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*Patristic Sources of Latin American
Liberation Theology*

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PATRISTIC SOURCES OF
LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Introduction: Transmission of Tradition

Many think of liberation theology² as a seed that fell on rocky ground. It sprang up quickly because it had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away (Matthew 13:5-6). To them, twentieth-century liberation theology constituted a radical break from church tradition, and this rupture not only did violence to the church as a whole but also led to its own demise. Like house built on sand (Matthew 7:24-27), liberation theology could not withstand the strong winds of intra-ecclesial critique, pentecostal and evangelical fervor, and the historical collapse and corruption of the Latin American left. Unlike other Catholic theological movements of renewal in the twentieth century that remain fruitful, the roots of liberation theology were not sufficiently established in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Church Fathers, and in the historical development of Catholic doctrine to sustain its life in the Spirit. Exemplary of this critical perspective on liberation theology is François Hubert Lepargneur, who writes, “The popularity of liberation theology is perhaps not helping, but rather thwarting, the deepening of techniques directly linked to the traditional elaboration of theology (exegesis, patristics, church history, knowledge of magisterial documents, the great medieval theological currents and their *Summas*, etc., not to mention archaeology, ancient languages and

² I thank Christophe Pichon for advising me to research the relation between liberation theology and the Church Fathers as well as Michel Fédou and Laure Blanchon for their guidance and feedback.

canon law).”³ Lepargneur laments what he perceives as liberation theology’s unprofitable tendency to “break the chain”⁴ of church tradition. Liberation theology cuts itself off from this chain and so falls to the ground with ungraceful violence.

Critics of liberation theology are, however, not the only ones to emphasize its radical newness. Its supporters and sympathizers frequently adopt a similar discourse. For instance, Joy Gordon affirms, “Liberation theology breaks from traditional theology at a number of points. It claims that theology as such has a particular relation to poverty and the poor, and that theology and prayer, as such, cannot be done while remaining neutral to the issues of material poverty occurring alongside of abundance.”⁵ Indeed, both friends and enemies of liberation theology employ a hermeneutic of rupture that irritates those who approach church tradition with a favorable presupposition and animates those whose look on church tradition with suspicion. By demonstrating the ways that liberation theologians ground their work in patristic writings, this study will counteract the unfortunate, yet dominant impression that liberation theology situates itself outside and against twenty centuries of Catholic theology.

From another point of view, there is the question of the relevance of patristic theology. Can one put new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:14-

³ François Hubert LEPARGNEUR, “Théologies de la libération et théologie tout court,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 98-2 (1976) : p. 148. My translation.

⁴ LEPARGNEUR, p. 148. My translation.

⁵ Joy GORDON, “Liberation Theology as Critical Theory: The Notion of the 'Privileged Perspective,’” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 22-5 (1996): p. 90.

17)? What is the point of referring to non-biblical sources from the first Christian centuries in a contemporary context that is so sociologically, literarily, and theologically alienated from the Church Fathers? Alister McGrath notes, “Some of the debates of the period seem hopelessly irrelevant to the modern world. Although they were viewed as intensely important at the time, it is often very difficult for the modern reader to empathize with the issues and understand why they attracted such attention.”⁶ Their preoccupations can strike us as overly technical, their methods excessively allegorical, their arguments unduly vitriolic. In a similar vein, Marcus Plested observes that many Christians relate to the Fathers from a “reactive model”: “The patristic witness is seen as irredeemably dated, irrelevant, outmoded, patriarchal, culture-bound, useless, etcetera.”⁷ If the Second Vatican Council invites the Church to embrace its “duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel...in language intelligible to each generation”⁸, where does that leave the Church Fathers, whose signs of the times are not those of contemporary Latin America, whose writings are not canonical, and whose language is archaic? In contradiction to the “reactive model,” the liberation theologians’ mobilization of patristic sources provides evidence of their enduring significance. This study will demonstrate that the content and the methods of the Fathers can and do speak prophetically

⁶ Alister E. MCGRATH, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, Second Edition, Wiley, New York, 2013, p. 17.

⁷ Marcus PLESTED, “Reflections on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the Contemporary Context,” *Theology in Service to the Church*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2012, p. 13.

⁸ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1965, para. 4.

to an oppressed people in pursuit of freedom and to the theologians who join this pursuit. In a paradoxical and potentially surprising way, the church's most ancient generations of theologians and one of the church's newest generations of theologians give credibility to each other: the former provides rootedness so that the latter can bear new fruit.

Liberation theologians are conscious of this continuity and make it explicit in their writings. Clodovis Boff clarifies, "First of all, liberation theology does not situate itself in contradiction to the great theologies of the past, such as patristic theology or scholastic theology. On the contrary, one can consider liberation theology to be their successor or heir."⁹ It is not sufficient, though, to simply take Clodovis Boff at his word. It is possible that liberation theologians claim to be inheritors of a tradition that they actually betray. This study will support Boff's affirmation, not only enumerating some of the ways that liberation theologians ground their arguments in patristic thought but also showing the solidity of these grounds.

It is important to acknowledge that the present investigation is not the first on the relations between liberation theology and the Church Fathers. First, Timothy Jervis Gorringe argues for "the cogency of the axiom 'Not assumed is not healed'...on the grounds of the category of 'solidarity', unavoidably invoked to describe essential dimensions of biblical and patristic

⁹ Clodovis BOFF, "Epistemología y método," *Mysterium Liberationis*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 87. My translation.

thinking.”¹⁰ As Origen¹¹ affirms that God fully assumes humanity in order to fully save humanity, liberation theologians affirm that God fully assumes humanity, “where networks of alienation have been constructed from the very beginning of human history,”¹² in order to free humanity from these “historical structures”¹³ of sin. A significant aspect of the incarnation is God’s assumption of human material conditions and social relations so that God can liberate humanity from all that is noxious in these conditions and relations. More specifically, God takes a position of solidarity with the wretched of the earth in the poor character of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To redeem the poor, God had to experience poverty. To save the oppressed, God had to experience oppression. God saves humanity through solidarity with the fullness of the human experience, as both the Church Fathers and liberation theologians hold, with the latter insisting on the sociohistorical dimension of human experience. Gorringer’s research establishes this significant connection, but he does not examine the way that Latin American liberation theologians themselves refer to patristic writings. He cites no liberation theologian in the article.

Second, James Dawsey considers how the liberation theologian Carlos Mesters and the Church Fathers approach the interpretation of Scripture. They

¹⁰ Timothy J. GORRINGE, “‘Not Assumed Is Not Healed’: The *Homoousion* and Liberation Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985), p. 481.

¹¹ “The whole man would not have been saved unless [our Savior and Lord] had taken upon him the whole man,” Origen, *Entretien d’Origène avec Héraclide*, Sources Chrétiennes 67, Cerf, Paris, 1960, p. 71. My translation.

¹² GORRINGE, p. 489.

¹³ GORRINGE, p. 490.

are similar in their conviction that “through the Holy Spirit the Bible speaks in the present to a community of believers.”¹⁴ The purpose of the church’s engagement with the Scriptures is to “change people’s lives” and to equip them “for any good work.”¹⁵ The conversion of the people of God, not the development of biblical theory, is the goal for both Mesters and the Fathers. The difference between the two is the nature of the conversion. Whereas the Fathers stress the soul’s discernment between temporal and eternal goods so that it can choose and cultivate the latter, Mesters insists on society’s discernment of “structures of oppression”¹⁶ so that it can overturn them. The Fathers tend to allegorize and spiritualize, whereas liberation theologians tend to historicize and concretize. We will return to the topic of biblical hermeneutics in Part I.

Third, María Soledad del Villar Tagle observes that both the *nouvelle théologie* movement and Gustavo Gutiérrez appreciated that patristic writers “sought wisdom that was essentially a meditation of the Bible, and was geared towards the believer’s spiritual growth.”¹⁷ French and Latin American theologians in the twentieth century found in the Fathers an escape from the dominant rationalized, fossilized Thomism of their era. They imitated the Fathers by interpreting the Bible so that spirituality, theology, and the signs

¹⁴ James M. DAWSEY, “The Lost Front Door into Scripture: Carlos Mesters, Latin American Liberation Theology and the Church Fathers,” *Anglican Theological Review* LXXII:3 (1990), p. 302.

¹⁵ DAWSEY, p. 299.

¹⁶ DAWSEY, p. 299.

¹⁷ María Soledad DEL VILLAR TAGLE, “The European Roots of *A Theology of Liberation*: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the *Nouvelle Théologie*,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 6 (2022), p. 35.

of the times could fruitfully engage with each other. Gutiérrez studied theology in France and Belgium under Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Marie Dominique Chenu, so it is unsurprising that their proximity to the Fathers gave birth to a similar proximity in his own writings. The purpose of Villar Tagle's article, however, is to establish the links between the *nouvelle théologie* and liberation theology, so her reference to the links between liberation theology and the Church Fathers is limited. That said, Villar Tagle's treatment of patristics, *nouvelle théologie*, and liberation theology together serves as a key inspiration for Part I of this study.

Much work remains, then, to establish the nature and purpose of liberation theologians' direct references to the Church Fathers. The first and perhaps most significant point to establish is the extent to which liberation theologians cite patristic sources. In examining alone the two volume anthology *Mysterium Liberationis*, which presents in a rather systematic fashion the basic concepts of Latin American liberation theology, one discovers 38 references to specific church fathers and 37 references to the Church Fathers in general. The contexts of these citations are vast, though most are favorable in the sense that they support the liberation theologians' line of argumentation. Given the impossibility of adequately addressing these expansive references, which represent only a snapshot of Latin American liberation theology, this thesis will focus on three sets of texts and three types of uses. Each of these text/use combinations corresponds to one part of the present study. First, building on the previous research of Villar Tagle, I will interrogate the way that liberation theologians reference patristic sources in

ways that correspond to the spirit of the *nouvelle théologie*. *Mysterium Liberationis* will be the main source for this section. The benefit of this text is that it demonstrates that several liberation theologians working in several fields of theology invoke the Fathers for similar reasons. The length of the anthology as well as the variety of its contributors provides enough data points to establish a trend. The thesis of Part I will be that, as for the *nouvelle théologie* movement, liberation theology refers to patristic writings to establish a precedent for its own biblical hermeneutics and engagement with ambient philosophies. Because the Church Fathers read the Scriptures in relationship to the signs of their times and employed the language of non-Christian philosophers to articulate the faith to their contemporaries, liberation theologians are justified in interpreting the Bible from Latin America's context of impoverishment and in relying on some aspects of Marxist philosophy to enhance their analysis.

After examining several authors and these two general trends in Part I, this paper will focus on two specific authors and two corresponding specific usages of patristic sources in Parts II and III. Ignacio Ellacuría's recourse to the Fathers to advance a dialectical understanding of wealth and poverty in his *Escritos teológicos* will be the subject of Part II. The argument will be that Ellacuría appeals to the Fathers to establish that one does not have to be Marxist to hold that the wealth of the wealthy is causally related to the poverty of the poor. This section will explore Ellacuría's patristic citations before consulting the Church Fathers themselves to extract eight types of patristic articulations of the rich/poor dialectic. Ellacuría is correct and astute to note

and mobilize the Fathers' critiques of wealth, which root his own critique in the Christian tradition and support his appropriations of Marx from within Christian tradition and in line with the philosophical reasoning of Part I.

Part III will feature Jon Sobrino's book *Christ the Liberator* (1999), the second volume of his two-part Christology. Near the end of this text, Sobrino pauses to consider both the positive and negative elements of the development of patristic theology. On one hand, he recognizes importance of the Church Fathers' identification of Jesus with God and their unification of Christology and soteriology because of the valorization of human history that these theological positions entail. On the other, he laments that the Fathers progressively abandoned the synoptic prioritization of the ministerial life of Jesus and of the Reign of God to concentrate on theological problems associated with the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. These theological problems emerge in conjunction with the increasing political alignment of the Church and the Roman Empire. This study of Sobrino's appraisal of patristic Christology shows that his approach towards the Catholic theological tradition is one of discernment. On some occasions, engagement with tradition means tending to branches from the past that, if pruned, can be fecund in the present. On other occasions, engagement with tradition means identifying the fruitless branches from the past in need of cutting away to make room for new growth.

These three parts contribute to the global thesis that liberation theologians' engagement with patristic sources can be explained in terms of the recovery of lost possibilities that allows them to situate their response to

current problems in Latin America within a valid theological tradition. This argument corresponds with Ellacuría's philosophical concept of *transmisión tradente* or "the transmission of tradition." The idea is that history consists of the transmission of "ways of being in reality insofar as these ways become possibilities for humanity."¹⁸ Each transmission constitutes an opportunity for self-becoming because it is in rejecting some traditions and embracing others that meaning is made, that identity is forged. Each embrace of a tradition is at the same time an act of creation because it is impossible to merely abide in a tradition without advancing it in some way. Indeed, a significant part of the identity of liberation theology is defined in terms of its appropriation of, development of, and rejection of some components of patristic theology. There is epistemological power in liberation theologians' claims of continuity with the Fathers, and the recognition of this power makes their occasional critiques of the Fathers even more persuasive. Liberation theologians' use of patristics is neither a dry repetition nor an outright rejection; rather, it is both creative and critical.

The starting point of liberation theology is historical reality as experienced by oppressed peoples, and, from this starting point, liberation theologians find that the Church Fathers provide them with some adequate tools to theologically engage with this reality. Their use of old tools paradoxically allows them to open new worksites. For them, the Fathers are deep, old roots that permit ripe, new fruit. As Michel Fédou notes in his

¹⁸ Ignacio ELLACURÍA, *Filosofía de la Realidad Histórica*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 502. My translation.

assessment of the relevance of patristics, contemporary theology can and should draw from the Church Fathers because “a civilization without memory would be a civilization without a future.”¹⁹ Fédou’s choice of the word *memory* applies well to the liberation theologians and *nouveau* theologians, whose memory of the Fathers allowed them to rediscover and develop “a certain number of categories that are [also categories used in] contemporary thought and that scholastic theology had lost.”²⁰ This movement of *ressourcement* is the construction of a theological lineage enabled by the creative transmission of church tradition. Jon Kirwan describes *ressourcement* as a “transhistorical triptych” that “flits between the past, present, and future”: “An attempt is made to look into the past in a search for historical forms that might answer present shortcomings, and when historical currents are apprehended, there is no attempt at antiquarian retrieval; they are configured to align with perceived current needs in a theology that is at once novel yet claims to stand on tradition.”²¹ What Kirwan writes of *nouvelle théologie*, one can equally write of liberation theology. It, too, is a *ressourcement*, and this study demonstrates one key element of this simultaneous movement backwards and forwards: liberation theologians’ engagement with patristic thought.

¹⁹ Michel FÉDOU, “Les Pères de l’Église dans la culture contemporaine,” *Études* 6-381 (1994), p. 632.

²⁰ Jean DANIELOU, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 79 (1946), p. 10.

²¹ Jon KIRWAN, *An Avant-garde Theological Generation: The Nouvelle Théologie and the French Crisis of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 167.

Three challenges will serve as a conclusion to this investigation. The first is a challenge for liberation theologians to fundamentally situate themselves in the theological tradition of the Catholic Church and to draw from this tradition in their work. All three chapters of this study demonstrate that many liberationists have done so and continue to do so. Their references to the Church Fathers give witness to this rootedness. Nevertheless, there is always a risk for liberation theologians to over-emphasize innovation when there are elements within the existing Catholic theological tradition that are perfectly capable of inspiring their research and practice. The second is a challenge for the broader Catholic Church to acknowledge that many liberation theologians go to great lengths to demonstrate their unity with church tradition and so deserve to be viewed not with confrontational skepticism but with fraternal respect. It is my hope that readers of this study will at least come to recognize important elements of liberation theology's continuity with church tradition even if readers do not agree with many of the liberation theologians' conclusions. Finally, there is a challenge for the broader Catholic Church to allow liberation theologians, and all theologians for that matter, to be innovative. Though essential, it is not sufficient for theologians to be rooted in church tradition. Theologians must also feel free to take risks as they respond to new historical realities. The risks taken by the liberation theologians give witness to the intellectual vibrancy of a faith ever ancient, ever new.

I. Liberation Theology, *Nouvelle Théologie*, and Patristics

Like the *nouveaux théologiens*, Latin American liberation theologians saw in patristic theology (1) a fruitful dialogue with prevailing philosophical trends and (2) a reading of Scripture in relation to the church's life of faith. Liberation theologians sought to continue these traditions by drawing from nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, by establishing common ground with indigenous cultures, and by interpreting the Bible in relation to their ecclesial context, especially the reality of poverty.

i. Philosophical Dialogue

It is helpful to study the liberation theologians' references to the Church Fathers' engagement with non-Christian philosophy by presenting and analyzing two characteristic quotes from *Mysterium Liberationis*. The first comes from Paulo Suess' essay on inculturation: "Justin († 165), apologist, philosopher, and martyr, admits that in the philosophy and ethics of a Socrates we find the seed of the Logos that God planted in all humanity. Vatican II (AG 11; LG 17), Medellín (*Pastoral popular* 5) and *Evangelii nuntiandi* (n. 53) take up the topic of Justin's *semina Verbi* to deny that non-Christian cultures, in religious matters, are only a blank slate or a

condemnable idolatry.”²² Sueß establishes a line of tradition based on five points: Justin Martyr, three magisterial documents, and himself. He moves directly from the second century to the twentieth century as if to indicate that Justin’s concept remains pertinent.

a. Justin Martyr and the Seed of the Logos

Three convictions in fundamental theology undergird Justin’s teaching on the seed of the Logos, and these three convictions are important for Sueß’ own argumentation in *Mysterium Liberationis*. To begin, Justin believes that all human beings, even those with no historical contact with Jesus Christ or with Christians, can participate in the Logos. Charles Munier writes that, according to Justin, Socrates “was inspired by reason, which is common to all humanity, and this individual reason is a participation in the integral Logos, object of Christians’ knowledge and contemplation.”²³ People who have yet to arrive at an explicit knowledge of the incarnate Logos can nevertheless have some access to the Logos by reason. It is in this sense that Sueß claims that non-Christian cultures are not a “blank slate” upon which Christian missionaries write truth. Non-Christian knowledge remains

²² Paulo SUEß, “Inculturación,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. II, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 404. My translation.

