

The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition

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Abstract

The theme of mercy stands at the heart of Jon Sobrino's theological project, fundamentally shaping his Christology, anthropology, martyrology, ecclesiology, and much else. This essay analyzes Sobrino's conceptualization of mercy as a development within the Catholic theological tradition. Drawing upon Thomas Aquinas's influential account of mercy this article argues that Sobrino's thought is consonant though not identical with earlier thought on mercy. Sobrino offers accounts of divine and human mercy that are faithful to the Catholic tradition and which productively push the tradition forward in response to both the biblical witness and contemporary challenges.

Keywords

almsgiving, Thomas Aquinas, Catholic tradition, liberation theology, mercy, poverty, Jon Sobrino, virtue

“**E**verything—absolutely everything—turns on the exercise of mercy.”¹
In this statement Jon Sobrino anticipates the underlying spirit of Pope Francis's pontificate and expresses his conviction that

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1. Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 677–701, at 682. Mercy comes to the fore in Sobrino's

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mercy² is the fundamental reality that structures the action of God, the person of Christ, the perfection of the human person, and the mission of the church. It is the reality seen in God's freeing of the oppressed and welcoming of the prodigal, and it is the demand placed upon all who seek to authentically love their neighbor. Recalling both the scene of the last judgment in Matthew and the parable of the Good Samaritan, Sobrino insists that we never forget that both our transcendent salvation and our moral life in history depend upon our exercise of mercy. Mercy is "the first and the last."³

The theme of mercy has gained prominence in recent years in the Church and Catholic theology. Ecclesiastically, this theme has been important in the pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and most notably, Francis. John Paul II's second encyclical, *Dives in misericordia*, richly explores divine and human mercy; and one should recall his institution of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2000. Benedict takes up the theme in *Deus caritas est*, among other places, and perhaps no other theme has so dominated Pope Francis's theological reflections. Indeed, one could rightly see Francis's papacy in terms of John XXIII's opening speech at Vatican II, where Pope John called for the Church to engage the world with the "medicine of mercy."⁴

Jon Sobrino remains one of the most influential voices in Latin American liberation theology and is one of the most insightful and perceptive interpreters of the

thought in the late 1980s and continues to be developed in key works from the 1990s through today. The most important work in this regard is Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), but the theme of mercy shapes his other works as well. There are a number of excellent secondary essays on Sobrino in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), including a few that make mercy their central point of reflection.

2. Throughout this essay I work with the English translations of Sobrino's texts. However, the reader should be aware of an inconsistency in these translations with regard to the theme of mercy. The original Spanish word throughout Sobrino's texts is *misericordia*. This would generally be translated as "mercy" or "compassion," and the translators usually adopt the former (with the latter used to translate *compasión*). However, on occasion the translators render *misericordia* as "pity"—perhaps influenced by certain English translations of Luke 10:33: "But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity" (NRSV, used throughout). See for example, Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 90–92, where "pity" is the translation of *misericordia* (and not, for example, *piedad*).
3. Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 215.
4. For an excellent collection of Francis's speeches and writings, see Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola, 2014).

theme of mercy in the contemporary church. Mercy is a theme that stands at the heart of Christian revelation, and, as has already been gestured at above, it plays a central role in Sobrino's thought. In this essay I argue that Sobrino's conception of mercy should be understood as an important and necessary development within the theological tradition, both in terms of a more faithful response to and representation of God's revelation and a more adequate conceptualization of the Christian life in response to the suffering of the poor, weak, and vulnerable. Sobrino's theology of mercy neither abandons the theological tradition nor leaves it where it is. Accordingly, an argument for development demands a demonstration (and not just an assumption) of how Sobrino is in strong continuity with earlier thought—otherwise we would have rupture or departure—but also an account of how and why he advances the theological tradition. These advances, as I will show, are at times simply a matter of drawing out what is dormant in earlier thinkers; at other times the development is more extensive and should be understood within the general contribution of liberation theology to contemporary thought. Either way, I intend to show that Sobrino's account of mercy is one of the most important for moving us forward in ways that maintain fidelity to the Christian tradition and respond to the contemporary world.

My argument proceeds in three steps. The first section provides an account of a "traditional" theology of mercy by means of an engagement with the theme of mercy in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Many other thinkers and sources—including the Cappadocians, patristic and medieval commentaries on Matthew 25 and Luke 10, traditional reflections on the works of mercy, and Catholic social teaching—could be used as the center of gravity in this section. I engage Aquinas not because he is the embodiment of the tradition, but rather because he provides one of the most robust and influential accounts of mercy in Christian history. Aquinas's account is particularly well developed, attentive to biblical and patristic sources, and influential on later thought—making it ideal for its role in this article. Furthermore, focusing most centrally on one traditional account of mercy provides greater rigor and precision for the comparative work with Sobrino. Nevertheless, other voices remain important and I draw them in below, particularly in the second part and the conclusion. In the second part I analyze Sobrino's conceptualization of mercy, attending to points of continuity and discontinuity with Aquinas throughout. I show that Sobrino's thought is in fundamental continuity with Aquinas on the nature and place of mercy within Christian faith but that Sobrino also insightfully explores the material, social, and structural dimensions of mercy. Although his consideration of these dimensions sometimes results in substantial changes to traditional doctrine, Sobrino's insights should be seen as a development of, not a rupture with, the theological tradition. Moreover, along the way I show that Sobrino's account of mercy presupposes a Chalcedonian Christology, further illustrating his continuity with the theological tradition. Finally, in the conclusion, I draw upon key insights from Walter Kasper, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Pope Francis to demonstrate Sobrino's fundamental contribution to a theology of mercy.

Thomas Aquinas on Mercy

Aquinas's theological account of mercy is complex, nuanced, and multifaceted, drawing upon and developing Aristotelian, biblical, and patristic sources.⁵ In the *Summa theologiae*,⁶ Aquinas defines mercy in the midst of his treatment of the virtues as "heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him if we can."⁷ Four elements of this definition are noteworthy. (1) Mercy is an interior disposition of sympathy; (2) it originates out of the suffering of another; (3) it compels one to action to alleviate that distress; and (4) it is marked by a realism (the "if we can" at the end). With this definition in mind, in this section I provide an initial description of Aquinas's theology of mercy and make clear his most fundamental convictions—with several key points held back until the discussion of Sobrino. I first briefly survey Aquinas's treatment of the mercy of God and Christ and then work in some detail through his account of mercy in the Christian life, for it is in the latter that we find his most robust treatment of our topic.

