

5-2020

A Christology from Below: The Scuffmark Christology of Dolores Mission

Manuel Valencia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Valencia, Manuel (2020) "A Christology from Below: The Scuffmark Christology of Dolores Mission," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol3/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

A Christology from Below: The Scuffmark Christology of Dolores Mission

Manuel Valencia

Abstract: Dolores Mission Church, located in Boyle Heights, is arguably the poorest parish in Los Angeles, California; and yet paradoxically, it is one of the most generous in the Archdiocese. This paper examines Dolores Mission, the Jesuits who shepherd this parish, and its people who, through their lives and ministry, continue the story of Jesus. Ministry begins inside this humble church where every evening, volunteers set up cots and blankets for homeless men and women. Over the years, the tight rows of cots have scarred and scraped straight lines along the church walls. “These scuff marks are evidence of ministry,” says Pastoral Associate Ellie Hidalgo. They also measure the Christology of Dolores Mission in its many ministries of charity and social justice in service to the people of God. This paper surveys the Christology and ecclesiology of this parish that is set amidst poverty. It reveals how aspects of liberation theology give a framework to the ministry of Dolores Mission, one that is biblically based, justice-oriented, and praxis-biased. It also highlights the ways that parishioners express their Christology through worship. In this work, I narrate the story of Dolores Mission in five movements: The Locus of Reflection, A Christology from Below, Liberation Theology, The Reign of God, and The Summing Up. These movements demonstrate how, in dramatic fashion, Dolores Mission puts skin on Christology, and how its parishioners work generously to build up the Kingdom of God.

Keywords: Dolores Mission, Jesuits, Christology, Boyle Heights, Theology



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Introduction

This narrative is the story of Dolores Mission and its people who, through their lives and ministry, continue the story and ministry of Jesus. It begins inside the humble parish church in Boyle Heights, California. Every evening for many years, volunteers have been setting up cots and blankets for nearly 70 homeless men and women. Over time, the tight rows of cots have scarred and scraped straight lines along the church walls. “These scuff marks are evidence of ministry,” says Pastoral Associate Ellie Hidalgo. Indeed, those scuff marks have measured the Christology of Dolores Mission in its many ministries of charity, social justice, and the building up of the people of God. The story of this remarkable parish and its people unfold in five movements: The Locus of Reflection, A Christology from Below, Liberation Theology, The Reign of God, and The Summing Up.

One: The Locus of Reflection

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46)

Dolores Mission is located in Boyle Heights, east of downtown Los Angeles. The parish had originally been home to two large public-housing projects, Pico Gardens and Aliso Village. These were largely demolished in 1999. The housing that has replaced them is predominantly semi-detached, single-family apartments.

Boyle Heights has served as a gateway for immigrants to Los Angeles. From the 1920’s to the 1950’s, it was the city’s most heterogeneous neighborhood. It has been home to Jews, Mexicans, and Japanese Americans, as well as African Americans. In 1946, the Canonesses of St. Augustine (later named the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) came from Belgium and, in 1952, they opened the first Catholic school in Boyle Heights.¹

By the mid-1980’s, the religious community could no longer staff Dolores Mission. At the invitation of Cardinal Manning, the Jesuits accepted the leadership of the parish. In 1986, Fr. Gregory Boyle, S.J., was appointed pastor. In the ensuing years, other pastors followed, including Fr. Michael Kennedy, S.J., Fr. Scott Santarosa, S.J., and the current pastor, Fr. Ted Gabrielli, S.J. Ellie Hidalgo was appointed pastoral associate in 2013. Like good teachers, the Jesuits promptly began tutoring parishioners on how to exercise leadership and empower their community. Today, roughly 850 parishioners attend the six weekend Masses offered at Dolores. Five of these masses are in Spanish, and one is in English.

Dolores Mission is arguably the poorest parish in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. According to a parish survey, 75 percent of its families earn less than \$35,000 annually. Nearly the entire congregation is of Latino/Hispanic heritage, with the majority hailing from Mexico, 20-25 percent from El Salvador, and the remainder primarily from other Central American countries.