²³ Charles MUNIER, *L’Apologie de saint Justin, philosophe et martyr*, Ed. Universitaires de Fribourg, 1994, p. 61. My translation.

knowledge, and their apprehension of truth is a participation in the Logos, who is the Truth (c.f. John 14:6).

Next, Justin asserts that Christians should establish friendly relations with non-Christians based on the beliefs that they share. Christians who study pagan literature find beliefs like their own. For instance, Munier notes that Justin discovered in Socrates' philosophy the unmasking of "the true nature of the evil powers, the demons," and a path towards "the knowledge and imitation of the one true God."²⁴ Justin acknowledges these points of contact, which set the nature of the alliance between Christianity and the Socratic school. They can now collaborate on a common project against evil spirits and for monotheism. In Suess' words, not all components of non-Christian culture are "condemnable idolatry."

Finally, Justin holds that the seed of the Logos present in pagan cultures and philosophies cannot mature to its ultimate end apart from the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. The early church father was not only seeking common ground with non-Christian philosophers. Evangelization was the goal. Munier observes, "Justin denies to profane philosophy the capacity to lead humanity to its ultimate objective, to its perfection, to its salvation. He assuredly describes all profane accomplishments in the areas of virtue and truth as a germ, as a seed, but he fixes them in this embryonic state: in his eyes all human knowledge and virtue are necessarily fragmentary and incomplete."²⁵ Pagan culture is a seed planted in rich soil, but it needs to

²⁴ MUNIER, p. 61. My translation.

²⁵ MUNIER, p. 59. My translation.

encounter the Christian faith to grow. Justin recognizes the fertile grounds of his non-Christian interlocutors as well as the uniqueness and necessity of the explicit presentation of Jesus Christ. In turn, Suess applauds Justin's acknowledgement of both what is good in pagan cultures and what is new in Christianity. Further, Suess rejoices in Vatican II's appropriation of Justin's approach: "Vatican II assumed the most positive themes of the patristic tradition concerning pagan cultures. These themes—'seeds of the Word,' 'pedagogy towards the true God,' 'evangelical preparation'—permit the theological articulation of the historico-cultural continuity of respective peoples with the newness of the gospel."²⁶ Underlying this tradition of Justin, Vatican II, and Suess is the conviction that God is at work everywhere and always. God's special relationship with the Jewish people in the first covenant and with disciples of Jesus Christ in the new covenant does not mean that God turns God's back on other groups of people. On the contrary, the Logos that Christians proclaim as Jesus Christ is the same Logos that non-Christians grasp in partiality whenever they participate in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

b. Paulo Suess and the Seed of the Logos in Indigenous Cultures

This generous, non-exclusivist approach to relations between Christians and pagans is just as relevant in Suess' context as it is in Justin's

²⁶ SUESS, p. 403. My translation.

context. The European colonization of the Americas often entailed an attempt at the suppression of indigenous culture and the imposition of European cultural supremacy, as if European culture were synonymous with the gospel. Today, the struggle in Latin America continues on the cultural and religious plane among Christians who seek to eliminate manifestations of indigenous culture from Christianity, Christians who welcome these manifestations, and non-Christian indigenous people who have differing attitudes towards Christianity. Suess' invocation of Justin offers a precedent for a Christian approach to this challenge. For Christians to identify "seeds of the Word" in indigenous culture, they must have an intimate knowledge of indigenous culture. What if Latin American Christians had as profound an understanding of Native American beliefs and practices as Justin had of Greek beliefs and practices? A thorough study of indigenous culture is a generous first step that permits the identification of shared values that can inform common projects. For instance, if Christian and indigenous non-Christian peoples identify a mutual belief in the goodness of the natural world, they might together oppose the extraction of natural resources in ways that fundamentally disturb the harmony of local ecosystems. This project of solidarity can serve as an opportunity for Christians to share their faith by way of attraction. Pope Benedict XVI describes in *Aporecida* in 2007, "The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by 'attraction': just as Christ 'draws all to himself' by the power of his love, culminating in the sacrifice of the Cross, so the Church fulfils her mission to the extent that, in union with Christ, she accomplishes every one of her works in spiritual and practical imitation of the

love of her Lord.”²⁷ Christians who work on liberative projects with other people of good will on the basis of shared beliefs radiate the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. The establishment of relationships of commonality and collaboration among Christians and non-Christians in Latin America can contribute to the healing of wounds that more conflictual, “scorched earth” Christian approaches have inflicted and continue to inflict. Justin’s “optimism” towards the capacity of non-Christians to attain at least some level of “natural revelation”²⁸ founds Vatican II’s *rapprochement* with non-Christians. *Gaudium et spes* speaks of “grace” that “works in an unseen way” in the hearts of “all men of good will.”²⁹ Suess inserts himself into this lineage that spans church history and invites other Christians to remember that a “traditional” approach to relations with pagan culture is not necessarily a violent one. Justin and Vatican II authorize Catholics in Latin America to practice inculturation without fear of betraying the faith. Justin and Vatican II also provide trustworthy guidelines for this effort. Through his patristic and magisterial references, Suess’ liberative theology of inculturation demonstrates the depth of its roots.

²⁷ BENEDICT XVI, “Holy Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean,” Aparecida, Brazil, 2007.

²⁸ MUNIER, p. 61.

²⁹ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1965, para. 22.

c. Enrique Dussel and the Philosophical Signs of the Times

A second trend in liberation theologians' references to patristic theology on the subject of pagan philosophy relates to their engagement with Marxism. If the Church Fathers dialogued with and even adopted categories from non-Christian philosophy in antiquity, why cannot liberation theologians converse with and employ the language of Marxist philosophy today? A citation from Enrique Dussel's *Mysterium Liberationis* chapter on liberation theology and Marxism is characteristic of this appeal to patristic literature: "Church Fathers made use of Platonism, Saint Thomas of Aristotelianism, the theology of a Rahner, for example, of Heideggerianism. In the 19th Century the use of historical 'science' caused the crisis of modernism; and, nevertheless, today all theology is 'historical'—the crisis has passed. It will be the same in the 21st Century with Marxism."³⁰ Dussel's defense of liberation theology's mobilization of certain Marxist doctrines is remarkably historical. He chooses four references from four periods of history: patristic, medieval, modern, and post-modern. The conclusion is that theologians have always read the philosophical signs of the times in the light of the gospel. Liberation theologians are no different in their reading of Marx. Further, theologians throughout history have frequently run into trouble and receive harsh criticism when they integrate Christianity with emerging

³⁰ Enrique DUSSEL, "Teología de la liberación y marxismo," *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 136. My translation.

philosophical schools, yet their work achieves reception in the broader church in time. The same will be true of liberation theology with Marxism.

Dussel undoubtedly has in mind the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (1984) in which Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger critiques liberation theology's use of Marxism. Though Ratzinger acknowledges that Marxism is not monolithic, he concludes that Christianity and Marxism are fundamentally incompatible: "It is true that Marxist thought ever since its origins, and even more so lately, has become divided and has given birth to various currents which diverge significantly from each other. To the extent that they remain fully Marxist, these currents continue to be based on certain fundamental tenets which are not compatible with the Christian conception of humanity and society."³¹ On one hand, Ratzinger's analysis is valid. If, for example, "atheism...is at the core of the Marxist theory"³² as he suggests, then the degree to which atheism is determinative of Marxist analysis is the degree to which Christianity cannot integrate its theory. Christians, following Henri de Lubac, have a duty to militate against Marxism's "vision of an infinitely flat world"³³ devoid of transcendence. On the other hand, Ratzinger's critique raises the question of the standard by which one should judge a philosophical system's or a sociological analysis' compatibility with Christianity, and this question

³¹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation,'" 1984, Section VII, para. 8.

³² CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Section VII, para. 9.

³³ Henri DE LUBAC, *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du dogma*, Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 284. My translation.

harkens back to Dussel's point. Is the doctrine of the hypostatic union in fundamental contradiction with Platonism, or is the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in fundamental contradiction with Aristotelianism? Is a historical-critical or existentialist methodology in philosophy in fundamental contradiction with Catholic theological methodology? Pioneers in theology often seek to articulate the Christian faith in the language that philosophical discourse renders available to their generation and corresponds to their historical reality even when others judge the synthesis impossible. Given this history, Dussel cautions against any *a priori* condemnation of attempted syntheses, for syntheses once thought impossible have been *made* possible by creative thought. Dussel continues, "[Liberation theology] has suffered...critique, misunderstanding, and even condemnation, but the path it has taken remains open and future generations will be able to navigate it with safety, orthodoxy, and integrity."³⁴ Because the Church Fathers took the risk to think through their faith in the philosophical categories available to them, new possibilities emerged. Some of these possibilities developed into orthodox formulae. Dussel hopes for the same for the future of liberation theology.

³⁴ DUSSEL, p. 136. My translation.

d. New Philosophies, *Nouvelle Théologie*

Liberation theologians are in good company when it comes to twentieth century theological movements accused of excessive concessions to philosophical systems. The *nouveaux théologiens* faced similar scrutiny. Jon Kirwan writes, “The controversy surrounding the *nouveaux théologiens* was intense, and recriminations flew back and forth. Neoscholastics accused them of ‘reinventing the Church Fathers to the music of Hegel.’”³⁵ Much of the controversy relates to the awakening of philosophy and theology to historical consciousness. Jean Daniélou makes the connection between the Church Fathers, the philosophical emergence of history, and the *nouvelle théologie* movement, writing in one of his watershed articles,

First and foremost, there is the notion of history. Contemporary philosophy, from Hegel to Marx and Bergson, has placed history at the heart of modern thought. Yet the notion of history is foreign to Thomism. For Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Christianity is not just a doctrine, but also a history, that of the progressive “economy” by which God, taking humanity in its primitive state, raises it little by little, in stages marked by the great biblical epochs, through a pedagogy full of mercy, until it becomes capable of receiving the Incarnate Word. One of the most important books of our time, *Catholicism*, by Fr. de Lubac, has helped to re-establish the link between the historical vision of the Fathers and that of our contemporaries. It was the Norwegian theologian Molland who observed that the notion of “figure” rendered to the Church Fathers the service that that of “evolution” renders to our contemporaries: that of enabling us to think history.³⁶

³⁵ KIRWAN, p. 2.

³⁶ J. DANIELOU, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 79 (1946), 10-11. My translation.

Daniélou argues that patristic theology is better equipped than Thomism to think through the challenge of history that nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers introduced. The Fathers' thought is closer in form and content to the Scriptures, which tell of God's salvific action in history. Like Hegel, Marx, and Bergson, the Bible narrates an evolutive process. One understands the world best when thinking in terms of dynamic dialectics, not unchanging universals. Neo-Thomist theology manuals may enjoy a certain formal structure with its corresponding clarity, but they lack the vivacity of biblical and patristic writings.³⁷ The answers of the manuals are too abstract and rigid to respond to the concrete and fluctuating historical questions emerging in the modern and post-modern periods. Daniélou and his colleagues needed to reach back beyond this reified version of Thomism to the Fathers to recover a Christianity that was defining and interpreting the truth of the faith in the liberty of the Spirit in response to contextual, historical problems.

A philosopher associated with *la nouvelle théologie*, Gaston Fessard, sought to better articulate the Christian tradition in the language of contemporary philosophy. His *Dialectic of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* is based on the inspiration of "Hegel, Marx, and Kierkegaard," who think through "the problem of freedom and truth" not speculatively and rationalistically but historically and existentially.³⁸ Truth in Christianity is not merely an object of transcendental contemplation but more

³⁷ See Hans BOERSMA, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 4-5.

³⁸ Gaston FESSARD, *La Dialectique des Exercices spirituels de saint Ignace de Loyola, Vol. 1 : Liberté, Temps, Grâce*, Éditions Montaigne, Paris, 1956, p. 17. My translation.

fundamentally a person who enters history. As Bernard Sesboüé writes of Irenaeus of Lyon's understanding of the Christ, Christianity is about the God who writes himself into "the flow of human generations" and recapitulates it in Christ.³⁹ Because God becomes history, history is a *lieu théologique*. The Bible, the Fathers, and contemporary philosophy, each with its valorization of history, become sources to the *nouveaux théologiens* who wrestle with the revival of Catholicism for their historical moment.

Liberation theologians, in the vein of the *nouveaux théologiens* a generation before them, turned to the history of theology and to philosophers of history to develop their own theology of history. We can recall that Dussel's defense of liberation theology's recourse to Marxism mentioned the normalization of the crisis of modernism: "today all theology is 'historical'". Whether Daniélou, Fessard, or Dussel, many twentieth century theologians took the important step of confirming the historicity of theology to which the modernist crisis drew the church's attention. There is no interpretation of the Scriptures outside of history with its material conditions and philosophical interests.

³⁹ Bernard SESBOÜÉ, *L'acte théologique d'Irénée de Lyon à Karl Rahner*, Éditions jésuites, Paris, 2017, p. 31. My translation.

ii. Biblical Hermeneutics

A second shared theological line among the Church Fathers, the *nouvelle théologie*, and liberation theology revolves around biblical hermeneutics. If the Reformation led many Christians to cite the Bible to defend their doctrinal positions against attacks by other denominations and modernism led them to interrogate the historical veracity of the Bible's narratives, the *nouvelle théologie* encouraged Christians to return to the Church Fathers who approached the Bible for its living spiritual sense, "a Mystery to be realized, to be accomplished historically and socially, though always spiritually: the Mystery of Christ and of his Church."⁴⁰ Liberation theology follows this tradition, especially in the practice of ecclesial base communities. In these groups Christians gather to interpret the Word of God in synchrony with their socio-spiritual reality. The letter of the biblical text reveals its Spirit, the same Spirit active in the contemporary church.

a. Augustine, Athanasius, and the Relation Between the Scriptures and Living History

One can perceive two main, interrelated invocations of patristic biblical hermeneutics in *Mysterium Liberationis*: (1) the relation between the

⁴⁰ Henri DE LUBAC, *Catholicisme : Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 123. My translation.

Scriptures and living history and (2) the moral sense of Scripture. Regarding the first, several liberation theologians explicitly refer or allude to St. Paul, who writes, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).⁴¹ This section of St. Paul’s epistle sets up a juxtaposition between the letter of the Mosaic law, written on stone tablets, and the letter of Christ, written on human hearts (3:2-3). The former condemns (3:9), but the latter liberates (3:17). The former brings death (3:7), but the latter gives life (3:6). The Church Fathers, notably St. Augustine, pick up on this dialectic. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 3:6, the Latin father argues that Christians “should not take in the literal sense any figurative phrase which in the proper meaning of its words would produce only nonsense, but should consider what else it signifies, nourishing the inner man by our spiritual intelligence.”⁴² One can discern four relevant points in this citation from Augustine. First, Augustine is interested in the meaning that the words reveal more than the words themselves. He seeks to comprehend what the words signify. Second, the purpose of the words’ meaning is the “nourishing of the inner man.” The Bible is a personal, anthropological, and spiritual document: personal because it addresses the person who reads it, anthropological because it is God’s speech to humankind, and spiritual because it resonates in the human spirit enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Third, Christians grasp the appropriate

⁴¹ See Gilberto DA SILVA GORGULHO, “Hermenéutica bíblica,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 180.

⁴² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “De l’esprit et de la lettre,” *Oeuvres complètes de Saint Augustin*, Vol. XVII, Bar-le-Duc, 1871, para. 6, p. 150. My translation.

meaning and receive nourishment through “our spiritual intelligence.” The Spirit of God is mystically active in the mind of the church. The activity of God in the community of believers permits a union of the spirits of the individual, of the church, of the Scriptures, and of God in the Liturgy of the Word. In this sense, one can say that the ecclesial interpretation of the Scriptures is an epiphany. God communicates God’s self to the faithful in the present moment of history through the Scriptures. Unlike the letter of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians, the spirit of the New Testament—which the church came to see both as the Christian Scriptures and, more fundamentally, as the mysteries whose meaning they reveal—is living and active in the history of the church. Fourth, Augustine establishes a criterion of absurdity for biblical hermeneutics. If a straightforward interpretation is excessively unreasonable, then an alternative one is preferable. It is absurd to think that Noah took a male and female of each species onto the Ark, but the story can speak eloquently to a contemporary reader conscious of threats to biodiversity. God calls human beings to care for all creation, even in a moment of existential crisis.

Illustrative of the meaning of Scriptures in living history are the writings of St. Athanasius of Alexandria. His letters are full of comparisons between biblical characters and his contemporaries. These scriptural invocations give the reader the impression that the biblical drama continues in the life of the church. When St. Athanasius faces accusations from his adversaries, he writes to the emperor asking him to follow the example of King David by expelling slanderers, “I beseech you, either have me refuted

face to face or condemn the slanders, and imitate David, who says: ‘I have cast out the man who spreads tales secretly against his neighbor’ (Psalm 101 [100].5) (Apol. ad Const. 5.1-4)”⁴³. The leader of the Roman Empire should emulate the leader of the Jewish monarchy. The emperor is not only a political but also a spiritual figure. He has a responsibility to use his political authority to defend the orthodox church from its enemies. The spirit of the Davidic story is not only written in the letter of the Scriptures but also “writes itself in the flesh”⁴⁴ of the members of the church of Athanasius’ generation. Athanasius’ pastoral letters to the diocese of Alexandria demonstrate a similar relationship to the Scriptures. The God of the Bible protected the faithful in times of struggle in the past and God continues to do so in the present. Timothy D. Barnes comments on one of Athanasius’ pastoral letters, “The main theme of the letter, incessantly reiterated, is God’s constant protection of his true servants. Athanasius produces the predictable biblical precedents to encourage his flock in time of trouble—Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in Babylon (Daniel 3.8-31), Israel leaving Egypt, David hunted by King Saul, Elisha (2 Kings 6.13-17), Esther, Paul, and above all Christ.”⁴⁵ Christians of the fourth century can trust in God’s fidelity as the great biblical figures did. Athanasius does not only refer to Scripture to encourage others but also to guide his own actions. Barnes describes in biblical terms Athanasius’

⁴³ Cited in Timothy D. BARNES, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 41. Psalm 101 [100].5. Apol. ad Const. 5.1-4.

⁴⁴ Christophe BOUREUX, *Commencer dans la vie religieuse avec saint Antoine*, Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 41. My translation.

⁴⁵ BARNES, p. 43.

response to the violent arrival of a rival aspirant to the Alexandrian episcopate, “Gregory and his supporters next seized the other main church of Alexandria, where Athanasius was staying, hoping to capture and kill him. Athanasius, however, mindful of the precept ‘If they pursue you in this city, flee to another’ (Matthew 10.23), removed himself.”⁴⁶ Jesus Christ’s advice to his disciples is also meant for Athanasius. The biblical narrative is not distant and alienated but near and relevant. The Spirit of the biblical letter remains active in Athanasius’ era.

