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Theology in the Light of Human Suffering

A Note on "Taking the Crucified Down from the Cross"

PAUL G. CROWLEY, S.J.

The writings of Jon Sobrino on suffering are so extensive, the theme so pervasively represented in virtually all of his works, that it is difficult to know where to start delineating a "theology of suffering" in his works. Sobrino himself does not identify any one part of his work as a "theology of suffering" per se. Still, there are certain fundamental motifs that recur throughout his writings and that lend to them a coherence and consistency that allow us to take the measure of his contribution to theological reflection on suffering. This project is probably best undertaken in retrospect, as we survey Sobrino's vast corpus, and as we reflect with gratitude on all that this great theologian has given us to consider on the topic of suffering. I will demonstrate here that the attempt to articulate Sobrino's "theology of suffering" will take us directly into his theology of the cross and resurrection—his theology of the paschal mystery—for this is where his fundamental reflections on suffering are to be found.

At the outset it should be said that Jon Sobrino's contribution to a theology of suffering is not so much a theology *about* suffering as it is a theology written *from* suffering, the contexts of suffering that have shaped his life and career in El Salvador for the past several decades. The suffering that motivates his theology is not hidden: It is the suffering that comes upon the impoverished and politically vulnerable by powers beyond themselves, crushing down on them with the force of an affliction.¹ It is, furthermore, the suffering of injustice, which compounds even the ordinary sufferings of life. His concern is for the suffering of whole peoples, those whom he will call the "crucified people," a term we will examine further. It is crucial to understand, therefore, that while he is certainly not uninterested in the personal sufferings of individual human

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beings, he sees even these sufferings in the social context of the wider sufferings of peoples in historically conflicted and oppressive situations.

The purpose of his theological reflections on such suffering is not only to understand this suffering but to unmask its causes, and thereby to have theology work toward not only the ameliorization of suffering but also its removal. As a theology of liberation, Sobrino's theological reflection on suffering is therefore written for the sake of freedom from suffering. Following the pattern of his Jesuit companion and intellectual collaborator, Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino would have us take the "crucified people" down from their crosses of suffering. He would interrupt these crucifixions, because these crucifixions are themselves expressions of the unjust suffering, suffering caused by the sins of oppressive power. And, crucial to our considerations here, it is important to remember that every part of Sobrino's theology stands in relation to the drama of human suffering to which he has been an integral witness in his years in El Salvador—through civil war and the transformation of the church there into a theater of martyrdom, to earthquake and the exposure of even deeper structures of injustice. This is no armchair theology.

As a point of departure for understanding Sobrino's approach to suffering, and to his theologizing about it, one could not do better than begin with the essay written in the wake of the Salvadoran earthquake of 2001, contained in the collection *Where Is God?*² One might think that a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, might elicit from a theologian a classical treatment of suffering, much as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 resulted in a flood of writing on theodicy, which considered how such catastrophic human suffering could be reconciled with a God both good and omnipotent. While Sobrino is certainly not uninterested in the serious questions of theodicy, and does treat of it, his fundamental question is a different one and could be formulated this way: Why is it that the poor suffer so disproportionately, even in a natural disaster? Sobrino proceeds to demonstrate how even a natural disaster serves to unmask the underlying structures of social and economic injustice because the poor are caught up in a physical embodiment of the oppression that marks their lives all along, robbed of land and now without a roof, literally clinging to cliffsides, and disproportionately buried in the rubble. The earthquake therefore becomes a summons to undo the unjust structures whose raw framework is exposed by natural disaster. The "crucified people" suffer not only directly by virtue of political, economic, social and military oppression, and from the forces of empire and market globalization but also indirectly through the effects of this warping of their lives. They are not only impoverished, but disproportionately vulnerable. They can disappear as if their lives were of no significance whatsoever. And, of course, we see this again and again in natural disasters around the globe.

