

# Jon Sobrino and Theology of Liberation

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

To sharpen the contours of this theology, I like to contrast it with two medieval theologies, which Jean Leclercq compares in his classic, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.<sup>2</sup> He says that the *lectio divina* (scripture reading) of the scholastics takes the direction of *questio* (inquiry) and *disputatio* (discussion) leading to “science and knowledge,” whereas in monastic theology the *lectio divina* moves along *meditatio* (rumination) and *oratio* (prayer) leading to “wisdom and appreciation.” If I were to extend this comparison to the Latin American Liberation theologians, I would have to say that their *lectio divina* alternates with *actio* and *reflectio* among the poor ending up in the “proclamation and anticipation of God’s Reign” here and now.

This theology, then, is not a Marxist reading of the bible as its critics interpret it simplistically, but a legitimate child of the Second Vatican Council. This Council’s invitation to return to the Scriptures and to forge autonomous local churches (see *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 5) was taken seriously by the Latin American bishops and priests who were *obedient* to the Council. Liberation theology was the fruit of a *lectio divina* made by the local churches of the poor, in line with the prophetic vision of John XXIII of happy memory, who invited the church to be “the church of the poor, the church of all.” If there is anything dangerous in this theology, it comes from the bible and the poor, not from a putative Marxist inspiration. The danger is bound to be felt by those ecclesiastical institutions that fail to reflect “the church of the poor, the church of all.”

After all the axial theme of the bible is a God covenanted with the runaway slaves of Egypt. The latter’s successful struggle for freedom, *the Exodus*, was partnered by Yahweh, whose self-definition invokes Her involvement in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1982).

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

Understandably, Benedict XVI’s discourse on the God of the Hebrew Scripture does not even allude to the Exodus but gives Aristotle an honorable mention.<sup>3</sup> The Word of God, as he puts it, is “the *logos*, the primordial reason,”<sup>4</sup> which, as we know, has been invoked in the apologetical treatises of the Church. But the liberation theologians, who bypass Greek philosophy and plunge into the bible in the midst of the poor, find the Word of God to be the Hebrew *dabar*, an executive word which demands *action*, more precisely an *exodus* from every kind of enslavement. Instead of explaining reality to the satisfaction of rational beings, they aim at transforming society to the satisfaction of oppressed masses. The intellectual exercise of reconciling faith with reason recedes before the more urgent task of aligning faith with justice. Hence their mission is not to demonstrate God’s existence and nature to the “wise and the intelligent,” but to bear witness to God’s love before the “little ones” with whom God is in direct communion (cf. Mt 11:25). Jon Sobrino, who wants us to read the bible with the eyes of the poor rather than with the heads of philosophers, is himself a brilliant thinker, who has successfully conveyed this theological method to the “wise and the intelligent” in their own sophisticated idiom!

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

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter on Christian Love Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Then comes the question of the teaching authority. The traditional dichotomy of the church into a teaching church and a learning church has been challenged by no less a person than John Paul II in his best-seller, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*.<sup>5</sup> Did not Jesus demand non-reliance on money-power from his disciples (Lk 10 : 4) before promising them the authority to teach as his proxy (Lk 10:16)? No wonder Dean Brackley, a North American Jesuit, who works with Sobrino, confesses that the moneyless and the powerless are his professors! I myself was not outrageous when I proposed in many places that the *ministerium* of the Pastors and Theologians should resonate with the *Magisterium of the Poor*. Authority is the credibility which one gains by renouncing all power derived from Mammon. What appears to be a crisis of obedience today is, in fact, a crisis of credibility.

Finally, no liberation theologian has ever denied any of the Christological dogmas, even if these dogmas focus mainly on the Incarnate God rather than on the Crucified Christ. Nor has the Church ever declared that these dogmas have exhausted everything that can be said about Christ. On the other hand it is not Sobrino but the Jesuit Cardinal Alois Grillmeier, who, in his authoritative study of the Christological councils, laments that these dogmas, though valid in themselves, have left behind what he calls “a burden,” namely, a Christology minus soteriology. It is the cross that explains the incarnation, not the other way around. Sobrino, who thinks, prays and writes in the midst the Crucified Ones is humbly trying to relieve the church of that “burden.” All of us should join him rather than hinder him in this noble task.

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<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994).