

# Jon Sobrino's Notion of Discipleship and Option for the Poor

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摘要：「我們如何告訴這個世界的窮人和被壓迫者，天主是愛他們的？」這是基督徒經常提出的問題。索布里諾的解放神學，特別是基督論，與上述問題可謂關係密切。他的門徒觀念可以被視為對這個問題的具體回應，即天主通過祂在耶穌和教會團體中的神聖行動來愛窮人。作為一個基督徒，要跟隨耶穌的整體，耶穌的使命是宣告天國，即為窮人和被壓迫者帶來希望和解放，使之成為現實和存在。在門徒的概念中，索布里諾在耶穌基督身上肯定了人的自由，這樣我們就可以在自己的具體情況中承擔道德責任。在他的作品中，上主的形像是一個公正和仁慈的神，但祂總是偏袒窮人，與窮人、受壓迫者和小孩站在一起。這也是出於對人類和世界的愛，成為一位受苦和被釘十字架的神。我們應該感謝上主，並願意作出承諾，以服務那些也需要上主之愛的人。這種「從下而上」的基督論，幫助神學家重新發現信仰的歷史維度和耶穌基督的生命。

關鍵詞：索布里諾、解放神學、關愛窮人、門徒觀

**Abstract:** “How do we tell the poor and the oppressed of this world that God loves them?” This is a question that many Christians often ask. Jon Sobrino’s liberation theology, and specifically Christology, is very much related to the above question. His notion of discipleship can be considered as a concrete response to that question, that God loves the poor through his divine action in Jesus and the Church communities. Being a Christian is to follow the totality of the life of Jesus, whose mission is the proclamation of the kingdom of God, that is, to bring hope and liberation to the poor and the oppressed, and to make it real and present. In the notion of discipleship, Sobrino affirms the freedom of human persons in Jesus Christ, so that we can take the moral responsibility in our own concrete situation. The God depicted in Sobrino’s works is one who is just and merciful, but partial—always siding with the poor and the little ones. This is also a suffering and crucified God, suffering out of his love for the people and the world. We should express gratitude to this God and develop a sense of commitment to serve others who also need the love of God. This Christology “from below” helps theologians to rediscover the historical dimensions of faith and the life of Jesus Christ.

**Keywords:** Jon Sobrino, liberation theology, option for the poor, discipleship

## 1. Introduction

Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit originally from Spain, has lived in El Salvador for over forty years. Many of his theological works are related to the social reality of El Salvador and the larger Latin America; they are written from a Latin American perspective. His later works, since 1990s, are shaped by the reality of martyrdom — the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the four North American churchwomen, and the massacre of his own Jesuit community. Among these martyrs, some were very close to Sobrino. These martyrs, those with names and many others with no names, were victims of oppression from poverty, inequality, structural injustice and violence, and very often were massacred at the hands of the State.<sup>1</sup>

Because of such experiences, Sobrino's theology, specifically Christology, always keeps an eye on the social reality of Latin America and the historical Jesus whom people can follow in their own social context. For Sobrino, the notion of discipleship is important in his theology because following Jesus means taking the love that God manifested on the cross and making it real in history. The gift of love and grace from God "is experienced as such only in one's own self-giving."<sup>2</sup>

In Hong Kong, in recent years, we also face a variety of social problems. Many Hong Kong people feel that the government is

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1 Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: the Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 3.

2 Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 227-228.

incapable of ruling, the gap between the rich and the poor is widened, the price of housing is unaffordable, and many core values of Hong Kong have been diminished. More importantly, people worry that the promise of a highly autonomous rule is at stake and the hope of democracy is nowhere in sight.

Very often, Christians ask, what are their roles in these kinds of social issues and phenomenon? How should we make judgment as followers of Jesus? I do not intend to provide an absolute answer here. The present situation in Hong Kong is different from that in El Salvador or Latin America. However, inequality, structural injustice and violence are some common elements both places share. Jon Sobrino's notion of discipleship and his understanding of God, Jesus and the kingdom of God can help us to reflect our role and mission as Jesus' followers. In this article, I will examine these notions.

