

## Article

# Jon Sobrino and ‘the Crucified People’

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**Abstract:** ‘The crucified people’ became a key theological concern in the writings of Jon Sobrino SJ in the 1990s. This article examines how and why Sobrino made this concern a central element in his theology at the time. Section 2 discusses what Sobrino has described as his ‘awakening from the sleep of inhumanity’ in the 1970s as he encountered liberation theology in El Salvador following his doctoral studies in Frankfurt. Section 3 examines three figures in the Salvadoran Church who influenced Sobrino: Ignacio Ellacuría (assassinated 1989); Oscar Romero (assassinated 1980); and Rutilio Grande (assassinated 1977). All three paid with their lives for their work in the Church. Section 4 examines the understanding of the crucified people offered by Ellacuría in 1978, and the encouragement for this idea in the words of Romero and Grande in 1977. Sections 5 and 6 turn to the use of the term as used by Sobrino himself. Section 5 argues that Sobrino’s early Christological writings are quite cautious in their use of this idea. The murder of Ellacuría by the military in November 1989 at the Central American University—alongside the killing of five fellow Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter—appears to be the pivotal event that prompts Sobrino’s bolder discussion in publications from 1989 onwards (Section 6).

**Keywords:** liberation theology; Jon Sobrino; Ignacio Ellacuría; Oscar Romero; Rutilio Grande; Christology; El Salvador; the cross

## 1. Introduction

Recent attention to Ignacio Ellacuría SJ and Jon Sobrino SJ in the Liberation Theology podcast by David Incauskis SJ, reflects new interest in Ellacuría and Sobrino’s work.<sup>1</sup> The podcast focusses particular attention on Ellacuría and Sobrino’s co-edited book *Mysterium Liberationis*, which was published in Spanish in 1990, soon after Ellacuría’s assassination in 1989, and then published in English in 1993.<sup>2</sup>

In *Mysterium Liberationis*, Ellacuría and Sobrino sought ‘to gather together and develop the fundamental concepts of liberation theology’ (Sobrino and Ellacuría 1996, p. vii). The book is a remarkable collection of influential writing on key theological themes by different liberation theologians, and the podcast discussion is an excellent way to revisit the anthology. However, there is a potential risk in reading a work like *Mysterium Liberationis* at a distance of more than thirty years. Whilst the theological ideas remain relevant, some important context may be lost. Readers might not be familiar with the shifts and developments that took place within Latin American liberation theology between the late 1960s and the 1990s, or the social events that shaped these changes. Incauskis is a knowledgeable and insightful guide. He frequently provides helpful background to explain the key ideas and discusses the context in which they emerged. However, there are limits on the historical background that can be provided within a podcast format.

The chapter on ‘The Crucified People’ (Ellacuría 1978) in *Mysterium Liberationis*, originally written by Ellacuría in 1978, is an especially significant contribution to Latin American liberation theology. Dean Brackley SJ says: ‘According to Sobrino, reflection on this paramount sign of the times—the crucified people—and reflection on response to this sign accounts for the real ‘novelty and ‘creativity’ of liberation theology (Brackley 2008a, p. 8). In



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light of this, the origins and development of the term crucified people merit close attention. In this article I trace the initial development of the idea in the 1970s in the work of Ignacio Ellacuría. I examine inspiration for the term in the words of Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande SJ in 1977 before the term was developed more explicitly by Ellacuría in 1978, and further developed by Sobrino after 1989. My argument draws on previous discussions by Sturla [Stållset \(2003\)](#) and Robert [Lassalle-Klein \(2009\)](#) and others.<sup>3</sup> I seek to add to their work by providing a further fine-grained analysis, which offers additional detail in two areas. First, I suggest that Rutilio Grande may have had more influence on the term than is usually noted.<sup>4</sup> Second, I examine how Sobrino's own understanding developed over time.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I argue that Sobrino had a more cautious approach to speaking of the crucified people in his writings in the 1970s and 1980s. The assassination of Ellacuría in 1989 is the point at which Sobrino fully embraces the term and becomes much bolder in his writing.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Sobrino's Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity

Jon Sobrino first arrived in El Salvador in 1957 as a nineteen-year-old Jesuit novice. By his own account though, it wasn't until seventeen years later, when he returned in 1974, that he woke up to El Salvador's social reality.

Sobrino was born in 1938 in Barcelona to Basque parents. The family had moved from Bilbao to Barcelona because of their opposition to Franco during the Spanish Civil War. He went to a Jesuit school in Barcelona when he was ten years old. After the war the family returned to Bilbao in 1950 and he continued schooling at another Jesuit school. As a young student he had considered the possibility of joining the Society of Jesus but while he was in high school he gave this little further thought. It was only after high school that he felt a vocational call during a religious retreat. In 1956 he joined the Jesuits' Western Castilian province and in 1957 was sent to El Salvador as part of the Jesuit Mission.