For Sobrino, what this must elicit is a response, a revulsion against suffering, not in and of itself, but because so much of it is caused by human factors

that render it avoidable. A “theology of suffering” would therefore involve a protest against suffering: a prophetic “no” that serves as a summons to bring an end to suffering. In theological terms: The suffering of the cross must be brought to an end. And this is to be accomplished by the liberating power of God’s love, which is the power of the resurrection. Sobrino’s theology of suffering is framed, then, within the paschal mystery, where the resurrection in relation to the cross becomes a heuristic for the saving work of God, which is reflected in the work of liberation undertaken by people of faith. And that work of liberation is described as taking the “crucified people” down from their crosses. This is at once an image of mercy, hence an interruption and alleviation of suffering, and a deposition, which attends to the suffering even beyond their deaths and cares for their memory, as we see depicted in the images of the disciples taking Jesus down from his cross. But Sobrino intends something more by the use of this image: a remaking of our image of the cross through a remaking of the people who suffer needlessly and at the hands of injustice. It is not suffering itself that is at issue: It is the suffering that issues from injustice. And the image of taking people down from their crosses is intended to address this fundamental fact. It is to join in God’s emphatic “no” to such suffering, definitively revealed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

I wish to consider Sobrino’s approach to suffering in three stages. First, I will examine Ellacuría’s metaphor of the “crucified people.” I will then show how Sobrino develops this metaphor in his own work, particularly in his theology of the paschal mystery. Finally, I will suggest that the praxis of resurrection gives concrete form to the summons to remove the suffering poor from their crosses. The whole of Sobrino’s theological treatment of suffering, I will argue, can only be seen within the framework of the paschal mystery, both cross and resurrection. Eschewing a theodicy removed from Christology, Sobrino’s theology *from* suffering is an integral moment of his Christology and leads to a central insight into suffering: that the power of God’s love wants to bring it to an end.

Sobrino’s Indebtedness to Ellacuría

Sobrino’s personal indebtedness to Ellacuría’s theology is expressed in many places in his theological corpus. It is an indebtedness that arose from their shared Jesuit mission and lives in El Salvador and their collegueship at the Universidad Centroamericana up until the time of Ellacuría’s murder in 1989, along with his Jesuit companions, their housekeeper, and her daughter. His personal admiration for “Ellacu” was expressed shortly after the 1989 assassinations in *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*, a book he wrote while in residence at Santa Clara immediately after the killings at the univer-

sity. But the most poignant and telling source of this relationship is to be found in his essay "Ignacio Ellacuría, the Human Being and the Christian: 'Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross.'"³

The most immediately pertinent connection between Ellacuría's thought and Sobrino's theology is to be found in Sobrino's description of the starting point of Ellacuría's own life work: a strong sense of the reality of the people whom he served, "service *from the place of others*." This laid the foundation for a compassion that was not in the least sentimental but was nevertheless real and felt: "Ellacuría was moved to the depths by the sight of a people prostrate, oppressed, deceived, ridiculed—in the forceful terms he always used. He reacted to this, not just by way of lament. Indeed, he never made peace with the pain it implies. . . ." And, further: "The suffering of victims has deep roots, and it is these roots that must be pulled out (no small thing), and replaced by others that produce life and fraternity." The meaning of his whole life, then, was "the struggle to reverse a history of inhumanity."⁴ For this reason, Sobrino tells us "his perception of the tragedy of reality: death, the terrible pain of the victims of the world," and that truly this "world is sin, radical negativity, a radical negation of the will of God, and the highest manifestation of the rejection of God." Yet this world is also "the historical appearance of the servant of Yahweh as suffering servant and the appearance of Christ crucified."⁵ From the sin of the world emerges the Crucified One from whom salvation comes. It is in this light, then, that Ellacuría would speak of the "crucified peoples" who are strung up unjustly on their crosses of suffering, but from whom, as Christ crucified today, salvation would ultimately also derive. And this would occur through the liberating power of God's love realized in part through a liberating praxis of the gospel.

Ellacuría himself was quite aware of the dramatic punch and even scandalous effect of the image of a crucified people. But it is the scandal of the cross itself, and "we must recover that scandal and madness if we do not want to vitiate the history-making truth of the passion of Jesus."⁷ What he wishes to keep alive with this image is the eschatological dimension of the "reign of God," which Jesus proclaimed. The reign of God is actually initiated in the whole of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the whole of the paschal mystery. Thus, the reign begins to be realized within and not apart from history, but finds its ultimate fulfillment in the future of God disclosed by the resurrection of Jesus. Due to its eschatological character, the initiation of the reign of God has not brought a final end to the "reign of sin" within history itself, even though history is already redeemed. "It is precisely the reign of sin that continues to crucify most of humankind and that obliges us to make real in history the death of Jesus as the actualized passover of the Reign of God."⁸ That is, the suffering of Jesus on the cross continues in history today, and it is we who live now who are called on to respond to the suffering of this cross, to become agents of lib-

eration from suffering, as did the Father in the Passover that was newly realized on the cross of Jesus' death.