## 2. Sobrino's Viewpoint on Moral Theology

Before looking at Sobrino's notion of discipleship, let us examine his basic viewpoint on moral theology. Sobrino's theological work is very much affected by Ignacio Ellacuria, a Jesuit theologian, who was Sobrino's close friend and was assassinated along with five Jesuit colleagues and two lay coworkers on November 16, 1989. Two of his concepts, "historical reality" and "theology of sign," influenced Sobrino.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: the Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria." *Theological Studies* 70.2 (2009): 347+. *Religion and Social Science* <http://hkhss.no-ip.org:2054/gps/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=IPS&docId=A200916253&source=gale&srprod=SP00&userGroupName=hkhss&version=1.0> [accessed 24 November 2010].

Focusing on the human person, Ellacuria asserts that historical reality is where all of reality is assumed into the social realm of freedom. The demands of everyday life require us to interpret and to make choices about ways of being in the world, thereby forcing us to define our own historical reality and to make a stand in the world. Historicization refers to the appropriation and transformation of the historical (i.e., tradition-centered) and natural (i.e., the material, biological, and sentient) dimensions of reality through which this process of human self-definition takes place. Emphasizing the component of human freedom, Ellacuria asserts that historicization involves not only (1) becoming aware of and understanding reality, but also (2) an ethical responsibility for reality, and (3) a praxis-related demand to change or to take charge of reality. Besides, relating to the theology of sign, Ellacuria argues that the mission of the Church is to be a sign, and only a sign, of the God who has revealed himself in history, and of Jesus, the Lord, the Revealer of the Father.

When talking about discipleship, many moral theologians choose to examine the moral subject, such as how to nurture, form character, and determine what the disciples should do. However, Sobrino emphasizes that his main interest in moral theology is to explore the original experience from which Christian morality arises. Since this sense of morality is grounded in Jesus, he chooses to reflect the object of Christian morality, that is, on the meaning of Christian obligation in terms of Jesus, not on the moral subject as someone who is under an obligation to do something. He argues that morality cannot be reduced to imitating Jesus' action, because action is concrete and historical by its very definition. The hermeneutical circle must be taken seriously if

one wants to follow Jesus.<sup>4</sup> That is why he suggests that Christians go back to Jesus and look at his whole life rather than tell Christians that they ought to do particular action or to follow particular teaching. Many of his works focus on constructing / re-constructing christologies with a historical dimension from a Latin American perspective, and from here develops the notion of discipleship as the way to follow Jesus.

Below, I shall focus on Sobrino's notion of discipleship, and how this concept relates to his understanding of Jesus, God and the human person. This may shed lights on the understanding of our role as Jesus' followers in our own contexts.

### 3. Discipleship as Following the Historical Jesus

Christological images affect one's concept of discipleship. With the influence of Ellacuria, according to theologian Robert Lassalle-Klein, Sobrino applies the philosophical category of historical reality (and historicization) and theology of sign to Jesus and also to Christian discipleship in three key ways. First, a truly Latin American Christology must be shaped by "a new historical logos" which takes into account the historical reality of Jesus, for Jesus is "the one who lived faith in all its pristine fullest." He is the fullest revelation of the Christian God. Second, the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth is created in large part through the words and actions that define Jesus' basic historical stance toward the history and the people of Israel, his relationship to the Father, his mission, and the affirmation in faith by his disciples that

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4 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 110.

he is risen from the dead and glorified with the Father. And third, the human Jesus is the real symbol of the Word, which is described in the gospels and forms the proper object of Latin American fundamental theology and Christology.<sup>5</sup>

In view of this, the works of Sobrino attempt to show the historical face of Jesus and how his followers are drawn into a mystical analogy between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the struggles of the crucified people in Latin America and around the world, who are victims of poverty, inequality, structural injustice and violence. Discipleship, for Sobrino and other liberation theologians, involves a call to personal conversion and a movement toward establishing a community of worship in which disciples engage in corporate moral discernment and the promotion of justice for the poor. The call to discipleship summons persons to follow Jesus and to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

### 3.1 Jesus as a Historical Person

Sharing Gustavo Gutierrez's point of view, Sobrino points out that the theology of liberation insists on "spirituality as a totality of the Christian and historical life," and the following of Jesus is "the totality of the Christian life."<sup>6</sup> Discipleship is "not something fixed, or an ascetical program, as if Jesus, his attitudes, his practices, and his virtues, were to

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5 Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People."