Jean-Marie Auwers notes a parallel phenomenon in the exegesis of Origen who reads the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ and the church. When Christians open the pages of the First Testament, they are not primarily seeking to comprehend the original situation of the Hebrew people but rather to discern figures of the new covenant relationship between God and the church in the Spirit of the Christ. Auwers writes, “Origen’s allegorical explanation is the interpretation of things past by things present, of the temporal world of the Hebrew people by the spiritual world of Christians.”⁴⁷ The church retains the Hebrew Scriptures as part of the Christian Scriptures at least in part because God brings the former to fulfillment in the latter. Likewise, God continues to be true to God’s covenants in the church herself. These covenants are working themselves out in church history. Christians of all ages are characters in the Bible, which draws them into its narrative,

⁴⁶ BARNES, p. 48.

⁴⁷ Jean-Marie AUWERS, *La lettre et l’esprit. Les Pères de l’Eglise, lecteurs de la Bible*, Éditions jésuites, Paris, 2002, p. 23. My translation.

realized in history. Auwers continues, “The reader who keeps the text at a distance in the name of objectivity risks missing the heart of the Scriptures. The Fathers remind us of this on every page.”⁴⁸ The very point of the Scriptures is the personal implication of the reader. As St. John makes clear, his gospel was “written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The Bible serves to give birth to and to nourish a living faith.

The *nouvelle théologie* is a key source for liberation theology’s appropriation of this aspect of the Church Father’s approach to the Bible. For Daniélou, the return to the Fathers was also a return to the Scriptures because “the Father’s writings are largely a vast commentary on Sacred Scripture.”⁴⁹ The richness of early Christian theology springs from the creative encounter between the patristic writers’ ecclesial experiences and the Bible. Like Daniélou, liberation theologians find this creativity inspirational given that much of theology in the first half of the twentieth century was limited to the memorization of scholastic manuals. The liberation theologian Roberto Oliveros states, “The theological task is enriched when it is not reduced to repeating truths but examines and illuminates ecclesial life with Sacred Scripture. And this task expands in light of the Church Fathers of the East and West.”⁵⁰ The object of theology according to Oliveros is the illumination of

⁴⁸ AUWERS, p. 75. My translation.

⁴⁹ DANIÉLOU, p. 9-10. My translation.

⁵⁰ Roberto OLIVEROS, “Historia de la teología de la liberación,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 27. My translation.

“ecclesial life,” and the Bible permits this illumination. The Scriptures are like a lighthouse that guides the ecclesial ark through the waters of history. Though beautiful in itself, the lighthouse’s purpose is not self-referential. It serves the sailors’ navigation. Similarly, the Bible exists not for itself but rather for the elucidation of the church’s synodal path. As De Lubac writes, “It is always man and his destiny that are the object of the Bible.”⁵¹ Exegesis should serve anthropology, should help human beings address the questions that history poses.

Frequently, liberation theologians cite St. Augustine’s teaching on the “two books”⁵² to illustrate their biblical hermeneutic. God is not only the author of the book of the Bible but also of the book of life. In fact, these divine books are essentially one. God creates life and is active in the history of human life, and God has inspired some human beings to record some of God’s actions in the biblical text. The Scriptures are the fruit of women and men’s experience of God’s work in their lives, and these Scriptures in turn nourish the lives of people who read them. The Bible reminds people that God has acted with love towards humanity and will continue to do so. God’s covenants are promises of life. The Prophet Isaiah records, “And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words

⁵¹ DE LUBAC, *Catholicisme*, p. 128.

⁵² See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “Exposition of Psalm 45,” *Exposition of the Psalms*, Vol. 2, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 2000, p. 315, and Oskari JUURIKKALA, “The Two Books of God: The Metaphor of the Book of Nature in Augustine,” *Augustinianum* 61-2 (2021): p. 479-498. Citing Augustine’s interpretation of Psalm 45, Juurikkala observes that Augustine speaks not only of the Scriptures and the book of nature but also of the book of history or of the world.

that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and forever" (59:21). The spirit that breathes life into humanity in the beginning (Genesis 2:7) continues to breathe life into humanity throughout history. The liberation theologian Pablo Richard writes in *Mysterium Liberationis*, "God makes Godself present and reveals Godself in history and in life as the liberating God of the oppressed and as the God who assures life for everyone, above all for the poor. This experience of God should be discerned and expressed. The Bible is the criterion or canon to carry out this work of discernment. 'God wrote two books: the book of life and the Bible' (Saint Augustine)."⁵³ The Scriptures are a tool, *the* tool, for the discernment of historical action. Enlightened by biblical revelation, the church discerns its path.

One might contrast this living approach to the Scriptures that unites the Church Fathers, the *nouveaux théologiens* and liberation theologians with a stale approach that sees the Scriptures as a rulebook or manual. For many Christians and theologians, the Bible provides the eternal laws that Christians must follow to inherit eternal life. The Bible becomes a document from which people extract doctrines and morals that apply to everyone regardless of their positionality in history. One first looks to the Bible with a spirit of rational objectivity to develop abstract principles, then one looks to life to put these principles into practice. The Scriptures become a source for texts that prove

⁵³ Pablo RICHARD, "Teología en la teología de la liberación," *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 219. My translation.

certain theological and ethical teachings. Clodovis Boff resists this worn-out method and insists on the fundamentality of the living sense of the Bible in allusion to St. Augustine, “Liberation theology does nothing other than rediscover what was the perennial vocation of all healthy biblical reading in accordance with what one sees, for example, in the Church Fathers; the vocation that for so long was neglected in favor of a rationalist exegesis that exhumes the meaning in itself. The liberating hermeneutic reads the Bible as a book of life, not as a book of curious stories. It certainly looks to the Bible for its textual meaning, but in function of its contemporary meaning.”⁵⁴ C. Boff contends that liberation theology is in fundamental continuity with the Fathers. Both prioritize spirit over letter, life over text, present over past, yet both maintain that the latter clarifies the former just as the Old Testament clarifies the New.

b. Origen, Athanasius, and the Moral Sense of the Scriptures

A second common trend between patristic, *nouvelle* and liberation theologies is the moral meaning of the Scriptures. One can turn again to Henri de Lubac to set the scene. De Lubac’s book on Origen seeks to counterbalance the common idea that the Church Fathers’ writings are overly allegorical. De Lubac cites Origen’s treatment of the rich young man. Though many suppose that Origen might strip the passage of the literalism of Jesus’ invitation to the

⁵⁴ BOFF, p. 108. My translation.

rich young man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, Origen does just the opposite, suggesting that we Christians today should do what Jesus advised to the biblical character: “All that was said for us, who want to carry out what is possible and become the one who ‘wants to be perfect’ by obeying Jesus, who says, ‘Go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor.’”⁵⁵ De Lubac marvels at the “evangelical literalism”⁵⁶ of this passage. Its literal meaning bursts to life in Origen’s moral interpretation. Jesus’ challenge to the rich young man is meant “for us,” and our positive response to this challenge is “possible.” There is little rational distance between the text and the reader. The meaning is worked out in an immediate communication. Though the rich young man went away sad because of his many possessions, we can make the ethical and spiritual choice to give what we have to the poor and to follow Jesus’ path to perfection.

Contemporary scholars of Origen also accentuate the ethical call to conversion contained in the Church Fathers’ interpretations of Scripture. Fédou comments, “The reading of Scripture inspires...ethical decision taking: not only a denunciation of immoral practices that prevailed in Greco-Roman society, but also the call to evangelical conversion that can impregnate personal and social behavior.”⁵⁷ Many of the Fathers’ writings avoid the spiritualization of Jesus’ ethical teachings and calls to conversion. They accept Jesus’ moral intensification with its radical implications for social life.

⁵⁵ DE LUBAC, *Histoire et esprit. L’intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène*, Éditions Montaigne, Paris, 1950, p. 198. My translation.

⁵⁶ DE LUBAC, *Histoire et esprit*, p. 198. My translation.

⁵⁷ FÉDOU, “Lire les Pères aujourd’hui,” *Études* 7 (2003), p. 74-75. My translation.

Indeed, many Fathers perceived in Jesus' interaction with the rich young man their own very literal call to monastic life. St. Athanasius writes that St. Anthony, upon hearing the reading of the rich young man in church as if it "had been made for him," gave "three hundred *aroures* of fertile, excellent land" "to the people of his village."⁵⁸ Shortly after this passage, St. Athanasius records that St. Anthony left his village and began to live as an ascetic monk in the desert. For Origen, St. Athanasius, and St. Anthony, the Bible speaks directly to the person and "guides Christian action today."⁵⁹ The Word of God is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The meaning of the Word of God transverse centuries and lands. God, speaking through the Scriptures, continues to call God's people to radical change, and this radical change implies a new way of acting.

Liberation theologians who read the Church Fathers notice the extent to which they connect the spiritual and moral meanings of Scripture. A certain course of action frequently accompanies God's revelation of God's self to humanity. Francisco Moreno Rejón claims that the Scriptures, classical theology, the Church Fathers and the scholastics all agree that "theological questions are intimately united to their ethical dimension. The theological question, and answer to the question, 'who is God?' is inseparable from the

⁵⁸ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Vie d'Antoine*, Cerf, Paris, 1994, p. 133-135. My translation.

⁵⁹ AUWERS, p. 22. My translation.

moral question, ‘what is to be done?’”⁶⁰ Exemplary of this scriptural pattern is the calling of Moses. The God who reveals Godself as “I AM WHO I AM” is the same God who invites Moses to lead a project of socio-ethical liberation of an enslaved people (Exodus 3). The ontology of God is at once the missiology of the people of God. God’s being implies human action. God’s call provokes a human response. One who reads Scripture and remains unchanged is not reading the Scripture with the correct hermeneutic. She is like one who has ears but does not hear (Psalm 115:6). She is dead with the letter, unalive in the spirit.

Ernesto Cardenal’s transcriptions of conversations with a group of poor Christian peasants in Nicaragua give witness to the living biblical hermeneutics that liberation theologians inherited from the Church Fathers and the *nouveaux théologiens*. In one study of the text of the Crucifixion according to St. Luke, the peasants focus on the character of Simon of Cyrene: “As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus” (23:26). After one member claims that Simon of Cyrene must have thought it a privilege to carry the cross of Christ, another contests this notion, “He would consider it a privilege? He is just coming in from the fields, just finished working, and is going to his house to eat lunch. It was three in the afternoon. And they oblige him to carry the cross.”⁶¹ A third adds, “He was

⁶⁰ Francisco MORENO REJÓN, “Moral fundamental en la teología de la liberación,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 275. My translation.

⁶¹ Ernesto CARDENAL, *El evangelio en Solentiname*, Second Volume, Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1978, p. 284. My translation.

working. He wasn't having fun. He came from the fields."⁶² The participants in the ecclesial base community are attentive to an aspect of the passage that many ignore: Simon of Cyrene "was coming from the country." These peasants of Nicaragua appear to be drawn to this biblical character whose only descriptor is related to the countryside. He is a tired worker forced to carry out additional work. Though it is possible that he considered his role in the Crucifixion a privilege because of his proximity and service to Jesus at this crucial moment, it is perhaps more likely that Simon found it irritating. The Roman authorities "took advantage" of this humble laborer and "abused him."⁶³ Another considers the solidarity between Simon and Jesus, "I see a relationship between the worker who was carrying the cross and other rural worker who was called upon to help him... It is a very symbolic picture: the worker, and the peasant accompanying him, also taking part in his tragedy."⁶⁴ Forced by oppressors, one worker assists another who is suffering. Their solidarity is one of circumstance. The Romans need someone to carry the cross of an oppressed worker, so they randomly choose another at their disposition. A major calculated act of terror inspires a minor spontaneous act of terror, and Simon is the victim of the latter. A student in the group concludes the commentary on this section of the biblical text, "An arbitrary thing. Like so many others that have been committed against the peasants for so long."⁶⁵ This student draws a connection between the biblical story and the

⁶² CARDENAL, p. 284. My translation.

⁶³ CARDENAL, p. 284. My translation.

⁶⁴ CARDENAL, p. 285. My translation.

⁶⁵ CARDENAL, p. 285. My translation.

recent reality of Nicaragua. As the Roman Emperor randomly terrorizes the peasant Simon of Cyrene, the Somoza dictatorship randomly terrorizes peasants in Nicaragua.

Several components of this section of Cardenal's text reflect the living biblical hermeneutic that runs from patristic theology to liberation theology. The group develops an interpretation of the passage that starts with the letter but that ultimately speaks to contemporary Nicaraguan reality. Though one member of the group spiritualizes Simon of Cyrene's experience by suggesting that he considered it an honor to carry the cross of Christ, most of the group returns to the basic horror of the situation. A political power in the midst of assassinating a working-class leader calls upon another member of the working class to suffer alongside him. This random, traumatizing act of violence leads the group to contemplate and criticize the oppression it faces. An ethic of solidarity between workers emerges. Compelled by military domination, one laborer lends a hand to another and discovers a certain pride in this act of solidarity. The Word of God is not distant from the experiences of the Nicaraguan poor. They discover that they are living the biblical story in real time.

Recapitulation

To summarize the findings of this first chapter, liberation theologians uphold the tradition of the *nouvelle théologie* in founding their positive

engagement with contemporary philosophy and their reading of the Bible as living history in the dynamism of the patristic period. Because God plants seeds of reason in all human beings, Judeo-Christian or not, Christians can exchange freely with non-Christian philosophers in whose pursuit of truth God is active. The Fathers can draw from and enlighten Platonists, Gaston Fessard can draw from and enlighten Hegelians, and liberation theologians can do the same with Marxists. God, the Logos, is not only active in reason but also in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. For the Fathers, the *nouvelle théologie* generation, and liberation theologians, the Bible is not simply an authoritative book from which Christians can draw theological doctrine but also a living document that helps them discern God's movement in present realities and respond accordingly. These three theological movements coincide in their conviction that, whether through emerging trends in philosophy or through the innovative study of the Word in relation to historical conditions, God continues to communicate with human beings.

Before moving onto the next section, I wish to pause and consider two objections to the liberation theologians' arguments about philosophy and biblical hermeneutics. First, while many Church Fathers adopt a friendly approach to Platonic philosophy, they situate themselves more critically towards other schools of philosophy. Richard Jungkuntz writes that the patristic authors find in Epicureanism "a useful club with which to beat an astonishing variety of heretics."⁶⁶ For instance, Tertullian attributes some of

⁶⁶ Richard JUNGKUNTZ, "Fathers, Heretics and Epicureans," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 17-1 (1966), p. 3.

Marcion's heresy to the negative influence of the school of Epicurus. For Tertullian, Marcion's god, following Epicurus, is excessively indifferent and incapable of emotion, which leads Marcion to reject the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶⁷ One can ask in the spirit of Tertullian whether the liberation theologians' reliance on Marxism is akin to Marcion's reliance on Epicurus. It is not necessarily the case that God's work through one non-Christian school of philosophy means that God is at work in another. Marxism may be more like Epicureanism than Platonism: it is better to see it as a corrupting influence, not a healthy one.

Nevertheless, as one will find in the following section, many liberation theologians explicitly reject Marxism's most nefarious doctrines, atheism and materialism, and embrace the ones that are compatible with Christian doctrine, such as a dialectical understanding of wealth and poverty. It is not necessary to be atheist and materialist to accept significant parts of Marx's account of how capitalist accumulation occurs through exploitation. Moreover, Marx's rejection of metaphysics does not mean that Christians cannot work alongside Marxists for the creation of a new society in which people give according to their ability and receive according to their need.⁶⁸ That said, liberation theologians would be wise to be on guard against an overly horizontal worldview. In their dialogue with Marxists, they should not lose their sense of mystery and of the supernatural.

⁶⁷ JUNGKUNTZ, "Fathers, Heretics and Epicureans," p. 3-6.

⁶⁸ Karl MARX, "Critique of the Gotha Program," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978, p. 531. Original text from 1875.

Second, a critic of the liberation theologians' interpretation of the Church Fathers' biblical hermeneutics might point out a possible tension between the spiritual and moral senses. On the one hand, the liberation theologians hope to avoid approaching the Bible in a dead, historical way or as a source for a set of abstract moral principles. On the other, they allow for readings of the Scriptures that focus on incidental historical details and abstract from them to general rules. For example, some of the Nicaraguan peasants interpret Simon of Cyrene as a laborer and draw the conclusion of solidarity amongst the oppressed. Is not this reading of the text too literal and too moral? Does it not leave little room for Simon of Cyrene's spiritual significance?

A consideration of the ecclesial base community's intention might shed light on this concern. Their approach is neither dry historical exegesis nor the distillation of moral principles. On the contrary, the group comes to the Scriptures in search of resonance. Members look for the elements of the passage that come alive when associated with contemporary life. In this case, it was the detail that Simon was coming from the countryside in relation to the peasants' own rural origins. It was also the similarity between the Roman authorities' oppressive behavior and that of the Somoza regime. These connections are both spiritual and moral. They are spiritual in the sense that the text is not only about the dead historical person, Simon of Cyrene. The text is living. It is about the spiritual connection that Simon of Cyrene and these Nicaraguan Christians share because of their similar social status and context. The connections are moral in the sense that the readers discern in the

passage a call to act in a certain way. As Athanasius discerns a call to give up his wealth in the story of the rich young man, these peasants discern a call to help each other in the face of oppression. Neither listens to repeat information from the past or to develop new commandments that apply to everyone. Both situate themselves at the intersection of the book of the Scriptures and the book of their historical world.

II. Dialectics of Wealth and Poverty

For the *nouvelle théologie*, the return to the Church Fathers was not only a return to the Bible but also to the social dimension of the faith. In fact, Kirwan describes De Lubac's *Catholicism* as "an extended argument to support the claim that the Church Fathers would have been ardent supporters of the *Semaines sociales*,"⁶⁹ organized reflections on the great questions facing French society in the light of Catholic social teaching. Many suppose that the patristic writers allegorize, spiritualize, and blunt Jesus' social doctrine—and there is no doubt that some do just that—but there are also significant strains of aggressive social critique in the writings of early Christians. Liberation theologians further accentuated this strain that the *nouvelle théologie*'s *ressourcement* exposed. Whereas the first section of this study referred to eight liberation theologians who contributed to *Mysterium Liberationis* to highlight the extent to which the liberation theology movement as a whole grounds itself in patristics, this second section will concentrate on the theological writings of one liberation theologian, Ignacio Ellacuría of the Society of Jesus. Ellacuría was a philosopher and theologian as well as the rector of the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador. The Salvadoran military assassinated him in 1989, accusing him of being the intellectual force behind the guerrilla in the nation's civil war which began in 1979 and ended in 1992.

