

## JESUS OF GALILEE FROM THE SALVADORAN CONTEXT: COMPASSION, HOPE, AND FOLLOWING THE LIGHT OF THE CROSS

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*The article analyzes a threefold isomorphism between the realities of Galilee and El Salvador: (1) the two realities are subjugated by imperial powers (2) the isomorphism least mentioned by commentators—between Jesus and the Salvadoran martyrs; and (3) the isomorphism between Jesus and the crucified people understood as the Servant of Yahweh who brings salvation. The article then considers three central realities—mercy, hope, and following—in light of the cross, Jesus, and the people.*

THIS ARTICLE RESPONDS to a request for a reflection on Jesus of Galilee from the perspective of El Salvador. The fundamentals of what I have to say have already been set out, for better or worse, in two books: *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (1991) and *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (1999). In these books I have tried to deal from the perspective of faith with the totality of the life and destiny of Jesus and with his ultimate reality. Here I will concentrate on certain elements that, while central to the Gospels, I see as especially clarified by the Salvadoran context.

The task of selecting these fundamental elements is not simple. I will take *the cross* into special account, not only because the Gospels are “a passion narrative with an extended introduction” (Martin Kähler, 1896),<sup>1</sup> but because the Salvadoran context is, above all else, the reality of “a crucified people” (Archbishop Oscar Romero, Ignacio Ellacuría). It is not simply metaphorical to say that we live here under a “reign of the cross,” while in other places it is possible to live under a “reign of *the good life*.” This is not to devalue the paschal experience as a whole, which is truly central to Christian faith, but the experience of crucifixion Christianizes the suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 80 n. 11.

of the Salvadoran people. Nonetheless, I will not treat the cross thematically, but rather as a principle, more useful than others, for interpreting the totality of the life of Jesus and its fundamental elements.

Among these elements, I will focus on mercy, which—and this is important—takes the form of justice; and I will focus on hope, which above all takes the form of liberation and of life. Building around these themes, it is possible to analyze many realities. Some are positive: the kingdom of God, the God of the kingdom, the Father and ultimate mystery, the little ones, liberation, resurrection, faith, and grace. Others are negative: the antikingdom, oppression, idols of death, sin, and crucifixion. All of this will be held implicit in what follows.

Finally, I will also focus on following. While following is not everything, it is the axis around which the Christian life—and Christology—must turn in order to “put on” Jesus. Following is central in the biblical text: “‘follow me’ are the first and last words of Jesus to Peter,” as Bonhoeffer noted.<sup>2</sup> And following is central for the Salvadoran context. “A great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) has emerged here, martyrs who have been distinguished followers. If the following of Jesus is not central, the edifice of Christianity falls. It is still the *articulus stantis vel cadentis vitae cristianae* (the article of faith by which the Christian life stands or falls) in today’s world.

As necessary as it is to use exegetical and historical-critical methods in presenting the reality of Galilee and Jesus, I have nothing to add to the many studies on these topics. I will expand, rather, on the importance of the context, because being consciously and actively immersed in the reality of El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s has greatly enhanced my understanding of Jesus of Galilee. This methodological consideration may be perhaps the most specific contribution I can offer.

Finally, I will comment on two elements that have been recently and especially influential in these reflections. First, regarding the reality of the context of a world of oppression and repression, I will mention the generosity, love, and martyrdom of many men and women, led by Archbishop Oscar Romero. Second, regarding thought, I will focus on the work of Ignacio Ellacuría to illumine this reality in the light of Jesus of Galilee.

### THE CONTEXTUAL STRUCTURE OF THEOLOGY: LOCATION AND SOURCES

It used to be thought that theology was universal, a notion that contributed to the almost exclusive emphasis on the use of sources: Scripture, tradition, and magisterium. *Location* was taken into account only for

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *El precio de la gracia* (Salamanca: Sígueme 1968) 20–21.

pastoral reasons. But things are not so simple. In a crucial, much-cited text Ellacuría says:

The difference [between location and source] is neither strict nor, still less, exclusive, since in a way, location is a source, inasmuch as it makes the source give of itself to the other, so that, thanks to its location and by virtue of it, certain determinate contents are actualized and are really made present. Granting this distinction, it would be erroneous to think that direct contact with the sources (even if we believed and prayerfully lived them) is enough to put us in a position to see in them and draw from them the right thing for what must constitute theological reflection.<sup>3</sup>

This means that sources must be read in a *context*, a *location*, the *ubi* of the Aristotelian categories, to which must be added the *epoch*, the *quando*. This spatio-temporal context can make the *text* give something or other of itself, so that the fundamental question will be, What is the best context from which to read the texts about Jesus of Nazareth? I do not have a definitive answer, but I will share Ellacuría's programmatic statement, which is generally true: "The Third World<sup>4</sup> is the place of the gospel."<sup>5</sup> In this article I want to show how the Gospels' *text* about Jesus has been read in the Salvadoran *context*—which stands as a symbol of a much larger Third World—with the conviction that this reading has made the text "give of itself" its Christian content more than other readings in other contexts have done, at least in some important respects. Before I take up the aspect of *ubi* or location in the context, however, I would like to offer some clarifications.

"Giving of itself" does not mean to quantitatively add content to the text. It means that the context can, in fact, help ensure that the most original and profound meaning of a text is discovered. What does *liberation* mean in Exodus, what is meant by the sin of the world, or a utopia of the reign of God, etc.? When texts have been buried or marginalized for eons, context can help recover their relevance or sometimes even their existence—for example, even progressive European theology did not used to treat the Beatitudes and the woes of Luke,

<sup>3</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, *Conversión de la Iglesia al reino de Dios* (San Salvador: UCA, 1984) 168.

<sup>4</sup> The "Third World" is not just a geographical concept; it is fundamentally historical. It can be described as a world of poverty and insults in which life and dignity are not taken for granted, and as an impoverished world, since its prostration has, as an important if not determinate cause, the oppression by other worlds. It can also be described as a world that both hopes for salvation and can generate it.

<sup>5</sup> Ellacuría uses "the Third World" to introduce the Christian paradox: it is the place to announce the Good News; there the Good News is accepted connaturally, and, like the Suffering Servant, the Third World brings salvation.

justice and injustice in the prophets, and the liberation of Exodus as central themes.

Since the context as well as the texts has *virtus*, power, and energy, “giving of itself” also means that, by virtue of the context, the texts end up affecting those who study and read them in new, unanticipated, and more profound ways, both intellectually and existentially. This rereading has certainly happened with texts about the kingdom of God, the Jesus of history, and the cross and martyrdom when the texts are read in the Salvadoran context.