The Mercy of God and Christ

In his treatment of the attributes of God in the *prima pars*, Aquinas argues that mercy is present in all of God's actions toward creation: "mercy is especially to be attributed to God . . . in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy."⁸ Indeed, he includes here the very act of creation itself, where the defect to be remedied or alleviated is the state of non-existence.⁹ When in Matthew the two blind men on the road to Jerusalem call out for mercy, Aquinas comments, "they ask for what is proper to God, namely to have mercy on us." And then Aquinas follows this with a verse from the Psalms that he cites frequently: "His tender mercies are over all his works"

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5. There are many excellent secondary studies on Aquinas's treatment of the virtues in general and mercy in particular. Four shorter, helpful essays are the following: Stephen J. Pope, "Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity: An Interpretation and Reassessment," *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991) 167–91; Shawn Floyd, "Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 (2009) 449–71; Jean Porter, "The Common Good in Thomas Aquinas," in *In Search of the Common Good*, ed. Dennis P. McCann and Patrick D. Miller (New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 94–120; Anthony Keaty, "The Christian Virtue of Mercy: Aquinas's Transformation of Aristotelian Pity," *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005) 181–98.
 6. My account of Aquinas will mostly follow his treatment of mercy in the *Summa theologiae*, with his other works and the works of other thinkers coming in as further support and illustration. In terms of the *Summa*, there are scattered references to mercy throughout, but the two main treatments are the considerations of divine love and mercy in the *prima pars* (qq. 20–21) and the virtue of charity in the *secunda secundae* (qq. 23–32).
 7. Thomas Aquinas, *ST II–II*, q. 30, a. 1. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Aquinas will be to the *Summa theologiae*, 3 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948).
 8. *ST I*, q. 21, aa. 3–4.
 9. *ST I*, q. 21, a. 4 ad 4. He even sees the presence of mercy in the punishment of the damned (ad 1).

(Ps 144:9).¹⁰ It is important to underscore the preeminence of mercy in Aquinas's understanding of God. In his lifting up of mercy as a virtue in the *secunda secundae*, Aquinas argues that the Christian life should imitate that of God: "Mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested."¹¹ This passage also indicates a further point in Aquinas's account of divine mercy. It is crucial to see that God's mercy is connected to God's sovereignty, to God's providential care for creation, for it is this fact that prevents any perceived contradiction between God's mercy and justice.¹² Mercy does not contravene "justice," as if the latter were some higher law. Comparing human mercy and divine mercy on this point, Aquinas writes,

a man shows mercy in remitting punishment; yet here too a qualification must be observed: he must not contravene the justice of a higher law. God, on the other hand, can remit all punishment since he is not bound by any higher law: "Who gave him charge over the earth? Or who else set the land in its place?" (Job 34:13). Thus the mercy of God is infinite because it is not limited by a scarcity of wealth, nor is it restricted through a fear of injury, nor by any higher law.¹³

Aquinas's account of the preeminence of God's mercy is, of course, not unique. Walter Kasper has described mercy as "primordial" in God, as the attribute to which all else is referred and thus also the virtue by which the church's fidelity to God and its mission is measured.¹⁴ Many other earlier figures say as much as well. For example, in Gregory of Nazianzus's famous oration, "On the Love of the Poor," he concludes

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10. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, trans. Paul M. Kimball (New York: Dolorosa, 2011) 677—commenting on Matthew 20:17–34. For other references to this psalm and others like it (Ps 85:15; 102:8), see for example, pp. 358 and 549.
 11. *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 4.
 12. This point has been developed well by Yves Congar, "La Miséricordi Attribut Souverain de Dieu," *La Vie Spirituelle* 106 (1962) 380–95, at 390; this article is cited in Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist, 2013) 225.
 13. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/Eph2.htm#2>, chapter 2, lecture 2. (This and all other URLs herein accessed November 9, 2015.) Thus, Aquinas clearly distinguishes between the infinite and unbounded character of divine mercy and the finite and limited character of human mercy. He further distinguishes divine and creaturely mercy in another way. In the definition of mercy as virtue given above, one finds an emphasis on sympathy in the presence of the suffering of another. For Aquinas, God's mercy is not marked by sorrow, but rather by God's willing the good in love for one who suffers. See *ST* I, q. 21, 3; II–II, q. 30, a. 2 ad1; II–II, q. 30 4. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. Brian Mulladay chap. 10, lesson 1, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSJob.htm>, and Thomas Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000) 165–67. Thus, "sadness," "sympathy," and "sorrow" can be attributed to God only metaphorically or analogically for Aquinas, pointing to the truth of God's merciful love in the face of creaturely suffering.
 14. Kasper, *Mercy* 98, 157.

his cataloguing of virtues with the following statement, which acts as a sort of thesis for the rest of his oration: “I must conclude that love of the poor, and compassion and sympathy for our own flesh and blood, is the most excellent form of [love of neighbor]. For God is not so served by any of the virtues as he is by mercy, since nothing else is more proper than this to God.”¹⁵ In accord with God’s fundamental disposition toward creation, Gregory notes that in Christ we have fittingly received “such a great example of tenderness and compassion.”¹⁶

Aquinas likewise makes the move from the mercy of God to the expression of this mercy in Christ. Jesus is the “font of mercy,” “for he does everything out of mercy.”¹⁷ In particular, in the christological part of the *Summa*, Aquinas emphasizes that God’s mercy toward sinners frames and drives Christ’s work. The mercy of God is seen centrally in the deliverance of the human person from sin on the cross.¹⁸ By means of the incarnation and the cross, Aquinas suggests that the human person “knows thereby how much God loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation.”¹⁹ Jesus’s life and work are shaped by God’s merciful love, which seeks to bring the sinner from a state of alienation to one of friendship with God. And as the previous quotation suggests, this love is meant to stir us to act out of charity toward God and toward others.

Mercy in the Christian Life

Although the theological roots of his account thus lie in his understanding of God’s relationship to us in Christ, Aquinas’s main treatment of mercy in the *Summa* comes

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15. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 14: On the Love of the Poor,” in *Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. and trans. Brian E. Daley, S.J. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 78 (5). Many early Christian thinkers make a similar point. See the treatment of Cyprian in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996) 212; John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1984); Susan Holman, *God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty* (New York: Oxford University, 2009); and three sermons from Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa in Susan Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University, 2001) 183–206. Two more general and helpful resources on the theme of wealth in early Christianity are Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) and Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2012). For other resources, see Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2013) 191.
16. Nazianzus, “On the Love of the Poor” 83 (15).
17. Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew* 542, 678—commenting on Matt 15:21–28 and 20:17–34.
18. *ST III*, 46, 1. Furthermore, it is through mercy that the human person is moved to repentance (III, 86, 2, ad 2—cited in Congar, “La Miséricordi” 390).
19. *ST III*, 46, 3; cf. the almost identical statement in III, 1, 2.

within his treatment of the virtues. He places mercy within the virtue of charity, and at the heart of the Christian life. Although charity—the virtue which unites us to God and others in friendship—is above all, Aquinas argues, “of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest.”²⁰ Indeed, “as regards to external works,” “the sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy.”²¹ Concisely explaining this point, he writes, “charity likens us to God by uniting us to Him in the bond of love: wherefore it surpasses mercy, which likens us to God as regards to similarity of works.”²² Thus, for Aquinas mercy is a particular *form of love* which seeks to alleviate the suffering of another and which conforms us to the God who is merciful.²³ Echoing Kasper’s language for divine mercy, we can rightly say that for Aquinas, mercy is “primordial” to the Christian life. Love is ultimately ultimate, but the most fundamental form of love that must be expressed to one’s neighbor is mercy.

