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Christ's Presence in the Poor and the Church: A Traditionalist Liberation Theology

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Abstract
This paper argues that central claims about the poor in liberation theology do not displace traditional claims about the centrality of the Church but are a natural outworking of them. Christ is present in the poor first in the sense that Christ is present prior to and as preparation for justification, working to overcome our infirmities; Christ is present second in the sense that the poor are God's special instrument of salvation. Neither manner of being present relies on the rethinking of nature and grace in the 20th century that is sometimes made foundational to liberation theology, suggesting that at least some of its central claims could survive translation to other conceptions.

Keywords
liberation theology, Jon Sobrino, solidarity, ecclesiology, nature and grace

How is Christ present in the poor, and how present in the Church? How does suffering suggest already a kind of baptism, the baptism with which he was baptized (Mk 10:38)? How do we accommodate Christianity's lingering fascination with the downtrodden, unless the Spirit is made so ingredient in our everyday existence that the poor become the Church, or grace so naturalized that the Church is built not just on Peter but on every stone that ever a builder rejected? This is a long-standing worry with liberation theology, expressed most notably by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: that it appropriates the keys to the dispropriated and builds up the poor by tearing down the Church.[1] It is also misguided. The point of this piece will be to suggest why; in particular,

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html

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it will be to suggest that central liberationist claims about the presence of Christ in the poor are a natural outworking of classical claims about Christ's work of redemption, and benefit from being seen as such. I will therefore try to develop the major lines of a liberationist proposal out of classical claims themselves without any reference to liberation theology—this will be section one—before considering in the second section how the result squares with and helps clarify a liberationist account of Christ's mystical presence and its consequences. I will also suggest that, if this approach is successful, we might reevaluate the debt that liberation theology owes to 20th century accounts of the relationship of nature and grace, since the last century's revisions are not required for the trajectory that I trace.

If there is a certain whimsy in this way of doing things, re-constructing from neglected antecedents a theology framed already upon its own foundations, its goal in a sense is to show that the liberationist project is a genuine development of doctrine: not just, as is often the case, by finding what Newman called "anticipations of its future"—that Chrysostom comments here and there in a proto-liberationist way, for instance—but by showing that it proceeds in what Newman calls a logical sequence from previous beliefs (and beliefs that precede Vatican II). This is an argument for the traditionalism of at least some form of liberation theology, then, but also an argument that liberation theology might benefit from seeing itself as a development—from adopting the sort of "conservative action upon its past" that "illustrates, not obscures, corroborates, not corrects, the body of thought from which it proceeds."[2] Since, as Newman himself would hasten to add, the logical sequence of this procession is not strictly deductive, the trick will be to exhibit the naturalness or harmony of fit between the larger classical view and the points of liberationist emphasis. This is not to imply that liberation theology would have inevitably been produced by the trajectory of classical Christology even absent, say, theologians working from and among the poor, but only that a theology from the place of the poor is faithful to that trajectory. In what sense a theology from that place *alone* can be faithful will be the sort of question this project lays the ground to answer, even if it does not answer it itself.

This will of course require some selection of the classical and the liberationist, and since I am Catholic, these selections will tend toward the Roman: the classical represented by a set of patristic emphases developed through Thomas and into Trent, the liberationist by the Latin Americans who have inspired much Catholic work and aroused much Catholic suspicion. Jon Sobrino especially will be my focus, as particularly inspiring and particularly suspect. Though I will note in a couple of places where Catholic assumptions might exclude certain kinds of Protestants, the larger hope—to point beyond the mutual distrust of classically and liberationist-minded theologians generally—may yet flow out from the Tiber onto farther shores.

I

Why is Christ present to the poor or the Church or anyone at all? The answer, of catechetical simplicity, is to join himself to us so as to overcome sin and elevate creation.

2. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 200.

