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The Faith of Jesus

by Sr. Hang T.H. Nguyen

ABSTRACT:
According to Jon Sobrino, a theologian of Liberation Theology, Jesus has faith since He is a believer “like ourselves,” the model of faith, the one upon whom we have to keep our eyes fixed to live our faith. In another reference, Sobrino insists that “Jesus was an extraordinary believer and had faith. Faith is Jesus’ mode of being,” and “Faith describes the totality of the life of Jesus.” J. Sobrino’s view on Hebrews 12:2 does not conform with that of the Catholic traditional faith on the immediate and intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father. The essay is the arguments against Sobrino’s view, and then provide the sense of faith that should be understood for Jesus.

SYNOD:
Discernment is one of the three things that we need to do in accord with the teaching of the Synod. In fact, Christian life has encountered with many controversies that challenge their faith. Encountering with many teachings that goes against the revelation, Church’s doctrines, and Apostolic tradition, we need to be wisely aware of what we are believing. Particularly, we need to understand and interpret the words of God inspired by the authority of the Church so that we would not fall into false doctrines. The Church listens to her children, the children also listen to the Church on the true teachings; and above all listen to the Holy Spirit, who leads us to the truth. Thus, the essay is an attempt to explain and defend the Catholic interpretation and understanding of Jesus’ faith in response to Sobrino’s view. The Church teaches that Jesus has a faith of an essence unlike ours because He is consubstantial with the Father and has an intimate relationship with God. Thus, Jesus’s faith should be understood as the absolute trust and obedience to the Father that is model for our faith, the perfection of which we cannot achieve.
INTRODUCTION

“Would Jesus have faith?” is a question that many believers have asked. Theologian Jon Sobrino holds that Jesus’ life does give evidence that Jesus is a believer “like ourselves,” the model of faith, the one upon whom we have to keep our eyes fixed to live our faith.¹ Sobrino believes that “Jesus was an extraordinary believer and had faith. Faith is Jesus’ mode of being,”² and “Faith describes the totality of the life of Jesus.”³ To document his position, Sobrino also examines the letter to the Hebrews to affirm that Jesus was related to the mystery of God in faith. He is the first one who has most fully lived faith.⁴ In order to examine whether Jesus had faith or not and to understand clearly Sobrino’s assertion, it is necessary to agree upon a common conception of faith. Generally, faith is defined as belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence.⁵ But biblically, faith is “believing that God exists and rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11: 1, 6).⁶ Besides this belief, saint Paul defined faith an as insufficient knowledge about God or an incomplete experience with God (cf. 1Cor 13: 12). In this sense, if Jesus was said to have faith, it meant that He has insufficient knowledge about God the Father. But the Bible has clear statements to prove Jesus’ full knowledge and immediate experience about His Father (John 1: 18; 3: 11; Matt 11, 27). I disagree with Sobrino’s viewpoint that Jesus’ faith is like all other believers for these reasons: his understanding of Jesus’ faith does not specify sufficiently the intimate and immediate relationship between Jesus with the God Father; furthermore, Jesus, in his role as the mediator with a fully divine and fully human nature, cannot be a believer walking in the dimness of faith, but is the one through whom we confess our faith (Philippians 2:1). Hence, when addressing Jesus’ faith, what kind of faith must be understood? How must the Hebrew text be understood to be correct? The paper will also attempt to answer these questions in the

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³ Ibid., 157.
⁴ Sobrino, on Sobrino, Christ the Liberator, 136.
light of the Gospels and Catholic Doctrine. Before answering these questions, the examination on the historical context of the text is necessary.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TEXT

In 1960s, liberation theology emerged in Latin American with the aim at the liberation of the poor in society. It is an attempt to read the Bible and Christian doctrines with the eyes of the poor and interpret Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor. Liberation theology is also “a critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it,” and “a critique of the activity of the Church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.” Liberation theology has its emphasis on liberation in this life rather than salvation beyond this life, and claims that no one needs liberation more than the poor. The center of liberation thought is that “theology should be a matter for current situations rather than a set of abstract principles disconnected from real life. Theology should be for today, for here and now, for this particular, for this group of suffering people.” Theological liberation strongly developed in the late twentieth century and became entangled with Marxism and communism. However, after the fall of communism in the 1990s, Marxist liberation theology waned significantly, then being resurgent in other ways. It became relevant to contemporary and emerging Christian thought, especially as a response to the oppression of different groups of people, such as black theology in America and South America, and feminist theology in the United States and United Kingdom.