⁶⁹ KIRWAN, p. 169.

i. Ellacuría's Position

Ellacuría accentuates the dialectical understanding of poverty and wealth held by many of the Church Fathers. The accumulation of the rich leads to the misery of the poor. Consequently, when liberation theologians draw attention to this conflictual relationship, they are first and foremost reiterating a critique deeply rooted in the Church's theological reflection and only secondarily investigating the convergence between this patristic tradition and some aspects of Marxist thought. After laying out Ellacuría's argument, an examination of several primary and secondary patristic sources will establish that Ellacuría is justified. Many patristic authors do think about wealth and poverty dialectically. In fact, it is possible to discern at least eight types of economic dialectics in their writings. Theologians do not have to be Marxists to hold that there is a conflict between the rich and the poor. Dialectical economic thought has roots deeper than Marxism: the Church Fathers.

a. The Historical Reality of the Contradiction Between Wealth and Poverty in El Salvador

Ellacuría's starting point is often the national reality of El Salvador, and this national reality is one of extreme poverty and exaggerated inequality. He writes, "There is, above all, the dialectical character of the poor and of

poverty. In our concrete situation there are poor people ‘because’ there are rich people; there is a majority of poor people because there is a minority of rich people. This is true, to a similar extent, of the different social groups within a country as well as of the different countries in the context of universal geography.”⁷⁰ Ellacuría does not simply take for granted the dialectical character of the poverty that the Salvadoran masses are facing. In his political and philosophical writings, he provides evidence. For instance, his article “La historización del concepto de propiedad como principio de desideologización” cites a study demonstrating that “38% of the agricultural landowners in [a coastal area targeted by the government’s agrarian transformation project] obtain 35 cents a day from their land, while five landowners in the area have a daily income of 2,478.71 colones; that is, one landowner has the income of 6,968 families.”⁷¹ This fact concerns Ellacuría as a social philosopher, but it also concerns him as a theologian. He laments the scandal that Christians proclaim their “universal brotherhood” as “children of God”⁷² yet remain staggeringly unequal in economic terms. In an incarnate religion such as Christianity, it is unacceptable for there to be “spiritual equality” in the absence of “material equality.”

Confronted by the dialectical reality of the radical accumulation of the few and the impoverishment of the many in El Salvador, Christians raise their

⁷⁰ ELLACURÍA, “Los pobres, ‘lugar teológico’ en América Latina,” *Escritos teológicos*, Volume I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2000, p. 142. My translation.

⁷¹ ELLACURÍA. 1991. “La historización del concepto de propiedad como principio de desideologización,” *Escritos políticos*, Volume I, p. 597. San Salvador: UCA Editores. My translation.

⁷² ELLACURÍA, “Los pobres,” p. 142. My translation.

voices to denounce this injustice and to propose solutions that disturb the *status quo*. Ellacuría calls this resistance the “integral proclamation of the Gospel.”⁷³ He uses the word “integral” to mark the difference from an “unintegral” proclamation of the Gospel that ignores or minimizes the Gospel’s social dimension. An unintegral proclamation of the Gospel would consider El Salvador’s economic inequality irrelevant to the Christian message. The issue that arises, however, when Christians preach against the wealthy and their organization of Salvadoran society is that the wealthy and others who share the ideology of the wealthy make accusations of demagoguery. Ellacuría responds to these accusations, writing, “In the current structures of the third world, it is impossible that the holders of power in all its forms do not find the integral proclamation of the Gospel demagogic, just as it was impossible that the preaching of Jesus, the preaching of the prophets and of the Fathers of the Church did not seem demagogic to the holders of power and wealth.”⁷⁴ Ellacuría is seeking to root Salvadoran Christians’ critique of the domination of the rich in the tradition of the Jewish Scriptures, the Christian Scriptures, and the Church Fathers. Denunciations of the increasing wealth of the few and the increasing impoverishment of the many do not appear in the nineteenth century with Karl Marx and continue into the twentieth century with Marxists. Christians have had their own analyses and condemnations of riches from the beginning.

⁷³ ELLACURÍA, “Radicalismo cristiano y educación liberadora,” *Escritos teológicos*, Volume II, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2000, p. 618. My translation.

⁷⁴ ELLACURÍA, “Radicalismo cristiano y educación liberadora,” p. 618. My translation.

b. Ellacuría and the Church Fathers

Ellacuría proceeds with a series of five quotes from patristic sources that reveal that his contemporaries who cry out against economic inequality and its origins are not alone in their allegedly demagogic tone. He begins with St. John Chrysostom, “Tell me, where did you get your wealth from, from whom did you receive it? [...] From your grandfather, you will say, from your father. But can you go up the family tree to prove the justice of that possession? Surely you will not be able to, but its beginning and its root must necessarily have come from injustice.”⁷⁵ He concludes with St. Ambrose, “It is murder to deny a man his wages which are necessary for his life.”⁷⁶ With these quotations, Ellacuría wishes to show that the Church Fathers decried economic exploitation in no uncertain terms, yet a Christian who uttered similar phrases in El Salvador during the second half of the twentieth-century would be labeled a demagogic communist. Bishop Carmelo Giaquinta of Argentina notes the same problem, “Woe to the bishop, woe to the priest who today would dare to utter such homilies! He would have to put up with no lesser nicknames than ‘Third Worldist,’ ‘socialist,’ if not ‘red.’ Has only the sensibility of listeners and preachers changed that it is now impossible to pronounce or listen to such words?”⁷⁷ Ellacuría answers Giaquinta’s

⁷⁵ ELLACURÍA, “Radicalismo cristiano y educación liberadora,” p. 618. My translation.

⁷⁶ ELLACURÍA, “Radicalismo cristiano y educación liberadora,” p. 619. My translation.

⁷⁷ Carmelo J. GIAQUINTA, “El amor al dinero: ‘Idolatría’ y ‘Raíz de todos los males’.” *Lecciones de patristica para los problemas de hoy.* *Teología: revista de la Facultad de Teología de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina* 40 (1982): p. 168. My translation.

provocative question. Some sectors of Latin American society have become so anti-communist that Christians who share some aspects of the rhetoric and action of communists are considered first and foremost to be communists and not at all to be Christians. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" only exacerbated this problem with its assertion that "if one tries to take only one part [of Marxism], say, the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology."⁷⁸ Despite the Vatican's claim, it remains absurd to suggest that St. John Chrysostom is a Marxist because his aforementioned quote describes the same process of historical plundering that Marxists call "primitive accumulation." Some elements of Marxism simply coincide with Christianity, and Christians should be able to live out these elements without fear of anti-communist persecution.

Following Ellacuría's presentation of the patristic citations and similar citations from Paul VI, Vatican II, and the Medellín bishops' conference, Ellacuría underlines what is common and what is not common between the Christian and Marxist traditions. Regarding the similarities, he writes, "There is no doubt that many of the best Marxist purposes coincide, in part, with some of the Christian purposes: the actual attempt to liberate the oppressed, the search for a radical equality and fraternity among men through the disappearance of social classes, the giving of oneself in solidarity with others, the austerity of life, the repudiation of exploitation in all its forms, and the

⁷⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Section VII, para. 6.

subordination of superfluous individual needs to true social needs.”⁷⁹ Christians can affirm each of these points without embracing the totality of Marxism, and these points form a foundation on which Christians and Marxists can work together to achieve shared social goals. In this spirit of collaboration that marks a significant change in tone from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1984 document, Pope Francis encourages Marxists and Christians to not stop “dreaming of a better world.”⁸⁰ Sues’s principle of inculturation in evangelization taken from the Church Fathers applies to Marxism, too. Total condemnations leave little room for the formation of good will and relationships that permit the transmission of the fullness of the Gospel, yet mutual recognition allows both parties to grow towards evangelical plenitude.

That said, Ellacuría is not naïve when it comes to the differences between Christianity and Marxism. The liberation theology for which he advocates is not the mere “translation of Marxism into religious terminology” that ends up falling not only “into secularism and horizontalism, but also into a strict materialistic worldliness.”⁸¹ Some liberation theologies do over-emphasize the fruits that Marxism can bear in theological discourse, yet there is a danger in limiting theology to a Marxist reading of the Scriptures. Ellacuría argues that liberation theology is at its best when it does not ignore

⁷⁹ ELLACURÍA, “Radicalismo cristiano y educación liberadora,” p. 619. My translation.

⁸⁰ Cited in Salvatore CERNUZIO, “Pope encourages Marxists and Christians to fight corruption, uphold rule-of-law,” *Vatican News*, 10 January 2024.

⁸¹ ELLACURÍA, “Tesis sobre la posibilidad, necesidad y sentido de una teología latinoamericana,” *Escritos teológicos*, Volume I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2000, p. 282. My translation.

or systematically cast aside “the doctrine of the Church and the great patristic and theological tradition.”⁸² Dialogue with Marxism may help nourish Christian theologians seeking to address oppression in El Salvador, but these theologians should not turn their backs on the more firmly established Christian tradition with its own framework for understanding and criticizing the dialectic between the rich and the poor.

Before pivoting to the patristic sources themselves and distilling eight types of rich/poor dialectics that emerge from them, it is indispensable to identify a few caveats. First, patristic literature spans centuries, languages, and cultures, so it is difficult to affirm that the Church Fathers collectively hold a certain position on wealth. Their views are diverse and sometimes contradictory. David Ivan Rankin writes of the patristic period that “attitudes towards wealth creation and engagement in commercial activities on the part of Christians vary.”⁸³ Second, even within the writings of a given church father, there are differences in content and accentuation that cannot be ignored. Their positions shift according to circumstances and the evolution of their thought as well as according to the biblical passage on which they are commenting. John Anthony McGuckin observes, “If patristic tradition on the subject of wealth and possessions often appears ambivalent in its attitudes, then perhaps one of the reasons for this is that this tradition grows from an exegesis of Gospel teachings on the subject that themselves are far from being

⁸² ELLACURÍA, “Tesis sobre la posibilidad, necesidad y sentido de una teología latinoamericana,” p. 283. My translation.

⁸³ David Ivan RANKIN, *From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers*, Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 144.

straightforward, even though they are immensely forthright.”⁸⁴ The diversity of Scriptures reproduces itself in the diversity of the thought of the Church Fathers, sometimes the same church father. Third, some patristic scholars argue that the Fathers do not treat the intricacies of economic questions at all. For example, Joseph Schumpeter asserts, “The why and the how of economic mechanisms was of no interest in any degree neither to [Christian] leaders nor to [Christian] writers” in the patristic era.⁸⁵ Though Schumpeter’s position is exaggerated, it is important to note that the Church Fathers were not economists in the modern sense of the profession. One cannot expect them to produce nuanced analyses of the economic workings of their time. Nevertheless, many Fathers are interested in the ethical and theological ramifications of socioeconomic realities, and their critiques touch on fundamental questions of political economy that continue to be discussed today. Rendering these caveats explicit makes it clear that this study will be selective in its patristic references to economic dialectics. The purpose of the exposition of the various dialects present in the Fathers’ writings is merely to demonstrate that Ellacuría is more than justified in reaching past Marx to some trends in the early church to found his “demagogic,” conflictual discourse against wealth.

⁸⁴ John Anthony MCGUCKIN, “The Vine and the Elm Tree: The Patristic Interpretation of Jesus’ Teachings on Wealth,” *The Church and Wealth: Papers Read at the 1986 Summer Meeting and the 1987 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Oxford, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Cited in Jean-Marie SALAMITO, *Travailleuses, travailleurs ! Les Pères de l’Église et l’économie*, Salvator, Paris, 2023, p. 68. My translation.

ii. Eight Dialectics of Wealth and Poverty

Ellacuría employs the word *dialectic* to characterize the Church Fathers' construal of the relationship between wealth and poverty. By *dialectic* in this context, one can understand *a contradiction between two realities demonstrative of a second contradiction between the first contradiction and a utopic vision*. At the most basic level, the Church Fathers and Ellacuría recognize and denounce the contradiction between wealth and poverty demonstrative of a second contradiction between this first contradiction and God's utopic plan for the thriving of all people. While Ellacuría himself does not enumerate and describe the iterations of this dialectic in patristic writings, this study does so to illustrate the accuracy of Ellacuría's thought. A dialectic understanding of wealth and poverty by the Church Fathers is so extensive that one can discern at least eight types of contradictions in their works.

a. Common Use and Private Appropriation

According to the first, most rudimentary, and most popular patristic dialectic on wealth and poverty, God created everything for the use or possession⁸⁶ of all, yet the rich appropriate creation's goods for themselves.

⁸⁶ I write "use or possession" because of the ambiguity in the patristic literature and because of the high stakes that this ambiguity assumes in secondary literature. Some patristic passages seem to suggest a fundamental communism in the sense that God intended creation to be

St. Basil the Great compares the rich person to “a man who sets himself up in a theater, and then pushes aside those who would like to enter because he considers as his own property what is there for the use of all.”⁸⁷ The rich distort the communal *telos* of creation when they pridefully assert and violently defend exclusive property rights. St. Basil employs a second metaphor with a similar message in another homily,

Let us, who are rational, not show ourselves crueler than beings without reason. They make common use, as it were, of the fruits of the earth that nature offers them: flocks of sheep graze on one and the same mountain; numerous horses feed on one and the same plain; and all the animals, each on its own side, cede to each other the enjoyment of the goods that are necessary for their use. We, however, hide the common goods in our bosom; what belonged to the many, we take for ourselves.⁸⁸

The image is striking because of the connection that St. Basil makes between reason and common use. If animals who do not enjoy reason are able to share amongst themselves in harmony, human beings who enjoy reason should be even more capable of establishing practices of common use. St. Basil envisions a primitive version of a planned economy in which resources are distributed equally because each person has an equal right to the use of the earth.

“owned” by everyone, but others seem to dodge the question of collective ownership and affirm that everyone has the right to equal use of the goods of creation. It is not my intention here to wade into the debate about the “primitive communism” of the Church Fathers but rather to demonstrate that, regardless of whether they speak of “use” or “possession,” there is a dialectic relationship of tension among the “everyone,” the “rich,” and the “poor.”

⁸⁷ Cited in Stanislas GIET, *Les idées et l'action sociales de Saint Basile*, Lecoffre, Paris, 1941, p. 97. Hom. VI, in illud: *Destruam*, 7 ; II, 49, D ; éd. Courtonne, 33. My translation.

⁸⁸ Cited in GIET, *Les idées et l'action sociales de Saint Basile*, p. 112-113. Hom. VIII, in *fam. et sicc.*, 8 ; II, 70, D, E. My translation.

St. Basil is not the only Church Father to invoke this argument. St. Clement of Alexandria writes much the same, “God created humanity for the communication of one with another, as He began by distributing what was his. To all men He gave His common Logos, and He made everything for all. Therefore, everything is common, and let not the rich claim to have more than others.”⁸⁹ Clement accentuates the intentionality of God. God created humanity “*for communication*” and created “*everything for all.*”⁹⁰ Selfish accumulation runs thus against the will of God, which humanity should be able to discern because God has given humanity God’s very “Logos” or intelligence. The words of St. Basil and St. Clement in the East echo in the mouth of St. Ambrose in the West, “The world was created for all, and you, the rich few, are striving to claim it for yourselves. But it is not only the possession of the earth, but also the sky, the air and the sea that are claimed for the use of a few rich people.”⁹¹ St. Ambrose’s approach here is more direct. He addresses the rich in the second person as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Plain, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). The poor are poor because the rich take for themselves what fundamentally belongs to all.

⁸⁹ Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 160-161. *Pédagogue* 2, 12. My translation.

⁹⁰ My italics.

⁹¹ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *Richesse et pauvreté ou Naboth le pauvre*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1978, p. 27, para. 11. My translation.

b. Accumulation and Exploitation

A second and related dialectic found in the Church Fathers is the rich person's logic of expansion. Wealthy people desire more, but their accumulation means increasingly exploiting the poor. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine exemplify this dialectic. St. Ambrose uses the biblical story of Ahab's oppression of Naboth to condemn parallel oppressions in Roman Empire: "The story of Naboth happened a long time ago, but it is renewed every day. What rich man is not continually coveting what belongs to others? Who does not seek to snatch from the poor his small possession and invade the inheritance of his ancestors?"⁹² In the tale from 1 Kings, King Ahab of Samaria covets the vineyard of Naboth, but Naboth refuses to give up his "ancestral inheritance" so that the King can have a "vegetable garden" (21:2-3). Ahab's wife Jezebel proceeds to have Naboth stoned so that the King can "take possession of it" (21:16). St. Ambrose's "demagogic" preaching on this story is certainly in reference to the landowners of his day who were constantly seeking to enlarge their already expansive holdings. The saint shows courage in naming and condemning a social problem in the Roman Empire. In the spirit of his teacher, St. Augustine responds to issues in the Empire concerning the wealthy's search for accumulation at the expense of the poor. He writes in the *City of God*,

⁹² Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 173, o.c., 1. My translation.