The catechists' focus on this process of joining Christ has emphasized two stages: the sanctification that begins with the impartation of sanctifying grace in justification, and the glorification by which we are fully divinized. Still, at least on the Catholic account, justification is not the beginning of this process, for there is a kind of pre-sanctifying grace associated with our preparation for justification.[3] As the Council of Trent makes clear, were it not already obvious from experience, this grace is associated with dispositions and not just the occasional spasms of divine activity.[4] Pope Pius IX, great scourge of all modernisms, confirms that such grace extends beyond just, for example, catechumens to include those "who labor in invincible ignorance of our most holy religion and who, zealously keeping the natural law and its precepts engraved in the hearts of all by God, and being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life."[5] Because this grace is potentially so promiscuous, and because the pagans are so diverse, it is going to be difficult to give an exact account of its general character. The important point here is that it gives a kind of first stage to the process of sanctification that advances with baptism and culminates in the life to come.

Moreover, this first stage involves already, even before justification, a real relationship with Christ. For if we are graced before we are justified, this like all graces flows from God dwelling among us. In particular, just as in justification there is a relationship with Christ (incorporation into his body) that consists on our side in a habit of the soul (sanctifying grace) and that is the principle of action for subsequent actual graces (e.g. loving one's enemies), so also here, there is a relationship that consists on our side in a quality of the soul—a kind of pre-sanctifying grace—that is the basis or operative disposition for the action worked by further graces.[6] There is likewise a

3. Here is a first point of possible Protestant divergence. For if the more imputationist among the Lutherans will not stand for a real change in justification, how much more will they protest a real change before justification? I will leave it to such Lutherans to decide whether, as with justification, there might be some change of relationship without any change in the *relatum*.
4. Trent describes it in terms of some kind of preliminary faith, hope, and love; hatred of sin; resolution to keep the commandments; etc. (Session VI, *Decree Concerning Justification*, ch. VI; see also ch. VII, which begins: "This disposition… (*hanc dispositionem…*)").
5. From the 1863 encyclical *Quanto conficiamur* (Denzinger 1677). This view is reiterated in Pius XII's condemnation of the Feeneyites and then most famously in *Lumen Gentium*, 16. For a sense of what sort of grace this might be, for those who are ignorant of Christianity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 11:6: "for the Gentiles who were saved it was enough if they believed that God is a rewarder; and this reward is received through Christ alone. Hence, they believed implicitly in a mediator."
6. The character of this operative habit and its relation to actual graces is disputed between the Thomists, who think sanctifying grace is a remote operative habit distinct from the more proximate operative habit of charity, and the Scotists, who tend to identify sanctifying grace with charity. The Thomist might then deny that there is anything like a remote operative habit before justification; there are only the proximate dispositions corresponding to our preparation for justification. I am agnostic about this debate; all that I want to note here is that there is some kind of dispositional grace before justification that constitutes our side of a relationship with Christ.

corresponding habit in Christ himself. In the case of incorporation, the relationship consists on Christ's side in a preeminent possession of the graces that are communicated to us and in a mysterious vulnerability to our suffering. So also here, there is the same preeminence and a similar vulnerability, and for the same and similar reasons: because the way in which Christ communicates his grace is by assuming our lowliness and lifting us up. Pre-sanctifying grace involves this descent and this vulnerability just as much as sanctifying grace does. Christ does not hover above us, waiting for the Spirit to ready us to receive him; he goes down and communicates his Spirit. "With the Passion of Christ *all* human suffering has found itself in a new situation"—not just the suffering of the justified. "Christ—without any fault of his own—took on himself 'the total evil of sin.'"[7]

To put this first point syllogistically, then: what is not joined to Christ is not healed and elevated; there is healing and elevation before the infusion of sanctifying grace; therefore Christ is joined to us before the infusion of sanctifying grace. Let us call this joining Christ's *solidarity* with us. Solidarity is the relationship we have we Christ before we are properly speaking incorporated into his body.

