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School of Philosophy and Theology

Liberation at the Crossroads:

Where Divinity and Humanity Embrace

Gregory John Watson

A Dissertation submitted to the School of Philosophy and Theology

at the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle,

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology

(Coursework and Dissertation)

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Abstract

This dissertation critically examines the concerns of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in relation to the methodological presuppositions in the works of Jon Sobrino, SJ. In the context of the poor of El Salvador, Sobrino formulates his Christology through the Jesus of history who preached the liberating praxis of the kingdom of God. By focusing on a low Christology, Sobrino intends to correct that high Christology, often favoured in comfortable places, that tends to ignore the truly historical and kenotic aspects of the mystery of the Incarnation. The study highlights the view that all theology is contextual and hermeneutical, thus the Christ of faith does not exist in a transtemporal vacuum but arises out of the dialectic interplay between revelation and history. When context and historical setting is afforded its rightful place in theological method, then we can understand Sobrino's contention that the Church of the poor is the ecclesial setting for Christology in Latin America, a view which the Congregation rejects. The study also investigates Sobrino's claims that the dogmatic formulas of the early Councils are "dangerous" and offers some plausible suggestions as to why Sobrino uses such strong language. The final issue to be discussed will be Sobrino's contention that the conciliar dogmatics represent a "hellenization of Christianity," a view which the Congregation also rejects. In each of these issues raised by the Congregation, the intention of the study is to illustrate that the positions of the two parties should be viewed as complementary and not mutually exclusive, so that a constructive dialogue

might be set in place and so lead us further into the mystery of the Incarnation.

Declaration of Authorship

This dissertation is the candidate's own work and contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in this or any other institution.

To the best of the candidate's knowledge, this dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the dissertation.

_____ _____

Gregory John Watson Date

Student ID # 20040699

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Introduction

After an examination of the books* Jesus the Liberator *and* Christ the Liberator *by Jon Sobrino, SJ, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith found a number of discrepancies with the faith of the Church and therefore felt it necessary to publish the* Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ *(November 26, 2006). The erroneous propositions identified by the Congregation regard: (1) the methodological presuppositions on which Sobrino bases his theological reflection; (2) the divinity of Jesus Christ; (3) the Incarnation of the Son of God; (4) the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God; (5) the self-consciousness of Jesus, and; (6) the salvific value of Jesus' death. This dissertation will critically examine the concerns of the Congregation regarding the methodological presuppositions underpinning Sobrino's Christology.

The length of the study does not permit an examination of more than one major concern identified by the Congregation, yet given that the issue of method is foundational for theology, then how the theologian proceeds to articulate and deepen the

understanding of the faith will clearly impact upon the other concerns listed by the Congregation. The Christology of Sobrino, which builds upon the seminal works of Gutiérrez and Segundo, argues that it is necessary to return to the figure of the Jesus of history in order to recover what is meant by discipleship of Jesus as "good news." Sobrino proposes a new way to do theology by seeking to illuminate the relationship between salvation in Jesus Christ and the historical struggle for human liberation. As critical reflection on historical praxis, theology is a liberating theology. Throughout this dissertation a major theme that will emerge is the theme of "history" in Sobrino's writings, and the integral role that historical "context" plays in the doing of theology and the confession of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine. The stress on history, it will be argued, serves to counteract what appears to be an excessive stress on the philosophical category of "nature" in the Congregation's writings. Once it is acknowledged that there are **both** ***ontological and historical aspects to the Christological mystery that unfolds "for us", then the positions of Sobrino and the Congregation should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as open to dialogue so as to allow for a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the***

hypostatic union and hence what is meant by Jesus Christ as "Liberator." The title of this study, **Liberation at the Crossroads: Where Divinity and Humanity Embrace*****, is intended to express the view that the mystery of the Incarnation is the ultimate crossroad in the history of salvation, and that a liberating praxis offers a privileged way of entering more fully into this mystery.***

The dissertation will pursue these aims by discussing the following matters. Chapter One will consider the contextual nature of theology and the development of liberation theology as a response to real history and the problems it poses for the faith of the Church. Chapter Two will then critically discuss the Congregation's rejection of Sobrino's view that the Church of the poor, and not the apostolic faith of the Church, is the ecclesial setting for Christology. Finally, Chapter Three will examine the Congregation's rejection of Sobrino's contention that the dogmatic formulas of the early Councils are "dangerous" and that they represent a hellenization of the Christian faith. It is important to appreciate what Sobrino intends by the use of the word "dangerous," and in seeking to determine this the final chapter will treat the key issue of "inculturation" which serves to underscore the genuinely

historical-contextual character of the divine-human encounter.

Chapter One

Liberation Theology as Contextual Crossroad

> If one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished; the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.
> The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly and he is not propitiated for sins by a multitude of sacrifices.
> Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor.
> The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood.
> To take away a neighbour's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood. (Sirach 34:18-22)

The authentic pursuit of Christian discipleship is made evident in every aspect of the life of the follower of Jesus Christ: belief and faith, worship, and action in daily life. The words of Sirach point to the fact that belief and worship are not authentic unless they are accompanied by genuine love of neighbour practised in daily life. In other words, worship of God is an activity that is always done in a specific context wherein God is experienced as saving, healing, nurturing, and liberating. In the New Testament, the confessed belief that Jesus is "Christ" and "Lord" arises out of the realistic narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus which is both received and proclaimed in specific contexts. Theology is contextual because it is done in the concrete context of ***history*** and the problems it poses for faith development. Since liberation theology is contextual, then its history tells how its context has shaped it. Its history speaks to us of its concrete context and the problems to which it has responded in faith. Throughout the history of Latin America we notice key factors which have marked out the

boundaries and qualities of liberation theology. Recognising this, the chapter at hand will consider the following matters, which are essential to appreciating the overall context of liberation theology. Firstly, it will provide a brief political and social history of the context out of which liberation theology arose. Secondly, it will present and discuss some of the significant ecclesial influences that promoted the arrival and development of liberation theology. Thirdly, it will outline the defining theological characteristics of liberation theology and offer some brief observations.

I. Political and Social Context

To begin to understand liberation theology requires that we recognise and appreciate the basic details of the political and social history of its birthplace. The history of the Church in Latin America may be broadly divided into three main stages.[1] Firstly, colonial Christendom (1492-1808) indicates the stage during which the Church existed within a political and social structure pertaining to a capitalist model dependent on Spain and Portugal. Secondly, Christendom in crisis (1808-1950) denotes the stage during which politics and society were marked by a dependence on Anglo-Saxon capitalism and the influence of the industrial revolution. Thirdly, the stage referred to as the church of the common people, or *the people's church,* emerged after 1950.

[1] Enrique Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)" in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, eds Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 77-78.

As the first two stages of the Church's history in Latin America operated within the framework of Christendom they shall be considered together. The framework of Christendom indicates a particular style or type of relationship between the Church, on one hand, and political and civil society, on the other. In this relationship, more often than not, the two hands of Church and civil society were firmly clasped together or, at least, worked in close cooperation. A clearer appreciation of this relationship will be assisted by a brief recognition of the manner in which the Church's presence in the colony began and how that relationship developed during these two stages of colonial Christendom and Christendom in crisis.

When Columbus arrived in 1492 he was not accompanied by any priests. It was not until 1500, with the arrival of a Franciscan mission, that any formal evangelisation of Santo Domingo began. In respect of its missionary task in the new colony, the Church laboured within the cultural context of Spain's colonial policies. Indeed, its missionaries were themselves products of this cultural mindset and its colonial expansion. An important point that illustrates this is the practice of the *encomienda* system.[2] The *encomienda* functioned on two levels: firstly, it provided the colonisers with a means to achieving wealth in this life; and, secondly, it offered them the opportunity to gather spiritual credits for the next life. The *encomienda* system provided large tracts of land, along with its Indian inhabitants, to Spaniards in gratitude for

[2] Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 40.

faithful service to the crown. The recipients (*encomenderos*) used the Indians on this land as forced labour, usually to extract gold and amass personal wealth. In return for this earthly wealth, the *encomenderos* promised to evangelise the Indians within their *encomienda* so that the Indians would die in a state of grace and escape eternal damnation. The further benefit of fulfilling their obligation as evangelisers, and having ensured the salvation of the Indians' souls, was that they increased the likelihood of their own entry into heaven.[3]

It is within this context of the initial years of the colonial history of Latin America that two missionaries, in particular, stand out. Father Antonio de Montesinos stands out because of his response to the *encomienda* system. On the third Sunday of Advent, 1511, he began his sermon to the local *encomenderos* with these words, "A voice cries in the desert." (Jn 1:23) His sermon went on to include these words of admonition to his congregation, "You are all living in mortal sin, and you will live and die in sin because of the cruelty and tyranny with which you abuse these innocent people."[4] Father Bartolome de Las Casas stands out because he was both a priest and an *encomendero* who underwent a profound conversion. He had arrived in Santo Domingo in April, 1514. Las Casas was reflecting upon the words of Sirach 34:22, "A man murders his neighbour if he robs him of his livelihood, sheds his blood if he withholds an employee's wages," and he recognised

[3] Brown, *Liberation Theology*, 40.
[4] Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America. Colonialism to Liberation (1492 – 1979)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 47.

the injustice he was inflicting upon the Indians. He turned his land over to the Governor on 15 August, 1514, and devoted himself to defending the Indians until his death in 1566.[5] Within this *Patronato* system, the Spanish State and government had charge of the Church and its missions.[6]

The collapse of the *Patronato* system indicates the commencement of that stage of the Church's history known as Christendom in crisis. Between 1808 and 1825, Latin America struggled for its independence from Spain. This began a period during which Latin America faced, in a century and a half, the experience of upheaval and change which Europe encountered over six centuries. Enrique Dussel succinctly summarises this 150 years of history:

> Relatively young communities have had to face successively the crises of being new nation-states with growing nationalism, secularisation, the injustices of the colonial system imposed by the great industrialised powers, and the development of pluralistic society. On the other hand, the diverse social groups have had to attempt to recover their coherence, equilibrium, inspiration, and means of government. The Church has been situated amidst these conflicts attempting all the while to defend her ancient privileges to the point of having almost lost them altogether, and has had to begin a vigorous renovation…[7]

The movement for independence was not so much a people's revolt as a struggle by the Creole oligarchy to free itself of Spain's control.[8] The Creole sought a relationship that would benefit them better than the relationship that

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[5] Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 48.

[6] The Church carried out its pastoral relations with its people through the state to such an extent that it was almost impossible to differentiate between the two bodies. Las Casas, prior to his conversion, is a perfect example of how that system functioned. The Church used the state to build churches, send missionaries, protect its wealth, provide education, etc. In return, the state gained the Church's support and, therefore, legitimation. When the colonies won emancipation from Spain and Portugal, colonial Christendom fell into crisis.

[7] Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 73.

[8] Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 99-100. The Creole pertains to the children of the Spanish colonisers and it was they who sought, in the land of their birth, independence from Spain's dominance and influence. The Creole oligarchy exercised control over the Indians and over the "little people" who were not part of its class.

existed with Spain. Therefore, the Creole walked away from Spain, which took gold and silver and offered oil and wine, and walked into a relationship with industrial England, which took raw materials and offered manufactured products. Stated bluntly, the Creole removed themselves from Spanish domination and placed themselves under the domination of industrial England. The Creole continued dominating the original, and other, inhabitants of Latin America. This situation prevailed throughout the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century.[9]

Following the independence movement of Latin America from Spain, the years from 1850 to 1929 introduced a distinct rupture between Church and state. In 1849 Columbia became the first liberal government in Latin America. It was the first government to declare itself both anti-Christian and anti-Catholic. This political phenomenon spread throughout Latin America during the 1850s. It rejected Latin America's past as barbaric and was driven by a liberal oligarchy which replaced the Creole oligarchy of the independence movement. At this point the Church found the challenges of this period too great and, while it tried to cling to the model of Christendom, it began to fade from the picture and fell into crisis.[10]

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[9] Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, 100.

[10] Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, 104-105, offers the following list to describe the Church's crisis: "lack of resources, the absence of bishops, the disappearance of seminaries, the cessation of shipments of priests and books from Spain, and a planned rupture put through systematically by the ruling oligarchy."

It was, however, both a period of deterioration and opportunity for the Church as it was presented with the challenge of regaining its independence from the state so that it might begin to act of its own accord. An example of the Church's opportunity to establish its independence is found within the economic crisis of 1930 when the crash of the US stock market impacted heavily on many countries within Latin America. The Church was able to return to a more positive model and relationship with the populist state. Dussel refers to this positive model of the church as *New Christendom*. He describes it thus, "The church broadened its base because it was able to make contact with groups of workers and marginal people, who were necessary allies of populism."[11] However, during this period of transition, the Church still made use of the state to do such things as promote religious education in public schools. As long as this relationship continued, the Church was still offering legitimisation to the state. Within the context of this political and social upheaval, the Church was moving into a new stage of its history marked by the need to depend upon its own resources, renew its relationship with its people, and reconnect with its own religious freedom.

The third stage in the life of the Latin American Church, the people's church, falls within the political and social context of the 1950s. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, populist governments, especially in Brazil, Argentina and

[11] Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)," 78.

Mexico, inspired nationalism and industrial development.[12] In response to large financial incentives, large foreign interests established themselves throughout Latin America and used local raw materials and cheap labour. The labouring class was exploited and further marginalised while the affluent of Latin America and their foreign partners grew wealthier. As a result, union movements and other popular movements were established and began to mobilise.[13] Leonardo Boff summarises the political and social tension that was produced by this time of transition in Latin America's history:

> This process led to the creation of strong popular movements seeking profound changes in the socio-economic structure of their countries. These movements in turn provoked the rise of military dictatorships, which sought to safeguard or promote the interests of capital, associated with a high level of "national security" achieved through political repression and police control of all public demonstrations.[14]

It was within this context that both Christians and non-Christians collided with the dominant system and moved in search of liberation. This era of political crisis brought about tensions within the Church as some powerful sectors of the hierarchy turned toward comfortable models for the Church in Latin America, while other bishops, priests and religious were branded as suspect for their commitment to the poor.[15]

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[12] Mostly this came about via import substitution which benefited the middle class but disadvantaged the peasantry who were forced into greater rural marginalisation or sprawling urban shantytowns. There was development but it came at a price. The development of Latin American countries was second to that of rich nations and it excluded the vast majority of national populations.

[13] Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 8-9.

[14] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 67.

[15] Roberto Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation" in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology,* eds Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 18.

