partner (Mark 10:2-12);
  - command to love one’s enemies (Luke 6:27-28);
  - foundation for men *and* women of a new egalitarian family based on obedience to the divine will (Mark 3:34-35).
2. Jesus touching the political life of people, both nationally and internationally:
  - extending the divine mercy to tax-collectors, who collaborated with Roman and Jewish leaders (Luke 18:9-14; 19:9-10);
  - speaking out against hatred of foreigners in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37);
  - prophetically electing the Twelve as a symbol of his desire to reform Israel (Mark 3:13-19).
3. Jesus leading the way in delivering people from bondage with a religious revolution with obvious social and political implications:
  - his table fellowship with impure outcasts (Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 11:19; Luke 15:1; 19:7);
  - his attitude in welcoming women as disciples (Luke 8:1-3).

Quoting J.P. Meier, O’Collins states that through the beatitudes, Jesus is promising to do in his kingdom “what Israel’s human kings often failed to do: defend widows and orphans, secure the rights of the oppressed, and in general see justice done.”<sup>6</sup> He also expresses his view that in Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth, Luke was expressing “what Jesus’ proclamation aimed at: a new religious and social order that would bring liberation for those oppressed by various forms of evil.”<sup>7</sup> O’Collins further states that “Mark and then Luke and Matthew, when remembering and interpreting Jesus for their communities of faith, acknowledged, or at least implied, that the offer of divine

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 30.

salvation he made through his words and deeds *also* enjoyed massive social and political repercussions. The new attitudes towards and relationships with others that he encouraged must deeply shape human beings in their progress towards a new society, both here and hereafter.”<sup>8</sup>

O’Collins, however, points out that the “modern dream of emancipation, through which free and intelligent human beings would everywhere become active subjects of civilized progress rather than remain passive objects of oppression, has collapsed. Along with the rational liberalism encouraged by the Enlightenment, Marxism now counts among the ‘gods who have failed.’”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, more than ever, we Christians are called to fully live “the ‘Gospel values’ (*Redemptoris Missio*, 20) as in hope we all journey together towards the final kingdom. In a special, but not exclusive way, Christ’s liberating work continues through the Church, the sacrament of salvation for all human beings. Christ’s community serves the kingdom by its preaching, by sharing new life in him, and by its ‘commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and children’ (ibid.)”<sup>10</sup> “Christian believers should seek to alleviate and eliminate misery through working for a world situation in which individuals will be freed from all oppression. The bishops at Vatican II reflected on the manifold nature of this degradation: ‘Never before today have human beings been so keenly aware of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4)”<sup>11</sup>

The work of Christ, the Liberator, is the core thread between the kingdom here and now and the kingdom yet to come. Again, from O’Collins, “faith in Christ’s liberating work inescapably implies an obligation to strive for progress towards peace in our world. That earthly life continues to be so brutal for so many is intolerable. Their faith in Jesus our Liberator should impel Christians to take up the cause of those who suffer economic injustice, cultural backwardness or any other form of human misery. Jesus’ account of judgement sets our hope for the coming kingdom in just such a context of responsibility for the alleviation of physical and mental suffering. ‘I was hungry and you gave me food’ (Matt 25:35). The sequence is not: ‘I was hungry and you preached patience to me.’ There is a hard particularity about the duty imposed by the hope for the coming kingdom. ... Social and political action proves the truth of our belief in the climax of Christ’s liberating work: the complete redemption to come for human beings and their world.”<sup>12</sup>

E. Scheffler, a South African theologian, also extracts from the Gospel of Luke an image of Jesus as the *savior* or *liberator* for various kinds of human sufferings: political, economical, social, psychological, physical, and spiritual. According to him, “Jesus himself also suffered on these different levels of life and is also ultimately exalted after

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pages 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pages 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 34.