Still, there is a sense in which solidarity is already a kind of incorporation. For we are not just graced before being justified; we are graced in order to be justified. These are stages in a single process, and the first stage is, as Trent and Pope Pius both make clear, a preparation for the later ones. This solidarity, then, grounds and is ordered toward sanctifying grace, just as sanctifying grace itself is ordered to the *lumen gloriae* "by [which] the blessed are made deiform."[8] So there is an extended sense in which solidarity can be called a kind of incorporation, since even those who are potentially in the body of Christ are in some way members. "Love [the unbeliever], and that with a brotherly love: he is not yet a brother, but you love to the end that he may be a brother. All our love is a brotherly love, towards Christians, towards all His members."[9]

Now this solidarity is premised on our need for Christ, but it consists not in our need as such but in Christ beginning to abide in us and we (and in some dark way our suffering) in him. Thus, even though there is a sense in which sinners are more in need than those who suffer the consequences of sin, sinners are not more united to, in solidarity with, Christ. For sin just is the rejection of him. Christ communicates grace through our weakness, but not through that weakness that rejects his communication. He becomes sin not in the sense of becoming a sinner but in the sense of uniting himself to sin's ill effects in order to overcome them. This is why his solidarity with the needy is a solidarity with the oppressed, the poor, with those who suffer the consequences of sin. This is true even where we suffer for our own iniquities, provided we have not let our iniquity cut us off from him entirely. But it is especially clear where

7. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 19, my emphasis. Here is a second point of divergence from some Protestants, since this is a denial of limited atonement.
8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I q.12 a.5c.
9. Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John*, 10.7 (all translations from the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1). Cf. Thomas, *Summa Theologica* III q.8 a.3c.

sin's consequences are borne by those who have not brought it on themselves: the Jobs, the men born blind, the mothers pierced in their hearts. Following Gregory the Great, we might distinguish three kinds of sufferers: those whose suffering is punishment outside of Christ, like the damned; those whose suffering is corrective, either remedying past sins or preventing future ones; and those whose suffering is not punishment, not due to one's prior or future sins, at all.[10] Christ's solidarity spans the latter two categories, and the point of the last one in particular is that Christ is not joined to us insofar as we are sinners but insofar as we suffer from sin.

All of us suffer in this way to some degree; all those this side of hell have some such solidarity, but the especially poor possess it in an special way. There are two reasons for this. Most obviously, it is because the especially poor are especially oppressed by iniquity. Christ comes to heal and elevate the whole creation, and this universal destination of grace, like the universal destination of goods, implies also a preferential option for the poor: it is meant for everyone, and therefore particularly for those who lack it. Where do you find the balm of Gilead if not in the wounds of the world?

> For love … gives a preference to the weaker, because she desires to impart to them such strength as is possessed by the stronger, whom she passes by meanwhile not because of her slighting them, but because her mind is at rest in regard to them.[11]

"Now true love is found in this, that those in greatest need receive first."[12] Second, Christ is especially present to the especially poor because God uses the poor—the younger son, the barren wife, the poor fisherman—to show that redemption is not our own accomplishment. "He chose disciples, whom He also called apostles, of lowly birth, unhonored, and illiterate, so that whatever great thing they might be or do, He might be and do it in them."[13] God could have acted in each person only to meet her needs, and this would have entailed more activity among the more needy, but God acts also in us to meet each other's needs, and this entails, because God so chose it, an even greater activity among the neediest. Put differently, just as Christ goes to the depths of

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10. But rather is training in virtue or serves for the manifestation of God's glory; see *Moralia on Job*, preface, V.12; cf. Thomas, *Commentary on John*, ch. 9, lectio 1, n. 1302. There might still be a difference in emphasis between those who focus on the moral or spiritual consequences of sin—e.g. the disordered passions and habits it produces—and those who focus on its material consequences, between what we might call sin and death. See here the comparison between Aquinas's and Sobrino's accounts of mercy in Todd Walatka, "The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition," *Theological Studies*, 77(1), 2016, pp. 96–117. But it would be a mistake to map the first onto traditional sources and the second onto liberationist ones; 'sin and death' after all is a traditional formulation, and the emphasis on one or the other has varied throughout the tradition.
11. Augustine, *Epistle* 139.3.
12. Bernard, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 50.II.6 in Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 244.
13. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. XVIII, ch. 49. Recall also that one of the ways that God uses suffering for Gregory is to manifest his power in overcoming it; see fn. 10 above.

our need as individuals to lift us up, so also he goes to the depths of our need as an entire creation—to the ditches and the fallen sheep—to elevate the cosmos. For *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God* (1 Cor 1:27-29).