Although mercy can be defined in part as an interior disposition—as sympathy—mercy likens us to God especially as regards works. Throughout his account of mercy, Aquinas emphasizes the necessity of action. Put simply, he says that love of neighbor requires that one is not just a “well-wisher” but also a “well-doer”; and first and foremost here must be the alleviation of our neighbor’s needs.²⁴ In a comment on Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 9:13, Aquinas suggests that God’s preference for mercy over sacrifice is due precisely to mercy’s direct focus on the well-being of one’s neighbor.²⁵ Following earlier traditions, Aquinas locates almsgiving—both spiritual²⁶ and material²⁷—as the characteristic action of mercy.²⁸ Aquinas sees these traditional acts, rather than limiting what acts can be considered authentically merciful, as representing all forms of

20. *ST II–II*, 30, 4. It is noteworthy that Aquinas later recognizes mercilessness as an extreme defect. See Floyd, “Aquinas and the Obligations of Mercy” 464.

21. *ST II–II*, 30, 4, ad 2.

22. *ST II–II*, 30, 4, ad 3.

23. Earlier thinkers push this final point quite far. Merciful action is part of the Christian life as *imitatio Dei*, and it is understood that merciful action draws one closer to a merciful God (and to a God who commands mercy). Yet Gregory of Nyssa raises it to another level, by connecting it to the theme of *theosis*: “Mercy and good deeds are works God loves; they divinize those who practice them and impress them into the likeness of goodness, that they may become the image of the Primordial Being” (Nyssa, “On Good Works,” in Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying* 193–99, at 197).

24. *ST II–II*, 32, 5. In this passage Aquinas quotes 1 John 3, but the language reflects more nearly the discussion of faith and works in James 1–2.

25. *ST II–II*, 30, 4 ad 1. Elsewhere, Aquinas suggests that there are two kinds of sacrifice that one can make to Christ: “devotion to God and mercy towards our neighbor.” See Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 751, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSHebrews.htm>.

26. Instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, counseling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted, patiently bearing wrongs, forgiving injuries, and praying for the living and the dead.

27. Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead.

28. For the etymological connection between alms (*eleemosyne*) and mercy (*eleos*), see Anderson, *Charity* 42.

mercy in response to the needs of one's neighbor.²⁹ Mercy certainly involves—and flows from—and internal disposition of sympathy, but without actually moving to action, it is not true mercy.³⁰ In this emphasis on merciful action, we can see Aquinas reflecting the teaching of the Letter to James: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (James 2:15–16).

Even as Aquinas insists upon the importance of merciful action, his account of almsgiving is shaped by another fundamental conviction: almsgiving must be guided by reason and prudence. It is this fact that makes almsgiving a virtue, as opposed to merely a visceral reaction to the suffering of another.³¹ Throughout his account of almsgiving, Aquinas emphasizes the inability for someone to help all and accordingly the need for giving to be guided by right reason. Returning to a distinction made above, in terms of wishing the good to others, we must love all equally; in terms of *doing* good, Aquinas quite practically argues that it would be impossible to love all equally.³² Instead, one must take into account a number of factors. For example, Aquinas argues that we should prioritize those who are closer to us, those who are in greater need, those who suffer spiritual hardship, those who are holier, those who are of greater importance to the common good, and those who suffer undeservedly.³³ It is obvious that conflict would arise immediately with such a list. Aquinas in general prioritizes spiritual works of mercy over material ones, but also notes that "a man in hunger is to be fed rather than instructed."³⁴ Aquinas insists again and again that one must prudently attend to the particulars of a situation. He frequently notes that it is in situations of extreme material need that exceptions are to be made: it is to those who suffer most that our attention should turn;³⁵ it is in the case of extreme need that theft is not counted as theft;³⁶ and it is in these cases that even the vessels of the church

29. *ST II–II*, q. 32, a. 2.

30. It is worth noting that even with an emphasis on action, an act can only be truly defined as almsgiving if it is inspired by mercy and thus actually seeks to alleviate the suffering of another (*ibid.* *ST II–II*, q. 32, a. 1).

31. See *ST II–II*, q. 30, a. 3 and q. 32, a. 5 for the necessity of reason. For prudence, see q. 31, a. 3 ad 1, among others.

32. *ST II–II*, q. 26, a. 6, ad 1. In other words, one is called to universal benevolence, but prudently limited beneficence.

33. See *ST II–II*, q. 30, a. 1; q. 31, a. 3, ad 1, and q. 32, a. 9. One should also seek to help many over a few when possible (q. 32, a. 10). There are many good accounts of the *ordo caritatis* in Aquinas; for just one, see Eberhard Schockenhoff, "The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, qq. 23–46)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2002) 254–55.

34. *ST II–II*, q. 32, a. 3.

35. *ST II–II*, q. 32, a. 6. For many of the references in this and the following paragraph, see Pope, "Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity" 176.

36. *ST II–II*, q. 66, a. 7.

should be given away to provide others their basic sustenance.³⁷ What is needed in all of this is the use of reason and prudence to guide one's decisions and the humility to recognize that one cannot provide for all.

These prudential qualifications do not, however, undermine the urgency and importance of merciful actions. On this point, Aquinas uses the traditional language of precepts and mortal sin. Given the scene of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, he argues that giving alms to those in need is a precept; it is a command of God which is mandatory as a condition for authentic love of neighbor.³⁸ Accordingly, Aquinas states that failure to help those in need may be counted as a mortal sin. A failure to respond with sympathy and action to the suffering of another may be a sign of a rupture in one's relation to God. On a number of occasions he draws upon memorable passages from Ambrose to illustrate this point: "Feed him that dies of hunger: if thou has not fed him, thou has slain him"; "It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold, the naked man's cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor man's ransom and freedom."³⁹ Describing what a situation of mortal sin might look like, Aquinas points to someone who sees an urgent need that is unlikely to be met by others and which one could address from one's surplus;⁴⁰ and he also includes bishops who hold back for themselves what is to be given to the poor.⁴¹

At this point I've provided a basic sketch of Aquinas account of the mercy in terms of God's acts toward creation, Christ's salvific work, and the fundamental demands of the Christian life. In short, Aquinas sees mercy at the heart of God's work and Christian action in the world. Aquinas's account draws heavily from earlier Christian thinkers and, given his immense influence within the Catholic tradition, it represents a fairly standard theological conceptualization of mercy. There is still more to say about Aquinas's theological vision, but this will be best done with Sobrino's account in view, and thus it is to Sobrino that I now turn.