The worshippers and admirers of [the pagan] gods delight in imitating their scandalous iniquities, and are in no way concerned that the republic be less depraved and licentious. Only let it remain undefeated, they say, only let it flourish and abound in resources; let it be glorious by its victories, or still better, secure in peace; and what matters it to us? This is our concern, that every man be able to increase his wealth so as to supply his daily prodigalities, and so that the powerful may subject the weak for their own purposes. Let the poor court the rich for a living, and that under their protection they may enjoy a sluggish tranquility; and let the rich abuse the poor as their dependents, to minister to their pride.⁹³

Augustine criticizes not only the powerful who “subject the weak for their own purposes” but also the Roman patronage system in which “the poor court the rich for a living.” He sees a doubly parasitic relationship in which the rich and the poor feed off each other. The rich submit the poor to servitude, and the poor accommodate themselves to this exploitative relationship. A dialectic of dependence forms based on the avarice of the few and the slothfulness of the many. Such a dynamic may correspond well to the earthly city, but it does not belong in the City of God.

c. Hoarding and Helping

The third dialectic has less to do with the accumulation of riches and more to do with the use of these riches. Perhaps in a world without others, it would be acceptable to accumulate wealth. However, in a world with others, accumulation is not neutral or praiseworthy. One has the imperative to help

⁹³ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *La Cité de Dieu*, Livres I-V, Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, Paris, 2014, II, XX, p. 365-367. My translation.

others if one has beyond one's needs. Instead of sharing their wealth with the poor in need, rich people hoard it. Stanislas Giet notes that St. Basil condemned this practice, "It is not wealth, but its excessive abundance that accuses the injustices of the rich...: abundance that clearly shows how much they have preferred their particular enjoyment to the relief of the many."⁹⁴ Their worship of mammon blinds them from the struggles of the suffering. Their personal pursuit of lavishness is more important to them than the mere survival of others. They choose the vice of avarice over the virtue of charity. St. Ambrose adopts a similar perspective, "How many poor people was I able to keep alive thanks to last year's wheat?"⁹⁵ For St. Ambrose, the parable of the rich fool is perennially relevant. Having reaped in abundance, he pulls down his barns and builds bigger ones, yet he does not know that he will die that very evening. He will not be able to take the treasures he stores on earth with him into heaven (Luke 12:51-21). His decision to hoard jeopardizes not only his spiritual health but also the physical health of his neighbors who could have used the excess wheat for their immediate nourishment.

d. The Usury of the Rich and the Vulnerability of the Poor

St. Basil the Great saves his choicest words for usury, the fourth dialectic. Usurers take advantage of the vulnerable poor by loaning money

⁹⁴ GIET, p. 106. My translation.

⁹⁵ AMBROSE OF MILAN, p. 37, para. 33. My translation.

and then demanding return payments with interest. The result is often that poor people who received the loans find themselves in a more precarious position than the one that led them to seek loans in the first place. The rich, who have money to lend, end up richer due to the interest rates, yet the poor end up accumulating not money but debt. St. Basil accuses usurers of “the height of cruelty.” Addressing his discourse directly at them, he preaches, “You take advantage of misfortune, you make money out of tears, you strangle the naked, you strike the hungry. Pity? No pity. Consideration for the family of the afflicted? None at all. And the gain that comes from it, you call humanity!”⁹⁶ St. Basil considers usury to be especially wicked because usurers present their activity as a benefit to humanity. They say they are doing a favor to the poor by affording them a loan. Just the opposite is true. The loan is a pretext for exploitation. The application of interest runs against the biblical tradition of justice, “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them” (Exodus 22:25). The text highlights the relational problem of interest. The parties are no longer on the register of friendship, fraternity, or fellow creaturehood but in a relation of rich creditor/poor borrower. The terms are unequal and ripe for exploitation.

Giaquinta writes that St. Basil is far from the only church father who speaks harshly against usury. St. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, laments, “What could be more intolerable than to favor the indigent so that his need

⁹⁶ Cited in GIET, p. 116, Hom. in Ps. XIV, 5 ; I, 113, n.a. My translation.

may be greater and to accumulate wealth at the expense of the misery of the poor? If you are a Christian, why do you expect God to reward you, when He Himself in other men receives not favors but harms? Why do you give away at interest your idle money and increase your treasures at the expense of the want of your brother for whom Christ died?”⁹⁷ St. Hilary’s criticism is of a more Christological nature. There are echoes of Matthew 25:31-46 in which the Christ reveals that he is one with the “least of these” and that one’s service or denial of service to them is a service or denial of service to the Christ. St. Hilary seems to be arguing that the Christ will say to the usurer at the Last Judgment, “I came to you in need of money, and you exploited me by exacting interest. Now go away into eternal punishment.” Moreover, St. Hilary attacks the usurer’s manipulation of poor people, who are the usurer’s brothers “for whom Christ died.” Jesus Christ sacrificed himself totally for the other, yet the usurer sacrifices the other for himself. Instead of acting in a way worthy of the sacrifice of the Christ, creditors do violence to the worth of the other won by Christ’s death. The sin of usury is undeniably grave.

e. Time of Need and Price Gouging

Like the dialectic of usury, the fifth patristic dialectic shows, contrary to the perspective of Schumpeter, the extent to which the some of the Fathers are attentive to economic mechanisms, at least in so far as they involve

⁹⁷ Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 169, Tract. in Psalmos, Ps 14, no. 15. My translation.

injustices in need of remedy. St. Ambrose clearly communicates his disapproval of the practice of raising prices in times of natural or artificial scarcity. He presents a series of rhetorical questions to merchants in *De Officiis ministorum*, “Why do you take away from the use of men that which nature produces for all? Why do you diminish the abundance of the people? Why do you desire scarcity?”⁹⁸ As if it is not sufficiently sinful to take for themselves the fruits of the earth meant for all, some merchants have the evil audacity to “hide the wheat” and “raise prices.”⁹⁹ They steal from the people, manufacture scarcity, and sell back what they have stolen at exorbitant prices. This process is particularly damaging to the poor. The rich may be able to afford the merchants’ high prices, but the poor cannot. These merchants fabricate famine so that their wealth can increase.

f. Luxurious Consumption and Dangerous Work

Remaining with St. Ambrose for the sixth dialectic, the bishop of Milan addresses the problem of the relation between the luxurious consumption of the rich and the dangerous labor of the poor. The wealthy enjoy the comforts of high society because workers have gone to great lengths to acquire the necessary raw materials, assemble them, and transport them. He astutely describes,

⁹⁸ Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 174, oc, 3, 6, 41. My translation.

⁹⁹ Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 174, oc, 3, 6, 41. My translation.

The table of [the] rich man lives on the blood of many poor people, and his cups drip the blood of many poor people he had gathered into his nets. How many are sacrificed to prepare what you rejoice in? Your greed is harmful: your sumptuousness is harmful. One falls from the top of a roof to prepare huge granaries for your harvests. Another falls from the highest pinnacle of a great tree, where he had climbed to examine the different kinds of grapes he is bringing, from which will come wines worthy of your banquet. A third is drowned in the sea because the rich man fears that fish or oysters are missing from his table. A fourth ventures out into the freezing cold until he finds hares or manages to catch birds with his traps.¹⁰⁰

Ambrose's text shows an incredible level of awareness of the dangerous inequalities of consumption and labor. Poor workers assume great risks to feed the capricious appetites of the rich. Sadly, this phenomenon remains largely unchanged from St. Ambrose's era to the present. Enterprises who sell luxury goods to the rich rely on the hazardous labor of the poor. Miners and people from communities who live around mines suffer from lead, cyanide, and mercury poisoning caused by the extraction process so that wealthy people can have gold, silver, and diamonds. Happily, thanks in part to pressure from "demagogic" Christians in El Salvador, the nation outlawed the mining of metals on national territory in 2017. Their persistent imitation of St. Ambrose's example bore fruits of justice.

¹⁰⁰ AMBROSE OF MILAN, p. 30-31, para. 19-20. My translation.

g. Wealth and Injustice

The seventh dialectic, perhaps the most radical, is principally found in the writings of St. Jerome. He offers a blanket condemnation of wealth, asserting that injustice is its necessary cause. One instance of this argumentation appears in St. Jerome's commentary on Jeremiah: "Like a cage full of birds, [the houses of the wicked] are full of treachery; therefore, they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (5:27-28). The prophet makes a connection between people who have become rich and their unjust actions towards the poor. St. Jerome focuses on this connection, interpreting, "[The wicked] fill their houses through the plunder and losses of others, so that the saying of the philosophers may be fulfilled, 'Every rich man is unjust or the heir of an unjust one.'"¹⁰¹ The extremism of St. Jerome's stance lies in its universality: "*every rich man.*"¹⁰² Whereas other church fathers are careful to distinguish between the neutrality of the *possession* of riches and the moral reprehensibility of a selfish *use* of riches, St. Jerome folds the former into the latter. Wealth is not neutral but rather condemnable because its source is injustice. St. Jerome's affirmation here is not unique in his writings. He repeats it in several texts. For example, in his

¹⁰¹ Cited in John A. RYAN, "Were the Church Fathers Communists?" *International Journal of Ethics*, 14-1 (1903), p. 35, Book I, chap. V, verse 26.

¹⁰² My italics.

commentary on Micah, he writes, “The rich abound not so much in wealth as in injustice; for all riches—being a spoliation of others—are born of injustice.”¹⁰³ John A. Ryan supposes that St. Jerome’s vitriol against wealth stems from the development of incredibly huge estates in the Roman Empire that were owned by an incredibly small number of people,

When [Jerome] wrote, the yeomanry of Italy, the men who cultivated their own land, had long since disappeared through impoverishment or violence. To them had succeeded the holders of the ‘Latifundia’ and the hordes of dependent tillers. Already in Pliny’s time, these immense estates were, in the words of the writer, causing the ruin of Italy, while half the Province of Africa was in the hands of six owners. The evils of this institution had undoubtedly become so great by St. Jerome’s time as to constitute an outrage on the Christian sense of justice.¹⁰⁴

Extreme inequality calls for extreme denunciation. Instead of inheriting the Reign of God which belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20), some Christians are inheriting estates. They do not follow the early Christians’ example in selling their properties and giving the money to the apostles for distribution to the poor (Acts 4:34-35); rather, they receive estates whose immensity is a result of generations of violent dispossessions. What was once incompatible with the Gospel, private ownership, had become institutionalized, and remarkably so, in the Roman Empire, and St. Jerome could not but speak out against this aberration.

¹⁰³ Cited in RYAN, p. 36, Book II, Chap. VI, verse 3.

¹⁰⁴ RYAN, p. 36-37.

h. Wealth and Inequality

The eighth and final patristic dialectic on wealth and poverty is based on God's will for all human beings to be equal. By proclaiming that God is the Father of all, that this Father wills human equality, and that the Father's will should be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), Christianity introduces a rupture into heavily hierarchical Greco-Roman society. This dialectic is a utopian one. It introduces into history a project that has radical human equality as its aim. Its theological root is not, as in the first dialectic, God's will as Creator but rather God's will as Father. In a special way that accentuates a theological current in the Jewish tradition, Jesus reveals that God is Father, and this revelation comes with social implications. Lactantius, a Christian advisor to Constantine, writes, "If [God] is the Father of all, we are his children with equal right. No one is poor for God... No one is rich... This is why justice could not exist between the Romans and the Greeks. They allowed a great diversity of conditions and degrees: poor and rich, humble and powerful, citizens and princes. Where all are not equal there is no equity."¹⁰⁵ Lactantius' position is bold in that he directly compares the will of God and the reality of Greco-Roman society. The latter is irreconcilable with the former. The implication is that Greco-Roman society, rich in inequality, ought to give way and is giving way to a new Christian society, rich in justice. The metaphysical basis of this new order is "the Christian conception of the

¹⁰⁵ Cited in GIAQUINTA, p. 162, o.c., 5, 15; ver 5, 8. My translation.

inviolable dignity of the human person founded on the divine filiation of humanity.”¹⁰⁶ This truth is the metaphysical motor behind the ultimate resolution of the dialectics of conflict that aggravate the inequality between the rich and the poor. Christians have the immense task of historicizing our beliefs in the equality of humanity in God.

The contradiction of Lactantius’ doctrine—which Giaquinta considers to be the first articulation of human dignity in society rooted in each person’s identity as child of God—is that its appearance coincides with the increasing identification of the church with the Roman Empire in the Constantinian period. Ellacuría laments this fact. The present exposition of eight conflictual dialectics of wealth and poverty found in the Church Fathers’ writings vindicates Ellacuría’s position. Liberation theology need not trace the origin of its own sense of the dialectic nature of wealth and poverty to Marxism when sources from the first centuries of the church constitute a more than sufficient source. Nevertheless, the Church Fathers, many of whom were strong in their denunciations of unjust wealth, were not strong enough to fend off distortions to the faith that accommodation to the Roman Empire implied. Ellacuría writes, “Post-Constantinian Western historicization leads the faith along the paths of power, wealth and worldliness.”¹⁰⁷ In the next section, a study of Jon Sobrino will illustrate how the Constantinian turn infected some components of patristic Christological formulae.

¹⁰⁶ GIAQUINTA, p. 163. My translation.

¹⁰⁷ ELLACURÍA, “El desafío cristiano de la teología de la liberación,” *Escritos teológicos*, Volume I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 2000, p. 31-32. My translation.

Recapitulation

This section has shown that Ignacio Ellacuría relies on the Church Fathers to affirm that the Christian understanding of wealth and poverty is dialectical. Though God desires equality and condemns oppression, the rich build their wealth on the misery of the poor. Ancient Christians' promotion of egalitarianism and criticism of exploitation not only predate Marx but also constitute areas of compatibility with Marx. Outlined in this section, the eight dialectics found in patristic writings provide evidence for Ellacuría's position. When some Christians today criticize Marx on his dialectical conception of wealth and poverty, they are also criticizing a position held by many Church Fathers. The patristic writers preached allegorical homilies and crafted treatises on the nature of God, but it is important to not forget that they were social critics, too.

Opposition to Ellacuría's position might take two forms. First, one can claim that Ellacuría ignores writings by Church Fathers that are decidedly not dialectical on wealth and poverty. There are notable counterexamples to the eight dialectics listed here. For instance, Peter Brown writes that Augustine altered the Pelagian "get rid of the rich and you will find no poor" to read "get rid of pride, and riches will do no harm."¹⁰⁸ Brown interprets, "In practice this meant a view of society where the inequalities created by wealth could be

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Peter BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012, p. 349, *Sermon 37.4*.

accepted as long as they were softened by the abandonment of the toxic by-products of wealth—arrogance, violence, and the abuse of power.”¹⁰⁹ Augustine’s light position here is one of many similar statements that one could find throughout the patristic writings, and there is no doubt that it neutralizes much of the dialectical radicalism.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Ellacuría was ignorant of patristic stances that differed from the ones he cited and from his own. Rather, by referencing a cluster of dialectical positions, he hoped to establish that it was possible to root such an interpretation of wealth and poverty in the ancient Christian tradition. It was not the only way to approach economic inequality, but it was a way to approach it. Further, it was an especially appropriate position to take as a Christian intellectual confronting extreme inequality in El Salvador. Given the reality of the Salvadoran poor for whom Ellacuría had made a preferential option, Ellacuría discerned that the Fathers’ more dialectical writings were the most fitting for contemporary appropriation.

Second, one might object that many liberation theologians hold a dialectical understanding of wealth and poverty in order to justify revolution whereas revolution was not the solution enacted by the Church Fathers. Indeed, some liberation theologians like Ellacuría think that the way to the prophetic utopia is through revolution. Ellacuría states, “In search of a historically universalizable utopia, in which the poor or the popular majorities have a decisive place, and from the hope that drives towards it, a new

¹⁰⁹ BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 349.

revolution is envisioned with the prophetic motto: ‘to begin again.’”¹¹⁰ For Ellacuría, almsgiving and reform are not sufficient means to address economic inequality. Revolution is the most reasonable path for a people whose oppression is as grave as that of Central America.

This revolutionary vision contrasts with the practices of the Church Fathers, whose actions ranged from calling on the rich to give generously¹¹¹ to setting up hospitals for the poor and the sick.¹¹² Given that the liberation theologians would find little support for revolutionary projects in the patristic era, they turn elsewhere in the Christian tradition to situate their position. Juan Hernández Pico cites Pope Paul VI, who legitimates the people’s right to revolution “‘in the case of evident and prolonged tyranny that seriously infringes upon the fundamental rights of the individual and dangerously harms the common good of the country’ (*Firmissimam constantiam*, 35, 36).”¹¹³ Some liberation theologians considered that the Latin American dictatorships in the second half of the twentieth century met the criteria specified by Pope Paul VI. The extreme conditions of modern oppression called for ways of proceeding that went beyond what the Church Fathers

¹¹⁰ ELLACURÍA, “Utopía y profetismo,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. I, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 414. My translation.

¹¹¹ See BROWN, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 352-368.

¹¹² See Daniel CANER, “Not a Hospital but a Leprosarium,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 72 (2018), p. 25-48. Caner argues that the scope of St. Basil the Great’s hospitals was narrower than previous scholars have thought: “I claim that Basil’s institution was founded neither as a general hospital nor as a charitable multiplex, but instead as a kind of monastic leprosarium where monks and lepers were sequestered together, each supporting the other” (26).

¹¹³ Juan HERNÁNDEZ PICO, “Revolución, violencia y paz,” *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. II, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 614. My translation.

imagined. The dialectical inequality and the state's violent repression of attempts to overcome poverty were too severe to suggest mere philanthropy or reform.

III: Jon Sobrino on Christology in Times of Empire

Jon Sobrino notes a gradual abandonment of the life of Jesus and of the Reign of God in the early centuries of the church. This trajectory, which corresponds to a greater identification between the church and the Roman Empire, is regrettable because it de-historicizes the Gospel. It is therefore necessary for contemporary theology to correct these aspects of patristic theology while acknowledging and accentuating other, more beneficial aspects, such as the Church Fathers' unification of soteriology and Christology and identification of the historical Jesus with God. Whereas the previous two chapters have focused more on liberation theologians' favorable referencing of patristics, this chapter highlights a more nuanced case in which Sobrino rejects some elements of patristic theology and embraces others. Sobrino studies the patristic soil to dig up Christological problems that have their origins in the times of the Fathers and to fertilize the Christological roots that bear fruit. The central text of this section will be *Christ the Liberator*, the second volume of his Christology, given that the concluding chapters of the book address the fecundity (or lack thereof) of patristic theology, especially concerning the conciliar formulae of the patristic period. This section will limit itself to presenting Sobrino's position, recent historiographical research that supports it, and a couple of opposing viewpoints. In the next section, the conclusion, I will carry out a broader evaluation of Sobrino's position and of those of other liberation theologians covered in previous sections.

i. The Limits of Conciliar Patristic Theology According to Sobrino

a. Abandonment of the Life of the Historical Jesus

The most fundamental problem that Sobrino seeks to uproot is the Fathers' increasing neglect of the life of the historical Jesus. He takes as evidence of this unfortunate phenomenon the Christological formula of Chalcedon and Nicea. Examining the doctrine of Chalcedon, one perceives that the central concept it employs is "nature" or "substance." Jesus Christ is "consubstantial with the Father according to divinity, and consubstantial with us according to human nature."¹¹⁴ He is recognized in "two natures, without mingling, without change, indivisibly, undividedly, the distinction of natures nowhere removed on account of the union but rather the peculiarity of each nature being kept, and uniting in one person and subsistence."¹¹⁵ Christians come to know this teaching as the hypostatic union. Sobrino regrets that the adoption of the Greek philosophical language of "nature" and "substance" advances "an understanding of God based on universal concepts rather than concrete elements (those of Jesus)."¹¹⁶ This understanding is problematic because it leaves out any sense of the way that Jesus existed as a human being. To claim that Jesus Christ is "fully human" is a mostly vacuous phrase

¹¹⁴ Henry DENZINGER, "Council of Chalcedon," *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, Loreto Publications, Fitzwilliam, 1955, p. 60.

