

Church as Sacrament: Gutiérrez and Sobrino as Interpreters of *Lumen Gentium*

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Vatican II's Gaudium et Spes (GS) has had an unmistakable and demonstrable impact on Latin American liberation theology. Likewise, any sufficient account of the impact of GS on the wider church would need to attend to liberation theology. This article affirms this basic point, then explores the often-underappreciated relationship between liberation theology and Lumen Gentium (LG). In particular, it investigates how Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino interpret a fundamental ecclesiological affirmation of LG: the church as a sacrament of salvation and unity. Gutiérrez's early work provides, and Sobrino deepens, the basic point that the church's work as a sacrament inherently demands an option for the poor. Rather than being simply part of its social teaching, this option is at the heart of the church qua church. It is essential both for an adequate interpretation of LG and for a church seeking to be a credible sign and effective instrument of salvation and unity in the world.

Keywords: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, *Lumen Gentium*, liberation theology, church, sacrament

As we pass the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's opening session, questions regarding the interpretation and implementation of Vatican II's vision have hardly subsided.¹ Indeed, with

¹ For a concise, well-done overview of the debates over the significance of Vatican II, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012). In addition to Faggioli, John O'Malley's *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) represents an engaging and illuminating account of the event of Vatican II that argues for the need to attend to the "style" (or spirit) of the council documents in order to interpret the council properly; another side of the

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this anniversary we unsurprisingly have seen increased interest in the history of the council and what its impact should be on how we understand the nature and mission of the church.² One of the most fundamental ecclesiological affirmations of the council is that the church is “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] §48); as a sacrament, it is “a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all [human beings]” (LG §1).³ The implications of the sacramental nature of the church are wide ranging, impacting work in ecumenism, liturgical theology, and much else. One of the central strengths of the image of the church as sacrament is that it provides a model for distinguishing without separating the visible and invisible elements of the church. It further helps us recognize the presence of Christ and the Spirit in the church and the role of the church as a mediator of salvation, but without reducing the work of salvation to that of the church. Each of these aspects of the image of the church as a sacrament has been well worked over in the decades since Vatican II. In this article I argue that the reflections of liberation theologians are essential for an adequate understanding of the implications of *Lumen Gentium*’s notion of the church-as-sacrament—though this often goes unrecognized in the history of interpretation of the council.⁴ Not only do liberation theologians

debate is represented by a volume edited by Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering: *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). The latter, taking Pope Benedict’s 2005 Christmas address to the Curia as its inspiration, offers commentaries on the documents of Vatican II that seek to show a strong continuity between Vatican II and the pre-Vatican II tradition.

- ² Many scholarly journals (e.g., *Theological Studies*) and popular magazines (e.g., *National Catholic Reporter*, *America*, *Commonweal*, *First Things*) have had at least one issue devoted to the anniversary of the council’s opening, and many of these articles focus on how Vatican II should be received today. Many religious and theological conferences (e.g., the American Academy of Religion, the Catholic Theological Society of America) have also had substantial sessions devoted to Vatican II over the past few years.
- ³ In addition to these two references, one finds this basic idea in *Lumen Gentium* §9 and in other documents, including *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §§5 and 26, *Gaudium et Spes* §§42 and 45, and *Ad Gentes* §§1 and 5 (see Avery Dulles, “Nature, Mission, and Structure of the Church,” in Lamb and Levering, *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, 26–27). All citations of the documents of Vatican II in this article are from Austin Flannery, OP, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (New York: Costello Publishing, 1996).
- ⁴ In this article I engage primarily the work of liberation theologians working in Latin America, and particularly that of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino. However, this is neither the only tradition within liberation theology that engages our theme nor the tradition that should necessarily be given priority. See, e.g., Jamie Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (2000): 672–99. Phelps’ essay is insightful in many respects, but one particular point on the need to reflect upon the church as sacrament is helpful as we begin. Whatever one

affirm the points mentioned above, but they also show that the option for the poor is essential to the church as a sacrament. These reflections are necessary, in part, to prevent the image of the church as sacrament from leading to, as Avery Dulles puts it, “an attitude of narcissistic aestheticism that is not easily reconcilable with a full Christian commitment to social and ethical values.”⁵

My analysis proceeds in four steps. First, I explore the way in which liberation theology is frequently understood to be connected to Vatican II. Here the emphasis almost always falls on *Gaudium et Spes* and Pope John XXIII’s famous phrase “the church of the poor”—both connected to and interpreted through the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. I also establish in this section the relative inattention to the relationship between liberation theology and the other great ecclesiological pillar of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*. In the second section I introduce the affirmation of the church as a sacrament in *Lumen Gentium* and discuss several important aspects of this ecclesiological image. In the third section I look at the ways in which Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino take up this image in their theological work and show in particular how the church’s work as a sacrament of salvation must be shaped by the preferential option for the poor and oppressed. In seeking the unity of all, the church must operate preferentially as it seeks to overcome oppressive divisions in the world. In the fourth and concluding section, I draw together the basic points from the article and look at the situation in El Salvador today in light of the church as a sacrament of salvation and unity.

I. Liberation Theology and Vatican II

Commentators and liberation theologians rightly point to the foundational impact of Vatican II on the development of liberation theology, particularly in terms of Medellín.⁶ As with all who engage the council, however,

thinks about the 1985 Synod of Bishops’ elevation of the church as *communio* as the fundamental ecclesiology of Vatican II, this elevation provides greater ecclesiastical weight to the need to understand the full dimensions of the church as sacrament of salvation and unity: union with God, union among Christian communities, and union within the human community at large (Phelps, 672).

⁵ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 67.

⁶ The genealogical relationship between liberation theology and Vatican II is a complex one. On the one hand, the seeds of liberation theology are already present in ecclesial and theological movements in Latin America prior to the conclusion of the council; see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition with a New*

liberation theologians privilege some texts and ideas over others. Three themes from Vatican II stand out most prominently in standard readings of liberation theology, each of which is grounded in the words of John XXIII and finds its fullest expression in *Gaudium et Spes*: (1) a general spirit of openness toward the world and the process of worldly development; (2) the call to read the signs of the times; and (3) John XXIII's notion of the "church of the poor."

It is clear that Vatican II represents a greater openness and engagement with the world, and this very basic orientation—along with the related link between the kingdom of God and worldly development—is strongly embraced by liberation theologians. John XXIII's opening speech and the oft-quoted opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* represent this tendency at the council.⁷ Furthermore, in *Gaudium et Spes* we find a greater recognition of

Introduction by the Author, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxix; Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 27; part 1 of *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 1–37. Thus, it would be erroneous to see liberation theology as merely the application or inculturation of an insight from abroad. On the other hand, it is accurate to say that liberation theology and Medellín must be placed directly in the context of Vatican II. See, e.g., Archbishop Juan Landazuri Ricketts' welcoming address at Medellín, which sets forth the following as the conference's task: "to define the presence of the Church in the actual transformation of Latin America in the light of Vatican Council II . . . , to fathom the signs of the times for that which the Holy Spirit desires for the Church" (Latin American Episcopal Conference [CELAM], *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, vol. 1, *Position Papers* [Bogotá, Colombia: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970], 23–24). Many other speeches given at Medellín confirm this basic impulse. On the relationship between Vatican II and Medellín, see Archbishop Avelar Brandão Vilela's speech at Medellín, *ibid.*, 69–76, as well as Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Density of the Present: Selected Writings*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 59–101; and Gaspar Martínez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 108, 121.

