

THE MARTYRED PEOPLE TODAY AND THE HOPE THEY BRING US

Introduction:

Monseñor Romero, like Rutilio Grande, his predecessor, and Ignacio Ellacuría, his follower and reflective echo, had, in their historic moments, in the years before and after the Salvadoran civil war, the prophetic charism and the genius to give voice to the suffering of the people. The people, sacrificed at that time to the idol of wealth, cut down in their struggle for a life of dignity, exposed to cruel and barbaric violence, expelled from their homes and their land, living in a nightmare of torture, of overnight escapes and separation from their loved ones. This same people understood, in an instinctive and unambiguous way: Rutilio, Monseñor Romero, and Ellacuría are talking about us, about the reality that we suffer on a daily basis in our flesh. We are “the crucified people,” we are “the martyred people.” And not only are they talking about us, but they also dignify us and apply to us the ultimate kind of hope: You all are the body of Christ, crucified in history! You all are the martyred flesh – like the flesh of the poor guy from Nazareth, in which God makes God-self present in this world shaped by sin.

Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría interrupted with a new way of announcing the Gospel and denouncing sin. This new way of speaking, categorically rejecting theological and pastoral “docetism,” verbage without flesh and empty of true reality. In this new language, “the living and effective Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12) is made incarnate. This Word creates reality; it is “liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus himself.”¹

Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría had a brilliant gift of giving words to the reality, to the suffering of the people, but it is not only this that gives their language salvific and hope-giving power that speaks directly to the hearts of the most vulnerable and unprotected, but rather the firm and absolute coherence of their lives. This coherence coated the seal of their martyrdom, which was sealed with their blood.

Remembering the martyrs, and celebrating them, is dangerous. It obliges us, like them, to let ourselves be touched in our consciences, by the anguish and the martyrdoms that the victims suffer today; it obliges us to risk what seems like self-destructive insanity: to throw ourselves, with all of our existence, against this machinery that brutally crushes the vulnerable. To remember the body and blood of the

¹ D. Bonhoeffer. *Reflexiones en ocasión del bautizo de Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, Widerstand und Ergebung*, en *DBW* 8, p. 428-436, aquí p. 435 y ss.

martyrs, among them, the proto-martyr Jesus of Nazareth, not not allow for any kind of diet-celebration. It either initiates us into following them, or it is a lie, and carries with it “its own judgment” (cf. 1 Cor 11:29).

Making the legacy of the martyrs productive and doing theology in a way that is faithful to their inheritance, does not allow for any kind of sterile or mechanical repetition. One can be a specialist in the thought of Ellacuría, reading and analyzing every last word, and still betray him. Studying the thought of martyrs in depth is a task of the utmost importance that demands all of our intellectual rigor. But it can never be an end in itself, a merely academic task. To be faithful to their legacy, we are obliged to a patient exercise of contemplation, of paying close attention to the reality that the crucified people live today. If we do it well, it hurts. In good Salvadoran – and Austrian – slang, it hurts us to the marrow of our bones. Only from such pain can a new theological and pastoral word be born, a word that is effective and hope-giving, faithful to the inheritance of the martyrs.

We are tired of responding to the objection that the thought of the martyrs has lost validity and belongs to a past era because the “paradigm” has shifted. But yes, we are conscious that their creativity prevents us from treating them as museum objects. Rather to the contrary, it commits us even more to using all of our creativity. Yes, it’s true, we have to “update” the inheritance of the martyrs. However: What does it mean to “update”? As Ignacio Ellacuría says: **“To update something doesn’t mean, primarily, to bring it up to date in the same way that this expression might be fashionable these days. To update it means, rather, to give it present-day reality...”**²

I invite you all to the following exercise: to give present-day reality to the inheritance of the martyrs.

² I. Ellacuría, *Utopía y Profetismo*, *Mysterium Liberationes I*, p. 398.