¹¹⁵ DENZINGER, "Council of Chalcedon," p. 61.

¹¹⁶ Jon SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, Cerf, Paris, 2015, p. 483. Original text from 1999. My translation.

because human beings, endowed with freedom, act in different ways. Sobrino writes, “Nature, in fact, leads us to know what a thing is, its components, its characteristics, its limits. But when that thing is a person endowed with freedom, if we know nothing about the actualization of that freedom, we know almost nothing about that thing. Apart from history, we know almost nothing about persons, and this is a fundamental problem for Christology.”¹¹⁷ On the one hand, it is significant to declare that Jesus-Christ is both human being and God because it implies that, when we come to know something about the identity of the man Jesus, we come to know something about the identity of God. When Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus replies, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). On the other hand, if Jesus is human and divine and reveals the divine in his humanity, there remains the necessity of “having been with Jesus all this time” to discover precisely what Jesus’ humanity reveals of God. Consequentially, it is not sufficient to know that God became a human being to reveal God’s self to humanity. One must know that God was *this* human being with *this* life story. It means little to proclaim that the human Jesus is divine without knowing Jesus’ history. Sobrino summarizes, “A universalism based on the eternal nature of things won’t allow us to put the concreteness of Jesus’ life and death—and the reasons behind it—at the center.”¹¹⁸ Jesus Christ participates in the universal categories of “humanity” and “divinity,” yet, if liberty is

¹¹⁷ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 445-446. My translation.

¹¹⁸ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 446. My translation.

definitive of humanity, it is essential to know the way that Jesus lived out his liberty.

One can trace the unresolved question of the character of the historical existence of the human Jesus posed by Chalcedon (451) back to Nicaea (325). It is helpful to examine what this Council says about the life of Jesus in its credal formula: the Lord Jesus Christ “for our salvation came down, and became incarnate and was made man, and suffered, and arose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven.”¹¹⁹ This section of the Creed consists of three movements. The first is the incarnation. Sobrino writes, “In the patristic period, the focus gradually shifted to the Incarnation—believed in as a real event—but in such a transcendent way as to undermine the concreteness of Jesus’ life.”¹²⁰ Nicene Christology justly avoids Docetism, according to which God merely appears as a human being in Jesus. Whereas Docetists deny the human incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the Nicene Fathers assert that the Lord Jesus Christ “became incarnate” and “was made man.” Sobrino celebrates this Nicene position, which disturbs ideologies according to which God and humanity are mutually exclusive categories. This positive theological development will be the topic of a later section in this chapter.

That said, Sobrino insists on the limits of Nicene Christology revealed by the Creed’s second movement. After Jesus Christ “was made man,” he “suffered.” Following the incarnation, the Creed moves directly to the pascal mystery. There is no notion of the life of Jesus, of his actions and teachings.

¹¹⁹ DENZINGER, “The Nicene Creed,” p. 26.

¹²⁰ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 423. My translation.

Jesus is born, suffers, dies, and rises, but he does not live. A comparison to a synoptic gospel sheds light on the problem. Of the twenty-eight chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the first two narrate Jesus' birth, and the last three recount his passion, death, and resurrection. Consequently, the Nicene Creed passes over twenty-three of Matthew's twenty-eight chapters. The reason is that the Council is responding to heresies of a philosophical order more than to questions of an existential order. The doctrines of the incarnation and the crucifixion that Nicaea defines address abstract, categorical concerns about a spiritual, eternal God who enters time and space. The Creed begins with God the Creator, identifies Jesus Christ as consubstantial with this God, and recounts Jesus Christ's descent onto earth. The movement is one of condescension, and the Fathers justly defend the reality of this condescension in the face of opponents who insist on its impossibility to greater or lesser degrees. The Fathers' formulation memorialized this condescension to the extent that Catholics around the world still proclaim it at Sunday mass. Though necessary for its time, the Nicene Creed is far from sufficient. Sobrino pinpoints the problem:

At Nicaea, the Son is declared consubstantial because of who Jesus is (uniquely born—begotten of the Father), not because of what Jesus does. The actions of Jesus of Nazareth (then declared of divine nature) are not taken into account in 'redefining' God. This means that Nicaea will not go beyond an essentialist, non-historicalized vision of the divinity (of the Father), as the Old and New Testaments do. And this lack of historicity will not be overcome, even by introducing Jesus into the reality of what is divine.¹²¹

¹²¹ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 481-482. My translation.

Put succinctly, for the Nicene Fathers, the human being Jesus Christ is consubstantial with the Father, but the inverse is absent. The historical Jesus is God, but God is not presented as the historical Jesus. The Creed attributes divinity to Jesus, born and died, yet it presents Jesus ahistorically. Nicaea proclaims that Jesus Christ's nature is divine, but it does not distinguish his actions as divine. Chalcedon's issue of Jesus Christ, the general man, has its origins in Nicaea. For the reader of the formulae of Chalcedon and Nicaea, the life of the historical Jesus remains a mystery. It has no content. As such, God remains distant from the human experience.

The issue of the immediate passage from Jesus' birth to his death creates a second challenge. It mystifies his execution. Sobrino writes, "Without the history of Jesus, the cross means bloodshed and death, and nothing else. Thus soteriology becomes magic, arbitrariness or the cruelty of a god. With the history of Jesus, the cross says love, and so a soteriology without magic, arbitrariness or cruelty is possible."¹²² Jesus' crucifixion was the result of the way that he chose to live. His absolute commitment to love, especially of the poor, put him at odds with the religious and political authorities who conspired to kill him. Jesus' death is inseparably related to the actions of his life. He did not live like any man, and he did not die like any man. The Nicene Creed ignores this essential connection.

It is true that the additions of the First Council of Constantinople (381) address Sobrino's concerns in part. The Fathers add that Jesus Christ "was

¹²² SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 554. My translation.

crucified for us by Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried.”¹²³ The specification of the type of suffering—crucifixion—and of the authority that caused the suffering—Pontius Pilate—communicates a few concrete details that fill in the portrait of Jesus, the abstract man consubstantial with the Father. Crucifixion indicates that the authorities perceived Jesus as a criminal. He did not merely die. He was executed for disobeying the law. The naming of Pontius Pilate situates Jesus in time and space. A leader of the Roman Empire in Palestine decided to have Jesus crucified. A few key components of the circumstances of Jesus’ death come into view. Nevertheless, the public ministry of Jesus that led to Pontius Pilate’s verdict remains hidden. Constantinople makes the same quick passage from Jesus’ birth to the suffering at the end of his life.

The third movement is Jesus Christ’s resurrection and ascension into heaven, which gives the impression of his absence from subsequent history. The Son of God came down to earth, died, rose from the dead, and went back up to heaven. There is a lack of connection between the meaning of contemporary life on earth and the fact that Jesus Christ is in heaven. The lack of detail about the life of this absent Jesus Christ only exacerbates the problem. Jesus passed through earth having carried out no action, and he has since left earth. Articulated in this way, life here and now appears vacuous. Nonetheless, the Nicene Creed does formulate that Jesus Christ came down from heaven “for us men, and for our salvation,” and Constantinople does add

¹²³ DENZINGER, “The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,” p. 35.

that he was “crucified for us.” These phrases indicate that the incarnation and the pascal mystery are soteriological, and it will be important to return to this soteriological axe, appreciated by Sobrino, in an upcoming section. For now, the issue remains that Jesus Christ, distant from the details of a human story, is also distant from the earth where human beings reside. The Creeds maintain a distinction between heaven and earth, which leads to the mystification and alienation of the human experience from the reality of God with which Jesus Christ is identified. Jesus Christ begins in heaven and ends in heaven, yet human beings are still on earth.

Christians would have to wait until Vatican II for the emergence of history in conciliar doctrine. Sobrino notes, “Vatican II had the merit, which has perhaps not been sufficiently appreciated, of having expressed the reality of God in terms of history, of having given a story to his nature, even if it was in simple terms.”¹²⁴ The most recent council filled in what Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon left empty. The Council speaks in terms of the relationship between the Trinity, the church, and human history, “United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”¹²⁵ Vatican II also gives a meaning to history: Christians are on a “journey to the Kingdom of their

¹²⁴ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 483. My translation.

¹²⁵ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, para. 1.

Father.” The Kingdom resurfaces in the Council, and the “God of the Kingdom”¹²⁶ resurfaces with it.

b. Devaluation of the Reign of God

Vatican II had to resurface the Reign of God because the Church Fathers contributed to its decentralization and distortion. Decentralization refers to the fact that, though the Reign was central to Jesus’ ministry, patristic writers separate Jesus from the Reign to the detriment of the latter. Sobrino asserts, “Jesus’ relationship to the Reign of God, which was a constitutive relationship during his life, gradually disappeared from Christological reflection or, at least, was reinterpreted, so that its centrality disappeared, even if important values were retained around the category of the Reign.”¹²⁷ The first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). In the last verse of the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul is proclaiming in Rome “the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31). Many of Jesus’ parables describe the Reign, and Jesus advises his disciples to “strive first for the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). The “good news” that Jesus announces is the “Reign” itself: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and

¹²⁶ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 482. My translation.

¹²⁷ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 601. My translation.

proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23). It is for the Reign that Jesus is murdered. His words and acts in inaugurating the Reign are a threat to the reign of Herod, Pilate, and Caesar. Before Pilate, the crowds “cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor.’ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified” (John 19:15-16). The connection between the penultimate and ultimate sentences of this passage suggests that Pilate caves before the pressure of the crowds for political reasons. Jesus’ pretensions to authority and the authority of Herod, Pilate, and Caesar are incompatible to the crowds. Jesus must have known that the proclamation of a reign that is not the Roman Empire was dangerous in his political environment, yet he persisted in his announcing of the Reign of God. The Reign of God, which belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20), not to Caesar, was so important to Jesus that he was willing to die for it.

However, the Reign of God has little-to-no place in the conciliar formulae of the patristic era. At the end of the section on the Son in the Creed of Constantinople, the Fathers profess that the Lord Jesus Christ’s “kingdom” shall have “no end.”¹²⁸ This statement comes immediately after the affirmations of the second coming and the final judgment. While one must recognize the inclusion of the Reign in this foundational creed—it is not entirely absent—the placement of the Reign raises a significant question. The

¹²⁸ DENZINGER, “The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,” p. 35.

Reign is not tied to the historical life of Jesus but to the eschaton. Moreover, nothing about the Reign is defined aside from its everlasting quality. These aspects of the Creed mystify the Reign. Whereas the historical Jesus spent considerable time describing the Reign through his words and actions according to the synoptic gospels, the Creed says nothing about these words and actions that would flesh out the Reign. The Fathers do not follow Jesus emphasizing the Reign in their conciliar declarations. Sobrino observes that the problem intensifies at Chalcedon: “The Reign of God, which is absolutely central to Jesus, is not present in any way in the Chalcedon formula: Jesus Christ does not appear in relation to the Reign of God.”¹²⁹ His observation, which is accurate, highlights a problem more at the level of interest than at the level of truth. Sobrino does not contest Chalcedon’s articulation of the hypostatic union. In fact, he valorizes it, and it will be beneficial to return to this valorization later. Sobrino simply contests the omission of the Reign of God from the Fathers’ sphere of interest. Their conciliar formulae are not false, but they do not reflect Jesus’ preoccupation with the Reign.

The Fathers not only marginalize the Reign in their Christological declarations but also distort the meaning of the Reign relative to the way that Jesus understood it. Sobrino enumerates three distortions. The first he labels the “personalization” of the Reign, and he cites Origen as the culprit. Because Origen claims that Jesus himself is the Reign of God, the *auto-basileia*, the Reign “ceases to be the type of historical-social-collective reality preached by

¹²⁹ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 562. My translation.

Jesus, and is transformed into another type of reality, now personal, so that the former ceases to be thought in its own reality. What is central—and utopian—is therefore the person of Jesus alone.”¹³⁰ The Reign is not synonymous with the person of Jesus, though it is closely related to Jesus. The Reign is an emerging social, historical reality characterized by justice for the poor. It belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20) and to “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matthew 5:10). One can “enter” and “lock people out of” the Reign (Matthew 19:24, 23:13).¹³¹ Spatial prepositions accompany it. Jesus proclaims and inaugurates the Reign, but he is more of a servant of the Reign than the Reign itself. He says to his disciples,

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:25-30).

The Gentiles’ reign of authority is compared to the Father and the Son’s Reign of service. The Son forms his disciples in the style of this new Reign, which they receive from the Father through the Son. The Reign of God is a just alternative to the Roman Empire. Jesus demonstrates by his example the

¹³⁰ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 602. My translation.

¹³¹ For recent exegesis on the spatiality of the Reign, see Andreas B. DU TOIT, “The kingdom of God in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Skrif en kerk* 21-3 (2000), p. 550, and John P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, “Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles,” Doubleday, New York, 1991, p. 240.

advantage of servant leadership. He is so great a servant that he does not cling to the leadership given to him by the Father but rather shares his leadership with his disciples. The Reign is a sort of social project that flows from God into humanity.

The second distortion during the patristic period named by Sobrino is the “ecclesialization of the Reign of God.”¹³² The Reign is now synonymous not with the person of Jesus but with the church. In agreement with Sobrino, Eirini Artemi concludes that St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. John Chrysostom all conflate the church and the Reign.¹³³ The problem with this amalgamation is that, instead of the church being the servant of the Reign, the church becomes the Reign itself. The followers of Jesus turn the project of Jesus in on themselves. The Christian community assumes the ultimacy of the Reign. “Seek first the Reign” becomes “seek first the Church,” and this slippage introduces nefarious consequences. What Jesus created to be a servant turns into a master. What Jesus created to be a counter witness to imperial power turns into the imperial power. The Constantinian turn accelerates this distortion, as the next section will demonstrate. Sobrino proposes a return to the conception of the followers of Jesus as servants of the Reign. His desire for this restructuring of the relationship between the church and the Reign echoes the 1975 statement on the purpose of the church by the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation USA, “The Church is that

¹³² SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 602. My translation.

¹³³ Eirini ARTEMI, “The Kingdom of God in Church Fathers in the 4th century,” *Mirabilia Ars* 12 (2020/1), p. 81-100.

community of persons called by the Holy Spirit to continue Christ's saving work of reconciliation. As Christ proclaimed the Kingdom, so the Church serves the Kingdom."¹³⁴ The church advances Christ's work for the Reign in the grace of the Spirit. The church's power is not absolute but ordered to the absolute of the inbreaking Reign of God.

The last patristic deformation of the Reign of God is its gradual shift into the afterlife.¹³⁵ Though Jesus taught his followers to pray for God's Reign to come and for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), many Christians of the patristic period, as well as Christians today, repeat the error of the early Christians in fixing their gaze on the heavens instead of giving witness to the Reign to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:6-11). They look to the heavens for the God of the Reign, but the God of the Reign has come to earth. On this point, Sobrino shows a strong continuity with Karl Rahner, who boldly claimed, "Of the God we confess in Christ we must say that he is precisely where we are, and it's only here that can we find him."¹³⁶ God created the earth. God redeemed humanity on earth. The earth is the locus of God's attention, and it is here that God sets up God's Reign. God plants it in earthly soil (Matthew 13:31-32). Nonetheless, influenced by Greek religious teaching on the heavenly mysteries and philosophical teaching on the superiority of eternal, spiritual realities over temporal, material realities,

¹³⁴ ANGLICAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC CONSULTATION USA, "Agreed Statement on the Purpose of the Church," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1975, para. II.1.

¹³⁵ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 602. My translation.

¹³⁶ Karl RAHNER, "Réflexions théologiques sur l'incarnation," *Œuvres* 12, Paris, Cerf, 2019, p. 425. Original text from 1960. My translation.

the early church after Irenaeus and Tertullian begins to preach a Reign that “[shifts] from earth to heaven, [that detaches] itself from history,”¹³⁷ as Sobrino writes, citing Joseph Moingt. The Reign, the project of the God who entered time and walked on earth, becomes a largely eschatological concept. The Reign of life becomes the heaven of the afterlife.

These three distortions of the Reign of God are of concern to Sobrino not only because they are departures from the heart of biblical teaching—the synoptic gospels—but also because they sap significance from the struggle of the oppressed for their present-day liberation. The promises of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and of a community in the Church overshadow the challenge of an inbreaking new society. The promise of a heavenly paradise weakens the challenge of the accomplishment of God’s just will on earth. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” becomes “blessed will be you who are poor, for yours will be the kingdom of God” (cf. Luke 6:20). These distortions give ammunition to Marx’s invective against religion: “The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo*, the criticism of that *vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*.”¹³⁸ The three distortions amount to the belief in a God that acts outside of history at the end

¹³⁷ Joseph MOINGT, *L’Homme qui venait de Dieu*, Cerf, Paris, 1999, p. 112. My translation.

¹³⁸ Karl MARX, *Contribution à la critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel*. Aubier Montaigne, Paris, 1971, p. 53. Italics in the original text. My translation. Original text from 1844.

of history, yet the Judeo-Christian God acts in history. The Judeo-Christian God cares for the “real happiness” of God’s creatures on earth. As such, when the cries of Hebrew slaves reach the ears of God, God calls Moses to lead their Exodus from Egypt. As such, when God comes to earth in Jesus Christ, God heals, feeds, and raises up God’s people in the flesh. If Christians are to be true to the God who acts in history, then Christians must preach and live a religion that serves not merely as a “halo” over a “vale of tears” but also as a “demand for real happiness.” Sobrino claims that the shift from a Christianity of reality to a Christianity of illusion occurs, at least in a large part, due to the accommodation of the church to the Roman Empire. What does the Rome of Caesar have to do with the Jerusalem of Christ?

ii. Greater Identification Between the Church and the Roman Empire

Having examined Sobrino’s critique of conciliar Christology in the patristic period that suppresses the life of the historical Jesus and the materially liberative dimensions of the Reign of God, one can proceed by investigating the ideological pressures behind these suppressions. The early church existed in a dialectical relationship with the Roman Empire, and this relationship had effects on the development of Christian theology. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, some of these effects are positive. St. Justin Martyr’s doctrine of the “seed of the Word” planted in the Greco-Roman world laid the groundwork for fruitful intercultural and philosophical

exchanges between Christians and those from other religions, eventually including those indigenous to Latin America.