Texts therefore end up generating a collective consciousness that is more widespread than the forms of individual or group knowledge that experts study, including, for example, the collective consciousness of rural peasants. This has certainly occurred with texts about the poor and evangelization, about prophetic denunciation and against lies, and about hope for the kingdom of God, etc.

Finally, “giving of itself” means that some texts bring about new formulations-syntheses that show us how to understand the larger whole, and become an *articulus stantis vel cadentis fidei*: “the crucified people is *the* sign of the times” (Ellacuría), “the glory of God is the poor person who lives” (Archbishop Romero).

There is no apodictic answer to the question of how one knows whether “the more” that a *context* can generate really supplies a “better” understanding of the *text*. More *objective* intellectual arguments help us know whether this statement is accurate: texts reread in this way give the faith a better internal coherence. However, in my opinion *subjective* experience—that place where each person must determine the ultimate truth of a text for him- or herself—is more decisive in this matter.

Stated phenomenologically, I think one can verify that the text has given more of itself in a context like that of El Salvador if, for example, an experience occurs like that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35): “Were not our hearts burning within us?”—which could be translated today as “With this vision of Jesus, does not everything seem *more* human and *closer* to the man from Nazareth?” That a text has given more of itself is confirmed by an experience like that of Jesus when he says in a moment of exultation: “I give you thanks, Father, because the poor and the humble have understood, not the proud and the powerful,”<sup>6</sup> which could be translated today as “We have finally

<sup>6</sup> This is a paraphrase of the quotation by Archbishop Romero’s reading of Matthew 11:25, “I give you thanks, Father, because you have hidden these things from the wise and have revealed them to the humble and the simple” (“La salvación, iniciativa de Dios,” homily of Archbishop Oscar Romero, July 9, 1978, on Zacharias 9:9–10, Romans 8:9, 11–13, and Matthew 11:25–30, <http://servicioskooinia.org/romero/homilias/A/780709.htm> [accessed March 9, 2009]).

uncovered something fundamental that was buried: the truth lies with the poor of history, not with their oppressors.” It is verified by those who find themselves saying, “Rereading Jesus from El Salvador has helped us act more justly, love the poor more tenderly, and walk more humbly with God,” the words of Micah 6:8 expressing what God finally requires.

What is important is that we see a text’s “giving of itself” as something real, good, and humanizing. For this to happen, it is not sufficient simply to refer to the orthodoxy of the magisterium to verify that a text has given of itself what it has to give (this idea will be important in my upcoming sections). What a text has to give must be able to be felt in reality, as has been the case in El Salvador.

To illustrate this point we should think about the reinterpretation of a foundational scriptural text, the liberation of Egypt, which 40 years ago was a minor inflection in theology in the church. But, “thanks to the Latin American context” and “by virtue of it,” this text yielded something substantial that had lain dormant: God listens to the cries of slaves and liberates them. God’s choice to liberate became clear in contexts like El Salvador, while in others the text remained practically mute or little discussed.

The 1984 Vatican Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation,” affirms, for example, that God’s specific purpose in initiating the liberation of the Hebrew slaves was the creation of a people who would celebrate his cult, which he would seal with the covenant on Mount Sinai.<sup>7</sup> Juan Luis Segundo criticized this interpretation and insisted that in the three great, most ancient sources, the Yahwist, the Elohist, and the Deuteronomist, “there is no trace of this supposed purpose.”<sup>8</sup> The text states that the essential purpose of the Exodus is that an oppressed people might have life and live in freedom as a people, which seems to me the most correct exegesis. At this point, however, I am interested in emphasizing the question why there would be such different interpretations of the same text. Fundamentally, I believe that different contexts have made the same text yield different meanings, and this explains why one reading has

<sup>7</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation” IV no. 3, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html) (accessed March 11, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 45: “We have to arrive at the last source of the Pentateuch—the Priestly, written during the Exile—to be able to speak of ‘the Covenant cult celebrated on Mt. Sinai’” (cf. Ex 25–31 and 35–40), although we could not speak of this as the *purpose* of the Exodus.”

prevailed over some other in the collective consciousness attached to a particular context.<sup>9</sup>

### THE CONTEXT: ISOMORPHISM, IRRUPTION OF REALITY, AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE

I will now look in some detail at the Salvadoran context and focus on three things. First, simply put, there exists a certain *isomorphism* between the reality of Galilee then and our reality in the Third World today. Second, during the 1970s *reality broke in* and made itself deeply felt. Third, there occurred a powerful *epistemological rupture* in the functioning of intelligence in Salvadoran reality, though this rupture was not exclusive to that context.

#### Isomorphism between the Reality That Appears in the Text and in the Context<sup>10</sup>

When we read a *text* narrating the reality of Jesus of Galilee, and we do so from within the *context* of the reality of El Salvador, what isomorphism may exist between the two pertains to similarities between their historical and social realities and the realities of followers of Jesus, especially the martyrs.

#### *Isomorphism of the Social Realities of Galilee and El Salvador*

In terms of a *location* from which the sources are being read, I understand El Salvador not just as a special reality, an *ubi*, nor simply as a cultural reality (although one must take this into account as an important element, especially in the neighboring indigenous world of Guatemala), but rather, above all, as a substantial *quid*. The essential elements of this reality are poverty, injustice, structural oppression and repression, and slow, violent death. These elements also include clinging to life (humanly and religiously) and hope for the liberation of the majorities who, though innocent and substantially undefended, have been slowly and violently rewarded with death. This is historically evident, and it is critical to take it into account, if not in the details at least in substance, if one is to

<sup>9</sup> Various First World scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures had already found in the text what was reread in the Third World. That rereading was even facilitated by those scholars. But the new reading of the Exodus became the interpretation most often taken into account in systematic and pastoral theology, much more in the Third World where it generated a “collective consciousness” and became a paradigm for praxis, hope, and faith. This development was due to the context.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to being a fundamental geographical reality in the life of Jesus, Galilee is also a symbolic reality that gives expression to the world of the poor. The faithfulness of Jesus to the reality of Galilee and its people creates conflicts, which become geographically explicit in Jerusalem.

understand the Galilee of Jesus. The reality of El Salvador helps one understand Jesus' Galilee. The nature of Galilee's historical sin and grace is better understood through the *real* sin and grace of El Salvador, not only our thoughts *about* that sin and grace.

*Isomorphism Among the Bearers of Salvation:  
Jesus and the Salvadoran Martyrs*

It is important to emphasize another form of isomorphism, however, one that is almost never taken into account, even though it should be carefully considered. In El Salvador—a Third World country not normally considered a part of the world of abundance, certainly not with regard to martyrdom—many human beings, despite suffering greater or lesser poverty or austerity, live, like Jesus, with unconditional mercy, defending the poor and the victims produced by very real economic, military, political, cultural, media, and imperial gods. They do this in fidelity to God with integrity *to the very end*, and with a love that makes them willing to give their lives. These are the martyrs. And Jesus is well pleased to call them *brothers and sisters*.