the humiliation of his death.”<sup>13</sup> Scheffler points out that Jesus’ stern command to his disciples not to tell anyone about his Messiahship (Mark 8:3) has been used by many commentators “to try to make Jesus out as a completely a-political figure,” a view that Scheffler strongly disagrees with. For him, “Jesus’ Messiahship does have political implications, but the difference is that it entails far more than what is contained in national and political expectations. The Lucan Jesus, in particular, is definitely not portrayed as obtaining earthly political power for his own benefit, but as being directed against political power which results in all kinds of suffering amongst people (cf Luke 22:25-27). Jesus’ Messiahship challenged the relevant interest groups of his time to such an extent that they in fact crucified him as a political criminal ... He is indeed the Messiah, but for him it does not mean immediate glory and honor, but actually implies that he must suffer, be rejected and die (Luke 9:18-21).”<sup>14</sup> For Scheffler, Jesus “saves people from all forms of suffering ... his redemption activities ... (are) probably the basic characteristic of Jesus as he is portrayed by Luke.”<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Jesus, the Liberator – the view from Liberation Theology**

We hope that by now it has become clear that the title Liberator attributed to Jesus has a strong practical connotation, with clear Scriptural roots. However, it must be pointed out that this title has come to such a prominence in the life and doctrine of the Church only in the last century. It happened through the advent of a new way of *doing theology* that started in the late 1960’s in Latin America and eventually spread to the whole Catholic world. *Liberation Theology* seized the title and brought it to the prominence that it nowadays enjoys. Broader Gospel reflections, like the ones made by O’Collins and Scheffler and referred to in the previous section, were *motivated by* the appearance of liberation theology. Obvious as those reflections might appear for us today, we believe that that they might not have come to fruition, at least not in the pungent and comprehensive ways that they have been phrased, if liberation theology had not arisen. Yet, it is our thought that the reflection on Jesus the Liberator from the perspective of the Gospels should programmatically precede the reflection from the perspective of liberation theology, even though they are chronologically and historically reversed.

With that said, we would like now to turn our attention to liberation theology. But, again, we will make another chronological reversal. By all accounts, this *new* theological way was born in the continent that has the largest proportion of Christians, and particularly Catholics, in the world: Latin America. And liberation theology in Latin America arose within a particular context: the huge economical, social and political inequalities that plagued that continent in the second half of the twentieth century, and that still do, to a large extent, today. However, we would like in this section to digress about liberation theology in the broader context of the whole Catholic world. We will leave the analysis of some specific aspects of the Latin American theology of liberation for the next section.

---

<sup>13</sup> Scheffler, page 205.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 206.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 207.

We will start with a quote from Robert Brown, which to a certain extent explains our decision to talk about Jesus the Liberator *before* talking about liberation theology: “liberation theologians have ... (*forced*) ... us (*Western Christians*) back to the person and the story (*of Jesus Christ*), before the theologies developed, and (*challenged*) us to look with new eyes at material we thought we understood. In a very important sense, there is nothing ‘new’ here. We have heard all these things before, though they have usually been surrounded by many other things that make the figure of Jesus more palatable to us. Liberation theologians, in other words, are not making up new stories about Jesus; they are simply recalling some of the old stories that have gotten buried in the course of 2000 years.”<sup>16</sup>

Peter Phan believes that “future historians of Christian Theology will no doubt judge liberation theology to be the most influential movement of the twentieth century, possibly even since the Reformation.”<sup>17</sup> One can say that the contemporary understanding of Jesus Christ, the Liberator “has targeted various arenas of oppression – gender (white feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theology), sexual orientation (gay and lesbian theology), race (Black theology), class (Latin American theology), culture (African theology), and religion (Asian theology), again just to cite a representative few.”<sup>18</sup> We would also add political oppression (Middle Eastern theology) to the list.<sup>19</sup> These references lead us to talk about several liberation *theologies*. Though some theologies have been predominantly associated with a geographic context, they are not constrained to specific parts of the world. Actually “they are each widespread in *all* parts of the globe and are often intimately interlocked with each other and mutually reinforcing, so that any genuine liberation theology anywhere must fight against all forms of oppression, be they sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, classism, cultural and religious discrimination, all at once, siding in effective solidarity with victims of all forms of oppression.”<sup>20</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Dominican priest from Peru, is one of the precursors of liberation theology. From that perspective he *redefines* theology as “a critical reflection on the Church’s presence and activity in the world, in the light of revelation. ... Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. First comes the commitment to charity, to service. Theology comes ‘later.’ It is second. The Church’s pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is rather a reflection on it. ... Theology, therefore, as a critical reflection on the Church’s presence and action in the world, in the light of faith, not only complements the other two functions of theology (wisdom and rational knowledge) but even presupposes them.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Brown, page 24.