Relying on the thought of the German Protestant theologian Wolfhart Panenberg, Ellacuría holds that the not-yet-fully-realized eschatology of the reign of God in history indicates a certain tension between the crucifixion and the resurrection. The resurrection marks the beginning of a new life for the human race, but it points back to the crucifixion, which is a constant reminder that the reign "is not possible as a community of human beings in perfect peace and total justice, without a radical change of the natural conditions that are present in human life. . . ."9 The enduring power of the resurrection points to the enduring power of sin, which, within history, persists as a fact of human life that is expressed in the unjust suffering of whole peoples. The crucifixion continues in history, just as the power of the resurrection continues to work its effect, and, in God's future, will bring an end to the suffering and death that are the crucifixion of whole peoples.

The crucifixion of Jesus continues, therefore, in the crucifixion of the poor. For Ellacuría, the crucified people are "that collective body" who owe their suffering "to the way society is organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which taken together and given their concrete impact with history must be regarded as sin."¹⁰ At the same time there are "subsystems of crucifixion" that include not only the oppressed poor, but those who oppress them, directly or indirectly. The latter, too, suffer, albeit in a different way, from the diminishment of humanity caused by the sinfulness in which they are enmeshed, leading to a flight from themselves in a drive to dominate the vulnerable or to pursue a life that excludes the horizon of the world's impoverished.¹¹ This includes, of course, the privileged few of the developed world for whom the vast majority of humanity, all of them poor and who make possible through their labors the wealth of the rich, is almost completely invisible. Yet, God will work salvation and establish the reign definitively through the crucified people, who stand in history today as the realization of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who bore Israel's offenses and thus saved Israel.¹² Like the Suffering Servant, the image of "the crucified people has a twofold thrust: it is the victim of the sin of the world, and it is also bearer of the world's salvation."¹³

This focus on the crucifixion of the crucified people leads us to a focus on the enduring sin of the world. The power of God over sin and death, revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, must also be treated. "Salvation does not come through the mere fact of crucifixion and death; only a people that lives because it has risen from the Death inflicted on it can save the world."¹⁴ This is where Sobrino takes up the mantle of Ellacuría, for in the notion of taking the crucified people down from their crosses, he is in fact suggesting a praxis of resurrection faith, a way that the power of the resurrection over sin and death in history can be effected and the reign of God established in history.

The “Crucified People” in Sobrino’s Christology

The themes sketched above are found in many places in Sobrino’s work. Perhaps the most succinct summary is in his essay “The Crucified Peoples: Yahweh’s Suffering Servant Today,” an essay written in memory of Ellacuría and in anticipation of 1992, the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas.¹⁵ In this essay, Sobrino describes the “horrible fact” of the crucified people in the inhuman poverty and misery in which they live, the marginalization of the poorest of the poor (especially indigenous peoples), and the crucifixion by impoverishment and disease that leads to actual death for so many. And, like Ellacuría, Sobrino sees the crucified people as the contemporary embodiment of the Suffering Servant, and as bearers of salvation.

Now, it is at this point that Sobrino introduces a creative tension into the working out of salvation in history. For, it is imperative that “we” bring the crucified people down from the cross. The tragedy that has been visited on them must be brought to an end. This is the requirement of an “anthropodicy by which human beings can be justified.”¹⁶ Although he does not develop this idea, the reference is significant. If the question for theology after Auschwitz was how to justify God, a question strictly speaking of theodicy, the question for the tragedy of Latin America is how to justify the human beings who have been the cause of so much tragedy. The only way the perpetrators can be seen as justified (from a human standpoint) is if they are converted to a new vision for humanity and themselves begin to take the crucified down from their crosses, thus working for their integral liberation rather than the continuing oppression that has resulted in suffering and death. To take people down from their crosses is to engage in the praxis of resurrection. This degree of conversion would seem to be rare, but not impossible. Sobrino frequently cites the conversion of Archbishop Oscar Romero himself from a position of upholder of the status quo to a prophetic leader of the crucified people and a stalwart defender of their dignity and rights.