Christ's presence in the poor is ordered toward further sanctification in two ways, then: first toward the sanctification of the poor themselves and second toward the sanctification of the whole world. They are in that sense like Israel, a kind of proleptic Church both as the site of their own preparatory graces and as a source of the world's salvation. And just as their preparatory graces share something of the character of sanctifying grace—a preliminary faith, hope, and love—so also their sanctification of the world shares in the character of the Church's mission. For the poor, like the Church, bear witness in their suffering to the darkness of this world,[14] and the poor, like the Church, are in their consolations a light that the darkness has not overcome.

Now just as justification is not abolished but consummated in glorification, so solidarity is not abolished but taken up in our incorporation in the Church. The glorified remain justified, and those Christ justifies remain still in solidarity with him. But the character of this consummation will differ according to the two ways in which the poor are ordered to sanctification. For the special presence of Christ in the poor that is based on their special need of Christ will be attenuated when all needs are fulfilled. Their poverty will be past, and so also the special effort required to overcome poverty. The final activity of Christ in them in this respect will be differentiated only by its history: not that more is being overcome, but that more has been overcome. So also their witness to the evils of the age when evil is no more (Ps 37:10); there will be no prophetic voices when prophecy passes away and we see face to face (1 Cor 13:8, 12). But no such stricture is true of the poor as a blessing of the nations. For even as they are sanctified, the poor continue to be the special conduits of God's saving power; indeed part of their sanctification consists in their being so conducive. The sanctification of Joseph is the salvation of Egypt, and even in glory Joseph does not shine like all the others but with the special sheen of Egypt's savior. This is true above all of the poor man of Nazareth: he in his poverty first makes God's power present, and in his glory continues to do so. So also the poverty of the poor may pass away, but their vocation as the chosen instruments of God's grace does not. Christ's solidarity with the poor is ordered to further sanctification, but the poor do not lose their special role when sanctified.

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14. In this respect, the "did unto the least of these" in Matthew is tantamount to a gloss on "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" in Acts. The presence of Christ in the poor revealed at judgment has a similar character to his presence in the Church revealed on the way to Damascus, and this because the poor are a kind of church in potency. So the twin tendencies in the tradition to interpret the "least of these" in Matthew 25 as just Christians or as including everyone are not in the end opposed to one another, since the universal poor have a proto-ecclesial character.

Nor do they lose their role with the coming of Christ, as if we could be supersessionists about the poor the way we have sometimes been about Israel. For God continues to exhibit a predilection for working through those neglected by the world. If there is one lesson from the life of Therèse of Lisieux, it is that God works precisely through her littleness, and if there is one lesson from her subsequent veneration, it is that God will raise up doctors of the Church from untutored girls. Bethlehem small among the clans of Judah (Mic 5:2) does not mark the last of littleness in the economy of salvation; it establishes the type of all later, as also all earlier, little ones. And Therèse's neglect was relatively benign—how much more those whom the iniquity of the world leads not just to being ignored but to being persecuted? These little flowers, indeed these crushed flowers, will in the end be gathered not just from the anticipations of Christ but from his offshoots, for he has seeded the whole sweep of history.

Only at this gathering in, when the Church is fully herself, will the blossoms be manifest in their fullness, including for the Church. Only at the end will she fully recognize and fulfill the various anticipations of, preparations for, participations in her that are sown across creation, and have sorted from her the contradictions sown in her own bosom. At present, the graces of the poor are ordered to incorporation in a Church that does not always recognize them as her own. If the poor, as I have adumbrated, represent both a special need and a special grace, then the mixed Church in her ignorance, impotence, and hardness of heart will sometimes fail to meet the one and fail to heed the other.