Jon Sobrino (1938) was counted as one of the liberation theologians from Latin America. He acquired theological thoughts of liberation theologians, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Ignacio Ellacuría. He also learned broad theological thoughts from Rahner and Moltmann in Europe. In particular, he experienced direct contact with the poor in El Salvador, where he was sent as a missionary in 1974. All of these shaped his theology. He found a reality of social sin which has structural causes in politics and cultures. It kills

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9 Berryman, 5–6.
11 Ibid., 478.
groups of people that it considers unworthy of human dignity. He recognized that the task of theology is to overcome the result of social sin causing death. He considered the reign of God as “justice and fellowship,” and as the core of Jesus of Nazareth. He incorporated a new view about life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as their meaning for the suffering peoples in the world. His theology centered on Jesus’ compassion towards the poor. He found that a meaningful theology is center to liberate from oppression.12

Sobrino wrote the book *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* in 1999 in continuation of the magisterial Christology of the previous book *Jesus the Liberator* written in 1991. While the first volume examined the “Jesus of history” relating to his life, proclamation, miracles and the conflict that led to his death, the second volume addressed the “Jesus of faith”, and was concerned with Jesus’ resurrection in the New Testament. Throughout *Christ the Liberator*, the author writes from the reality of faith, as set in motion by the event of Jesus Christ, and from the situation of the victims - the “crucified People” of history – particularly the poor of El Salvador, with whom he worked.13 Sobrino formed his fundamental Christology from what was presented in the New Testament through the ecclesial Councils. It reflects events in Latin America and the Catholic Church in El Salvador, as well as long years with Jesuit companions sharing ministry, persecution, and martyrdom at the University of Central America. This is regarded as his sharing with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It also is to be found today among the “crucified peoples” of Latin America, and the billions of victims of poverty, inequality, structural injustice, and violence around the world.14

THE OVERALL CONTENT OF THE TEXT

In order to make his argument of Jesus’ faith more comprehensive, Sobrino deals with the historical reality of Jesus Christ of the New Testament from the faith, hope, and love of the victims. He argued that a truly Latin American Christology must be shaped by a “new historical logos” which must start from indisputable facts of the Jesus of history. For him, the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth is defined through the words and actions of Jesus who lived as a

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12 Joe Drexler-Dreis, “Interview with Jon Sobrino,” *Newsletter CLT* 6 (September 2013), 1.
faithful Jew in Israel, maintained a close relationship to the Father, and lived his mission.\textsuperscript{15} Besides, the historical reality of Jesus as a faithful Jew, Sobrino also deals with the reality of Jesus Christ of the New Testament as seen in the titles given to Jesus as the Mediator. The title of Mediator implies that believers intrinsically relate to Christ as negotiator for and path to salvation.\textsuperscript{16} The title Mediator is a means of access to salvation. Human beings cannot approach salvation because they merely dwell in the human world. Therefore, they need the mediator coming from the divine world, radically distinct and separate from the profane world. The Mediator is the human embodiment of the divine, so He is able to mediate between the divine world and profane world, between God and human. The imagery of the mediator often references the letter to the Hebrews, in which Jesus is understood as a “new” God in the nature of priesthood, who has come to human beings and remains with us.\textsuperscript{17}

Moreover, God, as the Mediator who has come continues as the holy and transcendent God, and his holiness is the greatest incarnation, so that we can come to be “perfect” like the heavenly Father (Matt 5: 48). God has come to humans and offered salvation to us, and we need to have an active response in double dimension: (1) we should respond to God similarly in gratitude faith and in hope because God has come gratuitously as salvation, (2) and we should correspond to the reality of the God’s coming by making ourselves likewise good news and salvation for others,\textsuperscript{18} as saint John said: “Not that we have loved God but that He loved us... we also must love one another” (1 John 4: 9-11). Thus, as the Mediator, the God Jesus has brought salvation to human beings, and we are called to respond in our faith as well as in our love to God and others.

