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Sobrino's notification: a sign of things to come

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

I suspect the most common reaction to news this week that the Vatican has censured Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a pioneer of liberation theology and a former advisor to Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, will be, "Why now?" After all, the titanic battles over liberation theology were fought during the 1970s and '80s. Should we also expect the Holy See, some may wryly ask, to condemn eight-track tapes, or "Miami Vice"?

Given how anachronistic the move seems, some have been tempted to read it as a "shot across the bow" prior to Pope Benedict XVI's May 9-13 visit to Brazil for the meeting of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference.

In fact, however, the Notification from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Sobrino is not quite as "retro" as it appears. A close reading reveals that its main concern is not really old arguments over liberation theology and Marxism, but rather more recent debates over the uniqueness and singularity of Jesus Christ. The text is of a piece, therefore, not with the 1984 "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation," but rather the 2001 document "Dominus Iesus," and the proper analogy is not to 1980s-era investigations of Leonardo Boff or Gustavo Gutiérrez, but rather to notifications over the last six years regarding Jesuits Roger Haight and the late Jacques Dupuis.

My news story on the notification can be found here: **Vatican censures Sobrino, who calls procedures 'not honest'**

Surveying the contemporary scene, the Vatican's core theological concern is that, in the name of cultural and religious pluralism, traditional doctrines about Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the World gradually will be drained of their content. Theologians may continue to use the old vocabulary, but what they mean by it will mutate, and over time the Second Person of the Trinity will be replaced with a merely human Jesus analogous to other great religious founders and prophets.

Christology is, to this way of thinking, the "canary in the coal mine" for the impact of religious relativism on Catholic doctrine. Once the decision is made that it's arrogant to impute a special truth value to Christianity, then traditional claims about Christ have to be understood as "metaphors" or "symbols," rather than as statements of fact. If that's allowed to happen, then Christian doctrines become a sort of religious poetry, rather than a body of teaching grounded in ultimate reality.

This scenario has been an *idée fixe* of Benedict XVI, the pope who famously declared war against a "dictatorship of relativism," for at least the last two decades.

In a 1996 address in Mexico City, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger identified the struggle against the pluralist theology of religion as the central challenge for Catholicism today, taking "the place occupied by the theology of liberation in the preceding decade." Moreover, Ratzinger warned, it would be in debates over Christology where the battle lines would be drawn.

At a 2002 Congress on Christology in Spain, Ratzinger again emphasized the need to accent Christ's singularity.

"Christ is totally different from all the founders of other religions, and he cannot be reduced to a Buddha, a Socrates or a Confucius," he said. "He is really the bridge between heaven and earth, the light of truth who has appeared to us."

Confusion on Christology, as the pope sees it, ultimately brings us back to liberation theology. If the objective truth of teachings on Christ is set aside, Ratzinger has observed, then some other reason has to be found for holding onto them. Usually, that reason is their purported social utility - that they promote liberation of the poor and oppressed. As Ratzinger has put it, such a move marks the triumph of *orthopraxis* over *orthodoxy*. Religious relativism, he believes, ends in a kind of liberation theology by default.

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Understandably, Sobrino's personal instinct has been to link this week's notification with older battles over liberation theology, what he has termed a "30-year campaign of defamation" from elements in the hierarchy. In a December letter to Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Jesuits, Sobrino identifies himself with other leading lights in liberation theology who have been targeted over the years, including Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Bishops Helder Camara of Brazil, Leonidas

Eduardo Proaño of Ecuador, and Samuel Ruiz of Mexico, as well as the Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR).

No doubt, that history played a role in disposing the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to take a critical look. The issues involved this time around, however, are nonetheless different.

It's telling that the book which got Boff into trouble back in 1985, triggering a formal year-long order of silence, was on ecclesiology: *Church, Charism and Power*. At the time, the Vatican found that by overstressing a distinction between the "church from above" and the "church from below," Boff risked smuggling Marxist concepts of class struggle into the church, thereby undermining its unity and its hierarchical structure.

The two books by Sobrino that triggered this week's notification, on the other hand, are concerned with Christology: *Jesus the Liberator*, originally released in 1991, and *Christ the Liberator*, first issued in 1999. Both were published in English by Orbis Books. The six categories of concern set out by the Vatican are focused on Sobrino's approach to Christ. He's accused of giving insufficient attention to the New Testament's teaching on the divinity of Christ, even of tending towards the ancient heresy of "assumptionism," meaning the notion that the historical Jesus was originally a human being who was later "assumed" by the Son of God.

It's worth noting that the investigation which produced the notification on Sobrino began in 2001, shortly after "Dominus Iesus" was published, and the same time that the inquiry against Dupuis reached its crescendo.

Coincidentally, Benedict XVI this week issued his long-awaited apostolic exhortation, formally collecting the results of the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist. News headlines focused on the pope's language on celibacy, reaffirming that it remains obligatory in the Latin Rite. At a deeper level, however, *Sacramentum caritatis* also reflects the pope's concern for vigilance about Christological doctrine.

"The Eucharist, as the sacrament of our salvation, inevitably reminds us of the unicity of Christ and the salvation that he won for us by his blood," Benedict writes in paragraph 86. "The mystery of the Eucharist, believed in and celebrated, demands a constant catechesis on the need for all to engage in a missionary effort centered on the proclamation of Jesus as the one Savior."

Benedict's concern is not just a matter of defending what he regards as a core truth of the faith. He also believes that defective Christological doctrines can have two dangerous consequences:

- If Christ is not understood as the lone and unique savior of the world, then Christian missionary efforts may be undercut, something the pope believes has already happened to some extent in the post-Vatican II church;
- If Christ is seen as merely a human being, then Christian service to the world could be reduced to a "purely sociological" endeavor, as opposed to something that points to a spiritual message about supernatural redemption and its salvation.

Given all that Benedict XVI and his team at the CDF believes to be at stake, this is likely not the last time we'll hear from the Holy See about debates in Christology. In that sense, this week's notification on Sobrino is not so much a remembrance of things past, but a sign of things to come.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org

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