Sobrino's first exposure to El Salvador was therefore at a very early stage in the long process of education and spiritual formation for which the Jesuits are famed. In the third year of his novitiate (October 1958), Sobrino was sent to Cuba to study the humanities and was still in Cuba when Castro's revolution finally triumphed in January 1959. In May 1960 he moved back to El Salvador for a brief spell before travelling to St Louis (MO, USA) for a licentiate in philosophy and a master's in engineering (1960–1965). His regency year in El Salvador (1965–1966) involved teaching for six months at the seminary and six months at the newly established Jesuit-founded University of Central America (Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, or UCA) in San Salvador. In 1966 he moved to Frankfurt to study theology at the Hochschule Sankt Georgen and began his second major period of international postgraduate study (1966–1974). After completing his theology licentiate (with a thesis on Rahner and the Sacrament) he completed a doctorate on the Protestant theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Sobrino took particular interest in Pannenberg's focus on the Kingdom of God and Moltmann's work in *Theology of Hope* published in German in 1964 ([Moltmann 1967](#)), and *The Crucified God* published in German in 1972 ([Moltmann 1974](#)). His studies also included lectures on grace by Karl Rahner SJ, a visiting professor.

Sobrino had returned to El Salvador at intervals throughout his training. In 1974, he returned permanently. This was timely because it united him with his fellow Basque Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría at the UCA ([Valiente 2016](#), pp. 68–70).<sup>7</sup> Ellacuría was a committed proponent of liberation theology at a time when many in the Church in El Salvador sought to avoid the questions it raised. Over the next fifteen years, the friendship between Sobrino and Ellacuría flourished. Their work together at the UCA served as the foundation for their theological collaboration in their understanding of Christology in El Salvador, and their writings on the crucified people ([Sobrino 1994](#), p. 1).<sup>8</sup>

Since his first arrival in El Salvador, Sobrino had been aware of the poverty and hardship that marred the lives of so many. But 1974 marked a turning point. Only then, he writes, did he fully confront the realities of poverty and injustice in Latin America. Like

Kant awakening from a ‘dogmatic slumber’, Sobrino writes, his experience was ‘awakening from the sleep of inhumanity’ (Sobrino 1994, p. 1). Sobrino explains this process as: ‘awakening to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world, a world whose liberation is the basic task of every human being, so that in this way human beings may finally come to be human’ (Sobrino 1994, p. 1). This awakening challenged him to embrace liberation theology and the Church’s work on behalf of the poor.

On return visits to El Salvador in the summers of 1971 and 1972 Sobrino witnessed early stirrings of liberation theology in the country.<sup>9</sup> In March 1967, Paul VI published his social encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) which had a powerful impact on the Church worldwide, especially in Latin America. In addition, a series of preparatory conferences (1966–1968) were in process as part of the build-up to the meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) to be held in Medellín, Colombia.<sup>10</sup> Progressive priests and theologians provided position papers (*ponencias*) for these conferences. These were shared and debated with others, and later revised in light of the discussion. One conversation that emerged was about the limitations of the term ‘development’, and the need for a more radical alternative. This encouraged talk of ‘liberation’ as an alternative to development. The first contributions towards an explicitly identifiable and self-conscious ‘liberation theology’ thus started to develop in 1968.

The Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez presented a paper on liberation theology at a meeting of priests at Chimbote (Peru) in July 1968. This was subsequently revised and published as *Hacia una teología de la liberación* (Gutiérrez 1969). The key ideas were further developed and published in Spanish in 1971 in Gutiérrez’s groundbreaking book *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (Gutiérrez 1971).

The meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín (24 August–6 September 1968) was a further pivotal moment for the Church in Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Some of the documents at Medellín reflect the commitment to transformation more strongly than others. The new direction is most obvious in the *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, the *Document on Justice*, the *Document on Peace*, and the *Document on the Poverty of the Church*.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite the shift marked by CELAM II in 1968 and the stirrings in El Salvador in the early 1970s, it was not until 1974 that Sobrino began to appreciate how radically these stirrings might affect his own theological and spiritual outlook. The early results of this process can be seen in his first book, *Cristología desde América Latina* (Sobrino 1976), which was subsequently published in English under the title *Christology at the Crossroads* (Sobrino 1978).

In this work, Sobrino seeks to identify and articulate a Latin American Christology within the framework of liberation theology. This was significant; up to this point liberation theology had paid relatively little attention to Christology.<sup>13</sup> Sobrino wished to develop an approach that would be both scholarly and relevant to Latin America’s reality. One of the key contributions of *Christology at the Crossroads* is its critique of abstract starting points in Christology. Sobrino insisted that understanding Jesus as a historical figure was an appropriate starting point and argued that, properly understood, the historical Jesus presented in the Gospels stands as an alternative to the abstractions of dogma. Furthermore, Sobrino argued that Christology required a specific discipleship and intentional commitment on behalf of a follower of Christ. Christian discipleship involved a commitment to social justice that aligned with Christ’s life. The original Spanish title for the book shows the importance in Sobrino’s approach of Christian commitment. It would be more literally translated as *Christology from Latin America: An outline based on following the historical Jesus*. These three commitments in his early work—to history, to discipleship, and to social justice—remain important foundations in Sobrino’s later Christological writing (Sobrino 1993, 2001). As discussed later, there are even some precedents in this early work for Sobrino’s later writing on the crucified people, but at this early stage the term does not appear directly in his work, and his first book pays more attention to the concept of ‘the crucified God’ as discussed by Moltmann (1974). However, in El Salvador an important shift was taking place in the 1970s that was turning attention to ‘the crucified people’. This shift can be seen in the writing of

Ellacuría, and the influence that both Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande may have had on Ellacuría's thinking.