And here enters the creative tension. For, as in the case of Romero, the ones who will show the way to conversion are the crucified peoples themselves. They themselves offer the insight into and grounding for a praxis of resurrection. Without wishing to romanticize the oppressed poor, Sobrino nevertheless suggests that they offer Western civilization a set of values (openness, cooperation, simplicity), a sense of hope, a capacity for love, a readiness to forgive, a demonstrated solidarity, and a testament to faith as church that the powerful and privileged have much to learn from.¹⁷ All of this comes from his lived experience with poor people in El Salvador. So he concludes: “It is paradoxical, but it is true. The crucified peoples offer light and salvation.”¹⁸ This does not mean that the poor do not sin or that they are not themselves in need of personal conversion. But Sobrino wants to emphasize that they are, nevertheless, instru-

ments of salvation, perhaps in spite of themselves, precisely because of their impoverishment and weakness.

These two parts of Sobrino's approach to the crucified people—taking them down from the cross and seeing in them the source of salvation—are in fact a reflection of a deeper structure in his theology from suffering: the pattern established in the life and ministry of Jesus. Both dimensions of this picture are reflected in his theology of the paschal mystery contained in his Christology. Indeed, we find these themes expressed very early on in his 1982 work on Christology, *Jesus in Latin America*.¹⁹ Here we find the familiar motifs of the crucified people and of their embodiment in history as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Rather than focus on taking them down from the crosses of suffering, however, Sobrino here focuses on how the crucified people follow as disciples in the pattern of Jesus and thus begift the larger church with an example to follow. They are in a sense, then, sources of salvation to the degree that they resemble Jesus as the living incarnation of Christ. They are enactors of Jesus' message by virtue of who they are, unmasking the false political and economic gods that oppress them.²⁰ "A crucified people resembles Jesus by the mere fact of what it is and is loved preferentially by God because of what it is. . . . The reality of the act of faith in Christ comes about in this reproducing of his features, in this becoming daughters and sons in the Son."²¹ At this stage, then, the suffering of the crucified people is salvific to the degree that it is an entrée into a lived discipleship of Jesus, which includes the enactment of the saving, liberating work of Jesus.

While the discipleship of the crucified people will remain the key to Sobrino's theological understanding of a Christian praxis of liberation, there is a marked shift in his later Christology to a focus on the death of Jesus, and a correlation between the crucifixion of Jesus and the sufferings of the people of Latin America, and more generally of the poor of the world. In *Jesus the Liberator*, the first of his two-volume Christology, he entitles the third part "The Cross of Jesus," and pays specific attention to why Jesus was killed. Here he addresses fundamental historical questions relating to why Jesus was tried and executed by the Roman authorities. This is followed by a theological reflection on the meaning of the cross, focusing on why Jesus *died*—the meaning of his suffering and death. In this theological excursus, Sobrino emphasizes that the revelatory power of the cross as a sign of God's saving work depends on its scandalizing effect. Echoing Ellacuría here, he holds that if we "dull the edge of the scandal of the cross," we risk reducing its role in salvation to a part of a calculus, an explanation that is merely "logical or even necessary."²² The fact remains, of course, that the cross signals a salvation that comes from suffering. Here Sobrino, following Ellacuría, relates the suffering of Jesus on the cross to the suffering of the Servant in Isaiah. "Jesus is innocent, the sufferings he bears are those that others ought to bear and by bearing them he becomes salvation for others."²³ This suffering and the death that follows are not in themselves and alone the cause of salvation. Rather, the whole of Jesus' life was not acci-

dental to his mission and destiny. It was the expression of his love, love that was pleasing to God and that reached its culmination in his suffering and death. "The cross, as a historically necessary component of love, is part of its historical fullness, and what God was pleased by was this fullness of love."²⁴ And this is related to the incarnation itself, in that it is the enfleshment of love drawing near to humanity within a world of sin that necessitates such suffering love. The cross is thus a product of an authentic incarnation of God into sin-ridden human reality.²⁵ The saving love of Jesus is therefore a wholly credible love, a love without limits, even though, within history, its effects are yet to be fully played out.