6 Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 51.

be the object of imitation<sup>7</sup> by the Christian subject already constituted.” It is the “process” of realizing the Christian life. Based on the notion of “totality” and “process,” spirituality of liberation is a journey in the Spirit of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Thus, for Sobrino, discipleship means following the historical path of Jesus and his way of life, not just the Christ of faith idealized by the biblical writers. Approaching Jesus as a historical person means understanding Jesus’ own self-awareness, his words and actions, his activity and his praxis, his attitudes and his spirit, his fate on the cross and the resurrection in their historical context.<sup>9</sup>

In his works, Sobrino argues that the most historical aspect of the historical Jesus is his “practice” and “the spirit” with which he carried it out. By practice, Sobrino means all the activities of Jesus in his social reality and the transformation of it in the specific direction of the kingdom of God, including the events of his life, his teaching, his inner attitudes, and his fate. Practice does not simply refer to events of specific space and time, but what is handed down to us as a trust for us to pass on in our own way. The continuation of Jesus’ practice by

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7 For Sobrino, the meaning of “imitation” here is reproducing the traits or acts of Jesus, doing exactly the same thing as what Jesus did and said. Sobrino does not agree with the approach of imitation, which implies to him the image of Jesus as a lawgiver or learning from Jesus through indoctrination. The word “imitation” being employed by Sobrino is different from the other Christian ethicists such as James Gustafson, who uses this word to describe the moral life of Christians. Imitation of God, for Gustafson, does not require Christians to do exactly the same thing as God instruct them to do; Christians have their own way or moral agency to decide what to do in their own contexts though they imitate God. The section on “Jesus as a model rather than a lawgiver” of this article will further explain Sobrino’s point of view relating to this point.

8 Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 51.

9 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, xxii; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 53.



the community is necessary, though not sufficient, to understand the historical Jesus who initiated it. The essential content of this practice is the liberation of the oppressed, its approach is to come down to their level and to take on oneself the sin which is destroying them, its goal is the kingdom of God, imbued with the spirit of the beatitudes. Through Jesus' practice, we understand better what he meant by the kingdom of God and the anti-Kingdom, his historical destiny on the cross and his transcendent destiny (his resurrection as God's justice to him), the inner dimension of his person, his hope, his faith, his relationship with God.<sup>10</sup>

The spirit is both within the practice (accompaniment of the practice) and able to shape the practice, giving it a direction and even empowering it to be historically effective. To speak of Jesus as spirit rather than law is to say that the most profound reality of the historical Jesus is "his ability to open up a wholly new history through his followers." The objective is to bring about the kingdom of God as Jesus did. As Sobrino contends, "so long as domination and protest have not been overcome completely, so long as sinfulness and conflict perdure in history, Jesus will... remain to call our own path into question on the basis of his own historical path."<sup>11</sup> He resonates with Ellacuria that discipleship entails a specific service: "to take the crucified people down from the cross," that is, to side with the poor, the suffering and the oppressed.

To take the resurrection of Jesus as an example, Sobrino illustrates how this aspect of historical reality can be lived in the present, in which

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10 Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, pp. 51-54.

11 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 138.

disciples follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This resurrected reality can be seen in the paschal experience and its acceptance in faith as recorded in the New Testament. The kerygmatic texts, according to Sobrino, affirm that “something happened to Jesus’ disciples” after “their encounter with Jesus” whom they call the risen Lord; that “a change was worked in the disciples... before and after Easter,” in their behavior (from fear to bravery), and their faith (from “waiting” to affirming that “the Lord is risen indeed”); and that the impact of Jesus on his followers emerged only “after their experience of the Resurrection,” not during his life time.<sup>12</sup> Sobrino contends that if the reality of Jesus’ resurrection is not made present in history in some form, then it will remain as something totally extrinsic to us. So the following of Jesus contains a sort of historical reverberation of his resurrection in two senses: fullness and contingency, that we can see hope, freedom and joy in following Jesus, and this following has an effect on the present life.<sup>13</sup> In Latin America, following Jesus with resurrection faith means to live as a risen people, that is, to have the victims’ hope that God will triumph over injustice.