### 3. Ignacio Ellacuría, Oscar Romero, and Rutilio Grande

Ellacuría was born on 9 November 1930, eight years before Sobrino, in the Basque town of Portugalete near Bilbao.<sup>14</sup> He entered the Jesuit novitiate in September 1947 when he was sixteen. After some training in Spain, Ellacuría moved to El Salvador in February 1949. He went to Quito (Ecuador) to continue his studies in humanities (two years) and philosophy (three years). In 1955 he returned to San Salvador to teach at the seminary for three years. He then studied theology (1958–1962) at Innsbruck (Austria) under Karl Rahner SJ, and completed a dissertation in Spain (1962–1967) on the Basque philosopher Xavier Zubiri. In 1967 he returned to El Salvador and took up a position at the recently established (1965) UCA. In 1968 he was appointed to the board of directors.

Ellacuría's return to El Salvador in 1967 coincided with the new leadership of Pedro Arrupe SJ as Superior General of the Society of Jesus. Like Ellacuría and Sobrino, Arrupe was a Basque Jesuit. The Society of Jesus had considered their response to Vatican II at their General Congregation XXXI in 1965 and their meeting had marked a new commitment to social concerns.<sup>15</sup> Three years later, the Latin American Jesuit provincials met in Rio de Janeiro in May 1968. The meeting discussed the social problems of Latin America and pledged to make them the 'absolute priority in our apostolic strategy' (*Jesuit Provincials of Latin America 1970*, § 3 p. 145). A summary of the discussion was sent to every member of the Society, and called on all members to make the changes that were necessary for this conversion to happen.

The changes that would be necessary would be profound. They included recognition of past failures and the need for conversion and new direction. For example:

We are aware of the profound transformation this presupposes. We must break with some of our attitudes in the past to re-establish ties with our humanist tradition: 'The human being fully alive is the glory of God' (Saint Irenaeus). We want to avoid any attitude of isolation or domination that may have been ours in the past. We want to adopt an attitude of service to the church and to society, rejecting the overtones of power that have been attributed to us... We are counting on you as we undertake this effort to divest ourselves of any aristocratic attitude that may have been present in our public positions, in our style of life, in the selection of our audience, in our dealings with lay co-workers, and in our relations with the wealthy classes. (*Jesuit Provincials of Latin America 1970*, § 3 p. 145)

The letter concludes: 'In this way, hopefully, the Society of Jesus in Latin America will be able to undergo the necessary conversion with God's grace' (*Jesuit Provincials of Latin America 1970*, § 11 p. 150). The letter was careful to distance the Society from party politics or any power in civil society. Nonetheless, their talk of *oppression and liberation* (not poverty and development), reflected the shift taking place in radical sectors of the Church at the time. For example, they promised that 'In all our activities, our goal should be the liberation of humankind from every sort of servitude that oppresses it' (*Jesuit Provincials of Latin America 1970*, § 3 p. 145).

In December 1969, Ellacuría and Miguel Elizondo SJ led the Central American province of Jesuits in a retreat shaped by the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. Kevin Burke SJ describes the intention of the retreat as being: '... to nurture within the vice-province a new way of seeing and acting' (Burke 2000, p. 17). After the retreat, Ellacuría was appointed to direct Jesuit formation for the whole of Central America.

From 1970–1975 Ellacuría combined his work at the UCA alongside his role as director of formation.<sup>16</sup> As social tensions escalated in the mid-1970s, his criticism of the government increased. As a result of pressures within the UCA, Ellacuría was forced to step down in 1975 from his work in formation. At that point he took on an informal role as a leading social commentator, a role that today might be referred to as a 'public theologian'. On

2 February 1977, Ellacuría was forced into an eighteen-month exile in Spain when he was refused re-entry into El Salvador following a trip abroad. He was unable to return until August 1978.<sup>17</sup>

The day after Ellacuría was denied re-entry, Oscar Romero was announced as the new Archbishop of San Salvador. The government and social elites in El Salvador saw Romero as a centrist and 'safe' choice to preserve the country's status quo (Brockman 1989; Tombs 2012). Romero had been a centrist bishop during his time as Auxiliary in San Salvador (1970–1974) and Bishop of Santiago de María (1974–1977).<sup>18</sup> However, during this time he had developed a friendship with Rutilio Grande. Grande was one of the Jesuits who had been influenced by liberation theology and Ellacuría's formation initiatives.<sup>19</sup> Grande was working with poor communities in the countryside at Aguilares, where he had been born (1928). Romero viewed some elements of this work with caution, but the two men remained close friends. Grande attended Romero's installation in San Salvador on 22 February 1977. He then returned to his work in Aguilares about 40 kms north of the capital. On 12 March 1977, Romero learnt that Grande had been murdered by security forces on the road to El Paisnal, along with an old man and a young boy in the car with him. Their deaths prompted Romero to change his thinking. He insisted on a thorough investigation of the murders and started to see El Salvador's social problems through new eyes.

Romero became increasingly outspoken on the injustices and violence that were directed against the poor and against the progressive Church (Tombs 1999). In the three years that he served as Archbishop, Romero became renowned as a 'voice of the voiceless' in defence of the poor. Romero himself was murdered by a right-wing group linked to the military, as he was leading Mass on 24 March 1980.

