

## Interview with Jon Sobrino

By Joe Drexler-Dreis

Jon Sobrino can be counted as one of the theologians who are now considered as formative for what has come to be called “liberation theology.” Sobrino is a Jesuit theologian who has lived in El Salvador for over fifty years, where he teaches at Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA). Sobrino’s work is characterized by his commitment to, and solidarity with, marginalized and oppressed peoples, especially in El Salvador and Latin America. In 1989, the Salvadoran army murdered the six Jesuits Sobrino lived with, along with their housekeeper and 15-year old daughter. Sobrino escaped being assassinated because he was out of the country on a speaking engagement. This event has influenced much of Sobrino’s subsequent work. He is the author of many books, including *Jesus the Liberator*, *Christ the Liberator*, *Christology at the Crossroads*, *The True Church and the Poor*, *Spirituality of Liberation*, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, and *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*.

### CLT: How did you become interested in liberation theology?

**Preliminary remark.** I never thought that “liberation theology” is a “thing in itself,” with limits determined enough to distinguish it from other theologies. That would make it a system of theology among others, that was born, grew, and decreased to its disappearance. This brings me to answer the question.

I am 74 years old. Until 1974 I was totally unaware of “that thing” called liberation theology. In 1974 I definitively came to El Salvador, where I was assigned to teach theology. To stay current, and because of the good things I had heard, I read Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo, Porfirio Miranda.... And I was very close to Ignacio Ellacuría and his theological thought. During several years we gave various courses together.

From what I learned in those years, much of it was novel, and it struck me and I thought it was very useful for teaching theology in El Salvador. But these ideas were not carrying the label “liberation.” Ellacuría talked rather of “Latin American” theology. From what I was learning of the theologians who were already counted as “liberation theologians,” from what I had learned in Europe, especially Rahner and Moltmann, and as I listened to Ellacuría more and more, this is what was shaping the content of my theological thinking:

There is a reality of sin, which has structural causes and kills a majority of the population, and an evident need to overcome this situation of death. Without doing this task, theology was neither human nor Christian. From here I re-thought the reign of God—as justice and fellowship—as the core of Jesus of Nazareth. I re-thought the historical Jesus, and the following of him, including centrally his compassion towards the poor, the announcement of good news to the oppressed and the denunciation of the oppressors. I insisted that for this he died on a cross, and I insisted that the risen Christ is a crucified Christ. The resurrection of Jesus was the reaction of God against the victimizers who killed the innocent. From the love of the crucified and from his rehabilitation on the part of God emerges hope. God is the God of life in a struggle against the idols that demand death for survival.

What I discovered before, however, were “the poor”, massive and materially poor, oppressed and repressed, despised and ignored. And, paradoxically, I discovered as well that they have hope and the capacity to save us. And here a word forced itself upon me, a word that I hadn’t studied in Europe: “liberating them” from oppression was a human and evangelical must, something centrally important to for faith to being human. It dawned on me that speaking about a theology that centers on “liberation” made sense. And the unshakeable conviction that this theology was necessary was born.

And I'll tell one more step. In El Salvador, in the roughly twenty years from 1977 to 1989, there occurred something new that changed our lives: the massive and cruel reality of Jesuanic martyrs.<sup>1</sup> This issue was not sufficiently treated in conventional liberation theology. Thus, in 1993, I wrote a programmatic text: "De una teología sólo de la liberación a una teología del martirio" ("From a Theology Merely of Liberation to a Theology of Martyrdom"). Since then "Jesuanic martyrs" and "crucified people" have been central to my theology.

This is how I started, and without looking for it they started to call me a "liberation theologian." (In a Salvadoran newspaper, in 1975, there appeared sharp attacks against liberation theology, which in those days were usual. To my surprise, I was among the liberation theologians.) The conclusion is that I never started by wanting to be a "liberation theologian." I think that I haven't ever given a course on "liberation theology," although in many courses and books I've maintained the ideas that I mentioned earlier.

I think that the fundamental intuitions that generated liberation theology are still very useful today, and more useful than those of conventional theologies. And it must not be forgotten that, whatever liberation theology is, it was born in Latin America, a continent of the poor.

It is from these reflections that one must understand my brief responses to the following questions.

**CLT: There has recently been a focus on "the future of liberation theology." Unfortunately, this can sometimes leave the impression that the realities that Latin American liberation theologians focused on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are somehow no longer relevant. As liberation theology continues to mature, what elements and emphases developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be carried forward?**

It's stupid to think that poverty, oppression, imperialism, death, and on the other hand, the struggle for life, hope, compassion, generosity, and the generosity of martyrs have disappeared or have ceased to be real and central. And it would be even more stupid to think that what we have said is no longer critical. The forms change, for example in the murders on the one hand, and the organization of the poor on the other. But the necessity of life and the nearness of death have not disappeared.