Sobrinó's next move in this Christology is to inquire into what the cross reveals to us about God, precisely as a suffering or "crucified" God. Sobrinó is sensitive to criticisms that in his earlier work he focused too much on the cross and not enough on the resurrection. Yet, he says, we risk losing the scandal of the cross if we forget that its meaning is revealed within "the real crucified world" of martyrs. Of course, he has in mind not only his Jesuit brothers and Archbishop Romero, but all those who lost their lives in El Salvador during the civil war because of their witness to faith.²⁶ "Woe to human beings and believers if they forget the crucifixion!"²⁷ And here he explicitly invokes the memory of his own brothers martyred at the University of Central America.

In the shadow of this lived reality, which so deeply shades his theology, he focuses in this section on what cannot be avoided about the cross without diminishing its significance: that Jesus, the innocent one, made to be sin by the powers that prosecuted him, felt abandoned by God. The sense of abandonment expressed by Jesus himself on the cross (Psalm 22) raises fundamental challenges to our most cherished ideas about God as loving and present to us in our own sufferings. The "profound isolation" of Jesus, in turn, marked a "theological discontinuity" between Jesus' entire life of absolute closeness to God and now this nightmare of infinite distance: In his greatest hour of need, Jesus finds only the silence of God. This, in turn, reveals to us something about suffering itself, which "remains the supreme enigma for human reason."²⁸ Drawing on Johannes Metz, Dorothee Soelle, and others, Sobrinó confronts the harsh reality of suffering and its defiance of any final meaning in itself, a fact made more forceful when we are considering the suffering of innocent people or people whose suffering is caused by nothing they have called upon themselves.

What, then, do we make of the silence of God? Sobrinó arrives at a position that is neither apologetic (God is in no way involved) nor accommodationist (God somehow bore the sufferings of the cross). Rather, squarely facing the silence of God, Sobrinó suggests that "God suffered on Jesus' cross and on those of this world's victims by being their non-active and silent witness."²⁹ For if God allowed himself to become incarnate in the sinfulness of human reality and history, then he also submitted to the limitations of that condition. The silence of God is in

some sense an indication of the “weakness” of God precisely because God has entered into solidarity with the suffering victims of history, those who have no voice, who are themselves reduced to a silence in their suffering. But because this is a silence that issues from solidarity—God’s solidarity with the suffering—then it does not signal a resignation to suffering, but rather a profound divine sharing in the bearing of injustice. This divine sharing, and not any extrinsic program, theological or political, is the deepest foundation of a praxis of liberation. “In Latin America it is a tangible fact that God’s suffering has also been an idea that has encouraged liberation rather than resignation.”³⁰ The suffering silence of God, mirrored in the silence of Jesus himself as he went to the cross, is a powerful unmasking of the “illegitimate interests” that caused such suffering in the first place. This solidarity of the “lesser God,” the God of solidarity with the powerless, is in fact a kind of protest against the crucifixions of the world even as God silently bears the pain of such crucifixions.

And here we enter into phase three of this treatment of the cross in Sobrino’s Christology, the move from the cross of Jesus and God’s solidarity with Jesus precisely in his silence to a consideration of the continuation of the crucifixion in the “collective crosses of whole peoples,” in the historical catastrophes of the crucified people of the world. Here he defines what he means by the term “crucified people.” First, there is the factual data of poverty and death, the suffering that comes from massive deprivation of the assets of culture because of poverty, disease, war, and natural catastrophe. Second, there is the suffering and death caused by unjust social and economic structures, imposed by “powers” that dominate the poor and weak. Third, there is the theological-religious reality of such suffering, that the very human beings who do so suffer are the suffering Body of Christ in history.³¹ The sufferings of these peoples, not only in Central America, but throughout the world, and especially where people are subjected to historical catastrophe caused by human beings, are the “new name for Golgotha today and their peoples are the Suffering Servant.”³²

There can be no doubt that Sobrino’s theology from suffering emanates from a first-hand experience of what he has witnessed, and if we are to speak of his theology of suffering, we cannot do so apart from a theology of the paschal mystery—a full understanding of the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Suffering and the Praxis of Resurrection