These men and women provide a privileged place from which to reread the texts about Jesus of Galilee and to better understand his life, praxis, and destiny. They even shed light on the *pro me* of Jesus, so beloved by Paul and Ignatius of Loyola, though the *pro me* must be historicized from the *pro pauperibus*.

The poor also help us get to know, or at least guess at, Jesus' filial relationship with a God who is a Father in whom one can trust, and with a Father who continues being a God to whom one must always remain available for service. I cannot expand on this point here, but it is important, since Christologies usually squeeze out an inadequate treatment of the relationship of Jesus to God in favor of the relationship of Jesus to the kingdom of God. Nonetheless, the Salvadoran context illuminates the relationship of Jesus to God, certainly in quality if not in quantity. One has only to mention the names of Archbishop Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande, S.J. They not only resemble Jesus the *evangelizer and prophet*, but also Jesus, the *Son of God*.

We must also remember the theological dimension of this isomorphism. Jesus "went about doing good, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38b), said Peter in the house of Cornelius. So too, three days after Archbishop Romero's assassination, Ellacuría said in a homily at the University of Central America, "With Archbishop Romero, God passed through El Salvador."<sup>11</sup> Once again, then, given all the required qualifications, we

<sup>11</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, "Monseñor Romero, un enviado de Dios para salvar a su pueblo," *Sal Terrae* 811 (1980) 825–32; republished in *Diakónia* 17 (1981) 2–8; *Estudios centroamericanos* 65 (1990) 141–46; *Revista latinoamericano de teología*,

cannot ignore the fundamental isomorphism of these events with the journey of Jesus through history.

*Global Isomorphism of Oppression and Repression*

Readers who inhabit contexts far from ours may obviously conclude that, as El Salvador is not his or her context, the Christology emerging from here is not straightforwardly transferable. But things are not so simple, for the context I have described is not an esoteric exception or an unimportant anecdote to the story of the planet today. Indeed, the truth is quite the opposite. What is esoteric is the world of prosperity, not the world of El Salvador. As Pedro Casaldáliga recently put it:

There is great wealth on the earth, but there is more injustice. Africa has been called “the dungeon of the world,” a continental *Shoa*. 2.5 million people survive on less than one dollar a day, and 25,000 people die each day of hunger according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Desertification threatens the lives of 1,200 million people in about a hundred countries. Immigrants are denied human fellowship and a floor under their feet. The U.S. is constructing a wall of over 900 miles to shut out Latin America; and Europe is erecting a barrier against Africa in the south of Spain. All of this, besides being evil, is part of a plan.<sup>12</sup>

If one goes to the real foundation of our world—which is a jealously guarded secret—one discovers a fundamental isomorphism between the Galilee of Jesus and the many other galilees of our world, a world of those who are poor and victims. This world structurally reproduces what occurred in the Roman Empire, under which Galilee lived.

Trying to make the language of *empire* disappear is a coverup. And it is self-interested euphemism to substitute the language of *globalization*, which is also deceptive since the term “globe” is close to “sphere,” suggesting a “perfection”<sup>13</sup> that is absolutely nonexistent in the terrestrial globe today. And we must not forget the fundamental reality of the *imperium magnum latrocinium* (great thieving empire), as Augustine called it, which yesterday was Rome and today is life under the aegis of the United States. This larceny is the ground of the isomorphism of which I speak, exposing both its existence and its cruelty. The Pax Romana was cruel. Today UN expert Jean

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19 (1990) 5–10; and Ignacio Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos*, 4 vols. (San Salvador: UCA, 2000–2002) 3:93–100.

<sup>12</sup> Pedro Casaldáliga, “Utopía necesaria como el pan de cada día,” a circular letter of January 2006, [http://urc.confer.es/urc/publica/recursos/art/utopia\\_necesaria\\_como\\_el\\_pan\\_de\\_cada\\_dia.pdf](http://urc.confer.es/urc/publica/recursos/art/utopia_necesaria_como_el_pan_de_cada_dia.pdf) (accessed March 10, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *El banquete* (*Symposium*) 189c–192d. The sphere is a geometrical location in which all the points on the surface are equidistant from the center. The *equidistance* functions to subliminally suggest that there exists an *equity* in the globalized world, which is a notorious falsehood.

Ziegler says that the world of plenty is an assassin: “‘Every child who dies from hunger is assassinated’ because it could have been prevented.”<sup>14</sup>

This is the dominant isomorphism from the perspective of sin. However, this isomorphism can also be seen *sub specie contrarii*, i.e., from the perspective of grace: the hope of the Galilee of Jesus; the many movements in which his hope was expressed; the incipiently liberating praxis; and finally utopia: the life blood of the poor. It is enough for the moment to mention it.

### *Global Isomorphism of Martyrs like Jesus*

The isomorphism of those who bring salvation is also global. There have been movements of life and liberation in many places, and, above all, an immense collection of martyrs on which I will now focus. Limiting myself to El Salvador and Guatemala, two well-known bishops, Romero and Juan José Gerardi (plus a third in El Salvador, Joaquín Ramos, who is less well known), around 30 priests, and a dozen religious have been assassinated. There is also an interminable list of catechists, delegates of the Word, workers for nongovernmental organizations, and solidarity groups that began their work long before they began to officially exist as such. They did their work without administrative apparatus, with only the light of the gospel and a bit of enlightenment contributed by the theology of liberation, sometimes with rudiments of Marxism, with limitless generosity, and with a *parresía* for speaking the truth and denouncing the horrors of oppression and repression. They are the glory of the people and of many churches, not only in El Salvador and Guatemala but also the entire Third World—for example, Archbishop Christophe Muzihirwa of Bukavu, Congo, assassinated in 1996 for defending hundreds of thousands of refugees in Rwanda; today he is called “the Romero of Africa.” Jesus-like martyrdom is neither esoteric nor exceptional on the world stage.

