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

Following the Example of Monseñor Romero: Following the Way of Jesus Christ

By Macy Genenbacher

Abstract: To truly follow Christ requires more than a profession of belief; following Christ requires a commitment to walking in his footsteps, acting as he did. As a follower of Christ, one must commit themselves to bearing the fruit of Jesus's legacy, which requires one to look honestly at the reality of the world and the injustices that exist. The life of Monseñor Óscar Romero provides an example for following the model of Jesus Christ. Romero's own life and ministry in El Salvador bore the fruit of Jesus's legacy. In dedicating his life to the people, especially those on the periphery, Romero embodies what it truly means to be a Christian. Christians today have this same responsibility and ability. Jon Sobrino's Essay *Helping Jesus' Legacy to Bear Fruit in the Churches* recounts the life of Romero's ministry dedicated to preserving the true ministry of Jesus Christ. Sobrino presents four propositions on how to live a life that truly follows the example of Jesus Christ, just as he argues Romero did. These propositions provide the framework for true discipleship. To follow Jesus and continue to bear his legacy on earth, we must address the sufferings in the world, we must care for all people, and we must take responsibility for our actions and works. Following Christ was never promised to be easy; it requires us to do more than profess a faith, it requires us to live as Jesus. In the face of injustices in our current society of a global pandemic, political unrest, racial injustice, and a gamut of ethical issues, true discipleship is more necessary than ever. Christian persons have a responsibility to bring Christ to the world, to bring the transcendent God to earth. To live a life of true discipleship requires a great deal of grace and humility. In this paper, I recount the significance of Romero's ministry and the urgency that is needed for this same approach in the Church today.

Keywords: Christology, Óscar Romero, Injustice, Justice, Jesus's Legacy, Transcendence, Poor, Marginalized

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The call of the Christian person appears simple – to follow Christ, but the true meaning of what it means to follow Christ often becomes distorted or lost along the way. To truly follow Christ means to know Christ and act as Christ for others. This allows the world to bear fruit to Jesus' legacy. In Jon Sobrino's essay *Helping Jesus' Legacy to Bear Fruit in the Churches*, he recounts the example of Archbishop Óscar Romero's dedicated life to the people, providing an example of how to know Christ and live like Christ for others. Sobrino looks to Ignacio Ellacuría's description and witness of Romero's Christian lifestyle, dedicated to bearing the fruit of Jesus' legacy. With Romero's dedication to la realidad, it is impossible to look at our current situation in the world and the church without a recognition of the awakening that needs to take place. This essay confronts the falsehood that many Christians live in and calls us to action, to confront the real, to follow Jesus, and to bear the fruit of Jesus' legacy. We have to look at the reality of our current situation, not only with the COVID-19 pandemic, but the church as a whole in its response to injustice. We must ask ourselves, how are we, as church, bearing the fruit of Jesus' legacy at all times and especially now during this pandemic and civil unrest? This question will force us to look at the areas where we can be better. Then with humility, we can approach the four propositions Sobrino suggests, according to the example of Romero as recounted by Ellacuría, for truly living as Christians and bringing Christ to the world.

Sobrino takes an interesting approach of recounting Romero's life; he utilizes the witness of Ignacio Ellacuría, more so exemplifying the impact of witness. For many people, the only way they will meet Christ is through the actions and words of another person. This was the case for many people who encountered Monseñor Romero throughout his life. While the essay may seem complex, as Sobrino notes, to go through the line "from Ellacuría to Romero, and from Romero to Jesus," there is great significance in the impact of witness.¹ Sobrino notes the importance of having a twofold Christology. The "witness Christology" is essential, as well as the "text Christology."² This means we must both know the historical Jesus of Nazareth in addition to the reality of Jesus in our lives right now. It is through the witness of Christ, in conjunction with the knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, that we can approach the reality of our world and its problems. Sobrino details the great potential we have in the world, but he also makes us all too aware that we are not doing enough to continue the legacy of Christ. With the four propositions presented, we are given tangible, although not simple, ways in which we too can continue Jesus' legacy as Romero did.