#### 4. Ellacuría, Romero, and Grande on the Crucified People

In 1978, Ellacuría spoke on 'the crucified people' of El Salvador at an international meeting in Mexico (Ellacuría 1978)<sup>20</sup>. For Ellacuría, the suffering of the people of El Salvador was related historically and theologically to the suffering of Christ.<sup>21</sup> An understanding of the crucified people could therefore deepen an understanding of the suffering of the historical Jesus. The image drew on various biblical strands, including Paul's theology of the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), and the suffering servant in Deutero-Isaiah. (Isaiah 40–55). The identification of Christ with the suffering poor of Latin America provided a powerful statement on the religious significance of El Salvador's high levels of political violence. Stållset explains:

Their unity or likeness in suffering makes it, in Ellacuría's opinion, hermeneutically justified to let them shed light on each other: the crucified people sheds light on the historical significance of the death of Jesus, and the death of Jesus points to the salvific 'character' of the crucified people. (Stållset 2003, pp. 139–40)

The political situation steadily deteriorated in the 1970s, leading eventually to a twelve-year armed conflict (1980–1991).<sup>22</sup> Ellacuría's language of 'the crucified people' challenged the Church to recognize that the state terror directed against ordinary Salvadoran Christians was violence directed against Jesus. The Church could not relegate the violence convulsing the country to a separate political sphere, distant from its concerns. It is likely that the passage from Irenaeus that the human being fully alive is the glory of God, which had been cited at the XXXI meeting of the Jesuits, encouraged Ellacuría's thinking. Ellacuría saw the Jesuit motto 'For the greater glory of God' as a call to take the words of Irenaeus seriously.

Early precedents for speaking of the crucified people can be traced in a homily by Romero at Aguilares soon after the assassination of Rutilio Grande, and perhaps even before that in Grande's own words. A month before his death, Grande had publicly denounced the kidnapping and forced deportation of Fr Mario Bernal Londoño, a Colombian priest serving in El Salvador. In a sermon on 13 February 1977, two weeks after Londoño's deportation, Grande connected the mistreatment of Londoño to the mistreatment of Jesus. Grande suggested that if Jesus came to El Salvador, he would be treated as a foreign

agitator. Instead of being welcomed, the authorities would detain him at the border, and then, ‘Surely brothers and sisters, they will return to crucify him’ (Kelly 2015, p. 119). Although Grande did not use the explicit term crucified people, his words identify the connection between those persecuted in El Salvador and the crucifixion of Jesus.

In May 1977, in the aftermath of Grande’s assassination on 12 March, the military occupied Aguilares (and its church) for a month. When the occupation ended, Romero addressed the traumatized townspeople in a homily (19 June 1977). He described their suffering in the language of the reading taken from Zechariah 12:10. Romero spoke of their experience of violence as pointing to the piercing of Christ:

You are the image of ‘the divine one who was pierced’, the one who was spoken of in prophetic and mysterious language in our first reading, but which represents Christ nailed on the cross and pierced by the spear. It is the image of all the communities, which, like Aguilares will be pierced and violated...<sup>23</sup>

Two months later, Romero developed the same connection at more length in his Second Pastoral Letter (6 August 1977), for the Feast of the Transfiguration and National Day of El Salvador. Romero described the Archdiocese of San Salvador as marked with the signs of persecution (Romero 1985, p. 75). He noted ‘The marks are there precisely because it is being faithful to its vocation to be the Body of Christ in our history.’<sup>24</sup> Romero did not use the specific term crucified people in either the Aguilares homily or the Second Pastoral Letter. However, his speaking of the people as ‘the divine one who was pierced’, and then of the Body of Christ in our history, were both strongly supportive of Ellacuría’s words on the crucified people the following year.

### 5. Jon Sobrino’s Earlier Work

At first, Sobrino was quite tentative in the connection he drew between the suffering people of El Salvador and the suffering of Christ. In many ways, his initial writings are more cautious on this than the language of Grande, Romero, or Ellacuría.

In *Christology at the Crossroads* (Sobrino 1978, Spanish orig. 1976), Sobrino describes ‘a clearly noticeable resemblance in the situation here in Latin America and that in which Jesus lived’ (Sobrino 1978, p. 12). In particular, Sobrino emphasized the power of sin and death as the decisive similarities between the situation of the oppressed in contemporary Latin America and the situation of Jesus in Palestine. He paralleled the violence directed against Jesus with the violence directed against ordinary Salvadoran Christians, but he did not yet connect the suffering of the two in the explicit way that is notable in his work from the 1990s.

There are some passages in the book that point to the death of the poor in Latin America as a distinguishing mark of a Latin American Christology. For example, he writes (Sobrino 1978, p. 196):

This point is of the utmost importance for any historical theology of liberation. We live in the presence of so much death. There is the reality of definitive, physical death and of the death that people experience in the toils of oppression, injustice, and sinfulness. Any consideration of God that ignores such a basic datum of life is idealistic, if not downright alienating. In Europe the theological horizon of understanding in recent years has centred around the ‘death of God’. We shall see what that means a bit further on. In Latin America the concrete mediation of the ‘the death of God’ has been the ‘death of the other human being’—that is, the death of the peasant, the native Indian, and so forth (E. Dussel).

Likewise, he notes the connection between the cross of Jesus and the cross of the oppressed. He argues (Sobrino 1978, pp. 222–23):

The systematic importance of this point for any historical theology of liberation lies in the fact that the privileged mediation of God ever continues to be the real cross of the oppressed, not nature or history as a totality. It is there that we find something other than a totally ‘natural’ conception of God. Oppressed

persons are the mediation of God because, first of all, they break down the normal self-interest with which human beings approach other human beings.