“You all are the Pierced Divine”

On June 19, 1979, in the hard-hit town of Aguilares, Monseñor Romero gave one of his most precious homilies. As Jon Sobrino has reminded us many times, in the preamble of this homily, Monseñor Romero redefines his episcopal office in a tragic and accurate way: “It is up to me to gather up run-over and dead bodies...”³ Following this, he addressed the suffering people of Aguilares:

“You all are the Image of the Pierced Divine that presents Christ nailed to the cross and pierced by the spear. This is the image of all peoples who, like Aguilares will be pierced, will be affronted.”⁴

With these words, Monseñor Romero identifies, in an audacious and courageous way, the cross of Jesus Christ with the horror that the people of Aguilares lived with at that time, exposed to violence, cruelty, and humiliation. He affirms the “hypostatic union” between the crucified people and the crucified Christ, which are one single flesh and cannot be separated. And as a consequence, the crucified people is the presence of God and of God’s salvific work in this world; it is the sacrament of our salvation in history.

With this solemn declaration, Monseñor Romero directs his attention to the immense majority of human beings on our planet who tend to be made invisible by those, who are declaring themselves the truly “relevant.” It is true, also, that in the first world and in the condominiums of the wealthy in El Salvador there is suffering; children die of cancer or young people die in tragic accidents. There is no human existence without suffering. But there is disproportionate suffering, which is the characteristic of the crucified people. The people are martyr, for the very fact of living an exaggerated and unjust kind of suffering. Their lives look like the Stations of the Cross, a permanent Calvary. To those human beings is directed the promise: “You are the Pierced Divine”.

I invite us now to do an exercise together, taking the risk as Monseñor Romero did, to affirm today, March 18, 2015, in front of the Stations of the Cross of the current-day Salvadoran people, “You all are the Pierced Divine.” I want to be concrete, to give flesh to this affirmation, by telling you all the story of a single Salvadoran family. It is obvious that this makes us see only a small part of a much more complex reality. Nevertheless, unfortunately, the story of this family is not unique. Rather, it is exemplary of the nightmare that is lived every day by about a third of families in neighborhoods like Popot-

³Homilía en Aguilares del 19 de Junio de 1977.

⁴Idem.

lan, Apopa, La Campanera, Las Margaritas, Soyapango, Lourdes, Panchimalco, downtown San Salvador, and in many other places.

We are ten days away from Palm Sunday. We will hear, as we do every year, the Passion, this year, according to Mark. He is the Evangelist who writes soonest after the historical fact. Obviously, for the first communities, it was of primary importance to pay attention to every detail of this unraveling of tragic events of Jesus' final days. In the liturgy, the introductory title reads, "The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ" and invites us to accompany Jesus with an open and compassionate heart. If Monseñor Romero is right, and of this I am convinced, "You all are the Pierced Divine!" then it is important to take the history of this family with the same contemplative attention, accompanying them in all that has befallen them, as we accompany our Lord Jesus Christ in his journey to the Cross.

I will try to do this in the style of Mark: telling the facts in the most simple and sober way possible. Unlike Mark, I cannot give you the real names or places, in order to be discreet, and because of the danger this family would be in if the details are made public. However, I will put into words no more than the facts, although it will seem unbelievable that all this can accumulate in the life of one family. It is as implausible as the story of Job in the Bible. Upon them falls all possible misfortune.

Chapter One: the disappearance and violent death of Paul

I have been a friend of the mother of this family for five years. In 2010, she worked as a cook in the student residence where I lived at the time. From here on, I would like to call her Mary, as a symbol of all women whose hearts have been pierced by a sword (Luke 2:35). I realized that Mary, who had always been so happy, was suddenly in a bad way—something serious must have happened. We still didn't know each other well enough to talk about anything serious. But it pained me to see those responsible for the student residence fire her without hesitating as soon as she declined, physically and psychologically.

What actually happened, I learned months later, when she sought me out to ask for work. In the moment of her crisis, the second of her three sons, had disappeared, seventeen years old, driver for a bakery. I'd like to call him Paul. His boss had given him permission to travel with the bakery's vehicle to his house, which caught the attention of the local gang members. They demanded sixty dollars of him, and since he didn't have it, they gave him a final date. When the time was up, they took him and the young man never returned. His mother, his brothers, and his cousins looked for him hopelessly. After

three months of anguish, uncertainty, and the premonition of horror, they found Paul's body, already decomposing near a cornfield. They identified him by his clothes.

In those days, Mary was on the edge of an abyss with psychosis, seeing her son everywhere and talking with him. However, she rose again, to struggle for life, hers and that of her other two sons. Since then, she has worked with us, preparing food for our small community of ten people three times a week. (She is a creative cook, with spunk, always curious to try new recipes.)