Boyle Heights is scarred by four freeways – Interstate 5, the 60, the 101, and the 10. These busy thoroughfares divide the general area, effectively segregating the community from the rest of Los Angeles. Consequently, its residents suffer from some of the heaviest auto pollution

¹ “Dolores Mission Parish History,” Dolores Mission Parish, accessed Fall 2019, <http://www.dolores-mission.org/>.

and traffic congestion in the basin.² Boyle Heights is also scarred by violence. According to the Los Angeles Police Department, at the height of its gang violence, the area was a battleground for 21 gangs. Although the numbers of gangs have diminished, gang shootings and violence remain high and continue to plague the community.³ Last but not least, Boyle Heights is scarred by tragedy. Among those killed in gang-related shootings, are the innocent bystanders and residents, young and old, struck down by flying bullets. A horribly tragic example is the shooting-related death of 10-year-old Stephanie Raygoza, in October of 2000. As she played with her scooter on her front yard, a stray bullet killed her during a shootout between rival gangs. Stephanie is symbolic of the many innocent victims of gang violence. Boyle Heights may be scarred by violence, but it is also where Dolores Mission encounters Jesus of Nazareth.

Two: A Christology from Below

At the core of any Christology is the doctrine of the belief in Jesus' divinity and humanity. Does tension exist between the two? Are we to choose one over the other? No. Only by embracing both can we understand the fullness of who Jesus the Christ is. We require a balance, as James Papandrea writes, "that holds full divinity and full humanity together so that neither is diminished."⁴

A Christology from above focuses on the divinity of Jesus. It begins with the Second Person of the Trinity, the "Word made flesh" who came to earth, suffered, and died for humankind. This Christ then ascended to heaven. A Christology from above emphasizes the pre-existent Word, God's relationship with humanity and Jesus as a bridge between the two and divine mediator.

A Christology from below begins on earth, with Jesus in his earthly life, fully displayed in his ministry. It includes his ministry of healing, teaching, and table fellowship, as well as his strong association with the poor and marginalized. A Christology from below seeks meaning in the everyday lives of God's people, within the mystery of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. This Christology, however, does not stop there. Rather, it ascends as it reflects on Jesus' unique relationship with God during his earthly life, which is most evident in his prayer to God as Abba, and his authority and compassion for others.⁵ It emphasizes the Kingdom of God in our midst. Fittingly, Jesus began his formal ministry as he read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Is 61:1). He then concluded with a bold announcement: "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 14:18-19).

² Gilbert, Estrada, "If You Build It, They Will Move: The Los Angeles Freeway System and The Displacement of Mexican East Los Angeles, 1944-1972," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (October 2005): 287-315, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172272>.

³ "Mapping L.A.: Boyle Heights," A Tribune Newspaper Website (Los Angeles Times, 2017), <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/crime/>.

⁴ James Papandrea, *The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Postapostolic Age* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 107.

⁵ Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology* (New York: The Continuum International Printing Group, 2005), 33.

Jesus proclaimed that of the reign of God has entered this world through his person, and that the good news is meant especially for those who long for a just and compassionate society. It is the good news directly related to the option for the poor. In light of the Gospel, the Church's mission is to act as a leaven, transforming the world. Rather than seeing spiritual matters as separate from the world, the Church must engage in building a more just and compassionate world that embodies the values of the Gospel.

The preferential option for the poor is a principle the Church articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*. However, the phrase was first used by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in his 1968 letter to the Jesuits of Latin America. The principle soon after became one of the foci of *Gaudium et Spes* and many subsequent documents, including those drafted by the Catholic Bishops of Latin America during their conferences in Medellin and Puebla. In 1965, Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* became a call for the people of God to work for justice in the mission of the Church. The parishioners of Dolores Mission and its Jesuit leadership have embraced *Gaudium et Spes* and these other documents that highlight Arrupe's principle, as is evidenced by their social justice and charitable ministries.