This is especially true because of the sort of need and the sort of grace that the poor represent. For the poor are poor because they are the particular victims of the spirit of the age; they are in a special way indexed to the failures of their time. And it is just these failures that plague the mixed Church. The same rulers of this present darkness (Eph 6:12) immiserate the one and insinuate themselves into the other. Because of this, the Church will be particularly blind to the evils the poor suffer and the goods they continue to represent. Of all the aids the Church has to keep her on course—the map of the Scriptures, the ballast of the faithful, the provision of the Eucharist, the piloting of the bishops—the poor have this advantage, that they warn us of our moment; they are a barometer of the present power of the air (Eph 2:2). This indeed is part of their sanctifying mission, that they exhibit in their suffering the evils we would disregard and preserve in their consolations the resources we would overlook.

The disciples were illiterate, and wrote the Holy Scriptures; Therèse received no advanced theological education, and was a doctor of the Church; the poor are the blighted of our age, and the source of our age's flourishing. They are this source because we neglect their message, and God uses the neglected to overthrow our pride. This indeed is the role of the Church, to attend where others have neglected, and to set straight what others have made crooked. If the poor are particularly hard to hear, that is why they are particularly useful. And if the Church does not attend to them, who will? If they are not seen as other Christs, how indeed shall they be seen? If the Church too dismisses them, what errors and what oppressions will accompany her absence?

II

Much of my emphasis so far, with a kind of liberationist anticipation, has been on the poor as a site of God's activity in the world. For the constant theme in liberation theology is that the poor are the place of redemption, those whom God's good pleasure has made the means of redeeming the world: "We are never ashamed to say the Church of the poor because it was among the poor that Jesus desired to establish his seat of redemption."[15] But this is fairly general, so let me suggest some more particular places where the foregoing account both coheres with a liberationist one and helps reorder it.

First, the identification of solidarity with a kind of first stage or pre-justificatory sanctification helps make sense of liberationist gestures at the quasi-ecclesial character of the poor. "Thus membership of the Church may be understood by *analogy*, but on a basic criterion: wherever there are just people, innocent victims, believers, like Abel—there, *in some way*, there is Church, and there is salvation."[16] Sobrino's words here strike an intimate chord with Augustine's "all his members," with Thomas' Church-in-potency. Innocent victims are the Church because they are in a special way Church-ward—being prepared like others for full membership, but distinguished from others by the intensity of their preparation. Sobrino's "in some way" is thus both made more determinate and, because the diversity of preparatory graces and the poor to whom they are imparted will resist complete determination, motivated in some of its imprecision.

This in turn coheres with and helps make sense of liberationist statements on the sacramentality of others. For sometimes liberation theologians will identify the neighbor as such as a kind of sacrament.[17] And this stands to reason, for all people inasmuch as they are in need of Christ and Christ is active them to fill that need—all people inasmuch as Christ is in solidarity with them—are sacraments not just in some weak or natural sense of being a sign of God but in the stronger and supernatural sense of bearing the presence of Christ in the world, participating in his primordial sacramentality. At other times, it is the poor who are identified as a kind of sacrament[18]—not just in the natural or Marxian sense of being the class whose liberation requires the liberation of all others[19] but in the Christian and supernatural sense of being the people

15. Oscar Romero, *Homily on Christmas Eve, 1978*, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/i-bring-you-great-joy-saviour-born
16. Jon Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle* (London: Dartmon, Longman, and Todd, 2008), pp. 94–95.
17. Gustavo Gutierrez, citing Congar on the sacrament of our neighbor, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973), pp. 201–202.
18. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (New York: Orbis, 1993), p. 21.
19. As e.g. in the Introduction of Marx's *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "… a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*."

who bear in themselves a particular need for and the particular activity of Christ. At other times again, it is believers who are identified as a sacrament,[20] and this also has its logic, since they are in the Church to which the unbelieving neighbor, including especially the unbelieving poor neighbor, is in his sacramentality ordered. The sacramentalities here are diverse, but this account gives us a way of organizing them.