That other theologies form in the twenty-first century is normal, and in large part it's necessary. But that the new theologies forget the roots of the liberation theology of the twentieth century and the reality of martyrdom is at least impoverishing. And the worst of all cases is falling into a bourgeois theology.

Of the new issues that have appeared, I find extremely important, and in need to be urgently taken up, the issues of the indigenous world and women. They express today the world of the poor and the conventional liberation theology.... About the mother earth, Leonard Boff speaks very well. I don't have anything important to say about this...

**CLT: You were one of the theologians who has formed and who continues to form the trajectory of liberation theology. In the contemporary pastoral and theological contexts, how should the notion of "liberation" be interpreted?**

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. note: Sobrino defines the "Jesuanic" conception of martyrdom: "The violent death of many Christians, especially in the Third World, has led to a rethinking of the meaning of martyrdom. Martyrs are those who follow Jesus in the things that matter, live in dedication to the cause of Jesus, and die for the same reason that Jesus died. They are 'Jesuanic' martyrs" (Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, trans. Margaret Wilde [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003], 122).

Starting with common sense and without excessive sophistication. And it is necessary to remember that for liberation theology the most real and radical context is neither the “pastoral” nor the “theological,” but rather the historical reality itself (Ignacio Ellacuría) and the spiritual experience (Gustavo Gutiérrez). The biggest problem I see is to ignore these two things and to expect to do liberation theology today taking into account only, or principally, the *concepts* of preceding liberation theologies.

In other words: I don't have prescriptions for today. But it is good to take into account two things: (1) To reflect on what liberation theology has produced (the symbol may well be Monseñor Romero, and the work and fate of the Salvadoran martyrs) and what it continues producing (the symbol could be Pedro Casaldáliga, his defense of the indigenous, his critique of the institutional church, and the risks with which he lives. (2) To remember the epistemology of Ellacuría: reality is known—in this case oppression and liberation, suffering and hope—in the disposition of taking charge of these realities in a praxis (*en la disposición a encargarse de ellas en una praxis*), to carry these realities (*a cargar con ellas*)—running risks and the persecution that reality generates—and shouldering the weight of these realities (*dejándose cargar por ellas*)—accepting gratefully the kindness, generosity, and solidarity that there is in reality, and above all in the underside of history.

**CLT: How does the approach of liberation theology in Latin America connect with or relate to indigenous people and their desire to regenerate their non-Christian cosmologies and epistemologies? Or can it?**

I think we're learning. There are good theologians doing this work. Personally, I have nothing to add.

**CLT: How do you see Pope Francis' relationship with liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor? What is the significance of this relationship for liberation theology?**

Pope Francis has spoken well on the issue of poverty, and also against capitalism and against the criminal indifference of the world of abundance. From the theoretical point of view we should have to wait for an encyclical to explain it. From the practical point of view, we will have to wait for the naming of bishops and cardinals very different from the current ones, who make an option for the poor and take the risks this requires. Without taking risks, there is no option for the poor. That, at least in Latin America, a significant shift be made in the formation in seminaries.... And that he canonizes the Latin American church Fathers: Don Helder Camara, Monseñor Romero, Leonidas Proaño, his compatriot Angelelli, and others. And that he canonizes non-bishops: the four North American nuns assassinated in El Salvador, so many indigenous women.... The number and the names will have to be thought of in the best way. But the important thing is to render appreciation and homage to a poor Christian continent of martyrs, and to do the same with other poor continents.

Personally, the most important thing is not to look for a relationship between the Pope and liberation theology. The important thing is that Pope Francis performs *in actu* the liberation of the poor. That he takes risks for it, and challenges the powerful of this world.

**CLT: What does it mean to do liberation theology in a Western European context? With whom and with what should theologians who strive to be liberation theologians in such a context connect to?**

In the first place, it's necessary to leave Europe. It's necessary to see, touch, smell the reality of Africa.... It's necessary to be open to that which shakes and changes people. Also that they convert. From that experience they will do theology in a different manner than they do it now. I have seen this in excellent Spanish theologians.

**CLT: Several doctoral students in our Faculty are working on the theme of love within theology. If theology arises as a response to reality, as opposed to a reflection on concepts, as so many liberation theologians have affirmed, to what must a theology of love respond?**

Love must be above all compassion, along the lines of Metz towards the poor, those who do not take life for granted. And in our real world, that compassion should also be justice. And given the primacy of love-compassion-justice, theology should be “intellectus amoris.” So I wrote many years ago.

Translated by Joe Drexler-Dreis