In these and other passages he develops the argument that ‘... there is a real historical coincidence between the situation of Jesus and that of our continent today, and it is more marked than in other places’ (Sobrino 1978, p. 13). Nonetheless, he also warns that this resemblance between the situation in Latin America and the situation in which Jesus lived must not be interpreted in an anachronistic way: ‘The following of Jesus cannot be any automatic process of imitation which pays no heed at all to our own concrete situation and bypasses political, anthropological, and socio-economic analysis’ (Sobrino 1978, p. 12). So despite the support that passages in *Christology at the Crossroads* on resemblance offer for Sobrino’s later writing on the crucified people, his first book does not explicitly use the term ‘crucified people’ but pays more attention to Moltmann’s work on the crucified God (Moltmann 1974).<sup>25</sup> Referring to Romero’s words at Aguilares, which Sobrino had heard firsthand, Sobrino says in his book *Monseñor Romero* ‘... it was a day which, personally, I will never forget’.<sup>26</sup> Yet despite the impact that the language used by Romero clearly made on Sobrino, the term crucified people is not found in Sobrino’s writings in the 1970s.

A few years later, in his work ‘A Crucified People’s Faith in the Son of God’ (Sobrino 1982) Sobrino develops his ideas on resemblance further but still quite cautiously. He recognizes a three way ‘likeness’ between a people who are oppressed and crucified, the Servant of God in Isaiah, and Jesus Christ the Son of God.<sup>27</sup> However, Sobrino speaks of a crucified people in terms of the servant—rather than directly in terms of Jesus as the Son of God. He adds the proviso: ‘Theologically, this resemblance cannot be turned into pure identity, and we need to analyze of what precisely the resemblance consists’.<sup>28</sup> He writes that it is not easy to decide exactly how a crucified people can be the continuation of the servant of Yahweh but he concludes that many people in Latin America share the servant’s situation and reproduce one or more of the servant’s characteristics.<sup>29</sup> Sobrino sees the crucified people’s similarity to the servant as the basis on which they can see Jesus the Son of God as a ‘close brother’, so that ‘Through looking at Christ crucified, they come to know themselves better, and through looking at themselves, they come to know Christ crucified better’.<sup>30</sup>

Sobrino’s use of the term ‘crucified people’ in the early 1980s recognized the crucified people as brothers of Christ because they were in the likeness of the servant, Christ. At this stage, he was still hesitant to speak of crucified people as being more than an indirect resemblance. In the early 1990s, however, Sobrino became bolder and more direct. Here we find the most emphatic references to the crucified people, and a stronger identification between the people and Christ. By this time, the violence in El Salvador had also reached into Sobrino’s life in a much more immediate way.

## 6. Jon Sobrino’s Later Work

On 16 November 1989, Ellacuría and five other Jesuits with whom Sobrino lived (as well as their housekeeper and her teenage daughter) were murdered by the military.<sup>31</sup> The murders were one of the civil war’s most notorious acts of state terror (Doggett 1993; Whitfield 1994). The soldiers shot at the heads of the Jesuits, to punish them as subversive ‘intellectuals’.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, they shot at the pelvic areas of the women, to insult them as ‘whores’. José Tojeira SJ, who was the Jesuit provincial for Central America at the time, described it to journalists as ‘lavish brutality’ (Whitfield 1994, p. 78). Sobrino himself escaped the murders because he was out of the country at an international conference. In the preface to the abridged English version of *Mysterium Liberationis*, published in 1996 as *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, he recalls: ‘The news reached me in Thailand, and the reader can imagine the ice that gripped my heart’ (Sobrino and Ellacuría 1996, p. vii).

Following the murders, Sobrino wrote of the crucified people with a new urgency. He spoke of the two different forms of crucifixion taking place in El Salvador. One form of

crucifixion was inflicted on victims like his fellow Jesuits and the many others who actively protested against oppression. They faced the harsh violence of the military and security forces. The other sort of crucifixion, which was both more systemic and more common, was crucifixion of Salvadorans who died under the weight of grinding poverty. This was a more systemic and more common form of crucifixion. Sobrino had previously described the dilemma this created for a Christian in the Salvadoran context in his book *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards a Political Holiness*, 'If they resist, they are crucified suddenly and violently. If they do not resist, they are crucified gradually and slowly' (Sobrino 1988, p. 30). In *The Principle of Mercy* published in Spanish in 1992 (Sobrino 1994), he explains the crucifixion metaphor further:

*Crucified peoples* is useful and necessary language at the level of fact, because *cross* means death, and death is what the Latin American peoples are subjected to in thousands of ways. It is the slow but real death generated by unjust structures. . . It is swift, violent death caused by repression and wars, when the poor threaten these unjust structures. And it is indirect but effective death when peoples are deprived even of their cultures in order to weaken their identities and make them more defenceless. (Sobrino 1994, p. 50; emphasis original)

Sobrino developed his thinking on the crucified people at greater length in his book *Jesus the Liberator* published in Spanish in 1991 (Sobrino 1993). He opens with a dedication to the murdered Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter. The book's introduction describes the difficulty Sobrino had in giving the book its title:

This book seeks to present the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth, and so I have called it 'Jesus the liberator'. This choice of title was not easy, however, since writing from Latin America and specifically from El Salvador, we tend to speak of 'Jesus Christ crucified'. Faith points ineluctably to the first title; history forcefully reminds us of the second . . . this book is written in the midst of crucifixion, but definitely in the hope of liberation. (Sobrino 1993, p. 1)

Sobrino's sense of writing 'in the midst of crucifixion' is evident throughout the work. He interprets Christ as continuing to be present in history through the body of his people. He says that the poor and oppressed are 'the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history' (Sobrino 1993, p. 254). Thus an understanding of the crucifixion of the historical Jesus is deepened by an understanding of the crucified people and vice versa. He argues that since it is repeatedly stated that Christ has a body in history, it is therefore necessary to ask whether this body is crucified (Sobrino 1993, pp. 254–70).