Chapter two: the family is expelled from their home

The first pain had just calmed, and Mary was able to get back to a routine, when the gang members began to disturb her again. They sent eight or nine year old kids with little slips of paper decorated with the worst words (old whore) to announce that they would begin collecting on the "open debt" or take the life of another family member. Only this time, the amount was raised to five-hundred dollars. At once, the family escaped to a far-away municipality. They were able to find a small house, in pretty bad condition, but they fixed it up. They were excited about planting the seed that the government gives out to be able to harvest a bit of corn and beans. In the moment when the first tender plants of hope sprouted and they felt safe, Mary was inspired to file a report against her son's assassin, the head of the local gang where they had lived before. The police promised that she would be a protected witness. Nevertheless, in the attorney general's office, there was a confrontation between her and the accused, separated only by a glass panel. She was never sure that it was really armored glass, and she suspected that she had been exposed to the view of the gang member. Since that day, she lived with chronic fear of the consequences.

Chapter three: Mary is raped, and the family's escape continues

Her worst fears came true when the next hit happened. During Christmas of 2011, Mary, happy about receiving her end-of-the-year bonus, went to her house with her purchases for holiday dinner: chicken, vegetables, fruit. On the empty way from the highway to her house, she was assaulted and raped by five men wearing hoods. She felt ashamed and didn't tell her sons what had happened, but she insisted on leaving again as soon as possible. Her sons didn't understand why, and with bad attitudes left their house and went with her to the suburbs of San Salvador. From the beginning it was clear that they had entered a new cave of gangs, but those were the only kind of places within their economic reach. With the little they had, and having lost so much in the previous two times they had left their home.

To me, Mary is the embodiment of the kind of primordial sanctity that Jon Sobrino talks about. What has happened up to now would be enough to finish a person off. In her infancy, Mary had already suffered violence and abuse. Now the trauma a multiple and brutal rapes caused serious gynecological problems and a profound depression characterized by apathy and temporary mental lapses. It is a pure miracle that Mary was able to take up her struggle again to search for medical and psychological attention.

Chapter Four: Peter is run over

With an enormous amount of energy, Mary and her sons achieved a certain level of every-day normalcy again. Her oldest son, I'll call him Peter, had dropped out of school when his brother disappeared, just a few months before finishing high school. Since then, he had been working at a car mechanic's shop, without access to state health insurance or other labor rights. He had tried to claim them, and his boss had responded, "You know what door you entered through, and you can leave through the same one." Because of a lack of alternatives – without his high school degree, it was impossible to find work – Peter gave in. His work was to go out on his motorcycle to find parts in dumps all over the city.

When, in March of 2013 we celebrated here at the UCA a mass for Monseñor Romero, in the middle of Mass, I got a call on my cell phone. I silenced it, but because of the caller's insistence, finally I left the chapel to take the call. I Mary's hopeless sobs: "My son is dying on me, my son is dying."

At a stoplight, Peter had been hit on his motorcycle by an ambulance. The tires of the vehicle and run over his stomach. It seems like a bad joke, but the medics, instead of helping him, ran away in order to escape the consequences of the accident. At last, half dead, he was taken to the Rosales Hospital. Peter underwent a dramatic, hours-long operation, and the struggle for his life continued for at least the next fifteen days. It is important to mention that in the Rosales Hospital, he was treated by an excellent doctor, professionally and humanely. But only someone who knows the conditions in this hospital might intuit what it would mean for a mother to accompany her son in this struggle, sleeping only a few hours a night on the floor under his bed.

Chapter five: Chus' serious renal insufficiency

Peter had hardly recovered and, with great difficulty, was able to get back to work when the youngest of the sons started presenting symptoms of poor health. I'll call him Jesus, nicknamed Chus, as is common in El Salvador. Chus was studying his first year of high school at the time at a private high school. Because of the family's instability, he had fallen behind a few grades and was too old to attend

a public high school. Because of this, his mother and his brother made big sacrifices so that he could go to this private high school with a modest tuition which was for them enormous. In December of 2013, the doctors finally detected advanced renal insufficiency in Chus. He was on dialysis for a few months, until in March of 2014, an uncle on his deceased father's side donated one of his kidneys. The tragedy was that Chus got better after the transplant, but the uncle died because of an infection in the wound; he didn't wait long enough after the operation to resume bathing in a polluted river near his house. Chus' psychological problems because of the guilt he felt, that he live at the cost of another, were great and they added up to a depression typical in patients who have transplants.