¹ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 109.

² *Ibid.*, 109.

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First, Romero had a deep concern for the people. It is important to note that “the people” and “the people of God” must not be separated, they must be thought of as one. Ellacuría’s note on how Romero saw the people explains that to Romero, the people were one of his pillars of hope.³ To Romero, the people – those who need salvation, the poor, and the marginalized – are central to the mission of the Church. Monseñor Romero “dedicated his human, Christian, and priestly life to their salvation.”⁴ His homilies detailed his love for the people and his dedication to their salvation. In his August 20, 1978 Homily he stated, “Those who are in conflict with the people are in conflict with me. But my love is the people.”⁵ From this, it is clear that Romero’s liberation theology of the people drove his work. His focus was that of Christ’s, serving those who are in need, and seeing the suffering people as the source of salvation. Romero was far too familiar with the injustices in his reality in El Salvador; he was not afraid of the imperfections and flaws, rather he faced them with faith and resilience. The question is, do we do the same with our current reality, or do we just turn away from the people? Our current Pope Francis sets the example of how to be of the people and be as Christ to all with his focus on the real, but many do not follow his example, leaving our church even more divided, and ultimately contributing to the sufferings of the people. This is a constant Christian problem; many times, we ignore the real, but we cannot continue to ignore the imperfections, the injustices, and the sufferings. An important aspect of Romero’s recognition and care for the people is being able to see the combination of the human and divine in all people, and that those who are suffering can be compared to “the suffering servant of Yahweh.”⁶ Ellacuría elaborates on this notion, stating that “the crucified people stood for the Christ crucified.”⁷ Suffering, poverty, and other injustices are part of our reality, and as Christians, we are called to face these injustices as Christ did. Seeing injustice against the people should motivate the Church as it motivated Christ. Sobrino suggests that historical struggles must be seen as Christian struggles; however, our world has a tendency to “distort the reality of the peoples, especially in the affluent West, but also ignores and silences them as much as possible.”⁸ Romero, like Jesus, was moved with compassion for the people; neither would ignore nor distort the reality. This calls us to remain focused on the goal of Christ, by looking at the example of Romero, and to bring salvation to all as we build the reign of God.

In addition to looking at the reality of the people, Sobrino’s second proposition as made evident by Ellacuría from the example of Romero, deals with the transcendence, with God. The

³ Ibid, 110.

⁴ Ibid, 111.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 112.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 113.



way in which Sobrino presents this is that transcendence must be presented as “trans-descendence” or self-lowering and “con-descendence” or embracing.⁹ What made Romero so impactful was the way his deeds and word brought God to people. The way he lowered himself to be as Christ for others and embraced them with compassion and dignity ultimately brought the transcendent God to the people. Romero focused on God’s word and the call to transcendence, which required him to be honest and real with those he encountered, especially in his homilies. In his July 16, 1978 Homily, Romero stated, “It is relatively easy to preach, but when we live what we preach ... that is when the conflict starts.”¹⁰ Romero makes clear that truly living a Christian life is not easy, but that it is essential if we want to continue the legacy of Christ. Romero’s focus on the lies we tell ourselves in humanity forces people to approach the real. We see this in our current pandemic, in which people cover up numbers of cases, deaths, vaccines, or blowing off the reality of the situation instead of approaching the situation in a way that seeks to help and faces the reality. Romero would hear the cries of the poor during this time, as Jesus does too. Sobrino points out the obvious task of the Church to bring God to the world, and “Archbishop Romero’s way of making God present, lowering himself and embracing others is a great help.”¹¹ It is urgent that we focus on this idea of transcendence as “trans-descendence” and “con-descendence,” understanding that we must bring God to the world in our actions and words if we want to truly follow Christ.