The second volume of Sobrino’s Christology, originally entitled in Spanish *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (“Faith in Jesus Christ: An Essay from the Victims”), was published in English as *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*.³³ Here, in the first third of the book, is Sobrino’s long-awaited treatment of the resurrection—his response to those critics who complained of too

heavy an earlier emphasis on the cross and the sufferings of the crucified people. Here, too, his prism is the “victims” of history, a term he uses in preference to “the poor.” The “poor” are the “impoverished”—a term used to emphasize that poverty is the result of conditions forced on people. To be poor is not a natural state. As such, the impoverished are victims. These victims of history especially include those who are economically poor, because this poverty is caused by an inequality that issues from the indifference of the rich and by institutionalized hypocrisy at many levels. Because of this, Sobrino will hold that poverty “is the most lasting form of violence and the violence that is committed with the greatest impunity.”³⁴ It is from the viewpoint and experience of the victims, therefore, that Sobrino will undertake an interpretation of the resurrection—of its relation to the sufferings of the cross and to the ongoing saving work of Christ in the world.

It is, first, important to note that the resurrection is an eschatological action of God. It is the revelation of the supreme power of God’s love over suffering and death, but it is a revelation that occurs within the limitations of time and history. This means that suffering and death remain with us even as this power is being worked out within history. And this means that the victims of history are still suffering. And so they present a reality that must figure into our understanding of the resurrection. Still, the resurrection is also the source of hope for Christians, the pledge that God’s future is our own, and that it is life, not death, that God definitively and victoriously establishes. If the resurrection is the final cause of our hope, then how do we bring the horizon of the suffering victims of the world into relationship with the horizon of hope that is the resurrection?

Sobrino’s survey of Scripture in this work is the beginning of an answer to this question. In ancient Israel, resurrection stood in opposition to “the tragedy of ending in *sheol*,” which was tantamount to “ceasing to be in communion with Yahweh.”³⁵ For Israel, therefore, the promise of resurrection was the promise that the silence of God would not be eternal, that God would once again speak to Israel and be in communion with God’s beloved people, and within history. They would be established as a people, secure in their own land. But resurrection also bespoke of a hope of communion with God beyond death. The fidelity of God to Israel resulted in Israel’s faith in God’s eternal fidelity—the “lordship of Yahweh” beyond history in a way that overcame the finality of death itself. And this triumph over death established God’s “eschatological triumph over injustice” not only beyond death but also in the eschatological present. Here Sobrino notes that resurrection in the Hebraic imagination is never that of an individual but of a whole people.³⁶ The resurrection of the dead, therefore, is the salvation of a whole people, a salvation that begins within history and comes to fulfillment in God’s future.

And this has a definite effect on the victims of history, those who suffer but live in hope. This hope of the victims, which is more than hope for a mere survival, is nevertheless a “hope against hope” because of the darkness of suffering

that enshrouds them. And, it must be added, not every Christian is a victim of history in precisely the way the impoverished of the world are. The hope of the victims cannot somehow be a hope that is other than the hope of all Christians for eternal life. The question arises, then, as to how hope for *my* resurrection has anything to do with the hope of the victims for resurrection from what is already a living death, which is a living scandal. Sobrino's answer is religiously compelling: "the Christian courage to hope in one's own resurrection depends on the courage to hope for the overcoming of the historical scandal of injustice. In theological³⁷ language the question is whether God can do justice to the victims produced by human beings."³⁸ The power of the resurrection as an eschatological event is, therefore, going to be tied to the way the resurrection is worked out in history, through the agency of the living Body of Christ, the whole church. It will depend, then, in part on the degree to which those who are not victims can participate in God's loving response to the victims of history, how they can undertake a praxis of resurrection. This

means that we have, in Ignacio Ellacuría's words, to "take the situation on ourselves," in this case the situation of the victims, but it is also true that "the situation takes us on itself" and that it offers us not only sin and the obligation to eradicate it but also grace and the courage to hope.³⁹

And this is possible, Sobrino tells us, because "The victims offer us their hope." We have already seen why he finds "light and salvation" in the crucified people.