Mary's heroic struggle continued; she took her son to doctors and to psychological treatment, all with public, state help, and searching for support from many acquaintances for medicine and the special milk that Chus will need for the rest of his life.

Chapter six: gang persecution continues

Among all of these disasters, the trouble from the gangs got worse. They wanted to force Peter, the older son, to make trips for them on his motorcycle, his tool for work. The only way to get out of it would be to pay twenty-five dollars per month, more than a tenth of his salary. And in case that wasn't enough, the gang came to the family's house every Sunday to demand food for 15 people. When Mary didn't have anything besides rice and beans, they got angry and demanded, "real food."

The only escape was to continue fleeing, this time to a rural village far from the capital. Here there was a brief respite, but no sustainable solution because in such a place there was no way to make a living; they had to travel four or five hours every day to get to work, and they spent too much on transportation. After a few months, they gave up and returned again to the suburbs of San Salvador, to a different place, but no less dangerous than the previous, and the problems continued immediately. The gang members got Chus in the entrance to his school and beat him badly, with his scar still raw. They left no doubt that they would kill him if he dared to appear near school again. Mary, who had only attended two grades of primary school, went to the Ministry of Education to fight for her son to find a way to complete the few weeks that were left to finish high school. In her struggle, she could sometimes seem a bit exaggerated and aggressive. I don't see it in this way, rather, I see it in her "aggression" some of the "holy ire" of the prophets. It cannot be! This is passion in favor of life. At last, the principal of the school was moved by the laments of the "tedious widow" (Luke 8,4) and hid Chus in his own house. He helped him study according to the Ministry's guidelines and prepare for final exams.

While Chus lived at the principal's house, the rest of the family continued to be exposed to the whims of the gang. Coincidentally, the little house in which they lived had a lower roof than the neighboring houses. When the police carried out searched at night, the gang members jumped onto the roof of the shorter house to hide in the family's backyard. Peter and Mary were petrified by the scares and at least had no other escape than another exodus, this time together with a good number of other hopeless families.

In a town on the outskirts of the city, they sought refuge close to their relatives, knowing that they were moving into the territory of the rival gang, but they didn't see any alternatives. At the beginning, everything seemed calm, until in December of 2014, when Chus graduated from high school. At that time, some relatives were in town for the first time in many years since they had left without documents for the United States. They organized a lunch among the family and hung balloons and a banner that said, "Congratulations on the day of your graduation." It drew the attention of the gang members, and again, they took Chus, beating him up and insisting that they didn't like him and that they would erase him from the map if he didn't either leave town immediately or let himself be recruited to the gang. They also assured him that if they didn't manage to kill him, he would have to pay with the life of his family members.

Chapter seven: Chus' Calvary

That same night, and uncle took Chus in his pickup truck to the house of a friend in a neighborhood in San Salvador, close to the Chinese restaurant where Chus washed dishes at the time, even though he was very poorly paid. But the gang followed him and shot at him in the middle of the day. By some miracle, he was able to escape again, and very nervously ran away to where some distant relatives lived, far away in the countryside.

There he worked, helping out with the cattle. The woman of the home treated him very well, but the young people there, who were accustomed to that kind of work, made fun of him for being very skinny and having health problems. They found out he had had a kidney transplant and said to him, "Your life isn't worth anything, it's like an old rag." Again, I received a sudden call from Mary, saying, "My son is dying, my son is dying on me." This call was in January of 2015, late at night. That night, Chus had reached the limits of his strength and had tried to end his life. He swallowed a sulfur pill, together with other pills that were around the house. They found him having tremendous convulsions, foaming at the mouth. They took him to the closest hospital where they pumped his stomach and rescued him at the last second. He was left with a scalded stomach and deep depression.

Mary and Peter at that time began looking for a new way out, under incredible pressure. In the town where they still lived, the situation had become unbearable because of the gangs. The neighbors and their own relatives, who had lived in this town for generations, had already left. Mary and Peter found themselves suddenly among abandoned houses. They also considered that they couldn't leave Chus alone, out of fear that he would repeat his suicide attempt. They thought about going undocumented to the north, trying to get a humanitarian visa, or about going to the southern part of Central America. For the moment, thank God, they can breathe a bit more easily; they found good people who protect them here in San Salvador, and can focus on Chus' medical treatment.

The martyred people carry and denounce the sin of the world

The story of the Passion of this Salvadoran family represents what many others suffer in a similar or worse way. Upon hearing it, the Stations of the Cross as we traditionally pray them are superimposed; how many falls under the weight of the cross there are and how much energy is needed to get up and continue along the path again. And the tragedy of Simon of Cyrene helping Chus with his cross and in this losing his own life.

The mere existence of the crucified people, of the martyred people, is a prophetic denouncement; it raises its voice against "the sin of the world," it accuses the forces and powers that cause its daily crucifixion. Let us bear a few more moments contemplating this Passion and let us try to decipher the denouncement. The history of Mary's family could be our starting point for a socio-economic-political study of the evils which flagellate a considerable part of the Salvadoran people. Here I can only indicate some basic brushstrokes.

The loss of identity

The homilies of Monseñor Romero ended every Sunday with a denouncement of the violence that the people suffered: disappearances, torture, massacres. Meticulously investigated by his team, he gave dates, places, and the first and last names of the victims and victimizers. Bringing the atrocities from secrecy to the public view offered the victims protection, at least against the defamation of being called liars. Monseñor Romero made the faces of the victims visible and returned to them their dignity.

Today, it seems that the law that subjects all of El Salvador to iron-fist brutality is the slogan that can be read in the graffiti on so many neighborhood roads in dangerous zones: "See, hear, and shut up."

Telling the story of my friends, I felt strong frustration because I have to hide their identities. I cannot, for example, show you the precious photo of the proud mother together with her son when he graduated from high school. Everyone who lives in a situation like theirs has already died multiple social deaths. They cannot trust their closest friends, they have to disappear all of a sudden, without saying goodbye to anyone. The famous social fabric, broken since the displacements of the war, instead of recuperating itself, decomposes more each day. For people like Mary, their roots are continually cut, as the run, permanently fleeing, hounded and followed.

The “secondary effects” of poverty and vulnerability

People like Mary, exposed to permanent stress, suffer, as a consequence, serious physical and psychological damage. A life of continuous anxiety and high tension provokes all kinds of psychosomatic illnesses. For a healthy, robust person, it is already difficult to find decent and stable work; for a person with multiple traumas, it is almost impossible. To close this vicious cycle, it is a constant struggle to secure access to adequate therapies and medications. They are forced to beg without dignity for something that belongs to them, according to the Constitution: the right to healthcare.

Scandalous impunity and an unprotected people

Scandalous impunity weighs on El Salvador like a tremendous curse. Since “general amnesty” was declared for the victimizers of the civil war, the amount of unpunished capital crimes has multiplied progressively. Murderers seem to be untouchable. The vulnerable have no refuge, nobody to turn to, no court that offers effective protection. Apart of the infiltration of the police and the justice system, if they make the effort to put themselves on the side of the victims, they seem to be defenseless. Their searches and dramatic arrests often appear to be a big show for the media that covers their true impotence and represents an additional threat to the flagellated people.

Thanks to God, there are honorable police agents and officials in the justice system. There are institutions like the Institute for Human Rights at the University of Central America (IDHUCA), and many others of good will. But all of this seems like a drop in the ocean. In its majority, the martyred people are abandoned. As the psalmist says, “My escape has perished; no one cares for me... Listen to my cry for help, for I am brought very low. Rescue me from my pursuers, for they are too strong for me.” (Ps 142: 5,7)

Multiple victimization

Young people like Chus, the protagonist of our story, are always under suspicion. The first reaction, if somebody finds out that a young person has to flee because their life is in danger is, “There’s got to be a reason.” “He must have gotten involved in something.” The victim is always charged with the accusation that the horrors that happen to him or her are a result of his or her own guilt. This diagnosis could be the mantra of all vulnerable people: “That won’t happen to me, because I’m not mixed up in anything.” This mantra is deceitful and satanic because it dissociates us from each other. It’s worse if this diagnostic comes from those who live comfortably and in safety. They justify their apathy and the hardness of their hearts with the shameless affirmation; “Whatever happens to them, they deserve it.”

