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Latin American Images of Christ

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Abstract

In several areas, particularly in Peru and Chile, Catholic communities have developed traditions with rich symbols and wisdom as is expressed in images, rituals, devotions, festivals, and social movements. The faith of the people nurtures church life and theological discourse.

Keywords

People's Christology, Catholic rituals and festivals, images and discipleship, Latin American spirituality

People's Faith Nurtures Theological Discourse

The beliefs of the Latin American people nurture theological labor. This is our starting point and the fundamental core of our argument. We will consider images by which people relate to Jesus. This gives a foundation to our reflection.

Our reflection follows the path of the Lord's Word—and its praying and teaching church. When God's people think about Jesus, they must be obedient to Jesus' language and the apostolic tradition. This does not mean that one just reiterates canonized concepts; rather, it is the Spirit who reveals the truth for us today.

Therefore, we have to be sensitive to the Spirit, who—indeed—encourages God's people to reflect on faith. This is said without absolutizing popular thinking. One discovers in the heart of the people theological flowers and fruits, as well as poisonous bushes and plants. (This combination of healthy and unhealthy things is also found in the attitude of high society; omission and mistakes are not only found in the poor!).

A simple procedure would be to ask those who participate in ecclesial activities: "Who is Christ for you?" These selected groups are used to repeating formulas that are taught to them. In fact, I think it is better to unravel how common people, with their symbolic ways full of wisdom and also full of ambivalence and mistakes, live and think. I want to concentrate on the symbolic world of the people—of Catholic communities, in particular (that I know better). I will not include realities in which belief in Christ is absent or where it is a secondary issue; in those realities there is an a-thematic Christian way of belief that requires another type of reflection. My contribution is about common people, mostly Roman Catholic, that have links with Jesus Christ, and use varied mediations. "In Latin America the popular Catholicism is still communicating through a religious language, very rich in symbolic expressions, among which the abundant and extended use of images..."¹

Are those living experiences, Christologically speaking, important? In my view, yes they are. It is a way of understanding the Lord Jesus with precise *and* fragmentary traits. (As is in any formal Christology). Therefore, I recognize not only the existence of popular Christologies, but I also think that they contribute to the work done by the academic world and by church leaders.

During these years, I have noted that people's religious experiences contribute new perceptions about the Christ mystery to the church itself. But they also invite the guild of theologians to widen the theological perspective beyond academic emphases. I do not agree with those who try to correct and fill in the gaps in popular experiences (supposing that those people are not faithful to Christ, do not understand the Resurrection, and do not practice morals, etc.). I think, rather, that we should reorient the ecclesial reflection and church action from the common people's wisdom and solidarity.

Basic questions should be asked: Do we take into consideration how marginalized sectors of society and the church offer their own signs of discipleship? Do we appreciate the revelation led and received by 'small' and anonymous people? In the people's daily *via crucis* and in their fascinating festivals, do we find traces of the living God? Are the Christian communities, with the wisdom of the gospel's beatitudes, able to announce a humanizing project?

¹ Victorino Zecchetto, *Imágenes en acción. El uso de las imágenes religiosas en la religiosidad en la religiosidad latinoamericana* (Quita: Abya Yala, 1999), 57.

Next, I will analyze how some sectors in Latin America live the announcement, the discipleship and the celebration of faith. How do they understand the heart of the revelation: Jesus saves humanity?

Ancient and Contemporary Voices

In our context, there are stories (oral and sometimes written) that directly or indirectly refer to Jesus Christ. The oral tradition is the most common mediation to approach God's Word. Besides that, the faith stories of the people encourage Christian thinking and praxis.

Religious Traditions and Christianity

Many popular tales and legends contain religious elements in the sense of contact with sacred beings in nature and with representations of Latin American Catholic saints. Some of these stories speak directly and indirectly about the Savior.

Popular stories emphasize the interaction between the Lord and those who really believe in Him or those who do not accept him. In general terms, it is about people who recognize our Lord in a particular place and moment, and show His wonderful work to those who believe and live according to God's will.

To begin with, let us recall some mythical personalities and divine heroes that were not assimilated to Jesus Christ. In the long period of colonialism, the sacred indigenous beings were not amalgamated with the person of Christ. What did happen was imagining the presence of some apostle.² Traces of this are found in Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia. Quetzalcoatl, a civilizing hero and a divinity with serpent and bird-like traits, is the one who unites heaven and earth. He was associated with Saint Thomas. In the colonial period, an Andean divinity called Thunupa, divinity of the fire, was portrayed carrying a cross and being martyred. He was associated with Saint Thomas and Saint Bartholomew. Mainly, it refers to apologetic attitudes—to show the presence of Christianity before the arrival of Europeans, and, consequently, encourage the respect for the Native American people who had already received the Christian message.

As is well known, colonialism was very critical with respect to the aboriginal divinities and denied any connection between those beings and the Savior.

² See Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl y Guadalupe* (Mexico: FCE), 1985, 273-287; Teresa Gisbert, *Iconografía* (La Paz: Gisbert, 1980), 40-46. In an unforeseen way, Quetzalcoatl is called "Saint Jesus"; see R. Nebel, "Altmexicanische religion und christliche Heilbotschaft," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 31 (1983), 243.

Nonetheless, on the one hand, there were many links—present until now—between aboriginal sacred beings and Afro-American people, and, on the other hand, with Christian icons. Besides that, in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, many messianic movements came to the fore. For example, we have many Mayas, Guarani, Amazonic, and rural movements in Brazil—*Quechua* beliefs about *Inkarri*, the Huilliche tradition of an Inca king who will stand up and will reestablish order.³ Therefore, there are sacred heroes. But no individual human beings, nor aboriginal sacred beings are considered as equivalent to Christ (with some exceptions).

What is remarkable (as we will see below) is the presence of modern epiphanies and symbolic interactions with images, and testimonies about the salvific presence of the Lord. We will now elaborate on these realities.

The poor communities have *christified* places and times. Groups and sometimes multitudes meet together. They are summoned by an extraordinary epiphany (the presence of an image of the Lord and, sometimes, apparitions), or by a cross on the hill, in the household, or in the workplace. The cross represents the Christian Easter; it is much more than an object of worship, since people interact with it. Those realities and also the representations of saints and Mary have God, who saves here and now, as a background. They express characteristics of the Incarnation and Easter. One could say that there is a *christification* of space and time.

Some of these events have a representation of Christ in its core. Usually they are carried out, especially in their origins, in marginal, uninhabited and deserted places; that is, its genesis is not connected with the socially powerful. Faith in those images belongs to everyone who interacts with them, but frequently those images privilege abandoned and abused people.

Catholic Images in Peru

Images speak, smile, cry, get upset, feel cold, bless and send punishment. Let us now consider some Peruvian realities.⁴

³ In the Andean world, see Juan Ossio (comp.), *Ideología mesiánica del mundo andino* (Lima: Prado Pastor, 1973). In the Chilean tradition: C. Contreras, “El mito del rey-Inca en los huilliches,” *Nutram* VII/1 (1991), 14-32; it is noteworthy to read the testimony of Domitila Cuyul: “The Inca king was king of all of us: the Mapuche, the Huilliche Indians... the Spaniards killed him, but he did not truly die. He is gathering armies to send upon the land... his uprising...” 17. There are similar stories among the *Quechua* regarding *Inkarri*; see also, Cesar Toro (ed.), *Mitos y leyendas del Perú*, II (Lima: AFA, 1991), 71-84.

⁴ I summarize and quote stories about the Jesus Child, J.L. González, *La religión popular en el Perú* (Cuzco: IPA, 1987), 91; The Lord of Huanca, in *Gregorio Condori Mamani, autobiography*

Jesus as a child is portrayed as poor. An example from the Peruvian highland: "The Child of those lords was found, smiling to them . . . it seemed that the Child did not like to stay with those foreign white lords and that he wanted to stay with the *Guayacondo* Indians of our people . . . in this way, we already had our 'little patron Saint'. This was the miracle, well . . . they won the judgment and the Child already knew that he would be our patron . . . Our people from this time did not know him yet . . . but he was already performing miracles for them." In this case, Jesus takes sides with the poor. In some cases the Child goes out and plays with other children.

Most of the manifestations are related with the Passion Story, and—in these cases—Christ is identified with his suffering people.

According to an informal worker from Cuzco, Gregorio Condori, the famous lord Huanca appeared in this way: "In these pampas a little mestizo child had appeared carrying bread, he became friends with those little shepherds. They started to play and did not tend to the livestock any more . . . Well, here the Lord was living between the bushes and tumbleweeds; and approaching them, he said, 'Ah Papay! But where have I looked for you? You were living here all this time,' 'But son, I told you that I was living in Huanca-Huanca.' And when Pedro Arias saw him sweating blood, he asked him, 'Are you going to stay here, father?' 'Yes,' he answered him . . . while looking for him, Pedro Arias found him. 'Papay, don't hide anymore. We are looking for you.' When the Lord saw the parishioner and so many people, he ran away, but they went after him. And when he was within a hair's distance from being caught, too tired to go, he stretched over backwards on top of a immense rock. He began to tremble and held fast to the rock. And in the rock, only the relief portrait of his body is left." In this case, the insertion of Christ in a marginalized world and His distance from official Christianity is also clear.

The biggest Christocentric epiphany has Afro-Peruvian roots, and it has become a matter of national worship. It is known as 'The Lord of the Miracles': "During 1650 some Africans from Angola well-known during the viceroyalty in Lima, met together to form a brotherhood. They built a rough thatch made of branches . . . it was a time to gather and celebrate loud revelries, which in several occasions, little had to do with devotion and edification. An act of mere devotion had inspired the Pachacamilla brotherhood to decorate the wall of their meeting room with the effigy of the Crucified redeemer, but neither the place

(Cuzco: Las Casas, 1977), 68, 70; and the principal devotion in Peru to the Purple Lord, R. Vargas U., *Historia del Santo Cristo de los Milagros* (Lima: Sanmarti, 1957), 4-7.

nor the quality of the image was suitable to worship it.” This cult, founded by slaves, shows the Savior of all believers. During the month of October, Peru becomes the Lord’s house; he is displayed in a procession in marginalized areas and towns.

Each of these realities has its own characteristics; its fundamental core is the tenderness and hope for the Lord’s people. The main Christological title is “Our Lord”; and it contains—like surnames—names of places where He lives or some features of His life (The Nazarene, The Fallen Lord, Holy Sepulcher, etc). In this inculturated and contextualized way, people give witness to Christ and know him. He is recognized as Savior by specific communities with their necessities and aspirations. There are no ethereal manifestations, but many signs of an incarnated presence.

People’s Soteriology

Informal communication is widely present: stories about help, blessing and, sometimes, miracles done by the Lord are told from one person to another. Christological content is also found in bonds between the living and the dead; and also in the oral traditions about martyrs. In a few cases, the word ‘Christ’ is used, but mostly soteriological terms are used. There is acknowledgment of God’s action, and this encourages and depicts other people’s faith.

We note the symbolic experience and the often a-thematic understanding of Easter in people’s daily life. It tells how God helps in the midst of a difficult economic situation, a human conflict, a personal crisis, difficult situations in sickness, and in a time of crucial decisions. There is also a presence of an Easter event in relation to the dead and the living (with the symbol of the cross on the tomb adorned with flowers, miraculous crosses hanging in a place where a tragedy happened, etc.). In those regions of the continent where systematic repressions were executed, the martyrs are remembered. In this and other realities, soteriological and Easter issues are involved: God saves us. Even though the name of Christ is not pronounced, the faith process generally contains a Christian concept—through God the Savior the given transition from death to life has an Easter resonance.

On the other hand, where a renewed evangelization occurs, there is an overt testimony of Christ. In some instances, this happens in an inculturated and liberating way; in numerous cases, it reflects a fundamentalistic announcement and vision. In each circumstance, it is amazing to see the concrete mystic and profound relation with the Savior.

There are also pseudo-salvific phenomena. The popular strata of society echo the dominant voices, where secular absolutes abound. Many people venerate, in a religious way, modern progress. It is understood that ‘salvation’ comes from

wealthy people and institutions, from consumer products sold in the world market, and from leaders admired by multitudes. Although some Christian signs are employed, the facts refer to idolatrous realities.

Contribution to Church Action and Theology

Which human and spiritual aspects of the people do, and which do not transmit Jesus' Good News? Which Christological aspects are present here? The mission given by Jesus to the twelve disciples (Mt 10:7-8, Mk 6:7-13, Lk 9:1-2), to the seventy-two (Lk 10:8-9), and to the post-Easter church (Mk 16:15-18, Mt 28:18-20) implicates word and action in a specific context and in very well determined groups of persons. In the Latin American context and spiritualities, how is this mission being carried out? It is necessary to examine both the implicit things (for instance, healing or the struggle against evil) and the explicit ones in the Lord's discipleship and in the sacramental life. We see that the message is given by official authorities—ministries in the universal and local church, and laity that evangelizes—and that the message is also spread in an anonymous, inculturated, unified fashion—through the religious practices of the people. This last point will be further examined.

We have already seen that there are Christophanies and a wide array of soteriological communication and testimonies. People speak about life (interpreted in Christian terms), and communicate and understand symbols of faith. They show their devotion to Christ, and, in general, their daily life is related to God the Savior. This popular language is precise, and it has a universal scope; for instance, each invocation of Christ has local features, according to the community that worships him, but Christ is understood as the Savior of all believers. (What is said here is different from the imaginary of the elite sectors: they pretend to be universal—such as in the devotion to the Sacred Heart—but what they say represents a privatizing paradigm with a clear cultural delimitation. It is also different from the fundamentalist positions, either evangelical or Catholic, in which personal faith and historical ethics are segregated). I am underlining here that the Word is lived, announced, and understood through embodied mediations. Certainly, the believing language of the people is not the same as the divine word. Only the latter has the character of revelation. What God's people do is give testimony, symbolize, and reflect on the message of salvation. Sometimes this happens; sometimes it does not. What is carried out by each community has to be interpellated by the revelation as it is communicated to humankind by the church.

An objection should be made now: many say, “The people believe in God, but it does not show much of a Christocentrism. We just remarked that soteriology abounds and that Christology is only modestly present”—often only implicitly. Let us examine Jesus’ language: his proclamation and action always referred to the Kingdom and to the merciful God of the Kingdom. It was a Kingdom especially directed to the poor. Jesus did not focus his life on himself. The apostolic message (especially the books of Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters) interweaves the person of Christ with his salvific mission. In this sense, the people that believe in the Savior God can deepen and better explain their relationship with Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Christ-centric thrust of illustrated theology should be reexamined. Today, what is rediscovered is the following of Christ, the essence of the Kingdom destined to the poor, the manifestation—as a human Jesus—of God Savior, and the work of the Spirit in humankind and the cosmos. All this helps to recognize Christ—not as a sacred center—but as the only Savior of humanity.

Besides, it is necessary to evaluate people’s voices and thoughts, and to work critically within the community of faith. Today, there are realities that seduce parts of the population. There is a proliferation of idols that replace God the Father and Creator, as well as human portraits and objects that stand in place of Christ. In the same way that theology is critical of idolatry, Christology should also be able to confront pseudo-saviors.

In Latin America, the Catholic hierarchy had carried out its rereading of the truth of Christ, in the light of the experience of the people who have lived the experience of Easter. The continental *magisterium* has begun to recognize the crucified faces, but there is a need to recognize the resurrected faces and the ways in which people love and know Christ. Is something important missing? Yes, in Latin American writings the spirituality and wisdom of our peoples, who in their own way become the Lord’s disciples, are missing.

Forms of Discipleship

In people’s religious faith, are there indications of discipleship? Frequently, being a disciple has not been attributed to a mass of people, but only to ‘trained’ individuals and small groups in the church—supposedly because the religion of the masses is something incomplete. With that in mind, let us remember what Jesus, convener of disciples, wanted. In the New Testament, following Christ has two facets: converting in order to receive the Kingdom and to do its mission (emphasis

to be found in the synoptics), and, believing in Christ as the only Savior and living according to his Spirit (emphasized by Peter and Paul). Let us see these two facets and its requirements for the faith of the people called today to be part of the discipleship.

The first facet is repentance and life transformation, due to the imminence and presence of the Kingdom of God. This is the starting point of the calling of the gospel (Mk 1:14-15) that is addressed to and taken up by common people. This implies carrying the cross (which is the experience of the excluded and marginalized), following Jesus in his mission and renouncing everything in order to be saved (Mk 8:34-35 and parallels). It is a radical discipleship (Lk 14:25-33; Mt 10:37-39) without any ambivalences. To say 'yes' means 'yes,' and to say 'no' means 'no.' It could be said that all of God's people are called to this kind of discipleship today, and there are some hints that prove that this happens in many cases; people walk with Jesus towards God.

The second facet corroborates the previous, and emphasizes the devotion to Christ and to live according to the Spirit. This means believing in the Lord Jesus, who was killed by human beings and resurrected by God, to accept his Spirit, and to live like new human beings (See Saint Peter's theology in the book of Acts 2:14ff, 3:12ss, 4:8-12, 5:29-32, 10:34-43). The call to conversion from sin is reaffirmed—in order to experience Easter. The call is for Jews and Gentiles; that is, to all humanity. The way into the Kingdom is to be a disciple, to partake of the ecclesial community, and do the work of Jesus. Is this present in the faith of the common people? I think that the Christian population does not express this facet of discipleship, which requires a larger inculturated evangelization. Traces are mainly found in the symbolic praxis of people. Besides, today more people understand what it means to follow the Easter Christ through biblical catechism, reinforcement of spirituality, and testimony of solidarity action.

Suffering and Compassion; People Who Are Crucified

I want to emphasize the importance of common discipleship with its theological contents.⁵ People walk with Christ in a special way through suffering and

⁵ To see Latin American traits of spirituality and compassionate wisdom, in Franz Damen, Esteban Judd (comp.), *Cristo crucificado en los pueblos de América Latina* (Quita: Abya Yala, 1992); L. Boff, *Pasión de Cristo, pasión del mundo* (Bogotá: Indoamericana Press, 1978). The one who best assumes these traits, in the theological perspective, is Jon Sobrino, "Meditación ante el pueblo crucificado," *Sal Terrae*, 74 (1986), 93-104, "Teología en un mundo sufriente, la teología de la liberación como intellectus amoris," *Revista latinoamericana de teología*, 5 (1988), 243-266; *El principio misericordia* (Santander: Sal Térrea, 1992); *Jesús o libertador* (Sao Paulo: Vozes, 1994), 366-392.

compassion, and through the desire of justice and wellbeing without limits. These can be called a-thematic experiences of discipleship. The poor suffer with Christ, and they tend to be compassionate and exercise solidarity, just as he did.

Jon Sobrino has stressed that it is a crucified people that God raises. People understand that being a Christian is to carry the everyday cross—not only our own, but also that of our neighbor's, and, in this sense, the resurrection is lived. The experience of bearing the everyday cross, which invites the believer to resurrection, is portrayed symbolically through many testimonies and rituals. The daily conversation, in the context of the ecclesial base communities, shares several small stories about how one can help others to overcome pain and sadness. It is exciting to see so much compassion and many small initiatives of solidarity, which are rarely newsworthy, but are core events in the life of the poor. Ritually, the processions and pilgrimages stand out—carried out with fervor and symbolic quality.

We have, thus, many discipleship manifestations. Here, traces of inculturation of Easter of the crucified, compassionate and resurrected people can be discovered. It is an inculturation carried out by each community of believers. There is an acknowledgement of the current passion of Christ's body through the suffering and mercy of humankind. This theology is able to articulate pain with liberating compassion.

Nonetheless, there are ambivalences. Sometimes, like in any other religious praxis, rite is not compatible with historical ethics. We also can see the absence of references to the salvation that Christ brings to humanity today; in addition, there is a certain sense of defeat: there is always suffering, and such is the divine will. Some show an obsession of sorts towards passion, and pay less attention to the resurrection of abused peoples.

Social Movement and Christian Symbols

Ordinary discipleship also reveals an aspiration for justice and solidarity wellbeing. Let us acknowledge the past time periods; there was not only a liberating aspiration in the last decades with its liberating language. For centuries, Latin American people have established their rights. They have done this both symbolically and sporadically through movements and overt mottos.

There is also the feminist perspective: see Ana María Tepedino, “¿Quién dice las mujeres que soy yo?” in J.J. Tamayo (dir.), *diez palabras claves sobre Jesús de Nazaret* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1999), 415-452; Nancy Cardoso, “Jesús Cristo Latinoamericano,” and vv.aa. *A graça do mundo transforma Deus* (Porto Alegre: Universitaria Metodista, 2006), 70-79.

Throughout the colonial period, and—above all—during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, there was a series of facts that refer to Christian salvation (and that may be read within the language of discipleship). Each occurrence has its own distinct feature. Some common aspects are: the protest of subaltern sectors, the projects that unite the socio-economic factors with identity and faith, and the syncretistic and *mestizo* religious forms.⁶

Beginning with the Mexican context, according to Victoria Reifler, “Jesus became an Indian,” within the caste wars of Yucatan (1847-1901) and also in the Chiapas rebellions. The facts do not seem to show as much as Reifler states; nevertheless, there is significant information. During the Mayan uprising of 1850, Juan de la Cruz Puc proclaimed, “it was I who redeemed you;” and in Chamula (Chiapas), on Good Friday of 1868, an indigenous boy was crucified in order to have a savior there. On the other hand, in the Amazon areas in southern Venezuela, the Arawak in the 19th and 20th centuries recognized a ‘second Christ’ amid festive and therapeutic mobilizations. The Tukanos give testimony of a ‘Vicente Christ,’ whose followers danced around a cross. In the Chiriguan area—in 1778-1779—there were several social crises and several leaders called Christ appeared there. Their leader was *Apiaguaiki Tumpa* (= God).

The complex messianic phenomenon has relevant aspects for our reflections. There are several good studies regarding the events that happened in Brazil. Pereira de Queiroz examines ‘Sanctity’ movements (in native and *mestizo* contexts) with persons that re-encarnate Christ and employ Christian symbols; as well as modern rural phenomena with supernatural figures—such as the cases of Father Cicero and the monk Joao Maria—that built ‘holy cities’ and carried out emancipating actions. Other important events are the quests by the Guaraní for the *Tierra sin Males* (Lands without Evils); in Bolivia, the belief by the Moxeños in the *Loma Santa* (the Holy Hill); and in Peru in the 18th century, the uprising of Juan Santos Atahualpa, which included messianic factors. In present-day Peru, an Amazonic revival has occurred concerning Francisco de la Cruz; in the mountain range and coastal regions, we find the Israelite Association of Exequiel Ataucusi. Many of the past events are tragic; swiftly and violently they were subdued. In terms of belief, one sees that the figure of Christ is manipulated. Nevertheless,

⁶ For the Mayan reality, see Victoria Reifler, *El cristo indigena, el rey nativo* (Mexico: FCE, 1989), 305, 346. For Amazonian and Brazilian accounts, E. Schaden, *A mitologia heroica de tribos indigenas do Brasil* (Sao Paulo: EDUSP, 1989); María I. Pereira de Queiroz, *O messianismo no Brasil e no mundo* (Sao Paulo: Dominus, 1965), 161-162, 188-194, 283; F. Pifarré, “Guaraníes: el derecho de ser pueblo”, *Cuarto Intermedio*, 23 (1992). For Peru: the case study of Francisco de la Cruz, in Jaime Regan, *Hacia la tierra sin males* (Iquitos: CETA, 1983), II: 129-162; the Andean messianism, in Alberto Flores G., *Buscando un Inca* (Lima: IAA, 1987).

there is a faith-based background in favor of social transformation. It could be said that, traditionally, Christian faith has opposed social evil. This is significant as a way of following Christ.

Types of Images and Devotions

Let us examine some elements of belief identity. Based on roots and traditions such as the ones already noted, as well as those elements of revival evangelization, what are the faces of the Savior? We will analyze certain realities.⁷ Two thousand participants of the cited Peruvian survey, when asked about the names of Christ, answered the following:

- "The crucified Jesus" (38%)
- "Defender of the poor" (29%)
- "The Lord that does miracles" (23%)
- Other names, or no answer (10%)

When weighing this data, one has to take into account that the 'crucified Jesus' is deemed as 'miraculous.' It is equally interesting to note that a high percentage sees Christ as associated to the poor. These three main titles show a great deal of proximity and faith in the Savior. Insofar as the Lord is thus understood, discipleship can be assumed in a more integral form. The people's art forms also reveal perceptions of Christ and its historical implications. By examining "songs for the divine and human," Max Salinas sheds light on the theological contents of the people—the Passion is experienced as "social denouncement about the poor's oppression," and the Resurrection is understood as "love's triumph over death." Once again, the concrete and mystical harmony with the Christ of the Easter is ascertained. Faustino Teixeira notes that ecclesial base communities are born "out of the dynamics of discipleship, as an effort to live by following Christ." Also, the way people live the discipleship, according to their cultural, gender, and age group condition, should be taken into consideration. The development of black, indigenous, and women's theology in Latin America has shown what it means to be a woman in Christ, the indigenous semblance of the Savior, and the negritude of Christ.

⁷ I gather some elements from J.L. González, *op.cit.*, 81; from Max Salinas, *Canto a lo divino y religión del oprimido en Chile* (Santiago: Rehue, 1991), 47-61, 115-125; y "El cuerpo vivo de Jesús," in his book *Gracias a Dios que comí, el cristianismo en Iberoamérica y el Caribe* (Mexico: Dabar, 2000), 365-419; from Faustino Teixeira, "A espiritualidades nas CEB's", en vv.aa., *As comunidades de base em questão* (Sao Paulo: Paulinas, 1997), 216-128.

Anyway, the numerous marks left by the people that follow Jesus Christ are asserted. Thus, by walking—as is metaphorically expressed by the procession and pilgrimage—the people understand the Lord. It is thus a predominantly non-verbal language, vastly rich in symbols and in human solidarity. One understands the pain in oneself, in the others, in the Lord, from a solidary compassion. One perceives the desire for justice, which is fastened in the divine will and in the message of Christ. The believer's identity, from his or her culture and historical project, also has Christian components. In the end, the people recognize themselves as the body of Christ, with different and complementary parts. All these traces and wisdom open new roads for theological elaboration. Pain and compassion among the poor summon us to question the scholarly representation of Christ. In silence, the people call us to understand Christ from the condition of hunger, of the struggle for life—all of which are present in the members of His body. The 'ordinary' way of feeling, suffering with, and celebrating Christ constitutes an immense Christological treasure. This deserves to be structured and confronted with both the Word and the teachings of the church.

Understandings of Salvation

I will finish this section by gathering some concerns that deserve better attention. The first issue is to reckon Christ's place within the complex experience of the people's faith. In what way is it present or absent? Concerning this issue, we like Cristián Parker's suggestion to distinguish the following types of popular Catholicism:⁸

- Traditional popular religion: God, Virgin, saints
- Traditional renewed religion: God, Virgin, a greater presence of Christ than saints
- Popular religion with a strong emphasis on justice: Christ, God
- Religion with a traditional protection sense: God, Virgin
- Rational and liberal religion: God

Only in the third type would Christ be the first and main presence. However, the common mentality of people takes the scheme of what is considered sacred in little account, in terms of greater or less appraisal, since it regards sacred beings

⁸ Cristián Parker, *Religión y clases subalternas urbanas en una sociedad dependiente*, tesis en Lovaina, 1986, 314-359; *Otra lógica en América Latina* (Mejico:FCE, 1993).

as complementary. In any case, in each place and moment there is a need to evaluate how people understand Christ and other figures.

Another matter of great importance is the identity of each person in reference to Christ. How is discipleship lived by a young person, a woman, a black population, indigenous and *mestizo* communities, and—in the end—each part of God's people? Each part provides its own understanding of following, Easter, or the kingdom of God. There are particular forms of being a disciple of Christ (whether they are *mestizo*, man or woman, young or adult) and each one of us, as a whole, is called to be a people following the Lord. Are the particular traits being established clearly enough with common calling?

One last remark: we face the problem of a broad fundamentalism, on one hand, and of indifference, on the other hand. One regrets the tragedy of messianisms of previous times that reveals gaps on the social level, and a certain distortion of Christ's mission. Today there are other fanatic and simplistic tendencies that are widespread. Not only does this occur in the Catholic context, but also the evangelical. They use a Christ-centric discourse, yet seem to be bereft of an integral discipleship. There is discontinuity with the spirit and wisdom of the gospel. On the other hand, there is a great indifference towards the Christ, which radically questions discipleship. Many prefer the image of the Lord to whom one goes to in case of need. This and other concerns require greater ecclesial and theological attention.

Christian Celebrations

I will again take up a characteristic principle of Latin American theology: knowing salvation implies praxis. As Jon Sobrino states, not only is it about pondering the reality of Christ, but also to “ponder it in such a way that it already brings historic salvation into being.”⁹ That is, the Christology is inseparable from the following and the action in the world. One could speak about a *Christpraxis*. In this sense, one could ask: to what extent do the rites and the images worshipped by the people carry the wisdom and transforming action in accordance with the Spirit of Jesus, which is full of charity?

⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Cristología sistemática: Jesucristo, el mediador absoluto del reino de Dios”, in *Misterium Liberationis* (Madrid: Trotta, 1990), I: 590. From the Evangelical perspective, the writings of José Miguez Bonino, *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); y *Rostros del protestantismo latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: ISEDET, 1995).

Beliefs and Images in Chile and Other Regions

The majority of people is neither indifferent to the Lord, nor far from him. On the contrary, the informal dialogue between believers show (as well as present studies) that there is a widespread acknowledgement of Christ's person and work. It is a solid and constant faith. Nevertheless, those who work within the church tend to complain about mistakes in belief, and about unbelief. Let us review some collected data in a modern context, with strong secularizing effects, as is the case of the capital of Chile, Santiago.¹⁰

Almost all the people who were surveyed said they believed in Christ: 95% in 1980 and 93% in 1985 (the surveys were conducted by CISOC, from the Belarmino Center). This is corroborated in the studies of C. Parker in marginal populations (between 93% and 98%). However, when it is an indirect question, belief in God and the Virgin predominate. In 1970, A. Cruz asked: Whom do you prefer to pray to? The answers (of several types) have been: God 71%, the Virgin 52%, Christ 18%, spirits 7.5%, and saints 5.5%. C. Parker asked in 1981 in Pudahuel: In whom do you believe? The answers were God 84%, the Virgin 27%, Christ 12%. It is possible that by saying God Christ is included, but this is not clear.

The data point out that the language of faith is not Christ-centric. Then again, those in charge of the church regret the lack of faith in God and in Christ. In 1995 (during the preparation of the Synod of Santiago), the notion was diffused that the majority of people do not believe in the God of the gospel and that Christ was absent in the non-practicing Christians. These are matters that deserve greater explanation. Without a doubt, secularism affects the population. Yet one can confirm that in the city, in every social stratum, there is an expression (sometimes explicitly) of faith of Christ. The surveys that have been carried out in Peru

¹⁰ Info. from A. Cruz, *La religiosidad popular chilena* (Santiago, CISOC, 1970); C. Parker y otros, *Rasgos de cultura popular* (Pudahuel: Vicaria Oriente, 1981); Patricia van Dorp, *Religiosidad en el gran Santiago* (Santiago: Centro Belarmino, 1985) (and a previous study from 1980); study performed by Cristián Parker in Lo Hermida, Huamachuco, José María Caro, 1987; Josefina Paga, *El Dios y la iglesia de Las mayorías* (Santiago: Centro Belarmino, 1994); IX Sínodo Arquidiocesano, *Mirada a la realidad* (Santiago: Arzobispado de Santiago, 1995), it contains a fascinating vision: "God in who people believe is not the one present in the Gospel," 76, and, further, he said that among Catholics without religious practice, "The idea of God-Father, God-Love is not present, and there is in fact a total absence of the person of Christ," 79. In other contexts, like in Peru (see J.L. Gonzalez, *op.cit.*, 80 and 93), one can observe that "what is essential of the official teachings about Christ" is present in the religious experience of the people; yet what remains to be said is if Christ is seen as God or a Saint (he argues the first).

prove this. In any case, the belief in God is highlighted more than that in the Jesus presented in the New Testament; the role of Mary also stands out.

The beliefs have to be evaluated with the Christian norm of love. One wonders if all these rites and invocations referring to the Lord are accompanied by human and historic responsibility. We have to highlight the contrast in our societies, full of violence and marginalization, on the one hand, and the almost unanimous belief in God and the strong belief in Christ, on the other hand. That begs the question: what is the importance of the latter in terms of human praxis? Almost everyone says they believe, but the world is full of evil. Certainly there is incoherence. In the aforementioned studies done in Chile, P. van Dorp asked: are you for or against “living in the best possible way without worrying about the things that happen,” to which 50% answered “yes,” and 40% answered “no.” In each case, it is necessary to compare what is being said with what is being done in a daily setting. The fact that so many assert their Christian faith does not mean that they live according to what Christ has taught.

Nonetheless, in Latin America a great many beliefs are motivated by concrete images. For centuries, and even to this day in several areas of the continent, people have experienced and read the life of Christ through statues, oral stories, and all kinds of Christ representations. (Today, little by little—due to catechism, Bible study groups, and spiritual movements—there are sectors that picture Christ as is portrayed in the New Testament). The following section will concentrate on the images. The representations and the most common names can be classified in the following way.¹¹

The main names or titles that the population gives to Christ are: Our Lord, My Lord, Little Lord (trans. note—this a literal translation for a diminutive of

¹¹ I gather information and contributions from Enrique Marroquín, *La cruz mesiánica* (Oaxaca: Palabra, 1989); Riolando Azzi, *O catolicismo popular no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978); A.E. Otto, “O nascimento de Jesús numa perspectiva da negritude” in Marical Mena and Meter Nash, *Abrindo sulcos, para uma teologia afro americana e caribenha* (Sao Leopoldo: EST, 2003); Antonio A. da Silva, “Jesús Cristo luz e libertador do povo afro americano”, en vv.aa., *Existe um pesar teológico negro?* (Sao Paulo, Paulinas, 1998); F. Damen and E. Judo, *op.cit.* (with articles from Mexico, Central America, and the Andean Region); vv.aa., *Santuarios* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1989); O. Plath, *Folclor religioso chileno* (Santiago: Platur, 1966); M. Salinas, *Historia del pueblo de Dios en Chile* (Santiago: Rehue, 1987). In the Chilean context, the presence of the Christcentric imaginary is far less than the presence of Mary. I list the Images: “Señor de la Agonía” in Santiago (invoked since the earthquake of 1647); “Corazón de Jesús” at national level and sponsored by the Apostolate of Prayer (and local devotion in Pozo Almonte); “Niño Dios” in Sotaquí, “Señor de la Tierra” in Cunlagua, Coquimbo; “Niño Manuelito” en Pica (where there is regional dances); “Niños” from Malloco, Toconao (in the region of Antofagasta), and Las Palmas (Valparaiso); “Jesús Nazareno” in Caguach (Chiloé).

'Lord'; unfortunately, English has no diminutive suffix), Good/Kind Jesus (from Portuguese); there are even terms of endearment for Christ. Other ways of invocation with a strong sense of affection are Sacred Heart (which includes a meaning of resurrection) and Lord of Mercy. Equally important is the association of the Father with Christ: Father Jesus, 'Daddy' or 'Papa,' Taytcha (in Quechuan language).

Concerning the life of Jesus, the imaginary figures of Christmas and the Passion stand out in the everyday life of the people's faith. In each corner of Latin America we have the nativities, with the Jesus Child, the God Child, and the Manuel Child (derived from 'Emmanuel'). The vast majority and variety of images refer to the passion and the death of Christ. I will list them: Lord Palms and Saint Palms (from Palm Sunday); Just Judge (from the figure of Jesus in trial, in the Andean world; the figure of God in the clouds, in areas of Mexico); Lord of the Column (tied to a column); *Ecce Homo* (with tied hands); Lord of the Cane (a cane with a green center); Nazarene Lord (carrying the cross; in Brazil he is called the 'Lord of Walking Steps'); Lord of the Fall (carrying the cross uphill, and with one knee on the ground); Lord of the Agony (very dramatic); Crucified Lord (figure of a dying and dead Christ; in Brazil: *Senhor do Bom Fim*, Lord of the Good End); Lord Santa Cruz (Holy Cross, generally portrayed with or without the body of Christ); Lord of the Descent (as in being brought down from the cross); Lord of the Mercy (Jesus in Mary's arms); Lord of the Sepulcher and Lord Burial (in either an urn or coffin). There are rare instances of representations depicting the Resurrection (this Easter aspect has been assumed, in a certain way, by the figure of the Sacred Heart). Regarding the emphasis on the Crucifixion, this was part of the imaginary of the European Counter-Reformation, colonization, and the Baroque period; therefore, people's faith has this cultural-religious conditioning factor; but it is also apparent that said images are re-interpretations given by the faith community. One crucial point is how the suffering and dead Christ is considered miraculous, relating to the Easter context and resurrected through the interaction with believers. It is one of many manifestations of the inculturation of faith and theology.

Many regions of the continent have cults that beckon multitudes: the common denominator is the imaginary realm of the Passion of Christ. I will mention some: the Lord of Chalma (a crucified Christ) near the capital of Mexico; The Lord of Esquipulas (image of a dark-skinned Christ) in Guatemala and Central America. The Lord of the Miracles (crucified) in all of Peru; and the Lord of the Tremors/Quakes (crucified) in Cuzco. In Brazil: the Good Jesus of Pirapora, of Tremembé, of Iguapé, of Lapa; the *Senhor do Bom Fim* (Lord of the Good End) from Salvador. The Lord of the Agony, during the month of May in Santiago,

Chile; the Lord of the Miracle in Salta, Argentina; the Lord of the Miracles in Buga, Colombia; the Almighty Lord in Ecuador and in Bolivia.

I dare to suggest the following interpretations—First: the communitarian aspect in tension with the private attitude. The images of Christ (as well as the other images) call upon and unite people, groups, and multitudes. In this collective framework, personal faith is revealed. It could be said that the image summons and builds an ecclesial community. But there is the other side of matter; the global process of privatization of the human existence affects the ways and attitudes of faith concerning the representations of the Lord. I believe that the figure of the Sacred Heart is expressed better in the private context. There is also a utilitarian way of addressing the Lord, for the solution in urgent and specific matters, especially at an individual level.

The second annotation: the humanity of Christ. This is stressed by dramatic images of the Passion. God manifests himself in a bloodstained Christ in pain. God manifests himself as a bloodstained man who is experiencing pain. Here there are also psycho-cultural meanings. According to R. Nebel, due to the “longstanding traditions of penitence, self-sacrifice, loyalty to their ancient gods, Mexicans were especially qualified to identify themselves with the passion and death of Jesus.”¹² Generally, the people correct the unilateral position that we find in much a-historical catechism that only represents Christ as divine, and complement it with the message of the humanity of the Redeemer.

In the third place, I am impressed by what people ask and receive when praying to the images. They are not abstract things, nor concepts. The population cries and celebrates its images of the Lord, seeking blessings, favors, forgiveness, and other concrete petitions. It concerns the young person that gets a job, a cure from disease, family reconciliation, financial success, etc. The thanks and the petitions are generally given to images of a suffering or dead Christ. So, the Crucified Christ is the Resurrected Christ that saves the afflicted people. Through ritualistic language, the poor converts the image of the dead Christ into one of a living Christ; or they adore the one whose death saves humankind. In the logic of the poor, death and life are not separate and mutually exclusive worlds, but rather, one includes the other.

Fourth, appreciation: Christ in association to Mary. This association is made, in a more frequent and profound manner, in poor sectors. That way both the Christology and the Mariology are enriched. In the reception of Christian salvation, masculine and feminine dimensions are combined. The humanity of the Savior is consolidated through the joint veneration along with his mother.

¹² R. Nebel, “El rostro mexicano de Cristo” in F. Damen and E. Judo (comp.), *op.cit.*, 68.

This is particularly true during the period of Christmas, Lent, and Easter. One can conclude that the images of Christ and Mary refer to basic realities of life-death-life (for example: Mother with Child, the *Dolorosa* with her Son). One can feel and comprehend Christian salvation within the processes of life amid death.

Rituals and Festivals

Both the belief and the relation with the image tend to be aimed at the feast of faith. It is interesting to note that there is much more of a popular celebration with images of virgins and saints; in those aimed at Christ, there is a predominance of atonement and meditation celebrations. Nevertheless, there is a wide array of cults and celebrations.¹³ I will not describe cases. Instead, I want to shed light on the theological meanings. Symbolically, what does the population that worships and celebrates images of Christ say?

The people convey their affection, artistic creativity, and an organization typical of their faith. These gifts of the Spirit are seldom included in Christology treaties. They are qualities that are experienced in the feasts of the God child (the period from Christmas to Epiphany), in the crosses and in the images of the Passion. The spiritual and artistic sensitivity thrive in the groups of children, young people, and adults—all who show their affection for the Son of God. In the presence of the manger, there is a display of prayers, songs, and—in certain places—beautiful dances. There are the *posadas* celebrations in Mexico and Central America; the ‘dances of the shepherds’ in Andean culture; the *autos do Natal*, Christmas pageants, and the *folias dos Reis*, the letters to the Three Wise Men in Brazil; and songs to ‘the divine and the human’ in areas of Chile. In the presence of images of the suffering Christ, there is profound compassion and signs of communion between human beings and the Savior. There is also the prominent presence of faith, participation, liturgical creativity, and organization in the feasts of crosses. In urban settlements, the particular history of neighborhoods and life projects are recalled around the cross. In rural regions, there is a relationship between the cross and agricultural fertility. There are also beautiful and emotional worship services in homes and work centers. On the other hand, there are also pilgrimage celebrations dedicated to shrines that display the images of the Lord. There, devoted people carry out rituals and strengthen solidarity in terms that become life-defining traits.

¹³ See essays on feasts of Christ and of the Cross in Peru, by Ana Gispert, Teresa van Ronzelen, Bernardino Zecenarro, José Luis González, D. Irarrazaval, in Damen and Judd, *op.cit.*

These realities show that faith in Christ is inseparable from daily life, food, festivities, human relationships, the cultural traits of each place, and many more. Thus, we have the marks of an integral Christology. There are many dimensions that are interwoven. By means of symbols, the gift of life is affirmed. It provides humility and joyous gratitude for the divine blessings bestowed upon the community—placing human needs in the hands of God. In this respect, the everyday experiences are established in reference to Christ, to God. The image is an icon of the Savior that is nearby and works effectively—and the participants make up a unique ecclesial community. Without a doubt, these popular acts have great evangelizing and theological qualities. Cult and feast are a vast channel of faith. At the same time, they are events penetrated by ambivalences. There are existing factors of disintegration, manipulation of what is sacred, prayers with no ethical accountability, images that have been appropriated by a group opposing another population sector, and absence of the memory of Jesus in the gospel.

Sacramental Dimensions

The people's faith and theology develop forgiveness, reconciliation, and communion with God. In every continent there are ceremonies of penance and solidarity. This especially occurs during the time of Lent and Easter. The processional rite sticks out: one walks in silence and in compassion with the Lord—experiencing first-hand his suffering. In certain places, a solemn wake is held, as if for a recently deceased, on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Hymns of 'passion' and 'praise' are sung. There is conversation and drinking, and community is strengthened. In these occasions (as in the rites of the Child), physical, emotional, and spiritual contact with the image is extremely important. It is a type of sacramental experience, such as when one participates in Mass. In terms of reconciliation, God's forgiveness is directly received, and sometimes the bonds between estranged human are made anew. Compassion comes with joy; personal and communitarian renewal and faith in the Lord are joined; that is, there are signs of essential Christianity that are expressed through love in all its dimensions. From this principle, we can evaluate each religious custom.

In my opinion, amid this symbolic production there is great theological content and evangelizing contribution from the poor. This inspires those of us who theologially reflect at a professional, scholarly level. I have emphasized positive aspects of beliefs, images, and celebrations. The members of the church share the same faith in God, but it is understood differently by each Christian individual and community. Among the poor, there is a great ability and quality of symbolic and sacramental wisdom. These are concrete mediations by which God grants us

his grace; they are inculturated realities that lead us to a life in the divine. We rediscover the icon as a place of encounter and knowledge of God. We can speak about a *Christ-icon-ology*, as part of the symbolic reflection made concerning Christ. With regard to liberation theology, it is enriched by the symbolic production and by the people's insight: images, feasts, ethical criteria, forms of organization, ecology, and historical action.

Regarding the communication of Christology within the heart of the Latin American people, there is still much to be done on a horizontal level. I mean by that that some sectors are bearers of a firm faith and wisdom; other sectors lack, or have little, devotion to Christ the Savior of humanity. There are also fanatic and fundamentalist sectors. The first sector can become responsible for evangelizing and shedding light theologically to the rest. This work, of horizontal nature, achieves better results than a top down manner of instruction (the learned academic) that teach the lower levels (the common folk). Besides, the problem persists (the one faced during the 1970s) of community of faith and people's religion. The first notion tends to be deemed as Christocentric and faithful to the gospel, and regards the second one as saint-centric and syncretistic. This is seen in Brazil and Chile.¹⁴ While reporting on the Interecclesial meeting of 1975, Faustino Teixeira points out the "clear tension" between ecclesial base communities and popular religion. The IX Meeting of 1997 showed a lucid reconsideration of community, cultures, and religions. In Chile, the evaluation of the 1970s and 1980s affirms that the communities "are Christcentric," with different styles and practices from popular Catholicism. It is evident that there is an urgent need for interaction, constructive and critical, between these two different ways of being a believer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I mention the debate in scholarly contexts about Christology from the perspective of 'from above' and 'from below.' Both perspectives focus on the mystery of Christ in his divinity and humanity. The Christologies that stammer the truth from below tend to be closer to the message of the New Testament, especially the Synoptic texts. The person of Christ and soteriology are combined. In this sense, the people's conception of faith has advanced.

¹⁴ I quote the assessment done by the authority in Ecclesial Base Communities in Brazil, Faustino Teixeira, *Os encontros intereclesiais de CEB's no Brasil* (Sao Paulo: Paulinas, 1996), 29 (the closing remarks of the meeting held in 1975 stipulate respect and take up popular religiosity, p. 157); vv.aa., *Comunidades eclesiales de base, 20 años en Chile* (Santiago: Rehue, 1989), 32, 60.

On the other hand, people need to deepen—and sometimes correct—their beliefs, concepts, and symbols. The people require good teachings, and the whole of the church deserves to learn from the faith and Christology of the poor communities. The Christian wisdom of the people tends to recognize the signs of the Savior's presence, which saves his people in all of the world's corners.

These realities need to be understood in the light of Christian norms: unconditional love towards God and your neighbor (Mt. 22:36-40 and parallels), relationship with Jesus through the poor (Mt. 25:31 ff), and to make oneself a neighbor of the defenseless in order to have life (Lk. 10:29-37). I wonder in what sense the actions and religious objects that refer to Christ are symbols of love, of the transition from death to life?

Jesus has confronted beliefs, images, and other sacred elements (as is the case of the Sabbath rest). On the other hand, He participated and assumed the Jewish piety towards YHWH. In general, Jesus evaluated the activity according to the rule of love, humility, and justice (see Mk. 12:40, Lk 11:42-44, 18:9-14, 21:1-4). Therefore, past and present, the belief and the rite are not goals of being Christian. The only important thing—and that transforms and transcends everything—is love (1 Cor 13:1-13). With this perspective, the Christology of the people is faced. The primacy of love is the criteria that allows us to evaluate people's Christology and be nurtured by it.