The larger question to which this points is how Christ's presence in the poor relates to his presence in the Church. The long-standing suspicion against liberation theology is that it wants to ecclesialize the poor so as to have an independent base of operations against the broader Church. Thus the Notification on Sobrino's works by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith worried that "in these quotations the 'Church of the poor' assumes the fundamental position which properly belongs to the faith of the Church … The ecclesial foundation of Christology may not be identified with 'the Church of the poor', but is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations."[21] But the foregoing account gives us a way to order, or to begin to order, these things one to another without losing the liberationist emphases altogether.

For the distinctions of this article are not so far from those of Sobrino. The emphasis on the poor as both witnessing to neglected evils in their sufferings and witnessing to neglected goods in their consolations is an echo of Sobrino's long-standing reading of the Puebla conference.[22] That the poor are in this way a particular reflection of our historical moment is itself a common Salvadoran theme—for example, Oscar Romero's insistence that "it is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the Church's service to the world should be,"[23] or Ignacio Ellacuria's briefer formulation: "the sign of the times is always the crucified people."[24] And this in turn grounds Sobrino's sense—the source of some suspicion—that the poor are a challenge to the Church: "according to the gospel and the *orthodoxy* of the Latin American Church, Jesus Christ is most present—and most challenging—'in the poor' (Matthew 25:31-46) … It is in the poor that Jesus Christ can challenge the Church, and the Church has no defense against that challenge."[25]

The aim of the sketch above is to dispel the suspicion without dispelling the challenge, and to do this by situating the challenge in a larger positive relationship between the poor and the Church to which they are ordered. Indeed, on this account, the poor are a challenge precisely because they are an extension of the Church and so share in her mission. The poor are in a certain sense countercultural, but it is in precisely the same sense in which the Church is countercultural, inasmuch as the culture represents

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20. Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 44.
21. *Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J.*, p. 2. The notification is primarily concerned with how this plays out in practice in Sobrino's works.
22. E.g. in Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, pp. 56–57 and *Jesus the Liberator*, pp. 21–22.
23. Oscar Romero, *Address to the University of Louvain*, February 2, 1980, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/1980-02-02%20Louvain.pdf
24. Cited in Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* (New York: Orbis, 2001), p. 304.
25. Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom* (New York: Orbis, 2003), p. 137.

the *spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Eph 6:12). The ecclesial challenge they represent, then, is the challenge to the Church to be herself. They are in that sense a norm for the Church in something like the way that other norms are—Scripture, apostolic tradition, the Eucharist, and so forth—as, in different ways, internal to the Church they are norming. That their riches go unrecognized, that they therefore stand in judgment over her failings, again makes them no different nor any more external than these other, more straightforwardly intra-ecclesial norms. The norms are complementary, not interchangeable, and together help constitute the Church.[26] The upshot, then, is that we should not ask whether to attend to the poor instead of, for example, Scripture or tradition but rather ask how the poor show these other things—finally, how they show the Church—being violated.

To contrast the poor with the Church in any strong way, then, is to risk misunderstanding their special role. This is true in both of the ways I have suggested they are special. Solidarity is a relationship that Christ establishes with us in order to communicate his grace, and this brings us back to the different qualities of grace, or the different axes of the qualification of grace. One axis runs through a given individual life, from alienation to solidarity to justification to glorification, and membership in the Church is a measure on this scale. On this axis, the poor are special because they exhibit in an especially intense way those anticipations of the Church that are present the world over. But this specialness is no threat to the Church, for this grace is proto-, not extra-, ecclesial. The other axis runs from least to greatest among the kingdom of God, and the poor are special here because of their particular role in sanctifying the world. This special role is of the order that diversifies the saints, not the order that distinguishes them from the damned: to be poor is to have a specific kind of calling from God. To worry that privileging the poor in this way threatens the privileges of the Church also makes no sense. It is a category mistake: their privilege is to be the Church in this particular way, not to play counterpoint to its particularity. One might as well worry that the great saints of history undermined the greatness of glorification. Their historical greatness is a kind of sign of that glorification, but it is not meant to make glorification historical instead of sempiternal; no more are the peculiar graces of the poor meant to make justification political instead of ecclesial. We could as soon think that Paul's distinction of star from star in glory (1 Cor 15:41) is a threat to the loftiness of the firmament in which all stars have their place.