It is here that the loop begun in the work of Ellacuría, which so strongly influenced Sobrino, is closed. The ways Christians live within the power of the resurrection through what he calls "the praxis of raising the crucified" is the beginning of the realization of our hope. The pattern was set by the apostles, who are described in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles as witnesses to the resurrection—witnesses entrusted with a mission. The resurrection event is not exhausted by the accounts of the appearances of Jesus and the empty tomb; it is fully realized in the apostolate of the witnesses who are commissioned by the gift of the Spirit to carry out the work of the risen Christ. "From this it follows that the apostolate—a praxis—is a hermeneutical principle for understanding the resurrection and that without it the resurrection cannot be understood as an eschatological event that essentially inspires praxis."⁴⁰ Praxis is the expression of the hope that motivates the witnesses to history who are also witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

How can we bring to fruition this praxis in relation to the suffering of the crucified people? We can do so, first, by proclaiming the resurrection through "putting oneself at the service of the resurrection" by working "in the service of eschatological ideals: justice, peace, solidarity, the life of the weak, community, dignity, celebration, and so on."⁴¹ These are "partial resurrections" that help the eschatological reality of the resurrection itself to be realized in history. Further,

this means undertaking courses of action that will bring about social, political, and economic transformation of the structures that have caused so much suffering and created victims. In this kind of work, the resurrection coincides with the establishment of the kingdom, itself an eschatological vision of God's triumph, and the reversal of the programs of death and disintegration that led to the crucifixion in the first place. "And this is also what Ignacio Ellacuría meant when he . . . used the expression 'taking the crucified people down from the cross' as a formulation of Christian mission."⁴² Taking the crucified down from the cross is, therefore, an expression of resurrection praxis. It is the most hope-filled activity, positively oriented toward life, that a Christian can imagine. It is the most radical expression of hope in the saving power of God made manifest in the suffering of the cross and vindicated in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, his having been raised from the dead.

Sobrino's Theology of Suffering in Relation to Other Voices

As I indicated at the outset, Sobrino has given us not so much a theology of suffering as he has a theology arising *from* suffering and searching for a response to it inspired by the central mystery of Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have also seen how his powerful image of taking the crucified down from their crosses is motivated both by his own historical experience as a Jesuit companion in El Salvador and also by an understanding of the praxis of the resurrection. This is an enormous contribution to our understanding of the meaning of the Christian message: God's self-communication of his saving power to us in Jesus Christ, realized in history.

Precisely because an understanding of the praxis of the resurrection is such a theological accomplishment, it would behoove us to imagine how the central insights of this theology could find a wider theater of application by entering into conversation with thinking that neither begins within the same historical reality nor is mediated by similar theological categories. For if suffering is universal, if "crucified peoples" are to be found all over the globe, then the language of the "praxis" of resurrection, especially when understood as taking the victims down from their crosses, could well be served by engagement in wider dialogues. I can touch only on three such potential conversations here, but each would, I think, draw Sobrino's thought into wider circles of engagement, understanding, and application.

The first encounter is with the work of Matthias Beier, whose work on psychoanalysis and exegesis explores the origins of a religious typology that could sanction violence, and the visiting of violence upon the innocent. His *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann*⁴³ offers, I think, one valuable contribution to the problematic with which a theology of liberation is concerned: how the oppressors can do what they do even while being

Christians. Beier pushes his investigation through an analysis of war and interprets the cross as a redemption from the violent God-image that has given sanction to the pursuit of war and other ways of creating victims in history. If the praxis of resurrection includes the work of conversion, even of the powerful, then this kind of investigation would be helpful to a liberation methodology.

A second possible encounter with Sobrino's theology would be the work of Elaine Scarey. In *The Body in Pain*⁴⁴ she explores the ways human beings, and precisely their bodies, are "unmade" through the pain of torture and war. Certainly, this is timely for the period of war in which the United States now stands convicted of having caused so much unmaking of human lives. While not a theological work, her insights into how the power of oppression actually works to create victims is illuminating and extends the analysis to a broad field of human experience. The second half of the book examines how bodies and lives can be made again, reconstituted, as it were, through appeal to the structures of belief as realized in the materiality of history and concrete circumstance. This work has clear resonances with Sobrino's "resurrection praxis" and could lend further insight into the meaning of taking the crucified down from their crosses. It could help especially to relate this powerful metaphor to concerns in the developed world to bring an end to the machinery of war that contributes to dehumanization and poverty wherever it is waged. Sobrino can attest to that from his experience in El Salvador alone, where the war was fueled by resources from the powerful North. But we are seeing similar and even more disconcerting patterns around the world, with other powers repeating the tragic patterns of empires of the past.