That said, not all points of contact between Christianity and the Greco-Roman world were positive. As Christianity adapted to Roman society, it lost some of its essence. Most notably, the religion of the Reign of Jesus Christ, crucified by Caesar, becomes the religion of the Empire of Caesar, the crucifier of Jesus Christ. The beliefs and practices of Jesus were counter-cultural enough to lead to his execution, yet nascent Christianity had the difficult task of presenting this counter-cultural religion to mainstream Roman culture. This difficult task is not unjust in itself. Jesus Christ himself connected successfully with some members of mainstream Roman culture. What is unjust is an adaption to the dominant culture without a simultaneous call to the dominant culture's radical conversion. For the "kings of the Gentiles" to become like Jesus Christ, they can no longer "lord their authority" over their subjects and relate to these subjects as "benefactors" (Luke 22:25). They must accept the way of service, especially to the poorest. The dominant must ally themselves with oppressed people's quest for equality, even if it means the dominant will be dethroned and sent away empty-handed (Luke 1:52-53). Sobrino contends that the early church often adapted the Gospel to the Roman elite without sufficiently emphasizing the social transformation the Gospel entails. One of these lamentable adaptations was the disjunction between the Gospel and the Reign. It is, after all, difficult to present an alternative Reign to those who are at ease in the dominant Reign. Sobrino writes, "We've mentioned the forgetting of the Reign of God several

times, but now we want to link it with inculturation and counter-culturalism. This oversight meant that Christianity ceased to be counter-cultural where it should have been, and instead adapted to a worldly and sinful politico-religious cultural form.”¹³⁹ Jesus asked his followers to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17), but many early Christians took up the practice of rendering unto the emperor the things that are God’s.

Sobrino names some instances of patristic writers’ excessive accommodations to Caesar:

Meliton of Sardis (d. 172) enthusiastically describes the relationship between Church and State, reminds Emperor Marcus Aurelius that Christian philosophy brought his Empire happiness and blessing, power and greatness, and promises prosperity for him and his descendants as long as he protects the Christian religion. Origen (d. 254) goes so far as to promise military success if all the Empire’s subjects become Christians, for Christian prayer—he argues—is more valuable than Moses’ for defeating enemies: politically speaking, Christianity is the most effective religion. Lactantius (d. 320), a convert, saw the Christian religion as the ferment of an ordered social life. Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) saw in Constantine’s edict the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament: the Church had integrated the religious aspirations of mankind. And these wishes were fulfilled: Christianity was to be attributed a moral function in society, due to its stabilizing influence.¹⁴⁰

Instead of disturbing the comfort of the imperial court, these Christians promise its perpetual comfort in exchange for religious affiliation. Instead of inviting the Empire’s rich young rulers to sell their possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus Christ, these early theologians offer them

¹³⁹ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 465. My translation.

¹⁴⁰ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 458. My translation.

additional prosperity. Instead of declaring to military powers that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52), some Church Fathers pray for imperial conquests. Jesus Christ bravely proclaimed to Pilate, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). The patristic cases mentioned by Sobrino invert Jesus’ words, “Christians would have no power unless it had been given them from the Empire.” In these ways Christianity becomes an ideological apparatus in service of the imperial *status quo*.

Changes between Jesus’ relationship to authority and many of the Church Fathers’ relationships to authority are not isolated developments. They have a bearing on the church’s budding theology. Sobrino argues that a church that seeks favor with the Roman Empire will necessarily produce a theology that does not bother the Roman Empire: “To put it...simply, the post-Constantinian Church...would not have been able, with a Christology of the Reign, to justify in principle the aberrations it committed, but which were ‘justifiable’ with another Christology, a Christology without Jesus and without the Reign.”¹⁴¹ A Christology of the Reign would have functioned as a roadblock on the path towards the unity of the Roman Empire and Christianity for the same reasons that it led to the execution of Jesus. The ultimacy of the Reign of God threatens the pretended ultimacy of the emperor. One can hear once more the cry of the crowds before Pilate, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king

¹⁴¹ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 415. My translation.

sets himself against the emperor” (John 19:12). Even if Jesus Christ did not claim the same type of political and military authority that a Roman emperor would have claimed, Jesus’ proclamation of the Reign of God with its preferential option for the poor was enough to create a rivalry with Jewish and Roman leaders. Jesus’ style was and remains a threat to imperial style. The style of Jesus’ Reign is “not of this world” (John 18:36) in the sense that it does not conform to the way that power functioned in the Roman Empire. His methods of mercy do not make sense to power brokers. They cannot understand the truth of his kingship (John 18:37-38).

Nevertheless, several church fathers sought to thread a camel through the eye of a needle by unifying that which Jesus Christ separated: Caesar and God (Mark 10:25, 12:17). Describing post-Constantinian Christianity, Sobrino writes, “Everything surrounding the emperor becomes divine: his palace is a sacred place, and refusing to venerate the emperor is sacrilege which, according to Athanasius, can be legitimately punished by death.”¹⁴² Theologians go as far as comparing the emperor with Jesus Christ. Averil Cameron observes, “Comparisons between Christ the king and the earthly ruler are extremely common in fourth-century Christian literature, just as later defenders of images often rested their justification on the respect paid to images of the emperor.”¹⁴³ Bolstered by Church Fathers who saw in the emperor a continuation of the line of the Davidic monarchy through Jesus

¹⁴² SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 460. My translation.

¹⁴³ Averil CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 127.

Christ, the son of David, the Emperor Justinian presented himself at the concluding Eucharist of the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553 as the new Solomon of the new Temple, the Hagia Sophia.¹⁴⁴ Christianity now elevates the images of rulers instead of casting them down from their thrones (Luke 1:52). It has morphed into a political religion that reinforces imperial power. The church's bishop-theologians gradually evolve closer to the emperor and further from the poor, and the church's theology evolves with them: "One doesn't think the same way from the world of power as from the world of oppression."¹⁴⁵ Many Fathers embrace the Reign of Rome at the expense of the Reign of God.

Sobrino's harshly condemns this imperial trend in patristic life and thought, but it remains to be seen whether church historiography confirms Sobrino's claims. Three historiographical points give credibility to his position: the early church's (1) insistence on social order, (2) progressive appeal to and capture of elite culture, and (3) bifurcation of secular and ascetic vocations. First, it is true that Jesus Christ promoted an ultimate unity. At the Last Supper, he prayed to the Father that his disciples would be one with each other and one with him as he is one with the Father (John 17:20-23). Nevertheless, Jesus was a cause for division and recognized himself as such. Simeon tells Mary at the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—

¹⁴⁴ CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, p. 203-204.

¹⁴⁵ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 466-467. My translation.

and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-35). Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus assumes his divisive vocation telling his disciples, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (12:51). Near the end of the Gospel of Luke, the assembly accuses Jesus before Pilate, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place” (23:5). A significant thread of disruptiveness runs through the life of Jesus.

Jesus’ thread of unruliness did not translate well into a Greco-Roman world that placed high value on social harmony. Consequently, one finds that early Christians, especially those close to Roman power, de-emphasized Jesus’ rebellious side in favor of the continued integrity of the Roman Empire. Cameron notes that Clement of Rome (c. 35-99) “presupposes Christian support and acceptance of the prevailing political order when he likens the Christian’s feelings towards God to those of the citizen toward a good ruler.”¹⁴⁶ David Ivan Rankin confirms that Clement “employs a rhetorical commonplace against strife and division, common not only to Roman thought but to all antiquity.”¹⁴⁷ The stability of the Roman order highlighted by Clement took on such a theological importance in the first centuries of the church that the eventual decline of the Roman Empire shook Christians to the core. De Lubac observes that several Church Fathers believed that “the ruin of the Empire could only herald the end of the world: so impressive was the

¹⁴⁶ CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, p. 40-41.

¹⁴⁷ RANKIN, *From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers*, Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 28.

power and majesty of Rome on people's minds at the time.”¹⁴⁸ The Roman Empire adopts a place of ultimacy in the minds of many patristic writers. After all, if the emperor is “appointed by God” as “Tertullian, Theophilus, and Irenaeus”¹⁴⁹ held, then it becomes increasingly difficult for Christians to challenge the imperial authority with the same level of freedom with which Jesus and the early Christian martyrs defied the political leaders of their day. In the post-Constantinian sacralized Roman Empire, Christians who resisted imperial authority risked the same fate as Jesus Christ, execution, though now under political authorities that claim to follow Jesus Christ.

Second, recent scholarship identifies a consistent Christian effort to penetrate the cultural world of the Roman elite that meant a distancing of their theological language from the discourse of Jesus Christ and his core disciples, a carpenter and fishermen. Jesus may have preached “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18), but an influential group of early Christians directed their rhetoric to the rich. In fact, Jared Secord argues that Christianity's arrival at the upper echelons of Roman society sometimes had little to do with the Christian message itself:

Christianity was not always the defining factor in how Christian intellectuals were regarded by imperial authorities and other elite figures in the Roman Empire. Christian intellectuals were also regarded as intellectuals and judged for the ‘culture and philosophy’ that they displayed. In some contexts, they placed more emphasis on culture and philosophy than on Christianity in terms of how they presented themselves. In short, Christian intellectuals often behaved in ways that avoided, deemphasized, or complicated the simple claim of ‘I am a Christian.’

¹⁴⁸ DE LUBAC, *Méditations sur l'Église*, Cerf, Paris, 2003, p. 242. My translation.

¹⁴⁹ RANKIN, *From Clement to Origen*, 143-144.

Rather than marking themselves off from others, they depicted themselves as full participants in the intellectual culture of the Roman Empire and were judged on that basis.¹⁵⁰

Christians' capture of imperial power coincided with an abandonment of St. Paul's presentation of the cross of Christ as "foolishness to Gentiles" who "desire wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). St. Paul writes that not many first century Christians in Corinth "were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1:26). By the fourth century, though, Cameron, in agreement with Secord, reports that "a jump was made," and Christians "were increasingly people of influence and position." Their success was due to "the achievement of an adjustment between [Christian rhetoric] and the traditional rhetoric"¹⁵¹ of elite Roman society. The formulae of Nicaea and Chalcedon exemplify this success. They express the Christian mysteries in Greco-Roman philosophical language, but they do so at the expense of the interests of those who move outside elite circles. The formulae speak to the nobility. Their language is not that of a poor carpenter from Nazareth but that of a rich student from Athens. Their language is not false, but it is alienated from that of the oppressed.

Third, the appearance of a split between diocesan and ascetic Christian leaders in the fourth century demonstrates the extent to which the institutional church adapted to the Roman Empire's structures of power and wealth. Timothy D. Barnes' study of St. Athanasius of Alexandria documents that,

¹⁵⁰ Jared J. SECORD, *Christian Intellectuals and the Roman Empire, from Justin Martyr to Origen*, Penn State University, University Park, 2020, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, p. 121.

though St. Athanasius himself likely came from humble origins, the religious authority of the diocesan clergy was increasingly “vested in local political élites who normally also formed the wealthiest group in their city.”¹⁵² Bishops became the “centre of a web of local patronage”¹⁵³ that sustained the poor. The post-Constantinian diocesan model came to closely resemble Jesus’ condemnatory description of Greek rulers recognized by their subjects as “benefactors” (Luke 22:25). Though bishops were like lords of their dioceses, their authority often ultimately depended on the will of the emperor, who would intervene to resolve disputes between competing pretenders to the episcopacy. This power of the emperor would mean that bishops often aimed to curry favor with the imperial court. Emperors needed the support of Christian bishops to maintain order in their dioceses, and Christian bishops needed the support of emperors to keep them in power in the face of challenges from their rivals. Each had a certain privilege over the other, but each depended on the other. This interpenetration undoubtedly influenced the direction of Christian theological development, especially considering that bishops were the voting members of ecumenical councils. Hugo Rahner reports that a group of Eastern bishops in the fifth century went so far as to assert, “Emperor, God has established you above us bishops, there is no one above you, you reign over all, and that is why you have the right to do what

¹⁵² BARNES, p. 179.

¹⁵³ BARNES, p. 179.

you will.”¹⁵⁴ The degree of submission of the body of bishops to the emperor was so high that “the councils, including the Orthodox councils, addressed him with the title ‘priest-emperor.’”¹⁵⁵ Imperial and ecclesiastical authority became dangerously intertwined, even when it came to formulating doctrines.

Barnes juxtaposes the figure of the Christian bishop to the figure of the Christian holy man: “The holy man acquired status individually through miracles, prophecies, or asceticism, and he typically operated on the margins of society as a patron of poor villagers or as a mediator of conflict in or close to a large metropolis.”¹⁵⁶ He had greater autonomy from the Empire. One might consider the example of St. Anthony of Egypt. Though he himself was in constant dialogue with Rome, St. Athanasius presents St. Anthony as an alternative. He records that St. Anthony’s first reaction to receiving a letter from the imperial family was indifference. St. Anthony told his fellow monks, “Why are you in admiration if an emperor writes to us, for he is a man? Rather, admire that God wrote the Law for men and spoke to us through his own Son.”¹⁵⁷ When the other monks informed him that the imperial family is now Christian, St. Anthony offered his congratulations but urged the imperial family “not to regard present things as important, but rather to remember the judgment to come, and to consider that Christ alone is the true and eternal

¹⁵⁴ Cited in Hugo RAHNER, *L’Église et l’État dans le christianisme primitif*, Cerf, Paris, 1964, p. 171. Original text from 1961. PALLADIUS, *Dialogus de Vita Chrysostomi*, 10 (PG 47, 34). My translation.

¹⁵⁵ H. RAHNER, p. 173. My translation.

¹⁵⁶ BARNES, p. 179.

¹⁵⁷ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, para. 81:3, p. 343.

emperor.”¹⁵⁸ Although Athanasius was exemplary among his fellow bishops for his resistance to the emperor in the name of preserving orthodox Christology, his autonomy as a bishop was not as absolute as that of Anthony. It may be recalled, as Sobrino does, that Athanasius encouraged the emperor’s veneration while opposing some of his decisions.

The research of Cameron, Rankin, and Barnes renders Sobrino’s argument not only plausible but convincing. The early church hierarchy’s move towards the imperial hierarchy constituted a move away from the teaching of Jesus in several key ways. Seeking to appeal to the Roman elite, many Church Fathers blunted Jesus’ divisiveness, spoke in a language increasingly alienated from the language of the poor to which Jesus addressed the good news, and aligned the kingship of Christ with the authority of the emperor. These accommodations correspond with Christological formulae that make room for abstract Hellenistic terminology but minimize the decisions of the Jesus of history, namely the annunciation of the Reign of God, which is also the Reign of the poor. While Sobrino maintains a critical attitude towards these aspects of patristic Christology, he neither fails to acknowledge that many Church Fathers stood up for the poor¹⁵⁹ in their actions and writings nor discards other aspects of the Fathers’ Christology that speak to poor people in search of liberation. Therefore, it is prudent to turn now to Sobrino’s positive references to the Church Fathers.

¹⁵⁸ ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, para. 81:5, p. 343.

¹⁵⁹ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 454. My translation.

iii. The Advantages of Conciliar Patristic Theology According to Sobrino

a. Soteriological Christology

Sobrino follows Rahner in conceiving the Trinity as a “mystery of salvation” and so affirms that “the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and *vice versa*.”¹⁶⁰ The God who saves is God in Godself, so the fact that God saves touches the essence of God’s identity. The incarnation reveals the splendor of this mystery. Jesus Christ, *Savoir*, is Jesus Christ, God. The Second Person of the Trinity comes to earth to save humanity as a human being, but the Second Person does not discontinue being God. Jesus’ disciples who saw and touched him experienced “what was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1). The eternal identity of God, the immanent Trinity, and the human person of Jesus Christ are one by virtue of the incarnation, and the incarnation is for the Trinity’s salvation of humanity, the economic Trinity. Rahner and Sobrino can affirm this doctrine with confidence because the Church Fathers in the Nicene Creed declared faith in the “one Lord Jesus Christ,” who is “true God of true God,” “who for our salvation came down” and “was made man.”¹⁶¹ The Fathers’ choice to define Jesus Christ in this way is a bulwark against many interpretations of the Jesus

¹⁶⁰ Karl RAHNER, “Le traité dogmatique *De Trinitate*,” *Ecrits théologiques*, Volume VIII, Paris, DDB, 1967, p. 120. Original text from 1960. My translation.

¹⁶¹ DENZINGER, “The Nicene Creed,” p. 26.

event that firmly maintain a distance between God and humanity in Jesus Christ's work of salvation. Sobrino writes, "Patristic writers share a fundamental presupposition with the Old and New Testaments; indeed, they radicalize it in response to its opponents. In the presence of Marcionism and Gnosticism, they assert that there is no difference between God the Creator and God the Savior, that creation is good, that it is a work of love and not the imperfect act of a demiurge."¹⁶² The unity of the Nicene Creed is stunning indeed. It is by Jesus Christ, who is God, that "all things were made," and it is this same Jesus Christ who saves.

This unity defined by the Church Fathers at Nicaea is important for Sobrino given that the Latin American masses need salvation, understood as full communion between God and humanity. Manifesting Gorringer's thesis that liberation theologians draw from the patristic *homoousion* and from Origen's instance on the relation between the full humanity of Christ and Christ's capacity to save, Sobrino argues, "Christ's true divinity is necessary so that what is assumed can be saved, and his true humanity is necessary so that what God wants to save can be assumed."¹⁶³ Humanity is incapable of salvation without the intervention of God, yet the saving intervention of God is impossible unless it carries the fullness of humanity. For many Latin American people experiencing the weight of impoverishment, it is evident that God must act for them to survive and thrive in this life and to resurrect to eternal glory in the next. The limitations of humanity are omnipresent. What

¹⁶² SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 431. My translation.