In the midst of such social and political pressures some churches, such as Brazil, El Salvador and Nicaragua, went in search of a new model. This search brought these churches to abandon their previous commitment to the Christendom model and its relationship with the state as a means of evangelisation. Dussel maintains that this move by the Church led it to redefine its place in civil society and to establish an alliance with the oppressed. The Church could no longer rely on the state to carry out its pastoral tasks and so it had to develop new institutions and methods. The movement of base-level ecclesial communities arose out of this need. The Church's new self-definition meant that it no longer provided the state with legitimacy as in the past. By no longer offering legitimacy to the state's repressive behaviour the Church could win credibility among the oppressed. This came to be one of the distinctive marks of the people's church. Dussel stresses that the church of the common people was not a new model but a reclaimed model, "It is not a different church or a new church; it is simply a new model of the age-old church."[16]

The reclamation of this model was a significant development within the Latin American Church and, for that reason, it is important that the model of the church of the common people is not romanticised. Dussel's understanding of the people's church is witnessed in the early Church that existed prior to the Constantinian Church and its evangelisation of the Roman Empire and its

[16] Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)," 79.

colonies.[17] It was a retrieval of that model of Church that Paul speaks of when writing to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 10:17; 11:26; 12:7, 26-27). The church of the common people indicates, within the complexities of Latin America's social upheaval and unrest, a church that struck out in search of autonomy after having existed in a relationship with the political community which had prevented it from authentic evangelisation in the name of Jesus Christ and participating freely in the work of salvation. The people's church was a renewal of the connection between the common people and their experience of suffering and injustice, and the authoritative message of *justice* preached by the historical Jesus.[18]

Jon Sobrino succinctly expresses the departure point for this relationship by outlining the basic points of consensus in Latin American Christology regarding the historical data of Jesus:

> On the level of *facts* we have Jesus' baptism by John, the initial successes (and perhaps also some conflicts) of his preaching, the choosing and sending out of some followers to preach, increasing threats and persecution, and the passion and death on the cross. On the level of *conduct*, we have activity involving miracles and exorcisms, preaching in parables, critical attitudes to the Law and the Temple, the call to conversion, discipleship and faith in God. On the level of *words*, there are two authoritative *words* of Jesus, "Kingdom" and "*Abba*," and the sayings that justified his condemnation.[19]

This knowledge of Jesus is essential because it is via an appreciation of the life that Jesus lived that the people begin to recognise the life they share in common with Jesus. Through this awareness the people begin to make a

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[17] Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)," 125.
[18] Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)," 122, explains that in order for a sign to be understood there must be a relation between the sign and the people to whom it is given. The sign that is com- prehensible to people in Latin America is justice.
[19] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 61.

connection with Jesus in their present experience of life, which invites them to enter into a fuller relationship with Jesus in a manner that calls them beyond their experience of suffering and oppression. Sobrino explains the importance which the life of Jesus has for the life of the people:

> Jesus' life, seen from its historical end, seems historically very plausible. This conviction is due to the "structural similarity" of situations. We know that in our own day there are thousands of people whose deaths are like Jesus' and the causes of whose deaths – as alleged by their executioners – are similar to the cause alleged against Jesus. These lives that today lead to this type of death have essentially the same structure as that claimed for the life of Jesus: the proclamation of the Kingdom to the poor, defence of the oppressed and confrontation with their oppressors, the proclamation of the God of life and the condemnation of idols.[20]

II. Ecclesial Context

The third stage of the Church in Latin America, the people's church, redefined the Church's place in the political and social landscape of the subcontinent.[21] It is worthwhile noting several significant influences within this stage of the Church's development: the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the Conference of Latin American Bishops (hereafter CELAM) held at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979).

The 1960s heralded a spirit of change within the Church of Latin America. This spirit, which interacted with the political and social turmoil of wider society, awakened within the Church a commitment to the poor. Sociological endeavours awakened people, including those within the Church, to the true

[20] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 61.
[21] Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980)," 78.

causes of underdevelopment and made them realise that the poverty experienced by the Third World was the price it paid for the overabundance being enjoyed by the peoples of the First World. This resulted in calls for national progress and modernisation. New movements, sustained by European theology, began to rise from within the Church. Along with these local movements came a growing desire to do theology in a way that was authentic to the context of Latin America. Boff describes the emergence of a theology of liberation out of the context of a new ecclesial reality and a people awakened to the causes of their poverty:

> The relationship of dependence of the periphery on the centre had to be replaced by a process of breaking away and liberation. So the basis of a theology of development was undermined and the theoretical foundations for a theology of liberation were laid. Its material foundations were provided only when popular movements and Christian groups came together in the struggle for social and political liberation, with the ultimate aim of complete and integral liberation. This was when the objective conditions for an authentic liberation theology came about.[22]

It was during this time that John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and invited the Church to enter into a new dialogue and relationship with the world. The Latin American bishops may have gained the nickname *church of silence,*[23] due to their limited active participation in the Council, but they returned to their respective dioceses aware of the way in which the Council had opened doors and windows through which they could now look for new ways to evangelise within their own ***historical*** contexts.[24] Boff credits the Second Vatican Council with giving Latin American theologians the courage to think about and discuss the pastoral difficulties

[22] Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 68.
[23] Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 7.
[24] Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," 14.

within their countries. In fact he goes further and claims, "The council documents seemed to confirm, reinforce, make official, the stretch of the road that Latin America had already traversed."[25] The Introduction to *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, offers a foundation for contextual and hermeneutical theology when it requires that the concrete reality of people's lives come under critical reflection in the light of faith.[26] In its Introduction, the *Constitution* clearly indicates a new approach to the interaction between Church and the world when it talks about reading "the signs of the times:"

> In every age, the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other.[27]

Such critical reflection on reading the "signs of the times" reminds the Church that the mystery of the Incarnation has to do with the person of the eternal Word entering into time and history in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In keeping with the biblical view of the divine-human relationship, *God is presented by the Council not as a metaphysical entity but as an historical force* who accompanies his people in good times and bad times. The experience of God emerges from within the experience of history as the primary reality (not "nature"), where history is not just a narration of events and happenings but the human situation "as ex-istence, situation, decision-

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[25] Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 11.
[26] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 312.
[27] Vatican II Council, "*Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (hereafter GS)* in *Vatican Council II*: *The Basic Sixteen Documents*. ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), #4.

making, and commitment."[28] What "humanity" is and what "divinity" is should not be conceived in static, metaphysical terms (as suggested by the term "nature"), but dynamically as emerging from history (the human as radically open to Something More or Absolute Mystery, and the divine as gratuitous self-communication to the other).

Penny Lernoux rightly proposes that Vatican II's reference to the Church as the *people of God* is one of the most significant influences on the Church of Latin America.[29] This term was introduced in *Lumen Gentium*, the Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, and it influenced the language and thinking of the entire Council. [30] Lernoux gives particular attention to the way in which this term was used in *Gaudium et Spes*, the final document produced at Vatican II. It speaks of the relationship between the people of God and the discernment of God's presence in the midst of humanity:

> The people of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole world. Impelled by that faith, they try to discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, the needs and the desires which it shares with the rest of humanity today. For faith casts a new light on everything and makes known the full ideal which God has set for humanity, thus guiding the mind towards solutions that are fully human.[31]

Lernoux argues her position based upon the link between the expression *people of God*, which is associated with the Exodus narrative, and Vatican II's desire to emphasise the church as a believing community in search of a

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[28] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1979), 36.
[29] Penny Lernoux, "The Birth of Liberation Theology" in *Expanding the View. Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology*, eds Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 40.
[30] Vatican II Council, "*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (hereafter LG)* in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*. ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), #9.
[31] *GS,* #11.

deeper understanding of the faith in its lived, historical context. Lernoux explains the cultural significance of referring to the church as the people of God and why it would have a particular influence within the church of Latin America:

> When translated into Spanish and Portuguese, however, "people of God" took on an even deeper meaning, for it became Pueblo or Povo de Dios – and pueblo has always been understood as the masses, the poor.
>
> It was from this particular social location – el pueblo – that Gutierrez and other Latin American theologians developed their original vision: a theology grounded in the reality of poverty.[32]

Inspired by the Second Vatican Council, as well as Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, CELAM met in Medellín, Columbia, in August 1968, to reflect on the church's mission in Latin America. The encyclical by Paul VI significantly shaped the Conference inasmuch as it highlighted the need to confront the dehumanising conditions of poverty that undermine human dignity and the common good.[33] The Conference reached the conclusion that it would be best to employ a method that begins with an analysis of a particular situation, continues with a brief theological reflection in the light of the scriptures and Church teaching, and concludes by stating a number of pastoral commitments. The method employed by the Conference indicated a new way of understanding the Church and its mission. Bevans and Shroeder describe this understanding in these words, "The church was not to be

[32] Lernoux, "The Birth of Liberation Theology," 40.

[33] Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Development of Peoples* (Rome: March 26, 1967). In #21, Paul VI speaks of the "rise from poverty," the "elimination of social ills," an awareness of "other people's dignity," and an "active interest in the common good;" and in #44, he speaks of fighting wretched conditions in order that people can "live truly human lives" where "liberty is not an idle word, where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich man at the same banquet table."

centred on itself or on its own concerns, but on its mission in the very concrete world of Latin American reality; mission was conceived not only as the proclamation of the gospel but as a commitment to justice, genuine development and liberation."[34] This new emphasis on the historical process in which people find themselves situated gives rise to what has been called the "hermeneutic circle" in theological reflection on the faith of the Church. Gustavo Gutiérrez speaks of the hermeneutic circle as the interplay between "revelation and history, faith in Christ and the life of a people, eschatology and praxis."[35] The documents of the Medellín Conference adopted this language of liberating praxis which was closely tied to the bishops' reading of the signs of the times:

> The fact that the transformation affecting our continent had made an impact on the whole person appears as a sign and a demand. In fact, we Christians cannot but acknowledge the presence of God, who desires to save the whole person, body and soul.
>
> For all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. God has raised Christ from the dead, and therefore also, all those who believe in him. Christ, actively present in our history, foreshadows his eschatological action not only in the impatient human zeal to reach total redemption, but also in those conquests which, like signs, are accomplished by humankind through action inspired by love.[36]

The final words of this statement, "action inspired by love," are an important qualification that ought to be carefully noted. The action that the bishops speak of is no mere human activity, but action inspired by the Spirit who conforms people to Christ so that they may give witness to the kingdom of God in history.

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[34] Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 312.
[35] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxiii.
[36] Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Introduction to the Final Documents." #5. Cited in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1990), 96.

Keeping this motivation in mind, we may better appreciate the purpose with which the Church was engaging with its concrete context. At the time of the Medellín Conference the dominant thought throughout Latin America was that underdeveloped countries must imitate developed countries if they were to build a better future. Over time it became apparent that the gap that existed between these two groups of countries would never be bridged by such a course of mimicry. This shift in economic and political thinking flowed into theological thinking. Across the board a commitment was embraced that the only way out of underdevelopment was to break free from this system of dependence by breaking the established cycle of poor countries being dependent upon rich countries. Within this dynamic, liberation was established as the new paradigm. This is consistently seen in the documents produced at Medellín.[37]

CELAM held its third conference in Puebla, Mexico, in February, 1979. The declared purpose of this conference was to evaluate the ecclesial process begun at Medellín. Puebla continued the methodology employed at Medellín, which took as its starting-point a reading of the signs of the times in light of the Gospel of Christ. In the Final Document of the Puebla Conference, the bishops declared that the plight of the poor is not casual, but causal.[38] They asserted that poverty "is the product of economic, social, and political situations and structures, although there are also other causes for the state

[37] Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, 115-16.
[38] Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," 5.

of misery."[39] Puebla called the Church's attention to the shocking reality of the suffering poor as the primary or privileged locus (which, note, is not to say exclusive locus) for encountering Jesus Christ:

> Hence the church must look to Christ when it wants to find out what its evangelising activity should be like. The Son of God demonstrated the grandeur of this commitment when he became a human being. For he identified himself with human beings by becoming one of them. He established solidarity with them and took up the situation in which they find themselves – in his birth and in his life, and particularly in his passion and death where poverty found its maximum expression.[40]

This citation clearly shows that for the bishops gathered at the Puebla Conference, the Incarnation is recognised as having a truly historical character, not merely in the sense that the eternal Word became flesh in the womb of Mary, but in the sense that since the Incarnation involves the state of "kenosis" (that of Servant) then it should be seen as progressive and as reaching its zenith on the Cross.[41] What it means for the man Jesus to be the "Son of God" is ultimately revealed in his perfect obedience to the Father unto death, so that a proper understanding of the mystery of humanity and divinity perfectly united in his person must be informed by the history of Jesus that culminates in his Passion, "for us." It is this salvific union of humanity and divinity in the historical drama of the Incarnation that Puebla called the Church to embrace. By doing so, the followers of Christ will be mindful of the need to avoid the tendency to reduce the mystery of the

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[39] The Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, "Puebla Final Document," #29-30. Cited in Oliveros, "Theology of Liberation," 5.

[40] Puebla Final Document #31-39.

[41] Yves Congar, for example, in his *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Volume III (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 169-171, argues for the need to hold together the "ontological" and "historical" elements in the confession of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus is not only the Son by eternal generation; there are also moments in the history of the Incarnate Son when he becomes "Son" in a new way – such as Jesus' baptism and his resurrection and exaltation.

Incarnation "to the verticalism of a disembodied spiritual union with God,"[42] which would constitute an ahistorical approach to the Christ-event.

III. Theological Context

The new atmosphere breathed into the Latin American church in the aftermath of Vatican II created a new and fertile environment for the doing of theology that was particular to Latin America: "When we speak of theology in Latin America, we must speak of the theology of liberation."[43]

At a conference held at Chimbote, Peru, in July 1968, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez presented his unique approach to theology. In his paper presented at Chimbote, Gutiérrez set forth his early thoughts on the key question posed by the emerging theology:

> To state the question of a theology of liberation means, therefore, to ask about the meaning of this work on earth, the work that human beings perform in this world vis-à-vis the faith. In other words, what relationship is there between the construction of this world and salvation?[44]

He continued by explaining the distinctive style which this approach to theology offers in contrast to classical or traditional theology:

> I think it is much more exact to say that we are passing from a theology that concentrated excessively on a God located outside this world to a theology of a God who is present in this world …The theology of liberation means establishing the relationship that exists between human emancipation – in the social, political, and economic orders – and the Kingdom of God.[45]

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[42] Puebla Final Document #329.
[43] Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," 3.
[44] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Towards a Theology of Liberation" (July 1968) in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 65.
[45] Gutiérrez, "Towards a Theology of Liberation," 68-9.

In establishing the foundations for a theology of liberation, Gutiérrez recalled the intimate relationship between creation and salvation portrayed in the Bible: "The religious experience of Israel is above all a history, but a history that is nothing else but the prolongation of the creative act."[46] The history of salvation narrated in the Bible is simply regarded as God's ongoing creative activity, in which case we are required to see creation and salvation as two sides of one and the same theological coin (cf. Ps 136). Gutiérrez, then, insists that God's saving activity is intimately connected with this present world and is manifested in the construction of a present reality that better reflects the saving reality of the Kingdom of God.

