

GUEST EDITORIAL/INTRODUCTION

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Pope Benedict XVI recently invited Christian believers and theologians to interrogate research on the historical Jesus with the question, “What has Jesus really brought . . . if he has not brought world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world?”¹ The “great question” driving Benedict’s study *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007) emerges from his confrontation with the charge that Jesus “can hardly be the true Messiah,” since the kingdom of God that biblical exegetes tell us he claimed to inaugurate has “not brought world peace” or “conquered the world’s misery.”² This query places the Gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a hermeneutical circle with the hopes and the tragedies of humankind at the dawn of a new millennium. What does Jesus offer to the half of humanity that struggles for life in the face of grinding poverty?³ to those whose very culture and human dignity are under assault by predatory forms of globalization? to the innocent who yearn for peace amidst endless wars “of choice” like the recent conflagration in Iraq?⁴ and to the billions living in the shadow of looming planetary environmental crisis?⁵

In this special issue of *Theological Studies* Catholic theologians from Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe, South America, and the United States respond to the pope’s invitation, focusing on the significance for Christian churches and communities of faith around the globe of what we learned about Jesus of Galilee. This project emerged from events leading up to the 40th anniversary of the option for the poor embraced by the bishops of Latin America at Medellín (1968), and the 30th anniversary of Virgilio Elizondo’s groundbreaking dissertation (1978) on the Galilean Jesus in Mexican

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 44.

² Ibid. 116.

³ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005: International Cooperation at a Crossroads* (New York: United Nations, 2005) 3.

⁴ Ten weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Pope John Paul II said it would be “a defeat for humanity”: As “the Charter of the United Nations Organization and international law itself remind us, war cannot be decided upon, even when it is a matter of ensuring the common good, except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions” (Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps [January 13, 2003], http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2003/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030113_diplomatic-corps_en.html [accessed April 6, 2009]).

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report* (New York: United Nations, November 17, 2007).

American Catholicism. Widely considered the heralds or “fathers” of two important post-Vatican II contextual theologies, U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a theology, and Latin American liberation theology, Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez served with me as co-editors of this volume, which would not have been possible without their friendship, leadership, guidance, and support. Their latest work has emphasized, respectively, intercultural theology and the priority of the option for the poor. Thus, it is appropriate that, while the locations, methods, and substance of the articles are diverse, they articulate and serve the universal faith of the church as it is lived by local Catholic Christian communities with whom the writers live out an active option for the poor and ongoing engagement in intercultural dialogue.

For historical perspective, it is worth noting that Pope Benedict’s call echoes that of Pope John XXIII when he convoked Vatican II on December 15, 1961. Speaking in the aftermath of two world wars and two U. S. nuclear attacks against civilian populations, Pope John reminded us that, while “distrustful souls see only darkness burdening the face of the earth,” the church must insist that God “has not left the world which he redeemed.” Recognizing the urgent need to discern anew what Jesus Christ actually brings to the hopes and aspirations of a suffering planet, John urged the coming council to heed “the recommendation of Jesus” to learn “how to distinguish ‘the signs of the times’ (Mt 16:4)” in order to better discern how to cooperate with historical developments that “augur well for the fate of the Church and of humanity.”⁶ John’s call was adopted and expanded in *Gaudium et spes*, which sent the bishops home with the mandate “of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel” (GS no. 4) on every continent. The postconciliar contextual theologies represented here are but a small sample of the fruits of this process, a process that places the Gospel witness about Jesus in a hermeneutical circle with the life of local churches around the world.⁷

The contributions treat a number of interconnecting themes and issues from a variety of locations, perspectives, approaches, and theological subdisciplines. *Gustavo Gutiérrez* articulates an important evolution in his thinking on the priority of the option for the poor as the driving insight of his pioneering work in Latin American liberation theology. He describes this commitment as an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, which gives believers “reason to hope” and lends ultimate meaning to human existence. This position reflects Gutiérrez’s view of faith as a hermeneutics of hope enacted in the lives of

⁶ Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Toward a New Era in Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 168.

⁷ Neither the editors nor *Theological Studies* claims that this collection is representative or complete. We especially regret that a leading African American theologian had to drop out too close to the publication deadline to be replaced, which also impacted the gender balance of the list of contributors.

individual believers and communities of faith through the option for the poor. It seems likely that this statement approximates his final position on this important matter.

Virgilio Elizondo reprises and defends his own pioneering work on the Galilean Jesus with the claim that Galilee “must have had salvific meaning for early Jewish Christians, since it clearly plays an important role in the post-Easter memory of his followers and is part of the earliest kerygma” (Acts 10:37–41). This contribution represents an evolution of Elizondo’s position in light of recent critiques that his early work on the importance of the “Galilean Jesus” for Mexican American Catholicism may have unintentionally incorporated anti-Semitic aspects of German scholarship on the historical Jesus and early Christianity. His article stresses the Jewish identity of Jesus much more than any of his previous writings, while adding a new dimension and potentially reframing aspects of his widely read work on the relevance of the cultural context of Galilee for marginalized peoples and culturally contextualized theologies.

Michael Lee acknowledges the validity of these and certain other critiques of Elizondo’s *Galilean Journey* while arguing that the book nonetheless legitimately highlights the significance of New Testament portrayals of Jesus as Galilean, and that Elizondo enumerates principles that guard against anti-Jewish, supersessionist readings of the Gospels. Lee asserts that his position on this aspect of Elizondo’s work relies on and in some sense parallels the argument that Jesus’ prophetic ministry enacts faithful dissent against forces of marginalization and exclusion that impacted first-century Jewish culture. Lee’s article can be understood as a critical reframing and repristination of Elizondo’s visionary effort to draw a hermeneutical circle between the Galilean identity of Jesus and the faith of culturally marginalized Christians the world over.