In response, he answers 'From the Third World viewpoint, there is no doubt that the cross exists, not just individual crosses, but collective crosses of whole peoples' (Sobrino 1993, p. 254). He explains that to speak in this way is necessary at three different levels. First, at a *factual* level, to describe how people in the Third World suffer poverty and death in a thousand ways. Second, at a *historical-ethical* level, to highlight the fact that the poor do not just die but are put to death; their deaths are due to institutionalized violence and rooted in unjust structures inflicted by the various powers that dominate the continent in alliance with local powers. Third, it is useful and necessary at a *religious* level because it is right to use religious terminology to create religious awareness of this tragedy. Here, Sobrino states emphatically that the crucified peoples 'are the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history'. Recalling Romero's words at Aguilares, 'You are the image of the pierced saviour', Sobrino states, 'These words are not rhetorical, but strictly Christological. They mean that in this crucified people Christ acquires a body in history and that the crucified people embody Christ in history as crucified' (Sobrino 1993, p. 255).<sup>33</sup> For Sobrino, it is not just the Gospel accounts of crucifixion that require the urgent attention of the theologian and biblical scholar alike, but also the contemporary crucifixions of the poor and oppressed. The language of the crucified people brings these two realities together.<sup>34</sup>

Sobrino's book *Christ the Liberator* (Sobrino 2001) was published in Spanish in 1999, as a continuation to the Christological work represented in *Jesus the Liberator*.<sup>35</sup> The primary

focus is resurrection rather than crucifixion. Nonetheless, Sobrino is ever conscious of the plight of the crucified people (Ellacuría), or the pierced people (Romero) (Sobrino 2001). This concern provides the conceptual foundation for Sobrino's attention to 'taking the crucified down from the cross', which is another important term he draws from the work of Ellacuría.<sup>36</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

Sobrino's writing on the crucified people in the early 1990s provided a powerful expression of his Christology. His work illustrates how a creative theological idea can be shaped through collegial collaboration, as well as influenced by personal and social experiences, in this case, systemic violence, civil conflict, state terror, and personal loss. The language of 'crucified people' in El Salvador is not original to Sobrino and the term had already featured in the writing of his fellow Jesuit and close friend Ignacio Ellacuría in the late 1970s. The likely influence of Archbishop Romero's words at Aguilares on Ellacuría's use of the term has been recognized by previous work, including Stållset and Lassalle-Klein. In addition to the words of Romero, the even earlier words of Rutilio Grande should be seen as a further possible influence.<sup>37</sup>

Further attention should be given to the development over time of Sobrino's thinking about crucified people. Sobrino's early writing in the 1970s provided significant Christological foundations for his later development of the term, but Sobrino was initially more cautious than Ellacuría in his use of the term. Even when Sobrino started to explicitly use crucified people in his writings in the early 1980s he presented it as a 'likeness' or 'resemblance' rather than a more direct identity. It was not until the 1990s, following the murder of his colleagues, including Ellacuría, that Sobrino's writings became bolder and spoke more directly of the crucified of El Salvador as 'the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history'.<sup>38</sup> Recognition of this chronological development offers a fuller understanding of the term 'crucified people' in Sobrino's writings. Understanding the historical context and development of the idea of the crucified people is more compelling with an understanding of the painful realities which first shaped it in the writing of Ellacuría in 1978, and made it so important for Sobrino from 1989 onwards.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Liberation Theology podcast hosted by David Incauskis SJ began in January 2021. By the end of 2022 there were 24 episodes on different aspects of liberation theology (Incauskis 2022); see also, David Incauskis, <https://twitter.com/LibTheoPodcast> (accessed on 10 December 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Ellacuría and Sobrino began planning the volume in 1987, and had received most of the chapters by November 1989. It was first published in Spanish in two substantial volumes (Ellacuría and Sobrino 1990). Many of the chapters were published in a single hardback volume in English in 1993 (Ellacuría and Sobrino 1993). A further abridged paperback version of the English volume was published in 1996 (Sobrino and Ellacuría 1996). The podcast is not limited to a discussion of *Mysterium Liberationis* but adopts the book as a reference point for many of its themes and frequently addresses specific chapters as a means to explore liberation theology more broadly.
- <sup>3</sup> In addition to Stållset (2003) and Lassalle-Klein (2009), David Brondos devotes a chapter to Sobrino, titled 'Jon Sobrino and the Crucified People', in his book (Brondos 2007, pp. 154–68). The chapter offers an accessible and helpful overview of Sobrino's work, but the discussion is quite general and has relatively little to say specifically on the term 'crucified people' (Brondos 2007, pp. 164–65). A number of chapters in Stephen Pope's edited book on Sobrino (Pope 2008) offer discussion on different elements in Sobrino's Christology; for the crucified people, see especially, Crowley (2008, pp. 16–30). Nathan Heib also offers a valuable perspective on Sobrino's sense of the crucified people, but he is primarily interested in wider soteriological questions. He says

little on the contribution others made to Sobrino's understanding of the crucified people, beyond noting that it was a term used by Ellacuría (Heib 2013, pp. 15–21, 57–58). For an excellent bibliography on Sobrino's and Ellacuría's writings, see Valiente (2016, pp. 251–64).