Jon Sobrino on Mercy

In Aquinas, the virtue of mercy is understood as sympathy in the presence of another's suffering which compels one to alleviate that suffering to the extent one can. Sobrino's definition of mercy accords well with Aquinas's. Sobrino argues that mercy is a specific form of love, a "praxic love that swells within a person" in the face of another's suffering, "driving its subject to eradicate that suffering for no other reason than that it exists," and "in the conviction that, in this reaction to the ought-not-be of another's suffering,

37. *ST II-II*, q. 185, a. 7 ad 3.

38. *ST II-II*, q. 32, a. 5; q. 44. Aquinas notes that such giving is particularly demanded when times are good. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P. 160, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSColossians.htm>.

39. *ST II-II*, q. 32, a. 5; q. 66, a. 7. See also *ST II-II*, q. 188, a. 4.

40. *ST II-II*, q. 32, a. 5 ad 3.

41. *ST II-II*, q. 185, a. 7.

one's own being, without any possibility of subterfuge, hangs in the balance."⁴² A few initial points of continuity can be seen just on the basis of this definition. Like Aquinas, Sobrino places mercy within the wider frame of love, agreeing with the "whole of the Christian tradition" that "love is the fundamental thing"⁴³ but specifying that in a world marked by suffering and oppression, love's first form is mercy. He also further emphasizes mercy as a both *praxic* and as a *reaction*. The latter points to the inward compassion and sympathy at the core of mercy and the former to the necessity of the movement to action. Finally, Sobrino's definition emphasizes as with Aquinas the non-optional character of mercy. It is demanded of all those who would seek a full human life and call themselves followers of Christ.

It is clear that in terms of definition, we have initial evidence that Sobrino's theology of mercy stands within the tradition. In what follows I unpack Sobrino's account of mercy, noting further points of continuity with Aquinas. At the same time, I emphasize various moments of contrast in order to highlight precisely how Sobrino's thought advances the theological tradition. The three most important contrasts between Aquinas and Sobrino have to do with (1) the mercy of Christ toward the poor and weak, (2) the relationship between mercy and sociopolitical structures, and (3) the relative weighting of spiritual and material works of mercy.

The Mercy of God and Christ

Sobrino sees mercy as the origin and constant within God's actions toward humanity. God is the God who liberates the oppressed, who calls the prophets to speak out for the poor, and who welcomes the outcast and sinner. As for Aquinas, mercy is found within all of God's works and best defines God's outward actions toward humanity.⁴⁴ And Sobrino insists that this "primordial mercy of God," as he calls it, appears concretely in Jesus's practice and message and most clearly defines Jesus's life and work.⁴⁵ Although one must account for Jesus's faithfulness, service, hope, and much else, Sobrino argues that mercy is the fundamental structure of his life.⁴⁶ Whether or not the word is made explicit in every Gospel account, Sobrino argues that mercy is at the core of Jesus's praxis. In particular, Sobrino sees Jesus's mercy manifested in his activity toward the poor, the weak, and all those deprived of dignity. In their presence, Jesus is moved with compassion and acts to alleviate their suffering.⁴⁷

It is worth pausing to note the dogmatic underpinnings of Sobrino account of Jesus's mercy.⁴⁸ In short, Sobrino's theology of mercy presupposes and is only

42. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 18.

43. *Ibid.*

44. For Sobrino, the exodus event is paradigmatic for understanding God's mercy toward the oppressed. See Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 82.

45. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 132.

46. *Ibid.* 15.

47. *Ibid.* 19–20; *Jesus the Liberator* 90–91; *Where is God?* 83.

48. Although my primary focus is on Sobrino's constructive account of mercy, this point related to christological dogma is important given that Sobrino is one of the more recent liberation

intelligible within a thoroughly Chalcedonian Christology. For Sobrino, it is crucial that the identity of Jesus is that of a divine person, for only that preserves the true importance of Christ's loving mercy: that Jesus is "the very mercy of God, coming in concrete form to this world,"⁴⁹ that Jesus is "God's radical drawing near for love and in love," that God does not stay above the fray but instead enters into the messiness of the human world and sin, even if this leads to the cross.⁵⁰ Yet, it is not enough to believe in a "God" who is close to those who suffer; Sobrino argues that one must hold that God is truly *God*, the powerful and saving God who liberated the people from Egypt and announces the coming Kingdom.⁵¹ Elsewhere, Sobrino concisely summarizes this point: the mystery of faith is that human salvation presupposes "a God with alterity (a different, omnipotent, and therefore distant God) and a God with affinity (like us, crucified, close by)."⁵² It is the overall Chalcedonian shape of his thought that allows Sobrino to see Jesus's mercy as God's mercy in the strict sense and the unity of lowliness and power in Jesus's merciful deeds toward the poor and vulnerable.

Returning to the main thread of my argument, thus far I have demonstrated Sobrino's continuity with Aquinas with regard to the preeminent place of mercy in the life of Christ and God's actions toward humanity. Within this fundamental agreement, however, we have our first significant contrast between Sobrino and Aquinas. As mentioned above, Aquinas's account of Christ's mercy in the *Summa* focuses on the Christ's sacrificial love and the redemption of sinners on the cross. However, Sobrino's focus on mercy toward the poor and oppressed widens our gaze to other parts of Jesus's life. Three further examples—Jesus's priesthood, miracles, and poverty—are instructive for drawing out the contrast between Aquinas and Sobrino on Jesus's mercy. First, in his account of the priesthood of Christ, Sobrino agrees with Aquinas that the title of High Priest points us to the importance of Jesus's humanity, but Sobrino follows the Letter to the Hebrews more closely by emphasizing Jesus's mercy as lying at the heart of his priestly work:

theologians to receive an explicit reprimand from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) precisely on the question of continuity with the Church's dogmatic tradition. In sections two and three, the notification by the CDF suggests that Sobrino's thought downplays the divinity of Jesus and adopts a two-person Christology. The 2006 CDF "Notification" on Sobrino's works as well as significant engagements with its themes can be found in part II and the appendix of *Hope and Solidarity*. See also William P. Loewe and J. Matthew Ashley, "The Sobrino File: How to Read the Vatican's Latest Notification," *Commonweal* 134 (May 18, 2007) 10–15.

49. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 132.

50. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 244–45.

51. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 270. It is noteworthy, given that the CDF warning begins with a methodological challenge, Sobrino says here that he is drawing upon the perspective of the victims of history. Any theology that downplays Jesus's full divinity or his complete solidarity with the human condition is, according to Sobrino, suspect in light of, not only the dogmatic tradition, but also the faith of the poor. For an analogous position drawing upon popular piety, see Roberto Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

52. Sobrino, *Where is God?* 146.

It is said of the high priest that he “sympathize[s] with our weakness” (Hebrews 4:15), and that therefore we may trust that we shall “receive mercy” (4:16); that he is “able to deal patiently with erring sinners” (5:2); that he is “merciful” (2:17). Jesus’ mercy can be characterized as an antecedent condition for the exercise of his priesthood . . . and the exercise of mercy is the realization [of salvation].⁵³

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas does not make the connection between Jesus’ priesthood and mercy at all.⁵⁴

Second, both thinkers provide a clear interpretation of the miracles of Jesus. Jesus was recognized as a miracle worker,⁵⁵ but the New Testament does not point to one fully exhaustive way to interpret the importance of these works. Thus, multiple perspectives are possible and it is instructive to see what each thinker emphasizes. Sobrino sees the miracles of Jesus primarily as signs and concrete enactments of his merciful disposition, while Aquinas focuses on them as proofs of Christ’s identity and authority.⁵⁶ For Aquinas, Jesus’ miracles work to confirm his teaching, in the way that a holy life may do so today; and furthermore, when Aquinas does turn his attention to miracles of healing and feeding, he not only emphasizes Jesus’ authority rather than mercy, he tends to spiritualize the meaning of these miracles away from the service of temporal needs.⁵⁷

Finally, as one would expect, Sobrino interprets Jesus’ poverty very much in terms of his solidarity with and merciful action toward the poor; Jesus’ poverty is part and parcel of God’s drawing near to the lowly and oppressed. Such a position shows the underlying logic in the scene of the Last Judgment in Matthew. That what one does to the poor and vulnerable one does to Christ is not an arbitrary pronouncement but rather coheres with the merciful presence and praxis of Jesus among the poor during his ministry. In contrast, Aquinas’s account of Jesus’ poverty in the *Summa* centers on how this poverty gave further credence to Jesus’ preaching and does not connect it in any way to solidarity with and merciful action toward the poor.⁵⁸

53. *Principle of Mercy* 132; see also *Christ the Liberator* 136. For Aquinas, see *ST* III q. 22.

54. While Aquinas does make this connection to a certain extent in his *Commentary on Hebrews*, nos. 235, 258, it is still noteworthy that in his synthetic account of the theme in the *Summa*, mercy is absent.

55. This point is convincingly defended in John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume II: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New Haven, CN: Yale University, 1994).

56. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 90–92; *Principle of Mercy* 19, 37; Aquinas, *ST* III, qq. 43–44.

57. See Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew* 136–39, 357–59, and 550–54.

58. Aquinas, *ST* III q. 40, a. 3. There are strong similarities here with Aquinas’s defense of voluntary poverty for religious, which focuses almost entirely on the impact of this form of life on the individual who lives out the evangelical counsels. See *ST* II–II q. 186, and Christopher Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas’s Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). In one exception to this general emphasis, Aquinas does argue (responding to the question of whether or not voluntary poverty and begging end up taking away from the involuntary poor) that voluntary poverty should spur others to have mercy on the poor. See *Summa contra Gentiles: Book Three: Providence: Part II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1975) 135.17.

These differences are significant, and yet, what are we to make of them? One route would simply be to say that they are complementary rather than contradictory. For example, one can find New Testament passages that indicate Jesus's authority and mercy, respectively, in relation to his miracles. Emphasizing one does not negate the other. This is certainly true, but simply claiming complementarity is too imprecise and fails to recognize the way in which Sobrino advances Aquinas's account. I would suggest a different way of seeing Sobrino's relation to Aquinas's theological vision. To put it concisely, Sobrino sees the mercy demanded of us, the account of mercy developed by Aquinas as a human virtue, exemplified in Jesus as an expression of who God is. And once we see it in this way, the difference between Aquinas and Sobrino is certainly not one of principle. For example, in Aquinas's christological vision, Christ has the fullness of grace by virtue of the hypostatic union; the corollary of this is that Christ has the fullness and perfection of the virtues⁵⁹—the first and foremost of which is charity, and thus mercy as well. It is important to recognize that in the *Summa* Aquinas does not connect Jesus's priesthood, miracles, and poverty to compassion toward the materially poor and corporal works of mercy; Sobrino's account is superior on precisely these points as it reflects important parts of the biblical text that are under-emphasized or ignored in Aquinas's account. Nevertheless, if, as was quoted above from Aquinas, mercy "likens us to God as regards to similarity of works,"⁶⁰ an account of Jesus's mercy as one finds in Sobrino is not only non-contradictory with Aquinas, it is a necessary development.

It is also worth reflecting on why Sobrino makes the advances he does on Aquinas's account of divine mercy as it is manifested in Jesus Christ. Initially, we should re-emphasize that Sobrino's account simply brings to our attention the actual, concrete particulars of the life and praxis of Jesus. As a good Jesuit theologian, Sobrino's thought reflects the logic of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius and, in particular, the logic of Ignatian meditation. Sobrino argues that the logic of the *Exercises* is that "the basic structural norm of discipleship" is "living as Jesus did. While God's will for different individuals may be different, nothing can be God's will if it does not correspond with acting as Jesus did."⁶¹ Sobrino's account of Jesus's mercy is the fruit of an intense focus on and receptivity toward the particular shape and content of Jesus's works as they are presented in the Gospels.

The reason Sobrino accents these particular aspects of the biblical narrative is rooted in his liberationist methodological commitments. In his powerful introduction to *The Principle of Mercy*, Sobrino contrasts the awakening from a "dogmatic slumber" in Western civilization in the wake of Kant with a different fundamental change needed in light of the experience of the third world:

59. *ST* III, q. 7, a. 2. Given that Aquinas holds that Christ has the beatific vision, he rejects that Christ has the virtues of faith and hope. Charity and the moral virtues, however, are found in their fullness in Christ.

60. *ST* II-II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 3.

61. Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978) 406; See also Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 7.

an awakening, but from another type of sleep, or better, from a nightmare—the sleep of inhumanity. It is the awakening to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world, a world whose liberation is the basic task of every human being, so that in this way human beings may finally come to be human.⁶²

For Sobrino, awakening from the sleep of inhumanity requires engaging the biblical text, theological tradition, and contemporary world from the perspective of the poor and in service to the liberation of the poor.⁶³ This methodological choice turns Sobrino's focus to the centrality and concrete shape of mercy in the life of Jesus in a way that advances earlier thought. Sobrino's reading of Jesus's priesthood, miracles, and poverty is firmly rooted in the biblical narrative, but by seeking to theologize from the perspective of the poor and in service to the poor, his attention is drawn to essential elements of Jesus's mercy and to important connections between texts, including the connection between Jesus's poverty and Matthew 25.