It is in this context that we have to evaluate the liberationist habit of ascribing ecclesial titles to the poor. I have already suggested something along these lines in the case of "sacrament," but I want to conclude with a more recent and provocative ascription here: Sobrino's suggestion, following Javier Vitoria and Gonzalez Faus, that outside the poor there is no salvation.[27] If the presence of Christ with the poor is already

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26. It takes these other norms to discern where the poor are themselves wicked, for instance. Cf. Sobrino on the *mysterium iniquitatis, The Eye of the Needle*, p. 80.
27. Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 77. Indications of this can be found earlier, e.g. in Romero's statement that "all those who wish to be saved are saved by the poor" (*Poverty of the Beatitudes, Our Strength*, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/

ecclesial in an extended sense—as anticipation of the Church and vocation within it—then the essential role that the poor play in salvation will not be in contrast to the Church's essential role but in some way a participation in it. What is distinctive about the role of the poor will be the partiality of Christ's presence in them; not that they are the fullness in which all else participates but that they have a special or differential role in that fullness, as revealing especially what is overlooked by our age. Sobrino's suggestion, quoted above, that the poor are privileged as the site where Christ is most present—there contrasting it with Christ's fourfold presence in the Eucharist, the word, the community, and the pastor[28]—must be qualified, then. It is not that there is some one common scale according to which Christ is more present in the poor than in, say, the Eucharist, as if to imply that Christ were really and substantially, and not just mystically, present in his suffering members (or that he were merely mystically present on the altar). Rather Christ is more present in the poor in the sense of better representing a particular kind of challenge to the Church, or to those who are failing as Church. Christ's presence in the Eucharist is less intense *in that respect*. So also when Sobrino notes the necessity of entering into solidarity with the poor to gain a kind of analogous poverty,[29] this should not be read as setting up a separate economy of grace, parallel to or displacing that sort of analogous ecclesiality by which *Lumen Gentium* suggests that the Church is spread beyond her visible bounds.[30] Sobrino could be clearer about this, but our solidarity with the poor does not save in the way that membership in the Church saves. Rather, solidarity with the poor saves as an irreplaceable feature of that membership. One's *ecclesiality* is compromised 'outside the poor'—and therefore also one's salvation.

How irreplaceable is this sort of solidarity, our solidarity with the poor, supposed to be? Sobrino emphasizes its centrality but also qualifies it as that without which nothing else "*usually* suffice[s]."[31] Here again a comparison might usefully be made with other concentrations of Christ's presence in the Church. For the Scriptures, too, have a necessary role in the life of the Church and the life of her individual members, though there are cases where "a man who is resting upon faith, hope and love, and who keeps a firm hold upon these, does not need the Scriptures except for the purpose of instructing others."[32] So also the Eucharist is necessary for the fullness of the faith and indeed for its everyday health, though there are exceptional cases where some of the saints might never have received it. Our solidarity with the poor might well

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homilies/poverty-beatitudes-our-strength). The idea is worth examining in part because Sobrino himself calls for others to "correct, improve, and fill out what we are going to say" (Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 45).

28. Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, p. 137. This fourfold division is presumably taken from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, p. 7.
29. Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 74.
30. Ibid., pp. 94–95.
31. My emphasis, Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 74.
32. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.39.43.

operate in something like this way, as necessary for the Church as a whole and in general, as therefore influencing each of her members at least indirectly, as ordinarily incumbent upon each of them as individuals, especially those most discomfited by poverty, but as in extraordinary cases dispensable. Part of the goal of a project like this one, or of its many possible sequels, is to view the place of the poor in its proper proportions; neither to diminish nor exaggerate their role—again the comparison with Scripture is instructive—but to identify more exactly the character of their centrality within the Church's life.