¹⁶³ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 480. My translation.

may be less evident is that God acts as a human being in history to save all of humanity. It may also be less evident that the salvation of God is integrally connected to the incarnation of God. The Nicene Creed acts as a safeguard against a purely spiritual, personal, non-historical salvation. God becomes a human being with a human mind, a human body, and human social relations to save not only the whole person but also the entirety of humanity. Nicaea specifies that the incarnation is “for us men and for our salvation.” The use of the first-person plural highlights the collective dimension. The *telos* of the incarnation is social. Considering these elements of the Nicene Creed in conjunction with patristic teachings on the relation between salvation and incarnation, one can draw the conclusion that God comes to earth in the flesh so that humanity can be saved on the earth in the flesh. God enters time and space to save human society in time and space. The incarnation is the ultimate valorization of the human body and the social body. These bodies are not merely dry bones to be resurrected on the last day. They have significance in history because God came to earth to breathe new life into them in history. God did not wait to the end of time to save. God inserted Godself into the flow of time to make an eternal covenant with humanity in the flesh. Therefore, present human existence for Christians is not inevitably a valley of tears mythologically crowned by a spiritual halo per the Marx’ interpretation of Christian soteriology. On the contrary, as St. Paul makes clear, “now is the acceptable time,” “now is the day of salvation” for the Christian (2 Corinthians 6:2). The Church Fathers understood this present,

historical dimension of soteriology, so they were careful to present salvation alongside the incarnation in the Nicene Creed.

For the oppressed of history, this component of the Nicene Creed is good news. It means that God does not condemn them to a life of suffering. Rather, God wishes to care for them, heal them, and liberate them in the present, in the flesh. Though Sobrino does not mention the story of Lazarus in the Gospel of John in this way, one can use it as an illustrative example. Jesus tells Lazarus' sister, Martha, that her brother "will rise again" (John 11:23). She responds, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (11:24). She does not expect Jesus to resuscitate her brother in history but at the end of history, but such a resuscitation in the present is precisely what Jesus does. He does not wait until the eschaton to resolve suffering and death. He acts now. As the liberation theologian Pedro Trigo contends, Christians should not think that "the creator of this world has made it as a purgatory and then will give us heaven to compensate," that this world is merely "the place of trial," "the great theater."¹⁶⁴ God so loved the world that God entered it. God did not give up on the world, and neither should human beings. An incarnation connected to salvation invites the oppressed and their allies to see that God is re-creating in the present tense and inviting them to be fellow laborers in this mission (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-9). Incarnate salvation implies an active hope. God has come to earth for the salvation of

¹⁶⁴ Pedro TRIGO, "Creación y el mundo material," *Mysterium Liberationis*, Vol. II, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1990, p. 17. My translation.

human beings. It is on earth that human beings can experience the God who saves.

b. Jesus is God, and God is Jesus

Like Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon contain good news for the poor. By specifying that Jesus Christ is “consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity” and “consubstantial with us as regards his humanity” and that one can refer the divine attributes of God to Jesus and the human attributes of Jesus to God, Jesus’ human experiences truly characterize God. Hence, though Ephesus and Chalcedon do not theologize concretely from Jesus’ life choices as Sobrino laments, these councils do give Christians permission to do so. God is born in humble conditions (Luke 2:1-7). Herod’s hunger for power sends God into exile (Matthew 2:1-12). God blesses the poor and assures them that God’s kingdom belongs to them (Luke 6:20). God casts the money changers out of the Temple (John 2:13-22). God heals the sick and befriends the marginalized. According to this logic, the Second Council of Constantinople went so far as to anathematize those who deny that Christ, crucified in the flesh, was one of the Trinity. The life of Jesus is revelatory of God.

Sobrino rejoices in the fact that, because of Ephesus and Chalcedon, when Christians speak of the “actions of Jesus,” they are permitted to

“proceed to affirmations about God in Godself.”¹⁶⁵ Especially decisive for Sobrino are Jesus’ actions, such as those enumerated above, which demonstrate God’s solidarity with and liberation of the suffering poor. Jesus’ preferential option for the poor reveals God’s preferential option for the poor. The story of Jesus is the story of God, so God has a story characterized by service to the suffering. Those who seek to know God must come to know Jesus. When they open the Gospels, they discover a Jesus who puts the poor at the center of his existence. They also discover a Jesus who calls his disciples to do the same. God is this Jesus. God puts the oppressed at the center of his existence and sets out on the mission of their liberation (Luke 4:18). It is essential for the church to avoid forgetting the radicality that the hypostatic union and the communication of idioms entails. Sobrino dares Christians to “retain Chalcedon,” that is, to “remember that it is essentially in Jesus that we encounter God.”¹⁶⁶ God has a human face whose eyes see human wounds, whose ears hear human cries, whose mouth speaks prophetic words condemning human injustice and proclaiming human liberation.

The innovation of Chalcedon ensures that Christian theology does not become the mechanical application of the divine attributes to the person of Jesus. Chalcedon opens a much more creative project: the discernment of the nature of God through the details of the life of Jesus. Put simply, Chalcedon permits an ascending Christology that ventures to theologize from the basis of the human experience that God shares with humanity in Jesus. Sobrino is

¹⁶⁵ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 578. My translation.

¹⁶⁶ SOBRINO, *La foi en Jésus-Christ*, p. 600. My translation.

not the only liberation theologian to acknowledge Christian theology's indebtedness to the Church Fathers whose Christology becomes canonical at Chalcedon. Years before Sobrino's *Christ the Liberator*, Juan Luis Segundo wrote,

What Chalcedon adds by way of a more original contribution is that the process of 'divinizing' Jesus did not come down to first establishing the existence and characteristics of a divine realm and then ushering Jesus of Nazareth into them...The process proposed and crowned by Chalcedon is the opposite: in his limited human history Jesus, interpreted from the standpoint of a centuries-old tradition seeking the meaning of human existence, shows us the Absolute, the ultimate reality, the transcendent datum *par excellence*.¹⁶⁷

Chalcedon's theological method outlined by Segundo is essential for liberation theology. The liberation theologian does not begin with the abstract God of the philosophers or the non-incarnate God of the Jewish Scriptures. The liberation theology begins with the humanity of Jesus Christ, poor and humble, committed to the project of the liberation of the poor and humble. This approach, rendered orthodox by patristic councils, is precisely the approach that is most helpful for those whom Sobrino calls the "victims of history" throughout *Christ the Liberator*. It is in the humanity of Jesus that God shows God's solidarity with them as a victim and God's liberatory plan planted in the heart of history, the Reign of the poor.

¹⁶⁷ Juan Luis SEGUNDO, *The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1987, p. 39-40. Original text in Spanish from 1982. My translation.

Recapitulation

Different from the first two chapters, this chapter has shown that liberation theologians can be critical of the Church Fathers. They sometimes reference patristic writings to demonstrate their deficiencies. Sobrino goes as far as calling into question the sufficiency of Nicaea and Chalcedon, two fundamental Christological formulae developed in the patristic period. His hesitations are not baseless but coincide with recent historical scholarship that signals a link between Christian theological discourse and the church's growing proximity to Roman imperial power in its first few centuries. Similar to the way that Johann Baptist Metz writes of the dangerous memory of the passion of the Christ in the contemporary bourgeois era, Sobrino writes of the dangerous memory of the life of Jesus and the Reign of God in the ancient imperial era. The dangers of Jesus' life and Reign, which cannot but challenge the lifestyles and social arrangements of the Roman elite, fade away, and an increasingly abstract, significantly de-socialized set of interests takes their place. Nevertheless, Sobrino is far from discarding the patristic Christological definitions. He applauds their acknowledgment that God becomes incarnate to save incarnate humanity and that the socially engaged life of Jesus reveals the identity of God. These patristic teachings found Sobrino's liberationist Christology which accentuates the integral salvation of the poor in history, an accentuation to which the life of the Jesus of the synoptic gospels gives witness.

In short, Sobrino's study of a few of the major councils of the patristic period yields both critiques and appropriations. In some cases, he treats the councils as foils. They say little about the life of the historical Jesus and about the Reign of God in contrast to Latin American liberation theology. In other cases, he lauds the councils. They accentuate the soteriological dimension of Christology. God comes into the world to save humanity, and the salvation of humanity entails not only the salvation of the soul but also of the body and of social relations. The Fathers also define Jesus as God, which Sobrino interprets as good news for the poor and for their image of God. Jesus' special concern for the poor reveals God's special concern for the poor. It is not simply that God comes into the world, but that God comes into the world on the side of the poor in particular.

Though I will save a more comprehensive assessment of Sobrino for the final section, I wish to briefly address two critiques of Sobrino here. First, it is important to point out that he limits his scope in significant parts of *Christ the Liberator* to the conciliar documents of the patristic era. This narrow sample is a weakness of his research. The homilies, biblical commentaries, and letters of the Church Fathers fill in many of the gaps that Sobrino identifies in the councils. If he dedicated more attention to these other genres, his study would yield different results. It suffices to read some of the patristic writings cited in my second section on Ellacuría and the dialectics of wealth and poverty to temper the assertion that the Fathers did not sufficiently concentrate on the suffering of the poor.

Second, one might decry Sobrino's unilateral accentuation of the political and material dimensions of the Gospel. To cite one example, he pays little attention to the eschatological, transcendental dimension of the Reign of God and instead stresses its historical, intramundane dimension. To cite another, he largely disregards the religious reasons for the crucifixion and instead dwells on its economic, social, and political causes. In part, one can attribute Sobrino's preference to his Central American context and to his commitment to the perspective of the victims of history. He hopes to provide an account of the Gospel that speaks to those around him who are suffering poverty and other forms of oppression here and now. For them, the promise of a happy afterlife is a necessary-but-insufficient message. They desire real change in history and find in Sobrino's scholarship that Jesus comes into the world to affect the course of history. This message may be new to many Christians who have thought that Christianity did not have much to say about life on earth.

That said, I do not think that Sobrino's concentration on the socioeconomic component of salvation is explainable in terms of his context alone. It also serves as a challenge to Christians for whom poverty is not a daily concern, whether they are in the global North or South. For many such Christians, their principal theological questions have to do with secularization and pluralism, and they may fail to consider in any sustained way the interests specific to the poor masses or the Gospel's economic teachings. Sobrino serves as a prophet to the part of the church that fails to attend to God's preferential option for the poor. His insistence on the struggle against material

poverty is extreme, but his insistence may be justified in our contemporary world of extreme inequality.

Conclusion: Three Challenges to Liberation Theologians and to the Broader Church

In light of this presentation of several ways in which liberation theologians refer to the Church Fathers, one challenge to liberation theologians and two challenges to the broader church emerge. First, I invite contemporary liberation theologians to rise to the challenge of venerating previous generations of Catholic theologians enough to generously study their writings and look to them for inspiration. This study has shown that, when liberation theologians adopt this attitude, they find positions and methods that permit them to situate their work in continuity with tradition. This situatedness gives their theology greater credibility in Catholic theological environments favorably disposed to the rich history of the church. There is no need to make of the past an enemy when it can just as easily be a friend. When Dussel defends liberation theology's appropriation of some aspects of Marxism by appealing to the Fathers' appropriation of some aspects of Platonism, he not only honors the creative synthesis of the Fathers but also gives weight to liberation theology's own creative synthesis. The same is true for Ellacuría who draws from the Fathers to propose a non-Marxist genealogy of his dialectical understanding of wealth and poverty. Sobrino, too, highlights some advantageous aspects of the Christology of the early patristic councils, which define Jesus Christ as consubstantial with the Father and so permit an ascending theology starting from Jesus' lifestyle of solidarity with the oppressed. These theological moves take nothing away from Dussel's,

Ellacuría's, and Sobrino's methodological prioritization of the contemporary reality of suffering people; rather, their references to the Fathers allow them to approach the joy and the pain of the Latin American masses with the support and authority of the Catholic tradition. It is tempting for liberation theologians to discard this tradition for its supposed irrelevance, but this study has shown just how relevant patristic sources can be. Current theologians committed to the emancipation of oppressed people should consider the liberation theologians presented here as a model for their own work in this regard.

Given the extent to which many liberation theologians favorably integrate patristic theology in their writings, Catholics who are skeptical of liberation theology might challenge themselves by recognizing that liberation theology does not solely and systematically employ a hermeneutic of suspicion to church tradition. Mainstream interpreters of liberation theology have for too long emphasized its places of rupture at the expense of its places of continuity. In doing so, they marginalize a theological school that could otherwise find a hermeneutical home within the church's common framework of references. Ellacuría's retrieval of the Fathers' dialectical view of wealth and poverty is exemplary on this point. He chooses to relativize Marx by accentuating traditional Catholic thinkers who preceded Marx by fifteen centuries. Where Ellacuría hopes to serve as a bridge-builder between the Catholic tradition and contemporary social scientists and philosophers who criticize the fact that the wealth of a few means the poverty of many, many detractors of liberation theology build a wall between church tradition and

social critique and place Ellacuría and theologians like him outside the bounds of church tradition. These detractors undoubtedly contributed on the ideological level to Ellacuría's assassination in 1989. A few months before his murder, the Crusade for Peace and Work published a document denouncing the "tiny group of satanic brains led by Ellacuría and a pack of communist hounds"¹⁶⁸ allegedly ruining El Salvador. Ellacuría is careful in his theological writings to distance himself from Marxist doctrine in the places it contradicts church doctrine, notably on the points of atheism and materialism. When he expresses agreement with some aspects of Marxism, he is careful to show how these aspects coincide with or at least do not contradict church tradition. The rest of the church owes to Ellacuría and other liberation theologians the same care and attentiveness in their interpretations of liberationist writings.

Though Ellacuría and others go to great lengths to root their work in church tradition, one cannot simply ignore the disruptive, critical dimension of their thought. Sobrino's critique of Nicaea and Chalcedon illustrates this problem. Primarily, it is essential to consider whether Sobrino's reading of these councils is sufficiently generous and just. The interests of the fourth and fifth century bishops around the Mediterranean basin in the context of an ecumenical council are not the interests of contemporary people experiencing oppression and their theological allies as expressed in the Christological work

¹⁶⁸ Cited in Robert LASSALLE-KLEIN, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 2014, p. 175.

of a single theologian. Perhaps Sobrino is correct to call into question the sphere of interest of the early conciliar fathers and its lack of alignment with the interests of the Jesus of the Gospels; however, this line of questioning only goes so far. Might Sobrino be more effective in reaching those who are skeptical of contemporary critiques of the past if he focuses on the positive elements of Nicaea and Chalcedon and then turns his attention to the insufficiency of these councils today? In this way he could honor the tradition *and* accentuate the need for the contemporary church, even at the magisterial level, to fill in the gaps that Nicaea and Chalcedon leave open.

Another limitation of Sobrino's analysis is his rather one-sided account of the relationship between the Fathers and the Empire. There are patristic figures, including bishops after the Constantinian turn, who denounced the emperor. Hugo Rahner cites several examples in his book on the church and the state in primitive Christianity. One such case is that of St. Hilary of Poitiers, who calls the Emperor Constantius the "Antichrist." Hilary criticizes Constantius for using imperial power to re-establish Arianism, "You write formulas of faith while living against the faith. A stranger to the teaching of piety, you teach only profane things. You distribute episcopal sees to your followers, replacing the good with the bad. You put priests in prison, you deploy your troops to terrorize the Church, you convene councils, you drive faithful Westerners to impiety."¹⁶⁹ The Fathers did not blindly and unanimously follow Caesar's orders after Constantine. Many of them

¹⁶⁹ Cited in H. RAHNER, p. 123. Hilary of Poitiers. *Livre contre l'empereur Constance*, ch. I, 4-7, 10-11, 27. PL 10, 577 s., 580-584, 586-589, 602 s. My translation.

vigorously defended the independence of the church. Some condemned the emperor not only for dogmatic issues, but also for political and military decisions. Saint Ambrose of Milan wrote to Emperor Theodosius, “A massacre has taken place in Thessalonica which, in living memory, has never been equaled; a massacre which I was unable to prevent, but which, with a thousand pleas, I had previously shown you the atrocity of. You yourself, in revoking your orders—too late—were well aware of its gravity. I could not mitigate such a crime.”¹⁷⁰ This example could be useful to liberation theologians. There is an ancient precedent for bishops and theologians to challenge unjust political actions. Romero’s denunciation of military massacres was not the first. Sobrino would do well to develop further this more favorable line that links liberation theology to the Church Fathers. Prophetic patristic authors such as Hilary and Ambrose can inspire contemporary theologians to denounce oppression.

That said, the Church Fathers do not have solid answers to all the challenges facing liberation theologians today. The Church Fathers cannot be expected to articulate the fullness of faith convincingly for the contemporary victims of history, but this is precisely the third challenge facing the church and theologians. The church must allow theologians to innovate, and theologians must have the courage to innovate. Regardless of the appropriateness of some of Sobrino’s admonishments of the Church Fathers and their conciliar formulae, he signals a problem of no small stakes. The

¹⁷⁰ Cited in H. RAHNER, p. 147. Ambrose of Milan. *Lettre confidentielle à l’empereur Théodose*. Letter 51, May 390. *PL* 16, 1160-1164. My translation.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that Catholics profess today includes nothing about the life of Jesus aside from the incarnation and the paschal mystery. Further, the Reign of God appears at the end of the Christological section as if it were a purely eschatological reality. Given these limitations, might the church consider adding a line to the Creed¹⁷¹ between “became man” and “he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate” that summarizes the life of Jesus and his intimate connection to the Reign? The church might consider the following possibility: “He announced the coming of the Reign of God to the poor in word and deed.”¹⁷² This addition does justice to Sobrino’s concerns about the absence of Jesus’ concrete choices, the dissociation between the life of Jesus and the Reign of God, and the dissociation between Jesus’ life and the circumstances of his assassination. It would help Christians to value Jesus’ human choices and to acknowledge the ultimacy of the Reign for Jesus. It would also encourage Christians to reflect on their own words and deeds and on the place of the Reign of God in their lives. If to follow Jesus is to live like Jesus, then it is important for Christians to profess a creed that describes his life.

¹⁷¹ While adding a new line to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed may prove ecumenically difficult, nothing prevents the Roman Catholic Church from drafting new professions of faith. Paul VI, for example, promulgated a “Credo of the People of God” in 1968. PAUL VI, “Solemni Hac Liturgia: Credo of the People of God,” Vatican, 30 June 1968.

¹⁷² This proposal is similar to a phrase in an additional section of the Creed written by Jürgen Moltmann: “to proclaim the reign of God to the poor.” Jürgen MOLTSMANN, *Jésus, le messie de Dieu*, Cerf, Paris, 1993, p. 215. Original text from 1989. My translation.

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