- 4 Stållset's book (which is based on his PhD at the University of Oslo in 1998), and Lassalle-Klein's article, are both invaluable works on the significance for Sobrino of Ellacuría's thinking on the crucified people. As discussed below, they also both note Romero's homily at Aguilares. However, neither Stållset nor Lassalle-Klein say much on Grande's possible contribution to the development of the crucified people as an important term. Grande's contribution is now more easily recognized because of recent work that has been done on his life and work. Publications on Grande (see note 19 below) were stimulated by the canonization process started in 2014. His beatification was approved by Pope Francis on 21 February 2020. The ceremony was held on 22 January 2022 after a delay caused by the COVID pandemic.
- 5 Likewise, neither Stållset nor Lassalle-Klein say much on the significant shift over time that can be discerned in Sobrino's own writings on the theme. For example, although Stållset briefly notes Sobrino's writing in 1982, he focusses his analysis on Sobrino's use of crucified people in the 1990s (Stållset 2003, p. 150).
- 6 As in the works of Stållset and Lassalle-Klein, the research approach I adopt involves theological analysis resting on a close reading of texts. In addition to library work, during my PhD studies at Heythrop College, University of London, I was fortunate to speak to Sobrino during my visits to the Central American University in 1996 and 1999. I am very grateful to him for his generosity in making time for me, and for the grace and insight he offered in response to my questions. In addition, I am also grateful to Joseph Laishley SJ, at Heythrop, for his help in arranging both visits; the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD, London) and their then director, Julian Filochowski, who supported the 1996 visit financially, through the award of a postgraduate scholarship in memory of Oscar Romero; and the late Dean Brackley SJ, for our conversations during the visit in 1999. I am also grateful to Rocío Figueroa for her comments on a draft of this article.
- 7 On the ethos and work of the UCA, see Beirne (1996) and Brackley (2008b).
- 8 Lassalle-Klein refers to Ellacuría and Sobrino's work together as 'a remarkable collaboration' and asserts: 'The Fundamental Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría and the allied Christology of Jon Sobrino form what I believe may be the most fully developed contextual theology written since Vatican II' (Lassalle-Klein 2009, p. 347). Brackley describes both Ellacuría and Sobrino as representing a 'second wave' in Latin American liberation theology, due to their emphasis on the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth and Christian discipleship (Brackley 2001, p. 178).
- 9 The origins of liberation theology as a cohesive social movement in the 1960s and its development in the 1970s have been documented by Smith (1996). On the evolution of key theological ideas, and the social contexts which shaped these developments, see Tombs (2002). For a more recent overview, see Berryman (2020).
- 10 At the preparatory meeting in Baños (Ecuador) they discussed collaborative pastoral ministry and social action (June 1966). At Buga (Colombia) they focused on the role of Catholic universities (February 1967); at Melgar (Colombia) the focus was on the Church's mission (April 1968); and at Itapuá (Brazil) on the Church and social change (in May 1968); see Cleary (1985, p. 34).
- 11 The meeting in Medellín was the second general meeting for CELAM and is often referred to as CELAM II. The first general meeting (CELAM I), which had been a much less eventful meeting, had taken place in July–August 1955, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The appointment of the conservative Archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo as General Secretary of CELAM (1972–1984) made CELAM a focal point for opposition to liberation theology. López Trujillo oversaw the organisation of CELAM III, which was held in January–February 1979 at Puebla, Mexico, and included a visit by Pope John Paul II. CELAM IV was held in October 1992, at Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to mark the 500-year anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean. CELAM V took place in Aparecida (São Paulo), Brazil in May 2007, and was attended by Pope Benedict XVI.
- 12 The documents that were most significant for the development of liberation theology are reprinted in Hennelly (1990, pp. 89–119).
- 13 *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Boff 1978) published in Portuguese in 1972, and translated into Spanish in 1974, is a notable exception to this.
- 14 On Ellacuría's life and work, see Burke (2000, 2001), Burke and Lassalle-Klein (2006), Lee (2009, 2013a, 2013b).
- 15 This new relationship between Church and society was confirmed and further strengthened at the General Congregation XXXII (1975); see Burke (2000, pp. 16–17).
- 16 Ellacuría's writing during this time included a collection of theological essays (Ellacuría 1973). A second collection of theological essays was published as Ellacuría (1984).
- 17 After returning to El Salvador in August 1978 Ellacuría took up the role of vice-rector at the UCA in 1979.
- 18 Romero was initially also cautious about Sobrino's theology. In 1976, when he was still Bishop of Santiago, Romero was particularly concerned about positions in Sobrino's *Cristología desde América Latina* (Valiente 2016, pp. 66–67).
- 19 On Grande's life and work, and his friendship with Romero, see Kelly (2013, 2015), Guidos (2018), Cardenal (2020).
- 20 The conference was part of the preparations for CELAM III in Puebla, Mexico, which had originally been planned for October 1978. Due to the death of Paul VI in August 1978, and the brief pontificate of John Paul I (August–September 1978), CELAM III was postponed to January 1979.
- 21 See especially, Stållset (2003, pp. 134–50); Lassalle-Klein (2009, pp. 354–55).