⁷ Among other things, we see Pope John calling for the church to "ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate," to guard the deposit of faith while pursuing "that work which our era demands of us," to "make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity," and to "correspond to the modern expectations and needs of the various peoples of the world" (Pope John XXIII, "Gaudet Mater Ecclesia," in *Council Daybook, Vatican II: Sessions 1 & 2*, ed. Floyd Anderson [Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965], 27–29). The famous opening passage of *Gaudium et Spes* runs: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in

not only what is positive in the modern world, but also of how the church has indeed been enriched by developments in the world (GS §44). Key here is a strong sense of unity between salvation and history, between the church and the world. As Pope Paul VI told the council, “The church sees [the world] with deep understanding, with true appreciation, sincerely desiring not to conquer it but to serve it; not to disparage it but to value it; not to condemn it but to comfort and save it.”⁸ This insight is further reflected in the council’s (somewhat hesitant) recognition that earthly progress “is of vital concern to the Kingdom” and that the promotion of human dignity, community, and freedom reflects the presence of the kingdom of God on earth (GS §39).⁹ Liberation theology develops this basic connection by insisting that salvation must be understood as comprehensive and integral and that history must be understood as one; there is no clear separation between salvation history and profane history.¹⁰

The promotion of greater openness and recognition of the presence of God’s kingdom in the world more broadly provides the foundation for a second theme taken up again and again by liberation theologians: the responsibility of reading the signs of the times (GS §4). How is the church to

their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”

⁸ Quoted in Gutiérrez, *Density of the Present*, 64.

⁹ Another passage of importance is the particularly strong affirmation that faith demands the fulfillment of “earthly responsibilities”: “Let there, then, be no such pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other. The Christian who shirks his temporal duties shirks his duties towards his neighbor, neglects God himself, and endangers his eternal salvation” (GS §43).

¹⁰ On the latter point, see Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, chap. 9; and Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” trans. Margaret D. Wilde, in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 251–89. The former idea of integral liberation is affirmed throughout the decades of liberation theology, though with various emphases depending upon the context. For example, in an early work such as *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez stresses the need to include socio-political transformation as part of salvation against otherworldly accounts of redemption and the view of this transformation as simply pre-evangelical (83, 91, 104). In later works (including his 1988 introduction to the fifteenth anniversary edition of *A Theology of Liberation*), he emphasizes that the notion of integral liberation *does not reduce* salvation to socio-political liberation. Indeed, he says that the ultimate roots of injustice are sin and selfishness and that “social and political liberation should not in any way hide the final and radical significance of liberation from sin which can only be a work of forgiveness and of God’s grace” (*Density of the Present*, 180; *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxviii).

proclaim the gospel and serve God in this age? To answer this question a discernment of spirits is necessary, and liberation theology finds its roots in just such an attempt to discern the will and presence of God and the truth of the gospel in a situation shaped by poverty and oppression. For Gutiérrez the central sign to be interpreted is the “irruption of the poor,” the new presence of those who have been absent or ignored in society and the church and who yearn for liberation, freedom, justice, and, ultimately, life. He then sees liberation theology as in part “an attempt to accept the invitation of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council [to] interpret this sign of the times by reflecting on it critically in the light of God’s word.”¹¹ A central ecclesial moment in this process of discernment was Medellín.

A third theme is John XXIII’s notion of the “church of the poor,” though Gutiérrez sees this theme as having left only a “faint mark” on the conciliar documents themselves.¹² It is reflected in discussions of human dignity and the common good in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS §26 among others), missionary work and joining with the “poor and afflicted” (*Ad Gentes* §12), and the affirmation in *Lumen Gentium* §8 that “the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ.” Medellín (and liberation theology more generally) represents this seed sown by John XXIII bearing fruit as the church seeks to truly become a church of the poor, a church that opts preferentially for and works in solidarity with those who suffer.¹³ This is the key achievement of Medellín, one that is the fruit of Vatican II while also representing a significant development. At Medellín the church not only relates the faith and church to the world and history (an accomplishment of the council), but also now in a fundamental way to the poor.¹⁴

Almost any short summary appraisal of the relationship between Vatican II and liberation theology will reflect upon one or more of these three themes—and rightfully so, as they are at the core of liberation theology’s reception of

¹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxi.

¹² Gutiérrez, *Density of the Present*, 67.

¹³ See Teófilo Cabestrero, “En Medellín la semilla del Vaticano II dio ciento por uno,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 46 (1999): 59–73, for an analysis of speeches at Vatican II on this topic and its fruition at Medellín.

¹⁴ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 70, trans. Joseph Owens; Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Church and the Poor: A Latin American Perspective,” in *Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 192–93.

Vatican II. Generally speaking, however, the relationship between liberation theology and *Lumen Gentium* receives too little attention. If mentioned at all, two points usually come to the fore: the image of the church as the people of God (LG §§9–17) and the emphasis on the local church (LG §§23, 26). A possible third point is Leonardo Boff's appeal to the image of the church as sacrament in *Church, Charism, and Power* as a means to contrast the current structure of the institutional church with the charismatic nature of the whole people of God.¹⁵ Beyond noting this moment, and in particular the implications of points in the Vatican's condemnation of Boff's book,¹⁶ Boff's interpretation of the church-as-sacrament does not receive a great deal of attention today, although he is the liberation theologian most likely to be mentioned on this point and in connection to *Lumen Gentium*.¹⁷

It is also instructive to look at the reception of liberationist thought within the literature on *Lumen Gentium* more generally. Here I will mention just three works, all of which are quite helpful and insightful pieces for our understanding of the council, key ecclesiological texts, and postconciliar interpretations. First is a recent and useful review essay by Peter De Mey.¹⁸ After providing a basic introduction to the first four decades of interpretation of *Lumen Gentium*, De Mey's main task is to give an overview of books in Catholic ecclesiology published since 2005. With the exception of noting the importance of the Vatican's notification on Boff, it is telling that we find no mention of liberation theologians (from Latin America or otherwise) in any part of the review of important works on *Lumen Gentium*. Such an omission would be immediately recognized as fatal if one were tracing the history of interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes*, but with *Lumen Gentium* it is rather typical to find only the interpretative tradition of American and European scholars engaged.

Another instructive example is a fine textbook on ecclesiology, *The Gift of the Church*.¹⁹ Offering a basic introduction to a wide variety of ecclesiological topics, almost every author in the volume gives Vatican II pride of place. *Lumen Gentium* and the image of the church as a sacrament are engaged

¹⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, "Quaestio Disputata: Further Thoughts on the Meaning of *Subsistit In*," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2010): 133–47, at 138.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Peter De Mey, "Recent Views of *Lumen Gentium*, Fifty Years after Vatican II," *Horizons* 39, no. 2 (2012): 252–81.

¹⁹ *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield*, OSB, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

throughout the volume. Liberation theology—particularly the conferences at Medellín and Puebla—also plays a role, albeit a minor one. In particular (and almost exclusively), the insights of liberation theology enter into discussions of evangelization and social mission (into discussions of *Ad Gentes* and *Gaudium et Spes*). Discussions focused primarily on the nature and structure of the church draw upon other (European and American) sources.

One of the most important works on Vatican II in the last decade is the five-volume *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*.²⁰ This series is more successful than many in bringing reflections from Latin America to bear on our understanding of *Lumen Gentium*. In particular, Peter Hünemann nicely details the reflections of the Chilean bishops during the developmental stages of *Lumen Gentium*.²¹ Furthermore, in the concluding volume, which draws together various theological themes, a section on the church as sacrament does eventually make a connection between this image and the call to witness to the dynamism of God's salvation in the world through solidarity, particularly with the poor.²² Overall there is a greater recognition of the need to engage liberationist ideas in the series. Yet beyond a reflection on *Lumen Gentium* §8, the actual commentary on *Lumen Gentium* does not exhibit deep engagement. There is certainly nothing comparable to the treatment in the commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*.²³

Many other examples could be marshaled that fit with these examples—most of them similar to the first two.²⁴ Yet, as is demonstrated below, liberation theologians *have* deeply engaged *Lumen Gentium* and the theme of the

²⁰ *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, 5 vols., ed. Peter Hünemann and Bernd Jochen Hilberath (Freiburg: Herder, 2004–6). A useful appendix to these five volumes is *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit heute: Anstöße zur weitere Rezeption*, ed. Peter Hünemann (Freiburg: Herder, 2006).

²¹ See Peter Hünemann, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar*, 2:337–44, at 340 for a discussion of the church as sacrament. Engaging the Chilean bishops obviously does not equate to drawing upon liberation theology; nevertheless, it is still noteworthy that Hünemann's reflections demonstrate a careful attention to resources from the Global South for his reading of *Lumen Gentium* and that the particular points of the bishops do share much with the later reflections of Gutiérrez, Sobrino, and others.

²² Guido Bausenhardt, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar*, 5:258.

²³ Hans-Joachim Sander, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar*, 4:856–59.

²⁴ For two older but representative examples, see Lucien Richard, OMI, Daniel Harrington, SJ, and John W. O'Malley, SJ, eds., *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda; A Look into the Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); and Gerald M. Fagin, SJ, ed., *Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984). These two volumes are generally of good quality and yet reinforce the impression given by De Mey and *The Gift of the Church*. For a stronger treatment of *Lumen Gentium* that is closer to that of the Herder series, see Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*.

church as a sacrament of salvation and unity, starting almost immediately after the council. Indeed, the themes of openness to the world, reading the signs of the times, and becoming the church of the poor are grounded in a particular understanding of the nature of the church as sacrament. Recognizing this point is important for our understanding of both *Lumen Gentium* and liberation theology. In the next two sections I look at *Lumen Gentium*'s use of the image of the church as a sacrament and then explore how liberation theologians take up the image in a distinctive way.

II. The Church as Sacrament in *Lumen Gentium*

Originating in the early church and experiencing a resurgence in the decades leading up to Vatican II, the idea of the church as a sacrament was popularized by Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Otto Semmelroth, among others.²⁵ It is the central image of the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*, and it is worth pausing to consider this text: as a sacrament, the church is “a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all [human beings].” Designating the church as “sacrament” thus indicates two aspects and a twofold goal: the church is a visible sign of what God intends for the world and actually serves as an instrument of this final goal; and the *telos* of the church is understood both vertically and horizontally, communion with the triune God and unity among humanity. This basic statement of the church as a sacrament also grounds many of the key ecclesiological discussions later in the dogmatic constitution, including the nature of the church as the people of God (LG §9), the affirmation of ecclesial diversity and catholicity (§§12–13), the nature and purpose of the papacy (§§18, 23), the role of the laity (§§34, 36), the value of the evangelical counsels (§44), the pilgrim nature of the church (§48), and much else. Most fundamentally, however, a close reading of *Lumen Gentium* demonstrates that the sacramental nature of the church consists in its *Christological* foundation and *eschatological* orientation. Attending to these two fundamental commitments is essential to understanding how the church is a sacrament of unity and salvation.

Lumen Gentium begins its exploration of the nature and mission of the church with a description of the Trinitarian structure of salvation history (LG §§2–4) that finds its center in Christ. The church is the seed of the

²⁵ See Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 56; and Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 109–31. For the introduction of the idea of sacrament into *Lumen Gentium*, see Peter Hünemann's commentary in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar*, 2:324–26.

kingdom of God preached by Christ, “a seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race” (LG §9). As a sacrament, the church is both a *sign* and an *instrument* of the salvific grace of Christ: by the power of the Holy Spirit, it both points to and confers the grace Christ offered to humanity, particularly in the eucharistic liturgy (LG §11; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §8). Rather than an “empty sign,” “where the Church as sacrament is present, the grace of Christ will not be absent.”²⁶ In entering the church one encounters the unifying force of the grace of Christ, which draws one into deeper union with God and others.²⁷

Yet, the eschatological nature of the church as sacrament prevents a simple identification of the church with Christ’s saving grace or the kingdom of God to which it points. As a pilgrim in history, the church “will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven” (LG §48); it is “at once holy and always in need of purification” (LG §8).²⁸ These two passages highlight two aspects of the sacramentality of the church. First, from an eschatological perspective, the church has a certain provisional character: “The pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass” (LG §48).²⁹ It is a sign and anticipation of the greater reality that is to come: the renewal of all things. Second, as always in need of purification, to be a sign of grace and the kingdom of God is not simply a gift given to the church; it is a *task* to be taken up in every age: “The Church on earth must continually labor to become a credible sign of the future glory to which it points.”³⁰ As a

²⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 62–63. For a more extensive analysis of the Christological (and pneumatological) foundations of the church as sacrament, see Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol” and “The Word and Eucharist,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4: *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 240–42, 273–76; and Rahner, “On the Presence of Christ in the Diaspora Community according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10: *Writings of 1965–1967*, 2, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 91–95.

²⁷ Aloys Grillmeier, “The Mystery of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–69), 1:140.

²⁸ Contrasting this view with the dominant pre-Vatican II ecclesiologies, Joseph Ratzinger sees *Lumen Gentium*’s view of the church as “dynamic” and historical rather than as a “rounded-off and finished reality” (Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, trans. The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle [New York: Paulist Press, 2009], 75).

²⁹ See Otto Semmelroth, “The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church,” in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1:280–82, for an excellent discussion of the eschatological nature of the church and the shift from an individualistic to an ecclesial approach in the drafts of *Lumen Gentium*.

³⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 106; see also Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights*, 78; and a discussion of this point in relation to the traditional marks of the church in Thomas P.

result of human sinfulness, “the radiance of the Church’s face shines less brightly” than it should (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §4). Indeed, it is possible for Christians individually and communally to act as a countersign as they fail to reflect and enact God’s love in the world.³¹ Thus, the affirmation of the church as a sacrament of unity includes within it an affirmation of the church as grounded in the salvific work of Christ (and the Trinity) and a call to become an ever more credible sign of that salvation in the world.³²

Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 132–38. This same dynamic of taking up the task to become a clearer sign shapes much of the reform of the liturgy in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In addition to the central principle of facilitating active participation by the laity (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* §§11, 14, 30, 48), intelligibility and simplicity were established as norms to guide the reform of the liturgy (§§34, 50). As John O’Malley sums it up, “Whatever obscured or distracted from the essential meaning of the liturgical celebrations was to be eliminated” (O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 132).

³¹ Sadly, examples of such failure are frequent within the history of the church. The contemporary sexual abuse scandal, both in prevalence of sexual abuse and the widespread failure of church leaders to protect children, is perhaps the most obvious example of such a countersign. At Vatican II, we see the recognition of another countersign in the acknowledgment that the state of ecclesial divisions “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §1). Likewise, John Paul II recognized that the way in which the papal office has sometimes been exercised functioned as a countersign to unity: “What should have been a service [to unity], sometimes manifested itself in a very different light” (Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html, §95). Perhaps more than anything else, the history of Christian treatment of Jews and Judaism represents a countersign to the salvation and unity that the church is to represent and serve. In condemning those who would view the Jews as “rejected or accursed,” and in rejecting “every form of persecution . . . and displays of anti-Semitism” (*Nostra Aetate* §4), Vatican II is condemning much of mainstream Christian thought through the centuries (the history of Christian anti-Judaism is well known; for the complex relationship between anti-Semitism and the Catholic Church in the decades leading up to and during World War II, see John Connolly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews: 1933–1965* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012]).

³² This point has clear implications for the ecumenical movement as both a call for greater unity and the allowance for the recognition that non-Catholic churches act as effective signs of God’s grace in the reading and preaching of the Word, in baptism and in gathering for the Lord’s Supper, and in the holy lives of their members. Furthermore, it is a foundation for the affirmation of the universal call to holiness in *Lumen Gentium* §39–42: “If the Church is, in fact, the corporate presence of the triune God, who is holiness itself, then it must look and act like a community transformed by the divine presence” (Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* [New York: HarperOne, 2008], 165–66).

III. The Church as Sacrament in Gutiérrez and Sobrino

Latin American bishops and liberation theologians took up the idea of the church as a sacrament soon after Vatican II. Many of the speeches at Medellín explore the sacramental nature of the church; most notably, Eduardo Pironio, general secretary of CELAM, provides extensive reflections on *Lumen Gentium* in light of the church as a sign and instrument of unity and salvation.³³ Later at Puebla (the third conference of CELAM, held in 1979) the image of the church as a sacrament is the fundamental frame for the ecclesiology of the final document; here the church is recognized as a sacrament of communion, a church, which “in a history marked by conflicts, contributes irreplaceable energies to promote the reconciliation and solidary unity of our peoples.”³⁴ In his first pastoral letter as archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero centers his ecclesiological reflections upon the church as a sign and instrument of Easter in the world, and this theme shapes his three subsequent letters as well.³⁵ Deep reflections on the theme are likewise found in the works of Leonardo Boff, Ignacio Ellacuría, and others.³⁶ While the works of each of these could be used to further our understanding of this theme of *Lumen Gentium*, the most obvious source—and most important, given its influence—is Gutiérrez’s seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*.

At the “climax of the cumulative argument of [the book],” as Robert McAfee Brown describes it, Gutiérrez turns his attention to ecclesiology and

³³ CELAM, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, 55, 82, 109, 118–28, 247–48. Pironio’s speech is found on 107–28.

³⁴ John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 284; see 151–61 for the core discussion and 242 and 490 for a couple of later references.

³⁵ Archbishop Oscar Romero, “The Easter Church,” *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 52–62; for references in subsequent pastoral letters, see 66, 95, 125.

³⁶ See Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power*; Ellacuría, “Church of the Poor, Sacrament of Liberation,” 543–64; Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 95, 140; Kevin Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, eds., *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 177–80, 193–94, 206–7; Alvaro Quiroz Magaña, “Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation,” trans. Robert R. Barr, in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis*, 194–209, at 201–3. Boff sees the identity of the church as a sacrament relativizing the role and importance of the present institutional structure of the Catholic Church; Ellacuría emphasizes the sign character of the church as a witness to salvation and the historical and social character of salvation; Magaña reinforces the latter point from Ellacuría.

in particular to the church as a sacrament.³⁷ Gutiérrez recognizes that speaking of the church as a sacrament “is undoubtedly one of the most important and permanent contributions of [Vatican II],”³⁸ and he affirms the basic framing given in the previous section: the church must be understood in the context of salvation history and the call to participate communally in the Trinitarian life of God. The church is grounded in the work of Christ and the Spirit as it operates as a sacrament of this salvation. Gutiérrez likewise draws out the eschatological and provisional character of the church and brings these together with particular emphasis the church as a *sign* of salvation:

As a sacramental community, the Church should signify in its own internal structure the salvation whose fulfillment it announces. Its organization ought to serve this task. As a sign of the liberation of humankind and history, the Church itself in its concrete existence ought to be a place of liberation. A sign should be clear and understandable . . . [and] since the Church is not an end in itself, it finds its meaning in its capacity to signify the reality in function of which it exists.³⁹

In his account of the sign character of the church, Gutiérrez affirms the Christological foundation of the church—that it *is* as sign of salvation and unity—but puts further emphasis on the eschatological orientation of church and the call to *become* an ever more credible sign of the salvation promised by God in Christ. This emphasis is reflected later at Puebla as well: “In fidelity to its status as a sacrament, [the church] tries more and more to be a transparent sign or living model of the loving communion in Christ that it proclaims and is striving to realize.”⁴⁰ All of this is a fairly straightforward reading of *Lumen Gentium*, balancing both the importance of the church as the work of Christ and the Spirit and the need to decenter the church, since it is not an end in and of itself.

³⁷ See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, chap. 12; and Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 121. This section of *A Theology of Liberation* is reprinted in James B. Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 242–54. More generally, Gutiérrez’s theology has been rightly described as “intrinsically ecclesiological” in the sense that it centers on defining how the church can be a universal sacrament of salvation in the concrete case of Latin America (see Martínez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 114); see also Gutiérrez, *Density of the Present*, 65.

³⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 146.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁰ Eagleson and Scharper, *Puebla and Beyond*, 159.

Yet Gutiérrez offers his own distinctive take on what it means for the church to be both a sign and an instrument of unity. Put simply, the church cannot be a credible sign of the kingdom of God unless it makes a preferential option for the poor.⁴¹ It is worth noting that although *Lumen Gentium* does not put it in exactly this way, Gutiérrez's position has clear grounding in the text. The most obvious place is the famous and already quoted passage in paragraph 8: "The Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ."⁴² Gutiérrez also sees himself following the basic position of Medellín: the church must be "a 'poor church'"—that is, a church that in order to be a sacrament of salvation involves itself with the poor and with poverty.⁴³

At the most basic level, Gutiérrez insists that the sacramental character of the church places the church in the midst of the movement toward a just union among humanity in history: "Its fidelity to the Gospel leaves no alternative: the Church must be the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and

⁴¹ In what follows I unpack this basic claim. For a more general account of the preferential option within Gutiérrez's corpus of writings, see *A Theology of Liberation*, xxv–xxviii; "Option for the Poor," trans. Robert R. Barr, in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis*, 235–50; and "Memory and Prophecy," in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 17–38. It is significant that, for Gutiérrez, the preferential option "is the most substantial part of the contribution to the universal church made by the life of the Latin American church and by liberation theology" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology Today," in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 89–104, at 96).

⁴² This connection is made explicit by Sobrino, who sees *Lumen Gentium* §§1 and 8 as mutually explanatory (Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984], 240). Going beyond §8, Gutiérrez could point to the call for bishops to lead the faithful, "in a special way" to a deeper love "of the poor, the suffering, and those who are undergoing persecution for the sake of justice" (LG §23) and to the call for the poor to see themselves as united to Christ (LG §41).

⁴³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 169—drawing upon the document on poverty from Medellín. Later on the same page, Gutiérrez points to the passage from the next conference of CELAM quoted above: "Puebla therefore says that in Latin America we have opted for 'a church that is a sacrament of communion, a church that, in a history marked by conflicts, contributes irreplaceable energies to promote the reconciliation and solidarity of our peoples' (no. 1302)."

just society.”⁴⁴ Gutiérrez sees the task of proclaiming the gospel as fundamental to the church as a sacrament, and, as is implied in the previous quotation, this proclamation is two-sided: a message of hope for salvation and a rejection of sin. Thus, an essential part of the proclamation of the church as a mediator of unity is the revelation of *disunity*, of the things that rupture our relationship with God and others. This includes personal sin and selfishness—the “fundamental alienation which lies below every other human alienation”—but also social structures that dehumanize and oppress: “If a situation of injustice and exploitation is incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom, the Word which announces this coming ought normally to point out this incompatibility.”⁴⁵ In short, the first step on the way forward toward final reconciliation is often the revelation of what opposes and prevents authentic communion.

Vatican II can be understood, in part, as a call for openness to the world. As one would expect, Gutiérrez places great importance on this aspect of the council, but equally emphasizes, countering any naïve optimism, that the world is shaped by sharp, sometimes oppressive divisions. The church is to be a sacrament of unity in *this* world and thus cannot overlook such division; passivity or a neutral position is not possible if *true* unity is sought.⁴⁶ Instead, “in a divided world the role of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the radical causes of social division. If it does so, it will be an authentic and effective sign of unity under the universal love of God.”⁴⁷ Put in another register, the church is called to be a sacrament of *life*, a sign and instrument of God’s ultimate gift. However, unless it stands against the forces of death, including “persistent structural violence, terrorist violence of various kinds, and the violence of indiscriminate repression,” the church cannot be a credible sign and effective servant of life.⁴⁸ Thus, the church must be historically and socially engaged, striking at the structural causes of oppression and “taking a position, opposing certain groups of persons, rejecting certain

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 148.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 151. The impossibility of political neutrality (and thus the inescapably political nature of every position, religious or otherwise) is one of the most unifying themes among various liberation theologians. For one of the most influential and concise explorations of this, see Oscar Romero’s Louvain address the month before his assassination (Romero, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 177–87).

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 161.

⁴⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 108; cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 28, 135.

activities, and facing hostilities.”⁴⁹ At times, this will mean a strong critique of the role the church has often played in society. As Joseph Ratzinger sensed at the conclusion of the council, the need for the church to break with an identification with ruling classes is “a project of fundamental importance.”⁵⁰

In sum, Gutiérrez argues that if the church is to be a sacrament as *Lumen Gentium* describes, the work of the church for unity with God and among humanity is inherently preferential and even conflictual. It sides with those who suffer because of unjust structures and violence and calls to conversion those who benefit from and support these structures. Gutiérrez insists that these issues must be framed in terms of the church as sacrament—and not just as part of Catholic social teaching or the work of the secretariat for social affairs. They are at the heart of what it means for the church to be the church in a world marked by poverty and injustice.⁵¹ Unless the church “defends and protects the poor . . . there is a contradiction of the very essence of the ecclesial community.”⁵²

Jon Sobrino also insists that the church’s existence be shaped by the option for the poor.⁵³ He sees this as a necessary way forward to a more faithful and accurate understanding of the church:

The Church in Latin America is recovering the “catholic” meaning of the words at the beginning of Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Church*: “By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of *the unity of all mankind*.” But the

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 159.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights*, 78. Agreeing with this point, Gutiérrez argues that in the church’s critique of an oppressive structuring of society, “the Church must also criticize itself as an integral part of this order” (*A Theology of Liberation*, 152).

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *Density of the Present*, 92–95.

⁵² Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, 23.

⁵³ Whether or not to call the option for the poor a “preferential” option is of some debate among liberation theologians. The phrase “preferential option” has been used in documents of the magisterium (see, e.g., Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §42) and is endorsed by Gutiérrez in order to preserve a strong sense of the universality of God’s love (Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 239). Juan Luis Segundo argues against the use of *preferential*, arguing that its inclusion at Puebla was a move that weakens the critical edge of the option for the poor; in his view, the addition of *preferential* is tautological and can only function practically to eviscerate the conflictive nature of the option (Juan Luis Segundo, “Option for the Poor,” in *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, trans. Robert R. Barr [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993], 121). Sobrino generally sides with Segundo on this question (see Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor*, 20). This fits well with the discussion of his apocalyptic framing of the church’s mission and praxis below.

Church of the poor endeavors to give concrete and historical form to the meaning of “all mankind.” “Mankind” is made up of those sharing the same human essence. This face, though true, is abstract. For the majority of humankind to be human is to be poor. At the historical level, then, the Church of the poor is more a sacrament of unity of the human race than other forms of Churchly existence.⁵⁴

We thus see here that Sobrino confirms Gutiérrez’s fundamental point. It is, in part, through a partiality toward the poor—those who have been marginalized and excluded—that the church is a sign and instrument of universal unity. In addition to reinforcing this fundamental claim, Sobrino’s work also builds up and specifies Gutiérrez’s work on the church-as-sacrament in three significant ways.⁵⁵ He provides a more significant Christological foundation, offers an apocalyptic framing, and points to mercy as the guiding principle for the church’s preferential-unifying action.

Gutiérrez does discuss Christology, but he does not offer the same depth of Christological analysis as Sobrino. This is not the place to summarize Sobrino’s extensive Christological reflections on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁵⁶ Instead, I focus more narrowly on the way in which Sobrino’s

⁵⁴ Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 114 (emphasis in the original). Sobrino’s interpretation of the church as a sacrament affirms a number of the other points made by Gutiérrez and other interpreters of *Lumen Gentium* as well. For the eschatological, provisional, and sign character of the church, see Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 86–88; for an emphasis on becoming a sacrament as a task given to the church, see Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 119, 124, 137–38; for the option for the poor as fundamental to the church’s mission, see Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor*, 21; for the need to overcome fundamental divisions among humanity, see Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 164. As was already mentioned above (note 42), Sobrino interprets *Lumen Gentium* §1 in part through the lens of *Lumen Gentium* §8.

⁵⁵ It must be noted that although it is clearly present—see the previous note—the image of the church as a sacrament is not as systematically engaged by Sobrino as it is by Gutiérrez. In the key points of development that I suggest from Sobrino’s thought, some occur in his texts with explicit mention of the sacramental nature of the church; others do not. In both cases, however, the developments build upon Gutiérrez’s fundamental claim: the preferential option is essential to the church’s very existence if it is to be a sacrament of salvation; and thus, in both cases, Sobrino’s insights move forward our understanding of *Lumen Gentium* and the church.

⁵⁶ The two most important volumes are *Jesuchristo liberator* and *La fe en Jesuchristo*; in English translation: Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) and *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Excellent secondary essays can be found in part 2

account of ecclesiological praxis flows out of his Christological reflections on the person and life of Jesus. Much of Sobrino's project could be seen as a prophetic call to ensure that the one whom we follow in faith is *actually* Jesus of Nazareth. One may be orthodox in one's confession of Jesus as fully human and fully divine while at the same time constructing a Christology that is insufficiently grounded in the concrete particularity of Jesus and his praxis on behalf of the kingdom of God;⁵⁷ instead one ideologically makes of Christ what one wills. The danger here is captured well in the opening of Sobrino's *Jesus the Liberator*: "Let us remember that this continent has been subjected to centuries of inhuman and anti-Christian oppression, without Christology giving any sign of having noticed this and certainly without it providing any prophetic denunciation in the name of Jesus Christ."⁵⁸

In the praxis of Jesus, we see one who brings good news to the poor, who further reveals a God who has compassion for the poor and oppressed. In a world marked by sin, suffering, and oppression, Jesus sides with the poor: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:20, 24). The initial task of the Christian is to accept this Jesus as the Christ, to allow oneself to be challenged by a God who may not fit one's expectations or desires: "We must necessarily listen and answer, and in this we achieve our right relationship with God We have to let God appear as God, whatever such manifestation may be (such as the always scandalous manifestation of God's partiality toward the victims of this world) and whichever the path along which God leads us may be." And then "we have to put the word we have heard into action."⁵⁹ This basic move, along with Sobrino's actual analyses of the person and work of Jesus, places Gutiérrez's basic position on a strong Christological foundation. The church's praxis as a sacrament of salvation must reflect that of the Savior;⁶⁰ the universality of love

of Stephen Pope, ed., *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 79–152.

⁵⁷ This attentiveness to the concrete particularity of Jesus, the need to give "the history of the flesh-and-blood Jesus its full weight as revelation" (Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 47), is developed well by Roberto Goizueta as an aesthetic impulse in Sobrino's thought (Roberto Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009]; and Goizueta, "The Christology of Jon Sobrino," in Pope, *Hope and Solidarity*, 90–104).

⁵⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 189; cf. *Christ the Liberator*, 267.

⁶⁰ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 109.

and the task to bring about unity among humanity operate preferentially and conflictively in a world shaped by sinful and oppressive divisions.

The second way in which Sobrino develops Gutiérrez's point is his apocalyptic construal of our historical situation. Apocalypticism has always taken many different forms.⁶¹ Its biblical iterations include a theological hope for the interruption of injustice, and this basic hope is key to Sobrino's use of apocalyptic.⁶² In addition to this, three other traditional apocalyptic themes find their way into Sobrino's work, and each shapes the way in which he understands the mission of the church in our world. First, Sobrino paints the crises of history in much starker terms than we find in Gutiérrez. In accord with apocalyptic ideas, this world is filled with powerful forces that resist the coming of God's kingdom, persons and structures that resist a more just society and liberation for the poor. On one side of history we have the God of life, the coming kingdom, and those who fight for this kingdom in solidarity with the poor; on the other side of history we have the idols of death, the anti-kingdom, and those who violently or passively maintain an oppressive status quo that is contrary to God's will.⁶³ To be for God, to be a follower of Jesus, is to be *against* those idols of death that create victims in history. Only a church that decisively sides with the victims and against forces of

⁶¹ See, e.g., "General Introduction," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 2000), vii–xi; John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 129–61; Bernard McGinn, "Introduction: Apocalyptic Spirituality," in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, ed. Bernard McGinn, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 1–16. For an excellent treatment of Sobrino in the light of apocalyptic thought, see J. Matthew Ashley, "Apocalypticism in Political and Liberation Theology: Toward an Historical *Docta Ignorantia*," *Horizons* 27, no. 1 (2000): 22–43. For a helpful schematic treatment of various forms of apocalypticism in contemporary theology, see Cyril O'Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2009 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009).

⁶² It is significant that one of the clearest places where Sobrino invokes and affirms apocalyptic thought is in the context of his discussion of the Resurrection. Here he insists that as important as it is to emphasize the corporeal, social, and cosmic dimensions of resurrection against overly spiritualized and individualistic views of salvation, it is necessary to connect the Resurrection—as it is in apocalyptic thought—with a "hope in the power of God over the injustice that produces victims" (Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 42). A hope for the interruption of injustice is at the core of many other appeals to apocalyptic thought over the last decades; see, e.g., Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007), 81–85, 156–65.

⁶³ For a concise elaboration of this dialectic, see Sobrino, *No Salvation outside the Poor*, 82–88; and Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 84–86, 166–69.

oppression can be a credible sign and instrument of the salvation and unity brought by Jesus.

Second, as with traditional apocalyptic, Sobrino seeks to make the crises of history transparent and visible. An unveiling of the apocalyptic division of history into polarities of good and evil is necessary so that one is able to place oneself on God's side of the struggle. Traditional apocalyptic literature often relies upon visions in order to illuminate God's saving activity in the drama of history. For Sobrino, illumination comes from the option for the poor—that is, from choosing to see reality from the perspective of those who suffer unjustly. It is from this perspective that one sees reality most accurately and thus can *name* historical forces in terms of the apocalyptic duality of kingdom and anti-kingdom. Such a process is obviously fraught with difficulties and prone to many dangers.⁶⁴ What we need, according to Sobrino, is a spirituality of honesty with reality, an openness to being affected by the immense reality of suffering that is the lot of the majority of humanity. We need to name its root causes in human actions and structures and seek to transform reality to bring life. Only such a movement—even if it involves

⁶⁴ Two principal dangers of such an apocalyptic imagination are demonization and what Ivan Petrella calls “gigantism” (Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* [London: SCM Press, 2008], 100). It is not incidental that Sobrino's thought came to maturity in a situation of violent oppression and civil war in which tens of thousands of men, women, and children were attacked and killed—the vast majority by the US-backed Salvadoran government. Though figures such as Archbishop Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría continually sought peaceful solutions to the simmering and eventual civil war, the forces of the anti-kingdom were clear—though the decision to opt for the poor at the risk of one's person and community obviously remained a difficult one. From this situation of crisis an apocalyptic rhetoric rises, is intelligible, and yet also has the danger of demonization. Generally speaking, the battle lines cannot be drawn so cleanly, and an apocalyptic framing necessarily simplifies complex issues in order to get at what one sees as the core of the situation. Furthermore, if some sort of reconciliation is eventually desired (rather than simply the destruction of one's enemies), apocalyptic rhetoric may cut against such a possibility. The second danger, “gigantism,” has to do with the *paralyzing* effect that apocalyptic can have despite its own intention. In creating an enemy so powerful, overwhelming, and systemic, one may fall into defeatism rather than being spurred on to seek effective changes that bring greater life to the poor. These dangers do not condemn apocalyptic or prophetic rhetoric, to be sure. Despite the danger of paralysis, an apocalyptic imagination helps us to see the genuinely oppressive forces in this world (resisting naïve optimism) and rouses us to confront that which opposes the life of the poor and vulnerable. And indeed, often the forces that must be overcome *are* systemic and overwhelming. Being aware of these dangers does, however, require us to complement apocalyptic rhetoric with other forms of analysis and speech, and to recognize where apocalyptic rhetoric obscures more than it reveals.

seemingly harsh prophetic rhetoric—will bring a true unity and peace that is grounded in justice. Such is the mission of the church-as-sacrament.⁶⁵

The third important aspect of apocalyptic literature is its relation to situations of crisis. Usually originating from these situations, apocalyptic literature seeks to make a particular crisis clear, awaken the readers, and enable a community to “continue living faithfully and creatively in a world which appears to render such a life futile and absurd.”⁶⁶ This is a perfect description of Sobrino’s theological project and his use of the images of the God of life/idols of death and kingdom/anti-kingdom. Sobrino describes his Christology as “a sort of parable about Jesus Christ, which, like all parables, forces its readers/hearers to adopt a stance and make a decision.”⁶⁷ Such a description could be extended to Sobrino’s theological engagements with spirituality, the martyrs, and, not surprisingly, the church. The church must both respond with urgency in defense of the poor and be an agent that awakens others from their slumber.⁶⁸

Thus far we have seen a twofold development of Gutiérrez’s understanding of the church as sacrament of salvation and unity by Sobrino. Sobrino provides a thicker Christological account to ground ecclesiological praxis, and an apocalyptic framing that puts a more critical edge on the crises and decisions before the Christian community. A third point, though equally important, can be treated more briefly. At the heart of Sobrino’s Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and martyrology—and which likewise shapes how one understands the church as a sacrament of salvation—is what he calls the “principle of mercy.” As the reaction to the suffering of another that seeks to eradicate that suffering, mercy is for Sobrino the core of God’s activity and what is concretized in the life and praxis of Jesus.⁶⁹ The church in turn is to be a sacrament of this mercy, a corporate body that makes visible and effective God’s mercy: “The church, too, even *qua* church, should reread the parable of the good Samaritan and listen to it with the same rapt attention, and the same fear and trembling, with which Jesus’ hearers first heard it.” And further echoing the language of *Lumen Gentium* §1, Sobrino sees the credibility of

⁶⁵ Sobrino insists that when living out such a mission, the church should expect to suffer persecution and martyrdom. See Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 145. For Sobrino, it is Romero, his Jesuit brothers, and all the martyrs of El Salvador who best illustrate this fact (see Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*).

⁶⁶ Ashley, “Apocalypticism in Political and Liberation Theology,” 27.

⁶⁷ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 331.

⁶⁸ Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 147–49; Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 1–11.

⁶⁹ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 17.

the church (its sign character) aligned with the degree and consistency of its mercy.⁷⁰

Sobrino's emphasis throughout his reflections is that mercy must not be reduced to a few "works of mercy"; rather, it must be the guiding principle of a church that follows Jesus. In doing this, the church should expect significant resistance:

This world is ever ready to applaud, or at least tolerate, works of mercy. What this world will not tolerate is a church molded by the principle of mercy, which leads that church to denounce robbers who victimize, to lay bare the lie that conceals oppression, and to encourage victims to win their freedom from culprits. In other words, the robbers who inhabit this anti-merciful world tolerate the tending of wounds, but not the true healing of the wounded, let alone mounting a struggle to keep the latter from falling once more into their hands.⁷¹

Thus, in making mercy the central impulse in the church's existence as a sacrament, the initially conflictual nature of this sacrament may actually be accentuated as one opposes those forces that victimize and oppress. Mercy is inherently linked with the option for the poor, the option for the most vulnerable. And in the last analysis, it is only a merciful church that can be a credible sign of the love of God for humanity.

IV. Concluding Reflections

In this article I have laid out the contribution made by liberation theologians to understanding *Lumen Gentium's* affirmation of the church as a sacrament of "communion with God and of unity among all [human beings]." Before looking at one concrete situation that exists today, I will briefly summarize three important gains.

First, we saw in our initial reading of *Lumen Gentium* that viewing the church as a sacrament places the church firmly within the Trinitarian context of salvation history and orients it eschatologically. The church is to be a sign and instrument of the unity and salvation found in Christ and the final consummation of the world for which we hope. This eschatological orientation also draws our attention to the pilgrim character of the church; as at once holy and always in need of purification, the church *is* a sacrament of salvation and yet must ever seek to *become* a more transparent sign and effective instrument of God's saving grace.

Second, the most basic contribution to our inquiry from liberation theologians is that the salvific and unifying mission of the church must be shaped

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20, 25.

⁷¹ Ibid., 23.

by the preferential option for the poor if the church is to be a credible sign and effective instrument of God's love. As Gutiérrez argued, in a world marked by oppressive structures and divisions, the church's unifying work must operate preferentially. Sobrino's work solidly grounds this basic move in the praxis of God seen in Christ. Furthermore, we must not underestimate the strength and pervasiveness of those forces that rupture and prevent true unity; they are the forces of the anti-kingdom and the idols of death, which resist God's salvific and unifying will. In such a situation, the church cannot be a passive sacrament of unity. Instead, the church must name those forces that oppress, enter into the struggle for justice, and be willing to suffer with the most vulnerable. In every context, this work of the church must be guided by the principle of mercy. The church must tend to the wounds of those who suffer, but also mercifully seek to overcome the human-made and structural causes of oppression and victimization. Furthermore, it is an attentiveness and compassion for those who suffer that help the church see the forces and structures of oppression more clearly, as well as possible ways forward in diverse situations.

Third, at a more general level the reflections above should unsettle certain conceptions of liberation theology and its relation to Vatican II. It would be almost unimaginable for someone to give an account of *Gaudium et Spes* and its impact on the church without attending to its influence on liberation theology—and equally unimaginable for a genealogical account of liberation theology to omit references to *Gaudium et Spes*. Emphasizing this connection is proper and accurate.⁷² Nevertheless, this emphasis can also convey the idea that liberation theology must be consulted primarily when we are thinking about pastoral issues or the relationship of the church to the modern world rather than when we consider core dogmatic issues relating to the nature and mission of the church. This article affirms the arguments of Gutiérrez and Sobrino that the preferential option is not merely a matter of social teaching, as important as this is. Rather, it goes right to the heart of what it means for the church to be the church, to be a credible and intelligible sign and instrument of salvation and unity in the world.

What liberation theology forces us to see, therefore, is that calling the church a sacrament of unity points to the ethical or political dimensions of its vocation. I want to close with one brief, concrete illustration of that vocation. Sobrino's thought matured in the midst of the Salvadoran civil war and

⁷² For example, almost every cited text in the documents on "Justice" and "Peace" at Medellín are from *Gaudium et Spes*, Paul VI's social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI's addresses at Medellín, and the Bible (Latin American Episcopal Conference [CELAM], *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council II: Conclusions* [Bogotá, Colombia, General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970], 55–82.

in response to the many martyrs and ordinary people who lost their lives in large part because of oppressive regimes devoted to “national security.” While the situation in El Salvador has improved since the 1980s, in many ways the life of the poor is just as precarious. Poverty still means death, whether through violence or through the slow processes of malnutrition and insufficient health care. Indeed, over the past decade El Salvador has routinely been among the top two countries globally for homicides per capita.⁷³ Many factors contribute to this situation,⁷⁴ but two of the most important are the drug trade and organized crime. Due in part to gang intimidation, extortion, kidnapping, and murder, social instability remains high, and the poor and most vulnerable are the ones who most often pay the price.

What would it mean for the church to be a sacrament of unity and salvation in this context? In many ways, this situation still seems quite apocalyptic. There is an urgent crisis and a massive systemic problem that leads to the death of many people; clearly the hope for the interruption of injustice at the core of apocalyptic remains. Yet the line between the oppressors and oppressed is less clear than it was during the civil war. And the problem does not need to be “revealed”; everyone already sees it. The question, instead, is how to move forward. The harsh antigang legislation passed in 2010 represents one way forward;⁷⁵ in this option, the state must wage war and defeat the “anti-kingdom” represented by the drug gangs. Such a straightforward, confrontational approach would seem to flow from Sobrino’s apocalyptic rhetorical strategy. However, current events in El Salvador show the limits of a simple application of earlier rhetoric to the new situation, even if the impulse of mercy and the preferential option remain essential.⁷⁶ A new way

⁷³ According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2011 El Salvador was second only to Honduras. See Lisa Evans, “Mapping Murder throughout the World,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/oct/10/world-murder-rate-unodc>. For a study on worldwide homicide rates, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Global Study on Homicide, 2011,” http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Homicide/Globa_study_on_homicide_2011_web.pdf. See pp. 48–52 for data on Central America.

⁷⁴ For a summary analysis of why rates in El Salvador and other Latin American countries have increased while much of the world has seen a decrease in murder rates, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “UNODC Study Shows That Homicide Rates Are Highest in Parts of the Americas and Africa,” <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2011/October/unodc-study-shows-that-homicide-rates-are-highest-in-parts-of-the-americas-and-africa.html>.

⁷⁵ InSight, “El Salvador Implements New Gang Law,” <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-implements-new-gang-law>.

⁷⁶ The most basic point here is simply that there are various forms of moral discourse and each has its particular strengths and weaknesses. No one form of discourse will be

forward is needed, and there is today at least a glimmer of hope.⁷⁷ Prior to March 2012, there were fourteen murders per day in El Salvador; after March 2012 that number fell to five per day (with April 15, 2012, being the first murder-free day in El Salvador in three years). This sharp decline is attributable almost exclusively to a truce between major Salvadoran drug gangs negotiated centrally by Catholic bishop Fabio Colindres. Since that time, Bishop Colindres has worked with ex-congressman Raúl Mijango to negotiate “special zones of peace” in which gangs would refrain from aggression, murder, extortion, and other crimes,⁷⁸ and has drawn together a coalition of churches in a “pastoral initiative for life and peace” to work toward lasting peace and healing.⁷⁹ Other positive developments can be seen in increased grants from the US Agency for International Development and the involvement of private businesses in helping gang members reintegrate into society and in finding job opportunities for young people.⁸⁰ Without such economic developments, the underlying situation that leads young people to gang life will undermine the positive steps taken thus far. It is too early to know what the end results of this work will be, and more recently there have been significant spikes in violence.⁸¹ Nevertheless, this work

appropriate to every situation, and, ideally, various discourses will productively complement and challenge one another. Even in a situation in which urgent change is needed and an apocalyptic hope for a reversal of fortunes for the sake of the oppressed remains, apocalyptic rhetoric and condemnation may not be the best practical way forward. For a helpful, short analysis of “prophetic discourse,” “ethical discourse,” “narrative discourse,” and “policy discourse,” see James M. Gustafson, *Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988). His analysis of prophetic discourse—both its strengths and weaknesses—applies well to apocalyptic discourse. See also note 64 above.

⁷⁷ For an excellent overview of events on this front in El Salvador over the first year of the truce, see Tim, “Building on the Truce,” <http://luterano.blogspot.com/2012/12/building-on-truce.html>; and other posts at luterano.blogspot.com.

⁷⁸ Hannah Stone, “Next Phase of Salvador Gang Truce: Peace Zones,” <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/next-phase-salvador-gang-truce-peace-zones>.

⁷⁹ Tim, “Churches Unite in Peace Initiative,” <http://luterano.blogspot.com/2012/11/churches-unite-in-peace-initiative.html>.

⁸⁰ Voices from El Salvador, “USAID and SolucionES to Invest \$42 Million in Gang Prevention Programs,” <https://voiceselsalvador.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/usaaid-and-soluciones-to-invest-42-million-in-gang-prevention-programs/>; Americas Society, “Security in Central America’s Northern Triangle: Violence Reduction and the Role of the Private Sector in El Salvador,” <http://www.as-coa.org/sites/default/files/Central%20American%20Security%202012.pdf>.

⁸¹ For example, a gang truce in Belize also reduced the homicide rate dramatically, but this has now spiked again as the truce has broken down (“A Meeting of the Maras,” *The Economist*, May 12, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21554521>). The experience of Belize makes the further initiatives by Bishop Colindres, other churches, the business

represents a moment of hope, a possible way forward in a situation fraught with many difficulties, and one powerful example of the church operating as a sacrament of unity in our world.

These initial stages of healing within Salvadoran society represent just one small movement toward unity in a world marked by oppressive inequality and divisions. As a sacrament of unity, the church will often have to speak prophetically, naming oppressive relations that are largely ignored or covered up. In the US context the issue of racial injustice deserves much more attention, because of both its pervasiveness and a basic misunderstanding of how racism works in our age of colorblindness.⁸² Such an issue demands work toward healing and unity that first brings the truth of the situation out into the open—even if this initially creates tensions inside and outside the Christian community. In order to illuminate this situation and many others, the church must follow Gutiérrez's call to approach the world preferentially from the perspective of those who suffer systematic oppression and injustice. The church must be further guided by the fundamental impulse of mercy as it seeks to compassionately overturn structures that prevent the flourishing of the most vulnerable. Only by following this path can the church continue to be and become a sacrament of unity with God and among humanity.

community, and the Salvadoran government all the more important. See also Voice from El Salvador, "The Evolution of Gangs as Political and Social Actors in El Salvador," <http://voiceselsalvador.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/the-evolution-of-gangs-as-political-and-social-actors-in-el-salvador/>. More recently, May 2014 saw levels of violence that returned to close to pre-truce levels (see Diana Arias, "Alza en homicidios a las puertas del nuevo gobierno," <http://www.lapagina.com.sv/ampliar.php?id=95730>; Erika Brenner, "El Salvador: Blood and Roses on Mother's Day," <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/el-salvador-archives-74/4836-el-salvador-blood-and-roses-on-mothers-day>). See also Tim, "Murders Surge in the Weeks before Transition of Government," <http://luterano.blogspot.com/2014/05/murders-surge-in-weeks-before.html>. In light of these developments, Bishop Colindres has called for a recommitment to the gang truce from all sides (Nelson Renteria, "El Salvador Church Leaders Call for New Gang Truce," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/22/us-elsalvador-violence-idUSBREA3L1XV20140422>).

⁸² Among many others, see Brian N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010) for a persuasive account of the nature of racism as a part of culture (rather than defined by individual acts of bigotry or hostility), the need to name the causes and attack the sources of racism, and the general failure of the Catholic Church to be a leading actor (to say the least) in overcoming this enduring division in American life. For a more detailed account of key ways a racial hierarchy has been established and sustained in the United States, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed., with a new foreword by Cornel West (New York: The New Press, 2012).