In a similar vein, William T. Cavanagh's *Torture and Eucharist*⁴⁵ explores the experience of the church in Chile under the Pinochet regime, and sees the use of torture and the epidemic of "disappearances" as in some sense an ecclesiological problem. He then turns to the gradual conversion of the church into what he calls a "disappearing" church, which, through its eucharistic life, helps to reconstitute the tortured and disappeared Body of Christ in Chile. There would be rich possibilities here as well for interaction with Sobrino's notion of a "resurrection praxis" and the recovery of a prophetic voice in the church that would announce the good news in such a way as to expose the power of oppression for what it is and to work for a new order. In an "anti-prophetic"⁴⁶ age, as Sobrino calls it, a resurrection within the church itself of such vitality of spirit is ardently to be hoped for.

Any of these suggested encounters—and there are numerous others to imagine—would be fruitful if only because Sobrino's contribution to theologizing about suffering, within the framework of a Christology, constitutes such a massive gift to those who are concerned with it. They are concerned because human beings are actually suffering in today's world from the paroxysms of inhumanity, barbarity, envy, and greed—the very forces that sent Jesus to the cross. If there were no other reason to thank Jon Sobrino for his theology from

suffering, it might be this: that the horizon of the suffering victims is the horizon of his theology, and because of that, for all who take this horizon seriously, there is no possibility of a merely abstract theology of suffering. This is a theology written from witnessing the suffering of the victims, the crucified *and risen* peoples of the world. What is at stake in this theology, therefore, is an understanding of suffering that is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus, *and* a lived praxis of the cross and the resurrection.

Sobrino's theology will always thus pose a disturbing challenge to those who would wish to keep at arms length from theology the problem of the suffering caused by injustice, and what we are to do about it in the name of the gospel. But Christian faith and the exigencies of history will not allow us to escape these questions or our responsibilities as baptized people with breath and life. Following Sobrino's lead, we are all called on at this moment in history to learn what it means to enter into solidarity with the victims of history and help take the crucified down from their crosses.

Notes

1. The reference to "affliction" is from Simone Weil (*malheur*). See Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). For an explanation of the term, see Paul Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 35-37.

2. *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarism and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

3. See Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, eds., *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006), 1-67. The essay is translated by Robert Lassalle-Klein. For a thorough treatment of Ellacuría's theology, see Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

4. "Ignacio Ellacuría," in *Love That Produces Hope*, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino; trans. Phillip Berryman and Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 582.

8. *Ibid.*, 584.

9. *Ibid.*, 585.

10. *Ibid.*, 590.

11. *Ibid.*, 591-92.

12. *Ibid.*, 599-602.

13. *Ibid.*, 603.

14. *Ibid.*

15. In *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 49-57.

16. Ibid., 53.
17. Ibid., 55-56.
18. Ibid., 56.
19. Eng. trans., Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.
20. Ibid., 162-63.
21. Ibid., 163.
22. *Christ the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 221.
23. Ibid., 226.
24. Ibid., 228.
25. Ibid., 229.
26. See Jon Sobrino, "The Spirituality of Persecution and Martyrdom," in idem, *Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 87-88, where Sobrino provides a list of the martyrs, and includes, beyond that list, "Many other pastoral ministers and lay missionaries, delegates and ministers of the Word, catechists and sacristans, Caritas workers and human rights groups; many Protestant brothers and sisters, pastors and ministers, deacons and preachers; countless campesinos and Amerindians, workers and students, teachers and journalists, nurses, doctors, and intellectuals; persecuted and murdered for the reign of God."
27. Ibid., 235.
28. Ibid., 240.
29. Ibid., 244.
30. Ibid., 246.
31. Ibid., 254-55.
32. Ibid., 256. There follow here in the remaining pages of this remarkable book what may be some of the most trenchant yet lyrical passages ever written in the annals of liberation theology.
33. Trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).
34. Ibid., 4-5. Sobrino was a witness to that of which he speaks in the form of massacres of innocent poor people, for example, at El Mozote—a form of violence that has been replicated numerous times around the world since the civil war in El Salvador came to an end. Consider Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur.
35. Ibid., 37.
36. Ibid., 39.
37. "Theological" here is in contrast to a question that arises from and pertains to the human side of the equation. Here, the question is turned on God.
38. Ibid., 44.
39. Ibid., 45.
40. Ibid., 47.
41. Ibid., 49.
42. Ibid., 48.
43. (New York: Continuum, 2004).
44. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
45. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
46. *Where Is God?* xxx.