<sup>17</sup> Phan, page 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, page 41 and see Tisani..

<sup>19</sup> See Gregerman.

<sup>20</sup> Phan, page 41.

<sup>21</sup> Gutiérrez, page 244-245.

Dean Brackley and Thomas Schubeck offer a good summary of the overall “method that ‘classic’ liberation theology employs. First, moral theology is a ‘second act’ that presupposes practical commitment. ‘Orthopraxis’ feeds moral reflection and vice-versa. Second, moral theology assumes the perspective of the poor (as Gutiérrez has stressed for theology in general). Third, moral theology makes use of three ‘mediations’ or theoretical instruments to illuminate reality: empirical analysis, especially social science (others would add philosophy and utopian imagination), theological interpretation, and practical orientations.” They further interestingly note that this “corresponds to the method of Catholic Action groups: see, judge, act.”<sup>22</sup> In the next few paragraphs, we will make some comments on several of these aspects of the method of liberation theology.

Phan states that “the expression ‘(preferential) option for the poor’ describes well the fundamental commitment of the ‘first act,’ to use Gutiérrez’s memorable phrase, out of which liberation theologians are supposed to do their ‘second step’ of reflection. However, to know who the poor are in our society and the causes of their poverty requires more than expertise in the Bible and philosophy: what is needed is what Clodovis Boff<sup>23</sup> calls the ‘socio-analytic mediation.’”<sup>24</sup> Through *adequate* use of the social sciences, all types of liberation theology “seek the root causes of all forms of oppression and consider them in their historical development ... For example, Black theology has traced the roots of African Americans’ socio-political and economic oppression back to racism and the ideology of white supremacy. Similarly, Asian feminist theologians have highlighted how ‘capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, and religio-cultural ideologies work together to escalate the degree of women’s oppression.’ Some U.S. Hispanic theologians perceive the origin of the marginalization of Hispanic Americans in the inability of Anglos to accept the reality of *mestizaje* and *mulataje*.”<sup>25</sup>

The closeness between the socio-analytic method of liberation theology and the Marxist ideology has from early on brought to liberation theologians the accusations of embracing communism.<sup>26</sup> Phan believes though that those theologians have been able to defend themselves successfully from these accusations, by distinguishing “between Marxism as an atheistic and totalitarian ideology (which they vigorously reject) and as a tool of social analysis; they also point out the difference between class struggle as a fact (the existence of which cannot be denied in Latin America) and the Marxist interpretation of class struggle as a law of history.”<sup>27</sup> Phan, however, also points out that the strong, almost exclusive dialogue between theology and the social sciences is a predominantly

---

<sup>22</sup> Brackley & Schubeck, page 124.

<sup>23</sup> A Brazilian OSM priest, brother of Leonardo Boff (a former Franciscan priest), both of whom are also precursors of Liberation Theology.

<sup>24</sup> Phan, page 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pages 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Compound with this the fact that in some of their early works Gutiérrez and others thought also that ultimately only a violent confrontation with the established powers would bring liberation and justice for the poor in the world.

<sup>27</sup> Phan, page 46.

Latin American phenomenon. In other parts of the world, and particularly in Asia, other tools have been integrated into the liberation theology analysis. More specifically, he is talking about the tools of psychological introspection and interreligious dialogue. The former is essential to understand the reality of “voluntary poverty,” which in Asia is assumed by some people, “mainly monks, to liberate others from imposed poverty ... This ‘introspection’ not only serves as a bracing corrective to Karl Marx’s thesis that religions are the opium for the people but also highlights the potential religions have for social transformation.” Similarly, interreligious dialogue is essential in Asia “which is the birthplace of most world religions and where Christians are but a tiny minority and therefore must collaborate with adherents of other religions in order to achieve their agenda for social transformation.”<sup>28</sup> In Latin America, instead of interreligious dialogue that is hardly needed, liberation theologians have more recently been paying attention to popular religiosity and trying to incorporate it into the praxis of liberation. Phan further emphasizes the fact that more recently liberation theology has been giving increased importance to Christian spirituality as a source for its reflections too.