Sean Freyne examines three sociocultural aspects of the Galilean career of Jesus, which, he argues, shape the early Christian kerygma about Jesus. First, he asserts (a) that by establishing the Twelve, Jesus assumes the mantle of Elijah (Sir 48:10) and the Davidic messiah (Ps of Sol 17:25), symbolically gathering Israel’s dispersed tribes in preparation for final unification and restoration; and (b) that his many journeys in the northern region enact a symbolic “map of restoration.” Second, he suggests that Jesus’ frequent encounters in Galilee with the (culturally, religiously, politically, etc.) “other” likely influence his injunction to “love your enemy” and to be open to Gentiles as implications of his total trust in the creator God whom he knew as Father. Third, he believes that Jesus’ Galilean experience of oppression and marginalization led him to unite his messiahship with openness to Gentiles, and to universalize both in his role as prophet and seer of the wisdom of God. It is fair to suggest that Freyne’s work on what I would call the intercultural aspects of the Galilean career of Jesus has been influential in Elizondo’s rethinking on the Jewishness of Jesus.

Elizabeth Johnson's article on Mary of Galilee as a critical matrix for Marian studies integrates a commitment to an option for the poor and the empowerment of women with an appreciation for the sociocultural context of Jesus' ministry. Employing current research on the region to stimulate the reader's historical imagination about the Mary of Nazareth described in the Gospels, and situating her vis-à-vis the quest for justice today, Johnson notes that in the Gospels, Galilee serves as shorthand for the scandal of God's preference for the lowly of the earth. The article summarizes and explores the potential contribution of recent archeological, economic, political, and religious research on Galilee to Marian interpretation, noting consequential theological ramifications.

Jon Sobrino, perhaps the foremost writer on Jesus in Latin America today, focuses on the methodological and hermeneutical presuppositions that have informed his work in El Salvador. Some readers will find his article a valuable summary of material from his two-volume *Christology* (1991, 1999); others will see it as his most sustained response to recent criticisms by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of unstated "methodological presuppositions" in his two volumes including the accusation that "the 'Church of the poor' assumes the fundamental position which properly belongs to the faith of the Church."⁸ Without mentioning these criticisms Sobrino insists that his method is to create a hermeneutical circle between the church's normative faith in Jesus Christ and the church's contemporary situation in El Salvador. He enumerates three isomorphisms that inform his work: between the historical realities of Galilee and El Salvador, between the historical Jesus and the Salvadoran martyrs, and between the paschal mystery lived by Jesus and what Ignacio Ellacuría calls the crucified people, understood as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh who brings salvation.

My article (*Robert Lassalle-Klein*) places Sobrino's project in a larger historical context, arguing that Ellacuría's fundamental theology and Sobrino's systematic theology constitute both a unique and powerful collaboration, and one of the most complete Catholic contextual theologies developed since Vatican II. The article examines how Ellacuría's Christian historical realism shapes and informs what I call (following Rahner) the "saving history" character of Sobrino's two-volume *Christology*. I argue that the two projects are unified by a pair of claims: the historical reality of Jesus is the real sign of the Word made flesh, and the *analogatum princeps* of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found among the "crucified peoples" of today. I also situate Sobrino and Ellacuría as important interpreters of Rahner, Ignatius Loyola, Augustine, Medellín, and key scholars of Continental phenomenology.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J., in *Hope and Solidarity: Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008) 255–66, at 256.

Daniel Groody uses the metaphor of the crucified people and the spirituality of the desert fathers in a timely and original exploration of spirituality of undocumented immigrants crossing the dangerous U.S./Mexico border. The article incorporates firsthand interviews on, and original research into, the faith of migrating immigrants, exploring connections between the physical geography of their perilous trek and the inner landscape of their spiritual journey. The article examines how these modern-day sojourners turn to Gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the strength to face death and sustain hope for themselves and their families, and suggests what their spirituality offers to the universal church.

Teresa Okure's article develops a new contextualized approach to a familiar Johannine story of intercultural contact between Jesus and an outsider (Jn 4:1–42).⁹ Creating her own version of the hermeneutical circle described above, she asks, “What do Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee and the Samaritan woman share in common from their own contexts with those they would likely meet in a . . . visit to Africa?” She argues that John highlights the common experience of rejection, prejudice, and isolation shared by the two main characters, and examines how their encounter brings Jesus, the woman, the Samaritans, and the disciples into a communion fellowship of faith. Noting the complex variety of sociocultural, gender, and religious barriers overcome in John’s narrative, Okure examines what this story offers to those concerned about the social and cultural ills affecting African society today.

Finally, *Sophia Park* uses postcolonial theory to explore the crucifixion scene in John 19:23–30. She argues that the Gospel creates a “borderland” at the foot of the cross, where the displaced—Jesus’ followers, including women—are offered acceptance as members of a family/community of fragmented and dislocated disciples. Reading from the dual perspective of a native-born Korean and recent immigrant, she argues that John’s narrative is constructed to allow dislocated persons to achieve a hybrid identity by joining this community. Her analysis complements and expands Okure’s in that she examines the language of exclusivism and inclusivism that runs throughout the Gospel, showing how it supports the drive of John’s narrative toward the creation of a borderland community at the foot of the cross.

In formulating his portrait of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, Benedict declares, “I trust the Gospels.”¹⁰ On behalf of Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and all the authors, I wish to thank *Theological Studies* for this opportunity to explore the impact of what we have learned since Vatican II about Jesus and his Galilean context on how local churches read the Gospels and theologize about Jesus Christ.

⁹ See Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1–42*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, series 2, 31 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988).

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* xxi–xxii.