In December 1971, Gutiérrez published his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*. In his revised anniversary edition, he describes the authenticity of the development of liberation theology in these words:

> Liberation theology (which is an expression of the right of the poor to think out their own faith) has not been an automatic result of this situation and the changes it has undergone. It represents rather an attempt to accept the invitation of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council and interpret this sign of the times by reflecting on it critically in the light of God's word. This theology should lead us to a serious discernment of the values and limitations of this sign of the times.[47]

Thus, liberation theology for Gutiérrez is a critical approach to doing theology. It is critical because its purpose is to enter into serious discernment of the values and limitations of the situation with which the faithful are confronted. It is not about promoting and pursuing a humanist approach to liberation that involves little more than achieving human revolution in history.

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[46] Gutiérrez, "Towards a Theology of Liberation," 71-2.
[47] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), xxi.

Gutiérrez's book crystallized the work that had gone on in the Latin American Church since Vatican II and refined his original question at the centre of liberation theology: "What relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation?"[48] Beyond providing liberation theology with its key question, Gutiérrez's book offered a thorough exploration and theoretical basis for liberation theology as well as the impetus for its further development and growth. As far as a definition is concerned, Gutiérrez simply defined liberation theology as "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God."[49]

Within the landscape of liberation theology there is a danger, however, of focusing too narrowly on the social dimension of liberation while failing to adequately include other integral dimensions of liberation in Jesus Christ.[50] Gutiérrez expressly acknowledged this danger when he spoke of the need to distinguish three levels or dimensions of liberating grace in Jesus Christ, which the Puebla Conference took up as its own. First, there is liberation from social situations of oppression and marginalization; second, there is the

[48] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 29.
[49] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxix.
[50] This danger, amongst others, was addressed in two *Instructions* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The first was *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (1984) and the second was *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986). Prior to the publication of the 1984 *Instruction*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger published an article, "Liberation Theology," in March 1984, which was received with considerable surprise given its timing. The 1984 *Instruction* criticised "certain forms" of liberation theology for three basic reasons: (1) it reduces faith to politics; (2) it adopts Marxist ideology uncritically and; (3) liberation theology attacks the authority of the Church. The 1986 *Instruction* does not directly deal with liberation theology but deals with liberation in general. Its fundamental idea is that freedom is primarily personal and spiritual and is therefore more fundamental than any earthly experience of liberation. On a positive note, the *Instruction* did recognise liberation as an important theme of Christian theology. In this regard note #3, #60, #68, #69, #75 and #79.

element of personal transformation by which people live with inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude; and, finally, there is liberation from human sin, which attacks the heart of all servitude.[51] These interrelated levels of liberation in Jesus Christ make it clear that Gutiérrez's thought is governed primarily by theological analysis (not social or philosophical analysis), for only liberation from sin is able to get to the very source of social injustice and other forms of human oppression, and lead to reconciliation with the living God and our fellow human beings. A good summary-statement of what Gutiérrez understands by liberation theology is as follows:

> It is for all these reasons that the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind – gathered into *ecclesia* – which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open – in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society – to the gift of the Kingdom of God.[52]

A few years after Gutiérrez's foundational work, Juan Luis Segundo published his important work *The Liberation of Theology* in which he seeks to take Gutiérrez's project a step further by focusing more fully on "methodology" in theology, rather than on the content of theology and the theme of liberation.[53] Segundo criticises what he calls "autonomous"

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[51] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxviii.
[52] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 12.
[53] Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976). The reversal of the order of the two nouns in the title, when compared to Gutiérrez's title, is clearly significant. He was concerned to develop more fully the methodology of liberation theology.

theology, by which he means a theology that regards itself as independent of the current sciences (e.g. sociology and politics) that deal with the *present* real-life issues that people are facing in their historical situation.[54] On the basis of the prevalence of autonomous theology, Segundo proceeds to set forth his own understanding of the "hermeneutic circle."[55]

In addition to the efforts of Gutiérrez and Segundo, Jon Sobrino has made a substantial contribution to liberation theology in the area of Christology, which began with his *Christology at the Crossroads*. His motivating question is, "What did Jesus try to do?" He begins with the historical Jesus and focuses on the elements of Christology that serve to constitute a paradigm of liberation. Central to this process is the emphasis Sobrino places on Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, which is intended to direct us to the realisation that "our history has absolute importance and that it is only through history that we can envision and arrive at the absolute."[56] This

[54] Segundo is critical of a theologian as progressive as Schillebeeckx, for example, for thinking that theology can be conducted independently of "the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day" – *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

[55] The hermeneutic circle will be referred to in Chapter 2. Segundo explains that the hermeneutic circle involves interpreting the word of God anew in the light of present historical conditions, striving to transform reality, and reinterpreting the word of God again. Via this process of "suspicion" ideological elements that have come to mask the authentic message of the gospel, are removed. In his book he outlines four decisive factors in this methodology. Segundo, *The Theology of Liberation*, 7-8. For further reading see John Wilcken, "To Liberate Theology: Pursuing Segundo's Project in an Australian Context," *Pacifica* 17/1 (2004), 55-70.

[56] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), xviii. Sobrino develops his Christology as ecclesial, historical, and Trinitarian (xx). (1) It is ecclesial because it follows the approach of the New Testament and considers Christ from the context of the people's own situation and activity (xxi); (2) it is historical because if Christology is to profess that Jesus is the Christ, its starting point is the affirmation that Christ is the Jesus of history (xxiii), and; (3) it is Trinitarian because Christology cannot be done except within the framework of the Trinitarian reality of God which is the Christian

historical aspect of Christology was further developed in Sobrino's work entitled *The True Church and the Poor*.[57] Once again his methodology follows a study of Christology that begins with the New Testament and gradually moves to the revelation of Jesus' divinity – from the Jesus of Nazareth to the pre-existent Christ.[58] It is his intention to use this methodology and approach "to foster a clear vision and bold courage in Christians who follow Jesus."[59]

We see clearly in these early works of Sobrino a desire and commitment to connect the believing community with Jesus Christ in ways that ground their belief in the concrete context of their lived experience and which draws upon Jesus as he lived his life in his historical situation, so as to render God present in our midst and proclaim the Good News. Sobrino sums up this desire in these words: "The Christology of liberation does not intend to 'reduce' Christ, but to show how, from a point of departure in Jesus, the mystery of God and the human being, whose supreme expression in Christ himself, gradually – and scandalously and salvifically – unfolds."[60]

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expression of the hermeneutic circle required for any theological reflection and thus the most important contribution of liberation theology to theology in general (xxv).

[57] Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981).

[58] Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, x.

[59] Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, xvi.

[60] Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 10.

IV. Conclusion: History as Theology's Indispensable Context

The profound conversion of Fr Bartolome de Las Casas, on hearing the words of Sirach, began the first whisper of liberation theology, which gathered strength and voice throughout the centuries of colonisation and conquest, until it reached maturity as the clearly spoken response to the signs of the times in the context of Latin America. This growing whisper endured a muffled existence throughout the Church's adopted model of Christendom, which was adopted during the colonial and independence eras of Latin America's history. By the 1950s New Christendom had arrived and the Church recognised its need to break free of the manipulative and silencing influence of the state so that it might take up the challenge of reclaiming its independent voice and freely proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church's newfound religious freedom renewed its relationship with the common people and welcomed a new stage of history, the people's church. This drew the Church into an alliance with the oppressed, in which it rediscovered the voice of Jesus Christ and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. This rediscovery coincided with the Second Vatican Council and its call for the Church to enter into a new dialogue with the world in which it would read the signs of the times. The Church of Latin America recognised the need to proclaim, in its own particular situation, the mystery of the Word made flesh. At Medellín and Puebla the Church of Latin America saw the face of Jesus Christ in its suffering poor. Thus, the rejuvenation of theology in Latin America had commenced.

Within this context, Gutiérrez and Segundo set forth the key questions and elaborated the method of liberation theology. This critical approach to doing theology asks the central question: What relation is there between salvation in Christ and the historical process of human liberation? In responding to this question, liberation theology embraces the biblical view of God as historical force (not as a static, metaphysical entity), that is, as a "living" God who is zealous for the oppressed and poor in particular. Liberation theology is a new way of giving voice to the whisper that was begun by Las Casas. It is a voice that boldly confesses Christ, fully human and fully divine, and proclaims in the concrete situation of history the Kingdom of God as the Kingdom of "justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

Chapter Two

Entering the Crossroad

> This book has been written in the middle of war, of threats, of conflict and persecution, producing innumerable emergencies requiring an immediate response, and therefore innumerable interruptions to the work schedule. The murder-martyrdom of my brother Jesuits, of Julia Elba and Celina Ramos, left my heart frozen and virtually empty. But this is not the whole, or even the major significance of this book being written in El Salvador.
>
> The reality of this country has made me think a lot, and has helped me to think about Jesus Christ. This is why I began this introduction by asking about the most appropriate title: Jesus liberator or crucified. In any case, so much tragedy and so much hope, so much sin and so much grace provide a powerful hermeneutical backdrop for understanding Christ and give the gospel the taste of reality.
>
> The challenge posed by the situation in El Salvador does not render Christology superfluous, but makes it all the more necessary to put all one's intellect into elaborating a Christology that will help the resurrection of the Salvadorean people. But I also honestly believe – although the only argument I can put forward is the vulnerable one of reality – that this reality itself clarifies what divinity is and what humanity is, and the Christ who brings the two together.[61]

These words make it abundantly clear that Jon Sobrino has been powerfully influenced by his life in El Salvador. This has flowed into his Christology which he views through the hermeneutical lens of tragedy and hope, sin and grace. The result gives witness to the way in which the concrete context of history liberates our understanding of what humanity is and what divinity is, and recognises the two united in the person of Jesus Christ. With such a powerful and genuine commitment to his faith in Jesus Christ, it is hard to believe that Sobrino is deliberately challenging the apostolic faith of the Church. The aim of this chapter, therefore, will be to critically discuss a

[61] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 8.

possible point of dialogue between the apostolic faith, as promoted by the CDF, and the social setting, as highlighted in the two Christological works of Sobrino. This aim will be pursued by considering the following matters: firstly, the concerns raised in the *Notification* regarding "Methodological Presuppositions" will be highlighted; secondly, Sobrino's methodology, which he elaborates in *Jesus the Liberator,* will be presented, so as to place the CDF's statements in the broader context of Sobrino's work; and, thirdly, the responses of theologians in reaction to the *Notification* will be considered to gauge the theological world's assessment of the document.

I. Marking the Boundaries: The Notification

The *Notification*, under the heading "Methodological Presuppositions," makes the following observations regarding Sobrino's methodology:

> In his book *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, Father Sobrino affirms: "Latin American Christology…identifies its setting, in the sense of a real situation, as the poor of this world, and this situation is what must be present in and permeate any particular setting in which Christology is done" (*Jesus the Liberator*, 28). Further, "the poor in the community question Christological faith and give it its fundamental direction" (Ibidem, 30), and "the Church of the poor…is the ecclesial setting of Christology because it is a world shaped by the poor" (Ibidem, 31). "The social setting is thus the most crucial for the faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of Christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break" (Ibidem).[62]

Having selected these points, the *Notification* continues with a relatively brief explanation as to why each point deserves scrutiny. It begins by affirming Sobrino's preoccupation with the poor as admirable but then adds, "…the Church of the poor assumes the fundamental position which properly

[62] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J.* (Rome, 26 November, 2006), #2.

belongs to the faith of the Church. It is only in this ecclesial faith that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological setting."[63] For the CDF it is necessary that the ecclesial foundation of Christology is found in the "apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations," rather than identified with "the Church of the poor."[64] The CDF invites theologians to remember that theology is the science of the faith and that "other points of departure for theological work run the risk of arbitrariness and end in a misrepresentation of the same faith."[65]

II. Revising the Boundaries: Sobrino's Methodology

The *Notification* presents its concerns with Sobrino's methodology via four relatively brief excerpts from three pages of *Jesus the Liberator*. These excerpts are taken from Chapter Two, "The Ecclesial and Social Setting of Christology." The selected quotations are presented out of context which runs the risk of misrepresenting the author's intention. Therefore, it is proper that we should consider more fully what it is that Sobrino presents by way of methodology. This will be done by considering the first two chapters of *Jesus the Liberator*.

In Chapter One, "A New Image and a New Faith in Christ," Sobrino refers to the history of Latin America and claims that faith in Christ has survived over

[63] *Notification* #2.
[64] *Notification* #2.
[65] *Notification* #2.

the centuries without establishing a specifically Latin American Christology. He claims that a Christology has survived which is based on the dogmatic formulas that stressed the divinity of Christ over his real and lived humanity.[66] Sobrino writes of the popular appreciation of Christ in Latin America, which provides a contrast to this traditional image of Christ:

> From the beginning the defeated Indians who accepted Christ did so in a particular way. They did not adopt him in a syncretistic way, but, of the Christ brought by the conquerors they adopted precisely what made them most like him: a Christ who had himself been annihilated and conquered. In this suffering Christ they recognized themselves, and from him they learned patience and resignation to enable them to survive with minimum of feeling on the cross that was laid on them. What popular religion did down through the centuries, consciously or unconsciously, was to reinterpret the divinity of Christ (and the closeness to God of the Virgin and the saints) as a symbol of the ultimate redoubt of power in the face of its impotence, but what it really sought was consolation in its desolation. Until today the Christ of the poor masses of Latin America is the suffering Christ, with the result that Holy Week is the most important religious occasion of the year, and within that Good Friday, and within that the laying of Christ in the tomb.[67]

The suffering Christ, and the people's devotion to him, has given birth to a new expression of faith in Latin America. The traditional image of the suffering Christ, with whom the poor identified so as to be *consoled*, has given way to an image of Christ as a symbol of *protest* against suffering: a symbol of liberation. Sobrino highlights the significance of this popular identification, "that this new image of Christ exists is what we may call the most important Christological fact in Latin America, a real 'sign of the times'."[68] Sobrino develops the importance of Jesus as liberator in his methodology and speaks of Christology as it fits within the relationship between the local and universal Church:

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[66] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 11.
[67] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 11-12.
[68] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 12.