In the light of the New Testament, Sobrino also indicates that “Jesus is both at once: the expression of God’s access to us and the way for us to accede to God.” Jesus is both the Word of the Father who came to us by his initiative, not by the will of the flesh (John 1: 13), and the Way to the Father (John 14: 6). Then, “Jesus is the mediator through being the sacrament of God with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 46–47.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Sobrino, Christ The Liberator, 124.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Sobrino, 125-126.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 127-128.
\end{itemize}
respect to us and being the way for us with respect to God.” In the human nature of the mediator, Jesus is also a human being who can do mediation between God and humans. Jesus’ humanity is presented as the mediator in the whole New Testament, especially in the letter to the Hebrews, which describes it in detail. Christ the High Priest who is the source of salvation (Hebrews 5: 9), brings us to the glory (2: 10), makes us sanctified (10: 10), and give us “confidence to enter the sanctuary” (10: 19). It is clearly in the letter that Christ is seen as the mediator of salvation. However, Sobrino provides three observations on the nature of this mediator according to the letter: (1) Jesus’ sacrifice should be read as the consequence and expression of his mercy and faithfulness; (2) Jesus is the mercy of God coming to the world, touching us in our flesh so that we trust in God’s action and change it into mercy. Furthermore, the work of Christ as the new and definitive covenant conveyed salvation to us. It is not only as the forgiveness of sin, but also the new form of life: living faith, hope, and love; (3) the mediation is presented as serving human access to God, and also as serving God’s access to humans. In Jesus, God takes the initiative, and our concentration initially is a means to salvation. It might be said that we have to “go with him to God,” but with Him, God has already come to us. Thus, “Keeping our eyes on Jesus” (Heb 2: 2) shows us a clear way and invitation to see God and experience God’s power.

In this context of the role of the High Priest – the Mediator of salvation, Sobrino examines the true humanity of Jesus with his faith. Donald E. Waltermire notes that Sobrino tries to make Jesus’ humanity be “as particular as possible,” and intends to express Jesus’ faith as a process, an “ongoing search” for God and God’s kingdom. Sobrino’s concept of Jesus’ faith is evident in three ways. First, Jesus’ faith reformulates the concept of his divinity. For Sobrino, Jesus’ divinity derives from his “relationship to the Father” rather than to the Logos. Jesus’ divine character implies a conception of “divine nature” in relation to his mission, proclamation and actualization of the Kingdom of God. Second, Jesus’ faith shows that He is the revelation of the Son of God as the “first born” of faith. In this sense, Sobrino expresses

19 Ibid., 129.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 134.
Jesus relationship to both God and humanity. Based on the text to the Hebrews, Sobrino indicates that Jesus’ humanity is a condition that makes his faithfulness possible, and faith is not outward respect of Jesus’ humanity. Thus, Jesus is said to be like all others in every respect except sin (4: 15). For Sobrino, Jesus is an “extraordinary believer;” his faith is his mode of being; and his faith describes His whole life. In order to justify his own view, Sobrino quotes the text of Hebrews 12:2: “Tersely and with a clarity unparalleled in the New Testament, the letter says that Jesus was related to the mystery of God in faith. Jesus is the One who has the first and most fully lived faith (12:2).” Third, Jesus’ faith makes himself and his brothers and sisters different in history rather than ontology. Sobrino examines Jesus’ humanity in term of solidarity which express Jesus’ relationship with others as the members of the human family. Jesus calls others his “brothers and sisters” (Heb 2: 11). Thus, all true humanity has to be in solidarity; and Jesus is the mediator and the Christ, not only through being a human being but also through being a brother. Sobrino asserts the necessity and sufficiency of Jesus’ humanity in the mode of brother – and sisterhood, which defines that Jesus is like us as “brother,” but different from us as “elder brother.” Jesus was not spared passing through faith, but lived faith as its “pioneer and perfecter” (Heb 12:2), thus, Jesus in his life is presented as a believer like ourselves, the “firstborn” of faith and the exemplar, who left us the way that He has gone so that we can follow him to live our faith.

ARGUMENTS SUPPORT THE THESIS

In order to respond to Sobrino position and to identify the Jesus’ faith in the view of the Catholic Church, it is necessary to come closer to saint Paul’s concept on faith, the traditional belief of the Church on Jesus’ immediate knowledge of God and on Jesus’ role as the Mediator by relying on the New Testament.