### 3.2 Discipleship as Proclaiming the Kingdom of God and Option for the Poor

Since Jesus’ mission is “the proclamation of the kingdom of God” and “to make it real and present,”<sup>14</sup> the disciples of Jesus have to establish the kingdom of God in history, here and now. It is the ultimate

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<sup>12</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, pp. 64-65. Also see Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People.”

<sup>13</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 113.

good which founds Christian morality and gives it a Christian sense. It serves as the horizon, finality, and ultimate standard for the followers of Jesus.

Sobrino says that Jesus articulates a specific concept of the kingdom of God in the Gospels, and that he presents the Kingdom as primarily addressed to the poor, as illustrated in the first of his beatitudes, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."<sup>15</sup> He argues that the kingdom of God Jesus proclaims is one that brings hope and liberation to the poor and the oppressed. The kingdom is not only a concept, but also a praxis, which requires practice to initiate. Thus, Sobrino sees Jesus as driven by a spirit of ethical responsibility for the Kingdom. The miracles Jesus performs not only demonstrate his power as a healer, but show his compassion and pity for the suffering and sorrowful people, and he also brings hope of the possibility of liberation. In the miracles, the poor sees "salvations" in their daily lives, depending on their specific oppressions. Salvation to the poor means healing, exorcising, pardoning, achieved through actions that affect one's social realities.

Moreover, Sobrino claims that preaching the kingdom of God includes confronting and denouncing the "anti-reign." This is because God's action does not simply affirm the positive aspect of human existence, God also acts in such a way that human possibilities might

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<sup>15</sup> "Preferential option for the poor" is a main theme of Sobrino's work. He identifies two classes of poor, the economically poor who lacks basic needs (as in Mk 25:25), and the sociologically poor who are despised by the ruling society, including sinners, prostitutes, the little ones (as in Mk 2:16, 11:25, Lk 15:1). For details, please see Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, pp. 79-82.

be realized in oppressive situations. For the anti-reign, Sobrino refers to those acts and structures which are in opposition to the kingdom of God and brings oppression and enslavement to the people. Jesus denounces with actions and words those religious ritual structures that oppressed the people; he also denounced the rich, the scribes and Pharisees for their vanity, hypocrisy, and their oppressing the people. In doing this, Sobrino argues, Jesus struck at the roots of a society oppressed by all sorts of power: economic, political, ideological, and religious.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Sobrino argues that mercy is a guiding principle in the life of Jesus and is therefore a defining mark of the church. The mercy of Jesus is not only an occasional sentimental movement to alleviate isolated cases of suffering, but a lifetime commitment to eradicate the root causes of suffering. It is a love that initiates and animates a process of activity aimed not only at alleviating specific needs but also at transforming the structures of injustice that are at the root of these needs. According to Sobrino, the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the nature of the principle of mercy. It depicts a love that moves the Samaritan to alleviate suffering of the other, not just doing good out of obeying the commandments.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Sobrino quotes examples from the Scriptures to support his claim, such as Jesus' answer to the question about fasting (Mk 2:18-22), Jesus' disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28), Jesus' curing on the Sabbath (Mk 2:1-6), and Jesus' denouncing the scribes for loading people with burdens too hard to bear (Lk 12:46). See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 170; *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 47. Also see Joseph Curran, "Mercy and Justice in the Face of Suffering," in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 202-204.

17 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 15-17. Also see Curran, "Mercy and Justice in the Face of Suffering," pp. 207-208.

The whole life of Jesus opposes an ethics that emphasizes “only” the vertical relationship between Jesus and the individual, but it also points to the inseparable unity of God and neighbour. He put into practice the relational aspect in his own life so as to bring the kingdom of God to real fulfillment.<sup>18</sup>

Based on this understanding, Sobrino contends that the following of Jesus today demands Christians to join the poor on their journey and exist for the poor. “The irruption of the poor once more sheds light on the reality of God as God of life, and illuminates our pilgrimage in the Spirit as a fostering of that life.”<sup>19</sup> Christians today need to determine who the poor and the oppressed are in their context.

### 3.3 Jesus as a Model rather than a Lawgiver

How do Christians deduce the sense of morality and obligation in Sobrino's Christology? Since Sobrino emphasizes the spirit of Jesus, he does not stress the demands that Jesus imposes on people. Rather he suggests that “in Jesus there appears the authentic way,” which is “a broader experience with a comprehensive meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus is not a lawgiver but serves as the spirit of Christian morality. “The foundation of Christian morality is not some sort of indoctrination in what Jesus said we must do; rather, it is the experienced meaningfulness of the fact that he lived the life of faith in all its pristine fullness.”<sup>21</sup> The disciples’

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18 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 112-113. See also Thomas Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 178-180.