> As a general justification of this choice, let me say that this image better conveys the relevance of Christ for a continent of oppression because it is "liberating," and better recovers the identity of Christ – without losing his totality – because it directs us to "Jesus of Nazareth." And in this historic coincidence of relevance and identity, Latin American Christology differs from others, produced in the First World, whose underlying problem is precisely to unify the two. Walter Kasper's words at the beginning of his Christology speak volumes: "If the Church worries about identity, it risks losing its relevance; if, on the other hand, it struggles for relevance, it may forfeit its identity." Latin American Christology, in contrast, offers a new real image that unifies both.[69]

In the second chapter of *Jesus the Liberator* we find the excerpts presented in the *Notification*. In this chapter, "The Ecclesial and Social Setting of Christology," Sobrino considers the correlation between Christology and lived faith and the way this highlights the influence that historical setting has in the development of Christology. Sobrino introduces this dialectic:

> In dealing with its object, Jesus Christ, Christology has to take account of two fundamental things. The first and more obvious is the data the *past* has given us about Christ, that is, *texts* in which revelation has been expressed. The second, which receives less attention, is the *reality* of Christ in the *present*, that is, his presence now in history, which is the correlative of the real faith in Christ. On this view, the ideal setting for doing Christology would be the one where the sources for the past can best be understood and where the presence of Christ and the reality of faith in him can best be grasped.[70]

Sobrino's words indicate a balanced appreciation of the dialectic that exists between the faith of the Church, as transmitted via its authoritative texts, and the faith of the Church as it is encountered and expressed in its current setting. Sobrino's methodology recognises and respects the interplay between text and setting, past and present. The final line in the above quotation clearly indicates Sobrino's intention to do proper Christology rather than promote a particular setting for the sake of that setting alone. Setting is influential, but it is no more important than the other influential components

[69] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 12.
[70] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23.

in the theological process. He states, "Christology's specific sources are God's revelation, embodied in texts from the past, the New Testament in particular and its authoritative interpretation by the Magisterium."[71] Furthermore, he wisely acknowledges the manipulative role that setting can play in the interpretation of texts and that this must be monitored:

> The conclusion as it affects Christology is that one setting is not the same as another for grasping what the New Testament writings in general and the Gospels in particular say about Jesus. Both the image of Christ the liberator and the alienating images analysed previously have been based on readings of the texts of revelation, and the fundamental reason for the different readings was the place from which they were made.[72]

Sobrino refers to the Second Vatican Council and its use of the "signs of the times"[73] to support his methodology. He recognises two meanings in this term. Firstly, it has a "historical-pastoral" meaning which indicates events which characterise a period. The second meaning is "historical-theologal" which indicates authentic signs of God's presence and purpose.[74] Sobrino believes it is the theology of Latin America that truly attains the historical-theologal. To illustrate these authentic signs he offers the example of Archbishop Oscar Romero who declared to a group of terrified peasants after a massacre, "You are the image of the pierced God." [75] These people are historical-theologal signs of the times – they are the presence of Christ in a particular situation.

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[71] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23.
[72] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 24.
[73] *GS* #4.
[74] Cf. *GS* #11.
[75] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 26.

Sobrino's view of the setting of theology for Latin American Christology is clearly set forth in the following text:

> For some Christologies the setting of theology is basically texts, although they have to be read in a physical place and take into account the new demands of the situation, the signs of the times in the historical-pastoral sense. For Latin American Christology the setting of theology is first and foremost something real, a particular historical situation in which God and Christ are believed to be continuing to make themselves present; this is therefore a theologal setting rather than a theological setting, a setting from which the texts of the past can be re-read more adequately.[76]

Setting for Sobrino is the location in which Christology expresses itself and allows itself to be affected, questioned and enlightened.[77] It is at this point in the chapter that the *Notification* identifies its first problem with Sobrino. It is worth noting what Sobrino writes prior to the excerpt selected by the CDF:

> To decide what this real place is, let us apply to Christology the graphic words of José Miranda: "The question is not whether someone is seeking God or not, but whether he is seeking him where God himself said that he is." The setting does not invent the content, but away from this setting it will be difficult to find him and to read adequately the texts about him. Going to this setting, remaining in it and allowing oneself to be affected by it, is essential to Christology.[78]

The *Notification* selects these words by Sobrino which immediately follow the above paragraph:

> Latin American Christology – and specifically as Christology – identifies its setting, in the sense of a real situation, as the poor of this world, and this situation is what must be present in and permeate any particular setting in which Christology is done.[79]

Identifying a setting is essential for Christology. This is not unique to Sobrino, nor to theology in Latin America, but has been an integral part of theology throughout history. What is different is that the setting with which Latin American Christology identifies is the suffering poor, for they constitute the real "place" where Christ is encountered and where the Gospel texts

[76] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 27.
[77] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 27.
[78] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 28.
[79] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 28.

about him can be read more adequately by taking on real meaning and significance in their historical situation. For Sobrino, the suffering poor "constitute the supreme, scandalous, prophetic and apocalyptic presence of the Christian God."[80]

Sobrino introduces the ecclesial setting of Christology as the church of the poor. He clearly recognises the fundamental interpretive role of the Church when he writes, "The church is a real setting for Christology because the texts about Christ are preserved and transmitted in the church, and the church interprets them authoritatively to preserve their fundamental truth."[81] For Sobrino, the foundation of Christology is primarily ecclesial; Christology is always carried out within a community of faith which makes Christ really present in history, and which is "the primary agent in reformulating its faith, learning to express and formulate it so that it constantly reveals more of itself."[82]

This primary ecclesial reality manifests itself in a very clear and particular manner in Latin America, in the reality of the poor: "When the church and the poor are brought into an essential relationship, then we get the church of the poor, and the church becomes the ecclesial setting for Latin American

[80] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 28.
[81] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 28-29. Sobrino speaks of "secondary ecclesiality" to indicate the church as the institution which guards the deposit of faith and guarantees truth, and he speaks of "primary ecclesiality" to indicate the community's act of faith in Christ, which makes real and present Christ in history.
[82] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29-30.

Christology."[83] The church of the poor, as disciples of Jesus, leads us to discover anew Jesus' option for the poor. The key characteristic of the church of the poor is that it looks and acts like Jesus by highlighting Jesus' option for the poor and in doing so it helps Christology to come to know Jesus better. There is a communal significance in this and there is a solidarity, mutuality and dialectic relationship established between the poor and non-poor. It is not one or the other or one over the other; it is a relationship into which both are invited to fully participate. Sobrino expresses this in these words:

> Then, and at the level of content, since the poor are those to whom Jesus' mission was primarily directed, they ask the fundamental questions of faith and do so with power to move and activate the whole community in the process of "learning to learn" what Christ is. Because they are God's preferred, and because of the difference between their faith and the faith of the non-poor, the poor, within the faith community, question Christological faith and give it its fundamental direction.[84]

The *Notification* only cites part of this final sentence. This fails to acknowledge that Sobrino recognises that the poor exist within the context of the whole Church. This obscures his methodology. Similarly, the first sentence of the following text is cited by the *Notification*:

> This church of the poor, then, is the ecclesial setting for Christology because it is a world shaped by the poor. But I want to say that, even on the level of secondary ecclesiality, the church of the poor has brought forth new things from the "deposit" of faith, and at Medellín and Puebla it reformulated the reality of Christ from the point of view of the poor.[85]

As was evident in the previous quotation, Sobrino acknowledges and respects the fundamental place that faith and tradition hold in the doing of theology within the believing community. Equally, he acknowledges the

[83] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 30.
[84] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 30.
[85] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 31.

dynamic role of faith within the Church and the theological process. This dynamic interaction reminds us that theologians do not live in the clouds and that no Christology can be utterly neutral, whether it is done in the midst of suffering in El Salvador or behind the secure walls of Vatican City:

> In simple terms, believing in Christ is something done, in the last resort, in the real world; its most difficult challenges come from the real world and it is accepted in confrontation with the real world. A particular church situation may encourage or discourage acceptance of Christ, but acceptance that Christ is the revelation of the divine and the human, or rejection of this claim, is something that takes place in the real world and is encouraged or discouraged by this. The social setting is thus the most crucial to faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of Christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break.[86]

The social setting as the "epistemological break" directs us to consider truth as transformation (performative), as distinct from the traditional model of truth as disclosure.[87] This is important in seeking to promote a dialogue between the *Notification* and Sobrino because it assists our understanding of

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[86] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 31.

[87] Dermot A. Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1984), 68. Lane notes that while these two ways of approaching truth may be different, they are complementary and both assist our understanding of the world and our arrival at knowledge. N. Lobkowicz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) is an important work in understanding Lane's argument for the complementary nature of these two approaches to truth. Lobkowicz explains the difference between Aristotle's three kinds of knowledge: *theoria* (contemplative life), *praxis* (practical life) and *poiesis* (productive life) and that it was Aristotle's intention to overcome the Platonic idea of pure philosophy devoid from life (p. 9ff.). Lane explains, drawing upon Lobkowicz, that Aristotle philosophizes out of wonder and awe and believes that truth is discovered in order and rationality. Hegel and Marx, on the other hand, philosophize out of unhappiness and dissatisfaction and believe that everything needs to be transfigured, transformed and revolutionized (p. 68). Aristotle, therefore, holds a contemplative view of knowledge which is gained by bringing the intellect into line with the natural order. This philosophy views truth as disclosure. Marx holds the contrasting position which believes the world is not as it should be and requires change through revolutionary praxis. This views truth as transformation. Responding to these two positions, Lane argues that the transformative model and the traditional model of truth as disclosure should be seen as complementary models. He recognizes this in the person of Jesus, "The truth revealed in Jesus is at one and the same time a moment of disclosure and of transformation… the disclosure of truth involves transformation and the truth that emerges in transformation comes as disclosure" (p. 74).

the relationship between the two theological approaches employed by these participants. Dermot Lane, for instance, in *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation*, promotes the value of a dialogue between classical theology and praxis theology. This has something of value to add to our aim of proposing a point of dialogue between the *Notification* and Sobrino.

Classical theology concerns itself with the theoretical interpretation of texts from scripture and tradition.[88] Its task is to support the believing community in safeguarding the integrity of the received tradition. Classical theology is often criticised for neglecting the place of praxis within faith, with the result that the social reality is left untouched by the liberating Gospel of Christ. Lane, however, points out that the Christian tradition "is the outcome of the praxis of the faith of the community... [it] is always a living tradition supported by the activity of faith. To this extent it is misleading to suggest that classical theology ignores the praxis of faith."[89] Indeed, it must be conceded that classical theology did bear tangible fruit by way of charitable deeds and corporal works of mercy. For this reason, Lane stresses that, "This practical character of the faith of classical theology, as active response to the grace of God mediated by the Christian community and as source of individual acts of

[88] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 125. Lonergan provides an accessible introduction to specialization in Chapter 5. He considers the need for specialization within theology to prevent confusion in the theological process. He speaks of specialization as "dynamic unity" and "a unity of interdependent parts, each adjusting to changes in the others." This interaction functions within the "larger context of Christian living, and Christian living within the still larger process of human history" (p. 144).
[89] Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology*, 69.

charity, must be acknowledged before any fruitful dialogue can take place between classical theology and contemporary praxis-oriented theologies."[90]

Already it is apparent that there is far more to the meeting of classical theology and praxis-theology than mere conflict. Lane, in fact, is introducing a far richer and alternative view that begins to recognise the potential dialogue that is offered as these two theological approaches encounter one another in a dialectical fashion. The dialectic aims at a comprehensive viewpoint.[91] It is, therefore, important to appreciate that the inherent differences in the approaches can cause problems if the different worlds in which they operate are ignored:

> In the pre-scientific world of classical theology the quality of social existence was understood as something given by nature, determined by history and fixed by law. As a result the practical activity of faith was not directed to the transformation of the social structure of human existence, which was understood to be fixed in the first instance. Acts of charity inspired by faith were performed principally by individuals and directed towards individuals in need without much attention to structural change through corporate action and its transformative effects. Thus the criticism by praxis-theology that classical theology left the social structure of existence untouched and therefore unaltered is largely true though perhaps historically unfair. It is true in the sense that the individual acts of charity did not and could not intend or attempt change in the social structures. It is unfair in the sense that such change was not a possible option in the pre-enlightenment period.[92]

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[90] Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology,* 69. Further reading in praxis-theology is provided by Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity With Victims* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982) who considers the theory-praxis relationship and offers a constructive framework, via five models, by way of explanation (pp. 125-41). David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981) provides a discussion of the distinction between the classical understanding of praxis and the understanding developed by Hegel and Marx (pp. 69-79).

[91] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 129. Lonergan explains that dialectic "seeks some single base from which it can proceed to an understanding of the character, the oppositions, and the relations of the many viewpoints exhibited in conflicting Christian movements, their conflicting histories, and their conflicting interpretations" (p. 129). An extensive presentation of dialectic is provided in Chapter 10 of *Method in Theology*.

[92] Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology*, 70-71.

Lane believes that praxis-theology calls the Christian community to a new responsibility for the shape of the world in which we live, a responsibility that is demanded by the vision of the Gospel of Christ being fully lived out in concrete history.[93] We must appreciate that praxis-theology is concerned not merely with the transformation of the individual person (liberation from personal sin), but also with the transformation of societal structures that dehumanise masses of people (liberation from structural sin).[94] The social situation is no longer seen today as it was by classical theology, something given and determined; rather, it is seen as a reality that must be changed in order to better reflect the ultimate reality of the kingdom of God as preached by Christ. To advance the dialectic relationship into which classical theology and praxis-theology are invited, it is necessary to highlight humanity's invitation to salvation in Christ which is at the heart of both theological approaches. This marks the crossroad at which Sobrino and the CDF encounter each other, and in order for this meeting to be fruitful it is important to stress that praxis-theology does not consider the partial experiences of liberation that are achieved by humans as equal to the fullness of salvation offered in Christ. Praxis theology's insistence that liberating salvation comes from God and is effected ultimately by God, is a fundamental tenet that is to be found in Gutiérrez's seminal work on the

[93] This understanding of praxis theology, it is worth noting, is congruent with Pope John Paul II's assertion that, "A faith that does not become culture has not been fully lived out" – this will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this study.

[94] Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology,* 72. It is worth noting how this view is closely related to Pope Paul VI's notion of the "evangelization of culture," which will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this study.

development of liberation theology.[95] What is stressed, however, is that the disciples of Christ are called to partner the history of liberating salvation "in Christ," which involves increased responsibility for the world.

III. Dialogue at the Crossroad

We have presented two of the concerns raised in the *Notification*. First, Sobrino's claim that the setting for Latin American Christology is the poor and the church of the poor causes concern inasmuch as this claim fails to properly acknowledge the apostolic faith of the Church as the foundation of Christology, as the proper epistemological setting. Second, the CDF objects to Sobrino's claim that the social setting is the most crucial for shaping Christology, because such a claim allows for other points of departure which are inferior to the apostolic faith of the Church. These two concerns will be considered further by including the responses and commentaries of other theologians.[96] It is the intention in the following pages to use these responses as a way of seeking constructive dialogue between Sobrino and the *Notification*, so that we might not fall into the allure of simply labelling certain positions as right or wrong.