Three: Liberation Theology

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the LORD God of the Hebrews, ‘Let my people go, that they may serve me’” (Ex 9:1)

Dolores Mission also embraces several aspects of liberation theology, a theology that emphasizes the social concerns for the poor and the political liberation of the oppressed. It considers the socio-political and cultural context of a community, within the context of Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, as they are mediated by the Magisterium (the Church teaching authority). Liberation theology, explains Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, “is a theology of salvation incarnated in the concrete and political conditions of today and reflects the love of the Father and human fraternity, which is salvation operating in time and giving a deep unity to human history.”⁶ Ultimately, the goal of liberation theology is to bring justice to the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology is Biblically-based, justice-oriented, and praxis-based.

Biblically-based

Nowhere in scripture is the preferential option for the poor more powerfully expressed than in the Exodus 15 event. Indeed, the Exodus story roots liberation theology firmly in the biblical tradition. Its great theme centers on freeing a people from religious, political, and economic oppression. Liberation theology reflects upon Exodus, not from the viewpoint of the powerful and the status quo, but from the viewpoint of the oppressed. God intervenes and enters history to bring salvation to God's people. Thomas Rausch, S.J., gives powerful insight into the Hebrew word "salvation." He explains that its root, *YS*, connotes “open space, security, and freedom from construction.” He continues:

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, “Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future, *Horizons*, 2, no. 50 (1975): 50.

In the tradition of ancient Israel, the notion of salvation is concerned with God's interventions on behalf of the people of Israel. Though God saves the people in many ways, the paradigm of salvation for ancient Israel is always the great event of the Exodus, God's deliverance of the people from bondage in Egypt.⁷

Liberation theology sheds light on repressive societal constructions and calls out the need for security for the poor and oppressed.

Justice-oriented

Cornell West has said, "Justice is what love looks like in public." What is meant by the word "justice?" In the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas understands the virtue of justice within the notion of *jus*, or right. Moreover, Aquinas adds that religion (worship) is that which we owe to God alone as a matter of justice. To God, we owe the debt of honor, reverence, and gratitude. Aquinas, however, suggests a broader understanding of religion that includes certain duties to one another⁸. In the Bible, justice is based on the relationships between God and human beings and among human beings themselves. "Both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with other human beings must be in balance for justice or righteousness to exist," writes David McCarthy. "If either part of this equation is out of balance, the other is too. Only when the demands of a particular human relationship are met is the vertical relationship between God and the individual in balance."⁹

As a matter of justice, God is worthy of our praise. As our creator and giver of every good and perfect gift, we owe God an eternal debt of gratitude. At Mass, the priest says, "Lift up your hearts" (in prayer). The congregation responds: "It is right and just." We are lifting our hearts and our lives to God in Eucharistic worship because we owe this to God.

Praxis-biased

Christian actions and theology must go together; praxis and theology are interdependent. Christian praxis without theology ceases to be Christian. Theology without praxis is pure theory and speculation, lacking the heart and the action exemplified by Christ. Liberation theology, places great, one might even say urgent, emphasis on praxis. Liberation theologians insist that praxis must be the starting point of theology—praxis that is in solidarity with the oppressed. What is the social context of a people? How does scripture inform the faithful in this situation? What can and must be done to restore justice and alleviate suffering? Such discernment activates a theology from below. The community discerns the signs of the times. "This is when community gathers in faith," writes Elizabeth Johnson, "when it becomes conscious of its situation, prays, studies the scriptures, and seeks actions that can change things for the better."¹⁰ The faithful read and reflect on scripture from a specific location. For Dolores Mission, this means reflecting from its locus of Boyle Heights, as a way of bringing fresh insight to the community and the overall Church as a whole.

⁷ Thomas P. Rausch, *Catholicism in the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 192.

⁸ Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 58, 1.

⁹ David Matzko McCarthy, ed., *The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching: Its Origins and Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 20.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 2017), 101.