- 22 The literature on the conflict and the role of the US government is considerable, but see especially, [McClintock \(1985\)](#); [United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador \(1993\)](#); [Montgomery \(1995\)](#); [Byrne \(1996\)](#); [Stanley \(1996\)](#); [Ching \(2016\)](#).
- 23 [Romero \(1980, p. 208\)](#); [Lassalle-Klein \(2009, p. 354\)](#); [Stållset \(2003, pp. 15, 131\)](#). On the language of Zech. 12:10, and Jn 19:37, see [Rogers \(2020\)](#).
- 24 This identification of suffering people with the suffering of Christ had a long history in Latin America. In the early sixteenth century, the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas had written to the Spanish royal court with his concerns about the mistreatment of indigenous people. In the letter, Las Casas complained that he had seen: ‘Jesus Christ, our God, scourged and afflicted and crucified, not once, but millions of times’. Las Casas, ‘Historia de las Indias’ in *Obras Escogidas 2*: 356 cited in [Gutiérrez \(1983, p. 197\)](#). Gutiérrez—who has been particularly inspired by Las Casas—puts particular stress on this insight. See [Stållset \(2003, p. 133\)](#).
- 25 On Moltmann, Sobrino writes, ‘Our theology of the cross becomes radical only when we consider the presence (or absence) of God on the cross of Jesus. It is at this point that we face the alternatives posed by Moltmann: Either the cross of Jesus is the end of all Christian theo-logy or else it is the beginning of a truly Christian theology, one that is both a critical theory and a liberative practice’ ([Sobrino 1978, p. 182](#); see further, pp. 217–35).
- 26 [Sobrino \(1989, p. 34\)](#) [my translation]; cited in Spanish in [Stållset \(2003, p. 15\)](#). Stållset notes that in addition to the sermon at Aguilares, Sobrino’s thinking on this was also influenced by other sermons by Romero ([Stållset 2003, p. 131](#)).
- 27 [Sobrino \(1982\)](#). Page references below are to the revised version of this article published in English as [Sobrino \(1987, pp. 159–65\)](#).
- 28 [Sobrino \(1987, p. 160\)](#). Sobrino notes that one element of complexity is the exegetical problem on whether the servant refers to an individual, a group (the faithful remnant), or the people as a collective whole.
- 29 [Sobrino \(1987, p. 161\)](#). Sobrino then adds the further qualifier that: ‘Exactly who constitutes this crucified people and how exactly they reproduce the features of the servant needs further analysis’ (p. 161) but the direction of his thought is clear when he says it is neither the powerful nor simply the Church but instead, ‘This people is made up of the poor majorities who die slowly as a result of oppression and structural injustice, or quickly as a result of repression by the forces of institutionalized violence’ (p. 162).
- 30 [Sobrino \(1987, p. 162\)](#). Sobrino notes that recognising Christ as brother may not seem like a major advance in faith, but he explains that it is an important advance when contrasted with the position of those who cannot with integrity call Christ their brother because of their wealth, or power, or faith in science ([1987, p. 162](#)).
- 31 Segundo Montes SJ, Ignacio Martin Baró SJ, Juan Ramón Moreno SJ, Amando López SJ, Joaquin López y López SJ, Julia Elba Ramos (their housekeeper), and Celina Ramos (her daughter). See [Sobrino \(1990\)](#); [Hassett and Lacey \(1991\)](#).
- 32 On the false accusation of Ellacuría’s Marxism as a justification for the murders, see [Tombs \(2000\)](#). Ellacuría’s political writings are now all available as [Ellacuría \(1993\)](#). Many of his more philosophical writings have been published in the single volume [Ellacuría \(1999\)](#).
- 33 The boldness of Sobrino’s statements have attracted criticism in some quarters. In November 2006, Cardinal William Nevada, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published a ‘Notification of the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ’ ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2006](#)); on the notification and the criticisms raised, see ([Pope 2008](#)).
- 34 On how the crucified people has been taken up and developed in other contexts, see especially: ([Tesfai 1994](#); [Song 1996](#); [Tombs 2023](#)).
- 35 Whilst the English titles seek to signal the connection between the two books, Lassalle-Klein notes, ‘The English titles of the Orbis editions of Jon Sobrino’s two-volume Christology are seriously mistranslated from the Spanish, casting them in the model of Schillebeeckx’s two volumes, Jesus and Christ, and obscuring the focus of both volumes on Jesus Christ’ ([Lassalle-Klein 2009, p. 347](#)).
- 36 [Sobrino \(2001, p. 48\)](#) notes Ellacuría’s first used this term as a formulation of Christian mission. [Lassalle-Klein \(2009, p. 348\)](#) suggests that Ellacuría may have been influenced by Ignatian spirituality. He adds, ‘The first instance of this metaphor is cited as Ignacio Ellacuría, “Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España”, *Sal Terrae* 3 (1983) 230’; [Lassalle-Klein \(2009, p. 371\)](#). Further attention to the chronological development of this concern for Ellacuría and Sobrino lies beyond the scope of this article but has importance for understanding the wider relevance of their thinking on the crucified people.
- 37 In view of Grande’s recent beatification, and the importance the term crucified people came to have for Ellacuría and Sobrino, it is all the more important to recognize Grande’s possible contribution to the use of the term in El Salvador.
- 38 Future work might further explore the significance this has for what Sobrino sees as the primary challenge in relation to the cross; taking the crucified down from the cross.

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