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[95] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 85. The author states that it is Jesus Christ, and not the efforts of human beings, that is at the centre of God's salvific design: "Salvation – the communion of human beings with God and among themselves – is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fulfillment in Christ" (p. 85).

[96] To date, there have been only two significant theological responses to the *Notification*: Joseph Owens, SJ, (Trans.), *Commentary on the "Notification" Regarding Jon Sobrino* (Barcelona, September 2007), and; José Maria Vigil (Org.), *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (15 May, 2007).

i. General Responses

The reaction to the *Notification* has been mixed. In general, though, it would be fair to say that the *Notification* has caused a degree of anxiety amongst theologians, because it has raised questions regarding the style of interaction and approach that the CDF may be choosing to adopt in its future dealings with theologians. Notwithstanding this, these same theologians do acknowledge that there are some valuable lessons to be learned in the encounter between the CDF and Sobrino. A number of themes have surfaced in the responses given by theologians to the *Notification*: (1) It is an occasion for more hope than despair; (2) it is not above criticism itself, and; (3) it highlights the nature and possible future direction of theological work and discussion with the Magisterium of the Church. Each of these responses will now be discussed briefly to better gauge the reaction of the theological world to the *Notification*.

Firstly, the *Notification* has not been received with utter despair or negativity. A comment that often appears is the observation that the *Notification* is not a final condemnation. Pedro Trigo is representative of this group of theologians: "I first want to positively comment that this is a notification, not a condemnation. That is to say, it notifies the faithful on certain aspects, but it does not take any measures against the author. This is a very positive step, one we hope is maintained."[97] Luis Arturo Garcia Dávalos lends his support

[97] Pedro Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 295.

to this view when he says that the points raised in the *Notification* are "an invitation to deepen our understanding of Christology from a Latin American perspective, in order to bring to the forefront its reason for being."[98] As acknowledged by these theologians, the *Notification* offers an invitation to further dialogue, rather than an end to theological discussion.

Secondly, some see the *Notification* as not being above criticism. Jung Mo Sung, for example, refers to the *Notification's* ambiguous style of expression and methodology as an indication that it is not to be taken as a condemnation:

> What attracts attention in this document is the recurrence of expressions of this type: "although the author affirms that… the lack of due attention that he pays to them gives rise to concrete problems"; "Father Sobrino does not deny the divinity of Jesus… nevertheless he fails to affirm Jesus' divinity with sufficient clarity…"; "the author certainly affirms… [but] does not correctly explain". This type of argumentation shows us that, if there are doctrinal problems in the books of Jon Sobrino, they are not so explicit or serious. This is clear in the introduction of the document itself: "one must note that on some occasions the erroneous propositions are situated within the context of other expressions which would seem to contradict them, but this is not sufficient to justify these propositions (*Notification*, n.1).[99]

Alfonso Maria Ligorio Soares is more critical of the *Notification* and suggests that its position is weak rather than ambiguous:

> …the writers of the document opted for the old path of displaying quotations of individual theological propositions in order to illustrate how the ideas they want to strike depart from the Christian faith recognized by all or even refute it. It is obvious that such strategy simplifies the attack in so far as it neglects the nuances in the development of the work or various works of a given author.[100]

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[98] Luis Arturo Garcia Dávalos, "The Apostolicity of the Option for the Poor," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 132.
[99] Jung Mo Sung, "What is Behind the Notification of Jon Sobrino?" *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 273.
[100] Alfonso Maria Ligorio Soares, "In between the lines of the Notification – Previous considerations to an answer that must be constructed," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 253.

Trigo also finds fault with the *Notification's* methodology. He draws attention to the fact that the positions elaborated in Sobrino's works are not new or exclusive to the author, but freely circulate in the theological community.[101] Trigo is alarmed that the *Notification* focuses its attention on one theologian while ignoring the wider theological community:

> But, if what we are saying is true, the *Notification* claims that a large part of the exegetical and Christological material that circulates is dangerous to the faith or is positively erroneous. This judgement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is so generalized that it is frightening: is it really possible that so many educated people – even experts – of good will and sincere belief are wrong without being conscious of it?[102]

The proper use of methodology within the theological process is essential and its misuse is nothing short of dangerous. This is true for the CDF as much as it is true for Sobrino and any other theologian. No theologian is immune to the pitfalls that result from ambiguous expression, weak argumentation, and faulty methodology. In this regard, it is only right that the CDF, like any theologian within the believing community of the Church, be called to account for its own methodology.

Finally, the *Notification* raises questions regarding future relations between theologians and the Magisterium of the Church. Soares makes a number of pertinent observations which support the statements made above and serve to remind us of the role and parameters of the CDF. Of particular note is the need to distinguish between the "extraordinary" and "ordinary" Magisterium of the Church:

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[101] Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," 295.
[102] Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," 295.

> The first task is to help Christians remember the classic and effective distinction between the extraordinary Magisterium (that of the ecumenical councils or the Pope's *ex cathedra* definitions) and ordinary Magisterium (that of Papal encyclicals and exhortations in addition to the documents issued by the Roman curia). In so doing, Christians will take into account that opinions as those expressed in the *Notification* belong to the ordinary Magisterium and are, therefore, subject to errors like any other theological current or trend within the Church.[103]

That the CDF gives voice to the ordinary Magisterium, allows a more interactive style of dialogue between theologians and the CDF. Soares, nonetheless, advises a balanced and calm approach, fearing that the *Notification* has the potential to introduce an artificial opposition between theologians and the ordinary Magisterium (which sees the two parties as self-sufficient entities). This would do little good for the health of the Church as the people of God journeying through the vicissitudes of history on the way toward the Kingdom of God. Such an opposition would result in a reduced liveliness and creativity in the Church's theological efforts. In support of these concerns, Soares appeals to Karl Rahner who warned of the dangers of over-restricting the theological enterprise in the interests of controlling pluralism:

> That is precisely what Karl Rahner feared in a letter written a few days before his death and addressed to the Cardinal de Lima in defence of Gustavo Gutiérrez (who, at that time, was the butt of criticism). "A condemnation (…) would have (…) very negative consequences for the only environment in which a theology that is at the service of evangelization could last. Today there are several schools and this has always been so (…). It would be deplorable if by means of administrative measures we over-restricted this genuine pluralism."[104]

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[103] Soares, "In between the lines of the Notification," 250.

[104] Soares, "In between the lines of the Notification," 254. What Rahner has in view here is what is commonly known as "integralism," which is a pitfall of Roman Catholicism. For a discussion of integralism, see Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God Encountered*, Volume 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 57-62. The author explains that the "mood of integralism is authoritarian and objectivist" (p. 58), for the tendency is to reduce the faith to its "manifest elements" which are treated as a revealed system, as the "be-all and end-all of the Christian faith." Integralists therefore tend to idealize "past developments of doctrine as well as past forms of unity in the Church" (p. 59).

Rahner reminds us that there have always been several theological schools of thought in the history of Christianity, and that such pluralism is at the "service of evangelization." If the Magisterium seeks to gain too tight a control over the development of theological thought, not only will evangelization of cultures be less effective, but the utter richness of the mystery of salvation in Christ will be flattened out and deprived of its power to inspire humankind and offer real hope for the future of the world.

ii. The Church of the Poor

We now turn our attention to a consideration of the setting for Latin American Christology as the poor and the church of the poor. Sobrino asserts that from the Latin American perspective the poor occupy a *privileged* place and are a fundamental part of theological interpretation. This should not pass without notice or comment. To hold a privileged place is not the same as holding an *exclusive* place. This distinction needs to be kept in mind when objections are made to the poor being given preference. The *Notification* strongly disagrees with Sobrino: "The ecclesial foundation of Christology may not be identified with the 'Church of the poor,' but is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations."[105] In seeking to discuss the CDF's concern in a manner that will lead to dialogue, it is necessary to approach this in a number of ways**:** firstly, the term "Church of the poor" requires definition and explanation; secondly, it will be helpful to be

[105] *Notification* #2.

reminded of how the poor are portrayed in scripture; and, finally, the relationship existing between the Church of the poor and the apostolic faith needs to be elaborated.

1. Church of the Poor

The church of the poor as a term is obviously a central concern in seeking to provide a place of dialogue for Sobrino and the CDF. Ronaldo Muñoz exemplifies an approach that is interested in dialogue when he begins his response with these words:

> In the Vatican's analysis of these works, there is a tendency to attribute to the author "separation" or "alternative" (mutual exclusion), when what he raises is "distinction" and emphasis. For example in the, *Notification*: The "social setting of the poor" (or of the victims – the great majority of the continent – who are the believing community or the "Church of the Poor"), is described as an "other point of departure for theological work" that opposes the "apostolic faith transmitted through the Church.[106]

Muñoz highlights one of the essential sticking points in this matter: whether or not "church of the poor" is used to restrict discussion or to open up dialogue. This depends greatly on the way in which it is understood and employed. This is illustrated in a commentary on the *Notification* by a group of Spanish theologians. They write the following regarding the "church of the poor":

> We agree with what the CDF says about the faith transmitted by the Church as the setting for Christology. It seems to us, though, that such a position does not negate the earlier affirmations of Sobrino since the two groups of affirmations are not contradictory: they are what in logic is called "sub-contrary propositions". The reason they do not contradict one another is that "the eminent dignity of the poor in the Church" (to use a well-known phrase of Bishop Bossuet) forms part of that ecclesial setting for Christology. Read in the

[106] Ronaldo Muñoz, "Jon Sobrino's Notification," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 179.

> light of that eminent dignity, the CDF's comment about how "admirable [Sobrino's] preoccupation for the poor and oppressed is" sounds rather like derogatory praise.[107]

The church of the poor does not indicate a group in opposition to the faith transmitted by the Church; rather, the eminent dignity of the poor highlights this group's integral part within the ecclesial setting for Christology in Latin America. Far from standing in opposition to the faith, the poor stand firmly within the community of faith, the Church. Thus, the poor may be said to hold a privileged position, but not an exclusive position in Christology. José Comblin offers the pertinent reminder that all the communities mentioned in the New Testament were a Church of the Poor: in fact, "Until Constantine, the Church was of the poor – even though there might have been some rich in the midst of the poor, the tone was set by the poor people."[108] The Church's beginnings call us to tread respectfully when discussing the church of the poor and its influence within theology. It clearly highlights the respect that should be afforded this term which has intrinsic value for theology. "The Church of the Poor," far from being a term to be feared or opposed, invites the wider Church to be mindful of its origins and to value the privileged position into which this group invites it so that it might see the world with the eyes of Christ.

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[107] Owens, *Commentary*, 19.
[108] José Comblin, "Reflections on the Notification Sent to Jon Sobrino," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 77.

2. The Poor Encountered in Scripture

Liberation theology relies heavily upon scripture to better defend and interpret the place of the poor in the Church. Vatican II, especially *Dei Verbum*, greatly influenced the way in which scripture was rediscovered both academically and popularly. This led to a new appreciation and use of scripture within Latin America.[109] Néstor Miguez describes Latin America's rediscovery and use of scripture as, "A blending together of knowledge and experience, of everyday life and critical thinking, of suffering and hope, of fear and imperfect love in the light of the Scriptural witness of faith in the coming Reign of God."[110] Christine Gudorf describes the importance of scripture to Latin Americans in a similar vein:

> The Gospels and the epistles for Latin Americans are the beginning of a story that continues in their own lives. For these people the Spirit of God still walks the earth, the apostles and martyrs are still among them, and Jesus is being crucified and resurrected every day… for Latin communities, Scripture is an exposed vein of ore, immediately relevant to their social context.[111]

Sobrino's methodological approach is firmly rooted in scripture and its influence is evident throughout his writing.[112]The following texts are of particular significance. (1) Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20); (2) The poor represent a privileged place of encounter with God, as is evident in Jesus' teaching on judgment: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to

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[109] *Dei Verbum,* Chapter VI (#21-26) gives particular attention to the way that scripture relates to the life of the Church.

[110] Néstor O. Miguez, "Latin American Reading of the Bible: Experiences, Challenges and its Practice," *Journal of Latin American Hermeneutics,* Vol.1 (2004), 120.

[111] Christine E. Gudorf, "Liberation Theology's Use of Scripture: A Response to First World Critics," *Interpretation* 41/1 (Jan 1987), 6-7.

[112] Sobrino's methodology, note, is guided by *Dei Verbum* (#21) as it regards Scripture and sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith. It is in the scriptures that the word of God himself, and the voice of the Holy Spirit, resounds in the words of the prophets and apostles.

me" (Mt 25:41); (3) The Messiah sent by God is recognised in his proclamation of good news for the poor and hope for the hopeless (Mt 11:2ff); (4) Paul speaks of discovering Christ in suffering (1 Cor 2:2) just as Christ may now be encountered in the faces of the suffering poor and oppressed; (5) Finally, Christology is not a philosophical reflection on God becoming human, it is a reflection on Christ who, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6-7) … "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).[113] The last two scriptural texts serve to especially highlight the genuinely kenotic and historical character of the central mystery of Christian faith.

Vatican II, particularly *Dei Verbum*, directs us to the necessity of taking scripture seriously within theology. This should make us aware of the central place it holds within Sobrino's methodology. However, if further encouragement is required, then we ought to consider the following: "Disregarding all these biblical principles of Christological hermeneutics would leave theologians open to the Protestant accusation that the Catholic Church elevates the Magisterium above the Word of God."[114] Once we fully appreciate that Sobrino's methodology is firmly based on the mystery of the Incarnation (kenosis of the Son) and Christ's preaching of the kingdom of

[113] Owens, *Commentary*, 17-18, lists these five elements from scripture (although I have added Phil 2:6-7) to support Sobrino's methodological approach.
[114] Owens, *Commentary*, 18.

God which challenged the social-religious norms and conventional attitudes of his day, then the CDF's questioning of Sobrino's inadequate use of the New Testament appears unfounded.[115] In fact, the contrary appears to be the case; that is to say, the CDF seems to be the party that is using the New Testament material too selectively and narrowly, with the result that the truly historical aspect of the Incarnation is not sufficiently acknowledged in the interests of promoting the ontological aspect of the Incarnation. The two aspects, the *ontological* and the *historical*, must be held inextricably together, though, in order to fully appreciate the mystery of the Incarnation and the hypostatic union.