See, Judge, Act

A key methodology of liberation theology is the three-step process: *See, Judge, Act*. It *sees* the suffering of the politically, economically, and disenfranchised group. It *judges* the situation using tools of social analysis, including social, political, and economic studies, as a processing of exposing the forces that cause suffering and injustice. It then *acts* to change the unjust situation. Liberation theologians looked to Joseph Leo Cardijn for this three-step methodology. Cardijn (1882–1967) was a Belgian priest and Cardinal, best known for his dedication to social activism and improving the conditions of the working class. He focused on bringing the Gospel to the neglected, working class. Cardijn's *See, Judge, Act* model influenced several movements around the world, including the liberation theology movement. By referencing Cardijn's three-step methodology in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII affirmed the process as an effective way of reading and responding to the signs of the times.¹¹

Ecclesial Base Communities of Dolores Mission Embrace "See, Judge, Act"

Soon after the Jesuits assumed responsibility of Dolores Mission, they encouraged and assisted parishioners to form projects called Christian Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, also known as CEBs). Christian Base Communities are small neighborhood groups that gather to reflect on their situation in light of the scriptures and apply its lesson to their situation. This liberation theology practice began among Latin America's Catholic faithful. At Dolores Mission, similar groups meet weekly for two hours at a time, in parishioners' homes. They use the *See, Judge, Act* methodology, reflecting on scripture as it impacts their lives. In his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Fr. Gregory Boyle writes, "Their reflection compelled them to extend themselves to the gangs in their area of the projects." He explains "They would have *carne asadas* and other gatherings to communicate clearly that the gang members were not our enemies... They wanted to signal to the gang members, You are our sons/daughters – whether we brought you into the world or not."¹²

In addition to seeing the needs of their own children, these mothers saw the need to become mothers to other children and young adults, who had come from violent and broken families and turned to the gangs as a result. These CEB mothers began asking, "What risks are we willing to take?", and with their question came the birth of Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries is a free-standing non-profit with its own impressive headquarters, bakery, and popular restaurant, staffed by Homeboy and Homegirl clients near Chinatown, in downtown Los Angeles. Annually, an estimated 10,000 former gang members from rival gangs – men and women from across all of Los Angeles—come through Homeboy Industries, hoping to change their lives.

¹¹ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, (Papal Encyclical, 1961), no. 236.

¹² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Simon & Schuster, 2011), loc. 160, Kindle.

Homeboy Industries is undoubtedly the signature ministry of Dolores Mission. However, it is not the only one. This community exercises what *Gaudium et Spes* calls the people as Church to do—discern the signs of the times. It has taken numerous actions to address social and charitable issues. Although gang intervention remains essential for the community, affordable housing and immigrant rights have moved up to center stage in recent years. A parish program, Safe Passage (Camino Seguro), protects local children, assuring safe travel on their way to and from school. Dolores also maintains a Restorative Justice program, reaching out to families of homicide victims, as well as perpetrators and their families.

Four: The Reign of God

“The time is fulfilled,” he said, “and the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15)

“Christology begins in worship,” writes Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., in *Who Is Jesus?*¹³ Those words contain a weighty truth. The first to worship the infant Jesus were the shepherds of the fields, the outcasts, and the Magi from the east. The consequence of a decapitated ecclesiology would be a disembodied and abstract Christology. Whenever Jesus healed the sick, exorcised evil spirits, or restored persons to this life, he was embodying and enacting the reign of God. In an unjust and broken world, he was making present the justice of God. Early in his ministry, for example, a leper begged Jesus for healing (Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16). By restoring the leper to health, Jesus restored him to life, restored a portion of God’s justice to the world, and revealed a dimension of God’s hope for the world.

The liturgy expresses this hope. In the celebration of Mass, the messianic banquet, Dolores Mission recognizes the stranger in the breaking of the bread. Out of its worship, Dolores Mission hears the words and mediates, that is, gives skin to the Kingdom of God in Matthew 25:35-45. These words send the community out in mission.

“Then the king will say to those on his right, inherit the kingdom...for I was hungry, and you gave me food” (Mt 25:34-35)

Some 1,400 volunteers have formed groups to prepare and serve daily breakfast and dinner for the homeless and hungry. They serve lunch and snacks to the school children. The school cafeteria at Dolores Mission is open 365 days a year, from 3 a.m. to 8 p.m. This program began 30 years ago with the Guadalupe Homeless Project.