According to saint Paul’s concept, faith is the indirect, dim awareness of realities in God: “At present, we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present, I know partially; then, I shall know fully, as I am fully known”

23 Ibid., 63.
24 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 157.
25 Sobrino, Christ The Liberator, 136–137.
26 Waltermire, The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino, 63.
27 Sobrino, Christ The Liberator, 137-138
(1Cor 13: 12). Hence, believers are people who live in a state like those who have not seen God directly; they are still walking in a dark pilgrimage. In another account, Paul said that we walked by faith not by sight in this mortal life (1Cor 5: 6-7). But the Gospels prove clearly that Jesus is “God became flesh” (John 1:14). He knows everything (John 21:17), He knows God as well as God’s will (John 8:55). Jesus also shows his intimate and immediate relationship with God the Father. In particular, the Gospel of John uses the word “see” to describe the direct relationship between Jesus and the Father: “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him” (John 1: 18). Thus, Jesus is the witness of the Father in what He knows about the Father. Jesus not only has infused and acquired knowledge like all others humans, but also possesses an immediate knowledge of the Father, a “vision” that “certainly goes beyond the vision of faith.” The hypostatic union, the mission of revelation and redemption require that Jesus must clearly see the Father and know his plan of salvation.28

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticizes that Sobrino’s understanding of Jesus’ faith does not conform with the traditional faith of the Catholic Church because his positions do not “clearly show the unique singularity of the filial relationship of Jesus with the Father; indeed they tend to exclude it.”29 The creed of the Council of Chalcedon (451) proclaims that:

“The Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in the Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood;... one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably...”30

From the Gospels of John and the Creed of Chalcedon Council, we need to acknowledge that Jesus, the Logos of the God Father unites with the Father in his divine nature. So, the Logos is not only in being with the Father, but in

29 Ibid., 261.
understanding with the Father as well. Since the Father, in his own infinite intelligibility, knows all things, so also does the Logos. The Logos, as the person of the Trinity, is not distinct according to being, understanding and will. So, the Logos is the same infinite act of being, understanding, willing with the two other persons\(^{31}\) because Jesus said: “The Father and I are one” (John 10: 30).

To support the idea of Jesus’s immediate knowledge of the Father, saint Thomas Aquinas believes that Jesus possessed beatific knowledge: “the soul of Christ, which is a part of human nature, through a light participated from the Divine Nature, is perfected with the beatific knowledge whereby it sees God in essence.”\(^{32}\) I totally support this position of saint Thomas since Jesus is God made flesh in humanity. Jesus possesses a fully divine nature and a fully human nature. Jesus’ beatific knowledge proved that Jesus knows God’s will and plan: He knows the Father’s will, namely, to save humanity from the destruction of sin, to bring humanity back to eternal life and happiness (John 10: 11-18); He knows the time of his suffering and passion (Matt 16: 21-27), and the day He leaves his disciples and returns to the Father (John 10: 11-18), etc. If there is a denial of the existence of Jesus’ immediate consciousness of God, this means that there is a refusal of the absolute fulfilment of the full union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ and the full union of the person of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. Sobrino’s position differs from that of saint Thomas, in that Sobrino fails in saint Thomas’ clarity in these expressions.

The doctrine of Jesus’s immediate knowledge of the Father is also expressed in the *Mystici Corporis Christi* of the Pope Pius XII: “The knowledge and love of our Divine Redeemer, of which we were the object from the first moment of His Incarnation, exceed all that the human intellect can hope to grasp. For hardly was He conceived in the womb of the Mother of God when He began to enjoy the Beatific Vision.”\(^{33}\) For me, in the moment of incarnation, the Word became flesh in the womb of Mary, the union of Jesus’s human nature and the Word – the hypostatic union – occurred.

33 Pope Pius XII, “Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on The Mystical Body of Christ to Our Venerable Brethren, Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and Other Local Ordinaries Enjoying Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See (Mystici Corporis Christi”), no. 75. http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html
immediately. When the union happens, human nature of Jesus in the womb joins the beatific knowledge of the divine nature. So the affirmation of the Pope Pius XII is convincing.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church also insists the Son of God possesses the intimate and immediate knowledge about his Father and “By its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal” (CCC 473-474). I agree with the doctrine of the Church because Jesus Christ in his person is the self-revelation of God. He has come to the world to reveal God’s love and bring salvation to human beings through his mission. As a Revealer of God the Father, Jesus cannot be unknown of the Father and must know the Father’s will. To come as a Savior, the divine becomes incarnate so that He can redeem humans.

Therefore, with the beatific knowledge, Jesus cannot be said to need faith or be lacking in faith if faith is understood in a sense of a dim awareness of realities of God. Faith surpasses the category of quantifying it. Jesus is said to possess beatific knowledge at the moment of conception, that is, an immediate vision of God’s nature. The relationship between Jesus and the Father is not correctly expressed by saying that Jesus was a believer like us. Since Jesus has the intimate relationship and the immediate knowledge with the Father that is not available to us as mere humans, as opposed to human and divine, that allowed Him to reveal the mystery of God’s love to human beings. Only in this way can Jesus lead us into the love of God.34

Furthermore, the whole of the Scriptures does not mention that Jesus as a believer, but speaks of that Jesus Christ in person is the mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5; Gal 3: 20). The mediator is the only One who has profound and direct knowledge of what is in the interior of God and brings us to salvation (Hebrews 2: 10; 9: 15). The viewpoint of Jesus’ faithfulness is placed in the role of the Mediator, who has union with God and human, and beatific knowledge is the culmination of this union. Thus, Sobrino’s viewpoint is improper in saying that Jesus united to the mystery of God in faith like all others. The mediator cannot be a believer walking in the dimness of faith, but

34 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 162.
is the one through whom we confess our faith (Philippians 2:11). He also is the object of our faith: “believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Jesus Christ as the man leads us to the knowledge of God, and Christ as God is the source and the destination of the Christian’s faith (Rom 10:8-9; Gal 2:16; 1 Cor 3:22-23). Sobrino focuses on Jesus’ faith rather than his knowledge, so Sobrino sees Jesus as mere exemplar of faith for us, as the one who gives us the ultimate example of faith. Thus, the critique of Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith is that he ignores the unique character of the mediation and revelation of Jesus and reduces the condition of “reveler” that is attributed to human prophets and mystics.35

Saint Thomas claimed that Jesus could not have faith similar to our faith. However, Jesus had it and has merit as a believer: “the merit of faith consists in this – that man through obedience assents to what things he does not see.” According to Romans 1:5, through Jesus, we are brought to the obedience of faith for the sake of His name. And Jesus Christ had the most perfect obedience to God because He “became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). He taught by example only a merit that He achieved perfectly Himself.36 Thus, faith also implies trust and obedience. In this light, the faith of Jesus in the text of Hebrews 12:2 should be understood that Jesus is a person of faith but His faith is not our faith. The faith of Jesus is the attitude of trust and absolute obedience to the Father.37 In Hebrews 12:2, Jesus Christ, “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith, must be understood as the “origin and goal,” the “first and last” of our faith. He is also the model of our faith in sense of the absolutely trust and obedience to the Father. Jesus is not the One who has an “indistinct vision” as in a mirror, but He has the beatific vision. Jesus is the One who perfects his faith, through this perfection He will bring our faith to its end, in the face-to-face seeing of God.38 Therefore, it cannot be said that Jesus is the model of faith when the faith is a human faith like ours.

35 Stephen, Hope & Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology, 262.
36 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Part III, Question 7, Article 3.
CONCLUSION

Sobrino had a new view of doing theology which related to the liberation of the poor and oppressors. He saw Christ in the poor; he walked with them and sought to relieve their suffering. He recognized that their liberation as their path to salvation is connected to us and our compassion for the poor. From this view, he shaped his Christology “from below” by examining the “Jesus of history” and “Jesus of faith” in the New Testament who opens hope of liberation for the poor. We, in faith, imitate Jesus, mediating for the poor, but our faith could not have the same essence. Jesus Christ had a faith of an essence unlike ours because He is consubstantial with the Father having an intimate relationship with God. Thus, if Jesus is said to have faith, His faith should be understood as the absolute trust and obedience to the Father that is model for our faith, the perfection of which we cannot achieve. Jesus, as the first born, the exemplar in our life. Like Jesus, we are “sons and daughters of God,” we have become “fellow-heirs;” we have died with Him and received the promise of a resurrection.\(^\text{39}\) Besides, His faith is of another nature than our faith because we are human in mortal life with incomplete knowledge of God. Jesus faith as the perfecter of faith shows how we can improve our faith who became obedient unto death. We can aspire to suffer for and with others as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus can be our model of faith in the sense of His total gift of love.

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