To express the matter more technically, the approach taken by liberation theology to scripture amounts to a hermeneutic circle of dialectical interplay between the poor of Latin America (context) and the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ (text).[116] The International Theological Commission, in its 1974 evaluation of liberation theology, reminded us that while the New Testament calls for change, it is not social change that is in view but primarily liberation from sin and death. As Arthur McGovern writes, the picture that emerges from the New Testament is that "no genuine change in society will occur except through conversion, unless men and women are

[115] *Notification* #3.
[116] Clodovis Boff, "Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology, edited by* Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino *(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) ,* 16; Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, 7-8; Jacques Dupuis, in his *Who Do You Say I Am?* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994), 8-9, explains that it is preferable to substitute the circle for a triangle: the text, the context, and the interpreter (which is the local church, not the individual believer). This way it becomes clear that there is mutual interaction between three components that constitute a complex reality.

reconciled with God and with one another."[117] He goes on to assert, however, that both liberation theology and its critics can be accused of using scripture selectively and partially:

> Liberation theologians tend at times to use scripture in the way traditional Catholic apologetics once did to "prove" Catholic doctrines (e.g., the primacy of Peter). They select the particular facts of interpretations that most favour a liberation perspective. The same criticism, however, would also apply to conservative theologians who promote a "theology of reconciliation" or who emphasize only Jesus' teachings in respect to interpersonal relations.[118]

In his assessment, McGovern reminds us that liberation theology arose out of a history of centuries-old tradition which strongly focused on personal devotion and forgiveness of sins (inner transformation) almost to the extent of totally ignoring social misery and communal suffering in Latin America. For this reason, McGovern refers to liberation theology's hermeneutic circle as a *corrective* to past theology which has since matured and developed into fuller and more integrated theology.[119]

3. The Church of the Poor and Apostolic Faith

Dávalos finds the comments made in the *Notification* regarding the church of the poor to be disquieting because he believes they suggest that the apostolic faith is opposed to the church of the poor. It is his conviction that anyone who does theology in Latin America cannot accept this. He therefore makes this suggestion: "This asks us to develop our understanding of two things: we must determine what "Apostolic Faith" is, and, from this

[117] Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 51.
[118] McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics*, 82.
[119] McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics*, 82.

perspective, we must verify if the construction of a Church of the Poor goes against it."[120] Dávalos promotes the apostolicity of the option for the poor and argues against it being dismissed as political strategy or an exercise in sociology:

> To construct "from below," "from the perspective of the victims," "from the excluded," and "from the poor" is a datum that already appears in the Old Testament tradition: "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmaster. I have come down to liberate them" (Ex 3:7). Jesus confirms it in the spirit of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-11). Our judgement will depend upon this salvific nearness (Mt 25:31-46). When the Church does not "discern the body," and neglects to base itself on this perspective, it is strongly reprimanded by its pastors: "That is why some of you are sick and weak, and some have died for this reason. But if we were to judge ourselves, we would not come under judgement" (1 Cor 11:30-31).[121]

Dávalos directs our attention to Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte* which highlights the extent of the Christian community's dedication to charity towards the poorest. John Paul II emphasises that our contemplation of Christ must teach us to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified: the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked and sick, and prisoners (Mt 25:35-37). Commentating on this biblical text, John Paul II writes:

> This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ… as the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us, there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them. This option is a testimony to the nature of God's love, to his providence and mercy; and in some way history is still filled with the seeds of the Kingdom of God which Jesus himself sowed during his earthly life whenever he responded to those who came to him with their spiritual and material needs.[122]

Far from opposing the apostolic faith, the church of the poor is discovered, as John Paul II indicates, within the apostolic community and its way of life

[120] Dávalos, "The Apostolicity of the Option for the Poor," 133.
[121] Dávalos, "The Apostolicity of the Option for the Poor," 134-35.
[122] John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Rome: 6 January, 2001), #49.

and belief. Indeed, the apostles were schooled by Christ in the midst of the poor (Mt 5:1-12; 14:13-21; Lk 6:17-19; 9:10-17).

Trigo lends further support to the view of the church of the poor as an epistemological setting. Trigo begins his position by stating, "In regards to the hermeneutics of his texts, I do not see how it is possible to interpret the Church of the Poor – the same about which John XXIII spoke and believed should become a focal point of the Council – as a distinct church rather than as an aspect of the universal Church."[123] Trigo very strongly argues that the church of the poor is an element of the universal Church. The poor belong to the Church and do not establish a competition by their presence. Therefore, Trigo recognises the church of the poor as an opportunity to enter into the faith of the Church, rather than a threat to that faith. He asks these questions:

> How is it possible to deny that the Gospels – read in the breast of the only Church and in the breast of the Tradition – open with an unusual purity and transcendence, read from the poor with spirit and, even further, with them? What does the faith of the Church have against affirming that to do theology from the evangelical commitment with them helps to maintain the evangelical transcendence of theology?[124]

Trigo provides an answer as to why this tension may exist. He goes beyond the *Notification* itself and refers to the *Explanatory Note* which followed after the *Notification*.[125] Trigo writes:

> In the Explanatory Note, it is apparent that the authors perhaps do not appreciate the difference between speaking about the poor in the proper context and embracing the poor as a perspective from which to focus on

[123] Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," 299.
[124] Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," 299.
[125] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Explanatory Note on the Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ* (Rome: 14 March, 2007).

> everything. Obviously it is not the only perspective, but it is an indispensable perspective. If the poor are only relevant in a particular place or conversation, that is, in the discipline of social ethics, one can spend most of one's time completely unconcerned about the poor. However, if it is a perspective, it is always necessary to take them into account, and it is impossible to live tranquilly in this situation of sin…. it is not without reason that many may fear that the Notification, at its base and perhaps unconsciously, seeks to neutralize the questioning role of this type of theology, which is certainly very healthy for the Church and for theology.[126]

Trigo, therefore, encourages us to embrace the church of the poor, not because they are poor or because they offer political analysis, but because they hold a perspective that, in co-operation with the other perspectives, is absolutely necessary to the continued health of the Church and theology.

IV. Conclusion: The Social Setting of the Poor Forms Part of the Ecclesial Setting for Christology

The *Notification*, we have seen, takes exception to Sobrino's contention that the social setting is "the most crucial for the faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of Christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break."[127] In its response to this assertion, the CDF reminds theologians that theology is the science of the apostolic faith of the Church and that other points of departure for theology "run the risk of arbitrariness and end in a misrepresentation of the same faith."[128] The CDF makes it plain that the foundation of Christology, the proper epistemological setting, is the apostolic faith of the Church.

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[126] Trigo, "Considerations about the Notification," 299-300.
[127] *Notification* # 2.
[128] *Notification* # 2.

This chapter has sought to argue that Sobrino's thought and the CDF's position should not be viewed as being in opposition to one another; rather, it becomes evident that they should be viewed as complementary when we recognize that the real social setting of the poor in the Church forms part of the ecclesial setting for Christology in Latin America. Sobrino simply argues the point that the setting of theology must be first and foremost something real, and that it is in the context of this historical reality that the presence of Christ is experienced and the faith of the Church confessed. The setting of theology cannot be confined to traditional texts of the past, for such texts must be read in light of the demands of the historical situation in which the faithful find themselves. Once this dialectic interplay between context, text, and interpreter (hermeneutic circle or triangle) is appreciated, then, Sobrino maintains, the historical reality itself clarifies what humanity is and what divinity is, and how the two encounter each other in a unique way in the person of Jesus Christ. When Sobrino proposes that the dogmatic formulations of the General Councils can be "dangerous," which is the subject-matter of the following chapter, this view is informed by the considerations discussed in this chapter which seek to highlight history as a legitimate and indispensable theological context.

Chapter Three

Expanding the Crossroad

> A doctor who came from abroad to help the country wrote: "All the time I felt the pain of the daily life of the poor in the shanty towns and the rural areas. It was in the midst of this pain that I discovered something of what I was searching for, a God who was not only a greater but also a lesser God. Among you I found a good and just God, who walks with his people and who still suffers alongside those who suffer."[129]

The previous chapters have acknowledged that the historical setting in which Sobrino works is characterised by suffering, poverty, and danger. The fact that he is a missionary who was sent to El Salvador from Spain means that his life and work has also been a real experience of "inculturation." As the doctor in Sobrino's story has also come to acknowledge, it is precisely in the midst of this context of poverty that God may be encountered in a new and intimate way as a God who suffers alongside the poor, a God who is "a lesser God." This highlights the genuinely kenotic and historical dimensions of the divine-human relationship, evident above all in the Christ-event, and it also serves as a prelude to discussing other concerns regarding methodological presuppositions which are expressed in the **Notification,** ***namely: Sobrino calls the***

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[129] Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 71.

dogmatic formulations of the early Church Councils "dangerous" and he considers that they signify a "hellenization of Christianity." It is to the consideration of these concerns that we now turn our attention in the hope that, like Sobrino's doctor, we will come to appreciate more fully what the process of inculturation of the Gospel of Christ actually entails.

V. Marking the Boundaries: The Notification

The* Notification *makes this statement regarding Sobrino's treatment of the early Church Councils:

> …according to him, these Councils have moved progressively away from the contents of the New Testament. For example, he affirms: "While these texts are useful theologically, besides being normative, they are also limited and even dangerous, as is widely recognized today" (*Christ the Liberator*, 221). Certainly, it is necessary to recognize the limited character of dogmatic formulations, which do not express nor are able to express everything contained in the mystery of faith, and must be interpreted in the light of Sacred Scripture and Tradition. But there is no foundation for calling these formulas dangerous, since they are authentic interpretations of Revelation.[130]

The* Notification *then adds that Sobrino considers the dogmatic developments of the first centuries "to be ambiguous and even negative"[131] and continues with the following:

> Although he does not deny the normative character of the dogmatic formulations, neither does he recognize in them any value except in the cultural milieu in which these formulations were developed. He does not take into account the fact that the *transtemporal* subject of the faith is the believing Church, and that the pronouncements of the first Councils have been accepted

[130] *Notification* #3.
[131] *Notification* #3.

> and lived by the entire ecclesial community. The Church continues to profess the Creed which arose from the Councils of Nicea (AD 325) and Constantinople I (AD 381). The first four Ecumenical Councils are accepted by the great majority of Churches and Ecclesial Communities in both the East and West. If these Councils used the terminology and concepts expressive of the culture of the time, it was not in order to be conformed to it. The Councils do not signify a hellenization of Christianity but rather the contrary. Through the inculturation of the Christian message, Greek culture itself underwent a transformation from within and was able to be used as an instrument for the expression and defence of biblical truth.[132]

The concerns of the CDF are clearly evident in these excerpts. However, the CDF agrees with Sobrino when it admits the "limited character of dogmatic formulations" and that Sobrino "does not deny the normative character of the dogmatic formulations." This point of agreement needs to be kept in mind. Furthermore, given this argument, it seems the CDF's language is too harsh and unfair when it says of Sobrino, "neither does he recognize in them any value except in the cultural milieu in which these formulations were developed."[133]

VI. Revising the Boundaries: Sobrino's Methodology

Part III of* Christ the Liberator *considers Conciliar Christology. It is here that Sobrino describes the dogmatic formulations of the early Church as "dangerous" and speaks of the "hellenization of

[132] *Notification* #3.
[133] *Notification* #3.

Christianity." To appreciate Sobrino's position, it is necessary to provide the broader context of his assertions.

In the very first paragraph of this section we find the words which the* Notification *singles out for attention:

> …while these texts are useful theologically, besides being normative, they are also limited and dangerous, as is widely recognised today. Above all, they are texts that launched Christology on an original and ambivalent course, one already begun in the New Testament and which I propose to take stock of in this introductory chapter and the excursus that follows it.[134]

Sobrino refers to the texts, not simply as limited and dangerous, but also as useful and normative. He does not deny their value and validity and the* Notification *recognises that. Sobrino's consideration of the dogmatic formulations is better appreciated when we read his following remarks:

> The conciliar texts are particularly useful when analysed in their formal elements: the specific, radical, and original relationship between transcendence and history, the absoluteness of what is human, the unexpectedness of God, reality as mediator of salvation. Their usefulness also depends on viewing them in their historical context from a proper viewpoint. Let me say at the outset that the viewpoint here is that of the victims of this world, a concept that needs a brief explanation, since it is not usually dealt with in the patristic and conciliar context.[135]

Sobrino argues that the viewpoint of the victims teaches us that modern culture and thought patterns differ from Greek thought and concepts, particularly regarding history, truth, and freedom. This makes understanding and analysing conciliar statements difficult and a demanding hermeneutical

[134] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 221.
[135] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 221.

exercise, especially when considering the need to take into account the actual situation of our world.[136] Sobrino has moved beyond his use of the word dangerous and now speaks of these texts as difficult and demanding due to the interpretation that is required to achieve understanding and analysis. Sobrino explains this succinctly:

> In order to understand the conciliar texts, therefore, we have to overcome the difference in culture between then and now, bearing in mind that "now" is not merely Western modernity and postmodernity but also the varied cultures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (which gives Christology adequate historical identity), but we have to do this from the objective *situation* as it is (which gives its relevance historical identity).[137]

Sobrino follows this chapter with an excursus*, Christianity in the Greco-Roman World, *where he considers the manner in which Christianity, during the Patristic Age, immersed itself in the culture of the Greco-Roman world and both defined it and was defined by it. This willingness to venture into such a complementary relationship showed a great amount of faith, although, Sobrino points out, it also invited the possibility of danger.[138] The danger was related to the Greek concept of nature (*physis*) which, when compared to biblical (and modern) understandings of nature, had severe limitations. This concept of nature introduces what is immutable while

[136] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 221-22.
[137] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 222.
[138] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 239.

ignoring or undervaluing what is historical and changing. Sobrino appeals to his fellow Salvadoran, Ignacio Ellacuria, to illustrate his fundamental point:

> It is in personal stories and in the history of peoples that God has been truly present … That history far more than nature is the proper place for God's revelation and communication is a statement of incalculable importance for theology and for Christian praxis: it is in history far more than in nature that we are going to make the living Gospel present.[139]

What is being portrayed here is the biblical view of God as an historical force, not a metaphysical entity. The classical metaphysics of the Greeks (and of the Medieval Age and the Post-Tridentine Age) was one stage in human thought which has moved, in modern thought, to a new starting point: history. Within this modern framework, talk of God is meaningful if it seeks to portray God as appearing "within human experience and the world as someone who remains further on, who cannot be laid hold of, who stands where human effort opens out to the future."[140] Too often our language of God, because it is based on the Greek notion of nature, paints a picture of God as closed up in the divine self and beyond the world as an absolutely transcendent mystery.[141] While the Greek idea of nature was able to explain God in Godself, it lost the notion of the **living** ***God as accompanying his pilgrim people in good***

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[139] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 242.
[140] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979), 37. Boff asserts that history is the "original reality" (p. 36) in which we come to know what humanity is and what divinity is.
[141] Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 41.

times and bad times, and the vision of God as the real and ultimate meaning of human existence in the world.