“I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink” (Mt 25:35)

In Boyle Heights, it is the children who thirst. They thirst for education. Dolores Mission School serves children from kindergarten through 8th grade. No child is turned away for lack of tuition.

“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35)

¹³ Thomas P. Rausch, *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 146.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The Guadalupe Homeless Project, together with its sister non-profit, Proyecto Pastoral, provides shelter, primarily in the church. Volunteers set up cots and blankets for nearly 70 homeless men and women every night. Over the years, tight rows of cots have chipped and scraped straight lines along the church walls. This parish-based shelter operates 365 days a year, with both showers and hot meals available.

"I was in prison, and you visited me" (Mt 25:36)

At times throughout the year, Dolores Mission celebrates Mass with the spouses, parents, relatives, and other loved ones of those who are in prison, to restore broken relationships. After Mass, they visit those in detention. This practice began with Fr. Michael Kennedy, S.J., who established a prison ministry at the parish many years ago. He led community members to visit those who were incarcerated, regularly, and this practice still continues today.

Five: The Summing Up

The Kingdom of God – now and not yet

The eschaton, the reign of God, is already arriving. The new heaven and new earth are taking root here and now. This is a realized eschatology that gives hope to the people of God. Indeed, as Elizabeth Johnson so powerfully notes, "The resurrection appears as the sign of God's liberation breaking into the world...and the loving power of God that is stronger than evil."¹⁴ Similarly, Gerald O'Collins writes, "The eschatological work of Christ and His Spirit leads all people towards an authentic social and political progress here and now. The liberating work of the crucified and risen Jesus encompasses not only the age to come but also the present human life on earth."¹⁵

In proclaiming the Risen Christ, Dolores Mission makes present the kingdom. This tiny church community becomes a robust and powerful eschatological sign of the kingdom. For Dolores Mission, the Risen Christ means that God's liberation is made visible in a Christology where a 10-year-old child is killed, but through the community's tears proclaims "*talitha koum*" ("I say to you, arise").

This narrative ends the way it began – with a parish community mediating through its joys and sorrows the life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, even as its people continually pray "*maranatha*" ("Come O' Lord"). Dolores Mission is the place where rough scuff marks on church walls give 'evidence of ministry,' and mark the plumb line of a Christology from below.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 110.

¹⁵ Gerald O'Collins, "Jesus Christ, The Liberator: In the Context of Human Progress" *Studia Missionalia* 47, no. 21.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2020

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Bibliography

Boyle, Greg. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York, Ny: Free Press, 2011.

“Dolores Mission Parish History.” Dolores Mission Parish, 2019. <http://www.dolores-mission.org/>.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. “Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future.” *Horizons* 2, no. 1 (1975): 25-60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900011804>.

Haight, Roger. *The Future of Christology*. New York: Continuum, 2005.

Johnson, Elizabeth. *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 2017.

“Mapping L.A.: Boyle Heights.” A Tribune Newspaper Website. Los Angeles Times, 2017. <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/crime/>.

Mccarthy, David Matzko. *The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching: Its Origins and Contemporary Significance*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2009.

O’Collins, Gerard. “Jesus Christ, The Liberator: In the Context of Human Progress.” *Studia Missionalia* 41, no. 21 (1998): 21-35.

Papandrea, James L. *The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Postapostolic Age*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

Rausch, Thomas P. *Catholicism in the Third Millennium*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Rausch, Thomas P. *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Aquinas, Thomas, Laurence Shapcote, John Mortensen, and Enrique Alarcón. *Summa Theologiae*. Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for The Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

Vigil, J.M. “The Challenge of a Christology in a Pluralistic Key.” In *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation*, 2nd edition, edited by J.M. Vigil (2007): 287-294. <https://liberationtheology.org/library/EATWOTGettingThePoorDown.pdf>

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2020

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles