

1. The Concern of the Church for the Poor

The proper function of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is the promotion and defense of doctrine on faith and morals for the whole of the Catholic world.¹ In this way, the Congregation seeks to be of service to the people of God, and particularly to the simple and poorest members of the Church. From the beginning, this **preoccupation for the poor has been one of the characteristics of the Church's mission**. If it is true, as the Holy Father has indicated, that "**the first poverty among people is not to know Christ**",² then **all people have the right to know the Lord Jesus**, who is "the hope of the nations and the salvation of the peoples". **What is more, each Christian has the right to know in an adequate, authentic, and integral manner the truth which the Church professes and expresses about Christ**. This right is the foundation of the **corresponding obligation of the ecclesial magisterium to intervene whenever this truth is placed in danger or negated**.

It is because of this right of the faithful to the truth of Christ that this Congregation has seen the need to publish the attached *Notification* concerning some of the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ. These works contain propositions which are either erroneous or dangerous and may cause harm to the faithful. Father Sobrino manifests a preoccupation for the poor and oppressed, particularly in Latin America. This preoccupation certainly is shared by the whole Church. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its Instruction on Christian liberty and liberation *Libertatis conscientia*, indicated that "human misery [...] drew the compassion of Christ the Savior to take it upon himself and to be identified with the least of his brethren (cf. Mt 25:40, 45)" and that "**The preferential option for the poor, far from being a sign of particularism or sectarianism, manifests the universality of the Church's being and mission. This option excludes no one. This is the reason why the Church cannot express this option by means of reductive sociological and ideological categories which would make this preference a partisan choice and a source of conflict**".³ Previously, this same Congregation in its Instruction on some aspects of liberation theology (*Libertatis nuntius*), observed that **the warnings about this theological trend contained in that document could not be interpreted as a reproach to those who wish to be faithful to a "preferential option for the poor", nor could they be an excuse for those who remain indifferent to the grave problems of human misery and injustice**.⁴

The citations clearly show the position of the Church with regard to this complex problem: "**The evil inequities and oppression of every kind which afflict millions of men and women today openly contradict Christ's Gospel and cannot leave the conscience of any Christian indifferent. The Church, in her docility to the Spirit, goes forward faithfully along the paths to authentic liberation**. Her members are aware of their failings and their delays in this quest. But a vast number of Christians, from the time of the Apostles onwards, have committed their powers and their lives to liberation from every form of oppression and to the promotion of human dignity. The experience of the saints and the example of so many works of service to one's neighbor are an incentive and a beacon for the liberating undertakings that are needed today".⁵

2. Procedure for Examining Doctrinal Teachings

This Notification comes as a result of a careful study of the writings of Father Sobrino according to the procedure established for the examination of doctrinal teachings. It may be helpful to explain

briefly the way in which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith proceeds towards a judgment on writings that appear to be problematic. When considering whether the writings of a certain Author present doctrinal difficulties or might damage the faith of the people of God, the Congregation initiates a procedure regulated by the *Agendi ratio in doctrinarum examine*, whose latest edition was approved by Pope John Paul II on 29 June 1997.⁶

The *ordinary process* entails sending the material in question to several experts for their review and opinion. The results of this, containing all the documentation required for the study of the case, is placed before the *Consulta*, a standing committee of the Congregation comprised of experts from various theological disciplines. The entire file, including the minutes of the discussion and the written opinions and evaluations of the Consulters regarding the existence of doctrinal errors or dangerous opinions in the writings, is then submitted to the *Ordinary Session* of the Congregation. This *Ordinary Session*, comprised of the Cardinals and Bishops who are members of the Congregation, undertakes a detailed examination of the entire question and decides whether or not to notify the author about the problems encountered. The decision of the *Ordinary Session* is then submitted for the approval of the *Supreme Pontiff*. Once approved, a list of erroneous propositions or dangerous opinions is sent to the Author through the Bishop or Religious Superior. The Author then has a period of three months in which to offer a reply. If the *Ordinary Session* considers this reply to be sufficient, no further action is taken. If it is judged insufficient, then it must be decided what measures to adopt. One such measure would be the publication of a *Notification* which details the erroneous propositions or dangerous assertions of the Author.

When the writings of an Author are judged to be clearly in error and, at the same time, when their diffusion could present a danger or has already proven to be of grave damage to the faithful,⁷ the process can be abbreviated. A *Commission* of experts is assembled and given the task of determining the erroneous propositions. The findings of this *Commission* are submitted to the *Ordinary Session* of the Congregation. In cases where the propositions are judged to be in fact erroneous and dangerous, the Congregation, after the approval of the *Holy Father*, transmits a list of these propositions through the Ordinary to the Author. The Author is then given two months in which to offer a correction or response. This response is examined by the *Ordinary Session* and the appropriate measures are taken.

3. The Particular Case of Father Sobrino

In the case before us now, the *Notification* itself indicates the steps that were taken according to this abbreviated *urgent examination*. This procedure was judged necessary given the wide diffusion of Father Sobrino's works, particularly in Latin America. In these works, one encounters grave deficiencies both in terms of methodology and content. Without repeating here what is treated in detail in the *Notification*, we note that among the primary methodological deficiencies of Father Sobrino is the affirmation that the "Church of the poor" is *the* ecclesial "setting" of Christology and offers it its fundamental orientation. This disregards the fact that it is only the *apostolic faith* which the Church has transmitted through all generations that constitutes the ecclesial setting of Christology and of theology in general. Father Sobrino tends to diminish the normative value of the affirmations of the New Testament as well as those of the great Councils of the early Church. These methodological errors give rise to conclusions which do not conform to the doctrine of the Church in certain key areas: the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the relationship of Jesus with the Kingdom of God, Jesus' self-consciousness, and the salvific value of Jesus' death.

In this regard, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith wrote: "**a theological reflection developed from a particular experience can constitute a very positive contribution, inasmuch as it makes possible a highlighting of aspects of the Word of God, the richness of which had**

not yet been fully grasped. But in order that this reflection may be truly a reading of the Scripture and not a projection on to the Word of God of a meaning which it does not contain, the theologian will be careful to interpret the experience from which he begins in the light of the experience of the Church herself. This experience of the Church shines with a singular brightness and in all its purity in the lives of the saints. It pertains to the pastors of the Church, in communion with the Successor of Peter, to discern its authenticity".⁸

It is hoped that this *Notification* will offer to both the pastors and to the faithful of the Church a secure basis, founded upon the doctrine of the Church, upon which to judge these questions, which are relevant both for theology and pastoral practice.

¹ Cf JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, 48: AAS 80 (1988), 841-934.

² BENEDICT XVI, *Lenten Message* 2006.

³ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Libertatis Conscientia*, 68: AAS 79 (1987) 554-599.

⁴ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Libertatis nuntius*, Proemio: AAS 76 (1984) 876-909.

⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Libertatis conscientia*, 57.

⁶ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Agendi ratio in doctrinarum examine*: AAS 89 (1997) 830-835.

⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 23.

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Libertatis conscientia*, 70.

[00347-02.02] [Original text: Spanish]