The assertion that history far more than nature is the "place" for God's self-communication in grace is further supported by Rahner's theology of grace which was formulated against the backdrop of the **nouvelle theologie*****. According to Rahner, God's decree for the human constitutes what it most fundamentally is, yet this "interior ontological constituent" is regarded "terminatively" because it pertains to our concrete historical nature – God's decree is not constitutive of our "nature" as such (against Henri de Lubac).[142] Concrete human existence is always a being-in-situation, a coming-to-be, a self-realisation, and it is precisely in this historical situation that we are addressed by God's self-communication in love as our absolute fulfilment and supernatural end. Rahner formulated his notion of the "supernatural existential" to express our capacity or "potency" for receiving God's abiding self-bestowal in grace (a mode of our existence) amidst the happenings of concrete historical life.***

[142] Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1, 297-317, at 302.

VII. Dialogue at the Crossroad

i. Dangerous?

The* Notification *is clearly concerned by Sobrino's reference to dogmatic formulations as dangerous. While it could be claimed that Sobrino has chosen provocative language, nonetheless it cannot be said that he is abandoning fidelity to the faith of the Church.[143] The warning given by Sobrino can be fruitfully examined in the spirit of Pope John XXIII's statements made in his address at the opening of the Second Vatican Council:

> What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honoured teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else.[144]

John XXIII firmly believed that "immutable" doctrine was in need of being "reformulated" in a language which was more intelligible to the contemporary situation. No conflict should exist, then, between the claim of the immutability of dogma and the need for formulating dogma anew in terms of contemporary language. He believed that this could occur without losing the accuracy and precision of the statements made at the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council.[145]

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[143] Owens, *Commentary*, 21.
[144] John XXIII, *Address at the Opening of Vatican Council II* (Rome: 11 October, 1962).
[145] John XXII, *Address*.

The statements made by the Pontiff, moreover, are clearly taken up in the Constitution* Gaudium et Spes *where theologians are asked to "seek out more efficient ways" of presenting "the deposit and the truths of faith" in a way that does not do violence to their meaning and significance.[146] Sobrino, following John XXIII and* Gaudium et Spes*, does not seek to discard or refute immutable doctrine; instead, he seeks to study it afresh and reformulate it in terms intelligible to his contemporary situation, while preserving their meaning intact. This basic issue will now be discussed and expanded upon under the following headings all of which are intimately interrelated: limitations, contexts, developments, and historicity.

1. Conciliar Limitations

Both Sobrino and the* Notification *state that dogmatic formulations are "limited" in character, so that the two parties share common ground in this regard.[147] What Sobrino is alluding to, however, is that because the dogmatic formulations of the early Councils are expressed in the categories of Greek

[146] *GS* #62. This process of reformulation, the Council points out, is no novelty. From the beginning of its history the Church has learned to "express the Christian message in the concepts and language of different peoples" (#44). Walter Kasper, in his *Theology and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 170, says that the Council made a distinction between "the underlying foundation of the faith, which is permanently binding, and its mode of expression."

[147] *Notification* #3.

philosophical thought ("homoousios," "physis," and "hypostasis") which are non-biblical and therefore ahistorical, these formulations fail to give adequate attention to other important dimensions of the Incarnation (other than the ontological = the Word become flesh) to be found in the New Testament, such as its kenotic character (Phil 2:5-11), its universal or recapitulating character (Eph 1:9-10), and its historical character (Heb 4:15; 5:8-9).[148] If these integral aspects of the mystery of the Christ-event are left out of theological reflection because they are not represented in conciliar dogmatics, then this amounts to a dangerous use of conciliar formulas.[149] The thought of Yves Congar in respect of a pneumatological Christology is worth appealing to here, for he underscores the need to appreciate the truly historical aspect of God's saving work and to avoid a non-historical theology:

God's work takes place in human history. It is achieved in a series of events situated in time, which, once they have happened, contribute something new and bring about changes. On the

[148] Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984), 184. Kasper recounts that the Council of Nicea adopted the Greek non-biblical concept of *homoousios* to protect its liturgical confession, professing the divinity of Jesus Christ, which originated in biblical and ecclesial tradition. This marked the entrance of metaphysical thinking about substance into the preaching and theology of the church. The consequence of this shift was that the biblical presentation of God had imposed upon it the Greek idea of the immutability, impassibility and dispassionateness of God. It was no longer possible to give full value to the kenosis statements of scripture.

[149] Owens, *Commentary*, 21.

> ***other hand, according to non-historical theology and even for Thomas Aquinas, Christ possessed everything from the time of his conception and, in what are reported in Scripture as institutive events, there is simply a manifestation* for others *of a reality that is already there. The theophany at the baptism of Jesus is an example of this.[150]***

Congar rightly insists that while the hypostatic union is a metaphysical fact by means of which a human subsists through the person of the eternal Son, nevertheless it required that Jesus, as fully human and therefore growing in knowledge and understanding, be an active agent in living out his life in obedience to the Father, an obedience which is perfected on Calvary (Heb 5:8-9). The life of Jesus unfolded not via the beatific vision, but through the way of obedience in a certain historical setting with all its problems and challenges, which was the way of kenosis.[151] It is here that we step into the great drama of debasement-humiliation and exaltation-glorification (Phil 2:5-11). The one who obediently entered

[150] Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit,* Vol. III (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 166. The thought of Congar, note, actually amounts to what could be referred to as a "progressive Incarnation;" that is, the Incarnation is not complete at the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, but is a process which is perfected on the Cross where Jesus "learned perfect obedience" (Heb 5:9) to the Father. What is more, it is to be noted how classical Logos-Christology highlights the "ontological" aspect of the Incarnation while a pneumatological Christology serves to underscore the "historical" element of the Incarnation. Logos-Christology and Spirit-Christology should be treated as complementary; this also serves to bring out the involvement of the Three Persons of the Trinity in the Christ-event.
[151] Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 166.

into the state of a servant is exalted in glory.[152] When the conciliar formulas are read outside of their proper historical contexts (i.e. various theological controversies expressed in metaphysical language) and are used as criteria for interpreting the scriptures - rather than the reverse being the case - they run the risk of ignoring the historical and kenotic elements of the Christ-event and thus become dangerous.[153]

Ronaldo Muñoz makes the observation that the **Notification** ***seems to be obsessively fixated on the dogmatic formulations of the Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries.[154] He too highlights the fact these formulas are strongly conditioned by Greek philosophy (which is concerned with defining the essence or substance of things) and are a long way from the abandoned multitudes who sought out the company of Jesus. A fixation with such a metaphysical approach limits our vision of the human Jesus and his cause, which unfolds dramatically in the historical context of his place and time. This historical Jesus has been more thoughtfully retrieved in recent times through the sound use of the biblical sciences.[155] To ignore***

[152] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burn & Oates, 1976), 36. For a more thorough explanation of kenosis-Christology see Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 189-198.
[153] Owens, *Commentary*, 21-22.
[154] Muñoz, "Jon Sobrino's Notification," 180.
[155] Muñoz, "Jon Sobrino's Notification," 180.

these sciences in favour of the Greek philosophy of the early Councils is to move towards making the dogmatic formulations produced at the Councils the totality of Christology.[156]

The apparent disagreement that exists between Sobrino and the **Notification*****, then, reflects the tension that exists between the New Testament and Greek philosophy. This tension is evident in liberation theology inasmuch as its mission is not to demonstrate God's existence and nature to the educated and literate, but to bear witness to God's love before God's "little ones" (Mt 11:25; Lk 1:51-53). Aloysius Pieris defends Sobrino for this very reason. He recognises that Sobrino's methodology serves not to diminish the deposit of faith, but to correct the imbalance brought about by an over-emphasis on a metaphysical approach to Christology (favoured by the CDF), by encouraging people to read scripture through the eyes of the poor and lowly ones, rather than the heads of philosophers.***[157]

[156] Muñoz states that such an approach contradicts the teachings of Vatican II (particularly *Dei Verbum* and *Gaudium et Spes*), Paul VI (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*) and John Paul II.
[157] Aloysius Pieris, "Jon Sobrino and Theology of Liberation," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 194-95.

2. Conciliar Contexts

The* Notification *states that the dogmatic formulations are authentic interpretations of Revelation.[158] What it fails to acknowledge, though, is that they represent interpretations that occurred in particular historical settings. Dogmatic formulations are limited to specific contexts.[159] Like any limited thing, they become dangerous once they are absolutised and are claimed not only to be normative, but unique.[160] Eduardo de la Serna observes that the* Notification *insinuates that while scripture should undergo exegesis and interpretation, the dogmas of the Councils should be accepted as though they had not been created in a particular language and at a particular time.[161] Unless the same recognition of context is applied to dogma as it is to scripture, then dogma is viewed as a text that exists outside of its particular setting and we lose sight of the purpose for which it was formulated. If the context is allowed to fall by the wayside, this paves the way for misinterpretation and misuse, for there is no such thing as decontextualized meaning.

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[158] *Notification* #3.
[159] For an outline of the major Councils and their historical settings see Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 13-19.
[160] Owens, *Commentary*, 221.
[161] Eduardo de la Serna, "An Analysis of the 'Notificatio' from a Biblical Point of View," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, 94.

Dogmatic formulations are developed with a clear and specific purpose in mind, which arises out of a particular context, and since the passage of time always brings new situations and new ways of looking at things, then new ways of expressing the fundamental tenets of the faith will have to be sought. Often the formulas of the early Councils were developed in response to particular heresies, thus they did not presume to be complete and total statements that exhausted the mystery of the Christ-event. The Council fathers themselves often recognised the potential danger of dogmatic formulas and requested that these formulas not be proposed to the faithful as catechesis, but be reserved for bishops in their struggle against heresies.[162]

In addition to highlighting the contextual nature of dogmatic formulations, José Comblin points out that Chalcedon is notable for what it did not state, rather than what it did state.[163] ***The whole of what Chalcedon had to say about the humanity of Jesus is expressed through the word*** **nature*****, with the result that the earthly life and history of Jesus is barely mentioned. The Council does refer to his birth and teaching ministry, but says nothing of his life reaching its***

[162] Owens, *Commentary*, 221.
[163] Comblin, "Reflections on the Notification Sent to Jon Sobrino," 74.

zenith in his paschal mystery, and makes no distinction between the earthly and glorified Jesus.[164] By alerting us to the historical gaps in the Chalcedonian definition, Comblin intends to remind us that human beings cannot be reduced to the term "nature" which simply fails to express that each human being is a history, a story lived in a concrete context which invests this history with meaning. The death of Jesus, on this view, has to do not simply with the fact that he died, but involves the context surrounding his death and how this happening is placed within his life story. Comblin emphasises this point when he writes," The result of Chalcedon was the progressive abandoning of the humanity of Jesus as a concrete history in a human context and, as a result, also its human meaning."[165]

3. Conciliar Developments

We have drawn attention to the fact that dogmatic formulations are necessarily limited and are responses to specific historical settings, in which case they cannot be regarded as representing the totality of Christology. While dogmas can be regarded as guideposts for orthodox faith, it is important to recognize that they are specific historical mediations of the

[164] O'Collins, *Jesus*, 173. O'Collins provides a thorough consideration of the definition of Chalcedon, 172-201. He supports a balanced approach to the formulations, keeping in mind their limited nature.
[165] Comblin, "Reflections on the Notification Sent to Jon Sobrino," 74.

one revelation of God. When dogmas are treated as if they were revelation itself, instead of* mediations *of God's self-communication in Christ, the result is a kind of fundamentalism that regards the teaching as an* end in itself.[166] *Karl Rahner was well aware of this Catholic form of fundamentalism when he wrote that the classical formulas "derive their life from the fact that they are not end but beginning, not goal but means, truths which open the way to the ever greater Truth."[167] Church teaching is certainly important, not as an end in itself, but because it directs our gaze toward Christ and illuminates for us the ever incomprehensible and inexhaustible mystery of God. Dogmas cannot be viewed as static once we regard them as starting-points for the development of faith, once we realize that they have a life beyond their origin as they reach into our time and seek to mediate God's saving presence in our historical setting.

[166] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), 92. The author gives the analogy of a sculpture of Christ placed in front of a parish church, which is beautifully illuminated by floodlights in the evening – the parish priest would be quite dismayed if the parishioners were to exclaim: "My, what gorgeous floodlights!" The point of the floodlights is not to draw attention to themselves but to illuminate the beautiful statue (p. 96).

[167] Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," *Theological Investigations,* Vol. 1 (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 149.

In order to properly understand in what way it can be said that Church teaching develops in time, it is necessary to first appreciate what the term "irreformable" or "irreversible" or "definitive" means.[168] It simply means that a teaching is not erroneous, that "it will not lead believers away from the path of salvation."[169] At the same time, since Church teaching is a human expression, it can always be improved upon, although, as Avery Dulles points outs, a tension exists between the positions held by Vatican I and Vatican II.[170] Vatican I, he explains, used the term irreformability to signify not merely that the formulations must be retained, but that the very concepts and terms used are to remain in force. The approach taken by Vatican II, on the other hand, as we have already seen above, was significantly different in that the Council spoke of expressing the dogmas in language intelligible to each generation. Vatican II therefore allows for a variety of formulations in accordance with the historical-cultural setting.[171]

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[168] The term "irreformability" has been in use since Vatican I where it is closely connected with the charism of infallibility. See Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 186-189.
[169] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, 95.
[170] Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, 190.
[171] Key Vatican II texts include *Gaudium et Spes* #4, #5, #62; *Unitatis Redintegratio* #14, #17. The term "irreformability" appears in Vatican I's Constitution on the Church, *Pastor Aeternus*. Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) is notable in that it accents the timeless value of the dogmatic formulas, following the lead of Vatican I.

This dynamic relationship which exists between the gospel and cultures surely must be a relationship into which the dogmatic formulations of the Church also enter. It is true that the dogmatic formulations indicate significant achievements in Christological development, but they become dangerous if they are frozen in time and treated as absolute and definitive ends in themselves. Nicea, for example, may be seen as the conclusion of a journey which began in the New Testament but it may also be seen as the beginning of a journey that was to continue throughout subsequent Councils in their responses to certain heresies. Even though Nicea proclaimed Jesus as "True God of True God, one in being with the Father," in response to Arius' denial of Jesus' divinity, this point continued to be disputed and required further Councils to develop the dogma. Thus, Nicea, far from being a final and absolute definition of Jesus' divinity, was a point along the path to gaining further clarification in expression of this dogma and one of many battles in the defence of true faith.[172]

It is in this spirit, especially highlighted by John XXIII and Vatican II, that Sobrino has committed himself to the development of liberation theology. He seeks to re-express dogmas in a way

[172] Serna, "An Analysis of the 'Notificatio' from a Biblical Point of View," 97.

that enables them to speak to the contemporary culture of his historical setting, while ensuring that their essential meaning is safeguarded and preserved intact.