It is intolerable to victimize the victims over and over again. Even the gang members are, often times, victims and victimizers in the same person. They are human beings. That’s why the vulgar demands to “fumigate the cockroaches” are also intolerable. Justice is needed, but not dehumanizing treatment that does not permit any kind of re-socialization and ends up turning them into the kind of beasts that the soulless part of society imagines them to be.

“The sin of the world”

The Passion of the martyred Salvadoran people shouts what the sin inside this microcosm of this country is. Really, the situation is much more complex than what these few observations can indicate. Here, we cannot adequately deal with the naiveté of declaring in a mythological way that the gangs are “the source of all evil.” In reality, the gangs serve as camouflage for much stronger forces, like organized crime, the drug and weapons mafia, etc. Furthermore, we will not understand the sin that the martyred people denounce if we do not contextualize it within the scandal of the global disorder.

The strong words of Ignacio Ellacuría prevail, which he spoke in his speech in Barcelona ten days before his murder: “What on other occasions I have called the coprohistoric analysis, that is, the study of the feces of our civilization, seems to show that this civilization is gravely ill...” Reformulated from my own experience, I feel that the reality of El Salvador is like a ‘concave mirror’ in which the truth of our world as a whole is revealed and made denser. This which the martyred people suffer at this moment in the highly dangerous areas of El Salvador allows us to see the repugnant face of global disaster and disorder, which, in an obscene way, privileges a few and martyrs at least one third of humanity. In October 2014, Oxfam, an NGO of international prestige, denounced that the 85 most wealthy individuals in the world possess the same economic resources as the poorer half of the world population, 3.5 billion-

people. According to OXFAM's prediction, in a short time, more will belong to the richest 1 percent than to the other 99%.

Obviously, Ellacuría's affirmation that greed, the accumulation of capital, is the motor that moves history hasn't lost its validity. Certainly, there are zones of this Earth where poverty and its consequences are much more deadly than in El Salvador. But there are few zones in which the discrepancy between those who live in abundance and those who are exposed to permanent vulnerability is densified in such a scandalous way. The price of a new Toyota "Prado" SUV is more or less equal to the minimum salary that one might earn working for twenty years in a sweatshop, in a *maquila*. There are some who have to work hard for two decades, in shifts that are bad for their health, often in inhuman conditions, and at the end they are not able to maintain their families, pay for a house, cover health costs, etc.; and others who spend the equivalent just to buy a vehicle, without taking into account maintenance costs. I have to confess that I have a bad habit of counting the high-class cars in the parking lot at the UCA and of comparing the vehicles that state and church officials drive with the 42A or 27 route busses in which the people move, exposed to assault day after day.

Between these two extremes, between the authors and the victims of the economic disorder, we find the little guys who benefit from the neo-capitalist system, people like me, like the majority of the first world and like the middle class here in El Salvador. Let's take the long view. We are a little thing compared to the truly wealthy, but we live well, safely in secure areas, and we are often characterized by disinterest and shocking apathy when placed before the people carrying their cross.

In the third week of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius of Loyola asks the participant to "make the effort to feel pain, to be sad and to cry." He or she is to ask for "pain with the crucified Christ, tears... for the torture that Jesus suffered for me" (EE #195 and #203). The psychological objection tells us that this would be a fixation on the negative, that we are being seduced by a kind of sado-masochism. But we have to read this in the style of another great Ignatius, Ignacio Ellacuría. We can understand the Spiritual Exercises as a lesson in compassion, which unleashes a completely different dynamic: letting myself be moved in my gut by this which the "sin of the world" inflicts, which our sin inflicts every day to the Pauls, Peters, Chus', and Marys, and let me cry for my comfort, for my lack of courage and initiative to stop their unending Stations of the Cross. We have to update, to give current reality again, to Ignacio Ellacuría's call to *conversión*, which we might consider as spiritual testimony:

"The only thing I would want... are two things: that you might place your eyes and your hearts on these peoples who suffer so much – some of misery and hunger, others of oppression and repression –

and then (because I am a Jesuit), that before this crucified people you ask yourselves the question from the first week of the Exercises: What have I done to crucify them? What do I do to take them down from their cross? What should I do so that these people may be resurrected?”⁵

The martyred people is the sacrament of salvation.