### *Isomorphism of Faith: The Crucified People, Suffering Servant of Yahweh*

To the above-named isomorphism I must add another that extends throughout the Third World: *the analogical isomorphism of the poor and victims of today with the Suffering Servant who carries the sin of the world, ransoms, and saves us*. While this isomorphism is more difficult to specify factually because it is perceptible only from a faith-based interpretation of the texts, nevertheless, this is how we have seen the Suffering Servant in El Salvador. Referring to the poor and the victims as “the crucified people” and “the pierced divinity,” Archbishop Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría have

<sup>14</sup> “Press Conference by United Nations Special Rapporteur on Right to Food,” October 26, 2007, [http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2007/071026\\_Ziegler.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2007/071026_Ziegler.doc.htm) (accessed March 16, 2009).

described them as a historical sacrament of the Suffering Servant. At the descriptive level the Servant Songs of Isaiah and Passion Narratives of the Gospels correspond with what is happening in our world today, and vice versa. The originality of this idea, however, lies not in asserting this correspondence but in conceding dignity to the victims of today: there is something sacred about them. The greatest innovation, however, has been to consider them bearers of salvation. In this, above all, they converge with the Servant who takes away the sin of the world and, scandalously, brings salvation.

There are hundreds of millions of poor and oppressed in the world, in whom appears what I have called “primordial holiness,”<sup>15</sup> seen in their untiring clinging to life, one to another in repressions, wars, migrations, and refugee centers. Miraculously many times they remain hopeful, offer pardon, and search for reconciliation. Moreover, they have a convening power, which generates solidarity, understood as mutual support, giving to one another and receiving one another with the best that one has. Those who come from the world of plenty to help the poor repeatedly say, with thanks, that they have received more than they have given. Therefore, looking at both the world of abundance and the world of poverty, I have said *extra pauperes nulla salus* (outside the poor there is no salvation).<sup>16</sup> Taking one step further, salvation comes from the poor. They are the servant of Yahweh.<sup>17</sup>

The Servant and the Crucified One help us understand the poor and the victims of our context. This does not imply that I think it is possible to turn to reflection without falling into oversimplifications, because the victims do not make us almost mechanically and entirely understand the figure of Jesus. His everyday life was not like that of the majorities of the poor and oppressed of our world. But they can certainly help us understand the significance of his life and destiny. We accept in faith that Jesus is the Servant who brings salvation. But understanding—with all the required qualifications—that today’s victims can bring salvation allows one also to understand, a bit, what it is about Jesus of Nazareth and his destiny that brings salvation.

The conclusion, then, is that El Salvador (the Congo, Haiti, Bangladesh), and not the world of abundance (Washington, Paris, Madrid), offers an isomorphism with the Galilee of Jesus and with Jesus of Galilee. The crucified people bear the sin of the world and redeem it, saving us.

<sup>15</sup> See Jon Sobrino, *Terremoto, terrorismo, barbarie, y utopía* (San Salvador: UCA, 2003) 129–40.

<sup>16</sup> See Jon Sobrino, *Fuera de los pobres no hay salvación: Pequeño ensayo utópico-profético* (Madrid: Trotta, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> The poor have also tried to organize themselves and to struggle against an enemy that is a thousand times stronger.

### The Irruption of Reality

The isomorphism I have analyzed is finally based in poverty, yesterday and today. It has existed for centuries, but neither the poverty that appears in the Gospel *text*, much less the Salvadoran *context*, has been taken into account in Christology. Since the end of the 1970s, however, theology has in fact taken poverty seriously. The conclusion is that in order to understand the context, one must add the *quando* (when) to the *ubi* (where). During those years something happened that changed theology. Reality, which occurs in time, has a *quando*, so one could say that this epoch was a *kairos* during which there was a discernment of the *signs of the times*. But I think something more radical occurred: the poverty that had always been there *irrupted*. It made itself noticed in a way that could not be hidden.

It is true that in the lives of believers and in theology, especially in its biblical roots, it has always been important to take reality into account. But reality can simply “be there,” or it can “break in.” The great events of the Bible are not simply “there” but rather “break in.” In the Hebrew Scriptures the cries of slaves “broke in,” and the God of the fathers “broke in” with his promise to always be with his people and bring them life. In the New Testament the sufferings of the poor, the sick, and widows “broke in” (even though the language is not as strong as in the Exodus), and Jesus of Nazareth is described in the texts as having “broken in.” He spoke with authority; no fear kept him from speaking the truth or constricted his liberty. He did not flee from conflicts, dangers, or death threats. His walking through Galilee was not a stroll, nor was his work reduced to doing good things; it involved conflict. Neither was he limited to communicating generic or only ethical truths, for his most central theme was prophecy. After going about doing good he died on a cross with “a loud cry” (Mk 15:38). His was not an agreeable death like that of Socrates or Seneca. In life and in death, Jesus “broke in.” Indeed, the resurrection itself was not a prodigious event but rather an “irruption” of God.

This “irruption of reality” is what shapes theology. It is true that the mystery of God manifests itself in everyday life. But when reality “breaks in,” the manifestation of God has a special quality. It shakes things up and forces us to think, to do theology.

The radical character of the irruption of reality cannot be required or programmed, and it does not offer reasons for its occurrence, even in intrinsically important circumstances. In my opinion while many things were well stated at Vatican II and, more recently, at Aparecida, I do not think that reality got to the point of “breaking in.” It did break in at Medellín, in a way that the participants—and analogously the texts—did not simply amplify on Vatican II, but allowed themselves to be shaped by the reality that was

powerfully “breaking in,” which explains the impact it made.<sup>18</sup> Also the theology of liberation has been built on this irruption. It was not built on and driven by an already constituted tradition or an already conceptualized doctrine, though some of the best theology Europe had to offer helped. The foundation and the beginning—what got theology going—was the irruption of the poor and of God in the poor, as was well understood at an early stage by Gustavo Gutiérrez.<sup>19</sup>

We could say something similar about the Christologies that were developing among us during this period. Without doubt the reflections from abroad by Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Jacques Dupont, and Joachim Jeremias helped. But to bring about a rereading of the texts, it was essential for a reality to break in that reminded us of oppressed Galilee, and for human beings to break in who reminded us of Jesus: his compassion, his honesty about reality, his prophecy, his courage in the face of conflict, his fidelity undeterred even by the cross, his prayer, his trust in and availability to the Father-God. This is the Jesus who broke in as the Son, the one to whom we must let ourselves be conformed, and the older brother we must follow. Both Son and brother became realities in Jesus.

The conclusion is clear. A theology grounded in the irruption of reality has, it is worth repeating, radical roots. Such a theology has problems by definition, since irruption does not occur every day, and it is not easy to maintain the light and the intensity that produced the original irruption. But whatever the difficulties in keeping them going, we have to overcome the temptation to ignore them. Pedro Casaldàliga, Jean Ziegler, and Ignacio Ramonet tell us that realities continue to exist today capable of producing an equally or even more powerful impact than those that broke in to our context during the 1970s. Communication media, governments and political parties, and cultural, political and religious institutions, each in their own way, take charge of trivializing reality and of concealing it. And they try, above all, to keep it from becoming an irruption that generates praxis and theology.

<sup>18</sup> In my view the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, called by Pedro Arrupe, caused a fundamental irruption of reality when it defined “the struggle for faith and the struggle for justice” as the crucial mission of our time (“Jesuits Today,” Decree 2, of *Documents of the Thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* [Washington: Jesuit Conference, 1975] 12). I do not believe this irruption emerged as a conclusion of reflection, or even as a result of discernment. It came from outside, sovereignly, powerfully. The reality of injustice and idolatrous unbelief had irrupted along with the need to return to the essence of Christianity. From that point on 49 Jesuits have been assassinated in the Third World for struggling against injustice. I think this is proof that reality had irrupted and that reality was moving toward this crucial struggle.

<sup>19</sup> See Jon Sobrino, “La raíz de la teo-logía de la liberación,” in *Teologías del tercer mundo*, Cátedra Chaminade 15 (Madrid: PPC-Fundación Santa María, 2008) 163–77.

Specifically with regard to theology, a variety of factors, but especially the costs, deter it from maintaining the original power of the inciting irruption: in society these factors include slander, persecution, and death; in the churches they take other forms. This has been evident in El Salvador. But it is also clear that if reality is not allowed to break in, the texts of the past become mute and do not give of themselves to the present.

### The Epistemological Rupture

The irruption of reality in Latin America accompanied an *epistemological rupture* in theology. The most novel aspect of this movement was the act of relating theological reason and praxis (historical, ecclesial, and pastoral), on which theologians as diverse as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Hugo Asmann agreed. Here in El Salvador, inspired by Xavier Zubiri, Ellacuría elaborated and amplified a specific understanding of the meaning of intellectual knowing. It should be applied to every form of intellectual knowing, but in fact he more deeply analyzed the intellection of Latin American theology as a theology of liberation.<sup>20</sup>

Ellacuría's proposal turned out to be innovative and, in important aspects, practically contrary to the epistemologies currently in use. For this reason I speak of an epistemological *rupture*, the foundation of which consists in the idea that intelligence should throw itself into reality. His proposal was that human intelligence must "apprehend reality and face up to it,"<sup>21</sup> an assertion that he breaks into three dimensions: "grasping what is at stake in reality" (the *noetic* dimension) from Zubiri; to this Ellacuría added "assuming responsibility for reality and paying the price for it" (the *ethical* dimension), and "taking charge of reality" (the *praxis* dimension).<sup>22</sup> For my part, more from experience and intuition than from theological

<sup>20</sup> See Ellacuría's programmatic article: "Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico latinoamericano," *Estudios centroamericanos* 50 (1975) 409–25. For my reflection on the epistemological rupture, see Jon Sobrino, "El conocimiento teológico en la teología europea y latinoamericana," *Estudios centroamericanos* 50 (1975) 426–45. The context can make the text not only give more of itself, but it can also help intelligence function in a specific manner, in this case, better.

<sup>21</sup> Ellacuría, "Hacia una fundamentación" 419.

<sup>22</sup> Ellacuría's original text reads: "'hacerse cargo de la realidad' (dimensión *noética*), de origen zubiriano, a lo cual Ellacuría añadió el 'cargar con la realidad' (dimensión *ética*) y el 'encargarse de la realidad' (dimensión *práctica*)" (Ignacio Ellacuría, "Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico latinoamericano," *Estudios centroamericanos* 322–323 [1975] 419; also in *Liberación y cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina, las comunicaciones y los debates del Encuentro Latinoamericano de Teología*, Mexico City, August 11–15, 1975, ed. E. Ruiz Maldonado and Enrique D. Dussel [Mexico City: Comité Organizador, 1975] 609–35; Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos* [San Salvador: UCA, 2000] 2:208).

reflection, I have added another step: “allowing oneself to be carried by reality” (the dimension of a *graced* intelligence).

Applying this proposal to *theological* intelligence, the notion of *taking charge of reality* led Ellacuría to define “theological intelligence” as “the ideological moment of ecclesial praxis,”<sup>23</sup> whose end was “the fullest realization possible in history of the kingdom of God.”<sup>24</sup> For my part, I tried to pick up this intuition from Ellacuría and defined theology as *intellectus amoris (iustitiae, misericordiae)*,<sup>25</sup> going a step beyond the *intellectus fidei* of Augustine and the *intellectus spei* of Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope*.

Emphasizing the praxis dimension of intelligence was not totally novel in Latin American theology, as I have said. I actually think the dimension of “assuming responsibility for reality and paying the price for it” was more innovative and demanding. Ellacuría argues that intelligence “has not been given to humanity so that we might evade our real obligations, but rather so that we might assume responsibility for reality and carry on our shoulders what things really are, and what they really demand.”<sup>26</sup> It is not possible to adequately grasp reality intellectually without the willingness to pick up what is burdensome in it—which is not usually taken seriously. The assassinated Ellacuría—thinker, philosopher, and theologian—can stand as a symbol for an intelligence that assumed responsibility for reality. Nor is it by chance that Salvadoran theology has pioneered persecution and martyrdom as central themes for theology in a strict sense—not just pastoral or spiritual theology—because it assumed responsibility for reality and paid the price for it.

There has also been a rupture in the way of “realizing about reality,” which implies “a being in the reality of things, and not merely a being before the idea of things, or a being in their meaning.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus understood, an exercise of the intelligence has as its referent the concrete reality that I have called the “context.” And being adequately in the context, which is to say, “in the reality of things,” the “texts” about Jesus were reread and intellectually known praxically, ethically, and gracefully. Let us see how.

<sup>23</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “La teología como momento ideológico de la praxis eclesial,” *Estudios eclesíasticos* 53 (1978) 457–76.

<sup>24</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “Aporte de la teología de la liberación a las religiones abrahámicas en la superación del individualismo y del positivismo,” *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 10 (1987) 3–28, at 9.

<sup>25</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Teología en un mundo sufriente: La teología de la liberación como ‘intellectus amoris,’” *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 15 (1988) 243–66.

<sup>26</sup> Ellacuría, “Hacia una fundación” 419.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

“Taking charge of the reality [of Jesus]” (the *praxis* dimension) principally signified *constructing* the kingdom today, which made one better understand, through a certain affinity, what the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus meant: a kingdom of life, of justice, mercy, and hope. It also brings one to understand better all that Jesus did in service of the kingdom—his proclamation, mercy, prophecy. It also certainly signified recognizing more clearly what constitutes the antikingdom, since dealing with reality in order to change it made one experience it as a negative, destructive, powerful, and opposing force. This in turn, *sub specie contrarii*, helped us Salvadoran theologians understand the kingdom. Further, through taking charge of the kingdom today, this improved understanding of both the kingdom and the antikingdom helped us “realize about” the person of Jesus, since the kingdom of God was not just one reality for him, or even the most important reality among others; rather it was that reality to which his life had a constitutive relationship.

“Assuming responsibility for reality and paying the price for it” (the ethical dimension) signified accepting what Jesus bore: persecution, slander, and torture by economic, military, cultural, religious powers. And again, through a certain affinity, that made it easier for us to “realize about” the cross of Jesus and its causes, as well as the crucified Jesus and his victimizers. “Assuming responsibility for reality and paying the price for it” helped us understand the crucified Jesus.

“Allowing oneself to be carried by reality” (the dimension of a graced intelligence) signified gracefully accepting a force and a light, as did those who “picked up Jesus.” It is not easy—from the texts—to know what it was that historically “picked up Jesus” (another example is his experience of the Father). But at least this makes us ask if Jesus also experienced grace, and in what that might consist, a question not habitually asked in Christology.

In a different context Rahner wrote some lucid words that help illuminate this dialectic of “carrying and being carried”—or in my terms, “picking up and being picked up.” In one of his last writings he says that “being a Christian is a heavy-light burden, as the Gospel calls it. When we carry it, it carries us. The longer one lives, the heavier and the lighter it becomes.”<sup>28</sup> Something similar, I think, has happened in El Salvador. We have had to pick up reality, but reality has also picked us up. Archbishop Romero had to pick up the repression of his people, but he said that “with this people it is not difficult to be a good pastor.” In our context, then, in order to “grasp” Jesus, we must “carry him on our shoulders.” On the other hand, however, “Jesus carries us on his shoulders.”

<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Our Christian Faith: Answers for the Future*, trans. Francis McDonagh (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 178–79.

The conclusion is that it is not enough “to be among concepts,” if one wants to grasp intellectually who Jesus is. Instead, it is necessary today “to be among realities,” analogous to how Jesus was among the realities of his day. Even a *kniende theologie* (kneeling theology) is not sufficient, as good and desirable as it might be. We must go through the epistemological rupture, throw ourselves into the real, take charge of it, pick it up, and allow ourselves to be carried by it. If we try to do it any other way, the texts give less of themselves.

Sometimes the texts have given of themselves the opposite of what we think was their original message. With no desire to exaggerate, it is paradoxical, on the one hand, that the reality of Jesus of Galilee has been well investigated, and that these investigations have yielded important theoretical results. On the other hand, the reality thus attained has not had as powerful an effect on the reader and on the collective consciousness as it could and should have had, given that these concepts have not only “content” but also “weight.”

Without an *irruption of reality* and a *rupture of the way of knowing intellectually*, the concept can be correct, but exceedingly trivial. In that case the reality behind the concept can remain far outside the grasp of theology and the collective consciousness, so that only with great difficulty can they unleash a living and creative thought process. But with the irruption of reality and an epistemological rupture, the concept has weight and can help transform the thinking subject, making demands and pushing the subject in that direction. It can become part of the collective consciousness and trigger an intense and creative process.

This is what I believe has occurred in the Third World with the concepts of *liberation* and the *historical Jesus*. They may of course be limited and always subject to improvement, but they have a special *pondus*.<sup>29</sup> When one is truly in the midst of reality, and the intelligence takes charge of the cause of Jesus, picks it up, and one allows oneself to be carried along by it, the concept can become not only precise and scientific but also powerful. It has a *pondus*. And this is usually transmitted, with limitations, of course, to the sayings of Jesus.

<sup>29</sup> The *pondus* of *liberation* finds verification in many places in the theology that bears its name, and also in the naturalness with which its content has continued to be amplified: liberation from oppression connected with race, ethnicity, gender, religion—including, analogically, even the suffering of mother earth. Christians and theologians have captured in “liberation” a concept of enormous depth and utility for putting hidden oppressions into words and for fomenting hopes of liberation. It has not been a case of *marketing* a hidden agenda far removed from the concept of liberation, but rather the *pondus* of the concept itself. The credit for having presented the concept in this way must be given to Gustavo Gutiérrez, the pioneer of this work.

A final reflection on the context. I have spoken about its importance for making the text yield more and better of itself. But we must also remember what the New Testament scholar Xavier Alegre Santamaría frequently says: “a text outside its context can be easily turned into a pretext.” Although he is referring to the *context* in which the biblical *texts* were written, his warning can also be applied to the context in which those texts are read today. Without taking the context of present reality centrally into account, a text—as distinguished as the Gospel of John, for instance—can be reduced to shaping the personal experience of the believer (a very important thing), to information about the realities of the past, or as referring to misty realities. And when this happens, the text becomes a pretext, an excuse for not having to face up to Jesus today, for not taking charge of what reality demands of us and makes possible in the present, and for not picking up its demands.

## FUNDEMENTAL ELEMENTS OF JESUS OF GALILEE

### The Cross of Jesus: A Light That Illuminates Everything

The life of Jesus has many dimensions.<sup>30</sup> Now the context can illuminate his life as a whole, but, depending on the exact nature of the context, it will illuminate some dimensions more than others. I will now briefly analyze three dimensions of Jesus’ life from the perspective of the Salvadoran context: the mercy of Jesus, the hope he evokes, and the following he demands. It is possible to analyze many things in relation to these themes, and I will say a few words about each, but I will start from the specific light provided by the cross.

It is not arbitrary to give priority to the cross. I said at the beginning that the cross is central to the *text* of the Gospels. And with regard to the Salvadoran context, I said that we are living under “a reign of the cross,” while in other places one can live under a “reign of the good life.” The cross has also been central in theology, such as the theologies of Paul, Mark, John, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann. Although the cross is not central in many theologies today, it certainly is in those of the most lucid theologians. In his treatment of religious pluralism, José Ignacio González Faus insists on “‘the uniqueness of the crucified’ as [what is] inescapably Christian.”<sup>31</sup> The cross is the nonnegotiable. Even the resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of Christians—without which there would be

<sup>30</sup> As is demonstrated in the recent book by José Antonio Pagola, *Jesús: Aproximación histórica* (Madrid: PPC-Fundación Santa María, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> José Ignacio González Faus, *El rostro humano de Dios: De la revolución de Jesús a la divinidad de Jesús* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2007) 203.

no Christianity—are better understood from the perspective of the cross of Jesus and the love of the martyrs.

## Mercy

### *Mercy in Jesus and the Salvadoran Context*

“Mercy”—or “compassion,” the term preferred by Johann Baptist Metz, among other theologians—is central for Jesus. To gain his favor, the poor and the sick had only to say, “Sir, have mercy on me.” For his part, Jesus speaks and, in his own way, theorizes about it, above all in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37). In doing this, he describes himself.

In Jesus, mercy is not just a feeling; it is also an action. More exactly, it is a re-action to the deeds of oppressors and victimizers. It does not consist in complying with a commandment, though Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to show the meaning of the great commandment, love of neighbor. It does not belong in the ambit of the religious (though it can and should be present there), since neither God nor the synagogue—the churches, we would say today—appear in the text essential for demanding compliance. Nor does it appear that a special predisposition for its exercise exists in the religious sphere, since the priest and Levite do not react with mercy, but with its opposite. In fact, the one who does respond, the Samaritan, is not well situated religiously.

For Jesus, therefore, mercy refers to ultimacy: it is not possible to go further. The victim lying in the road touches the deepest fiber of the human: *splachnon*, entrails, heart. And mercy restores the ultimate to the victim: life. It also restores dignity. The first is evident, but it is important to emphasize the second. When Jesus acts with mercy, persons in need not only receive help but also recover their dignity. He says to those who were healed: “Your faith has healed you,” which is to say, “You have helped cure yourself.” And he says to the woman caught in sin, “Your faith has saved you.” Human beings are no longer divided into two groups: some being merciful benefactors, and others being those who receive help. All are human.

The Salvadoran context sheds light on the ultimacy of mercy. When people asked Archbishop Romero what to do in response to the suffering of the people, he said, “do not forget that they are human, and that they are here, dying, fleeing, seeking refuge in the mountains.” He suggested concrete ways of helping, but he ended with something more fundamental, which refers to ultimacy: “Do not forget that we are human.” In this way mercy reclaims its proper ultimacy.

As with Jesus, the exercise of mercy restores dignity. A teacher for his people, Archbishop Romero used to say, “You are my prophet.” Like a lawyer risking everything for his client, he used to say, “With this people it is easy to be a good pastor.” The people recovered their dignity.

Mercy takes different forms depending on context, and this is important to take into account. The mercy expressed by Fr. Maximilian Kolbe who took the place of another man condemned to death in a concentration camp, for example, was different from that of Mother Teresa, who would do anything for the most abandoned. Mercy has taken diverse forms in El Salvador: assisting the fleeing, helping popular organizations, defending human rights, even burying the dead, which Archbishop Romero used to mention. Also, working for negotiations to bring a cruel war to an end, as Ellacuría did, and during which he lost his life, was also an outstanding example of mercy.

Liberation has been the horizon of mercy in the Salvadoran context, and its fundamental instrument has been *justice*. Mercy and justice can be conceptually distinguished, but really and existentially they are interrelated. Mercy-justice is essentially a dialectic, and therefore conflictual: it involves defending some against others who victimize them. It draws one into the struggle against the oppressor.

### *The Light of the Cross*

The cross of Jesus specifies the nature of his mercy. He entered into conflict by being *dialectically* merciful, by struggling against injustice. The cross also helps us see that Jesus was *consistently* merciful, since he remained in that struggle to its end on the cross.

The cross of Jesus also sheds light on Salvadoran reality. As Archbishop Romero memorably stated on the occasion of the assassination of one of the six priests who preceded him, “The one who gets in the way gets killed.” The archbishop consistently got in the way by exposing and denouncing the oppressors, but not to take advantage for himself, or to defend the Church, or even to advance a cause in itself (liberty, justice, democracy). His interference stemmed from the desire “to defend the poor who are defenseless, threatened, oppressed, tortured, disappeared, and assassinated.” The cross is, then, the clear consequence of a specific mercy: the mercy that arises from defending victims against their victimizers. It is from the perspective of this mercy, which does not merely assist but defends victims, that the new and massive phenomenon of martyrs must be understood.<sup>32</sup>

“Martyrdom” is a historical concept, and we could argue about its *analogatum princeps* and what standard is most relevant today. But in the

<sup>32</sup> It is well known, but it is good to recall (to illustrate the “added” significance that martyrdom grants to mercy), that Archbishop Romero and Mother Teresa were distinguished in mercy—both were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Archbishop Romero died a martyr. Mother Teresa did not. The process of beatification of Archbishop Romero is stalled because his mercy was conflictive, and his memory continues to be so. Mother Teresa has already been beatified.

Salvadoran context a martyr is one who gives his or her life to defend the poor, which is to say, for the cause of justice—and by this means testifies that Jesus is the Christ. The martyrs, then, are those who are distinguished in mercy, who love and defend victims, who transform that love into a struggle for justice, and who for that reason are assassinated. They are the consistently merciful. They resemble Jesus in life, and they die like Jesus. I call them martyrs like Jesus.

This mercy-justice, illuminated by the fact that it ends in a cross, sheds even more light than do the beautiful words of the psalms on what it means to say that God is a God of mercy. In speaking of the option for the poor, Puebla adds two essential clarifications in making this solemn *theological* affirmation. One is that God's option for the poor is gratuitous: "whatever the moral situation in which it is found." The other is that the option defends the poor against their oppressors: "God comes to their defense and loves them."<sup>33</sup> The love of God is an active mercy, but it is also a risky mercy, since it defends the poor against their victimizers. That risk—mysterious, scandalous—which God himself assumes, is what seems to be historicized in the cross of his Son.

## Hope

### *Hope in the Gospel and Hope in the Salvadoran Context*

Hope is central in the text of the Gospels. Jesus says programmatically: "The kingdom of God is at hand." Leonardo Boff comments: "Jesus articulates a radical fact about human existence, about its principle of hope and its utopian dimension. He promises that *utopia* will no longer be an object of anxious expectation (Lk 3:4), but rather a *topía*, an object of hope for the entire people (Lk 2:10)."<sup>34</sup> In the time of Jesus the kingdom of God gave historical expression to the hope of a people in great material difficulties and immersed in a political and cultural identity crisis. For this reason Jesus provoked an exuberant response among the common people.

One can also inquire about Jesus' own hope. At the last supper Jesus expresses the hope of returning to "drink wine in the kingdom." However, I think his various words about the poor and the humble should be interpreted as experiences not only of trust and joy but also of hope—as in his amazement at the generosity of the widow in the Temple and the audacity

<sup>33</sup> Bishops of Latin America, Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future, no. 1142 (Puebla, Mexico, February 1979), in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis) 264–67.

<sup>34</sup> Leonardo Boff, "Salvación en Jesucristo y proceso de liberación," *Concilium* 96 (1974) 375–88, at 378.

of the woman with the hemorrhage. His joy over the fact that the little ones understand, whereas the great and the wise do not, must have given him hope. And his hope is certainly present in his trust in his *Abba*.