4. Conciliar Historicity

The* Notification *accuses Sobrino of not taking into account that "the* transtemporal *subject of the faith is the believing Church." This is an ambiguous statement, to say the least, and therefore requires some critical discussion.

A good place to begin is with the response given to this statement in the* Commentary*: "The Church is not a transtemporal subject, but a perfectly temporal one, and from its temporality it is open to eternity through the faith that it professes and that the ancients admiringly formulated thus … the Eternal made temporal!"[173] The point being made here is that on the basis of the Incarnation as the union of eternity and time in the person of Jesus Christ, the Church as the community of believers in time cannot be understood apart from its historical journey in the midst of which it professes its faith in the risen One as the future of the world.[174] If we

[173] Owens, *Commentary*, 22. The notion of a transtemporal Church might lead, the authors point out, to a kind of "docetism or ecclesiological monophysitism" (p. 23).
[174] Kasper explains that in Greek metaphysics immutability, freedom from suffering and passion were always regarded as the supreme attributes of the divine. In the Old Testament

attempt to ignore temporality, our relationship with Christ could be reduced to an adherence to dogmas that are timeless and immutable. This would undermine the way in which Christians look to the life, death and resurrection of Christ to find the courage and hope to respond to the trials, tribulations, and challenges of everyday life.

The theology of Johan Baptist Metz also emphasizes that the Church is well and truly immersed in temporality. Metz argues that faith and dogmas carry the memory of the liberating life that they protect, and that dogmas become liberating when they are remembered in a manner that allows them to challenge the present status quo when it oppresses and dehumanises.[175] This is the practical implication for the believing Church which is called to live its faith in history and not be reduced to a community that professes timeless dogmatic formulas. Metz states it thus, "Christ must always be thought of in such a way that he is never merely thought of … It is by **following him** ***that we know whom we are dealing with and who saves us."[176] Christology is transmitted through the practice of the***

God is known is the God of history. God's becoming man and thus becoming history in Jesus Christ as the surpassing fulfillment of this historical fidelity to this promise that he is the one who is present and the one existing with us. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ,* 175.

[175] Johan Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns & Oats, 1980), 202-04.

[176] Johan Baptist Metz, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 40. The notion of "following Christ" reminds us of the performative character of faith or what we earlier (Chapter 2) referred to as the model of truth as transformation (which complements the classical model of truth as disclosure).

believing community and the written accounts of those who follow Christ. Christology grows out of these narratives and it leads us back to them; it is continually worked out as an open invitation to following Christ. This is the methodological underpinning at work in the theology of Sobrino. He recognises that the faith of the believing Church is a **living** ***faith, that is, a faith confessed in historical reality and radically oriented toward the anticipated life to come – the "risen life."***

To pay inadequate attention to the genuine historicity of faith and conciliar dogmatics is to run the risk of adopting an ahistorical or timeless approach to the "definitive" or "irreformable" character of Church dogmas. In such an approach, there is no room for adopting new and more adequate constructs or reformulations aimed at articulating in more intelligible language the mystery of salvation in Christ. To say that a dogma has been taught infallibly is not to deny its historicity, rather it means that we can trust that it will not lead us away from the path of definitive salvation; it does not preclude the task of finding better ways of illuminating and communicating its abiding truth.

ii. The Hellenization of Christianity?

The* Notification *takes exception to Sobrino's statement that there occurred a "hellenization of Christianity," and claims that the contrary is closer to the truth of the matter; that is, by way of the "inculturation of the Christian message, Greek culture itself underwent a transformation from within and was able to be used as an instrument for the expression and defence of biblical truth."[177] The* Commentary *admits that while Sobrino's assertion is arguable, it is certainly not heterodox "for it is an affirmation of* facts*, not of* truths *of the faith."[178] What is more, Sobrino is expressing an opinion that is shared by many theologians today, and the CDF itself concedes that there is truth in Sobrino's assertion when it talks of the "inculturation of the Christian message." It therefore becomes apparent that the two positions are not contradictory but complementary, and this serves to alert us to the reciprocal relationship between culture and the Gospel of Christ. It is this issue of inculturation that we must now turn to discuss.

This chapter has already noted the spirit in which John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council, a spirit directed toward the

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[177] *Notification* #3.
[178] Owens, *Commentary*, 23.

pastoral activity of the Church in the modern world.[179] The term "pastoral" refers to the process of bringing out the enduring relevance of dogma for the life of the world, a relevance that emerges from within the context of history and culture.[180] Vatican II, though, since it sought to correct a long history of the Church's defiance of modernity, was somewhat sanguine and overly optimistic about culture, as Michael Paul Gallagher has commented.[181] Hence, Pope Paul VI in his encyclical* Evangelii Nuntiandi *(1975) adopted a less sanguine tone than Vatican II, asserting that the "drama of our time" is the "split between the gospel and culture.[182] The emphasis here falls on conflict, on transforming cultures that present as obstacles to the liberating truth of the Gospel, which is why Paul VI used the term "evangelization of culture" to express the challenge posed by faith to the

[179] *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, even by this title, highlights the Council's emphasis that the Church exists in the world and as such it exists for the world. The Council linked the development of theology with the historical experience of men and women living in the world. Therefore, the Council shifted from the view that contrasted the Church with the world. The *Constitution* suggests that the Church cannot be fully understood without reference to the world and that we make sense out of the world with the light of the Church. Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology*, 110-14.

[180] Kasper, *Theology and the Church*, 171.

[181] Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 54.

[182] *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #20. It is worth noting the other main points in this paragraph as well: 1) To transform culture requires going beneath its surface to its roots; 2) the gospel, while independent of cultures, proclaims the Kingdom in such a way that it is lived within the cultures without becoming subject to those cultures; 3) an essential dimension of evangelisation is to heal the split which has opened up between culture and the gospel.

existing culture.[183] The term "inculturation of the Gospel" (first used in 1979 by Pope John Paul II), by contrast, refers to the challenge posed by culture to the faith (how to make the faith intelligible to an existing culture). The two terms should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, of course, for each serves to highlight an integral dimension of what is a two-way process, not a one-way process. The Pontifical Biblical Commission sums up this two-way process well in the following words:

> This is not, as is clear, a one-way process; it involves "mutual enrichment." On the one hand, the treasures contained in diverse cultures allow the Word of God to produce new fruits and, on the other hand, the light of the Word allows for a certain selectivity with respect to what cultures have to offer: harmful elements can be left aside and the development of valuable ones encouraged.[184]

This understanding of the "mutual enrichment" that takes place between culture and the Gospel was also the view that John Paul II came to espouse. Initially on the issue of culture the Pontiff gravitated toward a creative culture (art, beauty, truth, etc.) in keeping with his philosophical training, but he underwent a shift to **culture as lived** ***(cultural discernment, Christianization of cultures, resistance to oppressive***

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[183] *Gaudium et Spes* (#53-62) is not totally sanguine about culture, it should be noted, for it explicitly states that the Gospel also "combats and removes the error and evil" (#58) to be found in cultures. Yet it is optimistic, on the whole, with regard to culture as the means for moving toward a true and full humanity.

[184] The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 119. The Commission, in setting out its views, builds upon Vatican II's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*, #22).

cultures, and thus a shift to* mission*). In his encyclical* Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II writes that mission is an issue of the Church's faith, thus evangelization involves the transformation of cultures and should lead to the formation of a local Christian culture if the faith is fully lived out:

> As she carries out her missionary activity … the Church encounters different cultures and becomes involved in the process of inculturation …[which] means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures … Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission.[185]

For John Paul II, inculturation is regarded as an incarnational-sacramental process, and, moreover, this is seen as a two-way process involving a reciprocal relationship between culture and the Gospel. The "insertion" of the Gospel in a local culture may pose a challenge to that culture, on the one hand, and the "integration" of values pertaining to that culture in Christianity seeks to build upon what is already existing and authentic in that culture, on the other hand. The process of inculturation is presented as being mutually enriching for both culture and faith, and hence as being truly historical.

[185] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Rome: 7 December, 1990), #52.

This short excursus on the issue of inculturation assists us in our understanding of the tension existing between the CDF and Sobrino over the matter of hellenization of the faith. Kasper, for instance, does not see the use of Hellenistic concepts as a diminution or weakening of Christianity, but as Christianity's self-assertion rather than self-surrender.[186] The Pontifical Biblical Commission points out that the process of inculturation of the Bible has been in force since the first centuries and that it can never be regarded as a completed task.[187] Sobrino's statement that the formulations of the early Councils signify a "hellenization of Christianity" is correct insofar as it was inevitable that Hellenistic culture would exert its influence on Christian faith as the latter sought to incarnate itself in the Hellenistic world. This, however, is only one part of the equation; the reverse was also the case, namely, the Christianization of Hellenism, as the **Notification** ***rightly points out. Greek culture was itself transformed by the Christian faith, so that a genuine two-way process of inculturation was being played out in the early centuries of Christianity. It is difficult to see how Sobrino would disagree with this two-way process of inculturation, given his emphasis on the historical setting as fundamental to the***

[186] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 182-83.
[187] Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 119.

doing of theology. We can only surmise, therefore, that his apparent criticism of the early Councils as representing the hellenization of Christian faith is directed toward what he sees as the recasting of the biblical God (God is portrayed as a historical force) in ahistorical and transtemporal terms typical of Hellenic thought. The consequence of this is that new formulations of dogma in new cultural-historical situations are resisted and not encouraged. The question raised by Soares seems to lend support to this conclusion when he asks: "…if such a procedure in the past – surely a very risky one but nevertheless unavoidable – deserves approval, why isn't a similar approval given to the attempts of a critical approach to contemporary thinking?"[188] As the text above quoted from **Redemptoris Missio** ***makes clear, since inculturation is a truly incarnational process (there are both human and divine elements at play), then the interaction between culture and faith cannot discount the genuinely historical character of the process.***

[188] Soares, "In between the lines of the Notification," 251.

Conclusion: The Ontological and Historical Embrace

Crossroads draw into one location people and objects from diverse regions. The mystery of the Incarnation, as the salvific union of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ who preached the Kingdom of God in a particular time and particular context, is the ultimate crossroad in God's saving history. By standing at this crossroad, at which the life and history of Jesus Christ encounters the lives and histories of all persons in all times and places, the community of the Church will avoid professing a transtemporal or ahistorical form of faith that ignores the surrounding context or situation in which the faith is professed. Pope John Paul II was keen to emphasize the historical character of faith by employing the metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-8) to convey the real sense of the mystery of the Incarnation as "grafted onto the history of humanity, onto the history of every individual."[189]

This dissertation, as a critical response to the Congregation's concerns about the methodological presuppositions upon

[189] John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 74.

which Sobrino bases his theological reflection, has sought to argue that the validity and value of liberation theology consists in reminding us that all theology is contextual and cannot therefore be done in a transtemporal vacuum. Chapter One demonstrated the interrelated nature of the social-political, ecclesial, and theological contexts from the standpoint of the history of Latin America, while Chapter Two, building upon the findings of Chapter One, proposed the view that the social setting of the poor must be seen as forming an integral part of the ecclesial setting for Christology in Latin America where the experience of suffering and oppression is so pervasive that it defines the social situation. The Congregation's concerns with Sobrino's contention that the social setting of the poor is the most crucial for shaping Christology can be alleviated once it is acknowledged that Sobrino simply intends by this assertion to highlight the fact that the faith of the Church can only be professed in the real context in which the faithful find themselves situated, and in which they encounter Jesus Christ as Liberator. The respective positions taken by the Congregation and Sobrino should not be regarded, then, as opposed to one another but as complementary, for the

apostolic faith assumes meaning and significance precisely in light of the historical setting, not in spite of it.

The so-called "epistemological break" about which Sobrino speaks is really a continuation of what was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council when it stressed the need for the Church to read the "signs of the times" and enter into real dialogue and interaction with the world. The Council endorsed a new hermeneutic which encouraged a dialectic interplay between revelation and history, that is, between text (New Testament and dogma), context (social setting), and interpreter (local church). The biblical view of God as an historical force who stands where human commitment and aspirations open out to an unknown future, was rediscovered by the Council, so that the key question posed by liberation theology - what relation is there between salvation in Jesus Christ and the historical process? – is to be seen as supported by the pastoral concerns of the Council. A new way of doing theology had arrived in the Church, a theology that views the confession of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, as arising out of the concrete context of history that is directed toward the Kingdom of God as the future of the world. This recognition of the genuinely historical character of the

Christ-event serves, moreover, to underscore the kenotic aspect of the Incarnation, so that both the **ontological** ***and*** **historical** ***aspects of the Christological mystery are to be held inextricably together. Jesus is the Word Incarnate, yet the assumption of human nature in his person entails a truly historical existence that culminates in his Paschal Mystery.***

In respect of the use of the term "dangerous" to describe conciliar dogmatics and the assertion regarding the "hellenization of Christianity," this study suggests that such statements probably arise out of Sobrino's concern to highlight the ahistorical, static, and closed sense of metaphysical terms such as "physis" employed in conciliar dogmatics. Given that such metaphysical terms portray "human nature" and "divine nature" as closed systems or definitively known quantities, the impression can easily be given that the conciliar formulas represent the totality of Christology. Sobrino is keen to avoid this pitfall. The problem with the Greek view of God as a metaphysical entity is that it simply fails to capture the dynamic and open-ended texture of the "living" God narrated in the Bible, where God as historical force accompanies his pilgrim people in good times and in bad times. And the problem with the Greek view of human

nature is that it fails to convey the sense of the human as a dynamic being radically related to a personal God as its inviolable future and ultimate end.

Sobrino's methodology does not intend to diminish the deposit of faith, but seeks to correct the imbalance brought about by an over-emphasis on a metaphysical approach to Christology by encouraging the retrieval of biblical images of God and the reading of scripture through the eyes of the poor who constitute a privileged theological setting. This methodology is central to the task of re-expressing dogmas, as was encouraged by John XXIII and Vatican II, in a way that enables them to speak more effectively to contemporary contexts while ensuring that their essential meaning is preserved intact. This process of "inculturation" is a two-way process of interaction between revelation and history. Once this is acknowledged, then the concerns expressed in the **Notification** ***can be alleviated – the divinity of Christ is mediated by his true humanity which is not perfected at the moment of his conception, but through the historical process of preaching the Kingdom of God to his increasingly hostile surroundings, which culminates in his death on the Cross in***

perfect obedience to the Father's will that he drink from "the cup" for the salvation of the world.

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