Mercy in the Christian Life

Sobrino's account of discipleship and the Church flows directly from his vision of mercy in God and Christ. Reminiscent of Aquinas's account, Sobrino writes, "the fundamental exigency for the human being, and specifically for the people of God, is that they reiterate this mercy of God's, exercising it towards others and thus rendering themselves like unto God."⁶⁴ Sobrino often recalls that it is the mercy of the Good Samaritan that is lifted up as the measure of this love. A basic attitude of responsiveness to the suffering of others is essential for one who truly is a "neighbor." Drawing upon the scene of the last judgment in Matthew 25, Sobrino further notes that it is the practice of mercy that divides the sheep and the goats.⁶⁵

It is important to recognize the personal and social shape of Sobrino's call for mercy. Each individual Christian is called to embody the mercy of God in the world

62. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 1. On human development or "humanization" as an essential part of evangelization, see Paul VI's apostolic exhortation on evangelization *Evangelii nuntiandi* 29–31 and Gustavo Gutiérrez's reflection on Medellín in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 71–101.

63. See *Jesus the Liberator* 5, 8, and *Christ the Liberator* 3–8, 331 on the aims and perspective of Sobrino's thought. For the centrality of the theological method for liberation theologies, see Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976); Jose Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of A People: 20th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 2003); the majority of essays in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SMC, 2006).

64. *Principle of Mercy* 17. Cf. Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 83.

65. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 29.

toward the weak. This was clear in the definition of mercy given above. In his call to mercy, Sobrino often emphasizes the need for sympathy as the originating point of merciful action. In particular, he argues that in modernity, the rich and powerful have insulated themselves from the suffering of the poor and oppressed; he argues that often a lack of mercy manifests a culpable ignorance of the situation of the world, a refusal to look around and be open to others. In short, he reads the world as a social embodiment of the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in the Gospel of Luke.⁶⁶ Accordingly, a cornerstone of Sobrino's account of the Christian life is the demand to be honest with reality, to open oneself up to the truth of the world and the suffering of others.⁶⁷ And refusal to do this indicates a mercilessness that is a mark of human sinfulness and ultimately a rejection of the God who has mercy for the oppressed. When Sobrino remembers the words and deeds of figures like Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Ignacio Ellacuría, and other faithful men and women, he often recalls their disposition of openness to the poor: "Just as with the Samaritan in the parable, in the presence of a crucified people, their hearts were moved and they were moved to mercy."⁶⁸

Yet, just as these martyrs illustrate the personal character of mercy, they equally reveal its necessary social shape. These men and women were moved by the suffering of the poor and sought to eradicate that suffering by revealing the truth of the Salvadoran situation, denouncing oppressors, and lifting up the victims.⁶⁹ They sought mercy that would be effective and lasting, and thus went beyond temporary aid to succor the poor and struck at the structural causes of suffering and oppression. In short, for Sobrino, the fullness of their mercy is seen in its liberating, and not just beneficent, character;⁷⁰ it seeks to be "structural" and "enduring."⁷¹ With this position Sobrino anticipates Pope Francis's view that being guided by mercy "means working to eliminate the structural

66. Ibid. 60–61.

67. Influenced by Ignacio Ellacuría, this basic point runs through Sobrino's corpus. For one example, see Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* 13–22; see also Todd Walatka, "Uniting Spirituality and Theology: Jon Sobrino's Seeking Honesty with the Real," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13 (2013) 76–99.

68. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 175. Or, to recall an earlier image, Sobrino describes the gift of encountering "others who had already awakened from the sleep of inhumanity, among them Ignacio Ellacuría and Archbishop Oscar Romero, to name just two great Salvadoran Christians, martyrs, and friends" (3).

69. Ibid. 23.

70. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 84.

71. Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003) 200–201. Turning to the Church—social problems demand social and communal responses—he argues that "mercy [must be] the principal motive and guide in the mission of the Church; saving the poor from the slow death of poverty, or from the quick death of violence, repression, or war as the case may be, [mercy must become] the force that moves the Church to praxis and the guide that orients that praxis. And since poverty and suffering are massive and have historical causes, mercy must be historicized as a struggle against injustice, in favor of justice." See Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 26–27.

causes of poverty and to promote integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs we encounter.”⁷²

This final point presents the second clear contrast with Aquinas. Although both define mercy in terms of the demand to alleviate the suffering of another—and both agree that this includes a disposition of sympathy and works of mercy—Aquinas does not connect mercy to the transformation of structures. Indeed, one could say that Aquinas views mercy almost entirely through an interpersonal rather than social lens, and for two main reasons. First, common to his time, Aquinas simply views poverty as part of the structure of things,⁷³ even part of a divine ordering.⁷⁴ One should hardly expect a medieval theologian like Aquinas to point to structural causes and the need for structural reform in response to poverty as one finds in contemporary thought, but such an exoneration in the end only highlights the necessity of further development on this point as it is found in liberation theology, Catholic social teaching, and contemporary theology more broadly. Second, in placing mercy within the virtue of charity, Aquinas folds mercy within the relationship of friendship obtained in true love between persons. Thus, the model for mercy that he has in mind is the quite direct and personal giving of one person to another; a giving that ultimately strengthens the bond of friendship and draws one closer to God. There are times where one can see a social valence—for instance, he says that divine law “forbids the rich to be so stingy that some are compelled by necessity to beg”⁷⁵—but even here the emphasis is interpersonal.⁷⁶

All of this points to an important difference, but one which should be seen in terms of a positive and necessary development rather than rupture. Sobrino’s account is thoroughly grounded in Scripture and appeals to biblical traditions that see poverty and oppression through a clear social lens.⁷⁷ Though he does not make this move, he could

72. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 188.

73. Pope, “Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity” 180–84.

74. Jean Porter, however, rightly points out that Aquinas “explicitly denies that social inequality is grounded in differences of nature among human beings” (“The Common Good in Thomas Aquinas” 108). With the partial exception of women, Aquinas does not differentiate between classes of people in terms of groups that are more naturally fit to rule and or serve.

75. *ST II–II*, q. 187, a. 5, ad 3.

76. Whatever the limitations, it must be recognized that locating mercy within the virtue of charity and the purification of relationships has clear merits. This interpersonal contextualization emphasizes the command of mercy upon each person and that the path to holiness involves merciful love toward others. It further highlights the healing power of relationships and authentic fellowship for those who suffer. One finds something analogous to this in the demand for solidarity in liberation theology, where one is called to live life alongside the poor and not only help from a distance.