Experiences like these are also real in El Salvador, and I believe that such contexts have opened the eyes of many to understand the hope of the poor and of Jesus himself. When looked at from the perspective of historical liberation with its difficulties, failures, and disappointments, the good news that the kingdom of God “is coming” has regained its value.

### *The Light of the Cross*

The Christian paradox also breaks in here. Hope, as found in El Salvador and in the New Testament, is intimately related to the cross in two ways. First, the resurrection of Jesus is a symbol of hope qualified by virtue of the cross. Peter formulates it exactly in five discourses in Acts: “You killed him, but God raised him from the dead” (Acts 3:15). God’s resurrecting action is not, then, simply omnipotence before a cadaver, which would generate an expectation of “more life”; rather it is justice before an innocent victim, and so it generates a specific hope: that, as Horkheimer so often put it, the executioner should not triumph over the victim. Especially in this sense, the resurrection is a symbol of hope in El Salvador.

But there is something even more audacious here; the cross itself has been a source of hope. This conclusion comes not from being oblivious or insensitive. In Scripture the suffering servant and Christ on the cross create hope, just as do the innumerable Salvadoran martyrs. The facts are clear, as difficult as it is in other places to comprehend and accept. The key is knowing and explaining why. In Moltmann’s words, “Not every life is an occasion for hope, but the life of Jesus, who took up the cross for love, certainly is.”<sup>35</sup> In our context this is true. Beyond calculations, optimism, and expectations, where there is love, there hope arises. Love is what moves one to believe and to hope, mysteriously, that good has more substance and more power than evil. In the presence of love it is possible to go on living. The cross that is a cross of love also produces hope.

Earlier we remembered the martyrs in the context of mercy; they are the consistently merciful. Now we remember them in the context of hope; they have given their lives for love, and so they are producers of hope. This fact cannot be denied. It happened with Archbishop Romero and with thousands of martyrs. They become graces for us, and we give them thanks. Their anniversaries with tears are moments of joy and of remembering a great love. It supports hope.

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Umkehr zur Zukunft* (Hamburg: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch, 1970) 76.

### Following Jesus and Easter

In the Gospel Jesus calls us to follow, to imitate the praxis and the evangelizing of his life. One must “go about doing good” as he did. He demands the same of his disciples. In regard to El Salvador, there is no lack of talk about the cloud of witnesses in recent Salvadoran history, many of them martyrs; they have gone about doing good.

And Jesus adds with clairvoyance that in history doing good implies meddling in conflict and picking up what is burdensome: “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23). We just saw this in the martyrs. However, responding to the call to follow is the Jesus-like way of fulfilling what God asks in Micah 6:8: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” In both cases the text speaks of walking.

Following bring us face to face with the way Jesus walked, and the cross grants it absolute ultimacy. This is how it appears in the text of the Gospel and in the Salvadoran context. What I want to emphasize in bringing these reflections on Jesus and Galilee to a close is that following him conforms us to Jesus; it conforms us, some more and some less, to his reality. And this has decisive consequences: in following, we can, by affinity, take a step of faith—and yet following is logically also the place where one could abandon the path of faith.

It is in following that questions about faith can emerge most acutely. Like Jesus, we can be faced with ultimate questions: whether everything makes sense or is absurd, whether hope makes more sense than hopelessness, resignation than *carpe diem*. The same holds true of the question of theodicy: if the Son of God, and God in him, has passed through this world, why does the world continue doing so much evil rather than good? Why does the world not change? Why does God not change it? Are not Mark and Matthew correct in having Jesus die, representing all of us, with the heartrending cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). To this unanswerable question one can only reply, babbling, that God is an unfathomable mystery, silent and inactive in the face of evil. But one must pass through the questions. And the passing is more insightful, I think, in following rather than in just contemplating.

But following also enables meaning and joy to appear. Being like Jesus gives meaning to life itself, and one sees, or glimpses, that “the gentleness of God has appeared among us.” This kindness, with many ups and downs, continues driving history forward toward the good and the new. By following Jesus, our older brother and the first-born Son, we can keep walking until “God becomes all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). For many people following has meant rediscovering a good news.

Passing through history *in this way* is an anticipation of Easter: we go through death and pass into life. The dialectic is resolved only at the end. We are saved in the present *in spe* (in hope). But the reality of the present looks like a modest sacrament of the final paschal event.

Perhaps what is most extraordinary about the context of El Salvador and similar locations is that there are believers who follow Jesus and who continue walking humbly with God. They are people of faith and commitment. And many others are carried in their own faith by the faith of these martyrs.

For me there is no doubt that these martyrs are the most crucial reality of our *context* for understanding the reality and the *texts* about Jesus of Galilee. Simply stated, without them it would be difficult to understand texts like the Gospel of Jesus, much less with any depth. For that reason, personally, the lack of interest in the martyrs of not a few theologies makes me uneasy.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I draw attention to three more or less obvious considerations. The first is that this article could have analyzed many other aspects about Jesus of Galilee. In the two volumes mentioned earlier, I treated some aspects that are absolutely central, such as the relation of Jesus with the Father and Jesus' final reality—his “metaphysical” reality. Other aspects are *au courant* and need to be addressed: Jesus and the religions, women and their position in creation and in the Church, an understanding of salvation that integrates the achievements of reason into the task of liberation, the real posture of Jesus toward service and power, freedom and subjugation. Nonetheless, I hope what I have said is enough to demonstrate the importance of the Salvadoran context and the martyrs for christological reflection.

The second consideration is whether and how to historicize today what we learned in an epoch-shaping context of irruption and martyrdoms that is difficult to repeat, though not totally unique. I hope my words help in some way to advance understanding of the “original irruption,” and to discern new irruptions that are, finally, the truest signs of the times. And I hope my thought helps support the martyrs. If this task seems almost impossible for theology to fulfill, consider whether this, and no other, is the fundamental job of a Christian theology: to keep alive the “irruption of the martyr Jesus.”

The third consideration is the most obvious. I have given my personal opinion about Jesus and some aspects of who he was and is as a person. And I have focused here more than in other writings on what is usually called *method*. In my other texts I have not followed a method in an a

priori way, both because I do feel qualified to do so and because, frankly, I do not have much confidence in such an approach. In this article I have simply rethought the path I have tread in El Salvador. Undoubtedly Ella-curía would have said it differently, as would other theologians, male and female, from Latin America and the whole Third World. But perhaps there is something common to us all: taking seriously the context of the world of poverty, passing through an epistemological rupture, and thinking placed in the service of liberation. And from the perspective of El Salvador, to the list I would add: taking the martyrs seriously.