This leads to the third proposition of following Christ and what this truly means. When looking at the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth as told in scripture, we cannot help but to see a man who approaches suffering with enormous compassion. Ellacuría describes “Monseñor [as] a model follower of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹² It is essential to note that he was a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, and not simply a believer in Jesus the Christ. Looking at the reality of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and understanding the adversity that he faced and the injustice he stood up to allows Romero to know what it truly means to follow Jesus. Sobrino points out the necessity of understanding that we cannot simply look at the miraculous and divine Jesus without seeing Jesus of Nazareth. We must remain in the humble reality of Jesus of Nazareth; we must know him in order to follow him. Through this proposition, Sobrino stresses that Romero was a great believer, but more importantly a great follower,¹³ and this is a lesson that all Christians need to examine. Further, I would even propose the question: can we truly say we believe in Jesus if we do not follow him? It is not enough to just have a belief, this must be put into action by following the example of Jesus, both human and divine. Sobrino discusses the danger of “Christianity

⁹ Ibid, 117.

¹⁰ Ibid, 118.

¹¹ Ibid, 121.

¹² Ibid, 122.

¹³ Ibid.



Lite,” which downplays the reality of the world, misrepresents the message of Christ, and takes us away from the human condition.¹⁴ This only takes us further from the real, when following Jesus leads us into the real, which of course creates conflict and is not easy. However, in these conflicts we are able to follow the experience of Christ more closely, as his life was far from easy. In order to be a “real Church,” Sobrino notes we have to follow Jesus and do so with great faith in hopes of a victory. What would it look like to truly follow Jesus in this time in our world? Is it those who hoard goods and supplies from the grocery store to ensure they have more than enough, while families go without enough food or other essentials, or does it look like the healthcare workers, grocery clerks, and delivery drivers who risk their health and safety daily to make sure that the people have access to healthcare, food, and other essentials? Following Jesus is not easy, it requires us to take up our own crosses and truly live as Jesus, to take care of others. This also requires a great deal of grace.

Grace, the fourth proposition of Sobrino, is needed to look at what the Church needs to do and be. Grace requires an extensive amount of humility; it requires us to lay down our humanity and pride to encompass the first three propositions of recognizing the reality of the people, bringing the transcendence, and following Jesus. None of this is easy, and Sobrino does not try to say that it is. During Romero’s life, he sought to bring people to Jesus despite the risk of persecution.¹⁵ In this way, Ellacuría notes, Romero was grace to the people, similarly to Jesus being grace to the people in his recognition of all, especially the suffering. Jesus becomes grace for us as Romero did in giving us the power to be both human and divine.¹⁶ There is a humbling aspect in this recognition that is desperately needed in the Church. We must acknowledge our humanity, but we also must recognize the divine, and the great power we have with the grace of Jesus. Romero also provides the examples that we have the power to extend this grace to others, allowing them to continue the legacy of Jesus as well. We all have the same power Archbishop Romero had of lowering ourselves, being grace, and being for the people, but do we use it, or do we just stay in “Christianity Lite?”

We have the ability as the Church to be radical like Archbishop Romero, to spread the word of God, and to be as Christ for others. His remarkable witness of Christ has created an impact that allows for others, like Ellacuría and then Sobrino, to share Christ with the world. Romero, as seen in Sobrino’s essay, empowered all of us to continue the legacy of Jesus, but if we look at our reality, we can see that in many aspects, we are failing. We are called to be an evangelical Church,¹⁷ to be for the people, and to live as Jesus, yet we so often make the choice

¹⁴ Ibid, 123.

¹⁵ Ibid, 127.

¹⁶ Ibid, 128.

¹⁷ Ibid.



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to be quiet or turn away from the reality of the world. Are we bearing the fruit of Jesus's legacy? Not fully. Do we have the ability to do so? Absolutely, but this will require a great deal of humility and acceptance of the real.

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