19 Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, pp. 55-56.

20 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 111.

21 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 137.

experience of Jesus' life of faith inspires their re-creating the process of living the faith, and within this faith-context moral demands arise.<sup>22</sup> Jesus shows by his ministry *how* his disciples are to discern, not *what* they are to discern. The beatitudes epitomize the message and action of Jesus. These blessings, understood more as spirit than as law, inspire the praxis of the disciples. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" is singled out in the ethic of discipleship as a call to live with a basic honesty, to see things as they are and to speak the truth. The other beatitudes – thirsting for justice, being merciful – encourage disciples to give generously without expecting any return. This unconditional and mutual love serves as the mainspring of Sobrino's ethics.<sup>23</sup>

Sobrino's ethics operates within a community of disciples, which tries to discern how the spirit of Jesus is acting in the world. This can be seen in the history of early Christianity in which retrieving Jesus is an objective necessity of Christian life.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, discipleship does not merely refer to follow Jesus' verbal demands or moral injunctions. These demands must be taken within the framework of the more comprehensive reality and the Christian's experience of it.

In this experience of Jesus as the Christ, the revelation of ultimate truth and the meaning of history, Sobrino highlights two features, "urgency" and "gratuitousness," which form the basis of discipleship.

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22 Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics*, pp. 139, 183.

23 Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics*, p. 178.

24 Sobrino contends that the New Testament writings offer a variety of christologies which are mystagogical works, seeking to affect directly and deepen the faith and life of their readers. He illustrates this using a number of examples, including 1 Peter and the Pauline letters. He points out Paul asserts that "to live is Christ" and "Christ lives in me." See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, pp. 57-58.

The feeling of urgency emerges when the disciple recognizes Jesus as the Christ from the resurrection experience. It engenders a grateful heart for being invited to accompany Jesus. Moreover, Jesus' unconditional acceptance and unconditional forgiveness, of even those who had rejected and persecuted him, impel men and women to follow Jesus. This real-life example makes Christian morality obligatory. As Paul said, "the love of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14).<sup>25</sup> When disciples are moved to follow Jesus nowadays, they would historicize the values he proclaimed: love, justice, and freedom and engagement in Christian practice—immersing into the situation of the lower class, contacting the poor, serving the poor and experiencing the poor, and struggling for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. God as the Ultimate Standard of Morality

From this understanding of Jesus and the notion of discipleship, we can also see how Sobrino understands God.

##### 4.1 The Kingdom of God Metaphor Shows Who God Is

The kingdom of God metaphor, which accentuates transforming unjust relationships in fidelity to God's covenantal relationship, points to who God is and what God is like. By repeating the message that the kingdom of God is for the poor, the weak and the despised, Jesus tells his adversaries, according to Sobrino, that God takes sides—being

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<sup>25</sup> Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 111-112; Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics*, p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics*, p. 185; Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 123-126.

merciful, tender and loving to the poor and little ones. So the coming of the Kingdom is truly good news to the poor and sinners.<sup>27</sup> He tells them this is how the heavenly Father reacts to smallness and weakness, how he rejoices when the little ones prosper and accept him as a good and loving Father. This is Jesus' ultimate justification of his practice and of the partiality of the Kingdom.

#### 4.2 The Cross of Jesus and the Crucified God

According to Sobrino, following Jesus means taking the love that God manifested on the cross and making it real in history. Taking Christian existence as the following of Jesus, Christian life refers to the participation in the very life of God himself. The cross of Jesus invites us to participate in a process within which we can actually experience history as salvation. It invites us to adopt a radically new attitude towards God.<sup>28</sup> On the cross of Jesus, God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history. In God's abandonment of the Son, we find not only God's criticism of the world but also his ultimate solidarity with it. In this ultimate solidarity, he reveals himself as the God of love, who opens up a hope and a future through the most negative side of history. This is the fullest expression of love. The God-suffering relationship expresses "the ultimate reality of God possible," Sobrino says, "both in its content—God is love—and in its form—God is mystery."<sup>29</sup>

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27 Sobrino shows the love of God to the poor and who God is through the parables of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4-7), the generous vineyard owner (Mt 20:1-15), the debtors (Lk 7:41-3), and the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32).

28 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 226-227.

29 Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, p. 266.



Sobrino points out that this love for people must be converted into an active love. The gift of love and grace from God is experienced only in one's own self-giving. The feeling of gratitude will remain at the level of feeling and never becomes reality if we do not move from acceptance of the gift to self-giving out of love. Human persons come to know Jesus by means of solidarity with the least in society, who mediate God's truth to others. Human suffering illumined by the Scripture becomes the source for identifying the presence of God's kingdom. Sobrino quotes the parable of the last judgment in the gospel to bring out how going to God means going to the poor.

## 5. The Nature and Moral Agency of Human Persons

In any notion of discipleship, the role of the moral agent is very important. In Sobrino's theology, he respects both the divine initiative and the autonomy of the moral agent. The spirit of Jesus initiates the call, motivates persons to follow Jesus, and gives them the capacity to do so. At the same time, the human subject chooses to act or not to act in accordance with the inspiration.

### 5.1 Autonomy, Freedom and Responsibility of Human Persons

Sobrino emphasizes that following the historical Jesus is reproducing the whole process in which he was involved. It is not pure imitation of particular acts, but a process of realizing the Christian life. This involves today's disciples placing the values and spirit of Jesus within their own historical context, so as to take their moral responsibilities in today's world. Thus, a person's moral life

is unrepeatable. It entails a sense of creativity and imagination, and requires one to be dialectical to be Jesus' disciples. Sobrino says that the followers of Jesus grasp the experience of Jesus today in a dialectical fashion by allowing the gospel to shape their praxis and by reading the gospel in light of their active commitment. The dialectical process, which should occur within a community of disciples, includes community worship, church teaching, and a probing analysis of the social conditions. These combined sources help mediate the historical Jesus and help the disciples to discern how the spirit is acting in the world.<sup>30</sup> Sobrino also calls this dialectical process historicization. For him, Jesus' basic moral value is "re-creative justice," to realize justice concretely. He did that through immersing himself to the poor in the society, actively struggle against injustice, and be in continuous conversion and concretizing love.<sup>31</sup> Today's Christians need to discern how to take Jesus' moral values as their values and realize them like Jesus. This includes discerning how to live a life of service that will authentically correspond with the concrete will of God, what is truly and authentically good.

Sobrino, agreeing with Gutierrez, sees human persons as potential spiritual beings and free subjects. Through spiritual practice, we are free to love and serve God and others. Free human beings are those who are free from themselves, and not for themselves. They are "free to love," as the Scripture says, "No one takes [my life] from me;

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<sup>30</sup> Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics*, p. 187.

<sup>31</sup> Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 122-126.

I lay it down freely” (Jn 10:18). The freedom of the subject, and the subject’s self-bestowal and self-surrender for love, are correlative. The free subject is the spiritual person. The traits of a spiritual life include “conversion: demand for solidarity,” “gratuitousness: the atmosphere for efficacy,” “joy: victory over suffering,” “spiritual childhood: precondition of commitment to the poor,” and “community: outgrowth of solitude.”<sup>32</sup> For Sobrino, these are not isolated elements but traits of a liberated person who can be rediscovered within the liberative process. They can help Christians to recognized the need for purification and be a better liberator. All these traits are purely and simply Christian holiness, which is the substance of all Christian life. This is what the Christian community and the poor have to offer.<sup>33</sup>

## 5.2 Human Persons Moved by Mercy

In *The Principle of Mercy*, Sobrino demonstrated powerfully how the followers of Jesus are moved to follow his pathway and to show their mercy, compassion and love to others. Through the legacy of the martyrs of the Central American University, he shows how mercy moved the martyrs, more than as a feeling or as a willingness to alleviate some suffering, but as a principle which “guided their entire lives and work. Mercy was there in the beginning, but it stayed there throughout

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32 ^ Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, pp. 61-62. Quoted from Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 95, 107, 114, 122, 128. Sobrino mainly employs the work of Gutierrez in stating his ideas on spirituality and theology, and builds on this to make his own reflection.