77. For such a social lens in Scripture, see the treatment of the book of Revelation in Steven J. Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008) 17–36; see also the treatment of the Law and prophets in Norbert F.

further draw upon the social practice of mercy of early Christians.⁷⁸ Even sticking to Aquinas, we should see Sobrino's emphasis as a necessary development rather than a break. Aquinas's basic definition of mercy says authentic mercy seeks to help "as we can." This often indicates a call to prudence and humility for Aquinas. However, this "as we can" must take on a new significance given the recognition that social structures which oppress and impoverish are made, preserved, and transformed by human agency.⁷⁹ Resisting merciless structures that generate endless suffering is a logical extension of an authentic love which responds with effectiveness to the suffering of one's neighbor. In this way Sobrino affirms Ignacio Ellacuría's insistence that in the face of a long history of suffering and inhumanity that has become ingrained in cultures and economic structures, we need "to turn history back, subvert it, and send it in a different direction."⁸⁰

The need for humility is certainly not lost in Sobrino's account, even as Sobrino has greater confidence in what humanity can change and accomplish in the world. What maintains the basic continuity between Aquinas and Sobrino is the fundamentally non-Promethean character of Sobrino's call for structural transformation.⁸¹ Sobrino neither reduces salvation to material well-being nor rejects the need for personal mercy in view of social questions. Rather than a utopianism seeking the fullness of the kingdom through the power of human ingenuity, mercy for Sobrino is directed at "a modest utopia" where people are empowered to meet their own basic necessities.⁸² The faithful follower of Jesus is called through acts of mercy and in structural analysis, as one of Sobrino's favorite biblical passages demands, "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

The third and final point of contrast has been implicit through my discussion of Sobrino: Sobrino emphasizes mercy as a response to material poverty and suffering. Aquinas is explicit that all things equal, spiritual works of mercy should be privileged. Thus, recalling the points of emphasis in their respective Christologies, it is illustrative that, when looking at the poverty of Jesus, Aquinas focuses on how this poverty aids his preaching work while

Lohfink, S.J., *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Berkeley, CA: BIBAL, 1987), and Kasper, *Mercy* 55–58.

78. The most famous example of this is probably the work of Basil of Caesarea in building hospitals. For two concise treatments of early Christian practice, see Holman, *God Knows There's Need* 58–70, and Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2012) 154–62; see also Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

79. Although he warns against reducing the virtue of mercy to what can be accomplished through social structures, see Cardinal Christoph Schönborn on the social dimensions of mercy in *We Have Found Mercy: The Mystery of God's Merciful Love*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009) 113–16. See also the many affirmations of the work for structural social change in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

80. Quoted in Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 9.

81. See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 138, 330.

82. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 81.

Sobrinio sees this as a sign of his solidarity and mercy toward the materially poor. This third contrast is certainly indicative of a stronger tension than the previous two. Sobrinio's overall view of salvation centers on the Kingdom of God and accordingly is more inclusive of social-political questions and more attentive to material suffering.

This view, of course, is grounded in the theological developments found at Vatican II, Medellín, and liberation theology more generally.⁸³ Focusing on the first of these three, at a fundamental level *Gaudium et spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World") continually resists the ever-present temptation to envision the church and the kingdom as simply outside the world and society. Building upon the affirmation of the church in *Lumen gentium* (*LG*, or "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church") as a sacrament of salvation and unity, *Gaudium et spes* says the church "travels the same journey as all mankind and shares the same earthly lot with the world: it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation in the family of God" (40). The basic point here is that the church is in and part of the world, but, of course, not just any part. It is a sacrament of the salvation—of the Kingdom—which is the destiny of the world and the human race. This basic vision of the good of the world and the church-world relation is the ground upon which the text will later affirm "the good to be found in the social dynamism of today, particularly progress towards unity, healthy socializations, and civil and economic cooperation" (42, citing *LG* 1). It is also the ground for the urgent call for Christians to attend to their "earthly responsibilities" (43) and the recognition of a common cause with all those who seek a more just order in the world (21). In reflecting on the theological developments at Vatican II and during the pontificate of Paul VI in the decade after, the late Archbishop, Blessed Oscar Romero, described the church as having a new humanism:

the church has the same task as before—that of redeeming persons from sin and leading them to eternal life—but it starts from the situation in this world where there exists the duty of planning the kingdom of God now. This is the cause to which we want to be faithful, together with all that it entails.⁸⁴

Sobrinio's focus on mercy as a response to material poverty and suffering, then, should be understood as part of a wider development in the church and theology over the past 50 years.

83. For Vatican II, see the centrality of the Kingdom for the mission of the Church in *Lumen gentium* 5, 9, and *Gaudium et spes* 1, 39, and 45 in particular. For Medellín, see the discussion of the "doctrinal bases" in the document on justice, 3–5. See also O. Ernesto Valiente, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 795–827; Robert S. Pelton, C.S.C., "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America: A North American Perspective," *Theological Studies* 64 (2013) 819–27; and Todd Walatka, "Church as Sacrament: Gutiérrez and Sobrinio as Interpreters of *Lumen gentium*," *Horizons* 42 (2015) 70–95.

84. This passage is from Romero's address upon receiving an honorary doctorate from Georgetown University. See Archbishop Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, trans. Michael J. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 164.

Even with this placement of Sobrino within broader ecclesial trends, however, it is still important to indicate more specifically how his focus on material poverty and suffering has grounding in earlier accounts of mercy. First, Sobrino (with other liberation theologians) recognizes the importance of prayer, instruction, giving counsel and comfort, forgiveness, and the other acts traditionally counted as spiritual works of mercy,⁸⁵ and clearly insists upon the eschatological nature of final salvation against materialist visions which confine salvation to this world. Second, Sobrino can appeal to earlier accounts of mercy which very much put their emphasis on material suffering and which, even more importantly, illustrate the interrelation between personal holiness and mercy toward the suffering of the poor. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, calling to mind the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, vividly describes the opulence and waste of the parties of the rich and concludes that their sin is two-fold: “one is the excess of the drunkards, the other the hunger of the poor who have been driven away.”⁸⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus recognizes this twofold sin and lack of mercy toward the bodily suffering on one’s neighbor as a deep “spiritual sickness” that afflicts his Christian community.⁸⁷ Leo the Great, equally emphatic as the Cappadocians on this point, insists that fasting should be connecting to the giving of alms.⁸⁸ Finally, we can again turn to Aquinas’s thought and see greater continuity than what appears on the surface. Although it would be too strong to chalk up this disagreement entirely to a matter of “prudential judgment,” it should be read in part in this way. Aquinas notes that there are “extreme” situations when material need should clearly take priority;⁸⁹ for Sobrino, the world as we find it is in a state that Aquinas envisions as the exception. He sees a world that is “gravely ill,” that looks more and more like the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man: wealth moves ever more quickly to fewer hands and tens of thousands of people—particularly children—die every day from hunger and lack of basic nutrition.⁹⁰

85. See, for example, Sobrino’s account of sin and forgiveness in *Principle of Mercy* 83–101, his reflection on the figure of Romero in *Witnesses to the Kingdom* 179–94, his discussion of the limitations of liberation in “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus” 690–93, and Gustavo Gutiérrez’s accounts of gratuity, joy, comfort, and community in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. See also the excellent treatment of Ignacio Ellacuría and James Cone in Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crises of Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2015).