Returning, though, to the original issue of the *preferential option for the poor*, Michael Cook speculates, after Alfred T. Hennelly, “that ‘the real, though unexpressed, major thesis of *The Liberation of Theology* is that the entire millennium and a half of Constantinian Christianity has involved a gradual and massive ideologization of the gospel in favor of powerful and privileged interests in western society.’”<sup>29</sup> As a result, states Cook, the “implication for theological method of this relationship between faith and ideology is that one must continuously engage the concrete situation in order to discover what God is revealing here and now.”<sup>30</sup> To counter this presumed ideologization, liberation theologians adopted a key, albeit controversial, element of their method: the *hermeneutical cycle*, or *hermeneutics of suspicion*, as some critics refer to it. Juan Luis Segundo, a Uruguayan Jesuit, has written extensively on it. Essentially, according to Segundo, it involves four steps: “*Firstly* there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. *Secondly* there is application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. *Thirdly* there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. *Fourthly* we have our new hermeneutics, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.”<sup>31</sup>

Another key element of the liberation theology method is its reliance on and extensive use of the advances in the knowledge of the historical Jesus made in the last half century. Jon Sobrino<sup>32</sup> states that a Christology that wants to remain true to the

---

<sup>28</sup> Phan, page 47.

<sup>29</sup> Cook, page 264.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, page 265.

<sup>31</sup> Phan, page 51.

<sup>32</sup> Jon Sobrino is a Spanish-born Jesuit priest who has lived, ministered and taught in El Salvador for many years. He was traveling abroad in 1989 when six of his fellow Jesuit

tradition based in Scripture and yet become accessible to today's world must seek "the proper key to an understanding of the total Christ," that is, the historical Jesus. However, as Cook points out, the "basic weakness of (*this facet of*) Sobrino's approach is that it wants to claim too much about the historical Jesus without sufficient evidence. ... Sobrino's desire 'to see Jesus in the historical process of change and development,' to recover 'the totality of the historical Jesus,' to concentrate on 'the history of his faith,' is impossible without a chronological biography of Jesus – precisely what exegetes have denied since the work of Karl Ludwig Schmidt on the framework of Mark's Gospel."<sup>33</sup>

#### **4. Jesus, the Liberator – the view from Latin America**

Gustavo Gutiérrez saw at the end of the 1960's a failure of the capitalist proposal to develop Latin America. In his view, that proposal was leading to the enrichment of the national oligarchies, colluded with the industrialized powers, and a necessary impoverishment of the large masses of people. He noted the belief of many then that only a possibly violent process with Marxist inspiration would lead to the liberation of the *predominantly Catholic* Latin America.

He also noted the growing political engagement of the Latin American lower clergy in the late 60's and its clashes with the hierarchy of the Church, as well as with the established powers. He feared that those clashes would only deepen and lead to bigger confrontation. He equated the situation of poverty, injustice and exploitation of man by fellow man in Latin America to what is called "institutionalized violence," or, theologically speaking, a "situation of sin."<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, Gutiérrez saw a Church in Latin America divided between the need to reform society at any cost (including radical means) and the rejection of such a radical stance. A particularly pungent image of his view was given by the following statement: "we (the Church) often confuse what is 'necessary' with a comfortable installation in this world, the liberty to preach the gospel with the protection of the powerful groups, the instruments of service with the means of power."<sup>35</sup>

According to Michael Cook, one of the interesting unanswered Christological questions within the Latin American liberation theology is "which is prior: the situation of Jesus or our own? Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino give priority to Jesus and so apply the insights derived from Jesus to the situation in Latin America."<sup>36</sup> But the theorists in

---

brothers at the University of Central America in San Salvador, and a few others, were killed by a government-sponsored commando.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, pages 272-273.

<sup>34</sup> Gutiérrez, page 252.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, page 254.