What my account of that centrality has suggested is that the poor need not swallow up the Church, nor nature grace. Indeed, though the roots of liberation theology are sometimes located in those opponents to neo-scholasticism who were to have such influence at Vatican II,[33] there has been nothing distinctively DeLubacian or Rahnerian in this evaluation of the liberationist project. All that it has relied on is the profligacy of grace, its presence outside the institutional Church. But that implies neither that grace is so ingredient in our experience of nature that we cannot understand its distinctiveness, nor even that our natures are themselves ordered to grace; it implies only that grace is beyond the baptized aborning. In that sense, it could even animate some older, exhumed extrinsicism. Nor would this be quite so absurd as it might appear on its (still rather pallid) face: the separation that modern scholasticism, whether early modern or late, is supposed to have effected between a purely secular history and a purely supernatural eschatology[34] has never made much sense in light of the actual social teachings of the modern scholastics. Grace is needed to heal in history as well as to elevate toward eschatology, and policing the boundaries between where the Church is recommending health and where it is recommending elevation has never made much difference to the substance of her social concerns—certainly not in the age of Christian princes, nor even in the age of Christian democracies.[35] The real shift that occurs at

33. See e.g. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 206ff. and Gerhard Mueller in Mueller and Gustavo Gutierrez, *On the Side of the Poor* (New York: Orbis, 2015), pp. 27, 79–81.
34. Mueller, *ibid.*
35. Whatever the faults of the integralist tradition that emerges in the middle ages and continues in different forms into the Leonine encyclicals, it never suggested that the healing of nature was complete without right worship, which after the incarnation means Christian worship. See, e.g., Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum*, paragraphs 20–21. The early liberationists tend to view this older tradition through the lens of Jacques Maritain and the New Christendom, popular in mid-century Latin America, which softens this traditional teaching somewhat. But even Maritain's retreat from a stronger Christendom is framed as a prudential one, responding to the pluralistic conditions on the ground; see Joseph W. Evans, "Jacques Maritain and the Problem of Pluralism in Political Life," *Review of Politics*, 22, 1960, pp. 307–323. It is only when this model, adapted to pluralistic conditions in Europe and North America, is applied to the more homogenously Catholic Latin American context that the temporal can come to be seen as independent of any direct influence from the economy of grace: for now it is not just a prudential measure under conditions of pluralism but an independence in principle.

Vatican II, then, lies not in making the supernatural relevant to the political again but in reaffirming that relevance even for political communities that no longer claim to be Christian. Whether they are Christian or not, they have finally Christ as their king, with the incipient graces to prove it.[36] If the present approach does nothing else, then, it should at least make it easier to see the continuity between liberation theology and its silver scholastic and neo-scholastic antecedents, whether they are Vitoria and Las Casas or Leo XIII and Pius XI.

I said at the beginning that I would try to show how a liberationist account of Christ's presence with the poor follows naturally or in logical sequence from traditional theological commitments, and here we are at a point where my material conclusions can come to the aid of my formal presuppositions. That is, here we can see why we might expect a theology from the poor to be a genuine development of doctrine: because the poor are genuinely ecclesial. The target of both presuppositions and conclusions has been the suspicion that the Church and the poor are in some deep way at odds. But if Christ is at war within us all, as in the riven self of Romans 7, then where is his presence most intense? In one sense, where he has already won some measure of victory; in another, where the battle rages most fiercely. Both of these mark their combatants in a certain way: the first a mark shared by all who survive the battle, the second for a select few. But neither mark makes the other illegible, for they are of different orders. Why indeed should we have to choose between the different glories of the soldier in battle and the soldier in victory, or the exceptional presence of Christ in the stricken places and his excesses in the richness of the Church?

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36. Which is to say that of the two shifts on grace that Gutierrez remarks in *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 109—the universalization of grace to those outside the institutional Church and the integration of grace into nature—the first is more important than the second. The decisive point is that the state of pure nature is not a historical reality (as even Cajetan affirms): that pure nature is an imagined state but not an impossible one.