86. Nyssa, “On Good Works” 198.

87. Nazianzus, “On the Love of the Poor” 85 (no. 18).

88. Leo the Great, *St. Leo the Great: Sermons*, trans. J. Freeland, Fathers of the Church (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1996) 64, quoted in Anderson, *Charity* 136.

89. Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 32, a. 5; see Pope, “Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice, and Charity” 180.

90. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* 25, 37. For relevant data, see Robert E. Black, et al. and the Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group, “Maternal and Child Undernutrition and Overweight in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries,” [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)60937-X.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(13)60937-X.pdf). Undernutrition “causes 45% of all deaths of children younger than 5 years, representing more than 3 million deaths each year (3.1 million of the 6.9 million child deaths in 2011)” (1).

Conclusion

Sobrinó's account of mercy is one of the most important for moving the Church forward in fidelity to the Christian tradition and in response to the contemporary world. Three examples illustrate this importance well: first, with regard to our theology of God, Walter Kasper has noted that Catholic handbooks of dogmatic theology tend to neglect the theme of mercy in their treatment of God, mentioning it as one attribute among others and often only briefly and secondarily. Summarizing the situation, in most dogmatic theologies, mercy "is in no way systematically determinative. In more recent handbooks, mercy is often completely absent and, if it appears at all, then more like incidentally." He further suggests that the main reason for this marginalization of mercy is the metaphysical focus of most Catholic dogmatic treatises: "within the parameters of the metaphysical attributes of God, there is scarcely room for a concept of mercy, which derives not from the metaphysical essence, but rather from the historical self-revelation of God."⁹¹ An appeal to Aquinas would certainly help rectify this situation; however, this must be done in tandem with a figure like Sobrinó, who develops and enriches earlier accounts of divine mercy with his attention to God's mercy toward the poor and oppressed.

Second, with regard to our understanding of Jesus, it is important to make neither too much nor too little of christological dogma. Hans Urs von Balthasar represents this position well, arguing that councils and dogmas are normative but not exhaustive of the mystery of Christ: "There is much more truth in Christ than in the Church's faith and much more truth in the Church's faith than in the formulated dogmas. People with great charisms, like Augustine, Francis, and Ignatius . . . can enrich the Church in the most unexpected and yet permanent way."⁹² Chalcedon leads the Christian toward a proper understanding of Jesus, but it does not exhaust the truth about who Jesus is, and it does not guarantee that one's picture of Jesus even remotely resembles the figure in the Gospels.⁹³ This is where Sobrinó's account of the mercy of Christ is particularly helpful. Aquinas was unique in his own day in his devoting a substantial portion of the

91. Kasper, *Mercy* 10–11. Given the prominence of the theme of mercy in Aquinas, tracing this marginalization—perhaps in response to certain threads in reformation theologies—is a pressing need.

92. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Volume III: The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) 21; see also his *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in this Age*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993) 27–29, and his *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume VII: Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco, Ignatius: 1989) 106–9.

93. It is on these grounds that Sobrinó says that dogma can be "dangerous." Cf. *Christ the Liberator* 221. He argues that the language of conciliar Christology is particularly open to ideological manipulation. "Humanity" and "divinity" are open categories that need to be (and will be) filled in with biblical, philosophical, and theological content. While this positively grounds creative theological reflection and diversity in theological expression, it also allows for depictions of Jesus Christ which, although orthodox in terms of the natures and person of Jesus, are filled with content quite contrary to the concrete life of Jesus.

tertia pars to the “mysteries of the life of Christ.”⁹⁴ Yet, however much Aquinas moves Christology forward by attending to the concrete particulars of Jesus’s life, Sobrino focuses our attention on the principle of mercy that shapes all that Jesus does. Whether or not this specification is “unexpected,” as Balthasar describes the enrichment from the saints, it must become a “permanent” treasure of the Church’s understanding of Jesus.

Third, with regard to the Christian life, mercy must be maintained as fundamental. Most recently, we can see a call for mercy running through Pope Francis’s reflections and exhortations on discipleship, the love of God, and the mission of the Church. When Francis criticizes careerism within the Vatican bureaucracy, he does so on the grounds that self-ambition closes oneself off to the needs of the Church and humanity as a whole; when he criticizes wastefulness and consumerism, he does so, reminiscent of Nyssa’s concerns mentioned above, in terms of how this reflects a lack of solidarity and care for the poor and vulnerable.⁹⁵ In both these cases, and in many more, Francis is certainly calling for a growth in personal virtue and a purification of desires. But more importantly, he insists that personal and ecclesial praxis should be shaped by a merciful disposition which responds to the cry for justice; only in this way can it be an adequate reflection of and response to the mercy of God which fundamentally shapes Christ’s work and mission.⁹⁶ Francis’s words and deeds point to the personal, social, structural, and political dimensions of mercy that are developed so well in Sobrino. If Christian mercy—as a sympathetic response to suffering which seeks to alleviate that suffering—is to be worth its name, it must be both deeply personal and engaged with the structures that shape human life.

In his wide-ranging and illuminating reflections on mercy, Sobrino does not reference Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Leo the Great, Thomas Aquinas, or other early or medieval reflections on mercy. His explicit points of reference remain the biblical text, the reality of suffering and oppression in the world, and those faithful followers of Jesus in our own day whose lives reflect the mercy of God. Nevertheless, this essay has shown that Sobrino’s use of the language of mercy is consonant though not identical with earlier thought. Sobrino’s account agrees in general terms on (1) the definition of mercy; (2) the place of mercy within the Christian account of God, Christ, and the Christian life; (3) the emphasis on action and works; and (4) the urgency accorded to mercy within the command to love one’s neighbor. Moreover, the key points of contrast—namely, Sobrino’s configuration of the mercy of Christ, his insistence that effective mercy must strike at the causes of suffering, and his emphasis on mercy toward the materially poor—should be seen as

Thus, for example, Sobrino insists that we must not only affirm *that* Jesus Christ was human, but further *the way in which* he was human, “the actual ‘exercise’ of humanity.” *Christ the Liberator* 277; cf. 287, 290.

94. Aquinas, *ST* III, qq. 27–45.

95. Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy* 115–16.

96. *Ibid.* 24.

faithful to the biblical witness and as fruitful and necessary developments within the Christian theological tradition.

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