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, these two theologians have been disciplined by the Church for some of their positions, while the other three have not.

methodology – Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assmann<sup>37</sup>, and Juan Luis Segundo – seem to (make) a quite different claim, viz., that our image of God, and so of Jesus, will appear differently in different historical situations.”<sup>38</sup> In spite of these differences, however, Cook believes that if “there is anything really new and unique about Latin American liberation theology, it lies in the claim that the poor and the oppressed can and should speak Christ in ways that heretofore have not been heard, that they are ‘the historical subject of a new understanding of the faith’ (Gutiérrez).”<sup>39</sup>

Another interesting point made by Cook is that for the Latin American “liberation theologians, true universality does not reside first and foremost in global and cosmic considerations (although Leonardo Boff shows a great deal of interest in this theme Christologically). Such questions are important but secondary. True universality lies in the concrete particular, in the radicality or rootedness in the real-life context of ‘grass-roots language.’ The basic reference point for doing theology, that which is directly accessible, is not Scripture and tradition but the immediate and irreplaceable experience of the people’s praxis. It is only by entering ever more deeply into the concrete particularity of one’s own life-situation in all its human and historical relationships, actively participating in and living to the full the gift of one’s own life, that one can truly experience and so be sensitive to the universality of the human condition.”<sup>40</sup>

As a result of the observations made by Cook in the previous paragraph, for the sake of illustration and without loss of generality, he takes the case of the Andean Indians and formulates the following interesting question: “Is the Christ of the Andean people a ‘veiled Christ’ who was already present in the pre-Columbian religion of the people, so that the work of evangelization is properly to assist the Andean people to unveil *their own proper face of Christ?* ... The failure to recognize even the possibility of Christ incarnating himself by transforming the Indian culture from within led to the massive rejection of everything indigenous and the imposition of a foreign Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he quotes Saul Trinidad as suggesting that only three Christologies remained possible for the Latin American Indians: “(1) a Christology of resignation symbolized by the crucified Christ and the sorrowful Mother; (2) a Christology of domination symbolized by a glorious Christ, rich and powerful, adorned with gold and silver, and an image of the Virgin as *la conquistadora*; (3) a Christology of marginalization symbolized by the ‘marginalized Child.’ ... In all of this, where is the ‘other Christ’ of Luke 4:16-21?”<sup>42</sup> The vivid popular religiosity of Latin America is a clear sign of the results of the interaction between the cultures and religions of the original peoples and the *Christian* religio-cultural system imposed by the European colonizers. By the way, these remarks

---

<sup>37</sup> Hugo Assmann is a Brazilian liberation theologian and former Catholic priest. He currently teaches at a Methodist University in Brazil.

<sup>38</sup> Cook, page 275.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, page 275.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pages 276-277.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, page 279.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, page 280.

could as easily be made with respect to the Brazilian Indians or to the Africans brought by force to Brazil and the Caribbean.

Finally, Dean Brackley and Thomas Schubeck note that during the last twenty years, important changes that took place in the world, especially in the less developed countries, have had a significant impact in the socio-political component of liberation theology in general, and in Latin American theology in particular. These changes comprehend: “the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the failure of most revolutionary movements; the emergence of the ‘new economy,’ and the consolidation of the neoliberal capitalism; the crisis of legitimacy of traditional politics (governments, parties and guerrillas); the growth of feminism and indigenous awareness; new ecological sensitivity; conservative restoration within the Catholic Church; the challenge of post-modern thought; and, finally, increasing social disintegration, on the one hand, with the proliferation of non-governmental groups in civil society, on the other.”<sup>43</sup> Elements related to all these changes, along with a renewed emphasis on the aspect of *solidarity*, have been added to the liberation theology analysis. Moreover José Comblin, a Belgian theologian working in Brazil, has remarked that “the greatest reproach that can be made against liberation theology is that it has not devoted enough attention to the true drama of the human persons, to their destiny, to their vocation, and consequently to the ground of the issue of freedom ... He concludes that a ‘true liberation of the *self* lies at the very heart of all specific liberation struggles.’”<sup>44</sup> Brackley and Schubeck make an important distinction nowadays between two groups of Latin American liberation theologians: those who want to *transform* society and “who are more skeptical of the market, more influenced by Marx and critical social science, more sensitive to the obstacles posed by entrenched class interests,” and those who want to *reform* society and “who are less fearful of the market forces and more reliant on Catholic social teaching.”<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in March of 2007 a notification on some works of Jon Sobrino. Although the Vatican itself did not discipline Sobrino, it gave to his bishop the permission to do so, if he wished. Indeed, Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle, of San Salvador, asked Sobrino *not* to teach, lecture or publish in the Archdiocese, which includes the University where he works. Because this incident is quite illustrative of what the relationship between the Magisterium and Liberation Theology has been in the last forty-years and since some of the issues addressed by the notification are related to topics discussed in this paper, I will briefly outline these issues, along with the comments made by some prominent theologians in an article published in the *America* magazine (Garcia-Rivera et al).