33 Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 66.

the entire process, shaping them as well.”<sup>34</sup> In the article “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” Sobrino summarizes the relationship between mercy and Christian morality.

Mercy is the primary and ultimate, the first and the last of human reactions. It is that in terms of which all dimensions of the human being acquire meaning and without which nothing else attains to human status. In this mercy, the human being is perfected, becomes whole, as Luke teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The gospels use it to typify Jesus himself, who so often acts after being moved with compassion. The Bible actually uses it to typify God whose bowels grow so tender that the divine Father welcomes and embraces the prodigal. Mercy, then, is the correct manner of responding to concrete reality—as well as the ultimate and decisive manner thereof, as we learn from the parable of the Last Judgment.<sup>35</sup>

It is the sense of mercy that evokes and moved Christians to give their love to the others, not only the suffering individual, but the crucified people. To be moved by mercy “means to do everything we possibly can to bring them down from the cross.”<sup>36</sup>

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34 Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, p. 176. Also see James F. Keenan, “Radicalizing the Comprehensiveness of Mercy: Christian Identity in Theological Ethics,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 188.

35 Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberatiuis: Fundamental Concepts in Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 682. Quoted from Keenan, “Radicalizing the Comprehensiveness of Mercy,” p. 192.

36 Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, p. 10.

Joining Ellacuria's comment on Archbishop Oscar Romero, Sobrino agrees that Archbishop Romero was "a model follower of Jesus of Nazareth" in modern time. This can be seen from his historicizing praxis and how he appropriated the historical Jesus. He was considered as "a pastor who defended his people, a prophet who confronted the enemies of the people, a martyr, faithful to the end to the God who sent him to save the people."<sup>37</sup> Sobrino further points out that what makes Romero to be a model follower of Jesus is "his enormous compassion in the face of the people's suffering, the justice to go to the root of things, and at the same time the hope—against hope—that he gave the people." In addition, his immense freedom in speaking the truth to everyone, with which he directly defended some (the poor) and demanded radical conversion of others (the oppressors); and his firmness in the midst of persecutions, humiliations, and misunderstandings rooted in his faith in the mystery of God the Father also makes him a model follower. To Sobrino and Ellacuria, followers of Jesus are those "who in reality, not only by intention or in prayer, become like Jesus." They have lived like Jesus, they have loved the poor and defended them from their oppressors, they have denounced the oppressors' sins, they have persisted under the resulting persecution, and they have ended up on a cross like Jesus, just as Archbishop Romero and many other martyrs. Sobrino emphasizes that "following keeps faith from dissolving out of its real substance."<sup>38</sup>

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37 Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 121-122.

38 Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 123. Also see Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

### 5.3 Evil Use of Power Rooted in the Will to Power

When discussing the realization of the kingdom of God, Sobrino points out that Jesus condemns sin, both the individual and the collective sins that create a situation contrary to the kingdom, which is a utopian symbol for a wholly new and definitive way of living and being. Jesus sees the *de facto* evil use of power rooted in the will to power—specifically in the power that tries to manipulate God.<sup>39</sup>

In analyzing the moral subject as subject, Sobrino argues, Jesus stresses the danger of the temptation of ego. He warns that the yearning for justice may turn into an affirmation of one's own ego rather than that of others. Jesus warns that the human heart must be pure. The moral subject should not be guided by a retributive or vindictive notion of justice, rather they should work for a truly re-creative notion which is the basic moral value proclaimed and exemplified by Jesus. They must “renounce the will to power,” so that their justice will really be the justice of God and his kingdom.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. Implications

Sobrino has written that as long as there is suffering, poverty, exclusion and premature death on an immense scale—which is ever more the case in Latin America—there will be need for a theology that poses the kinds of questions posed by liberation theology. One of the most important questions for Sobrino is, to use the words of Gustavo

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39 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 121.

40 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 122.

Gutierrez: "How do we tell the poor [and the oppressed] of this world that God loves them?"<sup>41</sup> Sobrino's liberation theology, and specifically Christology, is very much related to the above question.

His notion of discipleship can be considered as a concrete response to that question, that God loves the poor through his divine action in Jesus and the Church communities. Being a Christian is to follow the totality of the life of Jesus, whose mission is the proclamation of the kingdom of God that brings hope and liberation to the poor and the oppressed, and to make it real and present. Jesus called his disciples to take the crucified people down from the cross. When the disciples do this, they are transformed and become living signs of the universal church of the Kingdom. Therefore, Sobrino's notion of discipleship is very much needed in view of the social situation of Latin America as well as in Hong Kong.