To not go on too long, this last point can only signal the path to continue on. Ignacio Ellacuría begins his crucial essay on the crucified people with one big concern: How can it be that a big part of humanity continues to be “literally and historically crucified” if Jesus announced the Reign of God and if the Church has proclaimed our salvation for more than two thousand years? The Stations of the Cross continue on and on. What does salvation even mean, given the fact that “the majority of oppressed humanity” continues carrying the sin of the world?

Ignacio Ellacuría shakes us up to draw us out of our apathy and indifference in order to make us sensitive to the Calvary of the martyred people. He pulls us out of the “false spiritualization” of talking about salvation. This “sweetening and mystifying” perverts salvation into vague promises, empty of reality, like promises made during electoral campaigns. Ellacuría sets us on the way to discovering and acting out our salvation here and now, in history. Either our faith in salvation corresponds to a palpable reality, either it creates reality, or it truly is the opium of the people that puts us to sleep and makes us into insensitive monsters.

Out of this concern, Ellacuría asks himself, “Who are the Chosen People of God? Who is the true Church, the true subject of the salvific mission of Jesus in history? The [Second Vatican] Council tells us that the Church is ‘sacrament,’ the ‘sign and instrument’ of salvation.” For Ellacuría, this affirmation is too vague. It must be made more precise. And this precision in the radical inversion of the perspective. It turns all of our ideas on their heads. The question is not, How do we talk about salvation even though the majority of humanity is beat up and oppressed? But rather, its inverse. We have to kneel down before this mystery: The martyred people is the historical subject of our salvation; the martyred people is the ‘sacrament,’ which means the real and concrete presence of God in this world; it is the martyred people who are the historical subject which makes real a salvific work for all humanity.

In the words of Jon Sobrino: Salvation comes from below! This means, firstly, that salvation does not come from above, not from the upper echelons of political parties, not from NGO’s, not from interna-

⁵I. Ellacuría, “Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España”, *Sal Terrae*3 (1982), p. 230.

tional development programs. This inversion of perspectives, in total harmony with the Gospels, is scandalous:

“It is scandalous to propose that the needy and the oppressed are the historic salvation of the world. It is scandalous to many believers, who no longer believe that there is anything remarkable to be seen in the sign that the death of Jesus brought life to the world, but who cannot accept, theoretically, much less practically, that that death that gives life is happening in a real way today for the oppressed of humanity.”⁶

In the Stations of the Cross of my Austrian infancy, we prayed, “In the Cross is salvation, in the Cross is life, in the Cross is hope.” As a young person, this prayer provoked in me a crisis, understanding that the cross brings before us poor Jesus of Nazareth, cruelly tortured until death. How can we say that salvation, life, and hope are present there? It is the same scandal, the same insanity, to kneel before the cross of Jesus that brings us salvation, as it is to kneel before the crucified people that bring us salvation. But this is our faith in Jesus Christ, incarnate, made of tortured human flesh.

“There is no salvation outside of the poor,” says Jon Sobrino. Making this affirmation concrete and giving it historic body: There is no salvation outside of the Marys and Peters and Pauls and Chus’ of El Salvador and of all the world. The creative and redeeming love of God is present in their daily and heroic struggle for life. With them, God passes through this world. They are the ones who carry our sins. By their wounds we are saved (Is 53). They are the ones who can take our hearts of stone to give us hearts of flesh (Ez 36:26), in them is present a vital energy capable of converting us and humanizing us.

The Gospel is the fierce call to the “world above” – and it is a great promise to those who suffer below. It says to them, this “world” considers you all to be disposable, the extras who don’t count, as those whose lives are not worth anything. The “world of sin,” in the sense of John the evangelist, configured by the powers that be, the economically, militarily, and politically powerful, who either do not do anything to protect your lives, or worse, actively takes your lives from you. But the truth is that there is no solution for this world unless the mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is recognized in you, and in the torture that they make you suffer. There is no salvation for this world if the world does not bow down before the divine mystery, present in you.

⁶ Pueblo Crucificado, 192.