One of the questions has to do with the methodological assumptions of Sobrino’s Liberation Christology. Sobrino emphasizes the social setting by identifying the nature of

---

<sup>43</sup> Brackley & Schubeck, page 125.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, pages 127-128.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, page 129.

the Church with the poor, while the notification identifies the nature of the Church with the apostolic faith. Regarding this issue, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera<sup>46</sup> reminds that “the ecclesial setting for truth is not objectivity but love. Truth is not simply about objectivity, but also solidarity.” With this in mind, he further states that “the Christ the church worships at its altar is also the Christ found at the altar of the world’s poor ... Christ’s ecclesial matrix is the church that worships in faith. It is also the church of the poor. This is the famous both-and (*our highlight*) that marks the church as Catholic ... A church that is methodologically indifferent to senseless suffering is at odds with the methods of Jesus himself ... The church has two altars. The C.D.F. rightly points to one; Sobrino<sup>47</sup> points to the other.” We particularly like this image. Paraphrasing Garcia-Rivera and borrowing from Chalcedon, we would say that the church has one altar, but two, or even more, natures ... it is fully based on the apostolic faith *and* it is fully aligned with the poor, the discriminated, the disenfranchised, the politically oppressed and so on.

Another question raised by the notification has to do with the balance between the humanity and the divinity of Christ. Kevin Burke<sup>48</sup>, while recognizing that “Christology is a complex discipline ... (requiring) an intricate balancing act among assertions perennially in tension with one another,” believes that this question involves the struggle between Christology from above and Christology from below. The notification seems to imply that theology should start “from above,” with the statement of Christ’s divinity, while Sobrino seems to suggest that theology starts “from below,” with the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels. Burke claims that neither one nor the other approach should have dominance, but instead both have to be taken simultaneously, within the balancing act of affirming Chalcedon’s statement of the full divinity and full humanity of the one person, Jesus Christ. We would like to add here a quote from Brown which we find quite pertinent to this issue: “Liberation theology ... has followed the route of *Christology from below*. It starts where the first disciples started and retraces the route they walked ... At first they tried to describe (*Jesus*) with familiar human labels: teacher, friend, counselor, healer. But these increasingly proved inadequate. And so titles redolent of divinity as well as humanity were attached to his name, culminating finally in the recognition of both his humanity and his divinity, even though they did not have a vocabulary that did justice to such a monumental claim.”<sup>49</sup> It appears to us that we *still* do not have a vocabulary that can thoroughly deal with this *monumental mystery* ... and we might not ever have indeed until the kingdom of God becomes fully realized!

Robert Imbelli<sup>50</sup> also speaks of the mystery of the incarnation and its intrinsic relationship with the two natures of the one person Jesus. He recognizes that in the wake of the Council Vatican II a “Christology from above” was complemented by a “Christology from below, one that takes with utmost seriousness ‘the human experience of Jesus’”. But he wonders if the notification from the C.D.F. to Sobrino may be seen

---

<sup>46</sup> Garcia-Rivera et al, page 2.

<sup>47</sup> And liberation theology in general.

<sup>48</sup> Garcia-Rivera et al, pages 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, pages 24-25.

<sup>50</sup> Garcia-Rivera, pages 3-4.

more as “a call to accountability to the grammar of Chalcedon,” in light of a possible danger of “an inclination to present a Jesus who is fully, but only, human: a ‘Christology from below’ that never quite manages to get off the ground.” He muses that Karl Rahner, who in the 1950’s called for the rise of this Christology from below, might not object in principle to the C.D.F.’s admonition, but would almost certainly differ with its findings and language.<sup>51</sup>

These comments and others contained in the America article, authored by prominent theologians, though appreciative of the normative responsibility of the C.D.F., at worst stop short of criticizing Sobrino’s work and at best offer a measured word of appreciation and sympathy for his work. However, our impression is that more than Sobrino’s work, what is at stake here is the discomfort that still exists in the relationship between the classic theology *from above* and the liberation theology *from below*. It is the tension between the kingdom to come and the kingdom here and now. It is the dichotomy between the Absolute Truth that is our vocation and destiny and the revealed truth that continues to unfold in time and place and in which we are immersed.

Assuming, from the arguments in section two of this paper, that the work of Jesus, the Liberator *is* indeed the work of salvation, then it has to begin at a very personal level, at the level of *self*. It has to start within the unique experience of each individual’s life. It has to be desired, believed in and yearned for. Only the one who experiences bondage, oppression, deprivation, suppression and discrimination can fully appreciate and benefit from the liberating *manifold energies* of the Incarnate Son. But first one has to be able to recognize one’s needs for liberation and one has to be able to identify the source of oppression (this is where mediation other than just religious or spiritual may be useful, even required). After that, one has to recognize the True Source of liberation and how to access it, how to work it in and how to be open to it. It is thus the duty of the Church, by vocation, to mediate, to facilitate, and to propagate this liberation, or *salvation*, process.

Paraphrasing (or more precisely *usurping*, for a good cause though) Romans 3:23, we can say that *all are poor and fall short of the glory of God* and are thus potential beneficiaries of Jesus’ liberation. Whether the poverty is economical, social, political, cultural, psychological or spiritual (the original *strict* sense), it encompasses the whole of mankind. Hence liberation theology, in the broader sense, is for all, it is universal. By the same token though, given that each one of us may, at one point or another, experience a *different kind of poverty*, it may be difficult or challenging for us to fully appreciate the need for a *different kind of liberation* by somebody else (this is certainly *my* personal case, as a white, married-to-a-woman, male, well employed, middle class citizen of the United States, in 2007 CE!). However, even if we cannot identify ourselves with or directly participate in *another’s* liberation process, we are still called, or better yet urged,

---

<sup>51</sup> Incidentally, Gerald O’Collins (2007) in a separate article on the same issue of America writes about the C.D.F.’s notification too. While praising the reaffirmation of some basic Christian teachings by the notification, he chastises the dubiety of its language and statements in a few points.

as a Church, to support, to contribute, to facilitate and to appreciate, in any way we can, *all forms* of liberation activities.

This is the way in which we envision Liberator as a truly, universally accepted and appropriated title for Jesus of Nazareth. This is the way in which we believe that the work of Christ, the Liberator, *will indeed be* the core thread between the kingdom here and now and the kingdom yet to come.

## 6. References:

1. Brackley, Dean and Thomas L. Schubeck. "Moral Theology in Latin America." Theological Studies 63(2002): 123-160.
2. Brown, Robert McAfee. "Jesus as Liberator - The Third World View." Living Pulpit 3(1994): 24-25.
3. Cook, Michael L. "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America." Theological Studies 44(1983): 258-287.
4. Garcia-Rivera, Alejandro et al. "What are Theologians Saying About Christology?" America 197.7 (17 Sep 2007)  
<[http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=10190](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10190)>.
5. Gregerman, Adam. "Old Wine in New Bottles: Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." Journal of Ecumenical Studies 41(2004): 313-340.
6. Gutiérrez M., Gustavo. "Notes for a Theology of Liberation." Theological Studies 31(1970): 243-261.
7. O'Collins, Gerald. "Jesus Christ the Liberator: in the Context of Human Progress." Studia Missionalia 47(1998): 21-35.
8. O'Collins, Gerald. "A Challenge for Theologians - Three puzzling positions." America 197.7 (17 Sep 2007)  
<[http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=10190](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10190)>.
9. Phan, Peter C. "Method in Liberation Theologies." Theological Studies 61(2000): 40-63.
10. Scheffler, E. "Luke's Image of Jesus as 'Liberator from Suffering'." Acta Patristica et Byzantina 14(2003): 205-220.
11. Tisani, Nomathamsanqa. "Christ the Liberator - The Attitudes of the Church to the Oppression of Women." Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 66(1989): 79-83.