We have to ask who are the poor and the oppressed in Hong Kong and today's world – people being deprived the right to political participation, the poor and the homeless who cannot lead a decent living, the workers without proper salary and reasonable working condition.

In Sobrino's notion of discipleship, we can see his understanding of Jesus Christ, God and the human person are very much inter-related. Adhering to the methodological starting point of a careful reading of

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41 Nancy E. Bedford, "Whatever happened to liberation theology?" *The Christian Century* 116.28 (1999): 996. *Religion and Social Science* <http://hkhss.no-ip.org:2054/gps/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=IPS&docId=A57042404&source=gale&srprod=SP00&userGroupName=hkhss&version=1.0> [accessed 24 November 2010].

the signs of the times, as the other liberation theologians do, and at the same time highlighting Jesus as spirit, calling people to re-create their own path on the basis of Jesus' own historical path, Sobrino's Christology, and particularly the notion of discipleship, affirms the freedom of human persons in Jesus Christ, who is both divine and human. It is this profound sense of freedom which allows the followers of Christ to have a deeper grasp of the poverty and oppression in a changing context and to live like Jesus in our own times, so that we can take the moral responsibility in our own concrete situation.

By building discipleship on the basis of the entire life of Jesus, which includes his teachings and praxis, and not merely his moral injunctions, Sobrino avoids an individualistic ethics. Rather, it is a social ethics that calls Christians to build the kingdom of God on earth like Jesus. The main sources and foundation of his ethics are both Scripture and human experiences in a social reality, which includes commitment of the Christian community in the Church and in the society. These sources interact in a dialectical way with the moral agent so that these various sources can shape the attitude and perception of Christians.

Given both the divine and human dimensions of Jesus Christ, the God depicted in Sobrino's works is one who is just and merciful, but partial—always siding with the poor and the little ones. This is also a suffering and crucified God, suffering out of his love for the people and the world. We should express gratitude to this God and develop a sense of commitment to serve others who also need the love of God.

In spite of this understanding of Jesus, God and the human person, some critics criticize Sobrino for his emphasis on the human side of



Jesus to the neglect of his divinity. However, I found Sobrino's Latin American Christology and particularly his notion of discipleship, integrating well these two dimensions, without neglecting the place of God and the relationship of Jesus to the Father.

Rather, I would criticize his insufficient focus on the human person. As Sobrino recognizes, he chooses to reflect on the object rather than the moral subject of Christian morality. What he emphasizes mainly about the person is the experience of getting in touch with those who are suffering from poverty. Such experiences ought to move them to respond and follow Jesus, as in the cases of the Good Samaritan, Jesus, Archbishop Romero, and himself. His treatment of the principle of mercy also highlights this aspect. However, there is still a lack of the kind of moral discourse that directs personal moral choices, and the ways to form and nourish Christians to have this sense of discipleship as he described.

On the other hand, apart from this Christology "from below" that helps theologians rediscover the historical dimensions of faith and the life of Jesus Christ, other theologians in Latin America argue that a Christology "from above," which underlines that it is the Triune God who chooses to walk people's paths in order to change them, is more meaningful nowadays.<sup>42</sup> They argue that a pneumatology of power, such as that displayed in neo-Pentecostal religiosity, often serves as a concrete answer to those who in ordinary life feel powerless, offering them a sense of dignity. To these theologians, one task of theology is to cultivate and reflect upon the "small stories" in the community of faith

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42 Bedford, "Whatever happened to liberation theology?"

without forgetting their connection to the “master narrative” of God’s kingdom. Small and humble practices of faith such as singing together or remembering the stories about Jesus can work towards rekindling a viable praxis of structural change. These practices also serve to empower and lend dignity to the poorest, while at the same time contributing to a sense of community. Proposing this kind of pneumatological theology does not mean that these theologians are against liberation theology. Rather, they argue for a need of pluralistic development of theology which can empower the mass who feel helpless in the unjust structure. This development can supplement the aspect which Sobrino and other liberation theologians have neglected in the past.